

249: Lucid

"Can you please at least acknowledge how unfair this is?" Rain asked, pacing back and forth in their bedroom. "You get your father, and I get a crazy old witch who's trying to murder me from beyond the grave."

"I never said it was fair," Ameliah said, watching from the sofa. "And she's not your guide, so it's not a valid comparison. She's a completely different kind of construct."

"Bah," Rain said, waving a hand. He didn't have his armor summoned, instead wearing a simple pair of cotton pants and a tight-fitting shirt, his rings threaded through a cord he'd hung around his neck. With how many meals he'd worked through lately, he should have been a walking husk. Instead, every bit of him seemed to glow with health and power. Watching the interplay of his muscles as he prowled side to side like a caged wildcat was a good distraction.

"Not helping!" Rain said, pointing at her without looking. "I am not sexy when I'm distraught, damn it!"

"You are, and what else do you want me to do but notice?" Ameliah asked. "You want me to think about something else? Think about you never coming back and what that would do to me? You want me to think about it so you can feel me thinking about it and start thinking about how you'd feel, having hurt me by abandoning me like that, never mind the fact you wouldn't be able to think anything at all with your brain mulched?" She sniffed, then waved a hand. "No, no thanks. I'm good on that."

"I—"

"You've *got this*," she interrupted, rising from the sofa and walking over to him. "You had this a week ago when you finished your paling. All this practice for your little *plan* is just procrastinating." She placed her hands on his shoulders. "Hells, even Velika says you're almost as good with your domain as she was, and she's only heard you underselling yourself through that anchor. She doesn't even know about the runes, does she? The Warden's not going to know what hit her."

"She was in my *head*, Ameliah!" Rain said hotly, using a move from Bear Kata to break her grip, though without any real force behind it. "She knows exactly what I'm capable of! She'll have prepared for it! She'll have predicted all of this!"

"She's not a god, Rain," Ameliah said flatly, crossing her arms. "Stop worrying and get on with it."

"But—"

"Is there anything more you can do?"

"I, well—"

"Is there. Anything more. You can do?" He started to respond, but she didn't let him.

"Anything *reasonable*. Do you honestly think you'll be able to figure out the rank thirty-one pattern and raise your cap without finding a blue? Do what centuries of people have failed to accomplish, not for lack of trying, just because you found what you *think* is a slightly more efficient way of pounding your skull against the wall?"

"...No." Rain sighed, then slumped onto the bed. "We could find one, though. A blue."

"And Kettel could become a poet if he put his mind to it," Ameliah said, teasing a weak smile from him as she sat beside him. "The Warden didn't say you'd need to raise your cap. She just said you needed silver essence, and you're *way* past that."

"I know," Rain said with another sigh, then summoned his armor and laid back. "I'm just... afraid."

"Congratulations, you're human," Ameliah said. She summoned her armor as well and settled beside him, snaking her arm through the tunnel formed by the pillow and his neck. On another plane of existence, she hauled on the bond between them, forcing their palings into contact against the outflow from their overstuffed souls. A thrill ran through her as her awareness of him redoubled. "I'll be right here. If she hurts you, I'll mess her up."

She felt his smile as if it was her own. "Thanks." There was a brief pause. "Dozer says you'll have to get in line."

Ameliah laughed. "Kick her ass."

Grannybrain, Grannybrain, Grannybrain!

"Ooph!" Vatreece wheezed as she landed on her backside, rebounding from the unexpected barrier blocking the backdoor access she'd left into Rain's soul as his call echoed in her mind.

Well then, she thought.

Actually thought.

The unnamed mind blender contingency and the Thought Shell were dissolving and flooding her with energy—enough to spark true, if temporary, mentation. She was the contingency now, and the test had already begun.

"Not bad, kid. Not bad. Didn't expect you to find that one. Means I can't talk to you, so I hope you're as ready as you seem."

