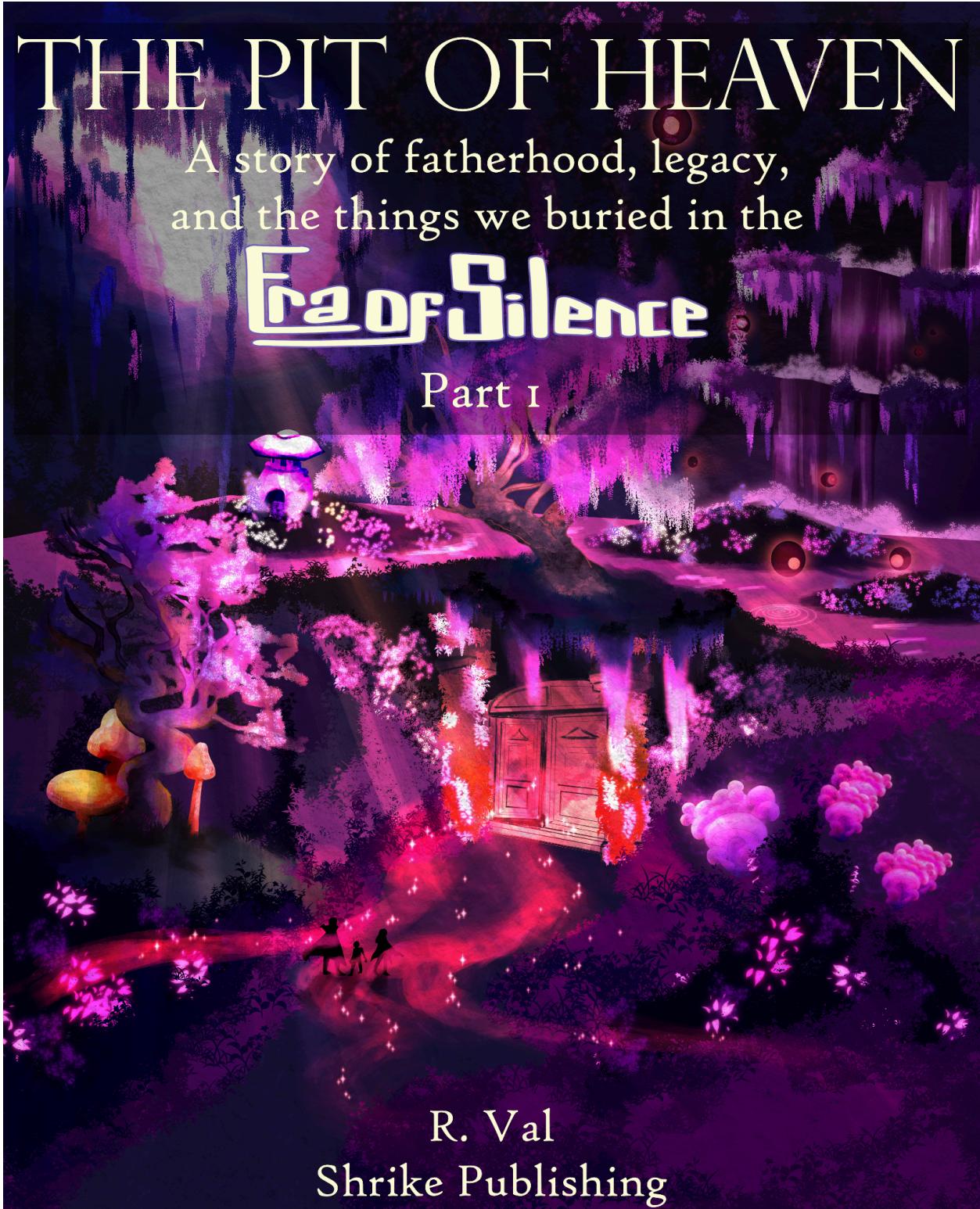


# THE PIT OF HEAVEN

A story of fatherhood, legacy,  
and the things we buried in the

Era of Silence

Part I



R. Val  
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To my peer, my brother, F. Dan O'Neill. The Silence grows long and strange, but it will always find its beginnings at your kitchen table.

\*\*\*\*\*

To Amanda, my love. No more faithful a companion could be summoned in this the Last Age.

\*\*\*\*\*

“The truth is that if my father weren’t my father, he would be one of the men he hates; he is incorrigibly faithless and thoroughly narcissistic, to such an extent that I tend to forget he’s also capable of being a real peach.”

Nora Ephron, Heartburn

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# Part 1- The Gryphon's Beak

## 1. Under Ashen Skies

Just as the cigarette lit, a buffet of sooty wind blew it out. Torinn swore under his breath, turned toward the wall behind him, and tried again. This time, the flame took and a plume of aromatic smoke wafted into the cold night. It smelled not unlike burning moss.

He took a long drag, held his breath, and looked up. The sky was smothered in dark clouds, occasionally broken by pale green rays of moonlight. He looked back down to the town around him. The alley he stood in was lined by composite structures, none of which rose above three stories. He stood on concrete pavement painted by dust and ash. There were countless settlements like this across the wastelands, but the relative centrality and size of this one had earned it the name Crossroads.

He hacked out the exhale and struggled to control himself. The thin air and his weakened lungs only hastened the urgency. He held the metal mask in his other hand to his face, and took a few cleansing inhales. When his breathing had calmed, he brushed a bit of dust out of his grey hair, and let himself enjoy the quiet moment. The cigarette's mild stimulant washed over him, a warm buzzing feeling.

He checked his watch. Their contact was late. He frowned at the bad sign, but there wasn't much to be done about it now. His boss would know what to do from here. He sighed, stamped his cigarette out, and went to head inside.

The bar's entrance was sealed by an exterior airlock that protruded from its prefabricated construction. In this way, it was like every other building in Crossroads. A vintage cast iron sign hung from the top, illuminated by the buzzing

white street lamps. “The Ebonsteel Pony,” which had the visage of the eponymous pony, was fashioned from the dark, enchanted steel.

When the exterior hatch opened with a hiss, Torinn and a few others shuffled inside. The hatch closed behind them, and he worked off his mask and took some deeper, unrestricted breaths. The interior was a small metal room with another doorway on the other side. It was lined with lockers and a few benches, where many of the patrons deposited rebreathers and protective gear. Two green glowstrips lit the room faintly from above.

Someone hit the button to cycle the airlock, and the background electrical hum climbed pitch to a whine. The smell of sterilizing agents assaulted the nose and left a lingering chemical taste on the back of the tongue. The lights turned red momentarily, and the whine grew louder; a couple of occupants covered their ears. Within a minute, the process was complete, and the interior door popped open into a bustling bar.

The persistent mechanical noise of the airlock was replaced by music and raised conversation. A woman with horns like a ram was singing and playing a guitar, accompanied by backing music from a soundboard. It was upbeat, folksy, and reminded him of the sort of music his kids would like. Many of the patrons ignored the music, but a decent crowd had gathered around her. Her melody carried to the rest over an internal sound system. The bar goers were a mix of locals and travelers of all different shapes and sizes.

No one paid Torinn any mind as he made his way through the central room. He bumped past several others, apologizing each time, and always checking his pockets after. He’d grown to distrust crowds. The noisy squall drowned half-remembered instructions of where he was supposed to go.

The music stopped, and over the speakers came the singer's voice, "Thank you, thank you. I've been Natasha Irinde! You've been great, but I've gotta get out of here before curfew." Drunken boos and calls for an encore. "Okayyy fine! You all are incorrigible!" She tuned the instrument. "I've got one more for you all. It's a favorite for true Astaelians! About a cowardly nobleman who abandoned his city. A man by the name of Lord Varan."

Torinn's heart sank deep in the recesses of his chest. He knew what song she meant. The crowd was ecstatic. She grinned and pumped her arms to hype them up, "Oh you all know it? Great! Sing along with me! It's called The Lord of Nothing." Half the bar joined her. Torinn's nausea worsened and he charged out of the common room. He was seeing white by the time they made it to the first chorus.

"He left!

*He ran!*

He left!

*He ran!*

And this is the song we sing!

He left!

*He ran!*

He left!

*He ran!*

The little Lord of Nothing!"

He slipped into a hallway in the back. The walls muffled the sound, but not well enough. He remembered his calming techniques. Not much help. Fascist fucking dogs all over this godless town. He needed to get to where he was going. Seeing a

set of three doors, he made a judgement based on the placement of the alley, and tried his luck with the rightmost one.

He was right. The door swung open revealing the diminutive frame and irisless golden eyes of his employer, an elek named Gallin'Vir. He wore a light grey business suit a few steps too formal for the setting, complemented with a vintage bowler hat that covered strawberry blonde hair.

The small man's long, rounded ears perked up, and he adjusted a pair of antiquated spectacles. He didn't waste time on formalities. "You're a quarter-hour late." The tempo of his speech was rapid, but Torinn had learned to keep up.

Torinn stepped into the private room as quickly as he could and half slammed the door. "I ran a little long. Was checking the exits on the place and got caught up—" He stopped himself. "It doesn't matter. Place is as secure as we can ask for. We can leave out of the back just fine..." He gestured to the miniature airlock on the far wall of the room. "Where are they?"

"Also late." Gallin'Vir's rapid cadence was burdened with a layer of annoyance. "You smell like smoke. Are you high?"

Torinn raised an eyebrow, "When's the last time you saw me get high? Just polypierce." He looked around the room; like the rest of the building, it was constructed mostly of metal, though they hadn't bothered to wallpaper it. Most of the space was taken up by a large round table. A single suspended light bulb without a shade cast sickly white light over the walls, adding to the discomfort. Apparently they were displacing a weekly poker game.

"Still, you shouldn't be smoking with your-" Gallin'Vir stopped halfway through..  
"Never mind. Are we ready?"

"Up to you." Habit dictated Torinn check his weapon. He unholstered it and did a quick once over. It was a revolver with two firing chambers, one stacked on top of the other, a Jerris Model X. Firing both barrels kicked like a mule and required wrist augmentation for safety, but it was a cherished gift from his wife. He confirmed it was loaded and put it back.

The two of them made conversation while they waited. Plans for their return back east. Torinn's experience in this region. Gallin'Vir's work. 10 turned to 11, and 11 turned to midnight with still no sign of the people they were waiting to meet. At some point, Gallin'Vir started pacing. It made the bodyguard anxious, but he had learned to let it go. Brilliance often came with eccentricities.

At long last, a fist banged four times on the interior of the room's airlock, a pause, then three more. The signal. Gallin'Vir stood on his tiptoes, a thing eleks did when getting a handle on the situation. Torinn headed to the entrance. He began to open it, but was pushed back when it slammed inward. Three armed people barged in.

At their head was a shorter human woman with red-grey hair, a furious glare twisting her face. A two shot pistol shook in her hands. The posse's leader, Esther Garad.

Immediately behind her was the hulking figure Torinn remembered most vividly from their first meeting with the crew. A 7 foot tall, muscle bound man. He had a haunted look in his eyes that Torinn was all too familiar with.

The third was one Torinn hadn't seen before. A person who had been augmented to resemble a wasteland jackal. Fur, fangs and all. They brandished a standard military rifle.

Torinn knew there was at least one more. He glanced through the open airlock. Where was he? He glanced over to Gallin'Vir who had sat down and was keeping on a polite grin. He stretched an upturned hand out to the chairs across from him, "Please, Ms. Garad. Have a seat!"

