

Prologue

Sweet Sixteen

Four Years Ago

I jolt awake, drenched in sweat with strands of hair plastered to my cheeks as I lay in my bed. The lingering afterimages of the Vision of Potential swirl in my mind. It had come to me in my sleep, just as everyone had said it would. It showed me what awaits me, of what the pinnacle of my class can truly be if I push myself.

It's the moment I've been waiting for.

At last.

I smile. The system just did its version of wishing me happy birthday.

Sixteen.

The age where the system acknowledges me as an adult, unlocking doors to possibilities I'd been waiting for. The chains binding me are gone.

I can leave this place. This shitty orphanage.

A joyous laugh escapes me even as a few tears stream down my face as I'm heady with the intoxication of newfound power and the tantalizing promise of freedom. "Finally."

Attempting to douse the flame of my happiness, a grumble erupts from above. "Shut up, Lexi. Some of us are still trying to sleep."

"Sorry," I mumble, the giddiness still evident in my tone as I quickly wipe at my eyes.

But the smile on my face can't go away.

A face, shadowed by the dim room light, peeks down from the top bunk, sleep-tousled hair falling into curious eyes. "Alright, tell me. Did it happen?"

The shit-eating grin splitting my face is all the answer she needs.

"What'd you get?"

"A hybrid class," I whisper, trying to stay quiet to not wake up any of the other kids in the big room filled with all the girls of the orphanage, but I can't help the excitement tinging my voice. "I think I'll need the director's interface to figure out the details."

Her eyes narrow. "She'll never let you touch it, you know how expensive it was. You'll have to wait until the evaluators come test you."

Oxylus

A mischievous glint forms in my eye. “Then maybe I won’t ask.”

She smirks back, eyebrows cocked. “You planning a theft?”

“Borrowing,” I correct with feigned innocence. “She’ll get it back. As soon as I’m done with it.” I’m about to elaborate when something makes my voice catch in my throat.

The town’s sirens shatter the stillness, their wail echoing with an urgency we all dread. Everyone knows the drill. If the siren ends within ten seconds, it’s manageable—just a minor breach of the wall and guards can deal with it.

Keep calm. Count.

Six.

The relentless cry of the siren continues. I see my friend’s face tense up above.

Seven.

The lights come on. Distant murmurs of adults grow louder, footsteps echoing in urgency.

Eight.

Shit. I’m an adult too now...

Nine.

Kids are sitting up in their beds. The room goes silent except for the siren.

Ten.

I hold my breath.

Eleven.

A cold dread sinks into my stomach, real tears, those of fear, threaten to overflow.

They’re coming. A monster swarm.

Chaos ensues like a dissonant symphony of frightened cries and hurried movement. Then, like a tidal wave, it sweeps through the room as children, some barely old enough to understand the gravity of the situation, scramble to their feet.

Adults, their faces taut with anxiety, barge in and immediately bark out orders and start herding the youngsters toward safety. Every second feels critical. Amidst the rush, I hastily yank on a pair of rugged pants and struggle into my boots. With swift, practiced movements, I pull on a jacket that has seen better days and snatch up my go-bag—always prepared, always waiting by my side.

As panic bubbles and threatens to consume us all, a familiar, authoritative voice slices through the bedlam. The director, a stern, no-nonsense woman with iron-gray hair and sharp eyes, stands tall

Corporate Mage

amidst the chaos. “Order! We will proceed to the bunker in an orderly manner. Panic will not serve us here.” She pauses, her gaze sweeping across the room, a silent demand for compliance.

The room, although still rife with tension, grows noticeably quieter. Her commanding presence, as always, acts as a beacon that pulls us from the abyss of terror.

She quickly confers with the burly man next to her. “Steven, make sure everyone is accounted for. Bring up the rear.”

Steven nods curtly and immediately begins his headcount by moving amongst the children and jotting down notes on a small pad. His very presence seems to reassure many, but I can tell, he’s just as scared as the rest of us.

Kids tug at adults while asking questions, some are crying and others are looking around, wide-eyed and terrified. But with the director at the helm and Steven ensuring no one is left behind, gradually, a semblance of order emerges from the chaos.

Just get to the bunker. We’ve rehearsed this.

We begin our swift but organized descent down the corridor with the dull thrum of the siren still echoing throughout the town that keeps us focused on the impending threat.

I’m toward the tail end of the line as we filter out into the open. Refuse and rusted cars await us. People covered in geometric augments and dirty clothes look around in fear as they shove and push past others toward safety.

An explosion sounds in the distance that makes everyone duck in fear.

