

In overling society, horns are a defining characteristic of one's abilities. An overling can have one to two horns, with the bi-horned sector being quite a bit stronger than the uni-horned. The number of horns was a rudimentary way to discern an overling's energy levels. The size, shape, and placement of the horns were far more varied, and the variation in those attributes provided more in-depth measurements of power as well as their sphere of control.

You see, reader, however far in the future you find my manuscript, know that there were only two classifications of overling horn number. This was not due to the lack of any other number, but because anything else is abhorred, indeed, the children with such characteristics are considered monsters.

This is due to the drawbacks of being more powerful. Outsiders would look upon this classification and conclude that overlings with a single horn will eventually be relegated to second-class citizens. That would likely be true, if not for the Plasma Madness.

The Plasma Madness is a part of every overling's life. It comes with growing older, and just as old humans die, old overlings contract the Plasma Madness.

Our bodies were not made to withstand the power we wield. Through some misfortune of fate or evolution, our flesh and matter can not contain the energy forever. As we grow old, the power begins to decompose our gray matter at a faster rate than it can be reproduced, and as an overling is slowly consumed by the madness and instability caused by this atrophy of the mind, they become unstable and dangerous.

This is the function of the Security Organization. It has been a part of our society as for as long as records hold. Once an overling displays indicators of Plasma Madness, the organization seizes them, locking them away within a maximum-security cell with padded walls and straitjackets. Then their family holds a funeral while they waste away, alone in everlasting white walls until they rot.

Harsh, but it is the way things are.

The average uni-horned overling contracts the madness at around eighty years old and can destroy several houses or public buildings in their frenzy. Bi-horned overlings sit anywhere from sixty to seventy years and they can decimate several swathes. The date where a tri-horn goes mad is unknown.

Considering the havoc I am capable of wreaking, it is little wonder they chose to exterminate tri-horned children.

~~~~~

The child always knew there was something different about her. It wasn't because of self-scrutiny or loathing, nor any blatant accusations of being "other", but the rift between her and other overlings was apparent. She couldn't go anywhere without being followed by whispers or negative looks. Wherever she walked, people would go the long way around to avoid her. As if she was a disease.

If the seven-year-old reminisced, she would feel the familiar calloused hands in her hair or a soft song that her mother sang whenever she cried. Her parents' happy memories were more distant now, filled with anxious glances and a specific repulsed look that she recognized but could never explain. Whether it be at a dining hall or a mech's shop or a store, the whispers sprung and her parents' worry followed. But it took too much energy to be concerned, and soon the concern faded entirely.

"Can I have that?" She whined, pulling at her mother's sleeve. She pointed to a pretty silver crown, made of synthetic plastic. "Can I? Please?" Why look away from me? I'm right here. Why are you afraid?

"No, starlight."

"Why not? Other children get things from their parents, why won't you give me things? Did I do something wrong?"

Her mother placed a gentle hand on her head, but stared off in the distance, over her head. "It won't matter dear. Toys won't be used for very long."

"I won't waste, I promise! Pleaseee?"

Her mother pulled her away from the circlet, even as she continued to whine.

~~~~~

A threat, they whispered. Too dangerous to be left alive. A creature like her could spell about the end of us.

The girl was lead through the streets like a convicted prisoner's procession, amid whispers of fear and hostility. Her empty eyes stared into the distance, unaware of the world around her. Better not to mind the cruel words, she felt, better not to exist at all in this worthless universe.

There had never been any record of a tri-horn existing, and if any had, they would no doubt have been eliminated. All her years of survival had only prolonged her suffering.

The nine-year-old girl continued forward, past the jeers and the cold stares of the soldiers. Past the crowded streets and commercial buildings of the starship, on and on beyond a forest grove. Past a small stream with a stone glowing faintly inside it.

Beautiful, whispered something visceral in her chest, it would look so nice in a circlet.

