

37 Runic Warrior

I grasped one of the spiked prongs along my elbow and jerked. It stayed strut over my skin, the metal strong and dense. I peered up, wondering how harvesting this would work. After wracking my head, I channeled augmentation through my palm. I let the energy course and strip the skin away. In seconds, it bled through my health. As my fingernails loosened and the skin softened, so its connection to the armor over my limbs.

I peeled the armor off my hand, the bloody remnants beneath grotesque and molten. Using another burst of augmentation mana, I snapped off a strip of armor. The actual metal degraded little while the meat beneath it disintegrated. Using the same process, I broke another shard from my other arm and let myself regenerate. As expected, I recovered without any worries.

Taking my time, I carved an identical passage into the unclad armor. Thirty minutes of etching later, I channeled a bit of mana through the smoothed plate. Energy coursed into the rune with ease. Unlike with the metal or wood, this material stabilized under the mana's current. It kept rigid and stable, easily handling the energy of the mana stream. It also conducted actual augmentation better than the other kinds of matter before it.

This difference in rigidity aided the entire process, evolving the runes from a temporary bonus to a permanent upgrade. Channeling mana, I marveled at the potential of the plate. Without this sheet of my armor, casting augmentation mimicked standing on a surfboard in the middle of an ocean. With the panel in my palms, my casting was like a rock with indentations made for my feet.

Between those two places, a world of difference manifested.

And yet, issues uncovered from this new strategy. Holding a slab of this stuff while fighting limited me, and if I let it go, the incantation's effects spiraled out of control. Worse still, the drain on my mana ramped up in an explosive surge after the plate stripped from my hands. It kept the same potent effects but not the absurd efficiency. That made this strategy risky albeit potent. I considered a few ways of holding several plates on me, but one solution sprang out instead.

I mean, the metal covered me. It isn't like I *had* to tear it off.

Staring down at my arm, it regenerated, the dark material sheening in the forest. If the sigils embedded into the armor itself, I wouldn't lose the runes. Using an elongated finger, I scratched at the metal on me. It bent into shape with more ease than the torn shards. I marked a small portion of the runes into my right forearm using my finger-knife. The metals grinded against each other as I strained to slice through my skin despite the greater ease.

After another thirty minutes of engraving, a line of symbols laid out on my forearm. Peering at myself in the shade of trees, the incantations felt right to me. The sigils fell in place as if they

were a part of me. With a very slight tug, I pulled some mana into the runes. The indentations filled with the energy, controlling the volatile flow.

When I poured mana into wood, it mirrored flowing water through a pipe of sand. Most of the energy poured out into the ether. The cast iron patched up some of those holes by comparison, but inefficiencies lingered anyway. This material on my arm experienced nearly no loss of energy. Even better, the mana molded and shifted without the same struggle as before. It was superior in every way.

I kept pouring more augmentation in, and it swelled into the cracks of my armor. It hissed and crackled. It sparked and popped. I lifted my arm, squeezing my fist.

This was it.

Vibrant, orange lightning streaked through my arm. I gripped my hand with enough strength to crush steel. My armor smiled at my own machinations, pleased with the development. With the glyphs filtering a stream of augmentation, I pulled more and more without my previous eruptions. Excited to test my results, I reared my fist back before slamming it into a nearby tree.

My hand crushed into the bark, lodging itself in the wood. As I pulled it out, splintering chunks fell onto the ground. I gawked at my own might, stunned by the runes working so well. I stumbled onto something effective and efficient without really meaning to. A notification in the corner of my eye explained why.

Skill gained! Soul Forging(lvl 1) - Many would change their behaviour and maybe even who they are. You temper yourself more deeply, changing the core of what you are and will be. +1% to precision of runic control. +1% to ease of runic creation. +1% to duration of enchantments on your soul.

Skill gained! Soul Siphon(lvl 1) - Some channel energy through their environment. Those who live without fear, they channel mana through their bodies. You live with madness in every breath. You channel mana through your soul. +1% to mana efficiency when channeling it through your soul.

The skills added an explanation for why the whole process smoothed over without any kinks. The names and descriptions of the skills left me chilled, however. They left behind strange, odd implications. I carved into metal over my skin, not into the fabric of my soul. Peering down, I wondered if that was actually the case.

It didn't seem like it. I mean, the runes on my arm lacked any impact on my personality or thoughts. To the skill's point, a bit of channeling did embolden my flesh and sizzle my blood, producing a power palpable. Without any real context, I lacked the references for what magic was supposed to be like, however. This was my normal, and it had been since the system started.

And yet, the skills and their descriptions insinuated I dabbled in more than just basic augmentation magic. At the same time, getting augmentation to work any other way seemed...Arduous at best. Raising a brow at my arm, I coursed energy through it. I soaked the energy in. My thoughts remained clear and my mind unmuddled.

If the runes provoked any lingering changes, I'd stop. At that point, nothing felt off, so I marched on. I didn't want to live in fear, and these runes helped put me ahead of my old self. I didn't want to look back, so I moved forward. Wielding the strength in my blows, I took a few swings. I stumbled about like a drunken sailor. Having my right arm so much stronger than my left threw me off.

After another half hour of carving, I owned two sets of runic glyphs glowing on each arm. As I clenched my fists, the air hummed with energy flowing between my hands. My engorged health pool and amplified regeneration allowed me to wield more energy than a normal mage of my level. That vitality pulsed in my palms and ran through my arms, an explosive potency at my fingertips.

Taking a moment, I tested out how each arm felt. When I used my normal fighting style, my arm's swings threw me off balance. The weight behind each blow ruined my previous training, so despite the sudden surge of power, I actually weakened in a real fight. After another hour of carving, I slotted more runes onto the sides of my thighs as well. My forearm sigils eased my etching from the surging strength they granted me.

With the runes finished, I stood up. When I stomped the ground, it caved. When I kicked a tree, wood splintered. The sheer rush of power intoxicated my reason, even though a pure burning scorched my limbs from all angles. That burning seeped into my chest as I kept testing my limits out. After building up my exhaustion, I cracked my neck and rested. Once restored, I tried some more punches and kicks.

It was fun, what can I say?

The extra strength in my legs helped balance my arms, but the sudden shift in strength still took a while to adjust to. After a few minutes of toying with various techniques and stances, I handled the power increase. Another two hours of trying, and I added some complex maneuvers using the extra strength. Whipping my body around trees, swinging on thick branches, and acrobatic leaps added to my fighting toolkit. Like Althea, I aimed to use them.

Even better than battling, my movement took a leap forward. For a long time, I lived in a shelled, metal body. It slowed me down, moving it like swimming through tar. The runes liberated me from my body's restraints, enabling a mobility I'd never known. While not quite as elegant or explosive as Althea, I gained a ramping kind of speed, a momentum in my movements. She was a speedboat while I was dreadnought, and that suited me just fine.

Wielding my speed with glee, I ran through the forest for a few minutes, enjoying the sudden change in acceleration and power. It was a rush. With A Boundless Storm, I could flip, twist, and move with fluid control. I jumped up, ducked under, and shifted around the trees like my own personal playground. I ended up spending several hours adjusting the runes and their placement while playing in the forest.

Just for that alone, those weeks of effort had been worth it. It gave purpose to my health regeneration when my health capped out too. Adding to the victory, the efficiency modifiers for each of the skills outdid most other common skills. If anything, Soul Forging and Soul Siphon mirrored unique skills in how much of an impact they left on me. Combining them with other abilities might make them even stronger.

I teemed with those excited thoughts as I took full advantage of my mana and toughened body. I realized a vast well of potential at that time. I lacked levels more than anything, and executing on my skills in sync could create more unique or mythic skills. Another strong point, those runic markings hid an underlying promise for all kinds of utilities. My metal skin could be stripped and used for all kinds of magic.

Brimming with excitement, I sprinted back towards the quarry, my stomps tearing bushes and smashing wildlife. Augmentation mana hummed into my surroundings, a low growl as I tore the forest. With my discovery and effort, I aimed to surprise everyone. Even after my harsh conversation with Michael and Kelsey, I wanted recognition from people. That was especially true for people I respected like Torix or Althea. And maybe even Kessiah.

