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## Friends of Disaster

One side effect of mana arriving and worming its way into literally everything was that it stabilized the Earth's ecosystem. The dangers of climate change that worried some people of my parent's generation never materialized. Ironically, it only took the end of the world.

Perhaps that said a lot about mankind.

Mana didn't just preserve; it amplified. Nature, now invigorated, spreads its tendrils assertively, and everywhere I look as I walk toward the train station is filled with plant life slowly reclaiming the world. The affluent cities deploy task forces to contain this new aggressive green. Those are the cities untouched by raiders, where crime statistics don't spiral into horror stories.

However, Houghton, my stomping ground, is a different beast.

It was thirty-five years after the Great Change, but still, things aren't too crazy yet. There aren't deserts with crazy cannibals or anything. Nope, just the remnants of a developed nation turned to something eerily reminiscent of pre-Change dystopian media, with corporate fortresses providing shelter for their laborers, and vast expanses of monster infested wildlands.

Well, Detroit kind of fit that bill beforehand, also... but let's not talk about that. It's said they were on the brink of a comeback pre-Arrival. I wonder how they fare now. For somewhere so close, I really have no idea.

I shudder to imagine the state of countries that were struggling even before this upheaval. When your own backyard is ablaze, it's hard to catch a glimpse of your neighbor's.

In this new world, geography and civilization are delineated into zones. Green zones—your postcards from before, just with a touch of the arcane. Places like Washington D.C. or—surprisingly—Atlanta. Even others across Europe and Asia—Switzerland in its entirety, Munich, Oslo, Tokyo, Beijing, Seoul, and Singapore—remain almost nostalgically familiar, or so people say. I've never been to any of them. Most capitals boasted this status, thanks to their heavy military presence. The focus of global governments turned these places into safe havens in the aftermath of what some wistfully dubbed the "Gentle Apocalypse."

*Green for go. At least, most of the time.*

Yellow zones are next. The buffer zones, where you could feel the world starting to fray at the edges. Cities like Toronto, Sydney, and Chicago fell into this category. While they are predominantly

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safe, monsters lurk just beyond the metropolises, and crime is more rampant. Yet, they retain some semblance of order—public services still operate, albeit with hiccups.

*Yellow. Proceed with caution.*

Then, the orange zones. Detroit, Montreal, New York City: these are glimpses into the beginning of the end. The world here wears the apocalyptic aesthetic unabashedly. Most of rural America—and, for that matter, rural almost everywhere—is painted a bold, unsettling orange. Civilization is hanging by a thread, dancing on the edge of chaos.

*Orange. Signal's starting to break.*

Next, we have the red zones. Where I call home.

And the reason I never leave home without my trusty assault rifle strapped to my back, and my runic knife strapped to my chestplate.

Think Los Angeles and vast stretches of the southwest. Africa and the Middle East in alarming entirety. These are places where any semblance of governance is a distant memory. The rule of law has been replaced by the whim of raiders, gangs, and warlords. Places where a monster swarm might, on any given day, wipe a town off the map; and that's only slightly hyperbolic. Needless to say, things are dangerous. Yet, red zones are also hotspots for mana density, becoming siren calls for corporations, adventurers, governments, and anyone with a mix of greed and bravery.

*Red. Dead ahead.*

Lastly, there are the black zones. The abyss, void of hope and light. Paris stands as a haunting testament—a once-beloved city of lights, now shrouded in impenetrable darkness. These are the places where civilization hasn't just crumbled; it has been brutally annihilated. Even the bravest souls, the platinum adventurers who made names for themselves in red zones, wouldn't dare set foot here unless absolutely necessary. Rumors swirl of unspeakable monsters, of curses that can unravel the mind, and of magic so twisted that the very earth seems to weep. Black zones are the epitome of desolation, bearing the scars of a world that has truly met its match.

*Black. Abyssal void. Not just dead ahead, but dead all around.*

As I navigate the streets, every sense is heightened, every instinct sharpened. The city is *safe-ish*, but my training has honed me into a paranoid bitch.

That and my lingering trauma that I keep buried deep.

All around me, others mirror my vigilance, armored in tactical gear and cloaked in caution. We are the wary inhabitants of this fractured new world. The city is a juxtaposition of ancient stone and advanced arcane technology. Everyone here is either strong or protected by someone strong, be it family or faction. Even the civvies in red zones were a different breed, if you could truly call them civvies out

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here. They all work for the corporation, so I give them a bit more benefit of the doubt than I would in some green zone.

Because out here, every day you make it through alive is a luxury.

Buildings scarred from the apocalypse's aftermath stand side by side with newly erected fortifications bearing powerful protective runes. But it isn't the structures that hold my attention—it's the people. In each person I look at, every step is measured, every gaze sharp and calculating. Men and women, young and old, from children barely into their teens to the elderly with their seasoned eyes, all walk with the weight of a world that demands constant vigilance. Every so often, a shimmer of mana flashes, the soft light of a personal shield from an abjurer or runic device being activated or a communication spell being cast.