The leader pointed her pistol directly at Gallin'Vir's head. Torinn responded by drawing his weapon, but her two underlings trained theirs on him in return. "What the fuck?" she shouted. "Those 'packages' of yours-"

Without skipping a beat, Gallin'Vir interjected, "-Ah yes, I was just about to ask... I noticed you don't have the shipments on your person. I'll need to see them befor-"

Esther fired a shot into the ceiling, and roared over the subsequent ringing in all their ears, "-Shut it, city boy! I don't know what in The Council's holy names you prissy fucks are taught, but 'round the rest of this country, we have a proverb. **Don't. Fucking. Touch. Parathan. Tech!**"

Even Torinn felt a superstitious shiver when that name was invoked. Gallin'Vir continued, "I was under the impression you weren't bound by Community guidelines. That is why I contracted you." There was a slight tremble in his voice, and his expression had steadily turned to a scowl.

"That's not just a Community rule, that's common fucking sense! We could've gotten our asses blown to the Reaper's Gates and back!" Esther's face was bright

red, her voice more and more like a dog's growl. Torinn considered their options. Peaceful resolutions to the situation were dwindling.

"I'm disappointed in you, Ms. Garad. I thought you to be a woman of the world, above such trite superstition. The national panic over the matter is largely overblown. There was- and is- no curse on The Parathan Empire. If you'd like to do some reading on the mat-

"-I didn't ask for a lecture you careless fuck! You didn't even give us a warning! Not just the fucking risk of the goods! Do you know how many soldiers they put on guard for that kind of shit?"

Torinn made eye contact with the other gunmen, as they wondered how long their respective bosses would keep this up. Why hadn't Gallin'Vir done something?

"There was nothing to warn you about, Ms. Garad. The items I requested were of minimal to no risk to your 'crew'. Beyond the fragility of the contents, there was nothing to worry about..." Gallin'Vir's face twitched with concern. "You didn't break them, did you?"

**"Enough!"** Esther howled. There was a long pause, Gallin'Vir tilted his head to the side, waiting for her to continue. "Double." she finally muttered.

"Pardon me?"

"Double our fee."

"I believe the agreed upon sum of ten thousand Standard Astaelian is more than fair."

"I lost a good man and risked much more grabbin' your shipments. Twenty thousand, or we walk and find a reaaal nice ditch to dump the junk in." A wicked sneer crept along Esther's lips. She lowered her pistol.

"Last I checked, that is an occupational hazard. I apologize for your loss, but I will not take responsibility for it. There was nothing about the contents of the packages that posed any inherent risk to you or your crew. I will not be doubling your wretched fee!" Gallin'Vir tossed his hands into the air. "Now, where are my items?" he finished, lowering his hands. Instead of putting them back on the table, they ended up in his lap.

The wasters didn't seem to notice the change, but Torinn knew what he was doing. The bodyguard kept a straight, stern face and shot looks at both of the other gunmen, keeping his gaze on each long enough to ensure they made eye contact. He needed their focus on him, as Gallin'Vir made subtle hand gestures..

Esther continued to stare down Gallin'Vir. Then it seemed as if she realized the elek's will matched- if not outmatched- her own. She turned away and motioned to her men. "Let's go, boys. This is a fuckin' waste of time," she half-muttered. They made a half-hearted gesture at turning with her. Neither Torinn nor Gallin'Vir were fooled. Esther made a dismissive gesture behind her.

She spun around with her weapon outstretched, but before she could fire, a *crack* like a miniature thunderclap sounded. The ball of white energy that slammed into Esther's gut came out of nowhere and disappeared just as quickly. The force of the

impact threw her to the ground. The only evidence of its origin was Gallin'Vir's intricately tattooed left palm, still raised and glowing from the spell's casting.

The unexpected counterattack halted the other two bandits. Even for the fraction of a second that it was, it was more than enough time. Decades of instinct took over in Torinn. He pushed Gallin'Vir to the ground, drew his revolver and rushed the jackal. Reaching out, he pushed the rifle out of their hands, then sidestepped while putting them to his front.

The big one raised his weapon and fired before he could even realize what he was doing. The jackal's chest took the brunt of the impact, sending them tumbling back into Torinn. With it came a sudden burning pain in Torinn's side. The force of impact from the dying bandit knocked them both against the wall, but not before Torinn managed to fire a double-shot from his gun.

The pain grew stronger, even through the adrenaline surge. He gritted his teeth and clutched his right hip. He pushed the now dead jackal off of him and looked to the fresh wound. The shotgun grazed his hip - shallow wounds, but bloody. Assured it wasn't critical, Torinn's mind returned to the present. His head jerked up to the big one, who was on the floor. Blood, bone, gore and brains on the wall where his head should have been.

It wasn't over yet. Torinn heard rushed footsteps from outside the open backdoor. "Stay down!" he grunted through gritted teeth. His employer complied and ducked underneath the table. Torinn raised his weapon and pointed to the doorway. "Hold it!" he yelled, trying to hide the pain in his voice as he got to his feet.

His head was pounding as he tried to control his ragged breath. The common room had grown quiet. No doubt, they heard the shots. The footsteps outside the

back doorway had ceased as well. “Don’t shoot, I’m coming in!” declared a boisterous voice.

Into the exterior doorframe came a portly fellow with the augmented visage of a wolf, wearing a rebreather. His canine eyes widened as he observed the corpses and he raised his open, fuzzy palms over his shoulders. “I told her it was a bad idea.”

Torinn heard the scraping of metal against metal as Gallin’Vir pushed a chair out from the table, stood up, and rushed over to Esther’s body. The reek of burnt flesh and entrails from the crater in her corpse suffocated in the small room. A loud banging came from the interior door. A voice on the other side demanded to be let in. “Just a minute, Ms. Haris!” Gallin’Vir called through the door, while frantically rooting around Esther’s pockets.

While his charge searched, Torinn kept his gun on the sole survivor of the bandits. He bared his teeth in a mix of pain and aggression. “The packages... where?”

“Outside! I can take you.” Either he was much more agreeable than his employer, or he knew when he was beaten. Perhaps both.

Gallin’Vir emerged from Esther’s corpse with a piece of paper in hand. He quietly slipped the paper into his chest pocket, and calmly made his way to Torinn and the other bandit. He waved down the bodyguard’s gun. The elek produced a small synthetic leather pouch, filled with coins. “I believe you will find this sufficient for services rendered.” The bandit accepted, surprised.

“Now would you kindly take us to the items?” Gallin’Vir’s pleasant demeanor had returned. Though, his face was unsettlingly expressionless.

The bandit nodded, and beckoned for them to follow. A loud *whump* shook the door to the common room. The owner was trying to break in. “That would be our invitation to leave. Come along.” Gallin’Vir blew past the others and out the first exterior door.

In the mini airlock between interior and exterior, the charge and the bodyguard secured their rebreathers. Just outside, a rickety wasteland buggy idled. Signs of combat were obvious in its bullet-riddled hull.

The bandit, who seemed older than the others, turned around and looked at them. “It’s just in the back, come with me...” he paused, leering at Torinn with uncertainty. “I know you... Royal Army, right? Damned 21<sup>st</sup>! I was with the supply corps.” He gave a friendly smile “Captain... um...” He trailed off.

“Just get going.” Torinn didn’t remember the man, even without the augs. He didn’t particularly care to be remembered back. The wolfman rattled off the names of commanding officers as he rushed them around the back of the car, where Gallin’Vir’s packages rested.

“The cylinder cracked open when we were hauling ass. That’s how Esther figured what you all were having us nab. Looked fine but you may want to give it a check.” A crash and the cracking of splintering wood could be heard from inside the meeting room. “Maybe later.”

Gallin’Vir nodded and motioned for Torinn to pick up the crate. It wasn’t terribly heavy for Torinn’s augmented strength, but the pain in his side made it harder. As

they rushed off, the bandit called back “Aha! I remember now! A pleasure, Captain Varan!” Torinn shuddered and they disappeared into the night.

## 2. The Alchemical Age

They got to their train right before last call for its 12:30AM departure, much to Gallin'Vir's satisfaction. To Torinn's satisfaction, the train was rapidly making distance between itself and the Crossroads. He had taken special care that the two of them only used aliases in town. No trouble would follow.

Settled in their private car, Torinn gnashed his teeth as the last scattershot pellet was removed from his side. It was a flesh wound, but no amount of getting shot was ever really acceptable. Gallin'Vir opened up his bag, revealing vials, bottles, and composite flasks that each glowed and glittered different colors. Torinn knew these were tools of a trade, but they seemed wondrous all the same. The small doctor took out a cloth, some cleaning solution, and a vial filled with a glittering red liquid marked “YF”.

Torinn was shirtless and glanced out the interior window to make sure no one could see. He was in exceptional shape for his age, with extra broad shoulders that flattered his above-average height. Regardless, he had a classical sense of modesty. The bloody shrapnel rattled around in a tin, and Gallin'Vir got to work on healing. He worked fast, wiping down and cleaning the wound expertly.

Gallin'Vir uncorked the glass vial. “This will sting,” he cautioned, though Torinn knew how this went. A couple of drops fell onto his wound, and the alchemist massaged them into the torn skin. Torinn bit his forearm to keep from crying out. Instead, he let out a low, pained grunt as the flesh began to stitch itself back together. Within half a minute, the wound was closed. All that remained was a

bulging bit of irritated flesh. “Looks to be healing well. Don’t pick at it, and it will be gone within the hour.”

Torinn nodded and thanked his healer. Yender’s Formula was a marvel, but uncomfortable. One’s flesh and muscle repairing itself at that speed blended the sensation of burning and electrical tingling. At the very least, Gallin’Vir was adept at his craft. Torinn had received much worse treatment. He still had a bit of trouble moving his left shoulder after a botched application in the war.

The alchemist made eye contact with him. The iris-less eyes of an elek were hard to focus on, but he met the gaze. “Have these been spreading?” Gallin’Vir’s hand pointed at the discolored patches of skin across Torinn’s torso.

Torinn tightened his lips and nodded, “Like you said they would.” Thinking about it reminded him of the irritation in his lungs, and he coughed a few times into his hand.

Gallin’Vir frowned and thought for a second, “Take your medicine as normal. I’ll look at some alterations to your prescription when we’re back in the city.”

Torinn nodded, stood up, and retrieved his travel bag. He grabbed his brown button-up from the floor, noting the damage. He’d see about getting it patched up. He could just go to a department store, but he’d had this one for longer than he could remember. He folded it, stuffed it in the bag, and put on a simple black tee he kept for emergencies.

He sat back down and looked out the window. A destroyed landscape sped by. The wasteland was a vast stretch of ash and jagged rock formations that carried on into the Alura Desert out west. Further out from that was the foot of the Kavan

mountain range. If one looked closely in the moonlight, they could see it dotted with mutated plant life, ruins of civilizations before, and small settlements. Then the nagging memory manifested in the words and song of the bar musician. Somewhere out there, beyond view, was a hole in the world. What remained of Varanskeep, his home.

He kept staring, and the mechanical rhythm of the train's motion lulled him into a sort of trance. This carried on for what could have been hours, broken when Gallin'Vir began talking to himself.

The elek had opened one of the packages: the canister. It was metal, with a prominent dent in the side. He reached into the container and pulled out a round, snub tube made of brass and glass. At one end of its structure, Torinn noticed a small switch. An engraved arrow pointed to what looked like a cap.

"Power cell?" he guessed and then felt dumb. It felt too obvious. He shifted his question. "Is it alright?"

Gallin'Vir stopped mumbling, and his head darted up. After a second to process, he nodded, "Yes, yes. The container absorbed the impact. No fuel, as expected. No reason to think this would be volatile." He went back to looking down and took out a small black rectangle of metal and glass. He thumbed a button on the side and began tapping on its surface. The dataslate was Gallin'Vir's preferred notebook.

Torinn let out a long sigh and grabbed a flask filled with brandy from his bag. He took a swig and rested his head against the wall behind his seat, closing his eyes. Not much more they could do. No point in either of them sleeping with only a couple of hours to their connecting platform.