The darkened sky casts eerie shadows over the panicked mass of people who are all pressing down the road toward where the bunker’s entrance lay. The cracking rhythm of distant gunfire punctuates the air, paired with the more immediate organized shouts from the corporate security.

The familiar rhythm of my own breath keeps me anchored in the otherwise frantic scene.

Don’t panic. Stay alert.

Our journey to the bunker is momentarily halted when a small squad of security personnel comes sprinting into view. Their frantic retreat and sporadic gunfire speaks of what’s chasing them before we even hear the monstrous roar that follows. As the firing abruptly ceases, one of the men spots our group, eyes widening.

“We got kids here!” one of them shouts upon spotting us, voice edged with panic.

Another turns and yells at one of the closest to us. “Rodgers! Get them into the fucking buildings! Find a basement!”

Oxylus

Three of them, led by the one I assume to be Rodgers, sprint towards us, urgency evident in their every move. “Follow! Move it!”

The director’s stern voice cuts through my rising panic, urging everyone to keep moving.

Yet before we can make any significant progress, a harrowing roar ripples through the night. Rodgers swears under his breath. “Go! Now!”

Before we can fully react, a monstrous creature lunges from the shadows of an alleyway. It is the size of a lion, but it moves with a speed and agility that are all its own. Its eyes are a fierce red, piercing through the darkness, and its mouth opens to reveal rows of sharp teeth that glint menacingly. The creature’s fur is a matted dark brown, its body a mass of muscle that ripples under the moonlight. Its front claws are extended and glint like metal, ready to tear through flesh and bone. The security team doesn’t hesitate, opening fire on the monstrosity.

But as one creature falls, another, even more menacing, emerges.

It’s eight feet tall, its body reminiscent of a massive, predatory praying mantis. Its exoskeleton is pitch black, like the void of space, giving it an unnatural, eerie appearance. Its enormous, compound eyes glint malevolently in the firelight, seeming to see everything around it. The antennae atop its elongated head twitch wildly, sensing movement. Its arms are massive, bladed scythes that swing through the air with deadly intent.

I let out a scream, the terror undeniable in my voice. In a split second, Steven is there, shoving me to safety. He doesn’t make it himself, though. The creature strikes, its huge scythe-like arms swinging down to catch him.

Its jaws clamp down.

A sickening crunch follows.

“Shit!” one of the security team exclaims, followed quickly by the group unloading bullets into the creature until it falls and starts twitching. “Move! Go!”

Paralyzed by horror, I stare at Steven’s lifeless form. I can’t move. He was just...

Someone’s shouting but all I register is a blur of noise and emotion before I’m physically yanked back to reality by a security member.

I turn just in time to see the others moving through the doorway into the building.

We make a mad dash toward the nearest building, but our path is suddenly blocked. A colossal monster slams into the building’s facade, and I hear a crack as the facade of the building crumbles, bringing down a shower of debris around it. The dust and smoke that follow make it difficult to see, but the suffocating presence of the monster remains. It shifts its hulking mass, a snarl escaping its lipless mouth that shakes the very ground beneath us.

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It turns its predatory gaze on us, towering over us like some sort of malevolent god. The twisted mass of flesh and scales is nothing like I've ever seen. Its enormous maw opens to reveal rows upon rows of razor-sharp teeth. Its eyes, like molten fire, fixate on us, and I feel as if it's peering into the depths of my very soul.

I feel a firm hand grip my arm, and I look over to see the man beside me readying his rifle. His eyes are wide with fear, but there's a determined set to his jaw that tells me he's not about to go down without a fight. He meets my gaze, his voice quavering with adrenaline. "Get ready to run, kid."

"I just turned sixteen."

I don't know why I said that.

He swears, a bitter twist to his lips. "Helluva birthday. Congrats on your first threshold."

The creature's roar is deafening, its maw dripping with anticipation.

The man raises his rifle, taking aim at the monster's head. I know we need to move, but my legs won't respond. The man gives me a sharp shove, breaking my trance. "Now!" he yells and fires his rifle at the beast. "Fucking run!" He continues his lead-filled assault as I break into a sprint, no longer paralyzed, but driven by pure survival.

The backdrop of the night is punctuated by his gunfire until an agonizing scream rips through the air. *Don't look back. Don't look back.* The instinct to escape is overwhelming.

I make a sharp turn into a narrow alley, but the thunderous impact behind tells me the creature is in hot pursuit. Risking a glance, I see its massive form charging after me. Pushing past my limit, I burst onto the next street. A gruesome sight stops me dead—a massacred security team.