In a way, wanting appreciation was too hopeful. The last time I wanted acknowledgement, I got slapped in the face and by my friends no less. Despite that, I couldn't help but desire recognition. These sigils were something I uncovered mostly on my own, and I brimmed with pride over it. That anticipation fueled me as I jumped into the quarry, my runes unused but still present.

Walking up to Althea and Kessiah, I waited on a dramatic reveal. The girls of our group moved through a few motion exercises, their ducks, rolls, and dodges focused on evasion. It all helped with keeping someone at a distance, and that made sense for Althea, considering how strong she was at a range. Kessiah taught her, not something I expected out of the remnant.

On the other hand, Torix carved out another extra cavern for his inscriptions. He added many of these winding caves over the last few weeks, his efforts reaching a fever pitch. As I approached, Torix peered at me, "Good to see you're still alive. What's been keeping you so busy?"

I put my forearms behind me, "You know, I was just testing some stuff out. I think I found a way of bypassing my lack of control for augmentation."

Torix finished his runes, "Oh, really now?" He turned to me, "Let's see this display of mediocrity...On with it."

I furrowed my brow, letting my hands down, "Y-You ok man? Anything wrong?"

Torix threw up his hands, "What isn't wrong is the real question. We've stayed here for a full week longer than I intended. Yawm's troops are searching all the nearby forests. I've combated his efforts for a while now, but it's only a matter of time before we are discovered. He'll uncover the plotpoint cluster of combat near this area, and he'll send stronger forces here."

I narrowed my eyes, "Torix...I don't think there's many people who'd think of something like that."

Torix snapped his fingers, forming a black chair and sitting on it at the same time, "But what if I'm not the only one with a few good ideas? What if this Yawm fellow is far more able than he appears?" Torix leaned against one of his hands, "If Yawm finds us, there will be more than a few complications. I've promised Kessiah an exit from this place. Now, I've stranded her here on this planet...She's becoming unstable."

Kessiah shouted at Torix, "I'm just fine. You're the one who can't even handle a single warping ritual. A real *archmage*, huh?"

Torix hissed back, "Ah yes, do excuse me while you two handle your basic movements over there. I'm creating a tear in the fabric of reality using an ancient runic language in the meantime...And being judged for it."

Kessiah glared, "Yeah, you're trying to do that. The problem is you're failing at it."

Torix gripped a fist, his anger palpable. I flinched at the thought of Kessiah and Torix fighting it out. Althea and I would be turned into paste and powder. Torix pointed at me and Althea,

"I believe my issues stem from you and Althea. You both are...Are making this difficult. Yes, much more difficult than it should be. Your mana signatures are utterly arcane. It's an amalgam of different energies, and I-I can't make sense of it. Not without a far higher perception than I currently have."

I leaned back, "That sounds...Difficult to deal with, I think. Is there anything we can do? Maybe us leaving would help?"

Torix sighed before dragging a skeletal hand down his face, "No, that won't be necessary. I'm merely coming up with excuses. How unbecoming of me. Please, dismiss my outbursts. I've been stressed as of late. I shouldn't shout at children for my own failings."

I let my hands flop onto my hips, "It's alright. I've been yelled at a few times, so I'm used to it."

Kessiah paced up, her eyes hungry, "Oh really? Do tell."

I scratched the back of my head, "Uh, let's talk about this later. I had something to show you all."

Kessiah leaned onto one of my shoulders, "Yeah, yeah, sure. That can wait till later. Tell us about being yelled at. I want to hear about that."

I pushed her off, "Just wait until I show you guys something first."

Kessiah raised a brow, "Tell me or I'm leaving."

I narrowed my eyes, "If you don't want to be here, then just go."

Kessiah smirked down at me, enjoying my reaction, "Not until you tell me about who yelled and why."

I spread out my hands while shaking my head at her, "Can you drop?"

She flicked my forehead, "I don't think I will."

She tried taking advantage of me, thinking she found weakness. I aimed to show her strength. I snapped at her, "Huh...Alright. Fine. When I was a child, my mom died."

Kessiah's demeanor changed, and she pulled herself off of me. Her desire for knowing evaporated as she mouthed, "Oh...Er, sorry to hear about that."

Turning the situation on a dime, I stared at her and stated,

"She died of cancer, and it wasn't quick either. It took half a year for her to pass. My dad was there with me when it happened. You know, it wasn't so bad at the start. But then, disease stole her strength. That wasn't so bad. After that, it stole her health. We all grieved, but we did it as a family."

I glowered at Kessiah, my words like iron, "It wasn't until it stole mom's smile that we broke down."

Kessiah blinked, coughing into a hand. She gulped, becoming uncomfortable. She mouthed, "That sounds awful. Like I said...Sorry to hear that."

Angry at Kessiah, I spoke about those memories, each of them frozen and numbed by time,

"It was worse than awful. Dad broke when that disease stole my mom's smile. It was a surreal thing for me. I guess I noticed when my mom quit taking care of the roses my dad bought her." Feigning strength, I shrugged, "It's like those roses mirrored her will to live. When they died, she died along with them."

A tense silence passed over us, thick and heavy as molten mercury. For me, those memories already calcified into shards of stone. I felt nothing from them, having already moved on. For

Kessiah, she held onto a memory that mirrored my own. Something fresh and open and vulnerable. That hurt exposed itself as I spoke, and I dug my words in with all I had.

In a way, that was my retaliation against everything Kessiah had said to me since she arrived. It was a surreal scene. I turned one of deepest wounds into a profound weapon. Breaking the silence, Torix's eyes flared green. The lich peered down, "I'm sorry for your loss. Losing family is one of the hardest experiences anyone may suffer."

Ripping my glare away from Kessiah, I waved off Torix's apology, "It all happened a long time ago. I'm over it. Point is, my father started drinking after my mom died. At that point, he started falling apart. He made damn sure I fell apart with him." I simmered, "Dad stopped keeping the house clean. He stopped going out with friends. Eventually, he stopped smiling too."

I gazed at Kessiah, "So I'm used to getting yelled at. There. Happy now? Or do you want to know anything else personal?"

Kessiah peered away from my gaze, "Yeah, I'm...I'm good."

I stood tall, "Good."

Torix leaned back before staring at the wall for a moment. He tapped the edge of his chair for a few seconds. An awkward atmosphere settled over us like a layer of lung burning ash. Torix waved his hands to interrupt the quiet,

"She's sorry for prying...I know Kessiah didn't mean to open old wounds."

I rolled my shoulders, "No, you're wrong. She did. She was prodding me for a reaction, and she got one. Don't play that down."

Torix stared down for a second before he met my eye, "Ahem, I hope you remember our conversation from earlier. That pain you carry can make you strong or weak. That hinges on whether you run from it or accept it. In that manner, our past defines us. It makes us who we are. At the same time, we decide what our pasts make of us."

I swallowed some sadness. I nodded, "Yeah. I know, but thank you for the reminder." Not expecting to blow up like that, I glanced at a wall. Torix walked up, "So, disciple, you mentioned you had something to show us. Perhaps you wouldn't mind sharing that now? At least to this old bag of bones here."

Torix tapped the side of his head, and dust fell off of him. Torix pointed at the dust, "Emphasis on *old*."

A reluctant smile ran up my lips before Althea walked up. She peered up at me, "I want to see it too...Is it, uhm, those markings on you? They look fancy."

I pulled up my forearm, my excitement dwindled to a lowlit ember. I poured mana into the runes, creating the vibrant, burning glow. A darkened orange energy rippled out with crescents of electricity. I stared at it, "I learned some of the runes you're using. I carved them into my armor. It worked out."

Torix grabbed my arm, his eyes flaring white, "Is this what you were doing over these past three weeks?"

I leaned back from him, "Yeah. It was."

Torix leaned close towards the etchings, "Remarkable...How does it translate...Ah, that's a strange wording you used there, but it fits, it fits...Remarkable, truly remarkable. You engraved this yourself?"

I nodded before Torix let go of my arm. He spread out his hands, "Incredible. So much progress...I wouldn't believe it if I hadn't seen it with my own two eyes. This is fine work. Very fine."

I peered off, blushing a bit, "Ah, it's not that big a deal. I just thought it would help with my fighting style."

