
VANDAL

The train glides to a halt at Arcan Corp's Houghton Regional Security Base. I feel the vibrations of the tracks fading as the doors slide open, releasing a faint hiss. Most of the civilian passengers have already disembarked at previous stops, leaving only a few of us who work at the base itself.

I rise from my seat and stride to the entrance, stopping to retrieve my rifle from the weapons cage and sling it back over my shoulder. Smirking, I look at Jason who instantly narrows his eyes at my expression. It doesn't faze me. "Hey, have a good day, Jason, and for the love of god, stop getting into trouble."

With a grin, he flips me off. "Bite me, Lexi."

Classic Jason. Such a nice guy, I think, my lips twitching in a smile. I turn and head toward the ARTFOR compound, my boots echoing on the platform.

Halfway there, I spot the base shoppette.

"Damn it," I mutter, suddenly remembering I forgot to pack snacks. The damned snacko at the unit has been slacking and I know there's nothing good stocked.

How do I know?

As a proud member of the LPA—the Lieutenant's Protection Agency—and the resident snacko... I haven't done shit with the snack bar. Bitches wouldn't pay their tab anyways, so I put them in time out.

One of us lieutenants still has to make the jalapeno popcorn daily. We'd be killed if we didn't.

I duck inside, cool air hitting me in a blast. The place smells like brewing coffee and low morale with a side of energy drinks. It's unfortunate, but not everyone can be an artie.

As I browse the aisles, I grab a bottle of water and a couple of power bars. I slink my way over to the machines happily cooking these little wrapped taquito-like things that are filled with all kinds of goodness. They're sitting there on the rollers, all lovely like.

Supreme omelet. Egg, sausage, and cheese.

French toast and sausage? A delicious maple sausage link wrapped in a sweet french toast shell that creates an amazing and craveable sweet-and-savory combo?

I know I shouldn't.

Oxylus

They're so unhealthy.

But look, everything I've read says people don't stop developing until like twenty-five.

So clearly I'm a growing girl. I need them.

I grab three.

The woman behind the counter nods as I approach. There's a hint of judgment in that look. I give her my best beaming smile as I scan my ID and pay.

That'll show her.

After leaving the shoppette, I continue on my way, weaving through clusters of people as I munch on my little breakfast snacks. I pass by corp sec members chatting, a couple others running PT tests, there're even some haughty scientists on their way to some squirrely shit. The entire base is a buzz of activity, as it should be. It's basically a town in itself.

I glance down at my interface and see that I still have time so I make a detour to the gate leading to the flight line. I spot a young corp sec guard, probably only a year or two younger than me, manning the post.

Sometimes it feels odd to be the same age as the lower corps when I'm an officer. Granted, I'm just a lieutenant, but still, it's a lot of responsibility. Luckily I have a lot of great mentors to help me.

"Hey there," I call out, raising my hand in a wave. "Is Sergeant Bohler on shift here today?"

The young guard looks at me, clearly seeing me out of uniform, blinks, then nods. He disappears to the backside of the guard booth, and a moment later, a lithe, athletic figure emerges. Sergeant Mathias Bohler has blond hair and piercing blue eyes that are too perfect to be real. He's unbelievably pretty, but also incredibly gay.

It doesn't stop me from admiring his good looks.

"Mathias!"

"Lieutenant Thorne!" he says, a smile playing at the edges of his mouth. "What brings you here today?"

I shrug, forcing my hands to my sides in a show of casualness. "Can't I come visit my friend without an agenda?"

He folds his arms, gaze flicking over me with a critical look. "LT—"

"Mathias," I interrupt, keeping my tone light. "I'm in civvies right now. Besides, I'm about to head to work. Come on."

He breaks into a grin that lights up his face, showing off those damn pearly whites. "Alright, Vandal," he says. "What mischief are you up to today?"

Corporate Mage

I feel a bit of the ever present tension in my body ease slightly. *Friends like Mathias make this place a bit more bearable*, I think, my mood lifting.

I can't help but smile. Vandal is my callsign, and it still amuses me every time I hear it. Its meaning is so ridiculous, but at the same time, it suits me perfectly. *Very Adept-at Nabbing Distinctly Awful Loot*. I have to hold in my chuckle.

To be fair, it was one time.

On my first real mission with ARTFOR, we'd hit a raider camp that had already been attacked by some monsters. The mission was to recover stolen corporate tech and, while we were at it, steal whatever magical resources we could find.

In my excitement, I'd grabbed a bag and stuffed it with everything I found in what I'd thought was the raider leader's tent. I was so damn proud of myself. Afterward, I found a can of spray paint and scrawled on the wall, 'Get Looted Bitch.'

I was such a fucking idiot. I'd been sure I'd found a treasure trove of intel and loot. I'd even bragged to my team about it, dubbing myself the ultimate 'loot queen.'