Her parents never even spared her new clothes when she outgrew the old ones. They spared no change for their doomed child. Why buy a toy that will only be thrown away, or else serve as a reminder to the daughter they sent to execution? The world ship Orb never lacked in resources to ensure all its denizens a good quality of life, but she did not qualify as “living”.

She wasn’t even tall enough to see the eyes of her captors.

Maya’s vision blurred, and tears fell on the hard metal ground. No one cared enough to notice or react. She wiped her face repeatedly in pained embarrassment, choosing to focus on the tears rather than her inevitable death. It was so humiliating, being jerked around like a beast. Her mother had told her not to cry.

They had led her father away, beyond parts of the ship that no one would venture, out onto a remote planet where she would spend her final days. A large, forested planet where few lived. It was a pretty planet, she had thought distantly, but she didn’t want to die in such a lonely place.

The entourage passed through the stream with the glowing light while Maya tried her best to memorize the locations of the landmarks. She followed the guards as they came to a massive steel building in the center of the dense forest. She intrinsically understood what the building was for and could almost hear the haunting screams of pain and madness that befell the overling race. Tears fell quicker as her imagination ran unhinged.

“Guard number 3074, permission to access the base.”

“One moment, the service number is unrecognizable.”

“Guard 3047, is there an issue with the document system?”

“The documentation system’s servers are under reconstruction, please wait until you are given access.”

“I work here every day, refer me to the other guards and they will give confirmation.”

“I’m sorry, access cannot be granted until your number is confirmed through the documentation system. Please remain waiting until the problem is fixed.”

"This stupid fucking machine-"

The distracted overling man loosened his grasp on her shoulder, providing a scant opportunity. Maya ran back, away from the panicked, furious shouts of her executioners. She followed the dirty red trail back the way she came, past the trees and gates, until what she was looking for sparkled under the water of the stream.

A blue jewel gleamed. It was the same star that had fallen from the sky, she instinctively knew, a shard of the cosmos from which they originated. It was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen. Maya keeled forward onto her knees, reaching for the gem with chained hands. She cupped the gem to her body, wishing that she could die with a piece of the world to remember her by. The gem wasn't living, but perhaps it would be enough. She did not want to leave this world alone.

The shouting behind her picked up again, signaling the overling securities' arrival. She trembled because it was inevitable that-

they would find her, fleeing the facility grounds. She could not outrun trained guards, and her powers not yet developed toward or disguise herself from their gaze.

she remained hidden under the bush, the footsteps thundering past as the guards followed the easiest path out of the forest grove, eventually coming to a dead end.

She rolled into the brush, curling up, taking up as little space as she could among the branches of the bushes as they dug into her flesh, brambles cutting and scraping her. Shadows moved past her, the silhouettes of her executioners flowing away, just as the vision foretold.

She let herself breathe.