Torix turned a hand, "Oh, it'll do more than merely that." Torix nudged me with an elbow, "And besides, humility doesn't suit a disciple of mine. Come on. Stand tall with your shoulders back. It makes you look better when you do so."

Pulling me out of my grim mood, I did as the lich asked. He spread out his hands, "There, that's more like my disciple."

I really appreciated him saying that to me then and there. It made a world of difference. After propping me back up, Torix swiped a hand, "As for the runes, they will be potent tools, should they not destroy you. This wouldn't be the first time you've done something insane, however...Precisely what skill did you use for this?"

I opened my menus, forgetting the skills' names. I murmured after a while, "It was...Soul Forging and Soul Siphon."

"Soul Forging? I've never heard of it. I suppose your armor would be the crux of that mystery, however. Hm."

I tapped my armor, "Maybe it's because the armor's an extension of me or something? That means carving into the armor with these runes acts like carving into my body."

Torix tapped the armor, "It seems to me that you're giving your armor commands in a language it understands. It's very strange, as this would never work on a normal person. Your body would

deform at best. At worst, you'd roast yourself alive. For those reasons, I'd have advised against this if I had known you were doing it."

Torix peered off, "But alas, my surveillance has suffered since I've been consumed with this disgusting ritual. Blegh. If only it were over."

I peered at a spike near my elbow, "Before we talk about that, do you mind telling me what's so dangerous about the sigils?"

Torix put his hands behind himself, "They work with magic, not flesh and bone."

I tapped the side of my head, "Blood Magic, remember?"

Torix leaned back, "But of course...Blood Magic. Gah, I must say, this was clever. Very clever. And here I thought you were simply *insane*."

Augmentation radiated out of my arms and legs, "This is insane?"

Torix nodded, "Oh, most certainly. It should warp and deform your personality, roast your blood and flesh, and it should even alter your body. As for the skill's name, Soul Forging, it should cause mental changes that are both unfixable and permanent. Being immortal, I'd rather not risk my soul like that. After all, I've got an eternity to lose should I make a mistake with any kind of soul manipulation."

He turned a hand to me, "For you, you've barely lived at all yet you put the little life you have left on the line...And at all times. It's incomprehensible to me." Torix gave me a nod of respect, "But by putting yourself at risk, you also put yourself in a position to gain. As before, it has worked once more...Well done."

I grinned at Torix, a bit more than I meant too. Torix raised a hand, pacing back and forth, "But, if we can create a more efficient conversion of this formula, we can come up with an even greater effect." Torix slapped my back, "Hah. I knew I chose you to be my disciple for a reason."

I peered up, standing tall. Torix's response outdid any expectations I had, and I beamed at him, "Heh...No problem."

Torix rubbed his hands, "Excellent. With this, we should have plenty of ways to fight against Yawm once we meet him."

Silence passed over us before Kessiah chimed in, "Speaking of Yawm, are you trying to get me to help fight him? Because, this whole ritual is taking a whole hell of a lot longer than you guessed it would."

Torix let out a sigh, "I really don't understand what's going on right now. I've developed the coordinates and set everything in stone. I've even made numerous augments via these additional caves. Nothing is working, which-

Torix leaned back, his eyes flaring red. He murmured, "Oh dear, that isn't good. Give me one moment."

The necromancer pulled out a circular, clear sphere with a gray ring around it. He tapped it, and Kessiah walked over. The remnant's eyes widened, "What's going on?"

Torix poured black mana into the crystalline orb, "That's what I'm wondering as well. Something's amiss."

Kessiah grumbled, stepping away, "Let me know when you finish your obelisk business. Don't think I'm letting you off."

Torix gave her a curt nod, "I wouldn't dare."

A blue ball expanded from Torix's glass orb, surrounding the lich and me. Cold air splashed across my face from atop a mountain. Clouds floated along an endless horizon, other peaks etching into the skyline. Two suns shone in the distance, and a gentle wind whistled in my ears. All the sounds from outside muffled in as if we swam underwater.

I reached down for the soft snow beneath me, but my hand phased through the white powder. I rubbed my fingers together, this experience mirroring a simulation. It was as convincing as real life, and I gawked around at the surreal scene. Snapping me from my stupor, Torix sent me a message. As I read it, his voice rang out in my head.

Torix Worm, of Darkhill | Level 1,236 | Unknown - Make certain you utilize personal messages here. The obelisk will convert thoughts into messages, should you decide to send them. This is primarily for privacy when we may need it at times, but in this case, there's something that needs my inspection.

I frowned before thinking up a message and sending it over.

Daniel Hillside, The Harbinger of Cataclysm | Level 105 | Unknown - So what exactly is an obelisk? You mentioned it helped with Schema's system format.

Torix Worm, of Darkhill | Level 1,236 | Unknown - That's correct, but as you may have noticed, an obelisk enables many more utilities outside of UI improvements. They may add options to it as well since Schema is rather stingy with his processing power. Obelisks enable a smooth interface with data you collect from Schema's status, letting you use it.

Personally, I use them for organizing my experiments, skill trees, etcetera. You can buy one from the Force of Iron for the price of a few dungeon cores, should you elect to do so.

Torix moved a few floating screens from in front of himself, organizing them.

Torix Worm, of Darkhill | Level 1,236 | Unknown - Despite their many advantages, I despise these devices, but at times they are necessary. Obelisks offer convenience, saving innumerable hours of administrative work. I do worry that this convenience comes at a cost, however. Many struggle to focus on real events and more mundane details after immersing themselves in such a convenient, cybernetic landscape.

Torix peered towards Kessiah, who rested just outside of this simulation.

Torix Worm, of Darkhill | Level 1,236 | Unknown - I find myself pondering if this device truly does save any time at all. Regardless, I peer into my obelisk's abilities as a necessary evil.

I glanced around as his messages rang out in the background. Swiping my hand through a screen, the display wobbled before stabilizing. The images and lists rippled like waves in a pond. Getting my feet wet, I sent another message.

Daniel Hillside, The Harbinger of Cataclysm | Level 105 | Unknown - Couldn't you just manage the addictive nature of an obelisk and use it all the time? You'd be more productive that way.

Torix pulled up an updated map of earth, most of it blank.

Torix Worm, of Darkhill | Level 1,236 | Unknown - I wonder if such an idea is even possible in practice. I've yet to see someone use an obelisk frequently and not be absorbed by it. An even greater point is how an obelisk strips one of their creativity. Is it not a wonder how this device, designed and created to open the world up to its user, actually narrows their view of it? It's an ironic manifestation, I should say.

I peered at the icy swirls below us. Blizzards sheared a desolate landscape at the mountain's foundation. The sky peered down from all angles as several suns gently beamed. Getting lost here in a world like this appealed to me, the endless peace a welcome change from the real world. I blinked at that, surprised by the draw of the simulation.

Daniel Hillside, The Harbinger of Cataclysm | Level 105 | Unknown - I remember humanity had an internet before Schema arrived. It had the same kind of effect as an obelisk, and a lot of the time, people just found others who thought whatever they thought. This created spots where everyone agreed, like an echo chamber. Eventually, they became places where everyone shouted the same ideas, each shout louder than the other.

Torix Worm, of Darkhill | Level 1,236 | Unknown - Quite a noteworthy observation. The way I've put it is that you learn exactly what everyone else knows if you use an obelisk. You learn what other people don't know when you read books.

Daniel Hillside, The Harbinger of Cataclysm | Level 105 | Unknown - Eh, you're probably right...So, what's the map for?

Torix Worm, of Darkhill | Level 1,236 | Unknown - I left packets of identifying mana on Michael and Kelsey before leaving them with a deathknight for surveillance. That sorcery tracked their location and ensured I could kill them if need be.

My jaw went slack as I gawked at Torix. The lich raised his palms to me.

Torix Worm, of Darkhill | Level 1,236 | Unknown - Daniel, I don't believe you fully understand what will happen to those that are captured by Yawm. Killing Michael and Kelsey isn't a threat, as I could've done so at any time. I am using their deaths as a tool for mercy should the need arise.

I stared down, unnerved by the nightmare Torix presented. The lich wore the possibility of death or worse like a cloak. He focused his efforts on stopping the horrific outcomes instead of worrying about them. Keeping that industrious nature, Torix fiddled with screens and messages alike. Being far less experienced, I cringed at what might happen to my old friends or even the townsfolk.