Getting to her feet, she dusted herself off, then looked around. Her mental construct was in the very outskirts of Rain's mind, right where she'd left it, but the scenery was vastly different. In fact, it was Scenery. Instead of floating in a nebulous cloud of half-defined thoughts and memories, she stood in a mountain village, breathing thin air as a goat blinked at her blearily. Further away, she spied a few townsfolk with indistinct faces going about their business, and beyond them was...the mountain.

To say it was impressive was a gross understatement, and that was coming from someone who'd seen Ter'Karmark. It dominated the landscape, other details fading to inconsequentiality against its massive, horizon-consuming enormity. Looking at it, she sensed that the clouds veiling the sheer cliffside only marked the beginning of the ascent.

That was the Narrative.

She was supposed to climb. There would be a fortress—because there was always a fortress—and to even start breaking in, she'd first need to get there. Annoyingly, she couldn't fly. Flying was against the rules.

"Hmph."

She stomped, finding the dusty ground solid. A second look at the village showed that it remained almost entirely unchanged. Perhaps one of the buildings had moved by a finger's width, but this was a Dream, the simplest and most basic defense of the mind, and such changes were expected. That Rain had managed to make one wasn't remarkable. What was remarkable was the quality of the Scenery and the startling degree of Continuity already on display.

"Let's test that. No way am I climbing a damn mountain."

Vatreece cracked her neck, then bounced on her toes, limbering up. She was actually starting to feel excited—as much as an artificial, disembodied mind could feel excited, anyway. She didn't exactly have the glands to make happy chemicals, let alone a brain to bathe in them.

Drawing on her precious reserve of Mental mana, she closed her eyes and began to spin. When she whirled to a stop, the Dream had changed.

Instead of in a mountain village, she now stood in a bustling metropolis, faceless salarymen and women pushing past her on the sidewalk as sleek cars zipped by. Across the street stood a massive building, all glass and chrome, extending far, *far* into the clouds. Not scraping the sky so much as puncturing it.

Vatreece harrumphed, crossing her arms. "First the mountain, now this. If I didn't know any better, I'd say he was compensating for something."

"You there, citizen!"

Vatreece turned, her eyebrows shooting up as a woman dropped out of the sky. The newcomer wore a red cape and a set of blue tights that did basically nothing to hide her athletic physique. Spandex. That was the word. A red 'S' stretched across her chest hinted at an identity the Warden knew she should recognize, but her original had only left her the vague idea of what a 'superhero' was, there being no room for specifics.

Specifics didn't matter, of course, as she'd also recognized the woman's face.

Ameliah.

"Frickin' male fantasy," Vatreece muttered.

"What was that?" the Actor asked in her tight but not-as-bad-as-it-could-have-been outfit, confused by a statement that apparently ran counter to the Narrative.

"Never mind, Dear," Vatreece replied. "I'm sure spandex and a cape make sense as armor for very real and legitimate reasons in whatever play universe you think you're a part of."

Drawing on the Narrative for information—quite dangerous if you didn't know what you were doing—she pointed in a random direction, then applied her will to the Dream. "There are evildoers over there! Go deal with them!"

"I...don't think...no. No. You're the one that doesn't fit. I'm going to have to ask you to come with me."

"Stubborn," Vatrece muttered, redoubling the effort she was putting into twisting the Narrative. A moment later, a massive explosion rocked the city, and the Ameliah Actor's eyes went wide before she shot off toward the now-rampaging supervillain, leaving a sonic boom in her wake.

Vatrece sighed as faceless Scenery-people screamed and milled about in confusion. "I don't know why I keep letting him impress me." She glanced down at herself and her admittedly out-of-place attire. "Not just Scenery and Narrative, but a paranoid Actor too? Guess I'll have to try."