My path leads me to the train station—home of the massive, armored behemoths of post-apocalyptic transportation. Before the world shifted, trains symbolized routine and daily monotony... well, at least in Europe. In America, they were apparently rare, but now they are necessities.

Gone are the days when everyone drove around in cars.

Traveling is done in groups nowadays, our primal human minds long reverted to the ancient necessity of community.

Now, they stood as fortresses on rails. Bulky gun emplacements line the length of the train, their black barrels gleaming with both polish and magic that were ready to unleash a storm of bullets and spells on any threat that dares approach.

As I near the entrance, I reach into my pocket and pull out my corporate pass. It was a sturdy card inscribed with runes that pulsed with a soft glow in its charged state.

When I get to the gate, I tap the card against the pad next to the turnstile. A chime sounds, accompanied by a green flash, and the gates slowly unlock and retract, granting me entrance.

Inside the station just before the platform stand three soldiers from the national guard, each standing tall and resolute. Their armor is more utilitarian—and cheaper—than mine, but the blend of kevlar and enchanted metals is still designed to withstand both bullets and magical assaults. To a degree. Their presence here isn't just a show of force but a reminder of the necessity of security and government.

That there are so few speaks of how spread thin that government is, and why I have a job in the first place. Corporate security is the main force here, but governments always want to meddle in places where they have almost zero reach.

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As I pass by them, one soldier catches my eye—a woman with striking features that causes me to do a double take. The sides of her head are shaved, with intricate tattoos trailing upwards, culminating in a pattern that seems to flow seamlessly into her dark hair on top. She also has some hardwire cybernetics that I'm sure give her a decent edge over other mundanes.

If I wasn't as leveled as I was, I'm sure she'd break me in two.

*She's pretty cute.*

Our eyes lock for a moment, and she offers a cheeky wink. I zero in on her unnaturally green irises and watch as the cybernetic one rotates. A clear sign she is zeroing in on me.

Heat rises to my cheeks, and I quickly look away, flustered.

*Stay focused, Lexi.*

Reflexively, my hand moves to the side of my face, fingers feigning to tuck nonexistent strands of hair behind my ear. My nervous gesture isn't missed by her companions, and they chuckle softly as they playfully prod at their teammate.

Without a look back, I hasten my pace, eager to escape the spotlight of their amusement and make my way to the platform.

A large digital board displays the train's departure time, along with various other destinations and their respective security ratings. The air vibrates with the hum of the train's mana engines gearing up.

As the doors open, I take one last look across the station and see the soldier. She gives me a playful wave. I instinctively wave back before embarrassment floods through me and I quickly turn and dart onto the train.

*Damn it. Nice going out there, Lexi.*

I keep my head down to hide my flushed cheeks when I hear laughing. Frowning, I look up and see a familiar corporate security member. "Jason?"

His laugh tapers off and he nods. "Hey, Lexi. You looked real smooth. I could recognize the signs of gay panic from all the way over here. Didn't take you for someone to go after one of the gavs, though."

My eyes roll on their own. I definitely have no control over the act, that shit just happens. I'll fight anyone that claims otherwise. "What are you doing here? Wait... did you get in trouble again?"

The burly corp sec member sighs and rubs a hand through his dirty blond hair.

*Here it comes.*

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His runic augments are the most prominent features on his face, two geometric lines made of biosilv that come from the corners of his eyes and back toward his ears. They're perks that Arcan Corp gives their security teams to help improve different aspects of a person when levels aren't enough.

His are sensory augments that improve his eyesight and hearing. The slight silvery glint in his hazel eyes shows the filament augments, like concentric rings, each one smaller than the last, narrowing down like perfect circles that gives him a heads-up display in his vision, improve his eyesight in all conditions, and likely connect with his interface.

All-in-all, a pretty standard loadout for a career corpo like him.

Most in corp sec have them, but they've never really been my thing. I'll probably get some eventually, but for now, I rely on my amazingness au naturale.

"Yeah. Mathias and I had a fight at the bar last night," he says as if that's all there is to it.

I know better.

"Jason. What else happened?"

"Don't worry, I paid for the damages, and... we... made up right after."

I close my eyes and chuckle to myself. There it was. "You two are crazy. You know that's not a healthy relationship."

He stands a bit straighter at that. It was probably the wrong thing to say, but I've known the guy for two years now; ever since I arrived in Houghton. He was one of the folks that helped show me around.

Jason is tall, which is saying something since most folks are pushing six feet nowadays due to the higher constitution stats. He's probably six-nine, six-ten. I'm six-two, and that's only barely above average for women.