Even worse, a bit of guilt sank in my chest like someone nailed it in with a hammer. Irrational or not, I held myself responsible for what might happen to my old friends and Springfield. It wasn't a conscious decision but an unconscious force. I willed the guilt down, keeping myself strengthened. Despite my efforts, a fragment of remorse lingered in the back of my mind like a bloated corpse staring me in the eyes.

And I couldn't get it to stop staring.

Torix glanced at the screens before tapping on the surface of an image. It bent ever so slightly at his touch as he tapped two red circles near the center of Springfield. Torix sighed, which sounded like a distant, deep echo.

Torix Worm, of Darkhill | Level 1,236 | Unknown - Michael and Kelsey were captured by the Force of Iron. I've dealt with them on numerous occasions. Handling them should be relatively simple. On the other hand, if Yawm has found them and made them spill their guts, then it's best I detonate the mana signatures now.

Daniel Hillside, The Harbinger of Cataclysm | Level 105 | Unknown - Woah now, let's think for a minute. Why would the Force of Iron even question or interrogate them? They probably just want to help them or learn something, maybe about us. Besides, detonating the

mana packets may kill some of the troops there. We don't want to burn that bridge, do we?

Torix Worm, of Darkhill | Level 1,236 | Unknown - The Force of Iron is hardly relevant to our battle with Yawm.

Daniel Hillside, The Harbinger of Cataclysm | Level 105 | Unknown - Althea could use some technology for her experimentation and cannons. I could use the Force of Iron to exchange runes for money. Kessiah might use them to get out of here. If we can save some of their members, then we end up tying up two loose ends without leaving a mess for later.

I think it's worth pursuing.

The sphere retracted, the mountain's peak disintegrating into the bottom of our quarry. Torix turned to me, "That's a risk I'd rather not take."

I frowned, "What if you didn't have to risk yourself? I can do it."

Torix narrowed his flaming eyes, "Why would you save them? They blamed you for their faults, spitting in the face of all your efforts. Their capture was non-violent as well... Though it was against their wills according to my death knight's testimony. As if either of those people would actually fight for their agency."

Torix threw a hand out, "In fact, I believe this may be the best outcome for all parties. I tire of hovering over those overgrown *children*."

A part of me wanted to defend them, but a larger piece dwelled on Torix's accusations. Why would I want to save Michael and Kelsey? I tried helping them, but it wasn't enough. Their expectations soared so high that nothing I did could ever have been enough. Despite that, I lingered on what happened. Something about the event rubbed me the wrong way, and after thinking about it, I understood why.

Kelsey and Michael weren't real friends anymore, but they helped me out of a couple tight spots. In my mind, I paid them back in full long ago. For instance, one time I beat the hell out of two bullies that messed with Michael. I got a black eye, but I unloaded some steam. Michael wasn't bothered by those two again. I did the same for Kelsey when a college student stalked her for a while. I confronted the guy, and that's all it took for him to stop.

This situation played out differently. By challenging the Force of Iron, I stuck my neck out for two friends who'd never do the same for me. They wouldn't even let me in their house, let alone pry me from the clutches of an organized guild. Even if they wanted to help me, they weren't able to. Kelsey hadn't leveled a bit since the system started. Only Michael had a chance, and in reality, he'd be walking right to his death.

Something neither of them would ever do for me.

Snapping me out of my contemplation, Torix put a hand on my shoulder, "Perhaps I was overly harsh. It is your life, not mine, and upon second thought, perhaps saving them is the right decision." Torix raised a hand, "After all, regrets will never leave you, and you may never have another opportunity to help them like this again."

Torix lowered his hand, "Should you choose not to assist them, this may haunt you forever. My son's death is proof enough of that, as I will carry it for eternity. I wouldn't wish for you to do the same with Michael and Kesley's deaths."

I raised my hands, "Yeah...I'm thinking this will be my last payday, you know? I'll leave them in my debt and call it quits at that point. I think that will give me some closure, and I'll be able to let this go." I turned to Kessiah and Althea, "Do either of you think you can help me out with that?"

Kessiah raised a palm, "I can wish you good luck, maybe give you some information. I can't help you out directly though."

I frowned, "Wow. Unexpected,

"Hey, I'm sorry about earlier, but this has nothing to do with that. I don't want anyone knowing I'm on this planet. It could attract some bounty hunters. None of us want that."

Althea bounced on her toes, "I'll do it...If you need the help."

Torix took a deep breath, which he didn't need. He pushed up his glasses, which also didn't exist, "Ah, my indecision is mounting once more. This is putting us under undue risk. That being said, what is reasonable and what is right are two very different things...Ah, what to do...I'm done fretting. I'll allow you both to do this, should you both allow a shade to watch over you."

I put my hands on my hips, "You're just full of sage sayings today, aren't you? And, uh....Thanks for helping us out. It means a lot."

Torix waved off my thanks, "The story you told me earlier has me sentimental and nostalgic. That's all this is. Now, I will give you a few days to capture Michael and Kelsey before I detonate the mana signatures lodged in their skulls."

I gave him an apprehensive smile, "Huh...Well then...We should hurry."

Torix turned back to the marble tablets, "Then I shall return to my duties...Ah yes, back to *this*. I wish this ritual was over and done with. It shall be the death of me." Torix laughed in an unhinged manner, "Hah...If I weren't already undead. It will undo my undeath, causing the death of my undying. Hah. Hah."

Rolling my eyes at the absurd joke, I jogged over to Althea. She shrugged, "Any ideas what the plan is? I'm really hoping it doesn't involve storming their base."

I shook my head, "I don't want to ruin our relationship with these guys. That's one of the reasons we're doing this in the first place. I'm thinking we get to the facility, scope out their defenses, and use that new info to make a plan of approach. Does that sound good?"

She let out a sigh of relief, "Heh, ok. That's a way better plan than I thought we'd come up with."

I gave her a thumbs up, "Alright, cool." I turned to Torix, "Yo, can you send us their location so that we can see it on our minimaps?"

Torix snapped his fingers, and a message appeared with an attachment. I downloaded it, and a little map popped up on my left side. The two dimensional, overhead graph reminded me of an old rpg. Everything blacked out besides for long, winding trails of color crisscrossing the darkness. One led to BloodHollow, another to Springfield. Dozens of other lines exposed more routes, likely inspected from Torix's scouts.

All along the map, red X's signified dungeons. The density of the red marks meant many dungeons lingered across the countryside. Near the industrial sector of Springfield, far fewer crimson dots lined the surrounding area. The Force of Iron helped get those rifts handled, meaning the eldritch spilled out less there. In the center of that clearing, Two blue dots sprung up, one with the name Kelsey and the other with Michael. I gave our necromancer a thumbs up before walking up to Kessiah.

I turned to her, "Is there anything we should know about the Force of Iron before heading out?"

Kessiah gave me a stare of disdain before eyeing my runes. She crossed her arms, "So...You still want to talk, huh?"

I raised my brow, "Yeah. I just don't want you to talk down to me, my home, and my life all the time. I know, I know, it's a big ask."

Kessiah tapped her forearm, thinking for a bit. She took a breath, "What do you need to know?"

I shrugged, "Anything, really."

Kessiah peered away, "They use tech for the most part. Most of them aren't all that skilled. You probably know, but they bring in basic technology from Schema's era. All of it's used, hand-me-down stuff, but that's a lot better than what you guys have here...Currently. That's not to say you guys won't ever be on that level, just, right now-"

I waved her elaboration away, "I get it. What kind of levels will they have?"

Kessiah tapped her side, "It's based entirely on the local population. They send in kiosks with hauls of supplies. As you fulfill basic quests, they open more of the supplies. You can expect people to be about ten levels over the average because of those quests and the equipment they own. Considering most humans are around the low teens to mid twenties, you can expect levels in the mid thirties for everybody there."

I nodded, "Thanks for the breakdown. I do appreciate it."

Kessiah eyed me up and down. She sighed before peering off. She crossed her arms, "Hey, sorry about getting in your business earlier. I shouldn't have. That was my bad."

I raised my hand, "It's fine."

Kessiah pulled out her obelisk, flashing me a smile, "Good...Try not to die out there, little man. No one else here can fight like you can...Besides me of course."