What was that? The handcuffs bound any of her powers, so there cannot have been any irregular influence from her three horns. She scooted out from the brush, uncurling her hands as the threat of capture slowly left her mind. In her small hands, the gem was glowing.

~~~~~

The inquisitor had lectured his guards furiously when they had finally returned, exhausted and empty-handed. The failure to procure the monster child had left him in a foul mood, and the thought of having to report the thing's escape would create quite a turn in public opinion against the security organization. He trudged home, relaxing on the couch. Well, he wasn't on duty at

the moment, so the work stuff can wait. He took a bottle of whiskey out of the freezer. As much as humans are a blight upon the universe, they had good taste in creating liquor.

"Hello, sir." A voice whispered behind his ear.

He jumped from the couch, frantically searching for the voice. He lived alone.

The source was sitting on the head of his couch, having silently moved there while he had enjoyed his glass. The monster!

The little girl watched him too calmly, too quietly for a child, like one would observe a bug under a microscope. Under her scrutiny, he felt completely exposed, and he despised it.

How did she escape the facility grounds? How did she find her way to my house? Could she have followed him and boarded his ship? No, that ship was too small- a vehicle meant for four- he would have seen her.

The inquisitor backed away, eyes never leaving the child, retreating until he was right next to a set of drawers. He kicked the drawer and it opened slightly, enough for him to reach in and draw a gun, fully loaded, at the child's head.

If he killed her now, then they could hide her original escape from the facility. He wouldn't get into any trouble. The inquisitor pressed his finger to the trigger. The blood would be an issue, but they are people who take money without asking questions. It's easy, all I have to do is shoot her. All I have to do is pull the trigger. Kill the monster. His hands shook. The girl didn't look scared. Did she even know what a gun was meant to do?

Maya had to keep herself from laughing. For all of the inquisitor's bluster and narrow-minded hatred of her existence, he had never done the dirty work. The man was just a glorified paper-pusher, giving our orders above his station in a bid for power. He would hesitate to murder because he had trouble separating "the child" from "the monster".

He would be quite unhappy at the action of harming her. She had viewed every possible iteration of what could happen, and more often than not, the man would scare her away with the threat of shooting before drowning himself in alcohol. The chance of truly being maimed was low. Now she simply had to put on an act to achieve the gem's most beneficial solution.

"Sir? What are you doing?"

She scooted off the couch and walked up to him, uncaring of the weapon in between her eyes. "Sir, you don't seem very happy to see me. Did I do something wrong?"

"Yes! How did you get here? Little girl, this is trespassing on private property!"

"I followed. I-I had seen which way the ship had gone when you left. I walked all the way here." She took off her small bow shoes, showing two feet covered in blisters and sores, the insides of the shoes smeared with purple blood. She had walked over fifteen swathes in the empty forest. "My feet hurt from all the walking, though."

"Then why?" The man asked in a haunted voice. "Why come to me?"

She gave him an innocent smile. "Because you have the badge." She pointed at the circular badge on his robes, an insignia possessed by all who served the security organization. The guards and hired patrollers didn't wear them on duty, only so they don't have an easily defining feature. "Central Commune said that good people wore the badge, so you must be a good person! Good people help others, and I hoped someone would help me."

The stricken look on his face was so worth all the blisters on her feet.

They were lies, all lies. But 16 hours had given her time ample to view every single possibility. She knew every word that left her lips was perfectly executed.

"...I was scared when those people took me. Was- was it something I did? Did I need to be taken?"

"NO- I mean yes, you did. You...needed to be brought in." Maya could see him struggle with his morals. All he needed was a small push.

"Then why take me? No one wants me. Why didn't they just take away the food that gets wasted on me instead, like usual?"

"Oh my God," he breathed "I can't fucking do this". The inquisitor dropped his gun to his side, no longer able to reconcile her with the monster the public damned. He threw the gun back in the drawer and took a long, hard swig of his whiskey.

"I'm thirsty", she added with hidden spite. "Can I please have some of that too? Are you going to take my water too?"

The inquisitor nearly cried with frustration.

~~~~~

The inquisitor had hidden her at his house for the night, intent on returning her to the facility the next day. Then he put it off until the day after. Then the next.

The man had tried to steel himself to send the black sheep to the slaughter, but by the time he had finally gathered enough determination, it was already too late. If he were to "capture" Maya

by the third day, he would be under greater suspicion of harboring her illegally. Turning her in, even with claims of coincidence, would be risky.

After week two has passed, the inquisitor gave up entirely. He provided her with enough to eat and drink, along with a few clothes, and went his own way. This did not mean he was a good parent or role model, as Maya often thought of herself as the more responsible one. The inquisitor only provided the bare necessities, treating her as a burden he never wanted and generally avoiding her presence whenever possible. He came home from his job and quickly got himself utterly trashed, and Maya sometimes disliked his addiction, since it meant she had to clean up the dusty rooms as the constant reek of alcohol-induced many headaches. But she understood the man had never wanted her.

