

## 43 War of Worlds

From the pod's refuse, a body emerged and formed in front of us. Scales and bones condensed into plates that ran across the front of the four legged creature. It gawked with a reptile's eyes, slitted but intelligent. The hulking torso of the creature flowed together like a deadly machine, its movements like music made with muscle and bone.

The beast reminded me of a tiger with no fur, bones placed over it instead. From its neck, a mane of jagged femurs expanded out, and the monster roared at us. The bottom jaw split in half, revealing a throat lined with sharpened teeth. The noble facade of the creature shattered as several other pods exploded, slopping onto the ground with wet slaps beside it.

**Unnamed of Yawm - Panthera Variant | Level 250 - These are the newly spawned footsoldiers of Yawm. If they prove themselves, Yawm may name them, granting them their previous sentience. They may then rise through the ranks of his army, being granted great power by accomplishing great deeds.**

**Though unnamed, each of these troops hold considerable power. They may operate in packs and coordinate with each other. They claim a much higher level of finesse and skill with their movements. Their regenerative capacities are impressive as well along with their sheer tenacity. Combine this with their tendency to attack on sight, and they make for deadly foes.**

**This specific sample is a panthera variant. Many variants and forms can be found of the unnamed. Be ready for combat when you see one.**

I rushed in, my heels tearing into the ground. I shouted, "Let's go, Althea."

A harpoon drilled past my head, piercing into the armored lion's face. The bullet of bone impaled through it, but the creature stayed standing. The beast shook its head as I reached it. I growled out, augmentation overflowing in me like a flood. I fought without any restraints, my full might on display.

My armor grinned, the armor shivering in anticipation of its next meal. The bone lion bit forward, trying to eat me. I whipped a weighted hook against one of its bottom jaws. The blow snapped the bone of the creature and knocked me sideways. I dragged towards its side, out of the way of its incoming bite.

It clapped its teeth beside me, a shockwave ebbing from the clamp. Keeping focused, I charged forward with my right hand dragging below me. As the creature turned its head, my fist snapped up into the roof of its mouth. The teeth of the creature chipped and uprooted as my fist knocked

its head upward. The dry, brittle ground cracked beneath my feet. I stayed silent with my next punch, turning on my feet.

My left hand slammed into the top of the armored lion's head, cleaving it down like a guillotine. The skull crumbled under the might of my fist, but the monster's life remained strong. It swiped with its bone covered paw. The claws scraped against my armor as I deflected the blow, but even the offset strike sent me dragging backward.

A green pouch smashed into the bone dragon's face, acid melting its mauled skull. It howled out, stumbling sideways past me. I dashed forward and whipped another strike into its side. My fist punctured the bone like tearing through tissue paper. As I pulled my hand out, several black veins crawled out towards me. They met metal, and my armor sliced into those tendrils with my own dark wires.

Recoiling for safety, the monster stepped back. Two spears sliced its knees, causing the head of the monster to clap the pavement. I ramped up my augmentation runes as its slitted eyes widened at my looming frame. In my gaze, it laid broken, searching for safety. It found none. I stomped the top of its head into the ground, bone crunching underfoot. It jerked away, but I charged towards it.

Another stomp, and I smashed the thing's face once more. Althea tore its back legs out, the creature staring at us with horror, but I gave no sympathy to the monster. Its brethren killed my kind, the beasts composed of melted humans. In us, it found its own monsters. In that way, it wanted mercy it wasn't willing to give.

The monster's bone plates cracked under my fists. With a quick series of bites, my helmet tore through dozens of pounds of the creature, the creature still alive with half its head missing. After a minute of my armor feasting, the unnamed monster perished in a pool of its own blood. The other pod's remains formed into three different creatures when we finished off the bone lion.

One was a hulking, brown boar with dozens of tusks growing from its face. The front paws of the monster curled into bestial hands instead of hooves like its back feet. The same intelligent eyes looked at me like the bone lion's. The other creature hulked out as an enormous yellow insect, like a praying mantis except with a flexible abdomen covered in jagged spikes and three eyes. Vibrant stripes of red interlaced its exoskeleton, and the limbs on its mouth ended with teeth, like stacks of moving enamel.

The mandible mouth made a mockery of a grin when I looked at it, an eerie drool leaking from its mouth. The last creature crawled out as a dozen legged crab with a mouth at the top of its shell. The arms fed towards the top of its head, made for shoving things into the abyss of teeth. All in all, the creatures made for a hellish scene, except for the boar. Its demeanor matched a demi human more than an outright monster.

I tried opening my status to allocate my points from my gained levels, but the beasts surrounded me. The boar charged first, roaring as it did. The crab scuttled behind it. The mantis opened its scythe arms, revealing hundreds of horns under them. One horn shot from under the mantises arms at a time, drilling out like fleshy cables. Their collapse used tactics, unlike their zombie counterparts. They weren't the only ones with a strategy, however.

My runes revved into action while Oppression weighed down on them. Those monsters approached, but off in the distance, the ear shattering echo of Althea's rifle blared. A lance of bone shot through the arms of the mantis, pinning it to the pod tree as it shrieked. The boar reached me, trying to gore me on its tusks.

I stomped forward, the energy in my runes reverberating with destructive force. Its head left a crack in the pavement under my feet as I weaved all my weight into my next blow. My right arm dragged behind me as I turned, my body struggling with all the untamed energy. I pushed more of my own tenacious life energy into the blow, further amplifying the already devastating punch.

As my blow landed, it unloaded kinetic force into the boar's face like a cannon. The tusks shattered. The skull ruptured down the middle. Blood sprayed in all directions like I squished a watermelon full of blood. My armor grinned, a set of spiked teeth forming. It laughed, a haunting echo amidst the decay. The same bloodlust of before crawled in from every direction.

I stomped it out as I stomped the boar's neck. Althea sent a bolt into one of the boar's eyes and out the other, ending its life. Keeping my sanity intact, I ducked backward, dodging a clamping claw from the top mouthed crab. Several snippers crushed towards me, but I curved myself, dodging each of them. They dug into the pavement below me as the crab turned itself and dug its teeth into the boar's corpse.

The cannibal drenched itself in the blood of its comrade, but as it did, I found a weakness. It carried many teeth in its gut, but the teeth shattered against the bones of its brethren. I leapt up towards it, landing inside the crab's mouth. The jaws of the monster closed in, an open maw turning into a closed iron-maiden. The red slit of my armor lit its insides, blood all around me.

And it was the monster's, not my own.

The teeth of the creature cracked and fractured against my armor. With a reformation, I turned my hands into dull mallets. I hammered into the insides of the crab, teeth piling at my feet. The monster's mouth opened when I dug into its insides, the numerous arms above me poking at me in a desperate struggle to get me out.

Spears stopped those claws, tearing and exposing the white flesh of the crab's muscle. I shouted in anger,

"Who's eating who now?"

The crab's lashings on my back doubled in effort at my taunting, but the damage sank in already. I turned its insides to outsides. I gripped and ripped everything and anything. The meat grinder of a mouth turned to a pulpy, bloody mass. After a minute of sloshing in it, I kicked out its side. As I crawled out, the monster stopped struggling, only its muscles twitching at random.

Blood dripped from me, but it soaked into my skin. I turned, finding the mantis already having reached Althea. She deflected a blow with her shield before lopping it apart with a few quick slices. I envied that ability of hers, but I also counted my own blessings. I survived jumping into a teeth crab. Turning back to said creature, I crawled back inside the thing. With my armor, I ate my way out, my helmet consuming the meat like a ravenous beast.