In another life, he had been a noble, Lord Varan. Then a soldier, Captain Varan. Now, and finally, a bodyguard, ‘Mr. Varan.’ It seemed his fate was to dash across the infant Astaelian Empire, escorting an eccentric little man wherever he needed to go. Perhaps some kind of divine justice, to be made to serve in the twilight of his life.

A grim laugh - the humor wasn’t lost on him. He knew how lucky he was, compared to many others, especially among the pre-Empire nobility. Gallin’Vir was doing important work, even if few other people realized it. Torinn’s family had heavily instilled the virtues of history. Even past superstition, he saw the value. The Parathan had nearly conquered the world. So much was accomplished. Their advances in the science of alchemy had built the modern world, without doubt.

Of course, all empires fall, and the Parathan fell spectacularly. “The Judgement” came. First, a cataclysmic earthquake that shook the whole of Vian, killing millions. Next, almost the whole world was buried in ash and rock upon a volcanic eruption from the supervolcano Draiskaln, followed by every other active eruption site on the planet. The mortals of Vian survived, just barely, but the old Empire was mortally wounded. It would collapse within the year. So much was lost.

Gallin’Vir’s profession was finding the things that were lost when they fell.

Torinn used this for assurance. They were doing good. Doing good, even if they had to break the law to get around the numerous moratoriums on Parathan artifact usage. He owed the world at least an attempt to make things better before he left. Certainly after everything else...

Outside their cabin, he heard an attendant coming down the hall, waking passengers and alerting them they were close to the station. A rough rapping could be heard on the clouded glass of their cabin, “Good evening gentlemen! We’ll be at

North Central in twenty minutes!" Such a jovial tone at such a late hour. Either she loved her job, or she loved stimulants.

"Yes, thank you!" Gallin'Vir called back and sprung to his feet. "Ready, Mr. Varan?"

Torinn nodded. He got up from his seat and checked his things. Everything seemed ready, but a light cough and a tension in his chest reminded him.

*Medicine.*

He reopened the bag and retrieved a small hard case. A sense of dread overtook him as his hand ran along the side. Within was a series of metal vials with no view slit. He retrieved one and popped off the cork. The stench was horrendous, as always, but he'd learned not to immediately gag. He wasn't so lucky as the smokey black slime slithered down his throat. He retched, nearly dropping the vial. He braced himself.

Without a doubt, Gallin'Vir's work was brilliant, but did it really have to taste like that?

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They arrived at North Central Junction around 3:30 AM. Good time, all things considered. The platform crowded with tired people as they shambled out of the cozy train into the bitter air of the night. Many fumbled to put on rebreathers as they moved on to their connecting trains, or out to the nearest town. Gallin'Vir said he had a message to send at the communications station, privately. He assured Torinn they'd meet in time for their departure. The bodyguard lamented the separation, but knew when his charge made a decision, it was final.

He sprung to alert when shouts came from the adjacent platform. A bulky, 8-foot tall reptilian known as a Primas-ika, and their child had been stopped by metallic yelling from station officers. These officers, military police, wore sealed cobalt blue armor. One of the soldiers demanded to see IDs. Both parent and child pleaded for mercy as guns were waved in their faces. One of the cops pulled on the parent's long braids. The parent cried out and went to pull open their bag, perhaps a little too quickly. They were struck in the face with the butt of a rifle. Another soldier fired into the air and held the gun to the kid's head. The instincts of the other travelers had taken over. The platform cleared in less than a minute.

All three officers declared their authority in the name of the Empire and screamed for both of the Primas-ikas to get on the ground. It was a performance of law and order, for an unclear audience. The fates of the captives had been sealed from the moment they stepped into the wrong area at the wrong time. No amount of obedience would have spared them.

If they were lucky, the parent would walk away with some injuries and a fine. The child would escape with memories of the cruelty that exists in the hearts of some adults. Torinn's fists tightened as he pondered the darker alternatives. Then came the gnawing rage. People were just going to let this happen! How easily he could draw his pistol and take care of things. Surely their Empire wouldn't miss a few enforcers. He had a good arm, and the crowd had cleared. He wouldn't hurt anyone who didn't deserve it. He could-

He had to breathe slowly and deeply. His calming inhales paced by the natural cadence of his rebreather. He turned away. He reminded himself he couldn't get involved, not tonight. Too much on the line. He walked back towards where he had come from. It passed soon enough. He never knew what happened for sure, and chose to live with the easiest explanation.

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He eventually found his way to the communications building, and stood under an awning. After a twenty minute wait, Torinn's cravings took hold. Soon enough, he was smoking with one of the staff. He covered his mouth with one arm and coughed out an exhale. He held the cigarette out to the man on the other side of the covering. "That's good. Natural?"

The young man, one of the relay technicians if Torinn gathered correctly, received the cigarette graciously and took a small puff. He waved his hand in the negative. "Nah, none of that this far out. Lab grown, but you couldn't tell, right?"

The tech was short, but his pinstripe outfit flattered him. His augmented fire-orange eyes glowed in the low light of night. Most strikingly, a third arm had been grafted into his right hip. Unlike his normal two arms, this third one was much more reptilian.

Torinn pointed at it, "Primas-ika?"

"Also lab, but genetically, yeah probably." He took another drag and passed it back to Torinn, this time with the third hand. "I got it a couple years ago. Never know when you'll need an extra hand, amirite?"

Torinn nodded and took a drag. "It's impressive what they can do now. In my day, cross-species implants were risky." When the sentence left his mouth he realized how old he sounded, and how much older he felt. It was like sour milk in his mouth.

Fiery eyes scrutinized him. The kid considered his next words. "What about you, man? Got any grafts?"

Certainly, compared to him, Torinn stood out less. To the outside observer, he had short grey hair, was clean shaven, was fit, and had a face wizened by a half century of wear and scars. You wouldn't know he had any alchemical work done at a glance.

"Some. Muscular and skeletal, common for the service. Replacement eyes and limbs. That sort of thing. I think my generation just had more taboos about outwardly showing ours." He passed the cigarette back. "Nothing wrong with how it is now, though. Just never expected to see it become fashion."

A sharp smile, "Future's great, ain't it? So you were—" the tech was cut short by a staticy blast of trumpet, as the speakers across the station hummed to life. The tune that played was short and triumphant. A grandiose version of the song at the bar.

The song about the worst day of Torinn's life had become a popular Imperial anthem. He wanted to claw his ears off. When it concluded, a soft, pleasant voice announced it was 4AM, and reminded everyone in the station of the curfew for nonessential travel. It drowned out every other sound on the platform.

The boy noticed the look on the older man's face. He exhaled a cloud. "So, when you say the service, you uh—"

Torinn grunted and held his hand out for the cig. "Yeah."

The younger man grimaced. "Shit, man. That's rough." There was a bit of extra care in passing the half-burnt cig this time. "I was a bit too young at the start of it to join up. By the time I was 18, well..." He didn't need to finish the sentence.

Torinn waved his hand, but didn't look at the kid. "It's good you didn't." Too many young people for the pyre as it was. He took three puffs. A breach of smoker's etiquette, contextually forgiven.

The tech looked at the open end of the platform, which was sparsely filled. People in protective outdoor clothing who were half asleep, waiting for their next train. No one who cared to listen in on the idle talk of smokers. "Fucking fascists." he half-whispered.

He seemed emboldened by the small act of rebellion, "Ra ra, Imperial pride and Astaelian strength! Glory for all!" He stopped suddenly. A bit too loud, a few passersby glanced at them, an officer too, but all kept walking.

The two of them laughed, now thoroughly under the thrall of the polypice. Torinn took another drag and started coughing. Longer and harder than one would expect. He recovered and hurriedly rummaged through the bag at his feet, lightheaded.

"Fuck! You okay? Do you have lung filters installed?" the kid asked. It was clear from the bewildered look on his face that he was unsure what he would do were the old man not okay. More of a gesture at decency.

"No." Torinn grabbed his rebreather and held it to his face, taking a few deep breaths. He coughed into the filtered mask a few more times, then regained control.

"Fuck man, the air's better lately, but it'll still kill you if you-"

"Not what'll kill me." Torinn's already deep voice was made synthetic through the mask.

“Fair enough.” A pause. The young man considered his next question.

“Not from around here?” The reptilian arm offered the cigarette again. Torinn declined.

“New Bekton.” Torinn fastened the mask to keep it on.

“Makes sense.” The cigarette was spent, and the three-armed boy stomped it out.  
“What brings you out here so late?”

“Work.”

“Is that why you’re carrying that monster?” Three index fingers pointed at the oversized pistol on Torinn’s hip.

The older man shot a look back. “You should know better.”

Three hands raised in apology, “Fair.”

There was quiet, and it was clear to both that the conversation was nearing its end. Not long after, Gallin’Vir emerged with a receipt in hand. The elek wordlessly waved for Torinn to follow.

The old soldier looked to his conversation partner, “I best head out,” and made his way toward the track where their train would be. He turned back to face the tech, who was himself backstepping his way to the employee entrance. “Thanks, Council’s Will be with you.”

“Yeah, you too, man... Stop by anytime you’re passing through.” A gesture of courtesy, more than anything else, they both knew they wouldn’t speak again. Torinn headed out onto the open platform.

\*\*\*\*\*

Gallin’Vir’s message would be sent out via local broadcast tower before the hour was out. They waited for their next train in a passenger shelter.

They were taking the flashttrack this time. Anxious tension tightened Torinn’s jaw. He felt old and set in his ways. Vivid recollections of the corpse strewn early days of the technology stained his memory. ‘Unnatural,’ he often thought.

He knew that this was unfair. The same could be said of most arcane and alchemical technologies. Still, that didn’t ease his mind when the large, tubular locomotive came roaring into the station. Upon its fast stop, it released a hiss of vaporized water and chemicals that turned the smell of the air sour even through their masks.

It was about the size of a normal train, if not a little wider. Outside of the main cars were reinforced, rounded alloy plates that each had “GT FLASHTRACK” painted on its hull.

He looked over to Gallin’Vir, who was staring at the porters loading their luggage. He frowned and stood on the tips of his toes. The flashttrack’s setup didn’t allow for personal luggage to be carried with the passengers. Torinn set his hand on the

smaller man's shoulder. Neither of them said anything. He wasn't the best comfort. Gallin'Vir thanked him with a slight smile anyway.

Torinn watched as the previous passengers of the train filed out, waiting for their turn to board with similar anticipation to a man awaiting execution. Soon enough, they made their way in. The inside of their car was dark. No windows, per safety regulation. The glowing red thermal light strips on either curve of the rounded rectangular ceiling provided adequate lighting and nothing more. In the stead of individual seats were metal benches with two harnesses and headrests attached to each side.

Torinn worked on his harness. It made a tight 'X' across his torso. He felt like a trapped animal. He didn't want to be here. Every noise was amplified, the chatter of passengers situated, the clicking of security belts, the slow, burdened clunk... clunk... clunk... of the porters' magboots as they made their way up and down the car checking tickets. It was all deafening.

He closed his eyes and sighed. When he got anxious he pictured his wife, Salee. Her blonde hair with tasteful streaks of grey, swept into a ponytail. Her kind green eyes. How she'd hold his hand a little tighter than he would expect of hands so fine. How she'd say, "It's all okay. This will pass." He lingered there in the moment, then he felt a sharp prick in his right hand, followed by a rushing coolness into his veins.

Torinn yelped and opened his eyes in surprise, he looked down to see the syringe that Gallin'Vir had jammed into his hand. He met the elek's orb-like eyes, "Just a mild sedative," he said, with a casualness that suggested drugging someone was the most normal thing in the world. Torinn didn't know whether to be furious or grateful. The sedative kicked in and decided for him. His muscles relaxed and he placed his head back on the rest. Nothing left to do but enjoy the ride.

