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## [023] [Footnote]

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Damon had once visited the Rocky Mountains national park. It had been the closest experience he'd ever had in terms of feeling awe towards something truly monumental. Snow-capped mountains as far as the eye could see, with a pristine blue lake flanked by high peaks in every direction. It was a feeling of grandness, of nature being far larger and more powerful than any one mortal could ever hope to tame.

Now, he stood before a similar view, the Rainbow lake flanked by mountains and forests in varying colorations, its waters reflecting and refracting the light and turning the water into a massive shimmering pool of color.

And yet, as awe-inspiring as that was, it did not manage to pull Damon's eyes away from the black tower. Damon had pegged it to be a handful dozen meters wide and a couple dozen stories tall. He'd been wrong, as it had been no more than an illusion of perspective from how far away he'd been looking at it.

The construct was at least a hundred meters wide, and taller than any sky-scraper humans had ever built. Standing near the base, there was a sense of impossibility in its scope and scale, so large that the village at its base could have easily fit inside. Staring at it made Damon feel minuscule in a way no mountain could, its opaque black surface drinking in the light and leaving the construction as nothing more than a gigantic silhouette that cut open the sky and turned it into void.

It was unnatural in every sense of the word he could think of.

SOMETHING had put that construct here. There was no possible way to consider it to be a natural occurrence.

Especially because it wasn't the only such black tower. There was another in the distance, higher up in the mountain. Eight long black cables dangled, connecting the two spires, barely moving or swaying. Damon shuddered to consider their actual scope, since it was hard to measure while being this close to the ground.

"The cable bridge was built by the goddess Irsi." Sybil declared proudly, not having missed Damon's slack-jawed gawking. "It has remained standing across all eras, Sky Bridge being the oldest city in the continent, connecting the east and west. A testament to the God's might and wisdom."

Damon didn't make any comments on that. He could see how anyone would come to believe something like a God had been involved in this construction. It was hard to imagine anything capable of building such a thing. Just trying to estimate it left him thinking of entire civilizations emerging and turning into dust in the process of the construction of just one.

"How... many more towers like these are there?"

Next to Damon, Idina sat on the cart with the same awe-struck expression in her eyes, unable to look away from the construct.

"There are forty three." Han commented. "They are all over the mountain-range that occupies the center of the continent. But only twelve remain connected to one another. Six on the eastern side of Sky Bridge, and another six on the west. The work that goes into keeping it running is impressive."

"He's trying to show off, but one of his first jobs was standing guard and pretending anyone would try to attack the crew." Sybil giggled.

It made Han's silver ears twitch as he snorted loudly and rolled his eyes. "Yes, laugh it up. I was not as grand as the vulpes that killed a monster lord before getting her first graft."

Sybil's bloated ego popped when she realized Idina was staring at Han with starry eyes. "And you weren't afraid of falling?"

"Of course not. We were given gliders and a puffer seed." He nodded.

"Speaking of, we need to get Damon a puffer seed." Sybil quickly tried to change the subject, following her words with a grimace. "And a... core."

"You sound like you'd go ill from thinking Damon should buy his first core rather than rip it out of a corpse." Han bellowed, only for Sybil's nose to scrunch up further.

Damon tried to keep his own discomfort from showing. "What's a puffer seed?"

"This."

Han brought out a cube from inside his pouch. It was roughly the size of his fist. "It will create a large air-filled membrane that quickly pops. It is meant to cushion and make it far easier to survive a great fall."

"Don't try stuffing it into a monster. The weak ones explode and the strong ones only get annoyed."

“Speaking from experience?”

Sybil shrugged at the question.

“She is.” Han added under his breath with a chuckle.

Damon idly remembered a video he saw, once upon a time, of a melon and an airbag, and what happened when the airbag deployed just a bit too early. His whole body shuddered.

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Their approach to the huge black pillar had felt as if it were no more than a crawl. The thing only got larger the closer they were, and it was plenty gigantic already. Damon had a chance to see that the population center at its base was not a village but a large town, at least thrice the size of the trade-hub where he'd gotten the pile of coins.

“At this time of year there's not much movement, so I don't think we'll have to wait for more than two or three days to be able to ride on the cable cars to Sky Bridge.” Sybil muttered as she pulled her hood on. “Once there, we can start sniffing around for some cores before you go to the Thalaring temple. I'd been thinking about your fighting style, and something to increase your defenses would compensate well for your shortcomings.”

“I'd been thinking much the same.” Han nodded along. “It would help if he ever has to go up against other users. And being able to cover for mistakes during a battle by merely taking the hit would make him quite formidable. A stone-eater core, perhaps?”

“Magnetic protection doesn't last much. He'd need something that matches his endurance.” Sybil replied, absently scratching her ear through the hood. “Something in the black-goop core family?”