Weapons.

Almost instinctively, I rush forward and snatch up the closest rifle. Swinging around, I aim just as the beast emerges. Panic makes my hands shake, but determination steadies them. With a roar, it charges.

Taking a deep breath, I pull the trigger and pray.

I can't help it. I close my eyes; I'm too much of a coward to look my death in the face.

A loud thump sounds in front of me, and I'm hit by a rush of wind.

Then... nothing.

The abrupt silence jolts me to my senses, followed by a rush of... *something* surging through me. The shiver it brings is nearly violent, my eyes snapping open to the quiet aftermath. All that greets me is the chilling click of an empty magazine. Before me, the gargantuan creature lays still, its once fearsome face now riddled with bullet wounds.

Oxylus

How am I still alive?

A tremor laces my exhale as the chaotic orchestra of roars and screams resonate, echoing louder than the sporadic gunfire. My grip on the rifle slackens as realization dawns—it's empty. The weight of the encounter, of having just killed a monster, is heavy. But the primal part of my mind is already working.

Levels. This has to be worth levels.

Scanning the ground, my focus narrows on the lifeless form of a security guard. I dart over, swiftly removing his sidearm and holster, securing it firmly against my thigh and cinching it down snugly. Each movement is deliberate, grounded in survival.

Beside him, a woman lies motionless. I force my gaze away from the mutilation, from the cruel end she met. My hands move of their own volition, extracting her tactical vest and donning it. Swiftly pocketing as many magazines as I can, the weight feels reassuring, grounding.

This isn't the end. Not for me.

The determination to survive fortifies me, steeling my resolve. I need to escape this hell.

Each step is taken with trepidation, the soles of my boots hardly making a sound on the cracked pavement. The desolate town around me echoes a world in disarray—boarded up shops, abandoned vehicles, and walls marred by the scars of previous attacks. I keep to the shadows, conscious of every shattered window and eerily silent alleyway.

The bunker's no longer an option.

As I edge forward, hugging the walls for cover, the metallic scent of blood hangs thick in the air, intertwined with the acrid smell of burning buildings. Every so often, the night's dissonance is punctuated by a distant roar, a scream, or the sporadic crackle of gunfire. It paints a soundscape of pure horror.

The memory of the other kids from the orphanage flashes, their fate at the mercy of an unintended barrier. *God, please let them be safe.*

The south gate. That's where I have to go. Hopefully, there's transportation left.

Suddenly, the grisly sound of tearing flesh stops me dead in my tracks. My heart races as a hulking beast becomes visible. Its ebony scales glisten, reflecting the dim light. Pincer-like claws grip a civilian's body, its many eyes—cold and soulless—locked onto its prey. But an unexpected crash draws its attention, and then, as I slowly raise my rifle, its gaze snaps to mine.

The monster's maw opens, revealing rows of jagged teeth that drip with malice. It lowers its head, letting out a low and menacing growl, taking deliberate steps in my direction. I steady myself, narrowing my gaze.

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I can't afford to miss.

I squeeze the trigger, hoping for a burst of firepower, but only a single crack greets me. My shot has missed, the bullet sailing past the creature's head. In an instant, the monster surges forward, devouring the distance between us with frightening speed. Panic wells as I fire again, a single shot. A graze.

“Shit!”

I frantically pull the trigger, round after round, until a bullet, then another, finally finds their mark. The creature is only a mere twenty feet away when it finally collapses and its momentum comes to a jarring stop.

My relief is short-lived. Gasping, I inspect the rifle, and it dawns on me. The selector. It's on single fire. With a frustrated growl, I swiftly flick it to burst. *That mistake won't happen again.*

Steeling myself, I weave through the debris and abandoned vehicles, eyes trained on the gate. The sporadic staccato of nearby gunfire perks up my ears, an unexpected beacon of hope on this night of death.

Don't rush. You have to be careful.

Turning a corner, my eyes land on a group of four security personnel. They've formed a makeshift barricade with the remnants of some UTVs, their muzzles flashing as they rain lead down the street. Without hesitating, I adjust my grip on the rifle, ensuring its muzzle points harmlessly towards the ground, and sprint towards them.

My footsteps pound the pavement, echoing my racing heartbeat.

As I draw closer, a woman in the group spots me, her face a mask of determination smeared with grime. “Over here!” she shouts, waving me in.

I skid to a halt beside them just as a wave of grotesque monsters looms in the distance. I hear someone say, “Shit, a civvie.” The overwhelming number of monsters makes my gut churn. “Fuck it. Fire at them, kid! Fire!”