A distant call came from outside, and the automatic doors shut. Within five minutes the train was in motion. Departure was slow and normal at first, despite what the accommodations within would suggest. That changed twenty minutes into the trip. A klaxxon buzzed twice, and the flashtrack lurched, throwing the occupants back in their seats. A humming started, slow and almost impossible to perceive above the background noise of the train's motion. Then it turned to a buzzing, and the air took on a blueish hue. A faint stench like hair burning in the distance assaulted his nose..

From behind he heard a porter walking. Clunk... clunk... clunk...

Then a whoosh alongside a flash, and Torinn passed out.

\*\*\*\*\*

*He dreamt he was a hawk, like the ones he'd seen in museums. He soared over the Derilian continent. It was before the Judgement, the air was clean and full. The land was so green and so beautiful. He flew above the icy peak of Haigspir, the tallest mountain in the world. The same place where the Council of The Gods had gathered their first followers, ten souls to spread their influence across the world. The Prophets, who would build their namesake hall on that peak. That Prophets' Hall had endured for thousands of years, long after the Council had fallen silent and their messengers had died. It remained to this day, a unifying symbol for the Divine Church and its adherents.*

*So where was the hall?*

*The question flitted out of his mind just as fast as it had arrived. He landed in the empty, serene place, and was no longer a hawk. He was nimble, mighty, and regal; a cougar. He let*

*out a roar, relishing his power. He climbed the tallest boulder he could find, and saw the entire continent from this place, his throne.*

*Vian stretched out before him. The beautiful waters around the archipelago of Nur Fasann, the lush forests of Psreid, the glimmering Glass Desert of Inerleis, and the rolling plains of Astael. All of which lived in the shadow of the uninhabitable Werusiinian wastelands and harsh Northlandic mountains. The view was breathtaking, like everything he had read of as a child.*

*He looked to the east, towards his homeland of Astael. He could see it all, despite the distance. Lush green plains unmarred by toxic ash. It was truly a beautiful land.*

*He shifted his eyes to the city he had ruled, buried in the heart of the Alura Desert, Varanskeep. There was nothing there. There was nothing anywhere in Astael, nothing anywhere north or south of it. Not even the faintest hint of civilization on the eastern half of the continent.*

*He spun on his feet towards the southwest, towards Psreid, with Nur Fasann in the waters beyond it. Patches of metal and mercrete structures dotted their lands. Cities and towns. Life.*

*Confused, he looked again to the east. It was as if civilization had appeared in an instant. All was where it should've been. The magically raised wall border between Astael and Inerleis, The Hanging City that towered over the Astaelian heartland, he could even see smoke stacks rise from isolated Northlandic settlements.*

*He felt relieved; all was well. Once again he looked to Varanskeep. Still gone. Yet now it was less than vacant. The sands beneath it were absent, the sky missing. Replaced by a sick, refracted light as if the very Fabric of reality had come undone. It was...*

*A Tear.*

*The memories flooded his mind all at once. The fear, the screams, the humming and cracking sounds as reality itself gave way. He looked back to Psreid, Tear. Nur Fasann, Tear. Inerleis, Tear. The world was coming undone before his very eyes.*

*He turned to flee. He had to get away. Save himself. In his haste he misplaced a paw. He stumbled down the boulder and landed face first on icy rock. He was shaken, but did not feel the pain. He was more focused on the Prophets' Hall that appeared before him.*

*The Hall was a massive semi-circle made of ancient stone. Elegant carvings of events from the earliest days of Vian's history were depicted in and around circular stained glass windows. His eyes were drawn to the carvings on the main doors, script written in tongues long dead and forgotten. Each time he tried to read one, the line before it shifted into another phrase. Mystified, he drew nearer to the entrance.*

*He was only a few feet away when the doors flew open. Inside shimmered like a Tear, but he knew something lurked within. Even though he could not see it, he knew. He knew whatever it was, it wanted him dead. For once, he couldn't run. He had to fight.*

*He hunkered down and attempted to growl. All he heard was a squeak. He realized he was smaller, and looked down. His strong claws turned to meek paws. He was a rabbit. He looked up again to meet the fangs sinking into his throat...*

### 3. New Bekton

A clattering jolted him awake. He was panting for air. Confusion clouded his mind as he tried to piece together events. His heart pounded in concert with his forehead, as he tried to shake the menacing images left by the dream.

He heard another noise, and his hand jolted for his gun bearing hip. His revolver was gone. He forced himself up. It was not easy to spring into action from a rest these days, but he made himself do it anyway. He scanned the small yellow room for his weapon. It was on the dresser. His dresser.

Memory clicked into place with his vision. He was back in New Bekton. He rushed through the outer doors onto the small balcony to find the source of the noise. Down in the alley below, to a delivery team that had spilled a cart of metal boxes onto the paneled street.

He looked up. It was daytime - tough to say more than that with the rolling tide of orangeish clouds blotting out the sun today. Beneath the clouds, surrounding the city, was a dome of glittering amethyst hexagons that protected New Bekton's air. Brick townhouses marked the Midtown University District. The sulfuric stench of tainted salt water wafted up from the Lowtown docks.

He spun on his feet back toward his room. It was small and simple. A bed, a desk, a dresser, and a door. A little more plain than he preferred, but he had no interest in finding his own apartment, nor any time or sense to decorate. This was a temporary job, he reminded himself.

Torinn tried to recall his most recent memory... "Flashtrack," he muttered as he furrowed his brow. Footsteps came from down the hall, and the white door opened. It wasn't Gallin'Vir, but someone else.

The woman who entered was a plain human, though Torinn knew for a fact she had changed her face drastically. She stood a head shorter than Torinn. Her broad shoulders were accentuated by her confident posture. She kept her auburn hair in a half bun that allowed her bangs to frame her face. She wore a pale blue shirt with the sleeves rolled up and tan slacks. Maev O'Thail.

Maev stood tall and saluted, "Captain Varan, good to see ya, sir!"

Torinn didn't smile back, "Hand down. None of that."

She looked hurt for a second. Then that hurt hardened into a professional seriousness. Her hand dropped to her side. "Good to see you too."

Torinn shook his head and sat on his bed "Right. What brings you here?" He looked up to the girl... No, girl didn't fit anymore. Maev was a woman, a commander. How old was she now, 26? 27? He could imagine situations in which he was proud of her. These realities were disconnected from the one in which they stood.

Maev walked in and leaned against the dresser with folded arms, "The Front wanted me to check in on our New Bekton assets."

"I write and handle delivery of our monthly reports. Is there a problem?"

“Don’t seem like it! Still, it’s more than fair to want some more direct contact, no? We’re putting a lot of faith in the doc.”

Conceding the point, Torinn moved onto business. “Did anyone see you on your way in?” he asked.

“Nah, I was careful. Plus-” she waved a hand over her face, “I get this redone every few months.”

“Smart... is he waiting?”

“Nah, I think he went out. Something about a lecture at the uni or something.”

Torinn’s eyes went wide, and he hopped to his feet, stretching his back. He rubbed his face in exasperation. “He should have woken me. He knows better than to go out alone.”

“He tried. You were out cold. Those flashttrack jumps are a killer.”

“Damn it!” He knocked his foot against the wall. A bodyguard leaving his charge unprotected was something of a professional taboo. He stood up to leave. Maev gave the *after you* gesture and they left the room.

The hallway was a simple off-white, contrasted by pieces of vibrant luminous liquid art that danced in thick glass frames as they passed by. Other decorations included tables that were a bit too nice for the place. They held clocks, antique lamps, and lab-grown plants. Gallin’Vir had done his best to make the space his own.

They made their way down the stairs. “You heard from the others at all?” Torinn rarely got a chance to check in on the unit.

“Rordin, yah. He writes from his monastery occasionally... They’ve got gear now that transcribes speech into text. He’s been keeping in touch more.”

“Carik?”

“She’s Chantal now, actually. Thareksdottir.”

Torinn paused to process the information, and mouted the name a few times.  
“Got it. Heard from Chantal?” He stumbled on it, but he was trying.

Maev shook her head, “Council... I wish. The Front needs her. I don’t think she’d really want to talk to you though.”

“Why?”

“She still blames you for...” Shared memories of events filled in the gap. “She felt abandoned, is all. What happened to Henry...”

Torinn stopped and turned to her. “What was I supposed to do, O’Thail? We lost.”

“I know.”

“The surrender had been issued. Staying and fighting would have been death. I have a family!”

Maev stopped too and held up both her hands. “I know! Look, I’m not blaming you. I was mad like the rest for a while, sure. I moved on. I just don’t think she’s ever going to. She lost her brother.”

Torinn took a breath. Sometimes pain has to fall somewhere. His son wasn’t too different from her in that.

“She stayed with the Front for a while, but I don’t know... I think she got tired of the uphill fight.”

Torinn almost said something, but thought better of it. Chantal and Maev had always been fast friends, and they stayed together after the war. They never really stopped fighting. Maev had tried to bring Torinn in more than once. A loose coalition of antifascists and displaced royal soldiers that formed a rebellion called the Front. He had no interest. He was too old and had his mind on other things. On his family, on what he would leave for them.

They stepped out of the hallway into a large living room with synthetic wooden flooring, white and faux-gold vertical striped wallpaper. The eye naturally rested on a sculpture against the far wall of a Yasre devouring the flesh of a mountain goat. A small gold plaque at its feet read “Cardinal Sin,” along with the sculptor and year it was made, 986.

Otherwise, the furniture was normal of a living room: a dining table was placed next to the window, to their left a couple chairs and a futon around a fake fireplace.

On the mantle hung a painted portrait of Gallin'vir's uncle, Ledam'Vir. It stared sternly at those who would sit beneath him.

An hour passed. The two veterans caught up as much as they wanted to. By noon, Torinn was reading the most recent edition of *The Gryphon's Call*, the local paper of record. It described a crew of bandits raiding a storage yard in the Alura region, suspected to be the posse of one Esther Garad. They fled the scene but one of their crew was killed in a chase with the army. Torinn worriedly ran scenarios in his mind, there was still no apparent link to them.

They heard the door downstairs open and close, and the pitter patter of elek feet running up the stairs. His head popped out first from the stairway. He looked to both of them through spectacles that covered the bronze of his eyes. "Oh excellent! You're awake, Mr. Varan."

He hurried into the room and sat in his chair. It was sized for eleks, and thus sat a fair bit lower than Torinn and Maev did. He did some shifting to have it face them. Before anyone else could speak he started on, "I am glad to announce that the operations of yesterday were a qualified success!"

"You call icing an entire crew qualified?" Maev blurted out. Torinn had not realized how frustrated she was. "Even for the Front, that's messy."

Gallin'Vir bit down on his lips. "They had no further use to our operation. I have deemed those losses acceptable."

Torinn tried to keep them focused, "And the packages?

Gallin'Vir's smile returned. "Fully intact and so very fascinating. Late Parathan frictionless design used a special lubricant that I'm very excited to attempt to recreate and-"

"Do we have what we need?" Maev had leaned against the corner of two walls, near some bookshelves. The effect bathed her frame in shadow.

Gallin'Vir nodded and gave that wavy uncertain hand gesture. "Mostly. Right now we have the two major mechanical components. The map and the power cell. I'm figuring out how to fuel the power cell and have a lot of ideas after today's study session. The graduate discussion section had some interesting ideas..." He caught himself getting off topic, "We're missing one thing. Without it I'll only be able to narrow our destination down to 100 square kilometers."

Maev stepped forward into the light, scowling. "You can't possibly expect my boys to go digging every which way until we find the fucking place!"

Gallin'vir turned to face them, "Of course of course. Before the... '*familial dispute*' we were in possession of an ancestral journal that offered more specific information. After my cousin..." Something flashed across Gallin'vir's face. He looked at the portrait of Ledam'Vir, clenched his fists, took a breath, and kept going. "Theo'Vir took a journal with him. We need it."

