
RAVEN

As there are eight of us and the shop where our gear is located only has five equipmentmen, getting suited up will take a bit of time. We gear up by alignment and role, so our pure mages will go first as their gear takes the most time, followed by me as the team's sole hybrid, then our physical classers will bring up the rear.

The ratings buzz around the operators, their movements swift and precise, reminiscent of technicians assisting astronauts before a launch. In pairs, they help each operator don their runic armor, a full-body suit that offers protection against both physical and magical attacks—not to mention the elements. Their job is crucial, ensuring every operator is properly suited up and ready for the mission ahead.

When it's finally my turn, I head to the locker room.

As I approach my ops locker, two techs are waiting for me, their faces focused and efficient. In case of any issues where I may need to change my skin suit, I am always assigned two female techs. Personally, it wouldn't bother me for anyone to do it, they're professionals, but it's protocol.

Plus, I can understand their need to be comfortable as well.

"Good morning, ma'am. The SPINS calls for RAVEN armor to be utilized due to high mana density," the tech holding a checklist says.

I already know this, but she's also confirming at the same time. The special instructions are what dictate various parameters based on operational areas. This can be which suit we wear, what waypoints are loaded into our GPS, what radio frequencies we use for our backup survival comms, etcetera. The equipmentmen use this to prepare the systems of our suits before we even set foot in here.

The Reinforced Arcane Vessel with Environmental Neutralization is neither our heaviest nor our lightest armor, but it's what we use for any mission based around mana-wells.

The whole suit is jet black, making me feel like a predator that's both stealthy and lethal. It's expertly crafted, streamlined with smooth contours that promise not only enhanced mobility but also a sleek, aerodynamic look.

The armor is broken down into five distinct pieces and each comes in magical, hybrid, or physical versions that are specially formulated to provide the most benefit to the user. Mine allows me to cast, while also improving my physical capabilities. Mine is technically the most complex, but since it has to work with both alignments, it can only fit so many systems.

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It's fine, because the versatility is what makes us hybrids so effective.

The main portion of the suit is the upper armor that comes as a solid piece that covers my torso from neck to waist. It requires both techs to lift, and is done after I get into the lower armor which is a continuous segment that extends from my waist to my ankles that's built for a snug fit that promises agility. The boots are tough, thick-soled and meant to provide excellent traction no matter the terrain with specialized runework based on my movement abilities. The gloves are reinforced, designed to fit perfectly and ensure precision in every motion while I use the mage variants that, if I could, would allow me to channel and cast amplified magic through them. The helmet is the final touch, a perfect seal for the RAVEN armor. It features a narrow blacked-out visor that, when worn, gives me an intense, predatory bird-like appearance.

The whole thing is designed to be form-fitting in a way that offers protection without restricting movement. The back is bulkier as that's where all the power and other systems are stored, along with my water container.

But one of the most vital parts is what really draws my eyes in the armor's current piecemeal state.

On the inside surface of each piece there are meticulous lines of magical runes that glow in white or blue mana which are the work of Arcan Corps's master runecrafters. These glowing lines are more than decorative; they are the conduits for the armor's magitech functions, powered by the flow of mana that shines like a river of light. They're done internally because of that glow; no one wants to run around with armor that shines like a damn lightbulb at night.

The RAVEN armor is a perfect blend of strength, agility, and magitech engineering. It's designed specifically for special forces combat in the most dangerous environments.

It's definitely our best looking equipment we have.

"That's correct. Let's get suited up, ladies."

I undo my braid, retying it low, and one of the women helps me thread it loosely through the elastic bands at the back of my skin suit just below my nape. It's important because it helps to ensure my hair is out of the way. I don't want anything to interfere with the suit's seal, after all.

They help me step into the lower section, and as they finish helping me situate myself inside the leg armor, one technician reaches for the UCD tube from the pocket on my skin suit and quickly slots it into the runic urinary recycling device. The woman looks up at her partner and gives a firm nod, declaring, "Good click!"

The other technician makes a note on her checklist, and I can't help but grin as I joke, "That's the best click of the day, girls."

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The girl holding the checklist snorts with amusement, a hint of a smile breaking through her professional facade.

I may have been joking, but that part is vital. If it isn't properly connected, I'd end up peeing myself. It's also why I took extra care to ensure the pad was situated just right when I first got dressed.

It happened to Bubbles once when it wasn't checked for whatever reason and she had to run around an entire mission like that.

Neither of us have ever told a soul.