One of my arms stabbed out of the crab's outer shell before another arm opened the hole further. Cracking the shell open, I fell out before standing up. I hit my chest, growling at the crab. I shook off the blood frenzy after, wiping some gunk off of me. I let out a sigh before shutting down Oppression. I turned to the others,

"Ah man, that was gross, but I prefer monsters to deformed people. They feel better to tear apart. By comparison."

Althea glanced around at the bodies, "I don't understand how they can sit in your aura. It's just too painful."

I rubbed some crab gunk off my armor, "It's because they have a ton of damage resistance."

Althea raised an eyebrow, my explanation a bit thin. I spread out my arms, "Think of it like this. Oppression's base value is very high. When reduced, it's not that big a deal. It goes from like ten thousand to...five hundred damage a minute. Enemies like this-" I kicked the shell of the crab, "They don't take much damage from it. It stops them from regenerating more than actually taking them out. It's still useful, but nothing too crazy."

Althea pursed her lips, "Cool...So armored enemies give you trouble? Compared to unarmored ones, that is."

I didn't know if that was the case yet, but I nodded anyway, "Probably."

She raised her rifle, "That's good. My abilities are great versus armored targets. I can fill in the gaps in your offense, so that's, er, cool."

I spread out my hands, "Yeah, we make a good team." I turned and looked around, "Let's handle our statuses and move on. We should follow the route Torix handed us." I winced as I said, "Standing still is how Elijah almost got me before. We aren't ready for him, not by a longshot."

Kessiah sauntered up, "No, *you're* not...I'll keep you pups safe in the meantime."

Althea smiled at Kessiah, "Thanks."

Kessiah returned the smile, "No problem, hon."

Even though it shouldn't, I bristled at seeing how warm Kessiah was to her. It wasn't like I wanted Althea to suffer or anything, but it felt unfair in a way. Still, I'd rather get the brunt of Kessiah's attitude rather than Althea. Letting it go, I opened my status. I furrowed my brow, only having gained seven levels. My eyes widened in surprise at that.

Schema slowed leveling down to an arbitrary grind. Even with the experience split between two people, we fought overleveled enemies with doubled experience. Getting levels from the risky venture was a given. I mean, normal people fought monsters at their level or lower, according to Torix at least, so it might've taken months for even a single level-up.

Despite that, our blistering pace still seemed slow sometimes. I couldn't even imagine what a normal person went through. I hovered my hand over strength, ready to put a bunch of points into the attribute. Before I did, I leaned back and ran a few calculations. Schema's status let me put points into different attributes before finalization. After messing around with it for a while, I gained a few insights. Endurance gave me about twice as many total points as Strength.

That changed my priorities. I intended on putting my last level one hundred perk into strength or constitution. They both gave very useful bonuses after all. However, while they synergized with my fighting style, those attributes didn't amplify from my trees at all. In particular, the Determinator line created a lopsided benefit to points in endurance.

Each point placed resulted in a cascade of bonuses, giving me more bang for my buck. Endurance boosted willpower which boosted intelligence which boosted luck then finally charisma. The other 'chain' of stats started with constitution that boosted strength which boosted dexterity then perception then ending at charisma again. This made constitution and endurance into these cardinal attributes that everyone should place a few points into at least.

Schema did that probably so that people were incentivised to never be too squishy. In my case, the Determinator trees bolstered my endurance chain by leaps and bounds. For that reason, I wanted to keep investing in endurance, piling the attribute up overtime. The health gained served a dual purpose as well, both tankiness and mana. My runic markings made mana into power. It came together well, syncing up like a puzzle.

So I peered down the endurance chain, finding intelligence peering back at me. Intelligence's benefits came across less clearly than either strength or constitution, but Blood Magic tidied that problem up nicely. Intelligence gave me mana, meaning more health. My armor synergized with health to an absurd extent. The extra resistance, health regen, and total health took my combat effectiveness to another level.

Besides all of that, intelligence granted a lot of intangible benefits. I won't lie either; I really wanted to feel and be smarter. Ever since I entered a school, I always felt a bit duller than most people. I made C's all throughout school, and whether I admitted it or not, that hurt my self esteem. This attribute acted as a way of fixing that issue without me having to confront an uncomfortable reality.

It was a win win.

Scathing personal issues aside, those reasons ended up with me placing my spare points into intelligence. Again, I hesitated to finalize. I snapped my fingers, a eureka moment passing through me. If I kept investing into endurance, the cascading points would give me the intelligence perk overtime. There was no real rush to get the last level 100 perk, so I put my points into endurance and selected finalize.

No rush of mental clarity coursed over me, but endurance condensed my blood and joints. The magical constructs in my body thickened as well, the arcane bonds tightening like coils of steel. The lack of mental impact left me disappointed, but I persisted either way. I'd hold onto my reasoning and follow it through to the end, wherever that left me.

With a little more health than before, I trekked onward into the deeper parts of the city. Althea tailed not far behind, staying outside Oppression's effective range. The plants and other various fungal creatures shriveled, giving enemies less places to hide from us. While irrelevant at first, the deeper parts of this new terrain enveloped the surroundings, choking the life out of anything coming nearby.

The thick tundra of fungal vines, herbs, and weeds altered Springfield into an alien landscape. Yellow and tan capped mushrooms of varying heights collected into dense clusters on the dirt. Stalks of dark yellow crawled and twisted into clusters, creating shrubs above the mushroom laden, grassy ground. Roots from nearby pod trees grew between these patches, along with dead grass. Vines of black crawled up and out of these tall trees, latching and crawling across nearby buildings and power poles.

At this point, the density for forest of fungi made moving forward a slow trudge. We didn't even make it a hundred feet forward before several zombies crawled out of cars, windows, or from out of the ground. The underground zombies carried roots growing out of them, like they were part of a tree's root system. They probably were.

The human bodies molded halfway into the mass of flesh and wood, making me wince. More mental whiplash rattled through me as the corpse of a father and its children sprinted towards me. They fused half together, and I wanted to run. Not out of fear per say, but more because I disturbed their remains. It was like we were grave robbers, turning the bodies into resources for our gain.

Despite my misgivings, the dead didn't know the difference. They ran at me, and I pulped their remains all the same. After taking out a few deformed families, even Kessiah dealt with some anxiety, her snappy phrases dampening as she fell into a strange silence. Althea tolerated our deformed surroundings the best of us all, actually. Our sniper stayed sharp, her mind accepting this reality without much difficulty.

Without anything to compare this too, Althea accepted the sights as her normal. Knowing how awful this was compared to its former glory, I promised to leave Althea with a different impression of Springfield. Taking me out of that head space, two children leaped towards me with their warped corpses howling. I grabbed them as a harpoon detonated one of their skulls, letting me breath for a second. I collected myself again before I crushed another one into the ground with a punch.

The black blood splattered in every direction as a nameless father dove onto my back. It pressed me down onto the ground, the man's neck split open with teeth. I shot out a few spikes from my back, the father's body skewering. I lifted it up and shoved myself sideways. The monster tumbled before crashing into a car. I dashed and slammed it into the vehicle's door, glass crushing and falling from the bent steel.

My armor chomped forward, devouring the creature. The jagged teeth cleaved through the flesh, severing and absorbing the creature in seconds. It tried crawling away as my armor ate it, but with two quick stomps, I crushed its legs. It couldn't escape as I tore it apart with my helmet's teeth. Althea shouted from a block away,

"Uhm, what are you doing? It looks like you're eating it...I don't know if that's sanitary."