Torinn chimed in again, "So we need to find him?"

Maev groaned. "You promised us we'd be starting the venture by Autumn Solstice. Do we really have time for a manhunt?"

Gallin'vir nodded, "That timeline holds, and we'll be back by Saint Xeck's Day, Ms. O'Thail. Yesterday, I dispatched a message via communications relay. I utilized a couple of local operators." "You should know them, personally. You're acquainted with one Mx. Vira Temperance, yes?"

Torinn paled, Temperance mostly worked with one person. "You didn't..."

Gallin'vir stood up, keeping his smile. "Forgive me, Mr. Varan. I didn't have many options on such short notice. The young Ms. Varan will—"

Torinn's fist connected with his nose.

## 4. The Voidspire Job

The poster looked exactly like she had imagined it would. Bright pastel pinks gently faded into darkness, dotted with sparkles and blocky cartoon depictions of music notes. In the center of the frame stood a short, metal woman with artificial pink hair, wearing a white tracksuit. On either side she was flanked by tall, striking dancers posing under the stage lights that somehow glowed and changed color on the paper. The text's mix of fonts gave the eye something to digest anywhere it looked. "STARCAST and LazBotanic Present: Chytri Canoda! Live in concert, one night only. PAS Stadium, Summer 52nd. Tickets on sale now!"

It took every ounce of willpower Arina Varan had to not make her way halfway across New Bekton just to get tickets. Chytri had come onto the scene in the last few years, a literal posterchild for LazBotanic's fungal-mechanical constructs. Despite her artificiality, her music and vibes were electrifying.

Arina would be the envy of all her friends...

She looked away, if only to steel her resolve. Behind her, a wall of posters for events and entertainment across the city. Ahead of her, the biggest mall in all of Vian. The courtyard she was in was covered by a tremendous metal ceiling broken by tasteful archways at regular intervals. Water fixtures, statues, and even a few trees greeted would-be shoppers coming in from the nearby metro station. Storefronts lined the walls as far as the eye could see. She could have stayed there for days, if she didn't have a job to do.

She slipped into the nearest bathroom, one of the singular ones with a lock for families and the disabled. She was neither, but she wouldn't be long. She set down a duffel bag on an impressively cleaned floor, grabbed the stool they kept for people her height, and washed her hands. She still felt some sticky residue from lunch.

In the mirror she saw tanned skin and golden, iris-less eyes. Her shoulder-length jet black hair matched her eyeshadow. Long, rounded ears were adorned with piercings of different metals and colors. Her lip had a prominent scar that she'd gotten on one of her first jobs. Her parents had wanted her to get it fixed, but she thought it made her look badass.

She realized how long she had been standing there admiring herself. She hopped down, kicked the stool to the side, and opened the bag. First, she took out a plated vest and worked it on. Next, an olive green jumpsuit with a name on the breast that wasn't hers, Lani'Qera. It fit easily over her other clothes and the armor.

She took a syringe out of the bag, and unfolded a piece of paper from her pocket. Drawn on it was a realistic depiction of a face. Another elek, presumably Lani'Qera. She made some adjustments, extended the needle and took a breath, jamming the needle repeatedly into her head. Cheek, jaw, lips, eyes, nose.

The pain was excruciating, but worse were the effects after. Her face burned like she had lit it on fire, and pains shot down her neck and into spine. She tasted blood and her vision had gone white. When it passed, she looked in the mirror. No longer did she see her own face, but the face on the paper. She moved her jaw and made a couple expressions until her mind registered that this new visage was hers. She burned the paper with a lighter from her pocket, grabbed a dataslate, and closed the bag.

Back out in the plaza she made quick time toward her next destination. She kept her eyes on the slate, occasionally glancing around. It was powered off, but she found people were less likely to bother someone who looked like they were working.

A fifteen minute walk in and she saw an avian, a Yasre, in a jumpsuit like hers admiring some religious necklaces in a display window. She didn't know the face, but she had a guess who it was. "That you under all that?" An odd statement if she was wrong, but she wasn't.

The person turned their head toward her. Long yellowed tusks, artificially lengthened dark feathers in a mane around their head, and a snub nose. They replied in a thick Psreidish accent. Both confirming but not directly answering her question. "My pendant has been getting a bit worn, the opal one would be an excellent replacement..." Vira Temperance, even if not in appearance.

Arina nodded understandingly. "Your birthstone. Thinking of getting one then?" she smiled. Faith had been a central part of her partner's life long before Arina knew them.

The Psreid pointed a discolored talon at the price tag and shook their head. "Maybe something from a Lowtown market instead... You ready?"

“Hmm, I can only think of one more thing.” She leaned in for a kiss.

The Yasre bent down to meet it. They smiled, “It feels like I’m cheating.”

Arina giggled, “You’re so fucking monogamous! Live a little. I think I look pretty cute right now!” She twirled. “You’re okay too.” She meant it, though she lamented they couldn’t have picked a face to steal that was a little cleaner. Smaller tusks.

They mutually nodded, and both began to make their way to the employee-only area Arina stage-whispered about a fake schedule for the day. Soon enough, they found the access hallway they were looking for. Behind the grandeur of the customer areas, these hallways were already showing signs of age. The Voidspire had only opened a few years ago, but its construction had taken a century. Arina wondered how long workers had been treading these halls.

Custodians and maintenance workers passed by. They nodded at them and they nodded back. Arina wondered if she would even have been noticed with her own face.

They both looked around. The hallway was filled with metal doors: offices, it seemed. A custodial closet, too. At one end of the hall was the entrance they had come in from, at the other was a fork. A sign at the forking paths indicated that going left would take them to the maintenance elevators. They took that path, skirting past two workers having a debate about the professional duelist season.

A couple of turns later, and they found themselves at the elevators. Compared to the grand lift at the center of the Voidspire, these were small and lacked elegance.

They only went part of the way up, not cleared for breaking orbit, but as far as the duo needed.

Next to each of the three elevators was a small panel with a hole the size of a finger. A blood-lock, keyed to only those who had access. “You got this?” Arina glanced at Temperance.

The Yasre nodded and murmured something to themself. “You’re on watch.” They had their own bag that clinked much more when they set it down. They pulled out some tools and began to work on the security.

Arina stood in front of the bird person, trying to make her small frame as concealing as possible. She kept tapping on the dataslate, which she still hadn’t turned on.

It took longer than either of them was expecting. “You’d think with all the other prep they’d have just given us some blood.” Arina’s usually lilted tone was rushed and tense.

“They did.” Temperance corrected, in a tone like they were in a trance, as they kept working. “You’ve been listening to too many serials, my dear. You can’t just have the right blood; it needs to be pumping. Which requires a bit of work to simulate... There!”

“You got it?”

“No, but I got the first part. Just a bit long-”

They were interrupted by heavy footsteps. Around the corner appeared a tall metal exoskeleton with a smooth, round metal head and an impression of a smiling face on an electronic head display. Out of every crack and joint oozed a luminescent purple fungus covered in greenish slime. A construct. Arina clenched her jaw as it walked into the elevator room and towards the mechanical side room, but stopped.

It pivoted its upper torso a perfect 90 degrees towards them without moving its lower half. Its displayed mouth flattened into a serious expression. A vocal system crackled to life, “What are you doing?”

She gave a laugh that she hoped it would find disarming, “Oh, you know how these lifts can be. Lock’s malfunctioning, it’s out of service until we can get it fixed.” She gestured behind her, “Grace has got it.” She remembered Temperance’s cover name in the nick of time.

The fungal construct stood motionless, with only the background noise of its speakers to fill the space. “This unit was not made aware of necessary maintenance. Has a report been filed with Mrs. Geurel?”

Arina nodded enthusiastically, “Yeah! We just talked.”

“What is your name?”

“Lani’Qera!” Arina made a gesture underlining her name patch.

Another silence.

The face swapped to an angry expression. “Lani’Qera is not scheduled to work today. This unit is authorized to perform security functions. Please follow, peacefully.”

Fuck.

Arina heard Temperance had stopped working, she kicked them to continue. “Oh my, wow! Yeah, that’s my bad, haha.” She was bending down. “You know how it is, you work so much and all the days start blending together.” Her hand was rooting around her duffel.

“Please come with us.”

“Let me just get my things.”

The bot wasn’t so easily fooled, and its face turned into a flat bright red as its speakers blared an alarm. Mechanical strength grabbed her jumpsuit and pulled her up, but not before she found what she was looking for, a thin metal baton.

She desperately thumbed for the power button. The machine lifted her off the ground and she felt her jumpsuit ripping. This thing had to be twice her height. She found the power button, praise the gods. The baton crackled to life and she jammed it into the arm holding her. Electricity coursed through the baton and through the machine.

It dropped her, and she took the fall into a roll. She paused for a second and focused. Both the machine and Temperance slowed considerably, or rather, she sped up.

The disruption was temporary, and the construct backstepped, trying to kick her with its weighted feet. She got back down to her heels and dodged. She moved to the side and looked for something important. The movement apparatus? The power source? The head unit?

She stepped out of the way of a punch. It landed in the concrete wall, leaving a distressingly deep hole.

No more time to decide, she let her gut take over. She jumped, grabbing the machine's shoulders as it tried to buck her off. She felt her grip slipping, but not before she could land a critical blow where the head unit met the torso.

The howl was like a blast of synthesizers as the construct's systems were overloaded. She struck a couple more times, until it was still. She hopped down and gave it clearance as it doubled over.

Time resumed its normal speed. A quick check of the bot. The fungus was intact, though the machinery was probably damaged beyond repair. It would be able to find new life in a new exoskeleton. She tried to calm her breathing and wiped some sweat from her forehead.

She looked up and realized Temperance had been saying "Come on!" for half a minute. Down the hall, chaotic shouts as others came to investigate the commotion.

She grabbed her things and slid into the elevator car. The doors closed behind her.

Temperance had already selected the floor they needed. "You good, A?" Only initials on the job.

“Yeah... Fuck.” She leaned against a railing on the back wall, trying to catch her breath.

“It would help if you weren’t such a shitty liar.” Temperance laughed as the elek’s eyes flashed annoyance. Arina glanced at the buttons on the door. There had to be hundreds.

They stood in silence for a couple seconds, until Temperance spoke up. “So was that assault or murder?”

“I think property damage, technically. Not murder: the fungus was fine and that’s the alive part, right?” A more philosophical question than they had time for.

“I suppose. Gods, they’re getting so smart so fast.”

Arina massaged her wrist where it had grabbed her. “Those security models don’t fuck around.”

“Good news is I did actually manage to break the call panel and the locks on the ground floor. If I did things right, they won’t be able to follow.” Temperance’s mane of plumage trilled in glee.

“Nice.” Arina had been distracted by the view. The elevator was on the tower’s main shaft. Once they cleared the town and shopping center built into its base, they could see the whole of New Bekton. Broken into three rings that spread out to the edge of the island. Uptown, where government and church officials enjoyed extravagance and wealth. Midtown, where most corporate business was done.

Midtown was her favorite, so much to do. Of course, Lowtown where most of the people lived. Millions upon millions, a truly amazing city.

Of course, nothing was more impressive than the tower they were climbing. They cleared the environmental shield and, after nearly an hour upward, both of them felt their breathing grow shallow. They were close.

Arina placed her baton on her hip and took out a full-face rebreather. She'd painted hers pink, her favorite color. Temperance was doing the same with theirs, which they'd covered in some stickers of flowers.

She sat on the ground and pulled out a ball-shaped cloth, which she unwrapped to reveal a spore drone. A less intelligent variant of the fungal constructs. Assessing its condition and being sure it was fine, she set it down. Finally, she turned on her dataslate, and the orb turned on with it. Its repulsor pads pushed it off the ground and into the air. An optical lens stared at her, waiting for input.