I'll take that secret to the grave for that woman.

I did feel a bit bad for the techs who had to clean it up after, but they were super supportive and understanding. Bubbles was embarrassed, but they helped her feel better.

They continue suiting me up, I sit down where the techs put my boots on for me, because without power my flexibility is a bit lacking. Next they help me into the upper suit, which is then attached and sealed to the lower. My interface is inserted into its slot on my left arm, and it automatically connects with the suit's systems.

I do a couple stretches, making sure nothing pinches inside that would cause comfort issues on the mission that I can't correct myself. Satisfied I nod and they move to my gloves.

Once they've secured me in the armor, they assist me with the helmet. One of them notices a stray strand of curly hair poking out from the face seal, and I quickly tuck it back in. Just something small that ensures a proper oxygen and pressure seal. Don't want any leaks after all.

With a press of a button, the visor closes with a hiss, and I can feel the arrays activating, sending conjured oxygen into the suit for both breathing and cooling purposes. The techs attach the water storage canister to my back, allowing me to carry up to a liter of water with me. Thanks to the combination of conjuration and alteration magic, even my pee will be transformed into drinkable water to keep it nice and full.

I move on to my gear, my focus sharpening as I tap in the code to my personal equipment storage. The tech hands me my spell pistol, and I check its charge before slotting it into the holster on my thigh. I sheath my monoblade on my chest, followed by slotting in extra power cells for my weapons.

My rifle will be ready in the buzzard, or rather the transport aircraft similar to the ancient repurposed ospreys the gov's still used. The difference is that ours are powered by mana and have a significantly improved performance envelope, defense system against both mundane and magical threats, and an offensive amplification nexus with targeting array—basically, a way for Slider to feed his magic into a big gun and use it to rain his own personal version of magical death on hostiles.

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Once that is all ready, I follow the two women to the testing area where a nice big, comfy chair is waiting for me with a big television in front of me showing some animated kids show that I can watch while they perform their tests.

It's like they know me.

They probably do. These two women know more about my body and habits than any of the people I've tried dating in the last three years.

I sit down, allowing the techs to conduct a series of tests on the suit's integrity and runic-powered systems. My visor lights up with various screens, and I meticulously run through my pre-ops checklist. Every system must be in optimal condition; I can't afford any oversights.

My technicians' fingers dance over the various systems and readouts on their control pads. They're diligent, double-checking and triple-checking everything. We all know how important it is to get everything right.

A small proximity sensor bar appears in the top center of the HUD, while a comm system status icon illuminates on the bottom left corner.

One of the techs taps my visor and speaks into her headset. "Vandal, can you hear me?" her voice crackles into my ear.

"Copy, loud and clear," I reply, my voice steady and confident.

She nods and then looks at her partner. Together, they start testing the various pressure systems. I feel a rush of air in the suit, and the pressure sensors light up in my vision. "Pressure check in progress," one tech says. "Hold your breath."

I take in a deep lung full of air and hold.

The suit constricts and then loosens as they check for any leaks.

"Breathe. How're your ears and sinuses?" the tech asks. "And your mobility?"

"Feels good," I say, moving my arms and legs to ensure that nothing is restricted.

Next, they move on to the emergency medical support system, a vital part of the suit designed to stabilize me in case of injury. They activate the system, and I feel a cool sensation spreading through the suit as the auto-doc system calibrates.

"EMS system check. Can you confirm, Vandal?" the tech inquires.

"Confirmed. EMS is green," I reply, looking at the display, which confirms that the medical system is fully operational.

Little indicators of my heart rate, oxygen percent, and physical stamina status along with other icons related to my physical health pop up in the top left. Next, icons related to the arcane populate the

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right side of my hud. My mental stamina, status of my mana core, and conduit flow rate are shown—everything needed to ensure I don't go into mana strain, or worse, mana sickness.

Not that it matters with my current level of magic use.

“Verify Interface integration,” the tech informs me.

I look down at my interface attached to my forearm and tap the link to bring up my system details on my HUD. Even amongst people we trust, our full statuses are private. No system that Arcan Corp owns stores this data in any way; it is retrieved fresh each time.

Daily First Boot...

Checking System: OK

Arcan Corp® Interface™ Platinum v9.23.13

Welcome Lieutenant Lexi Thorne!

Connecting to Status...

Please wait...

.

..

...

Connected.

Loading Status...

The status scrolls across my visor as the runic device *interfaces* with my core.