Lifting my rifle, I unload, the burst mode sending three rounds at a time into the onslaught. Even though each shot finds its mark, the horde's numbers are barely decreasing. *Focus on the frontliners. They're the imminent threat.* I mentally guide myself, suppressing the creeping panic.

The rifle's sharp click alerts me to an empty magazine. With fear induced urgency, I attempt to reload, but my fingers betray me, causing the new magazine to clatter onto the ground. *No time for mistakes.* Dismissing the fallen ammo, I pull out another magazine, jamming it in with a satisfying click and chambering a round. Just in time.

Oxylus

A monstrous behemoth charges, taking down one of the security personnel. Adjusting my stance, I send two quick bursts into its scaly hide. It drops like a stone. As I turn to the next threat, relief floods in when I see the fallen guard battling the creature off and regaining his footing.

I fire over and over, taking down more when another rush surges through me. This time, I know what it is.

I just leveled!

The air vibrates with a deafening roar, an explosion catapulting me sideways. Disoriented, I hit the ground hard.

Blinking against the smoke and grit, a surreal sight materializes. A squad approaches—five of them with rifles glowing ethereally, lighting up the horde. A woman stands defiantly, her arm raised, from which emanates a shimmering blue barrier, repelling the creatures that surge at the new threat. Another, wielding a pistol, stretches his free hand forward, releasing beams of searing yellow light that leave smoking lines of burnt flesh on contact.

The final member of the group, a man with a fierce intensity in his eyes, charges straight for us. He reaches the woman who had beckoned me earlier. Blood pours from a grievous wound on her neck, but she's somehow still conscious, eyes locked onto his. As his hands hover over her, they emit a soft, green glow.

Miraculously, the skin on her neck knits together, the wound disappearing before my very eyes.

The man's methodical care takes him to each of the security team members, assessing their physical states. When he finally arrives in front of me, I shake my head to signify that I'm unharmed. Regardless, he places his hands near my ears. A sudden sharp clarity makes me realize the insistent ringing I hadn't been aware of before. Almost as soon as I register it, it disappears.

Lending me a hand, he pulls me to my feet. I look around and the aftermath is staggering. The area is littered with the carcasses of monsters. All this devastation was brought about by just a few individuals.

High-level classers and mages.

My panic disappears almost immediately as the inner fangirl shoves its way free of its cage.

They used *magic!*

My mind rushes back to my Vision of Potential, remembering how I'm now a hybrid. My heart stops. That means that I'll be able to use magic.

But before I can reflect on my most amazing luck, a tall man with short-cropped hair, probably in his late twenties, approaches us, genuine concern evident on his face. "Is everyone alright?"

He's the mage.

Corporate Mage

We nod in response, and the woman, the one I'd seen so close to death moments ago, gestures toward me. "This civvie here came out of nowhere. We probably would have died without her."

Caught off guard, I shake my head quickly. "I just... I didn't want to die. And I couldn't let them die."

He offers a warm, appreciative smile. "Survival's a powerful motivator. What's your name?"

Clearing my throat, I reply, "L-Lexi. Just turned sixteen."

Why did I add that? Stupid. Focus, Lexi.

There's a brief silence before the man responds, amusement twinkling in his eyes. "Happy birthday, Lexi." He hesitates for a moment, scanning my face. "Where's your family?"

Swallowing hard, I reply, "I was from the orphanage. I don't have... anyone."

His comrades exchange a quick series of glances. The mage woman, whose blue shield had been nothing short of a miracle, wore a look of sympathy and regret—a look I knew all too well.

I close my eyes. "Shit."

"I'm truly sorry," the man says sincerely, his voice full of compassion.

They didn't make it.

Opening my eyes, I see him looking over me. "Where'd you get all of this," he says, gesturing to the gear.

"There was a group... they were... I needed to..."

He nods. "I understand. You did good. You made it to safety." He pauses for a moment. "Is there anywhere we can take you?"

Lost for words, I just shake my head. "The... the orphanage was all I had."

He steps closer, his gaze kind yet assessing. "I'm Captain Jerin, part of the Arcan Corp's Asset Recovery Task Force." After a sweeping glance over the fallen monsters, he locks his brown eyes onto mine.

He seems so... fatherly. It reminded me of mine.

"You crossed your first threshold *today*?"

Remembering my Vision of Potential before chaos erupted, I nod. "Right before everything turned upside down."

He throws a discreet look toward the mage woman, lips moving in a silent conversation that I don't catch. After she gives him a slight nod, he exhales audibly and faces me once again.

"Lexi... how would you like a job?"