Despite myself, I actually laughed a little. My helmet did the work of eating, and it chewed up another hunk. When it finished, I turned to Althea, "This is how my armor absorbs stuff now. I mean, its not really my preferred method, but I can't evolve my armor any other way. That's something I can't let happen, because we need every edge we can get. This has to be done."

Althea winced, "Huh...Uhm, it's gross."

I flinched at her words, my helmet covering my face. I nodded at her, "I mean...I can't say you're wrong about that."

After a few seconds of contemplation, Althea shot a harpoon through the core of one of Yawm's pawns. As the zombie fell down, Althea shrugged, "It isn't like my power's any better, so we, er, have that in common at least."

She gave me a weak smile, and I returned the gesture. I walked over towards the corpse before using my armor to get the ambient mana from it. With the corpses handled and the plants being destroyed, we trekked forward through the ruins of Springfield once more. I numbed at the

destruction and desolation, the abnormal situation becoming a new average. For once, I appreciated the lessening of emotion as it left me less exhausted.

After a while of walking, we all stood at a crossroads between the town and its suburbia. The houses gave way to dilapidated shops and brick buildings as we moved forward. The raided stores emptied out from raiders, full of rotted meat and produce. Jugs of milk blew up in the freezers, more festering pits than freezers at this point. Cars crashed into telephone poles, light posts, and even brick walls.

The fungal invasion smothered all of it, masking the signs of our old society. We'd never have seen it if not for Oppression's radius. It culled and cleared all life, sterilizing the ground as if we salted it. When the aura passed over the cars, no enemies spilled out. The petal insects hobbled over open corpses, but they lacked any means of getting into enclosed spaces.

That gave me some hope that we may find some survivors. The zombies tended to shatter encapsulated areas, however. Whether that was intentional or not, I couldn't say. That habit turned the hobbling petals bugs into a field of death. We found a few people turning while still alive, and it wasn't pretty. Oppression made the painful demise into a merciful death for most of them. We couldn't carry them with us either.

I tried saving a few of them, the horrid surgery more a form of torture than anything helpful. I continued the grim deed despite my lack of success, however. It was the only way to save Michael and Kelsey, so I did what I had to. After a dozen failures, I stopped tearing the living apart. Whether it was right or wrong didn't matter to me at that point.

I couldn't handle the screams of the mutants anymore.

By then, my mind muted. I didn't think anymore. I put one leg in front of the other, and I reacted. I couldn't handle any in depth thoughts at that time. Kessiah gave me a break, and Althea cracked jokes here or there. That eased our journey, but it taxed me all the same. In that droning existence, time passed. Minutes turned into hours. Hours turned into evenings.

The sun crossed overhead, daylight devolving to sunset. In the distance, we found a grocery store. The sound of chewing leaked out of it. Several of the spawns crowded around a few unconverted corpses and some rotting meat. They loved the putrefaction in the freezer isles, the food there spoiled beyond recognition. Everywhere else, the cans and other foods cleared out forever ago.

People left food in the refrigerators since it took people some time to finish the tutorial. The food all rotted by then. The zombies swarmed around those festering hellholes, their misshapened mouths sunken into the rotting mush. We took advantage of them feasting away. Althea and I skulked in, the rows of empty aisles standing taller than us both.



Some unlooted rows stuck out like the motor supplies section. Pacing by, I picked up two bottles of lighter fluid. I motioned towards Althea. She raised an eyebrow in confusion, but I walked forward anyway. As I got within Oppression's range, I pointed at the zombies. I tossed a bottle of lighter fluid towards them, the bottle landing in the brown filled fridge the spawn's indulged in.

The amber fluid leaked out, butane spilling everywhere. I tossed another bottle. I turned to Althea and whispered,

"Shoot it."

Althea raised her rifle, landing a harpoon dead center of a bottle. The force alone detonated the bottle in a fiery flash. The explosion chained with the other bottle, setting all four spawns on fire. I moved forward at the same time as the detonation, putting the spawns within and Althea out of Oppression's range. They died over the next five minutes from a few harpoons, my aura, and a few well placed punches. Schema even recognized my efforts.

**Skill gained! Resourceful(lvl 1) - You use whatever is at hand for whatever you need. +1% to damage from environmental objects or traps. +1% to creativity regarding quick planning.**

How Schema enhanced my creativity, I couldn't know. Despite that ambiguity, We walked out with a new skill and a few more levels under our belts. Getting out of the store no worse for wear, I shut off Oppression before walking up to Althea. I dragged my hands down my face, "How much more hunting should we do today?"

She glanced around, making sure no other zombies were present. Althea took a breath, "Torix gave us a lot of leeway for the plan, so we can just go until we're exhausted. I'm already tired, so we can stop if you want."

I gave my cheeks a few slaps, "No. I'm alright. Let's keep going."

Kessiah raised a brow at me, her hair a mess, "Between you two, you're the one who looks tired." Kessiah propped her weight onto a hip, "Even though I'm feeling it too, if I'm honest."

I frowned, "I'm fine."

I blinked, my shoulders wanting to slump. Kessiah scoffed, "You're barely reacting anymore."

I took a breath, "I'm just desensitized. I can't react to everything all the time. Come on, we can keep on going."

That's how we spent the rest of the day and even a few hours into the night. Althea transmogrified her eyes, letting her see in the dark. That let us set traps or just brute force our way through our blinded enemies. They relied on sight mostly, so the darkness rendered them

helpless. When all was said and done, I gained sixty one levels and Althea gained forty two. It was a goldmine.

It made a night and day difference for both of us as we retraced our steps out the quarantine zone. We found our way out of the barricade with Torix's map and Oppression's cleared path. Kessiah tailed us the entire day, making sure no one or no thing could kill us before we fought back. She actually killed a few monsters, the remnant just ripping them limb from limb with ease.

Despite all of our slaughtering, we never found any sign of a fight having taken place. I hoped and expected some resistance from the humans here, but the monsters engulfed them. It left me embittered, but I kept my head up. I closed in on my next evolution, and I cultivated an enormous pool of endurance. It fed into willpower and intelligence, bolstering those attributes to respectable levels.

Althea rose her strength to absurd heights too. I learned that because Althea and I chatted away about our builds while we all walked. We passed the plains towards our current base doing that, and it rejuvenated me some. Shades cloaked us both, but our outlines gave us both sight of each other. At least enough to work off of.

Althea tapped her chin, "But will strength help my cannon? I really don't think so."

I raised a hand, "But you mentioned an ability that doubles your effective strength already, and you put most of your points today into strength. That makes the strength perk required at this point. Your melee attacks will be devastating, sure, but you'll also be faster. You need to be strong to move fast."

Althea grumbled, "I know, I know, but even if I move fast, that doesn't mean I can handle it. Er, I've always had a ton of strength, and it usually outruns my dexterity. I usually reach a point where I can't control my body anymore. It's like...my mind is too slow to comprehend what I'm doing."

I gawked at her, "Woah...That reminds me of a sticking point I had with constitution. Have you tried putting some points into it yet?"

Althea frowned, "Yeah. It's definitely made me less frail, but the mass is really hard to work with. I'm easing into it, giving myself time to adjust as my damage resistance get higher."

"Ah, that's a great idea."