She grinned, then looked up, her clothing melting into a black pantsuit that screamed authority. Her hair untied itself, then grew out and darkened before again gathering itself into a bun. Her face smoothed as her wrinkles faded, stopping when she appeared roughly a fifth her actual age—not too young, not too old. A real attacker—one not strong enough to break Narrative but skilled enough to avoid getting snarled in it—would use a Role. With how early Rain had summoned her, she had enough power to bull her way through all of this nonsense, but that would be getting ahead of herself.

Armed and armored for business, she marched across the street, taking advantage of the traffic jam caused by the battle raging between Ameliah and the hostile Actor she'd bamboozled into existence. As she entered the lobby, she took a moment to look around, then made for the elevators.

Much easier than the mountain.

"Oi, you there!"

Again?

Vatreece turned to the guard staring at her, wearing Carten's face and an unimpressed expression. In his meaty hands, he held a half-eaten donut and a steaming Styrofoam cup wafting with the smell of burnt coffee.

"Yes?" Vatreece asked. "Did you need something?"

"Forget yer badge at home?" the Carten Actor asked, tapping a plastic rectangle pinned to the lapel of his blue uniform before popping the last of the pastry into his mouth.

"I don't need a badge," Vatreece said. She pressed down on the Narrative again, using a bit more power this time. "Don't you know who I am?"

"Of course, Ms. Stone," said the Actor politely, his brows knitting in confusion for an instant before the expression vanished. It was replaced by an apologetic grimace. "Still need your badge, though, or I can't let you up. Sorry." He gestured with the coffee cup. "Rules is rules, even for the CEO. I'll take you to the security office and get you a temp."

"That won't be necessary," Vatreece said, reaching into a pocket her pants hadn't had a moment before and removing a plastic rectangle that hadn't been there. It bore her youthened likeness, along with the name Karen Stone and her title. She waved it at the annoying Actor, then clipped it to her collar. "Happy?"

Carten grunted. "I'll be happy when they stop forgetting to refill the creamer." He took a sip from his cup, then shuddered. "You wouldn't be able to do something about that for us poor ground-floorers, would you?"

Vatreece smirked, amused by the lifelike Actor. "I'll see what I can do." Turning, she resumed her confident march toward the elevators, impractical heels clicking against the polished floor as she leaned on her Role to restore a neutral expression.

As she scanned her badge on the panel beside the elevator, her appreciation grew only higher. The panel turned red, rejecting her manufactured credentials with an angry buzz.

She'd put actual *work* into those.

"Oi!" the Carten Actor yelled from behind her. "Knew you seemed too nice! Impostor! Alert! Impostor!"

Deciding to just start over rather than spend however much mana it would take to smooth *this* over, Vatreece closed her eyes and spun. Before she even opened them, a wave of heat hit her, and she stepped back to see a literal wall of fire. It stretched from horizon to horizon, and above it extended the trunk of a tree no less impressive than the mountain from before.

And the no-flying rule was very much still in effect.

Nope.

With one more spin, she was back in a city, but nothing like the one from before. She was outside again, and while there was still a building in front of her, this one was dark, jagged, and foreboding. It was night, but neon lights crawled their way up the high rises, painting the

grimy street with a riot of color. The office workers and businessfolk were gone, replaced by leather-jacket-wearing punks with day-glow hair and cybernetic augmentations.

"Warden Vatrece," Carten said out of nowhere, the Actor's voice distorted through the speaker of what the Narrative helpfully informed her was corporate tactical response *power armor*. A metal gauntlet clamped down on her wrist. "For attempted infiltration and espionage, you are hereby placed under arrest. Resist. Make my day."

"Okay, really?" Vatrece said, glaring at the Actor. "Continuity across Scene? And you *recognized* me? Are you fucking *Lucid* in here, Custodian?"

"Received," the Actor said, though not to her. Servos whirred to life as he tightened his grip enough to force the bones of her forearm into contact. "Unit CR-TN acknowledging authorization. Proceeding with judicious application of force. And thank you, control."