But everything in that bag turned out to be junk. Every. Single. Item. It was humiliating, to say the least. I got reamed by my CO, and I'd never live it down.

And thus, at my naming ceremony, Vandal was born.

I love it.

It was when I became part of the team. No more was I the FNG—Fuckin' New Gal.

I snap back to the present, meeting Mathias's eyes, and adopt the most sing-song, girly voice I can muster. "Guess who I saw todaaay~!"

He rolls his eyes, clearly unimpressed. He's so much better at it than I am, not that I'd admit it. I wish I could do that on command.

But I can't. It's physically impossible. Since, of course, my eyes control themselves.

"What did he want you to tell me that he can't tell me himself?" he asks, looking skeptical.

I gasp, placing a hand over my heart, feigning hurt. "Mathias! I'm here out of the pure goodness of my heart. I saw a lumberjack—I mean, a friend in need. He was the picture of remorse. I swear I even heard him say he'd try to eat more vegetables. I heard something about salads being to die for. I didn't make that up. Those words came up somewhere."

Mathias laughs. "Vandal, you're too nice. And I know he's apologetic. But I'm not mad. I mean, it was a little hypocritical for him to get angry when I said I was going vegan. And those are one

Oxylus

hundred percent your words about the salad. You're the only person I know who says 'this food is to die for'. Literally the only one."

"W-woah! Them's fighting words, bro," I stammer, slightly taken aback. "Look, salad's my jam. I bet I can even convert Jason to the way of the green. He agreed to a double date sometime in the near future..." I catch myself and quickly correct, "The future."

He chuckles. "A double date? Remember what happened on your last date?"

"We do not bring up he-who-must-not-be-named."

He squints at me. "I thought you were dating what's her face last."

I wince. "Shit. You forgot about that blind date Courtney set me up on a couple of weeks ago?"

"Oh yeah! Oh man. Yeah, that was bad. Sorry, it was so bad I purged it from my memory."

"You're a real friend."

"I try," he says, smiling. Then his brows furrow as he looks down at his interface. "LT," he says, his voice serious. "Aren't you supposed to be at work at eight?"

"Yeah, why?"

"It's seven-fifty-seven."

"Fuck, gotta go, bye! Jason loves you! Text him!"

"You know I will. See you, LT!"

"Vandal!" I call back, sprinting toward the ARTFOR compound.



With every ounce of my enhanced stats, I start moving at a brisk pace before I activate my **[Physical Empowerment]** passive. Immediately, I feel all of my physical attributes spike, even as I sense the steady drop in my stamina. My limbs surge with energy, and I bolt forward, sprinting toward the compound at a pace that makes the surrounding mundanes look like they're frozen in place. Or at least they do in my head. The wind lashes at my hair, and I feel invincible, like a goddess among mortals.

But then, out of the corner of my eye, I see a blur whiz past me. A guy on a bicycle. My heart sinks, and in an instant, all of my hopes and dreams are thoroughly crushed. *I'm losing to a cyclist?*

I push harder, my legs pumping, my breath coming in heavy gasps. But it's no use. My boosted stats can't compete with this Olympic-level cyclist or whoever he is. It's simply impossible.

Corporate Mage

The cyclist glances over his shoulder, catches my eye, and smirks. *I could kill him*, I think, gritting my teeth. He speeds up.

As much as I want to catch him, I have to veer right toward the compound. Casting a final, scowling glance at my newfound nemesis, I slow to a jog, then come to a halt in front of the pedestrian turnstile that marks the entrance. Taking a few deep, steadying breaths, I scan my ID on the pad, unlocking the gate, and stride through.

As I walk into the main building, I'm immediately met with the familiar hum of activity and the sight of personnel in various stages of pre-shift preparations. I make my way to the security checkpoint, passing under an archway that scans my ID badge.

As I pass through the security checkpoint, the atmosphere around me thickens with tension. The air shimmers, charged with the latent power of the runic sensors that line the walls and floors of the area. These runes, as I've been told, are specialized to detect both mundane and magical threats, designed to pick up even the slightest hint of danger. The hum of the scanners is like a low, steady growl in the air.

A burly security officer waves me forward, eyes sharp and vigilant. "Your bag, ma'am," he commands, his voice stern and a bit terse. I extend my bag to him. The security officer places it on a platform and activates the runic scanner. The runes light up and swirl around my bag in a dance of blue light, examining its contents with a critical eye.

The security officer watches the display on his monitor, nodding in satisfaction when no alarms blare out. "You're good," he says, handing my bag back to me. "Have a good day, Lieutenant."

I thank him and proceed to the armory window, where I'm met by a stern-faced woman who is focused on something else she's working on. She's stationed behind a heavy pane of enchanted glass, which I know is impervious to most attacks, magical or otherwise. I watch as the enchantments on the glass flicker with a subtle light.