Althea locked her hands behind herself, "So...What are you working on? Anything for getting some range attacks? They're convenient, you know."

I rubbed my temples, "Plans are in the works, let me tell yah. I'm going to use my dominion magic for it, but I want to have augmentation down before I do. I like mastering one thing before moving onto another."

Althea murmured, "That makes sense...Give me one sec. I got to do something in my status."

She clicked a screen in front of her before her muscles rippled over her body in a wave. She stared at her hands for a moment before smashing a hand into a nearby tree. The wood exploded outwards like she'd struck it with a grenade. The tree's trunk bent away from her strike, long wedges split up and down the bark and wood. She turned on her feet, smacking the tree over. It tumbled with a momentous thud.

Althea hardly noticed the tree falling. She keeled over, grabbing her shin, "Ah...I think I broke something. Ooh, ouch."

After having seen her so much, I had an idea when she was serious. I rolled my eyes, stretching out a hand, "You're going to be fine."

She frowned, "Dang. You could at least pretend you're concerned."

She grabbed my hand, jerking herself up and off the ground. Her pull lifted her a few feet above the ground, and she smiled, "Yeah...This was a good idea."

I shrugged, "What can I say? I'm full of them. Speaking of which-"

I opened my own status screen and gave it a look over. It was a pleasant sight for sore eyes. The hard day paid off.

### **Level 221 | Attribute Menu**

**Strength [44.2] | Constitution [36.3] | Endurance [384] | Dexterity [32.8] | Willpower [187.8] | Intelligence [80.3] | Charisma [36.7] | Luck [40] | Perception [30.5]**

### **Daniel Hillside, The Harbinger of Cataclysm | Character Screen**

**Health - 12,800/12,800 | Health Regen - 2,169/min | Stamina - 7,825/7,825 | Stamina Regeneration - 89/sec | Damage Resistance - 97% | Mental Resistance - 97% | Physical Power - (+)542% | Damage Increase - 5% | Evolution: 14.96 Million/16.00 Million**

**Aura - Oppression | Current Damage: (8,000 + 25% of your health)/minute within a 150ft radius.**

Wondering how much of a difference the health made, I walked out in front of Althea. I reached out an arm, "Hey, do mind shooting me through the arm? I want to test something."

Althea raised her rifle to her chest, narrowing her eyes at me, "What? I don't want to shoot you."

I pointed at my arm, "I want to see if all my health has made a difference to the spears."

She raised her brow, but her eyes stayed narrowed, "You can look at your stat sheet and see the difference. What do you need me for?"

I rolled a hand, "You ignore my damage resistance, and that gives me a really good idea of what's going on in reality, not on a statsheet."

She grimaced, "You know, you don't owe me or anything. I don't want payback for the spars."

I waved off her comment, "What? No, this is a favor for me, not payback for you."

She grimaced before turning her rifle to me. She gave me a nod before unloading a shell into my forearm. The shell lodged halfway into my limb, but it got stuck as if it shot through glue. I raised my hand, smiling at it, "Hah! It actually worked."

Althea's jaw dropped before she looked at her cannon, "How did you do that? It should've gone right through you. Is...Is this thing broken?"

I shook my head, "It's my health."

Kessiah gawked at me, "You're crazy."

I pulled the spear out, "So normally I might be mad at you, but Kessiah...You could be right this time."

I watched my forearm regrow. All the leveling perks added up, and the shell's momentum lacked enough inertia to sling me back anymore. Being heavy and dense planted me to the ground. I gave Althea a smile, "Thanks. That was all I needed to know."

Althea sighed, "Dang...I'm going to need a bigger gun."

I jogged forward towards our base, "Maybe try to get the harpoons to shoot out with greater force?"

Althea furrowed her brow as we walked up to the patch of hills disguising our current base. As we did, I stayed hopeful. Despite the enormity of our enemies, Althea and I carried unique advantages. Althea's piercing and raw strength gave her the ability to hurt anyone no matter how much health they had. On the other hand, my health gave me genuine durability. Unlike most people, I could manage a few mistakes without dying.

The endurance bolstered my mana and my willpower as well. After a few more iterations of the sigils, I'd amass a behemoth strength of my own. Hopefully. That didn't even factor in more

evolutions. Our quick rise left me in a better mood after what a slog it devolved into. I walked up to the base before Kessiah flashed across a hill to me.

She gouged out a chunk of dirt as she stopped herself. Placing a hand on my chest, she hunched forward,

"Someone's in there besides Torix. It's strong. Be ready."

Althea and I set ourselves up for a fight as we headed back into the hill base. As we entered, Torix's voice came into focus,

"I take it we'll reap the benefits of your trading as well?"

An electronic voice strong as metal replied, "Yes. Indeed you will. Schema and the Force of Iron will be pleased with your cooperation. May we both prosper."

We reached the bottom of the earthen stairs, roots hanging from the roof. Stepping into the hill home, I gawked at a faceless, robotic humanoid. Its enormous frame cast a shadow over us, and it gazed down like a reaper. Smooth, futuristic, and intimidating, the figure kept a lightly armored skin suit over its body up to the shoulders and arms. There, the scale of its equipment changed.

A giant platform bolted onto the torso of the person, making a flat line of black armor at its head and shoulders. This giant, smooth machinery supported the giant with flaring lights and tubes all over it. They pumped a glowing blue mana, and at the edges of this block, two giant, over-sized arms hung from the sides of it. The arms extended down to the dirt, the automaton's massive knuckles pressing against the ground.

Black cables hung from the back of that platform. Tubes ran through the colossal, hydraulic arms and torso. Several moving bolts locked in at strategic points, giving the arms and shoulders excellent range of motion. On the pitch black plate covering its head, six silver bolts created a hexagonal pattern. The entire living suit sheened a glossy, bright blue. The metal carried a dull gray material tracing its joints.

It stood twice as tall as Torix, dwarfing everyone in the room as a titan. Even from a glance, I could tell it was an absolute entity. It wasn't something any of us could fight. Its presence alone demanded compliance. It had that as Kessiah gave it a bow. Our remnant spoke with reverence, "It's good to see you."

The giant lifted a palm as large as I was, the room filled by its form. It spoke with the same piercing, robotic voice, "At ease, Kessiah. You've done nothing wrong...Yet."

Kessiah winced, but she kept her face low. The faceless armor looked at me, and I shrank underneath its gaze. It turned a hand to me.

"I am the Overseer sent by Schema. It is good to meet you...Harbinger."

## 44 The Overseer

I gawked at the enormous presence, "It's...It's good to meet you too, Overseer."

The Behemoth turned to Kessiah, "You and Torix have joined forces again. Interesting. You both have quite the collection of tools at your disposal. Breaking the controlled territories shouldn't be a problem."

Althea unformed her rifle, and she made herself small. She murmured, "Hello, sir. I'm Althea Tolstoy. It's great to meet you."

The Overseer tilted its head at Althea, "We shall see if our meeting is good with time. To Schema, you are an experiment. So is the Harbinger. Whether either of you manifest your potential is the real question."

Torix turned a palm towards the giant, and the necromancer murmured, "Now, that is exactly what I am here for. This deal of ours will enable them to truly shine."

Kessiah crossed her arms, "What plan?"

Torix spread his hands, "You, Daniel, and Althea shall clear out the infected areas. The Force of Iron will then go behind you and move up the quarantine zone past the cleansed regions."

I raised an eyebrow, "We aren't exactly clearing the areas."