I turned and walked off, "I'll stay alive only if you and Torix promise not to kill each other."

Kessiah opened her obelisk, "Hah. No promises."

Walking off, Althea and I reached a cubbyhole that she stationed her cannon schematics and other stuff in. Lots of trinkets and machinery slouched onto a table of sliced stone. Althea cut it out, the shining edge sheening with the natural beauty of polished stone. I rubbed my gauntleted hand over it, "Man, this is so well done. It looks like you cleaned it."

Althea scratched her cheek, "So, uhm, it just ends up like that after I cut it." She reached out a finger, a thin claw extending out. She cut out some of the quarry's marble and tossed it over towards me. Wherever she sliced, a shiny finish exposed itself. I flipped it in my hand,

"You could make this a business."

Althea rolled her eyes as she packed, "Sure."

I slotted the marble back where she cut it out, "I'm serious here. There's potential for big money in this post-apocalyptic landscape. Trust me. You'll be a *millionaire*."

We debated the merits of a rock polishing business while jogging towards the edge of the quarry. Once we surrounded ourselves in the trees, we raced full sprint towards the facility. Based on where Michael and Kelsey were, the Force of Iron established a base in an old, abandoned factory. The refinery situated itself in the middle of many other industrial buildings.

People set up shop here for the coal and iron loaded in nearby mountains. Springfield's inhabitants harvested what they could before globalization decimated those industries. I wasn't commenting on whether that was good or not, but I had familiarized myself with the area a long

time ago. My dad worked there, and he got fired at some point. By the time they let him go, I made a few memories in those empty buildings.

Heading in that direction, Althea and I passed Pier's creek, trees arching over our heads as they struggled to get sunlight. Birds flew across the ravine now and again, and collections of fish swam deeper into the water as we passed. The rocky sand softened my stomping heels, keeping us quiet. Still, I left deep footprints behind me, but a shadowy presence passed over my markings. After doing so, it smoothed the evidence out.

Torix's shade performed its duties well, wherever it was.

After taking a few turns, we reached another creek, this one nameless. Everyone abandoned the area after someone found a few miners dumping chemicals in the water. No one wanted a nice batch of heavy metals in their drinking water, and even after thirty years, no one remained here. Well, besides for the monsters that moved in.

Strange nautiloids lapped at the water, refining metals with their mouthy bits. They cleared the water of all the waste, though they still fed on nearby, vulnerable wildlife. Althea and I let them live, the both of us moving towards our goal. Althea, our lavender haired sniper, glanced around in wonder at everything as we passed by. I could imagine why Althea marveled. This might've been her first time seeing all of this.

An unconscious smile lingered on her lips, and I liked the look on her. I murmured,

"It's nice, isn't it?"

"Yeah. It's very peaceful here. The sounds here are...Ambient. It puts me in a really clear state of mind."

I stared forward, "Me too."

After another fifteen minutes of running, we found abandoned factories on the horizon. Old smoke stacks loomed over the buildings, beacons of a bygone era. Those old towers no longer belched clouds of dark smoke, birds resting where the toxic smog once plumed out. Under those hollow pillars, empty warehouses covered block after block. Railroad tracks traced the ground throughout the empty place, no longer used but still scarring the ground.

Multicolored cargo crates rested on those emptied tracks. All the trains stationed on them, some having crashed and piled up. Since Schema arrived, this place of industry deadened into something lifeless but peaceful. We ran down those railways, birds resting on them. They flew off over the horizon as we passed by, each of us hidden by the trains lining our sides.

Within a few minutes, a familiar yet alien sound radiated across the skyline - the humming of a car's engine. Peering under several carts, Althea and I found moving vehicles. Even though they should've been commonplace and expected, they surged excitement in my chest.

Humanity rallied here enough to actually use cars. A small step to be sure, but a step nonetheless.

Althea and I slid under a train, getting beside several driving cars. Along the sides of these automobiles, a circular emblem beamed back at us. It was gear with a pyramid and eye on it. As I gazed at it, it too, gazed back at me. It reminded me that we infiltrated this place, and we weren't welcome here. From then on, Althea and I crept under train tracks, each of us calm and composed.

We found many more signs of human civilization there. Many old war machines scattered about, likely taken from nearby museums and repurposed. Parts from those machines scattered around with mechanics working on them. They wore combat fatigues imprinted with the gear and pyramid symbol. Around them, several soldiers stomped by.

Their combatant status was obvious; they donned blue gray armor, rifles strapped along their backs. The barrels and stocks glowed blue, a powerful symbol of Schema's dominance. If you bought in, you'd get great power, but their abilities didn't stop there. The soldiers carried shining, emerald green munitions on their chests.

I wondered what hid inside the capsules. Answering my question, one of the troops dropped a bullet onto the ground. It shattered, and the ooze painted the ground in green. It sizzled the earth, writhing deep into the ground. Within those glassy bullets, some kind of living acid squirmed around.

Althea mouthed, "Wow...I'd love to have that."

I shivered, remembering Althea billowing acid over me. I murmured back, "I'm not the biggest fan of that stuff, actually."

Getting closer to the heart of the camp, some soldiers carried glowing, red liquid in their bullets. None of those members dropped their ammo, unfortunately. Gawking at everything, it all honed in on a sharp, angular aesthetic. Schema created all of this equipment with precision. Everyone wore their helmets all the time too. This faceless ensemble lacked eyes on those helms, showing no weakness just like the Sentinels.

Cameras viewed the outer world for them, keeping them secure inside their steel plates. I grinned at the prospect of getting some of that good stuff, but I feared fighting several of the people at once. Althea shared in my fear, and our sneaking slowed down to a crawl. We found plenty to see, so despite our pace, time flew by. Several factories reopened here, and soldiers carried goods in and out of the buildings on hovering platforms.

My eyes widened at the sight, and I murmured to Althea, "How do they do that?"

Althea gawked at the buildings with me, "Uhm...Magic?"

I narrowed my eyes at her, “Well...Er, duh.”

She flicked my shoulder, “You’re the one asking dumb questions.”

“Touché.”

We got close enough to uncover details about the industrialized equipment. Hooks and bars traced the armors, places for carrying the pieces around with ease. The practical, deadly weapons on their backs sheened with glossy finishes. A few of them even carried sword handles at their sides. In a sparring arena, two armored individuals pulled those swords out.

Laser blades arose from the handles, and they clashed with burning ooze dripping down their weapons. I ogled at the awesome display before Althea and I nestled between a few of the cargo crates. Squeezed together, I sent her a message.

Daniel Hillside, The Harbinger of Cataclysm | Level 105 | Unknown - Any ideas for getting in and out of there?

Althea Tolstoy | Level 164 | Unknown - Huh...Not really.

I brainstormed for a minute before I sent her a message,

Daniel Hillside, The Harbinger of Cataclysm | Level 105 | Unknown - Wait a minute...I got the perfect plan.

I shifted my armor before turning my gauntlets into shovel claws. I turned and messaged.

Daniel Hillside, The Harbinger of Cataclysm | Level 105 | Unknown - How about we dig our way in? Eh? EH?

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Althea frowned before sending a message.

Althea Tolstoy | Level 164 | Unknown - So, like, I’m not a genius or anything, but I’m pretty sure they’ll hear you digging.

Daniel Hillside, The Harbinger of Cataclysm | Level 105 | Unknown - They probably won’t if we get a little distance and dig a little deep.

She shrugged before we crawled further back until we were out of earshot of the guards. With a few quick swipes, my shovel hands clawed through the dirt in large chunks. What would’ve been hours of work for a normal person passed by in seconds before I submerged underground.

Althea crawled off, chopping at portions of the railroad tracks. Althea sliced the steel bars and threw in a pile of them at the burrow's entrance.

I kept digging while she placed supports made from rebar to prevent the collapse of the tunnel. I gave her a nod of respect, "Damn. Nice idea."

She blushed, "Heh. Thanks. You're not too shabby yourself."

Adding to the structure, Althea spit acid at the ends of each railroad tracks. The green ooze melted the dirt as we traveled, making our tunnel pretty stout. Without worrying about a sudden cave in, we made decent progress over the next hour. By then, we landed fifty feet or so from Michael and Kelsey's holding chambers. Knowing next to nothing about the compound's insides, I turned to Althea.