He never came to check on her after the visions grew more powerful year by year, leaving her screaming and crying so loudly that she wondered if the facility workers could hear. She had to bear the burden of the future alone.

Oh, was it a heavy burden to bear. The jewel purred, vibrating against the circlet she wore like a crown. Does it wear on your shoulders Atlas?

Sometimes, all she wished for was a friend. That would be enough.

As the pain and agony grew, Maya began to see far beyond the confines of her body, people far and wide becoming the subject of her sight.

An overling painter who spends eternity in his studio, creating masterpieces worthy of the greatest exhibits. Will he squander his talent, will he become renowned throughout the universe, will he kill his wife, will he neglect his daughters, or will he love them more than life itself?

A bloodthirsty human who drowns in sadistic pleasure, manipulating the people with who he interacted, turning them at each other's throats while he pulled the strings. Who will be his next pawns, his next victims? How will he entrance them, gain their awe and adoration before leaving them to die?

A per-human who was so absorbed in all the wonders around her, to the point where she loses sight of herself and destroys all she touches. Obsession, to learn and know all the world in its glory. Where will life lead her, what will she do just for the sense of adrenaline and freedom?

She looked through their eyes, lived their lives, and learned from their mistakes. She learned not to underestimate herself or waste her life away, the basics of manipulation and politics, how to keep from losing herself in her visions. She was ecstatic to see a world far beyond the scope afforded to her as a monstrous abomination the overlings only sought to discard.

History and Math and Art, complex machines and murky philosophy. She consumed the knowledge of the world through others, greedily exploring the universe in her own small room,

endless avarice given physical form. She watched as chess masters played, as artists sculpted, as tacticians planned the next steps in their failing war. Laughs and cries and screams all blurring together as the visions swirled and grew and ever became more immersive, as Maya dove deeper into their psyches to learn and understand and tear their very self into easily predictable parts.

She grew to love the simple people she had watched, and as they flourished and grew, so she did along with them. They would experience the wonders and horrors of the world, their reactions mirrored by the ghost within their psyche. Children become adults, adults become elderly, the elderly grow old and die-

Maya remained alone and unseen. She snapped back to her body, sobbing with the crushing realization that even among crowds, even within them, she was completely and utterly alone.

She coughed and sobbed, her throat parched despite the wet cries. How long had she been in her headspace? Another cough. The sun was setting beyond the window. The last time she had looked, it had been the middle of the night. Maya had been sitting, hunched in the corner of the room for two days. Her legs shook as she dragged herself over to breathe the fresh air. Dusk, she thought with some disgust, was the prime time to drink oneself to death.

The house was too quiet. Usually the inquisitor left Central Commune on just to form background noise. Tonight, the house was silent and dark, not a single device buzzing. Maya carefully made her way downstairs, weak from her coma but unhurried. She already knew what had happened

She didn't remove the alcohol from his cabinet. A little test, a fifty-fifty chance. If the inquisitor didn't drink enough to give himself alcohol poisoning, just this once, she could have kept some faith in his character.

The man lay prone on the ground, covered in his vomit and the alcohol that dripped from the bottle. If she had been cognizant enough to interfere, he would have lived several more days. He would have called his family and received some closure. Perhaps he could have "confessed" that he cared about her, like family. Though such words would have been a lie- just a cursory kindness at best, but more than he had ever granted her.

"I guess it just isn't part of this timeline. Shame, I have to see the good people are capable of."