"Or maybe not," Vatrece said, reaching over with her free hand and peeling the armored hand off her with the sound of screeching metal. "For a second, I thought Olicia might have gotten to you, but this doesn't have her stink. No, you're not Lucid. This is just paranoia and raw power. Did you bring your *entire* soul up to rank thirty? Ah, what am I saying? Of course you did. Don't know *how*, but of course you did. In retrospect, I should have expected you to spend literal *years* trying to make things *optimal*. Mark me, once I get in there, I'm teaching you how to have a life."

"Unit CR-TN...requesting...backup!" The Carten Actor gasped as she forced him to his knees, sparks exploding from his armor's joints as she overpowered the machinery.

"Let him go!"

Vatreece turned in time to deflect the katana that had been aimed at her elbow joint. With the same arm, she shoved, sending the Ameliah Actor flying and getting a brief glimpse of sleek blue-and-red power armor evocative of her previous costume. That sight vanished as Ameliah cratered into the side of the massive building with a sharp explosion and a wave of shattering glass.

"Rookie mistake," Vatreece said. "Never call out. Lets them know you're coming."

A crackling whip wrapped around her waist, lightning surging through her with enough power to free her hair from its bun and make the Carten Actor scream.

"Better," Vatreece said, looking down, then following the whip to Jamus, the appearance of a third Actor fully expected at this point. This one didn't have power armor, instead sporting a fluorescent mohawk that perfectly matched his eye-searing orange biker leathers. She yanked hard on the whip with a sniff, sending him flying after Ameliah. She wasn't concerned about breaking him. Actors weren't actual memories, able to be damaged permanently. That was the whole point of a Dream.

Enough playing around.

Shoving the Carten Actor away, Vatreece shot into the sky, ignoring the Narrative's protests about flight as her passage shattered hundreds of windows. Outpacing the breaking glass, she rocketed up the side of the megacorp monolith, her ever-increasing speed soon carrying her above the steam and neon of the city behind her.

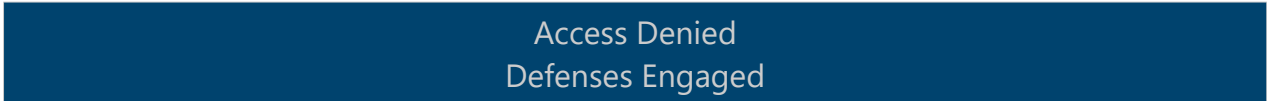
And still, she climbed, the tower rising up and up and up in defiance of physics and common sense. The air began to thin, but she merely removed her need for it, focusing on a shining star that swiftly grew into a massive station above the spire's peak.

There's always a fortress.

Against a real opponent, she wouldn't have slowed. As she didn't actually want to *kill* the world's best hope of stability, she instead blunted her assault, and so when she slammed *hard* into the invisible barrier that formed in front of her, it merely deformed from the force. She was sent screaming off into space, feeling actual pain.

What?!

The explosions that buffeted her in the moments that followed were mere annoyances by comparison, explosive shells lobbed by the station's turrets no more threat to her than the Actors had been. She ignored the fire and the heat, sending herself zipping through the maelstrom, right up to the energy barrier. Clamping onto it, she pushed with her will, only for a blue box to appear before her eyes.



Access Denied
Defenses Engaged

The Warden ground her teeth, snarling at the co-opted system dialog. It was obvious, now, what the Custodian had done. This shield was a reflection of his paling. Nothing else explained the strength of the barrier, reinforced by the structures he'd built in his soul.

How thick did he make that damn thing!?

Wait...

This being here means everything so far has just been his domain, which is impossible. He couldn't have that much control. Unless...

Unless he went to the Delving and spied on the Illuminators. Okay. Okay, it's possible, just EXCEEDINGLY unlikely. Even as a Dynamo, he shouldn't have had enough time to do all this. He didn't actually get them to TEACH him, did he?