I lifted a hand, sparking augmentation and bathing us in orange light. Althea stared back with worry wrinkles on her face. I whispered, "You ok?"

She frowned, "Just...a bit claustrophobic. That's all."

I leaned back, putting my hand on my chest. I dished out some sarcasm, "Oh, being close to me is that bad, huh?"

She pursed her lips at me, "What? No, it's the ground. I'm scared it'll crush us or collapse."

Remembering how she transformed into a burrowing eel at one point, she may have forgotten her own abilities. That being said, not all fears were necessarily rational, so instead of arguing, I gave her a knowing grin, "If it did fall, I'd get you out of here. Trust me on that."

Althea peered away, "Heh...I do."

I turned up, and from what I could guesstimate, Michael and Kelsey both languished in prison cells or something similar. Althea and I would have to take down a guard or two before busting them out and running back towards the unnamed, chemical creek. From there, escaping relied on Torix's shades. Considering how reliable they were, everything seemed pretty foolproof.

With some confidence, I pointed up, "I'll be a decoy. You focus on getting them out."

Althea frowned, "I could be the decoy, if you want."

I gestured at her arms, "I think I'll be better. You're stronger than me for one. Second, I can make a lot more of a ruckus than you can. Third, I can take a few bullets to the chest, and you can't."

"Hm...Ok. I was thinking I could escape after getting their attention, but your plan works too."

I cupped my chin, "Huh. You're probably right about that, but I'd rather bet on my plan."

"So like, I wasn't committed to my plan or anything anyways. We'll go with yours."

"Oh...My bad. Didn't mean to press the issue."

"You, uhm, you didn't. I just wanted to clarify."

After that awkwardness, we finalized the plan. Once we repeated the steps a few times, I dug upwards. I slowed down my pace until I reached concrete. By then, we dug underground for two hours, each of us sweaty and breathing hard. Planning anymore risked people finding the tunnel, and oxygen thinned out this deep down. Unable to stall anymore, I gave Althea a signal.

I tapped the concrete, the dense material reinforced with steel. For me, breaking through could've taken maybe a day or two, not to mention the soldier's would think a literal earthquake was infiltrating their base. For Althea, the task took seconds. She reformed her left arm, turning it into a biotic rifle. Extra adjustments covered the sides, along with an eye along the edge of the barrel. I whispered,

"Can you see out of that eye?"

The eye closed as she mumbled, "Uh, yeah. It makes aiming easier."

I raised my brow, "Woah...That's kind of cool."

From her right palm, she grew a riveted rod of bone. She placed it into the ammo compartment before placing it against the wall, "I'm going to spit acid onto the wall before firing. That should give you enough space to get inside. We get your friends and then run. Y-you ready?"

I raised a brow, "It sounds like you're the one getting cold feet."

Althea took a second, raising her hands. She steadied her breathing, and I gave her a thumbs up, "That's better. Let's go."

A swell formed in her stomach before she regurgitated acid onto the wall in steady increments. The acid steamed and hissed on the concrete before she fired. The sound of the shell blew back into our tiny tunnel, booming loud as a jet plane. My ears rang as the concrete gave way. A cloud of dust exploded into our tunnel from above, and Althea slipped through it. I followed.

I leaped up, mana filling into my legs. I crashed through the leftover splinters of concrete. As I came up and out into the air, I lost levity. My feet crashed into the oil stained floor, and I glanced around, powder obstructing my view. I waved my arms, the wind whirling the dust plume away from me. I found myself near the center of a garage, eyes already on us.

Several people worked on cars and machines, sets of tools beside them. Groups of armored soldiers spoke with technicians, and scientists hunched over tables lining the walls. Two large,

open doorways let light into the room. Above me, a small hole beamed down light at my face from outside. Althea's bolt pierced through the ceiling.

Along the edge of the vehicles, a set of clear, human sized capsules slotted into the side of the building. Kelsey and Michael's names were painted onto the sides of them, their hair and feet visible while the rest remained covered with a steel plate. They floated in a vacuum, each of them unconscious but having their eyes open. Althea already reached them, and she cut at the steel with several people watching her.

Everyone else gawked at me, stunned by my entrance. I raised my arms, mana filling into the sigils, "Hello...Everyone...Uhm, what's up?"

Compacted rifles expanded as soldiers readied their aim towards me. Dozens of laser pointers lined up on me before a deep, full voice shouted, "Don't fire. Get him out of here, and I repeat, do not fire in this space. We cannot afford to bust the containment pods here."

They held Michael and Kelsey in containment pods for something. I noted that while peering around. I also stood a head taller than everyone else. Their numbers worked against them because of friendly fire, but they used other means at their disposal. Several of them unsheathed laser knives, and they walked close. Getting behind me, a trooper sliced a shining dagger of red towards my throat.

He moved slower than a stream, and I grabbed his wrist while pulling him to me. He fell forward, and I punched his helmet. Letting him go, I crunched the metal armor on my fist, the runes giving me unnatural power. Another soldier came close and stabbed at my back. I wove sideways, the soldier's slice missing. The arm stretched out wide, and I grabbed the person's wrist. I shoved the straightened elbow, and the limb bent backwards, ligaments snapping.

The soldier howled out in anguish, and I jerked him sideways. They both flopped onto the ground, unable to stand. I peered at my hands, marveling at how easy it was to break them. It was like snapping a chicken's neck. Unlike a chicken, the broken soldier keeled onto the ground, an electronic voice blaring out of the speaker beside his helmet's camera.

Another soldier tried a sweeping kick towards my feet. I stepped just out of range and lifted a foot. I stomped my heel at their leg as the kick passed me by. Their armored joint crunched under foot, and I pinned them down. They collapsed before I lifted the person up with both my arms.

I threw them towards a car, and they collided with the windshield, shattering glass. I gawked at how I did all of that, and the others did as well. They peered at me in fear, the soldiers a bit more antsy to approach. My eyes darted towards Althea, and she heaved Michael and Kelsey's stasis pods. Wanting to make a real mess, I walked over towards a car. I bent over and lifted with all my strength.

The car flipped with relative ease, at least easier than I expected. It flopped over and crushed into another vehicle. Several people ran at me, so I leaped on top of the car. The jeep's fabric tore under my feet, and I fell into the cabin. Falling into the front seat, I looked at the ignition, finding no keys. A glowing blade stuck through the side window, and I bent my head away from it. They pulled the blade back over my throat.

Before it made contact, I grabbed them. I jerked them into the window, the metal covered soldier lighter than I was. Their head clapped against the window before I opened the car door into another soldier. They tumbled in a pile, one I stomped over while getting out of the jeep. As I got all the way out, three blades came from all directions. I stopped two arms, and the other blade pierced into my side. My armor reached out into the stabbing hand, shredding it.

The soldier pulled his hand out of me while thundering, "It's a monster."

I grimaced before kicking backwards at the guy. His chestplate caved, and he crashed into a wall. I crushed the two arms in my hands, snapping the bones in their arms before pulling them close. Their helmets clinked together with a loud ring, cameras shattering. Another trooper stabbed at me, but I used one of their own as a shield.

Another stab came in from an unseen angle, and it pierced into my chest. Fire erupted in my lungs, but I elbowed backwards. The soldier's facemask caved in, their head whipping into the side of a car. They slumped down, and I prayed they were still alive. Another soldier sliced down from above, but a harpoon impaled their raised elbows. The downslice fell apart, and I shoved the crippled soldier aside.

Two more stabs came in. I threw my fists out, and they landed like sledgehammers. Helmets caved. I struck once more, retaliating before they overwhelmed me. Chest plates sunk in. Arms shattered. Cameras fizzled to nothing. I whirlwinded through the group, tearing a dozen guards into broken heaps on the polished floor.

More came. I jumped up, grabbing the edge of a catwalk. I flung myself up, near several snipers. I tackled one, and their body flopped over the railing with force. The others followed their fall. Half a dozen tumbled down like dominoes. I charged through a less armored marksman before jumping back down. Another blade sank into my arm. An angry, violent voice rang out in the back of my mind to kill them, to eat them.