"Good morning!" Arina exclaimed.

"Don't talk to it! It's creepy." Temperance whinged from the other corner where they were doing their prep.

Arina ignored them. "We've got a big job today Dotty, are you ready?" The drone was named for the little white spots across its purple membrane.

Dotty chirped through its loudspeaker in response. It probably didn't understand her, but had been programmed to mimic an answer to questions. She carefully input a series of commands and conditions into the slate. She set it to follow her for now.

She stood and took the last item out of her bag, a bulky rifle-shaped weapon covered in capacitors and wiring. A battery was seated where the ammunition would normally have been placed. A green light on the side indicated it was primed to fire.

The last few floors felt the longest to travel. They had cleared the city long ago, and the cloud line not long after. Up here, the blue sky and the setting sun were unobstructed, and painted their car in a warm orange. Temperance handed her a sphere the size of a baseball, and held one for themself as well. Gas grenades.

They had a couple of dozen floors left. Time to think. Temperance spoke again.  
“Think they’re waiting up there?”

Arina cocked her head in no particular direction and pursed her lips, “Reckon 3/10 if things went as planned. But the droid... so, 7/10?”

They nodded. Arina looked back at Dotty. “Hey T, got another grenade?”

Feigned offense. “A, I’m a member of the Psreidish Demolitionists Guild in good standing! Are you asking \*me\* if I have explosives?”

Arina rolled her eyes. “Dumb question. Don’t care. Fork it over.”

“What flavor?”

“Low lethality, maximum radius.”

“Electrical, cryogenic, or resin?”

Arina paused to consider. “Cryo.”

Temperance produced a cylindrical grenade. Arina did some quick work with the trigger mechanism and attached it to a metal hook descending from Dotty’s chassis.

A few floors left. Temperance folded their taloned hands around a saint’s pendant and prayed in a hushed voice. Arina took slow breaths and tried to hold her focus; everything around her slowed down.

One floor, grenades in hand.

\*ding\*

The doors opened to men with guns on the other side, 7/10 held. The mercenaries’ grenades sailed through the air, releasing a cloud of sickly green-yellow gas.

The two of them dropped to cover on either side of the elevator doors. Bullets started flying, quickly joined by panicked coughing. Arina pressed the activation button on the dataslate, and Dotty flew out.

Dotty’s resograph camera didn’t give clear video, but traced outlines of the events outside. 6 shapes, two of them crumpled to the ground in the gas. Arina shifted the fungal drone’s movement just slightly left and dropped the payload. She set it to pull up and go about its tasks.

The cryo grenade went off, freezing several of the guards in place, and the scene turned to chaos. She stood up first, nodded to Temperance, and rushed out. She ducked and took a few shots. All guesswork: she couldn't see any better in the gas than they could. Screams from the larger area around them - the glimpse she got from Dotty's resograph said this chamber was huge.

She eyed a decorative stone wall that went on around the circular room as far as she could see. She slid to it and gave the "clear enough" signal to her avian companion. She fired a few more shots, arcs of white-blue lightning lit up the cloud, and toward where she guessed what remained of the welcome party would be.

She saw a shape advancing quickly and took a shot at center mass. The target let out a gargled noise and doubled over, convulsing. The shock rifle was nonlethal, in theory.

She quickly vented the rifle, no overheats on the job. She couldn't see a fucking thing in the gas. By the sounds, the defensive team had collapsed into mayhem. Screams, shouts, and, soon after, alarms. They needed to move.

"With me!" She took a couple more shots and led the way. It wasn't easy to maintain the focus to keep time dilation active, but she was a professional. She tried to ignore how much her eyes hurt.

They cleared the gas and got a view of a beautiful atrium. A titanic round glass window was built into the outer wall, bringing in the natural sunset onto what seemed to be a place full of plant life, surrounded by slate grey flooring and walls. From here, three main exits. Access to the grand lift, some offices with several company names Arina knew and several she didn't, and a security checkpoint to an area marked only with the image of a bubbling flask, underwritten in

future-modern font: “Yender Medical.” Temperance pointed them toward the last one.

She glanced behind them, the shape of the last conscious of the greeting party clutching his throat as it closed up, and he went unconscious.

In front of them, the Yender Medical guards were rallying. Four of them at the security station, but the alarms within suggested more soon.

They opened fire with pistols and simple rifles, and bullets started flying. Arina and Temperance split off. The young elek was the hammer in their team.

A roll and a duck behind shrubbery. Bad cover, she kept to the floor. Slate out. Resograph was clearer without a cloud of gas. 5 by the entrance, she saw their outlines and a rough sketch of the whole space. One of them was running to her position. Dataslate down.

She timed the footsteps, getting closer and faster. She swung out a leg, tripped them, and pounced. No identifying markers through a green hazard suit and reflective scarlet visor. She brought her baton down where the throat should be. The gasping and spasming rewarded her faith.

She jumped up and fired a couple of blind shots to the next cover, another piece of that rounded white wall that seemed to border the area.

She popped over the side and took another shot, but counterfire suppressed her in place. The inherent will of all creatures to live took over, and she was pinned there. What was taking Temperance so long?

Breathe. Just breathe.

She pulled out her slate, the drone was en route to a vent system, but she needed the help. She wasn't going to die. She wasn't. What would her dad do?

She looked at available functions and haphazardly slammed the loudspeaker button. She held the slate close to her mouth and made the most hideous screech she could manage. Dotty's loudspeaker amplified through the rafters, sounding like a hole opening up in the world.

Shouts of surprise and the gunfire went upward. Dotty entered the vents. Arina popped up and took a shot at the officer. A lash of energy pierced clean through their chest and they fell back. One more shot at a big one, horns protruding out of their hazmat suit: Primas-ika. She fired again to be sure, they rarely went down with one.

Two remained, and more were coming. Where the fuck was Temperance???

As if to answer her thought, an explosion shook the whole floor. A power cell that powered this quadrant of the spire just went up, if she knew Temperance's plan correctly. The floor went dark for a few moments, and then kept flickering off and on. The best chance she'd get.

She started screaming and charged the other two, hoping they'd be distracted. The small one was already aiming. Fuck. They exchanged shots. They took the lightning arc to the head. She took a shot to the left shoulder, not a bullet. She couldn't move her fucking arm! The bulky, sticky projectile stretched to her neck and hardened. Resin.

She held her rifle in her shaky right hand at the last guard. Something about the mix of rage and fear in her masked eyes and combat stance told the sole survivor to run, and he did.

She stumbled over to the metal wall just outside the entrance, slumped down, and tried to break the resin. No use, this shit was riot grade. Her focus faltered, and the world returned to normal speed around her. “T!” she cried. Why didn’t they get comms units? Like a prayer, “T!” The tower smelled of burning chemicals.

The shattering of glass joined a whoosh of flame, “Yeah?” Their head popped around the corner. They didn’t wait for an answer. “Healer’s bones!” they ran to her side and started pulling something out of the bag. “Any injuries, babe?”

“No, but I’m terrible with my right hand.” She pointed her head towards the stuck shoulder.

Temperance glanced at the stunned and injured bodies on the ground, “Bloody good job considering.” They applied a glittering, clear solution to the affected spot. “Alright grab a wipe, we have a minute tops before it hardens again.”

It would take more time and cleaning to get all the resin off, but the liquifying agent and cleaning cloths gave her back her full range of motion.

They stood, losing a couple minutes like that was bad. From the distance they could hear shouts in two directions. Likely, the Voidspire’s security and Yender Medical’s defenders were rallying. Arina was a good shock troop, but they’d need an army to win. They needed to get out fast. They nodded to each other and rushed into the Yender Medical labs.

Temperance hesitated and looked back at the bodies. “Are they going to be okay?”

Arina shot her head back, “No time, they’ll handle it when we’re gone.” An explosion in the distance shook the ground they stood on. “Or the tower will take care of it! What the fuck did you even do?”

Temperance looked back to the young elek and kept pace, “Electrical charge on one of the power cells.” The power went dark completely. Flames and emergency lights bathed them in shades of orange-ish red. “More effective than I expected.”

“How are we getting out of here?”

A reassuring wave, “I’m thinking about it.”

The entrance to Yender Medical’s space was an open office area, sterile white in flooring, walls, and cubicles. Now, though, it was made orange-red by the emergency lights, flames, and spatters of blood. So uniform, so organized, now bathed in mayhem. This place must have driven people insane. Arina shuddered at the thought of working here. The red was a nice touch, though. Reminded her of a nightclub she liked in Lowtown.

Temperance pointed them left, towards the hallway marked ‘Habitation’. Two guards charged but were stopped short by another blast from the shock rifle; they convulsed like demented marionettes. One of them got a shot off, and Temperance yelped.

Arina spun around, “T!”

The Yasre clutched their shoulder, “I’m fine; just a graze. Council’s Will, that stings!” Arina had begun to reach for the medical kit, “No time, I’m not bleeding out.” Temperance held their arm tightly but pushed forward.

The hab hallways had a luxurious sapphire color carpet with Parathan stylized patterns, and wall art between units that depicted the history of the Yenders. From the Parathan Empire’s favorite family, to the titan of industry they were today.

Three more chasing them down the hallway, charging. At their head, one of them was in full armor with a badge. Security chief? She tried to get her focus, no time. She held the trigger an extra long time and fired an overclocked shot. The fancy armor was no use; he went down in a seizure.

Baton out, she struck one of the remaining ones in the spine. No time to block the bludgeon the other was swinging at her head. She held her hands to protect her face. Instead a cracking of glass and the stench of flesh being destroyed. It was joined by one of the most hideous screams she’d ever heard in her life. She opened her eyes and saw the bludgeon guard on the ground, clutching his face, burning from some chemical agent. “Holy shit.” It was so... real. “Holy shit.” What a gruesome way to die. “Holy shit.”

“Hey, don’t snap on me now, A.” Temperance grabbed her by the arm and pulled her along. “Oh fine, you wipe out a whole fucking squad of these fucks and it’s fine and good. But little ol’ T throws \*one\* flask of acid and suddenly I’m the bad guy.”

Both got to the door. Arina’s head felt fuzzy. She held her rifle hesitantly.

“A, I need you with me right now. We’re almost there, okay?” Temperance was rarely serious. It creeped her out, but she couldn’t help but smile a half hearted

smile beneath her rebreather. The door they were in front of was marked "Theo'Vir. Director of Parathan Research." An electronic lock indicated a full lockdown, tied to the alarms? Automatic with the power failure?

She took out her slate - Dotty had navigated expertly. Autopilot was getting smarter and smarter. She carefully instructed the drone and its probe to adjust with a panel of lights and buttons. Then, when things were set, a jolt of electricity overloaded the system. Doors around them clicked, locks opened.

Arina retrieved Dotty from a nearby grate, thanked the drone, and powered it off. She wrapped it up and put it back in her bag. She gave the go-ahead to Temperance, who proceeded into the suite.

Within was a surprisingly spacious and luxurious apartment. One of the nicest beds Arina had ever seen, besides maybe back on the homestead. Warm yellow lights lit what was... actual wood? The Yender corporation didn't fuck around. There was a desk, a bed, a kitchen, a bathroom, and windows that revealed the purples and oranges of the last glow of day. In the center of it all, in a couch setup in a shallow pit in the floor, was an elek. The person, presumably Theo'Vir, was in very fine lounge clothes.

The occupant spoke first. Either he was completely calm, or he had a really good poker face. "Now listen, I don't know what you're here for, but I'm certain I can find something-" His accent was slight, but unmistakably Inerlesian.

"The journal." Arina tried to make her voice lower and bigger. It wasn't convincing.

"Oh. So \*she\* sent you." He made no effort to contain his disgust. He stood up and walked towards his desk.

Confusion. “He... Gallin’Vir.”