Kessiah leaned onto my head, and she sneered, "That aura of yours kills the plants and spores. You can just walk past assigned sections everyday. The Force of Iron could just walk behind us."

I glanced up at her, "Don't you think that's a bit risky to rely on my power like that? I'm pretty low level."

Kessiah rolled her eyes, "Letting Yawm's operations continue has the same risk. Taking them out is the only option. The thing is, you guys are killing any living zombies and I don't know, like 99% of all the infected *stuff*. Considering the Force of Iron wants to get rid of the infected zones, your aura is about as good as it's going to get."

The Overseer turned back towards me, its voice commanding the room, "I will organize the legion's efforts for cleaning up behind your team." The Overseer lifted a massive arm and pointed a finger at us, "You three will act as a vanguard. Torix will support you at a distance. Simple enough?"

I nodded, "Sure. That's not that different from what we had planned anyway...So, what're we getting from the Force of Iron in return?"

The Overseer lowered its hand, "Torix and I discussed an exchange of several goods, including several technologies and books. It should be a suitable compensation for organizing them."

While listening, I identified it.

**Overseer(lvl 20,000) - An enforcer of the monolith system within sector C-137. Invincible, powerful, but most of all, loyal to Schema. Do not disobey or else face elimination.**

The status read with some bias in its voice, but the level alone verified most of what it said bias or not. The Overseer turned towards Torix. The behemoth mouthed like metal,

"All parties agree. Good. We shouldn't waste anymore time here. We shall head to the Force of Iron, and I shall give the administrative rights for this faction to you...For the time being."

Torix gave the Overseer a slight bow, "Thank you. If I might ask, when shall we leave?"

The Overseer raised an enormous hand, "Now."

The giant raised a glowing arm, and arcs of blue lightning shot out of its palm before the giant clicked its fingers. Nothing changed in our room, but signs of a sudden shift ebbed in from outside. A factory hummed in the distance. Drilling machinery, revving engines, and firing guns echoed just outside the dirt walls. As I glanced around, Althea hugged herself and frowned. While I didn't hug myself, it unnerved me how potent the Overseer was.

By comparison, Torix and Kessiah kept a steady composure. I turned towards Torix,

"Where are we now?"

Torix shrugged, "We're in the Force of Iron's base. The Overseer warped us just now."

My eyes widened, "But...How?"

Torix peered at the giant. Torix murmured, "They have many of the same rights and abilities as Schema, as they are his most loyal paragons of destruction."

I turned towards the Overseer, "Were you made by Schema then?"

The Overseer didn't peer my way as he announced, "No. I earned my own strength. I climbed through his system, and I was rewarded for my own accomplishments. Schema did grant me my own cybernetic enhancements." The Overseer raised his hand, energy rippling the air like a rock tossed into a pond,

"They are...Potent."

The Overseer flicked his fingers, and above us, the ground dematerialized in a flash of light. Sun beamed in while I froze in place. Althea murmured, "So, why haven't you killed Yawm? You, uhm, look like you could do it...If you wanted to, that is."

The Overseer waved his hand, "You are not incorrect. I am able but not allowed." Wherever the Overseer's hand crossed, the dirt walls of our base disappeared in a wave of light. Tearing down the entrance to Torix's underground base, the Overseer revealed the inside of a warehouse. Soldiers stared at us, their guns pointed in our direction. The Overseer flicked a finger, the barrels curving up for each and every gun present.

The giant spread his hands, "You all serve these people now. Understood? This is a directive from Schema, and the quests will reflect this change."

The troopers gawked at the Overseer, anything it said like new laws spoken aloud. The Overseer clicked his other hand, creating a hologram of stars above us. Galaxies, nebulas, and quasars swarmed around each of us in real time, as if we drifted through the vast void of space. My eyes opened wide at the beauty and majesty of it all. I kind of whiplashed from all the changing scenery and circumstances, adding to the effect.

I appreciated the pause the Overseer gave us to relax. After a few seconds, the giant raised a hand towards the hologram, "As requested, I shall share what we know of Yawm. I relish in an opportunity to teach a little of Schema's past as well. Try to listen as I won't speak the relevant information twice."

The hologram honed onto a shiny planet that orbited around a red dwarf. It carried scars all across its surface, as if massive patches of glass reflected the nearby star's light. The overseer sighed,

"This was Wohak, a planet that sustained a population of sentient life much like earth."

The Overseer waved its hand, reversing the flow of time in the hologram. Light coalesced from a monumental detonation. A colossal, dark, and writhing shadow molded off the planet, fire raining across its surface in reverse. The Overseer winced, mainly through the tone of its voice,

"Schema's darkest instruments - Spatial Fortresses. They are disgusting but necessary. Schema could lob a chunk of iron at high enough speeds and simply crack a planet with ease. In that regard, planets are simply molten marbles floating in space. Your marble happens to be covered in dirt. If you send a large block of iron at it, the molten metal that composes the planet will split in all directions."



The Overseer raised a hand, "Schema avoids doing so as it ruins a planet for millions of years. In reality, how different are the Spatial Fortresses? It's a question for another day."

The Overseer opened his hand, zooming in on the planet, "This is where Yawm was born. This is also where he should have died. He left his planet and served Etorhma before coming back to this place. It was only after he had been touched by Etorhma that he began spewing nonsense."

Closer to the planet's surface, a writhing, dark mountain came into view, revealing giant beings. Cast in darkness, the dark blobs shifted over a scene of trees and other wildlife. It swallowed hills and lakes, crossing over them and igniting the surface as it passed. It carried no shape or reason, an incoming tidal wave of obliteration. The Overseer closed a hand,

"It's amazing how close Yawm came to creating what he wanted on Wohak. He converted his home planet into a fringe world, giving him an ample supply of materials for his experiments, most of it not of an animalistic origin. Wohak was a unique world in that regard. It's primary sentient species, the porytians, originated from plants."

The view of the hologram closed in on a wooden, hunched thing that walked on all fours. Flowing strips of wood acted as skin, and a thick layer of large, fanning leaves covered its back. Several tubes composed the mouth of the creature as it sucked up some water from a nearby pool. With no eyes and no mouth, the thing felt around with thick, elephant feet with hundreds of roots for toes.

"This is a porytian, the plant species that Yawm hails from. They have several subclasses for their species, this one being a collector. Yawm was a member of the warrior sub race."

The Overseer twisted his finger, sending the viewpoint of the hologram onto a much different creature. This beast owned the same flowing strips of wood for skin, but it stood upright. It walked on wooden goat legs, three large toes for standing. The long, wiry arms latched onto branches, letting the creature carry itself along a canopy of trees.

Falling from its back was a mane of leaves that looked like hair. The two glowing, green eyes on its face pulsed with green, ambient energy. The mana sent light through several cracks in its body. The Overseer stated,

"This is what Yawm's subspecies looked like. Lithe and agile, they can use their own hard skin for killing any predators or herbivores trying to kill the collectors of their tribes. They relish in combat as well, making them prime candidates for Schematization."

The hologram moved outwards, back to a view of the entire galaxy. The Overseer sighed and said,

"Yawm saw the horror of this universe, but in a different light. Imagine what paper must have looked like to him as he went to other worlds?"

I put my hands on my hips, "I think it would be like seeing leather boots or something."

The Overseer tilted his head, "The porytians view all plantlife as their own, a union and balance of all beings. That comparison falls flat. It is more the same as wearing human skin, or drinking from a human skull."

I shivered, "That makes a lot more sense then."