I grabbed my assailant's arm, breaking it. I jerked twice more, and it broke in three places. I kicked their knee backward. They crumbled down, and I roared out in a primal fury. My armor's crimson slit widened into a maw over the soldier's face. I kicked the soldier away, and they flopped back. They crashed into the wall. I inspected around me, most of the soldiers already taken care of or crippled for the moment. In my mind, I surged, my dominance clear.

Several of the gunmen tapped their triggers, wondering if firing might've been a good idea. Before they made that decision, more mana filled into my runes. I stomped my foot down. The

crushed concrete from our entrance whipped into the air, hiding us. Althea hugged two stasis pods to herself, having taken several soldiers out herself. She ran over, a soldier grabbing her foot. She fell forward, and the glass jars tumbled.

They stayed together, the glass flexible and not easily broken. Althea glanced around on the ground, seeing faceless suits of armor closing in from every side. She pulled her legs up into the air before forcing them downwards. Her upper body whipped up off the ground before she landed on her feet. A tornado of motion, she knocked several soldiers across the room, bones breaking with each of her attacks. Her own arm bled from the punishment, her fingers and hands bent backwards.

She left herself and her enemies a bloody mess.

The reinforcements rushed in. They took an even more cautious approach as they closed in on me and her. Althea gasped, "Gah...It's so hard not killing them."

I raised my fists, "I got to agree."

Althea's body crushed and crumbled, her entire skeleton deforming. She sprinted forward, a beast transformed. She stormed through a group of soldiers. She sent them flopping back with her unbelievable strength. Metal met walls. They fell. They plunged. They plummeted. Her legs looked like a goat's hind legs while her arms and hands expanded into massive clubs. With a few quick swings, she crushed and crumbled the incoming troops in seconds.

The room, once full, brimmed with incapacitated soldiers. A delicate silence loomed for a moment. I murmured, "Are you still in control?"

She tore herself apart as she attacked, but she rumbled back, "Yes. I am. What about that growl of yours earlier?"

I gave her a curt nod, "Ok, fair enough."

I picked up the glass tubes before sprinting back towards our hole. The deep voice from earlier roared with anger through an intercom,

"You maggots. There will be hell to pay if you don't stop those eldritch. I mean literal Hell."

The soldiers redoubled their efforts to stop us. A group of them lined up from outside, blocking our way back to our tunnel. I stopped in my tracks with the stomp of a heel. A thin piece of concrete burst underfoot, sending a hail of rocks at their helmeted faces. Althea leaped over me, latching one of her massive hands onto my shoulder.

I dug my feet into the ground as she pulled on my shoulder pauldron to swing herself around. Her other arm reformed as if she swung a tree trunk. The soldiers crashed into the wall before Althea dove into our tunnel's entrance. I tossed one of the containers towards her before leaping

in with Kelsey's tube held over my head. Althea slid the capsule through the hole before I followed her with the other one.

As we slid down, a rain of bullets slammed into the walls of the tunnel entrance above us. It looked like they abandoned orders. A hail of crumbling rock splattered down. I landed on the ground, my legs bent as the containment tube slapped against my back. The dense flexi-glass bent but held, the steel plate keeping them safe.

Tube in tow, I crawled with Althea. She bent over, crawling in her normal, unchanged form. I caught myself staring at her a few times, her figure drawing my eye. Althea had nice curves, and laid out like that, it accentuated each one of them. Tearing my eyes off of her, I focused myself back on the escape.

Not being as distracted, Althea expanded the tunnel with gouging strikes, letting me pull off a low trot along the ground. We dashed through our tunnel before jumping out of the entrance. Crawling back out beneath a train, neither of us could move the stasis pods. Already working that out, Althea cut at the edge of a railroad cart.

I raised my brow, "Does that slicing power have any limit?"

Finished by then, she shoved a behemoth piece of pure steel from the crate. Her collarbone broke from pushing the metal hunk out of the way. Her eyes watered as she reformed the bone back into place. She mouthed,

"Yes...But by Schema...This hurts so bad."

Her putting this kind of effort to help me meant a lot, and I aimed to pay her back. I couldn't right now, so I winced at the sight, "Damn...I'm sorry. I'd like to wait for you, but we have to go."

Althea nodded, "I know...I know."

We walked out between two fully loaded trains. With my legs slamming the ground beneath me, I kept pace with Althea, each of us carrying a pod. We sprinted between two railroad tracks, the gravel flinging behind us before we started hearing the sound of revving engines. Althea glanced at me,

"You. Decoy. Again?"

I tossed the tube towards her, "Of course."

She caught the tube with one of her arms before she set them down. Her arms shrank as her muscles tore and snapped into place. Looking like a furless centaur drenched in a robe, she grabbed the two tubes under her arms before sprinting towards the chemical laden creek. I winced a little as she gasped in pain, but her speed mounted to epic proportions.

In the distance, several jeeps rolled out of the garages, finding a gap between the two trains lining us. The vehicles drove in while I sprinted away. My feet thumped against the ground with each step like hammers against stone. Augmentation empowered my strides, chunks of wood snapping under my weight. The air rushed past my ears as I enjoyed the speed of my own running.

Althea still pulled ahead, but I kept her in my line of sight at least. After two minutes of running, a bullet whistled right past my head. I didn't turn around. I pushed forward. Another bullet landed straight into the ground where one of my feet marched. The round slinked right off my armor, leaving an indentation in it. More and more bullets rushed in before I found stray rounds hissing close to Althea, sparks bursting off the train near her.

Coming up with a plan, I bent down and scooped up some gravel. I gritted my teeth before leaping as high as I could. Flailing my arms, I hopped onto the top of a cargo crate, stumbling forward but not falling. After getting back into stride, I stomped my foot down. The thin steel bent under my foot, giving my feet some grip.

I changed directions, my joints hissing at me in discomfort. I beelined in the opposite direction, towards the jeeps and guards. My runes roared out, and I hurled several stones at their windshields. Trails of fractures formed over the panels, rocks embedding into the reinforced glass. Blinding them, soldiers turned and fired at me, but I ducked under the firestorm of rounds. The jeeps let their covers down for sight, and I hurled another few stones at them between bullet bursts. Enraged at my stone tossing, they dragged back around in a circle, barely making the turn between the two trains. My advanced problem solving worked like a charm, and another hailstorm of bullets rained my way. Great. Just great.

They lobbed grappling hooks, each of them snapping against the sides of the trains I rested on. They kept me pinned with suppressive fire, soldiers pacing up the cables. I let them get up there with me, wanting the soldiers to get away from their vehicles. Heading to the side where the grappling hooks tied down, I hung myself along the otherside of the train. My fingers gripped into the metal, but no other part of me exposed itself to them.

The troops scattered over the top of the train, searching for me. I waited, their footsteps sending my nerves ablaze. Flipping back onto the train, my feet panged onto the roof, and they turned to me. I bolted forward, bullets smothering where I just stood. I leaped high in the air over a jeep before crushing my outstretched legs into the engine. The front of the jeep caved in, the engine block bursting out the bottom of the vehicle.

I jerked my legs out of the car's front before rolling towards the side opposite of the soldiers. Another volley of bullets painted towards me. With a grunt of effort, augmentation flooded my frame. I growled while flipping the car over. Bullets whizzed past the jeep at certain spots, the car less protective than I hoped it'd be.

But that wasn't my goal.

I bent down and tackled the vehicle's side. It slid right in place, becoming a barricade for several other vehicles coming my way. A storm of bullets snapped into my skin from above, my health dropping fast. I sprinted towards the bottom of a train, leaping between a gap in the wheels. My stomach scraped the rails as I slid beneath the train. Taking a few deep breaths, I gasped for air, dust pluming up as exhaustion set in.

I stopped the troops from catching Althea, but now they closed in from all sides. I took a few breaths before clawing into the gravel and dirt. I tore into the ground, getting just beneath their barrels peaking into the railway. They let out a pelting of gunfire above me, streaks of light tracing over my head. The bullets banged and burst, several gunmen hitting their own team members.

They scrambled to get underneath here with me, but they struggled getting under the train in their plated armors. It gave me a breather. After half a minute, they scrambled inside again. Refreshed and ready, I peeled the ground apart before bursting out from beneath the train's tracks. I sprinted towards a set of warehouses in front of me. Bullets flooded in, and I jumped straight through one of the older windows of the building.