She buried his body but placed no gravestone. In time, the plot will be overrun, feeding vines and undergrowth and bugs for years to come.

~~~~~

A per-human merchant, distant and prideful and practiced in the art of deception, denying himself freedom because his loyalty toward his people was stronger.



He was a human general, passionate and brave and desperate for any scrap of affection that he ignored as a perceived weakness.

Maya was fifteen when she first saw them, two children also blessed by the stars. She was ecstatic, even if they were predestined to be her enemies. Even in an infinitesimally way, she was not alone. The other children suffered beside her, they too carried the burden of the war. Blood and bone and grit, their weight in souls heavy on their shoulders. She watched them while they trained and cried and grew, unable to console their pain, and through her sight, she became attached to them.

One day, I will meet you face to face.

She had seen them at their best- free and happy, using their blessings to serve others yet still unchained by all the monsters who wanted their powers, who weaved chains around them with professions of duty and love. But this world was not so kind.

Tyrion was cornered into believing that he must devote himself completely to his people and follow anything the per-human council said if it benefitted them. But most of the time, the orders only served to increase the council's influence and reputation.

Shariq pursues the love of his father, which can only be given through increasingly difficult standards. He wanted to make the elder man proud, thinking his father to be a good man. He strained himself, training his powers and absorbing the propaganda they fed him.

Maya herself can be easily swayed by a desperate need to affirm her own existence and fulfill her relations and attachments. She was self-aware enough to recognize her weakness, so had stayed in the isolated home to prevent anyone from taking advantage.

It was easy to recognize the manipulation they faced from the distance, but Tyrion and Shariq had not yet realized the extent of their dependence. But it wouldn't be long now, not compared to how long she had waited, looking out the windows of the house.

She swung her feet, seeing beyond the green forests and square window frame. In three years, she will finally greet them on equal grounds.

~~~~~

"Take cover!"

The soldier ducked behind a piece of shrapnel, the overlings casting barriers to protect from the bullets. She skirted around the sounds, shooting several beams at the first line of tanks.

Her beam managed to strike one tank dead center, and the others bounced off harmlessly. The damaged tank sparked and exploded in a brilliant explosion, annihilating nearby tanks in a fiery

blast. But it was not enough. Four, maybe five in several hundred wouldn't make a difference. It wouldn't save them.

None of this had been according to plan. They were only supposed to be messenger ships, unequipped for battle.

Sharp whistles as bullets and bombs flew.

Their line of shields fell. Several casters had been in the blast vicinity of the tanks. The man next to her collapsed to the ground, blood dripping from his nose and mouth. She pulled an arm around her, half-carrying him as he moaned in pain.

Another line of fire and half of their troops fell. One bullet caught her across the shoulder, lodging deep the arm not carrying her companion. She stumbled with a curse but persisted. It was pure misfortune that there was a new human base under their usual flight path, and it seemed that her crew would be the one to suffer for it. There was a chance

She was one of the only bi-horns. She may be able to destroy those tanks and give her crew a chance to survive in one fell swoop. If she gave in to the Plasma Madness and unleashed the destruction at the human force-

Three swathes. Good enough.

Her eyes blazed cold lime.

A massive shield of blue light blazed to life in front of the stragglers, hardened soldiers dropping their weapons and dissolving their Lumine spells to look on in awe. They stopped retreating, turning to stare at the miraculous barrier. The tanks stopped in their tracks as well, unable to pass the massive blue wall separating them.

The lime glow faded from the soldier's eyes. She hadn't been the one responsible for the shield. Such massive power would be a great asset on the field, but where the fuck did it come from?

Clop. Clop. Clop.

As if on command, something approached from behind them. An overling woman, or teenager, dressed not in the battle armor of the messengers and soldiers but instead in a dark blue dress, completely unsuited for battle. A blue gem twinkled from her circlet, framed by three curled horns. In the middle of the dirty and bloody soldiers, she glowed like an angel.

The mysterious overling sidled next to her, smiling kindly, sympathetically.

"It's okay. You don't have to take your life." She said under her breathe. The soldier's eyes widened.

"I don't-"

The silence was shattered by the sound of tank rounds shattering against the barrier. The woman seemed more annoyed than anything else.

"They just won't give up this time, huh?"

Before the soldier could ask her to fall back, that the tanks will overpower her barrier eventually, the glow of lumine already swirled around her. She made a pushing motion out to her sides, and the dust and debris around the shields cleared instantly. Violet light sparked on her hands like dark flames.