The Overseer turned back to the porytian, "But the horrors they found did not cease there. Paper would be writing on mashed bodies. Furniture and buildings are tethered corpses. Even something as benign as a flower bracelet is a terrifying prospect. This viewpoint is where Yawm's own warped views began."

The space hologram disappeared before a picture of two armies clashing came into view, one made of flesh and the other of leaves and wood.

"Yawm believed that his species would never be able to compromise with any other species. They were too different in his eyes. Over the next few hundred years, a hostile species, known as the bracken, attempted taking over Yawm's homeworld. This further entrenched his polarizing beliefs. During this war, Yawm was the porytians mightiest warrior."

An image of a single poryte hunched over a pile of torn bodies came into view. The glowing green of the creature's eyes webbed down its face and onto its chest. The shining lines ran down its shoulders, arms, and back, ending at its hands. Every part of the creature these lines ran over enlarged, turning hard and muscled. Wiry arms turned into muscled trunks.

The emerald viens linked together like a chain, keeping the creature's upper body heavy and in control. The curved legs looked more like a platform than the primary movers of this poryte. Its branch horns mirrored an elks, but too large and majestic for nature to create. It was a magnificent entity.

The Overseer simmered, "This...This is the image used to strike fear into the porytian's enemies. This was Yawm before his change. He was their symbol. The porytes won the war, destroying the bracken and enslaving them. Their species wore the bones of the bracken. They used the bracken's skin as their own parchment. They ground up their teeth, and used the powder as an abrasive."

Althea shook her head, pointing at the old Yawm, "And, uhm, Yawm wanted that to happen?"

The Overseer cast a chilly gaze over Althea. The behemoth said, "Yawm wanted to show other species the horror of what had been done to them. A hundred years of this passed before

Etorhma reached out to him. It was then that Yawm realized that there were more differences than merely plants and those of flesh."

An image of Etorhma appeared, causing gasps throughout the room. Kessiah spread her arms, "Don't you think you're telling them a bit too much?"

The Overseer waved her question away, "The Harbinger has been chosen as an avatar of Etorhma. You cannot tell me he has not already seen this entity."

Kessiah's face wrinkled like a raisin, "Daniel is an avatar? Really? *Him?*"

The Overseer turned to the image, "What matters is how different Etorhma is from us mortals. He is an immortal being who can move through space and time. Yawm saw him as a god and demon all in one. This interpretation is no further from the truth than what others have seen. Etorhma is enigmatic in that way."

On the hologram, a wave of white flashed over everything. Etorhma disappeared and the Wohak's surface came back. The Overseer gestured to it,

"Schema assimilated their world and warned them of the eldritch as well. Now Yawm knew of many different beings. He knew that he couldn't kill them all, no matter how strong he became. In the end, he went into hiding as he struggled to find a way to solve the problem he saw with existence as a whole."

The Overseer spread his arms, "Yawm said, 'How can beings, different to their cores, coexist? All differences are erased in wars and death and destruction. From that inescapable truth, there is but one way to prevent hatred and war, and that is through unity.' Yawm's twisted logic is wrong of course, but he saw no other alternative. He would create a singular creature, a singularity of all beings."

The Overseer closed the hologram with the wave of his hand, "Yawm found a way of bonding plants and creatures of flesh. He turned himself into the new abomination he created. His entire world burned and his species was torn asunder by his corrupted vision. Schema allowed this to happen."

One of the Overseer's hands clamped shut, and his voice rose, "And during the very apex of Yawm's power, he assaulted one of the Sentinels with an army of corrupt porytians. They warred for weeks until Yawm slayed Schema's guardian, and the porytian's hero stole the Sentinel's dimensional slicer. Wielding it, Yawm has traveled between worlds at his own leisure, bending them until they break."

The bolts on the Overseer glowed bright blue, "We will crush him here, before he destroys yet another world to support his own delusions. He has destroyed thirteen world's too many, and we will crush him before he completes his goal."

My heart sank in my chest. I mumbled, "Th-thirteen? Thirteen planets? Like, actual worlds?"

The Overseer deadpanned, "Yes."

I peered down, overwhelmed by that absurdity. Althea chimed, "Uh, how are we supposed to do what thirteen world's couldn't do?"

The Overseer lowered his hand, "Using your unique talents, you will dismantle Yawm's forces before killing him while he lingers alone. Know that Yawm has sweet words, his voice laced in honey. He speaks in convincing riddles and compelling lies. Always remember, Yawm is a misguided fool with a reckless goal. He will stop at nothing to accomplish it, no matter how many worlds he decimates. Yours will be as those before it, should you not stop him."

I ran my hands through my hair, keeping my breathing calm. A long pause pressed onto the room as if an anvil weighed us all down. Torix appeared confident still, his will unshakeable. That made sense. The lich already resolved to duke it out with Yawm regardless of the situation. Althea remained brave as well, fighting Yawm being her only way of escaping his experiments. She'd be turned inside out if Yawm got a hold of her again.

For me, my reasoning was the simplest of all. This was my home planet, and I wasn't about to watch humanity die without a fight. Unlike the three of us, Kessiah lacked any real reason to fight to the death, and the remnant was all too aware of that fact. She took a few steps back, leaning against a wall. It soaked in, and her hands trembled. Her breathing scattered into short bursts, turning sharp and rapid like she breathed in broken glass.

Kessiah blinked, "I'm...I'm stuck here. And...And I'm fighting something like that?"

The Overseer's stare might as well have been a hammer crashing against her cheek. The titan said like stone, "Yes. You will fight or you will die."

Kessiah blinked, her voice rising, "But...but you sealed this planet off. How are we going to get reinforcements?"

The Overseer announced, "You won't."

An awkward tension spread across the room as Kessiah gazed around in shock. She fumbled out her words, "There's no dungeons we can level with here. There's no craftsman or tech hubs or system analysts. We can't find any ancient secrets or hidden treasures either. We...We're being sent off to die? And for what, exactly? So you can *pretend* you tried to stop Yawm? You...You can't do this."

The Overseer tilted his head, "I can. I must. I have."

Kessiah raised her hands to the Overseer, "None of my contacts or friends are going to come here knowing they won't be able to leave, even through 'illegal' means. I was fine with fighting

Yawm before because I thought it might be an uphill battle, but this...We don't stand a chance in hell of winning. We're all going to die here."

The Overseer remained unmoving, "You cannot decide that. This is the will of Schema, and each of you shall enact it...Unflinchingly."

Kessiah unhinged, her voice rising, "We're trapped in a wasteland. A dirtball with no technology, magic, engineering-" She turned to Torix. She shouted, "What the hell is this? This was supposed to be a nice side adventure. I was supposed to just see runes, take a few pictures, and sell them for cash. I wasn't supposed to be trapped in a primitive world and forced to die."

Kessiah stomped over, but Torix could only peer away and murmur, "I...I'm sorry. I couldn't have imagined it would end up-"

Kessiah lifted the lich, and she reared her hand back. She howled out, "I'm going to die alone here, and it's your fault. It's all because you lied about what was going on. It's because you-" Kessiah turned away, and she bit through her lip and tongue. Blood dripped out, dropping onto the freshly teleported dirt.

The red dollops channeled from the ground, siphoning around Kessiah. The remnant's face gnarled into a twisted visage of rage,

"I just got everything back together in my life after you came in and tore it all down. This was supposed to be a break from all the mercenary work, and now-" Kessiah seethed, "You can't do this to me. You *can't*. Not again. Not this time."