The dirty panels burst into tiny pieces as I rolled forward. I landed onto a catwalk, my stomach slamming into the railing. Momentum carried me over it, and I flipped. I tumbled in the air before flopping onto the ground. Air left my chest, and I blinked, getting a sense of where I was. My hands flopped down as I let out a big gulp of air.

From my side, a click rang out beside me. A ball of metal shot upward, and I covered my head. The ball detonated, a set of blades spiralling in every direction. The force of the blades flung me sideways, several of the daggers lodged inches into my armor. Dizziness and disorientation muddled my view.

Shaking it off, I pushed myself back up, but my arms shook while drool leaked out of my mouth. Unable to keep moving, I leaned over. Vomit coursed up my throat and out of me. Falling back down, I puked my guts out, most of my health gone. A dull banging ebbed in from outside, the guards closing in. I lifted my head up, swallowing my spit. I stumbled back up, falling against a wall.

They spread mines out at random here, so it would take time to enter. If anything, spreading mines this close to camp seemed suicidal. They must've had a good reason for them. Stumbling forward, I found a soldier's corpse. Their head carried pin pricks all over their bloodied face, and their chest burst out from the inside from...Something horrific. As I walked a few steps further, a large spider jumped onto my face from the darkness.

Dozens of legs on its abdomen stabbed at my head. They poked and prodded my armor, unable to pierce my metal helmet. They left deep dents before I grabbed the bug. My fingers dug into

the beast right through its exoskeleton. I wrenched its body apart. Green blood poured out, soaking over my face from the pieces of the creature. I leaned over, gasping for a moment.

My armor stabbed into the creature, absorbing its essence as I got a grip on my situation. Those spiders explained the mines at least. Still exhausted and dizzy, I willed my body forward. I pressed my heels back into the ground before leaping through another warehouse window. Once I picked back up some speed, I kept my eyes peeled for any more mines.

They couldn't kill me, but they sure as hell slowed me down. Even in this chase, I peered at the windows leaking in light as I passed by them. This place oozed an empty, dark beauty. At the same time, the mine's blades oozed out of my body, falling out of my armor behind me. My skin wriggled the daggers out of me. Taking a breath of relief, I leaped into another warehouse window.

As I landed, another mine triggered, releasing a blade ball. My eyes opened wide, and I slapped the ball away as it reached eye level. It launched into another warehouse. Windows shattered as blades snapped out in every direction. They put those death balls everywhere. I ran forward, crushing a leggy spider by accident.

Ok, *maybe* they had the right idea.

Footsteps ebbed in from outside the building. I bolted forward as the sound of helicopter blades ebbed into the warehouse. At this point, I rolled my eyes. The situation was getting out of hand. Hiding in my building, three helicopters passed by, the wind off their wings blowing trash up around outside. Each helicopter carried thick bracers on the outer edges of their wings, making them more durable.

Caught between the copters and the troops, I closed my eyes for a minute. A part of me just wanted to use Oppression and wipe them out. That piece of me smiled at the thought of just ending this whole charade right there and then. I wanted to gore them apart, to kill them and strip their bones out of their body. I smothered that urge, knowing the bounty and guilty conscience wouldn't be worth it.

After sliding a window open, I flopped out of a warehouse. I shot down another alleyway. I evaded some soldiers before making my way down several factory floors. The helicopters circled overhead the entire time. After passing a few buildings, another helicopter locked in on my position, and they fired an old minigun at me. The many barrels changed into a ball of light and the bullets into a stream of fire.

It was more like the mouth of a dragon than a gun. The rounds dug inches into the gravel ground before slapping across my back. The lead hissed in my wounds, evaporating my blood. I withstood the onslaught, though the sheer force of the stream nearly knocked me down. The helicopter whizzed past me, so I kept running. The helicopters took turns gunning me down. Hiding behind dumpsters full of trash, I protected myself behind them.

To my amazement, the bullets punched through the dumpsters *and* the garbage. Stripes of embedded lead traced up and down my body as a result. However, the sheets of steel slowed the bullets enough that grievous wounds turned into superficial scratches. From place to place, I moved like that. Heat built in on my back, the hot lead squealing on my skin. The metal cooled from molten red to a cool gray, the helicopters hovering lower and lower to aim at me.

After whizzing several feet over a roof, I found my opportunity. I ran up and leaped onto a wall. The tin wall caved in, and I kicked off the indentation. Flying up, I landed on the side of the roof. After pulling myself up, I stumbled forward. I kept my balance by pushing myself up with my arms. With a burst of effort, I stomped my feet into the metal roof once more.

My heels left imprints in the tin before I jumped up towards one of the passing helicopter's side railing. I missed my landing, diving straight into the helicopter blades instead of the helicopter's window. The metal blades gyrated near me, but I flew just short of the spinning rotor. I stuck an arm up. Instead of putting my arm in the blades, I molded a mass of my armor into the rotor. I clipped it, and the circling mass knocked me sideways.

I expected a blade but they hit me more like a baseball bat. I flipped in a circle. One of my armored feet clipped another blade. Slamming into the roof, air left my chest as I gasped for air. Above me, the helicopter spun out of sync for a few quick whirls. That slightly off beat spinning snowballed until it spun out of control. The blades crushed into the roofing. They gouged out the tin and steel, chunks of the blades impaling the building.

The helicopter lost any way of staying afloat. Blades shattered. The hull tumbled. It fell out of sight. I let my head rest against the roof, taking several deep breaths. Adrenaline spiked in my system, my hands trembling and my knees wobbling. I grabbed the sides of my head, closing my eyes. I shook off my unease and terror before pushing myself back up. I had to continue. I had to push through, so I did.

The other helicopter whirled around, getting me back in its sights. I grimaced at it before looking around. Half a rotor blade jutted out of the roofing. A slicing, glowing trail of bullets passed to me. I leaped sideways and picked the blade over my head. The helicopter passed closer before chucked the rotor blade at the other helicopter.

Blade met blade, and my lobbed one whipped away. It was enough to throw the rotating edges out of whack. Like the other helicopter, it spiraled out of control before tumbling towards another building. It skidded over the roof, a maelstrom of red sparks shooting off the tin before the helicopter flew straight into the wall of another warehouse.

The front bent against the building, the glass fragmenting. It slid sideways before cracking into the ground. A fire ignited somewhere along the line, but the troops got out in time. A fiery inferno engulfed the scene, heating my armor even at the impressive distance. Everything was a

blinding red and orange before I turned and trotted away. I wiped sweat off my brow, thankful they were finally gone.

Getting my bearings again, I charged over a gap in the buildings. I dashed onto another building nearby. I landed, finding bits of flames following me. Peering at my back, pieces of fiery debris fell off me. I shook off the refuse before glancing around. Above me, a pilot floated down from above, a parachute attached to the back of his seat. I slammed my fists together and grinned at him. My armor contorted into a twisted smile.

The unarmed man in armor scrambled for a switch near him. As he floated closer, his scrambling devolved into a panic. He tapped a keypad on the side of his arm, and a jet of plasma erupted from behind him, shooting him away from me. I laughed a little at the guy's escape. I intimidated him more than I thought I would.

With nothing else in my way, I ran towards Springfield while aiming to lose them in the suburbs. After a few minutes of running, I neared the edges of the suburbs - this place was my ticket out of this mess. Adding to my escape, a dense fog clustered over the town. Perfect. I ran into it through the backyards of abandoned homes. People left this place for the Force of Iron's shelter and protection, and it emptied out like a ghost town.

Pacing through the desolate cityscape, I peered at the roads leading into Springfield. Lines of caution tape, safety cones, and gunmen surrounded the town on all sides. Many flames burned in the distance near homes, flashes of gunfire exposing marksman in the fog. Plumes of black smoke traced the compact mist, and a sickening smell lingered in my nose. Getting further in, that scent rotted down into a mix of ash and burning flesh.

My eyes watered at the putrid stench, but even with teary eyes, I found guards along roads arming themselves to the teeth. It unnerved me that so many people guarded every inch of Springfield's perimeter. Torix mentioned fights and whatnot, but this defied any expectations I had. I readied myself for more fighting because something was wrong here.

Very wrong.