Theo’Vir sighed, “Listen, I don’t care who you want to take your money from. I’m not feeding into her delusions. Doesn’t matter how many body mods she gets or what she changes her name to. A woman’s a woman.”

He produced a hard case from a locked drawer and handed it to Arina. “The contents within are very fragile. Please, do be careful.” Arina wrenched it out of his hand and looked away, her face red.

Temperance had stepped forward, “One more thing.” They held out an ornate vial of dark green liquid. “Gallin’Vir’s regards.” In their other hand was a pistol that Arina hadn’t seen earlier.

All three of them knew the meaning of the situation.

“T?” Arina was more surprised than concerned. Theo’Vir was awful, surely, but no one had told her this was a hit job.

The Yasre gave her a look as if to say “not now.” what they further tried to convey, unsuccessfully, was “don’t you see how clearly this bastard deserves it?”

“So... it’s like that.” Inerlesians had a sense of honor about these sorts of things. Theo’Vir had two choices: he was dead either way.

The Director of Parathan Research walked towards his bed, slipped off his shoes, and drank the vial. “They’re not going to let her control the family fault. Inerlesian

civilization is ruled by real men. Not pretenders, not frauds." He lay down and closed his eyes. "Wretched disgrace," were his last words. He choked on his liquifying insides and died.

Temperance followed quickly behind. They folded their hands in prayer and began to recite the rites of the dying and dead.

A sea of shouts and orders echoed towards them. Unlikely they were getting out the way they came, and here wouldn't be safe much longer. Arina looked to her comrade, "T?"

"A minute, please. Ritual must be observed..." They paused their sentence to finish the prayer and add an amen. When they concluded, they produced a glowing orange capsule. The commotion was getting closer. Another prayer, and the capsule was broken open on Theo'Vir's body. The body burst into flames that wondrously didn't spread to the bed. The smell of a burning corpse was strong even through their masks. In another life, well before Arina had known them, Temperance had been a priest of Death. Burners, they were often called. They still held their old practices in reverence.

Ritual observed and the spirit of the dead released, Temperance made quick strides to the windowed wall on bouncing avian legs. They started placing sticky explosives on the wall near the window. "You got something, T?" Arina asked, trying to purge the last few minutes from her mind. She didn't even know there were still people who felt like *\*that.\** She signed up to grab a book, not kill anyone.

Temperance took cover behind the couches; she did too. The explosives went off, and the howling open air tore through the space, papers from the desk swirled in the wind and blew outside. Another explosion shook the floor. something had been destabilized. The Psried stood up and produced a spray canister from their bag.

They screamed over the wind that ripped papers and loose objects out of the tower. “So, current and only plan. You know how they used to fire people out of artillery back in your all’s war?”

Arina nodded. “My dad was in one of those units!”

“Well, this was meant to replace that. Didn’t get much field testing, though. But it \*should\* work.” They glanced at the kilometers-long drop down, and the environmental shield they would have to clear. “Okay, it might work. Probably. Maybe.”

Arina looked at the unfathomable distance below. How far up were they? “That’s fucking crazy.”

Another explosion shook the floor, this one more intense than any before. They had to brace themselves. Voices outside the door. Temperance looked toward the entrance, to the improvised exit, and back to her. “Got any better moves?”

Arina didn’t. She shook her head. “Fine. Sounds rad anyway.” She tried to convince herself that things that scared her were cool. She held out her hand to spray but first they handed her a pill. “You won’t be able to breathe. This will help.”

She took the pill with apprehension, but she trusted her partner, her comrade. What other assurances did they have, if not each other? They embraced once more, and then Temperance began to apply the spray. It covered her person and began hardening like a stone. She couldn’t see it, but it expanded around her into a rough egg-shaped pod. The Yasre was right, she couldn’t breathe, but she didn’t

need to. It was freaky. Temperance said something she couldn't hear, and the sensation of gravity took her down to the surface.

## 5. Those Who Rule From Shadows

If it had come to it, Arina would have learned what many a flying creature had. That the shimmering hexagonal shields wrapped around and over New Bekton were made of such powerful energies that she would have been vaporized on impact. If she had fallen east, she would have landed in the Grey Sea and been consumed by its acidic waters. Perhaps fortunately, she did not hit the shield or crash into the sea.

Wind carried her descent from such a height and angle that she blew clear past the city, into the wastelands. Arina felt like she was suffocating, but she knew the pill Temperance gave her had reduced her need to breathe. She felt trapped and she felt blind. The cradle of false stone that held her kept the sensations from the outside minimal. No breeze, not even much turbulence. She was absolutely senseless. Just the feeling of being stuck in something much heavier than her.

She held in that pattern longer than she had expected. She knew they were high, but that high? Would she even survive the landing? Her will to live kicked in. Eleks had been made to tend the Divine Gardener's forests. Not to drop halfway from orbit! Should she pray? People prayed in situations like this, right? She was lost on what exactly she would pray for. She started making wishes to the Holy Council, wherever they were in the distance. She started at an open casket funeral and worked her way backward to survival without injury. A few seconds after she mumbled an "Amen" through her stuck rebreather, she hit the ground.

Some unknowable amount of time later, she opened her eyes. It seemed the egg had shattered and dissolved into its liquid chemical components, joining the

brown-grey dirt and sickly weeds. The pain was blinding. She tried to move either leg, both were broken. Her breathing was ragged, met with the hard “click, click, click” of a rebreather that needed a filter change. How long had she been out here? She tried to drag herself over to her bag, but she couldn’t. Her rifle had been thrown clear of the impact. No sign of Temperance, she was alone.

She managed to roll onto her back and face the night sky. She even caught a glimpse of the moon, in all its emerald beauty. Pain numbed into shock and delirium. The approaching engine and flooding white headlights felt like they were from another plane of existence. Visitors from another realm. She just hoped they were friendly. Most people were friendly, right?

They weren’t, but at least they didn’t kill her.

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“I’m sorry,” Gallin’Vir repeated for the 12th time in fifteen minutes. He was sitting in his chair and staring at the ground. His nose was red and irritated where it had been reset and treated with Yender’s Formula.

“Sorry? It doesn’t matter if you’re sorry!” Torinn hadn’t yelled like this in a couple of years. “You had no gods damned right you miserable welp!” He was pacing across Gallin’Vir’s living room. “My Ari...” he repeated to himself and massaged his scalp. He started wheezing and had to sit down. The other two, after making sure he wasn’t going to pass out, ignored it.

Maev was leaning against the mantle, under the portrait of Ledam’Vir. “The good father’s concern acknowledged, I need Temperance back, too. I reckon you need

the book.” She pointed to the elek, who was still looking down. He nodded. She continued, “So it’s bad. What can we do?”

Gallin’Vir stood up and stared at the Yasre sculpture against the wall. “Most of the crimes allegedly committed happened above the limits of New Bekton and Astaelian airspace. Technically, New Bekton Law Enforcement and their counterparts in the Imperial police have no jurisdiction. The WTA or Yender Medical would need to prosecute them through their system. But where they landed...”

He turned on his heel and made quick strides to a bookshelf. He pulled out an atlas and flipped a few pages in, a one-page map of New Bekton and the Gryphon’s Head Peninsula region, named for its shape. His finger pointed toward the top of the false beak. “This is the area they both landed. This is property owned by KAS Extraction.”

Torinn turned as pale as the dead. “No...”

Maev made a calming gesture. “We don’t know if they’re getting processed for the colonies. They could be getting extradited.”

Gallin’Vir shook his head, “No extraditions. KAS takes potential colonists; they don’t give them back.” Torinn was biting his fist.

“So, we’ve still got time, but not much, right? A few weeks at most? Where would they be held?”

“They’ve got an office in Midtown,” Torinn blurted. It was hard to focus, but he pushed the thought forward.

Maev shrugged. “Good as any start.”

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For speed and security, they took a rental car. Torinn drove, Maev took passenger, Gallin'Vir preferred the back seat. Torinn engaged the blood sampler which punched a needle into his index finger. A screen on the dashboard welcomed the fake name he had given when he signed up for the account, “Mr. Greencroft.”

The skimmer hummed to life and underside repulsor pads pushed it off the ground. Torinn began navigating their ascent. At the lowest layer was drone traffic. He pitched hard through into the second layer, causing a few constructs to hard stop. Second layer was for city personnel and those with special permits. He climbed once more to the third layer. He joined a steady stream of other air vehicles that formed a wheel and spoke grid around the city. Above, midday sky was a murky grey, tinted purple by the shield that danced just under the cloudline.

Maev started playing with the radio. “What do y’all even get over here? I never listen.” She flipped through stations. First, some stringed music with a heavy drum beat, then pulsing synthesizers that sounded like the inside of a womb, then the unhinged ramblings of some local radio personality, Dr. Swell.

Maev stopped on the talk show. Today, Swell was interviewing a recently fired New Bekton Law Enforcement officer about the high-profile assault on the Voidspire that led to a multi-floor power failure, 60 injuries, and a dozen deaths. They were in agreement that the attack had only been made possible by a reduction in NBLE security stations across the city, then credited it to the policies of the newly installed Imperial authorities.

Swell was a known libertarian, and while both in the interview shared a disdain for the Imperials, he didn't hold back on the officer. Several questions mentioned NBLE's alleged overreach. Overuse of force at protests, confiscated property marked as evidence disappearing, and the like. The interviewee tried to duck the questions and stay on topic. At several points one could hear the host snorting something. Maev laughed, "Gods, this guy is great! Is he around here? Can I meet him?"

Gallin'Vir popped his head across the center console. "I think he'd quite like that! I am given to believe he is fond of your movement." Maev beamed. Torinn gripped the steering sticks a little harder, ground his teeth, then slammed the off button on the radio. The others suffered the silence.

In another ten minutes, they began their descent. One close call as they nearly clipped a delivery truck. The driver blasted the horn and made an obscene gesture. No one in the car acknowledged it. Torinn barely even noticed; his mind was on one thing.

This part of Midtown was mostly offices and habitations for corporate employees. Not a single Imperial or NBLE enforcer in sight, replaced with the brightly colored, ornate armor of private security forces. They landed in an approved Wakenfern Transit Authority parking station and disembarked.

Vivid, extravagant designs lined the streets as far as the eye could see. They passed shops made to look as if their walls were liquid, as was the fashion. Corporate headquarters are separated by entire floors of clear glass. Even below them, the brown-green sidewalks were etched with traditional Lieni poetry. Each element was beautiful on its own, but together created a place where the eye had no place to rest. Perhaps one reason for the weary gazes of the residents they passed.

They made their way towards Prann Plaza, recently renamed from the much more straightforward Financial Square. Maev asked if they could stop at a QuikBru they passed. Torinn said no. She scoffed and went in anyway. The other two kept walking. She knew where they were headed.

A right turn down Providence Avenue, past the Our Prince of Wealth Temple and Bank. A left down Main Street past another QuikBru, and they saw the plaza at last.

Its picturesque grandeur was marred by a recently installed central statue. The new governor, Reinworth Prann III held a sword high and turned his head to the skies, with a crooked grin that seemed more a sneer. The sculptor had decided to depict him riding a sleek old-world horse, nothing like the bulky horned creatures that now traveled the wastes. This sort of thing had been the style of the 900s, gauche now.

Behind it was the PAS headquarters. Prann Alchemical Solutions had come into a substantial windfall when their CEO was appointed governor in the early days of the High Regent Vernicali's reign out west. The Pranns had been among the first to hail the new Empire as legitimate, well before the war had even ended.

To its left was a stoic structure compared to the splendor of PAS: heavy basalt walls carved in a brutal fashion, jagged and strong. Above its door in all caps deco font above the burnt yellow double doors, "KAS EXTRACTION." They wasted no time.