Mad at the failure of her modeling more than anything, Vatrece released a primal scream, her will overriding the Narrative's insistence that there should be no sound in space. She plunged her hands through the barrier, then began to *tear*. She couldn't worry about conserving power now. If she couldn't get through, she wouldn't be able to guide the Custodian through what came next. He'd passed her test and then some, but she refused to leave him to navigate global politics without at least *some* direction. A simple warning to stay away from Kev wasn't enough. She *had* to get through.

Access Granted
Proceed to Dock 1

Excuse me, what?

"This is *wild*," Rain said, his voice crackling from an earpiece as a helmet shimmered into being around Vatrece's head. "I'm dreaming, aren't I? Are you real? Wait, am I real? Filth! Don't wake up! Don't wake up!"

"No way! NO WAY!" Vatrece yelled, tumbling through the now-open barrier in her brand-new spacesuit.

"Damn. Okay. I can't get in there, and I can feel myself slipping, but I've got a plan. I'll have Tallheart bring you through."

"I have her," a deep voice rumbled through the earpiece, and Vatrece spun to see an *enormous* metal hand close around her. Before the fingers blocked her view, she got a good look at the antlered face of the literal *mech* the Actor was piloting. Or perhaps it was a Gundam, what with them being in space. She wasn't clear on the difference. Regardless, it didn't matter at that moment, as she could already feel what Rain was trying to do.

"Stop! You can't bring me in like that! I'm mana! MANA! You can't bring mana into your soul! Give me half a second, and I'll project—"

"Sorry...can't...hear..." Rain's voice warbled in and out, the Dream beginning to fray around her. "...losing it again. Hang on..."

"Stop, you imbecile!" Vatrece railed, finding that, despite her dissolution having never been in question as a construct, she didn't want to die.

"Shit, system's mad at me," Rain's voice crackled through the speaker. "Yeah, yeah, call your admin. See how far that gets you."

Desperate, Vatrece drank deeply from her dwindling mana reserves, knowing she was only buying time. She'd spent too much on the barrier, and he was too strong. Her original hadn't planned for this—hadn't left her enough power to fight a rank-thirty idiot who'd made his soul as solid as his skull. In her last moments, she decided she would take vindictive pleasure in knowing the Custodian had ruined his own chances of getting her to answer so much as a single one of his endless questions.

But her last moments didn't come.

Instead, the immense pressure she was under found an outlet, and she felt herself *move*. The feeling was disturbing, like her mana-built mind was being sucked through a straw.

And then her mind was made from *soul*.

The construct in which she'd been anchored was shaped to resemble her old, withered body, floating in a tank of refined potential. The inefficiency of its design and the clash between the Custodian's imagery and her own saw it trembling under the weight of her mind, swallowing potential in a flood just to hold itself together.

With all her might, she reached out to the foreign will that had captured her and gave it a little nudge in the right direction. The Custodian responded to her guidance, reacting to her touch in real time, correcting his errors, plugging the leaks as potential poured into her at a rate that would have drained any reasonable silver dry in seconds. Slowly, she began to stabilize. The flood of essence dropped to a trickle, forming an internal reservoir of power from which she could fuel herself.

"I'm not...finished with you...yet," Rain panted, dissolving the glass tube of her pod and freeing the excess potential to splash across the floor and a plume of chaos to spill into the air. "Can you hear me? Did it work?"

Vatreece coughed weakly, blinking him into focus. This wasn't possible. Clearly, her mind had been damaged. "How?" she gasped.

Rain grinned, though he looked exhausted. "A little guesswork, a little help from Ameliah's dad, some reverse-engineering, long hours watching an Essence Slime do Essence Slime things. You know, normal stuff. Also, practice. A whole lot of practice."

"Bullshit..." Vatrece said, her eyes flickering closed. She could feel herself fading toward an unconsciousness from which she wasn't sure she'd wake. "No way...you did this. If you did...it was...luck."

Rain snorted. "Well—and trust me, I've been waiting to say this—fuck you too."

With the last of her strength, Vatrece managed a single, wheezing laugh.

And then there was darkness.