"Yeah, more like a relationshit. But what can I say? I don't see you with anyone."

I remember when he first started dating Mathias. It was after they both beat the shit out of each other so much, I had to damn near carry them to their rooms at the barracks.

Poor corp sec—gotta live in the barracks on the compound. We ARTFOR folks get to live in relative luxury downtown.

He gestures to the green metal weapons cage inside the door and opens it. "Alright, you know the drill, Lexi. Rifle in the cage."

I nod. It's just standard protocol. Since I'm technically a member of corp sec, I get to keep my handgun, so that's always a plus. Everyone knows that ARTFOR doesn't really need the gun anyway.

Classers are like that.

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Jason isn't a classer like me, which is what really sets us apart. Classers are those who are constantly pushing their levels, striving to get to the next threshold.

That doesn't mean he's weak, he's definitely average for what's required of Arcan Corp's security, which puts him in his high twenties as far as levels go. This may not seem like a lot, especially for a man in his thirties when most people hit sixteen naturally, but the reality is, essence—the good stuff that increases our levels and strengthens our bodies—is difficult to get.

Scientists suspect it's because of how many people were in the world during the Great Change.

Now, it's spread all of the essence mana pumped into the world thin. Then the world somehow limits the amount of essence children can obtain beyond what their body gathers naturally as they grow.

There's evidence that the world generates more, but at this point, it doesn't leave much for people that don't go out of their way to gain more like the classers.

Due to the difference between each level being so minor and not worthy of much note, most various entities don't generally care about them. In fact, there isn't even a known level limit, which has led to the emphasis being placed more on what bracket you fall into. Which is all based on your threshold and how close you are to the next one. Each threshold is divided by four, and where your levels fall into based on that is what star you are.

For example, I'm at my first threshold with two stars. Or level thirty-two.

Most civvies, on the other hand, are just along for the ride. What most call the mundanes. Which only means they just live their life and don't do anything out of the normal to gain levels. That said, the civvies here are higher than normal and even they are more likely to have augments to help them perform whatever job the corporation demands of them.

Ironically, it's my lack of augments that outs me as a member of ARTFOR more than anything else.

I unsling the rifle before slotting it into place and tapping my badge to the pad next to it. A red light flickers on and a lock clicks into place. I step back and nod. "Thanks, Jason."

The train lurches into motion and I shift my weight to maintain my balance.

"No problem, Lexi. Better take a seat."

"Sure." I move into the closest car but stop and turn my head back. "How much longer do you have on train detail?"

He winces. "I have another month to go."

"Damn, dude."

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“Yeah.”

“Hey, when you’re back at the compound, hit me up. Maybe you, Mathias, and I can go hang out. I’ll see if I can find a date or something. What do you say?”

He smiles and walks with me as I make my way to a seat. “That sounds like fun, kid. Hopefully, it doesn’t end up like your last date.”

I turn to the side to move past a civvie and look back at him. My eyes narrow of their own volition. Really, my eyes have a life of their own. “That’s a low blow, bro.”

“Don’t bro me. You’re the one who said I had an unhealthy relationship.”

“Hey! You agreed!”

“It’s *my* relationship.”

I wince. “Yeah, that’s fair.”

He leans against the backrest as I sit down. “It’s fine. I’ll let Mattie know, okay? You still like steaks or are you also on this new vegan kick?”

I snort and look up at the guy. “Jason. I’m not getting in between you and Mathias because he wants to go vegan. But yes, I like steak.” The corners of his lips curl up. I quickly add, “But! I’m not gonna lie. A good salad? It’s *to die for*. Mmm, all that green. Soooo good for you.”

He rolls his eyes. “Okay, kid. I get the hint. I’ll see you around, alright? If you see him, tell him I said hey.”

I tilt my head. “Can’t you just text him?”

“I do! But... you know...”

“I’ll tell him I saw you and you seemed excessively remorseful and love him very much and can’t wait to see him as soon as possible. *And* you are understanding of his feelings and desire to go vegan.”

“It’s like you understand me.”

“Yeah, yeah. And trim that beard. You look like a raider.”

He smiles. “Mathias likes it this way.”

I chuckle and wave the big softie away. His own laughter joins mine as he walks back to his post. I can’t help the smile that curls my lips upward.

Now alone, I pull out a small charging case from its dedicated pouch on my vest. Grabbing the buds stored inside, I insert them into my ears and lean back. A quick flick through my interface and my favorite band is providing some sweet background music to my train ride as it leaves the station.

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I almost immediately yawn.

Exhausted as I am, I can't risk sleep. So, I choose to just relax. After all, peace will soon be a luxury I can't afford.

A banger comes on and I feel the music in my bones. I can't stop my head from bobbing to the beat. I ignore the looks I get when I start singing the vocals under my breath.

Everyone needs a traprun playlist for their life.