"Personal weapons," she states without looking up, voice clipped.

I obediently unholster my personal sidearm and place it, along with my other personal weapons, on the counter in front of her. Her eyes dart over them, fingers moving swiftly as she records the serial numbers of each weapon in a ledger.

"Name?" she asks.

My eyes roll of their own volition. "Really, Mackenzie?"

She glances up at me, smiling in recognition. "Ah, Vandal," she says, her voice softening just a touch. "Got yourself into any trouble recently?"

I smirk. "Wouldn't you like to know?" I reply playfully.

Oxylus

She chuckles dryly, eyes crinkling at the corners in what might be the beginning of a smile. “Alright, Vandal. Your weapons will be safe here,” she says, placing them into a secure cage. “You know the drill. Pick them up when you’re done.”

I give her a nod of acknowledgment. “Will do. Thanks!” I say, before making my way toward the locker room.

I stride into the operator's locker room, feeling a wave of familiarity wash over me as I take in the sights and sounds. The room is large, lined with rows of wide lockers, each one belonging to a fellow artie. The air smells faintly of disinfectant and the distant echo of boots on the tile floor creates a steady, rhythmic cadence. Members of the other two squads are already there, chatting in small groups, but I head straight for my little corner of the world.

“Vandal!” a voice says as I’m walking down the rows between the lockers. I stop in my tracks and turn, finding myself face to face with a woman from another team. She’s their offensive mage, a cryomancer who’s personality could not be more fiery when provoked.

“What’s up, Fuse?”

“Not much!” Fuse replies with a wide grin that doesn’t quite reach her eyes. “Heard you guys have a mission today also.”

I shrug. “Yeah, about to head to the brief now. You guys also?”

“Yup,” Fuse confirms, her voice betraying a hint of frustration. “Last-minute decision by command last night. You guys were already on the hook, so we were chosen.”

That was strange.

I can’t help but feel a bit of unease at the information. It’s unusual for two of the three ARTFOR teams stationed at this base to be deployed simultaneously.

She glances down at her watch, her eyes narrowing as she looks back up at me. “You should probably hurry,” she advises, her voice taking on a warning tone.

I suppress a groan. It seems like everyone I’ve run into today has felt the need to point out how behind schedule I am. “I know! Good luck out there, today. Good hunting.”

“And you! You go get ‘em, girl,” Fuse says as the two of us part.

I pick up my pace, my boots echoing against the metal floor as I make my way to change.

My locker is a double wide one with two doors, a few drawers, and a customized nameplate that I can’t help but smile at every time I see it. It reads: Lt. Lexi ‘VANDAL’ Thorne. I reach out and pat it with affection and good luck, feeling a swell of pride in my chest. It may be a simple piece of fabric, but it represents my identity, my hard-won place in this world.

Corporate Mage

With a smooth, practiced motion, I unslung my backpack and fling it into the locker. I quickly retrieve my earbuds and other personal items, arranging them neatly in the drawers where I keep such things. Everything has its place, and I like it that way.

I quickly strip from my clothes and neatly fold them and place them in the locker. I shiver a bit as I'm standing there in my sports bra and underwear, but then I take off my underwear and sit the UCD, or urinary collection device, into place and put my underwear back over it while feeding the small tube through the hole in my undergarment. I grab my undershirt and toss it on before pulling on my socks.

Next, I grab my combat liner, or skin suit, a sturdy one piece garment that has seen its fair share of action. I can feel the residual energy from the enchantments woven into the fabric under my fingertips, pulsing with a subtle power that I've come to rely on. I slip my legs in first and again feed the UCD's tube through another hole that leads into a little storage pocket on the outside of the skin suit. I toss the rest of the suit on and zip it up, adjusting the fit until it sits just right on my body before hiding my anti-divination choker under the collar.

This often seems like a lot to my friends, but the purpose is simple, when I go get suited up in my combat armor later, this suit ensures nothing bunches up and I can still pee during the mission.

I just have to make sure to do any other relieving in a safe place where I can remove everything.

That's always annoying.

Meal box thirteen is always a bad choice on mission days. That number is *not* lucky.

I quickly slide my feet into my combat boots and yank on the drawstrings to tighten the laces.

Finally, I meticulously affix every patch, making sure each one is perfectly aligned and in its proper place. These patches aren't just for show; they represent my unit and squad, my rank, and the responsibilities that come with it. My fingers hover momentarily over my name patch before yanking it off its temporary spot on my locker. I carefully adhere it to its rightful place over my left breast.

These will come off when I suit up for the mission, but they're part of my uniform when walking around like this.

As I finish, I can't help but stand a little taller, feeling a rush of confidence and resolve. I look at myself in the mirror that hangs on the locker door. I see an operator, a woman who has faced challenges and emerged victorious. I close the locker door, leaving behind my everyday identity and stepping into my role as Vandal.