I winced as her voice radiated in the Force of Iron's garage. Kessiah's wrath oozed from her, a palpable aura. Torix shook his head, "I'm sorry, but there's nothing that can be done. Forces outside my control have trapped us here, and I aim to make the best of this situation. Perhaps you should as well."

Kessiah shook Torix as she stated, "Outside your control? You saw the ritual. You knew something could go wrong, but that's not how you explained the situation to me. You...You just can't leave things be. You always have to put your hands and fingers on everything and warp it however you like. You like to be a puppet master with all the strings."

Kessiah's hands tore Torix robe as she grimaced at the lich. She seethed, "And it's all because you know better, right? You always know everything, so everything always works out just fine and dandy. Hah, yeah, just like when we first met. Just like right now, huh?"

Torix's eyes flared green, and he peered away. Kessiah spit as she spoke, "I...I wanna kill you. I want to end you and your little lich body. Gah."

Torix winced before sighing, “Hah...If you kill me, I can’t repay you for my mistakes, now can I? My death dooms you as well. Regardless of your current feelings, you need all of us to assist you in this effort. Control yourself.”

Kessiah heaved a few deep breaths. She threaded the line between rage and reason. Kessiah shook in place, not from holding Torix up but from fury. She turned away, nodding her head in disgust. She turned to Torix and smoldered out,

“Oh, you’d better pull me out of this, or else I’ll show you a dozen different ways you can die despite that phylactery of yours.”

Althea murmured, “Uhm, you know, Torix is in the same situation as us. I-I don’t know-”

Kessiah tilted her head to Althea. Kessiah radiated, “Oh, you think so, huh? He’s a *lich*, honey. If he dies, his soul will be sent to his phylactery god knows where. If *we* die, that’s it. We’re done. It’s over.”

Kessiah glowered at Torix. She fumed, “He’s risking us, but not himself. That’s how he always does things.”

Kessiah’s words fell down on me like icy water. I numbed all over, wincing as Kessiah’s anger over her situation made sense. Torix’s eyes flared red, but the lich stayed silent. Kessiah hurled Torix through the dirt wall of our just warped base. Torix’s equipment, charts, and graphs crashed into the air before the lich’s frail body hit the edge of the garage’s wall. The lich wasn’t as decrepit as I imagined, however.

The metal wall stretched before popping in a violent rupture. Torix tumbled on the dirt just outside the warehouse before he pushed himself up. Brushing himself off, Torix simmered, “Is your anger out, or perhaps you’d rather breed further animosity between us? And just as well, I didn’t lie to you about what occurred here. I was merely unaware of what would happen in the future. Excuse me for not being an all knowing oracle as you presume me to be.”

Torix pointed at his chest, “I never told you to think I had all the answers. I never told you to believe my words as law. You have a brain too, Kessiah, whether you believe you do or not. So yes, your *highness*, I’m oh so sorry I’ve made mistakes, but unlike some people, I do all that I can to prevent them.”

Torix looked down at Kessiah, “And I have done everything in my power to assist your escape from here. Accusing me of otherwise is far worse an insult than merely tossing me around.”

Kessiah closed her eyes as her form shifted, the air condensing around her in a wave. She howled out, and the air pressure shifted. A wave passed over us, knocking people back and

against the wall. The howl loomed across the landscape, a brutal, hateful cry. Kessiah walked over to a car, and she squeezed her hands into the steel, the metal crumbling.

After taking a few breaths she lashed out in frustration. Kessiah lifted the jeep and heaved it at another wall of the garage. The enormous collision left my ears ringing. The jeep tumbled into the distance, banging on hard dirt and harder pavement. Kessiah stomped out, her feet piercing concrete with each earth-shattering impact. She leaped away, getting distance between everyone and her.

I let out a held breath, not really remembering when I stopped breathing. Everyone else in the room did the same as Torix hopped over the large hole in the wall. The lich interlocked his hands behind himself and turned to us, "Hm, I must say, that went far better than I anticipated. She's not nearly as angry as I would've expected. She may even help us later if we're lucky."

My jaw slackened as I mouthed, "That...That was *good*?"

Torix put a hand on my shoulder, "As some of your literature has stated: hell hath no fury like a woman scorned. In this case, she's a remnant as well, so you may double that phrase's magnitude."

The Overseer turned to Torix. The giant said, "You believe she will assist you?"

Torix paced back and forth, "For now, yes. She is the strongest of us. We will need her assistance, else we will most certainly struggle against Yawm's Followers, let alone the cretin himself."

The Overseer peered where Kessiah left. The massive figure's tone lightened, "Did you trap her here on purpose? Perhaps you actually anticipated the quarantine?"

I frowned, wondering that myself. Torix stuck his nose up, "I'd never use underhanded methods like that. How could I anticipate a seal being placed here like that? It seems less like a method of killing Yawm and more a way of ensuring this planet's death."

The Overseer turned its hulking frame to Torix, "Schema's motives aside, this wouldn't be the first time you've predicted unlikely outcomes."

Torix's eyes flickered, "And it most certainly shall not be the last either, but this isn't one of those cases. Unfortunately, Kessiah has many reasons to doubt me on that account, but I aim to regain her trust."

Althea walked up to the Overseer, "Uhm, hello Overseer, sir. Would you mind if I ask a question?"

The Overseer opened a palm towards her, "What would you like to know?"

Althea murmured, "You were really angry about Yawm. It sounded personal, so I was just wondering if something was wrong...Er, that's all."

A silence lingered before the Overseer sighed. It hissed out with the sounds of steam and metal. The Overseer raised a hand, "Do you remember the bracken? The species that Yawm and his kind enslaved?"

Althea scratched her cheek, "Er, yeah. I do."

The Overseer pointed at himself, "I was one of their slaves. This is the first time Schema has let me actively work against Yawm. The other Overseers have failed to stop him. I will not."

I took a step back, stunned at his honesty. Even Torix's eyes flared white with surprise. The Overseer brushed us off, "I won't speak of those times further, but I will act in accordance with them. That means being the intermediary between you and the Force of Iron."

The Overseer turned away, "I've spent more time than I should here already. Speaking of history catches me at times. Even further, history has a way of ensnaring people in its web, whether through its repetition or its curiosities."

The Overseer stepped forward, and we passed through the warehouse as a group. The Overseer pointed a single finger at the gated doorway. Several tiny spikes of lightning arced from the giant's fingertips, making the door pop off its hinges and open. We all walked through the doorway before Althea murmured, "Overseer, I was wondering why you have emotions. Anytime I've spoken with Sentinels, they seem more...Robotic, I guess."

The Overseer opened a red status screen, typing on it, "Overseers are given full control of their conscience. Schema tried making Sentinels and Overseers completely driven by AI interfaces before. They were never as successful as a sentient mind. It was mostly due to risk management. The AIs take no risks, meaning they sacrificed many worlds to the eldritch without due cause."

Althea glanced forward, "Oh...Thanks for the answer."

The Overseer closed his red screen, "And it will be the final one before we meet again."

We walked in front of the Force of Iron. The warehouse amped up the security, and I spotted it all through the massive hole Kessiah left behind. The soldiers installed several turrets at the top of the building. New guards walked around other warehouses, and the troops even put up some barbed wire along the windows of the building, though it wouldn't do them any good.