From her position, the soldier heard the woman mutter. "I didn't want to send a message like this, but I suppose it was inevitable."

She reached out a hand, and a tank levitated in the air. The soldier's jaw dropped.

With a snarl, the woman closed her hand into a shaking fist, twisting it ever so slightly. The tank gave a metallic groan, once, twice- then crumpled into a small sphere. Blood dripped from the sphere lethargically, the only remains of the human residing within.

Someone behind her was violently sick. The soldier paid no heed to them.

"Who- who are you?"

The overling woman smiled.

"My name is Maya, and I am your Blessed."

The soldier gasped in awe? A Blessed! The overlings were the only faction that did not yet have a blessed leader. The abilities of the others had improved their respective factions' capabilities by leaps and bounds, forcing the overlings to try and defend their small sector of the galaxy. They were a species on the brink of extinction. If they were to gain a sudden, upper hand-

She watched as the woman lead her troops to an abandoned ship, her actions so deliberate that she almost questioned if the ship had been purposefully placed, as if the hand of God granted them fortune.

Her Blessed lifted the crew's spirits and they worked with ease to ensure liftoff. With a few well-placed words and a demonstration of her abilities, she had taken full control of the situation. Hope bloomed in the soldier's chest.

If anyone could turn the tide of war, I think it could be her.

~~~~~

The rumors spread quickly, talking of a mysterious empress of the overlings. A young woman who rose to power in historical speed to join the representatives' table.

It was plain to see that the dying race had found their leader. The queen managed to gain a position that even the other Blessed had not been able to attain. There were many plots of execution, but none even passed preliminary plans, the infiltrators being discovered with disturbing accuracy.

Her army remained vigilant, and her ability hidden from even the most scrutinizing eye.

She was satisfied with the power that she had attained. There will be more to come, situations to manipulate, disasters to prevent. But the feeling of power was sweet on her tongue.

Maya, the overling Queen.

The world blurred as she stretched her sight ever farther.

~~~~~

*Fear, shielding gentle golden features as he weighed the lives of his people.*

*Acceptance, twisting pained features as he pondered a life beyond death.*

*Horror, contemplating the existence of Limbo and its implications on their mortality.*

*Betrayal, in her carefully constructed plans and decisions.*

Hatred.

*Yearning, for beauty and strength beyond the confined infinity of darkness.*

*Anger, at a perceived fault derived from impossible standards.*

Hatred.

*Regret, stemming from her soul as they crumbled around her visions.*

HATRED.

She gasped as the tendrils of another nightmare dissipated. She clung to the blankets and ambient music and faint lamplight-

And the darkness, hanging over the vectors of her void space.

Fuck. It wasn't a dream.

The paths continued to diverge, every action delaying the inevitable, but there were no iterations where the timeline led to the idyll. More often than not, their presence in physical reality only spelled disaster. But if they were to stay-

Limbo forever. Together but so alone.

She just had to keep trying.

~~~~~

In time, she found another like her. An overling with three horns and a tear insignia on his back, slowly clawing his way from an abject horrible situation, making something of himself through any means necessary.

He will become something amazing. Finally, there was something for her. She had found someone to love and protect in the same uniquely selfish way that Shariq had.

Tyrion alone had remained in Limbo, ever dutiful. One day, she hoped that he could also experience loving someone else so wholly and selflessly. She could only hope it wouldn't destroy him in the process.

Silver eyes, silver blades, silver chains dragging on her skin as she struggled, clawing and dragging herself away hell, fleeing her fate with every breathe-

But that had yet to come. For now, she would live in the present, watching and waiting.

The overling boy shifted in his sleep, his brow wrinkled. He gripped his pillow tighter to his body, snuggling it as though it substituted for a warm body. Maya put a gentle hand on his head, spectral palm passing slightly through him.

"Sleep, my beloved Iris."