“As much as ferrofluids make for a decent-.” Han paused as he turned to Damon. “I think it would be better to ask. You've been sparring with us and fighting monsters. What sort of ability would you wish to have?”

He kept from answering the first thing that came to mind, which was that he'd rather have the superpower of not getting his body replaced with machine parts. “Why not see what's available and go from there?” He said instead.

Idina shifted, moving to sit next to Damon on the cart. “I would like to know about gatherers in the big city. I heard there were not many, and that they did not go looking for herbs.”

That seemed to derail the conversation. Han was the one to speak up.

“Gatherers in places like Sky Bridge help find lost items. More often than not, they’re recruited by knights to counter pickpockets and other forms of thievery.”

“Or they’re recruited by thieves.”

“Is being a thief an actual role?” Damon asked.

“No, though banditry certainly is.”

He quickly started asking details about the topic, trying to keep the conversation well away from cores and grafts. At his side, Idina had a thousand tiny questions about the city as well. A rather fortunate thing, as they got ever close to the black pillar.

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They finally reached the town of Pillar #7 and Damon could see things were wildly different to the towns and villages they’d been visiting throughout the past month or so. The tiny city was surrounded by high walls and watchtowers, defensive fortifications spread through its surroundings in the form of small bunkers with watchtowers rising from within.

The town itself was built with precisely cut stone and glass, the presence of metal being prevalent just about everywhere. It wouldn’t have looked out-of-place back on Earth, even if the architecture itself wasn’t the sort Damon had seen before. The rooftops were all black, with metal rods sticking out every so often.

More importantly, the sky was filled with the buzz of robot drones flying from the tower down to the town and back, sometimes between spots within the town itself. Each robot was different from the rest, some flat and wide, others narrow and small. It seemed as if each of them had a task to fulfill, cargo to take, and it wasn’t until Damon saw one such robot descending onto one of the metal rods on the rooftops that he realized the likely use was to charge them up.

“Just... how many robots...?”

“Hundreds here. Sky Bridge is worse.” Sybil spoke with an edge of annoyance, her ears flickering under the hood.

“How do they not crash?” Idina spoke, slack jawed and entirely stunted into silent shock.

“If you have a graft that lets you control robots, then you have to be cleared to fly anywhere near the towers or the cities.” Han answered with a sigh. “Lots of people rent

an axon just so they can get a robot-control graft. It'd been very lucrative for a time. For many, it still is."

"So... each of these is being controlled by a user?"

"A former user." Sybil shook her head vehemently and sighed. "But it's the only way to get to the station."

"The what?"

"The station, it's up there." Sybil pointed up towards a spot on the black tower near where the cables connected to the massive structure. "It's the only entrance."

"Unless you want to walk up there." Han chuckled. "There's a service entrance door every dozen meters or so. They were once connected to ruins, but things were taken apart and repurposed over the eons."

"Wait." Damon almost stopped in his tracks, looking up at the tower. "Are you saying there were buildings around that thing?"

Han laughed. "In a sense, but it would be more accurate to claim that a greater part of this structure had been buried underground. It's just that people have been constantly digging more and more since there were massive underground structures with parts that could be used to give maintenance to... well, everything that was being used." He pointed over at the lake. "That came about thanks to a cave-in some thousand years ago. At that point, there was little left to dig."

"Don't mind Han, he's boasting since he had to hear all that stuff from some of his very boring clients."

There was a glare, and a sigh. Han just shook his head. "Clients we will be meeting again. For Damon, remember?"

"Right."

With a slight nod of acknowledgment, Damon turned his focus away from the conversation and back to the sprawling town. As they approached, he put on his mask while Sybil pulled up her hood. The guards at the entrance tried to ask them some questions, but one look at Damon and they paled. They were let through with little issue.

The number of carriages and people walking about had greatly increased, and Damon could safely claim that he shouldn't have much of a problem to get lost in the crowds. Even if he was at least a head taller than everyone else, he'd just have to hunch himself

a little or something. Not that he was thinking much about that, he was too focused on other things.

Such as how many kinds of people there were. Most were sasins, with light green skin and silver ears. But there were at least a dozen different other 'species' he could see at a simple glance. From a couple with deep blue skin and colorful stripes to people with animal ears such as rabbits and foxes.

That last group had caught Damon's attention, as he'd seen only two in the crowd.

A quick glance confirmed they were the same kind of ears Sybil had. The other individuals, however, had something Sybil did not: a tail covered in copper-like fur, and a line of golden veins connecting from their temple to the side of their noses. Damon glanced back at Sybil. She wasn't looking his way, head bowed under the hood, shrinking within the cart, as if trying to become invisible.

Damon could only stare and wonder. Though seeing the disdain with which some within the crowd stared in the cart's direction, it was an easy guess as to what had happened.

"How about you guys look for lodging?" Han pipped up before any questions could be thrown around. "I'll secure our transport and see the wait times we'll have to endure through."