We walked out of our building and towards a different one. As we approached, several of the armor clad soldiers aimed their rifles at us. Once they identified the levels of our party, those



soldiers lowered their aim and threw themselves into a frenzy. Several even ran away when they saw the extra question marks beside the Overseer's name.

I didn't blame them.

Before any stragglers got too far, the Overseer raised his hand, and everyone stopped in place. As the titan lowered his hand, the force was allowed to move again but none of them did. They stayed frozen in place, terrified of the giant walking with a group of high leveled unknowns. We walked into a warehouse clad with flags and radio towers. It was the command center for this faction.

The Overseer faced his hand forward with his fingers pressed together. He opened his hand, and the walls separating us from the commanding office unfolded like wet tissue paper. Torix didn't even flinch, and I managed to stop myself from showing my amazement. Althea didn't quite restrain hers, her eyes still popping open with surprise.

To me, the Overseer's absurd telekinesis fell right in line with my expectations for him. At the end of this newly created hallway, a man specced out in a different, fancier model of armor leaned over a map of Springfield. He didn't have a helmet on, letting us see his face. With gray hair and a grayer beard, he looked like an old sea captain put onto land against his will. Carrying a look of utter confusion, he just stared at the five of us.

The Overseer reached a hand up to him,

"Hello, Sergeant Whitley. This group of four unknowns will assist your section of the force with containing the infected area. They will clear out invaded sectors, and your troops will lock in the containment field behind them. Do you understand?"

Sergeant Whitley shot up into a salute before shouting, "Sir, yes, sir."

The Overseer loomed, "As long as you understand. Don't disappoint me, but more importantly, don't fail Schema." The Overseer turned to us, "Good luck to you all. You will need it."

The Overseer typed out some coordinates into his red status, and his commands generated a portal. It showed a world of fire and brimstone, and the juggernaut trotted in without a care in the world. As the tear in space-time clashed shut, we all stayed there for a bit. Everything happened so suddenly, air rushing past my ears to fill the void he left behind. That air reflected his aura, as if a void in power existed.

Everyone stood still like statues, stunned by everything that happened. The first to speak was actually me. I scratched the back of my head,

"Hey. Whitley. I, er, want to say sorry about the other day. I wanted to find my friends. It makes sense why you guys contained them, so thank you for doing that."

Sergeant Whitley stepped out of his salute and shouted like a drill sergeant,

"You crippled several of my best recruits. We've had to re-break several limbs and have them healed back properly. You totaled several vehicles, you nearly killed three different people, and we had to replace nearly a dozen sets of armor."

Whitley turned to Althea. He shouted at her, "And you...You disgusting maggot-"

I stepped up and nudged my palm on his chest. Whitley fumbled back, and I sneered at him, "Don't talk to her like that. You can say that about me, but not about her. Got it?"

Whitley met my eye, and we glared at each other. He broke first, and I gave him a slow nod as I simmered, "It's good you understand."

Whitley turned and redoubled his efforts, "My point is that changing the commanding officer like this...It's going to result in more confusion than good. I understand that...*Thing* was strong, but does it understand our situation? I doubt it."

Torix stepped up, his hands interlocked behind himself, "Excuse me, Whitley was it? I do believe you and I haven't been acquainted. I'm Torix Worm-"

Whitley thundered, "You're already called a worm? Superb. That makes your new nickname easier."

Torix tilted his head, his eyes flaring red, "It is the name of my family, one of a reputable heritage. We managed the graveyards of many centuries worth of the dead. They acted as an excellent learning ground for my own necromancy. Now, unless you want me to do the same for you, perhaps you should watch your words more wisely, hm?"

Unaware of the situation, Whitley walked up and poked the necromancer's chest. Whitley shouted in his face, "You listen to me worm-"

Torix raised his hand and snapped his fingers. An invisible force crushed Whitley's neck. The veins on Whitley's neck bulged as his face purpled. His legs flailed against the ground as Whitley tried stopping the strangulation. The sergeant writhed in the air as Torix looked up at him. The lich spoke with a casual ease,

"Actually, you shall be the one who listens to me. I attempted politeness, but you wished to be used as an example. Well-" Torix swiped a finger sideways. Whitley crashed through the window of his office into a series of other makeshift offices in a large warehouse. Kiosks lined up with quests and assignments while people helped organize the flow of data from the terminals.

Torix took casual steps through the doorway into that room. The lich peered at everyone present. The officers and organizers gawked at the lich, their jaws slack. The necromancer pointed at Whitley, the sergeant's struggling intensifying. Torix spread his hands,

"Ah yes, I believe I have your attention. Simply superb." Torix flicked his other hand. Whitley's right arm bent backwards, causing a gasp of agony from the military man. Torix snapped his other fingers, and Whitley's convulsing form enveloped in silence. The sergeant still screamed, but no one heard him - not even himself.

Torix turned and looked at everyone, "Do you see your commanding officer?"

Everyone nodded, their eyes glazed over like animals of prey. Torix flicked another finger, sending Whitley's knee bending the wrong way. Torix spoke with a cordial finality,

"This is what happens to those who speak to me with rudeness. Need I reiterate? Likely not, but I shall regardless."

With another flick, Whitley's other arm and leg twisted like pretzels. The crack of bone and crumpling of steel stayed silent. Whitley struggled against the compressive forces around him, but Torix swaggered about without a care in the world. The lich tapped the edge of his robe, and Whitley collapsed down, his form unmoving and unconscious.

The soldiers watched the pseudo execution, all the eyes of the legion pinned to their commanding officer. Bent and broken, Whitley at least lived. I frowned at Torix, and all of a sudden, it made sense why Alfred left the guy. Torix owned surprising benevolence, but the lich also carried a grating cruelty. That's how he learned and became a philosopher, a scholar, but also a necromancer and lich.

He must've calmed down over time, but in Torix's heyday, the guy might've been a complete monster. It disturbed me, but at the same time, he never directed that at any of us. Torix made firm lines between his enemies and friends, and that calmed my nerves. Some, anyways. For Torix's anger, I preferred standing where the grass was greener. After watching Whitley, I intended on keeping myself there.

Torix stomped one foot, Whitley's limbs reforming back to their normal proportions. Torix peered over the soldiers, and the lich boomed, "This will happen to anyone who belittles me, ignores me, or treats me and my compatriots unfairly. If you should follow me with sincerity, however, then I shall return the gesture. I will bestow my vast knowledge of the arcane arts, tactical warfare, and even philosophy to those willing to listen."

Torix walked between Althea and I. Torix gestured to us, "These two are prime examples of that, and you may ask them if you don't believe me. Now-" Torix walked forward and stepped onto a cloud of mana, "Get me an empty room and the next officer in the chain of command. We will work out a deal while you make sure my compatriots are comfortable."

The crowd of troops burst into activity, each of them obeying Torix as if their life depended on it. It probably did. One trooper walked up, his hands shaking inside his armor. He stuttered,

"Uhm...Uh...We can get you Seargent Briggs. He's the next highest member, sir."

Torix gave the soldier a nod, "Then let's go meet him."

Torix walked off with the scared trooper guiding him. The rest of our group stood in the middle of the room. After another awkward pause, Althea coughed into a hand, "Ok...So...I'm just gonna *go*."

Althea ran off, leaving me surrounded. In the distance, a soldier clasped his rifle. I put my hands on my hips,

"So, none of you know me, I'm sure. I'm Daniel. Let's...Let's hope we don't ever have to see that happen again...Am I right?"

An unarmored scientist vomited his lunch, and I sighed. This was going to be a long day.