Oxylus

Lexi “VANDAL” Thorne

Class: Mana Striker (Mage)

Levels: 32 (Threshold I)

Core Rarity: ~~ERROR~~ (Core Connection Failure – Code: 218)–

Magic Affinity: ~~ERROR~~ (Core Connection Failure – Code: 218)–

Mana Attunement: ~~ERROR~~ (Core Connection Failure – Code: 218)–

Alignment: Hybrid

Capability: 183

Control: 126

Constitution: 67

Traits: Focus, Mana Sense, Quick Reflexes, Adaptability, Tactical Insight

Passives: Physical Empowerment

Actives: Double Step, Swift Kick, Vital Strike

It’s exactly what I expected, and the source of my great frustration. Something was wrong with my core. Maybe it was damaged, maybe something else. The doctors have never figured it out. While my Core Rarity is technically unknown, the doctors had helped me extrapolate what it was based on the stats we *could* see.

Rare.

Not the highest, but definitely well... *rare* when it comes to someone at only their first threshold. Not that that matters, because someone was more likely to be abducted by aliens than to increase their rarity.

People from my parent’s time would likely have thought that meant it was impossible.

Tell that to the Mana Taken and the Outlanders.

Clearly, it was possible. Likely not anymore, but still, that raised the chance from impossible to a statistical anomaly.

It fit.

The handful of known people that *had* increased their rarities at the second threshold had been great heroes, or in the case of the [Mindflayer], infamous villains.

They’d done something so profoundly over the top, that mana rewarded them.

Me? Just like almost everyone else in the world, I never expected it to change.

Not that it was *that* big of a deal.

All one’s rarity affected was how pure the essence was after our core bound it to us. Which, granted, affected the amount of stats we gained, so it was still sort of a big deal.

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The media had a field day with the designations all those years ago. I remember seeing a clip of it when I was little.

“The government recently released statistics regarding what they are calling the Core Rarity. It has been learned that the vast majority of the population will have the lowest rarity. We’ve been told that it will be rare to see someone beyond that. Going further than that would require an epic undertaking but those even further are the makings of legends. Anything else is simply a myth.”

When almost ninety percent of the world’s rarity was common, and a bit less than ten percent were rare, then less than a tenth of a percent was epic? I felt alright about the lack of upward mobility for my rarity.

Legendary and mythical rarities didn’t even factor into my mind.

It didn’t stop me from increasing my levels and my push toward the second threshold.

I swear some tabletop roleplaying nerd somewhere termed the names that we used for those two. Though, they must have seen how big of a difference common was from the next higher rarity and completely skipped the typical uncommon terminology.

I dismissed my status with a flick of my eyes where it disappeared into a small circle at the corner of the HUD that would light up when a system notification hit. I acknowledged the system’s connection to the techs, “Interface successfully integrated. Status... expected.”

The woman winced. While she didn’t know exactly what was on my status, she knew that I had issues so that when there was an error on their readouts, they were to ignore it.

She continued down the list of tests. “Verifying mana seal. Standby.”

My hud’s readout registered a surge of mana on the surface of the armor.

The Great Change had brought many wonders, but it had also brought dangers that we hadn’t foreseen. The tests and systems of my suit were designed after we learned that the hard way. The discovery of mana-wells led to an influx of magical energy into the region in which they resided. In the early days, we didn’t understand the consequences of such dense mana exposure.

What we figured out was that higher mana density could cause dangerous mutations in all forms of life. The beastkin were the first to appear, people twisted by mana into something not quite human. They were a melding of human and animal, and their very existence was a reminder of what could happen due to ignorance and carelessness.

Now, enclaves of new species of humans, the beastkin, lived on the fringes of our society. Their numbers had grown over the years, and they had formed their own communities, adapting to their changed circumstances as best as they could.

The price of progress has been heavy.

Oxylus

“We’re done here, Vandal,” the tech says, breaking my reverie. “Your suit is fully operational and ready to go.”

Finally, now that every test has been passed, I rise to my feet. The suit clings to my body like a second skin, lean and deadly. It’s not bulky, nothing like the power armor in classic science fiction. Magitech has revolutionized warfare; the magic-infused technology has made everything smaller, more efficient. The suit is one of Arcan Corp’s crown jewels and exclusive to the ARTFOR, and at a staggering one point five million each, I understand why.

I nod my thanks to both of them. However my thoughts stray to the beastkin, and I realize that in some ways, we’re all just trying to adapt to a world that has changed beyond our understanding.

But right now, I have a job to do.