Nods were shared.

Damon's eyes lingered over Sybil's hood and how her ears had flattened underneath.

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## [024] [Scrapyard]

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They'd found an inn with rooms while Han went off to secure a ride up to the city. And as soon as they had the rooms paid for, Sybil had made an escape, insisting Damon and Idina should stay put while she moved around to find some buyers for the cart and clopper. Not that Damon was going to complain, he was going to appreciate a comfortable bed and the chance to just lie back and rest for a while. Even if his feet were dangling over the bed's edge.

Which, apparently, left him in Idina's sights.

She was sitting in one of the other three beds in the room and looking at him intently.

His attempts to pretend he didn't notice didn't work for too long.

"Yes?" He muttered, rolling to lay on his side to look at the young woman as she sat straight, hands on her knees and long chrome ears tilted slightly downwards.

"Should I save up to become a user, sir?"

That had not been the question Damon had been expecting.

"Why are you asking me?"

Idina squirmed a little. "It's just that... well, are grafts... good?"

"I'm not following."

"Every time you look at Sybil's or Han's grafts, you grimace." Her hand reached up to touch her ear for a moment. "And... back in the cave, you didn't seem as appalled by the... punishment of having one's grafts removed. And, um... you've been avoiding the subject of cores."

Damon held back from grimacing, instead pulling himself up to sit cross-legged on the bed. He glanced at the young woman as she pulled her hands away from her ears and turned her gaze slightly downwards, though not without peeking upwards at him from time to time.

Finally, he sighed. "I think it should be your decision, not mine."

"But are grafts bad?" She swallowed.

He could only shrug. "It's not that they're bad. I can see their usefulness. Who doesn't want to be able to make super jumps? It's just that I'd rather not have to cut up my body for it."

Idina remained quiet, looking down at her hands as her fingers drummed against her knees. "What if... I wanted to help you? With your mission."

"Why would you think I have one?"

"I've heard you talk to your axon sometimes." She mumbled, head lowering a bit more. "Asking it why you're here, and... being frustrated."

"I thought I didn't have a hymn."

"Oh, you don't! It's just... the little things, sir." A slight squirm. She scratched her cheek. "How you'd sigh or grumble, or how your shoulders tense, or... that scary grimace whenever you're fighting a monster." The fingers continued drumming against her knees, ears twitching up and down for a moment. "Or when you laugh with Han about something." Her lips pursed slightly. "I'm sorry if that seems intrusive, sir, it's just, I've been thinking, about what to do, and, after the cave, and... I mean, the Gods chose you, and I-."

Her words bumbled and stumbled, and she went quiet, letting out a slow groan as she was clearly trying to put her head in order. Damon couldn't really do much more than watch the train-wreck and feel a bit of sympathy.

"Look, this whole thing is a bit of a mess. And there are things about the... Gods, that I'd rather not talk about." He tried to keep from grimacing at the word. "But what I can tell you is that if you want to help me out, I'll appreciate it. Just don't feel obligated to do so."

Idina jolted at that, straightening up and looking at him firmly. "Not at all!" She proclaimed, and the burst of bravado vanished near instantly after. "It's just... it's the least I could do."

"And about the grafts." His lips thinned. "I'm not even sure what I'll choose when the time comes. I just know that right now I'd rather not get cut up and have parts of myself replaced." His hands raised. "Especially with the prospect of repairs."

"Repairs?"

"I mean, I am trying to leave, go back home, and... well, at least try to find my way back." His voice wavered a moment. "If I get a graft, leave, and then it breaks? Or it does something weird? There'd be no way to fix it." His comment seemed to knock some wind out of Idina. She nodded, clearly a bit more sullen. Damon rushed to



continue. “And, look, whether you want to be a user or not, grafts or not, and all that, that’s your decision. You’re the one who’s going to live in your body.”

Idina nodded slowly, though Damon wasn’t too sure whether he’d managed to convey what he’d wanted to successfully.

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Deep in space, in the darkness of the ship, Emilie woke from her hibernation. Slowly, the Zuun opened her eyes, her body stirring from the self-induced deep slumber. Her limbs moved slowly, reaching out and touching the bed-frame she’d tied herself to before going to sleep. Her mind swam through the gelatin of thoughts and gently nudged herself back into full wakefulness.

Some part of her, some small corner, wished she hadn’t woken up, to just remain asleep until she was somehow rescued or she just... never woke again. There was even, mildly, the wish that the mechanical monster that had destroyed her ship finish the job once and for all.

But it hadn’t. And she was hungry. And thirsty.

The EVA suit indicated she’d been hibernating for eight cycles. “A new personal record, I guess.” She spoke through cracked lips and a parched throat. She coughed, but didn’t open the EVA suit’s visor. Even as tired as she felt, she moved through the basic checks. The ship had retained its atmosphere. That was good at least. Even without the recycling units functioning, the ship itself had more than enough air.

The problem was water.

Emilie unstrapped herself from the bed and floated towards the fridge. She had enough water for four more days of activity. After that point, things were going to get ugly. She opened the visor and drank her fill, then ate in the dark with only the lamp on her suit as a source of illumination. The sound of wrappers and crunching echoed across the empty ship. Its only other occupants, the nanomachines within the wiring, waiting for the faintest sign of electricity to begin their task anew. They would dismantle the ship, starting where there was electricity... and only stop when there was no more energy running through the ship.

She could’ve gone back to hibernation, go back to the bed, add more days to her life even if she spent them unconscious. But... what was the point? No rescue was coming, and it seemed that whatever defenses had been left behind thousands of years ago, none of them were actively seeking to kill her.

Drifting through the ship's corridors, she aimlessly moved, as if it would do her any good. A part of her still hoped that there would be a solution, an answer to the doom that was slowly eating away at her. She eventually found herself in front of the door to the main generator room. Emilie leaned over and pulled the manual override, hearing the door groan and open no more than the thickness of her fingers. A little grunt of effort and it doubled, then doubled again, now just barely enough for her hand to fit through.

Why was she trying?

She stopped trying to open it further. Instead, she removed the light from her helmet so she could get a better angle for the light to look inside. She pushed her hand through to look into the room. The light met a cloud of metal dust. Alarms ran through Emilie's mind, a shriek and a yank.

She'd let go of the flashlight.

"No!"

Her hearts froze as she saw the flashlight drifting away from the door and into the cloud of metal dust and nanomachines. The inward grimace was replaced by a sinking acceptance of her fate. The flashlight had touched the nanomachines, and they would tear it to particle-sized shreds.

"Any second now..."

The device drifted through the cloud, bouncing on the wall at the opposite side of the room. Its light bounced against the dust, a million tiny sparkles that would soon die out once the nanomachines ate up the device's battery, or wiring, or source of light.

"Any moment..."

It continued in its trajectory, spinning ever so slowly.

The light was still strong, unblinking.

Which shouldn't be possible. The nanomachines should've torn the device within seconds. Yet nothing happened.

"Why?" The main generator was gone, little more than dust. The nanomachines clearly had done their job there. They couldn't have shut down, or... were they not activating because there was not enough charge for them to activate? Did they need direct contact with a current? Had their charge ran out?

The ray of hope died out as Emilie sighed again. What use was there anyway? Even if they were inactive, the moment she had electricity running through the system, things would go out again.

“Except...”

She pulled away from the door, turning to look back into the darkness of the ship.

Slowly sealing back up the generator room, leaving the light to its unfortunate fate, she felt her way through the ship she'd spent the past five years in. She worked her way to her cabin and soon found the diagnostic tablet. Turning it on, she replayed the events right before the explosion had knocked out the ship.

Several parts of the ship had been dark, offline. And it hadn't been because of some damage. Some had gone off due to the damage from the blast, but the rest? The rest she had turned off because the generator had been acting up and she had to prioritize the twice damned warp bubble. “Could it be?”

Could she dare to hope?

Boom-box hand-held generator in tow, using the tablet's own flashlight to illuminate the way, she proceeded to move towards the area with the life-support systems. Another dark room, but no dust. Emilie felt a flutter within her chest, her chitin itching with a newfound energy.

“Modular design saves the day?” Ships built by modules were the cheapest option in the market. Also the most popular for any corporation out there. For once, Emilie felt grateful her bosses were money-hoarders.

She grimaced, finding the machine intended for water recycling. It was twice the size of her torso, bolted tightly behind several layers of protection. She was going to take a while to pry her way through. But as she started struggling with the proprietary literal nuts and bolts, her mind kept churning through the situation.

If she could get the water recycler to work, she'd be able to hold out for longer, at least until her food supply ran out. But what happened after that? Could she actually do anything at that point? No, this wasn't the time to doubt.

She was going to die. However far she took it, it would still be better than just...

A deep shudder was followed by a wrenching sound. Emilie blinked. It... it was out. The damn thing was out. Swallowing, she slowly maneuvered the box out of the slot, leaving it floating in the middle of the room and focusing her attention on the connection ports that kept it plugged into the rest of the ship.

One by one, she closely inspected for the sort of dust the nanomachines left in their destructive wake. She blew into them, waiting, changing the angle of the light, seeking out and trying to find even a minute dust particle. But there was nothing, which wasn't a guarantee, but it was good. It was as good as she was going to get.

Her eyes fell on the metal box and she grimaced.

“Now I just need to set up somewhere, hope it's not going to melt on me, hope the boom-box has enough juice to make this thing run, and hope it stays running for long enough for me to figure out the next step. Easy.”