Inside was a lobby with the climate controls set a little too cold. Torinn didn't mind, but Gallin'Vir held his shoulders. The walls were a bronzeish gold, and the floor a mix of black and beige tiles that directed those walking to the reception

desk or any of the approved exits. Receiving them as they came in were two guards, both Primas-ika in suits, and both armed.

The one that spoke had styled their hair into two braids, shaped to look like spheres that ran down to their shoulders. They held up a scaled hand and spoke like someone who had worked one too many shifts without a day off. “Welcome to KAS Extraction, Excellence to the Moon and Back (™).” They pointed at Torinn’s revolver. “Please surrender all weaponry and proceed through the scanners.”

A tempest of rage swirled in Torinn’s mind. He briefly considered the alternatives, but none ended in the freedom of his Ari. He took a breath and unclasped the holster from his hip. He handed it to the guard. Gallin’Vir, with no apparent weapons, followed close behind.

The metal detector was simple enough. Torinn removed a belt and set his boots on a table before passing through. Gallin’Vir took longer: several Inerlesian metal coins, keys, a lighter, and some thin metal sheet of indeterminate purpose. He had to go through again, remembering his belt. Torinn kept walking to the next station, the bioscanner.

They didn’t need to take anything off for this. The other Primas-ika guard, this one with back length hair fashioned into a crown of spikes alongside their normal horns, smiled as they came forward. “May I ask if the gentlemen have any augmentations?” A forward question, necessitated by several memorable incidents in the news. Both of them listed off the major augmentations they had had. Usually, you could skip simple limb replacements or cosmetic surgeries. They weren’t there for extra eyes and gender affirming procedures. They were looking for more pressing threats.

They passed through and the guard observed them through a resograph that operated at two frequencies, drawing the normal outline of the resonant threads of reality and their shapes, alongside a sketch of their interior. An alchemical residue sensor clicked. Torinn had no idea whether or not any of this was good, but the Primas-ika gave a thumbs up, and they were free to proceed.

Onto reception, where a woman was furiously typing on a keyboard for a terminal they couldn't see under the lip of the large circular desk that boxed her in like a pen. After a few minutes, she looked up at them. Both of hers had been dyed pitch black, not unlike the natural eye colors of the Primas-ika they had just passed. Torinn was only sure she was looking at him when she spoke. "Welcome to KAS Extraction! How may I assist you today sir- erm-" She noticed Gallin'Vir's head poking above the lip of the desk. "How may I help you, gentlemen?"

"We need to talk to whoever is in charge of the incarceration of potential colonists." The nausea in his stomach intensified.

The receptionist raised an eyebrow. "Do you have an appointment?"

"No, it's just- my daughter might be pending processing."

"My friend, too." A second feminine voice, Maev's. Torinn craned his neck. She had taken her place next to Gallin'Vir. She was still wearing her sunglasses and was sipping on some frozen neon teal drink. She gave him a faint smile before going back to it.

The secretary responded with the cadence and politeness of a woman who had given the same speech a dozen times over in her career. "I'm sorry, we don't allow in-person appeals. We have an electronic inbox if you'd like to send a letter. I will

let you know, full release is usually not accepted, but if you have some religious or medical documentation, we might be able to lessen the augmentation proc- Excuse me, hold on." She paused and started to type.

Torinn's face had gone hot and red. He ran through available options. Go back, get the gun, and start shooting until he finds her. No. Make up some kind of lie about why she had fallen out there. Didn't matter; trespassing was all they needed to justify processing. He ground his teeth, and he looked to the others; neither indicated ideas. Take the receptionist hostage?

His train of thought was broken when the receptionist pulled out the receiver for an internal communications line. "Yes... Uh huh... Oh yes, they're here right now... Oh... Yes, of course, right away, sir."

She set down the phone and folded her long fingers. "I'm so sorry, I was not aware of your appointment. Mr. Karil will see you now." She gave them instructions on which door from the lobby to take, which floor on the elevator, and where to go from there.

Maev gave both of them a wordless "what gives" kind of look. Gallin'Vir looked puzzled. Torinn had the same furrowed brow and frown from the rest of the day. They pressed on.

Up two floors and down a couple of long hallways with comfortable lighting and blood red carpeting, they arrived at a door with a placard reading "Edward Karil, Assistant Vice Director, Colonist Recruitment." It had been left open. Torinn went in first, prepared to start yelling and making threats. The office was gorgeous, of course. Soft yellow lights on shelves full of accolades, books, and decorations. A real wooden desk, even. All to be expected of corporate life, but what struck him more was the person sitting there.

Edward Karil was a name that suggested a lot of things. First, Torinn had expected a human. That was on him. Astael was a majority human territory, so when he saw an Astaelian name, he just assumed. That much he was right about. Next, he had expected a man. His kids had always told him not to make assumptions about gender presentation, but he felt like Edward was unambiguously masculine. Yet the person before him was anything but.

She was slim but tall for a human, even from where she was sitting. Her posture was impeccable, and she wore a grey three-piece suit with a white button-up, fastened to the neckline. Her angular features were more striking than classically beautiful, but one couldn't help but keep their eyes on her. Gentle lines on her forehead and around her mouth gave an air of maturity that complemented her apparent confidence well. She sat with her fingers tented and turned her chair to face them when they came in. On the desk, a pistol. Torinn looked at it and looked up to her. She gave a single "heh."

"Don't worry, it's not for you." There was something so disarming about her voice. So smooth. It reminded him of his wife. "Now, do me a favor. One of you say, 'Good afternoon Ed!' and close the door behind you." Maev complied.

The woman at the desk thanked her. She motioned to a couple of chairs and a small couch that had been fit expertly into the space. It was not a huge office, but you would never find yourself lacking space. Gallin'Vir sat in a chair, and Maev took the entire couch with her legs up. Torinn kept standing and opened his mouth to speak.

"Your daughter is fine, Lord Varan." He stopped dead in his tracks. She noticed his fear. "My apologies, we collected her last name in interrogation. She didn't say

anything about you, no." Her words continued to calm him, "I'm pretty good at guessing." She smiled.

"Is she-"

"Is she okay? Yes, of course. Honestly, I don't think she's really of much use to the colonial initiative. We usually look for people with less going on upstairs, if you follow."

Torinn wasn't sure how to take that, but the calming effect and relief mixed and he collapsed into a chair.

"Lord Varan and..." She pointed to Maev. "I actually don't know you."

"And you won't!" Maev cackled while looking for a place to throw out her drink. The woman at the desk held out a can, and the trash was deposited.

"Very well, anyway. I am happy to release the young Ms. Varan. Likely, Mx. Temperance too, but first I'd like to have a word with Gallin'prines'ov'Vir." The elek seemed surprised.

All four of them sat there for a second, and the woman gestured toward the door.  
"Alone," she clarified.

Torinn looked to Gallin'Vir. A mix of professional duty and lingering fatherly concern. Gallin'Vir nodded reassuringly.

Torinn and Maev stepped out, and closed the door behind them. People walked by them and the office as if it didn't exist. Maev pointed to an overlook through some doors at the end of the hall. "Want a smoke?"

"Gods, yes." Torinn's exasperation was like a sack of bricks.

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Torinn and Maev stepped through the door, glancing behind them on the way out. Left in the room was the woman in the suit and Gallin'Vir, who was in a fashionable white top and beige pants.

He spoke first, "Is that for me?" pointing at the gun.

"Is that for me?" she mirrored, pointing at his magemarks.

"Fair point, Mr.-"

"Ms. is fine. Henrietta Vanderi."

"It certainly seems you already know who I am. I hadn't told anyone of the change of my title." The middle name between the first and clan name. "And Edward Karil?" His curiosity was piqued.

"Dead, for a few months."

"Did you-"

"I would say he killed himself. He chose to overuse the Red and got addicted." A common, powerful, and illegal stimulant. Gallin'Vir never touched the stuff, he didn't lack energy. "Of course, maybe a batch he bought had been overcharged enough to cause him to overdose. But really, it was just speeding up the inevitable."

Gallin'Vir nodded. "And KAS doesn't know."

"Why would they need to? As long as colonists come in and the actual Director looks good, no one cares. It's easy work. A big paycheck, and so very rarely does anyone come in to bother me. When they do, I either get them on my side or..." a hand outstretched toward the gun. "Cremation capsules work fast; it's quite hard to catch a homicide if you don't know it happened."

"Silvertongue?" He pointed to her mouth.

"What?" The disjointed response caught her off guard, and then she realized what he meant. "Oh, yes. I got it done a while ago. Certainly helps keep people on my side. You're the first person to have noticed, actually. How did you-"

"I'm an alchemist, Ms. Vanderi. Pheromonal modifications were the subject of my undergraduate capstone." He waved his hand in a circular motion. "Back on topic, why are you telling me all of this?"

A smile, a couple of shades too white to be natural. "Because I know so very much about you. It's only fair if you know a little about me."

Gallin'Vir would have felt concerned if Henrietta's enhancements hadn't suppressed that. "What is it you think you know?"

She hopped up from her chair with speed and rooted around some files. First, she put down a dataslate with a newsfeed. The page it was on was from last week. “First, heavily augmented thieves break into a secured storage facility and steal two packages. Of course, Imperial news would never \*say\* the stolen objects were Parathan. You cause a panic that way, but a few network searches, a trip to an archive in the Rising City... It doesn’t take much more to figure out what facilities are in the region and what they are for.”

Gallin’Vir had folded his arms, listening.

“Of course, that only gave me a guess. The events of yesterday were so telling, though. Most people were focused on the explosions and carnage. Hardly any mention that the head of Parathan Research for Yender Medical was made to drink poison. Inerlesian tradition in matters of extended family, I gather. Theo’prines’ov’Vir. Prines, my Inerlesian is rusty since college, but “prines”... that’s the head of a Great House, is it not?”

Gallin’Vir didn’t answer.

“Inerlesian patriarchy is so fascinating: each man in the family with a place toward the head of their house. The Vir clan is small. Glassblowers mostly, right?” She didn’t wait for a response. “Then, a wave of poisonings, homicides, suicides following the assassination of one Ledam’Vir, your uncle, yes?”

Even with the Silvertongue enhancements, Gallin’Vir’s upset was visible and rising. He was tapping his foot.

“When Theo’Vir died, the role of patriarch could only fall to one other ‘Vir. A recent addition to the succession line, one Gallin’Vir. Your family may be small, but your reign is something unprecedented in the Great Houses. I truly must congratulate you, sir.”

Gallin’Vir stopped tapping his foot and leaned forward in his chair. “So, you have me at a disadvantage Ms. Vanderi. I understand that. What is it you \*want\*?”

Henrietta stopped and thought for a second. Her hand idly fidgeted with a swinging weight decoration that knocked around a ball filled with a swirling rainbow sludge. “Wealth, security, empire. The usual things. Not fame, though.” She turned back to face him. “Pretenders want their name known. True money, true power is anonymous. I drive a normal car, and I live in a two-story penthouse in Lowtown. Kaldwell, Andren, and Sons has certainly been a fine home for me. But a moon colony? Chopping up and forcibly augmenting bodies to dig out rocks? Flashy, expensive... inefficient.”

Gallin’Vir was about to repeat the question, but she held up her hand. “But what do I \*want\* from the good lord Gallin’Vir and his strange bedfellows? Well...” She set another dataslate on the table. “You’re doing \*something\*. I don’t know what, but if it involves the Parathan Empire, that means not many people would be willing to help. Some would even want to stop it. It means the potential of profit from an investment, a lot of profit. I want in.”

Gallin’Vir calmed again - this was business now. “And how can you help my operation?”

“Some mining equipment falls off a caravan on the border of the empire. Happens all the time, a major supervisor in Logistics and I have an ‘understanding’. It could be anything you need. I’ve even got territorial maps of the underground

settlements across the eastern half of the continent. But you need to tell me what you're up to, for me to be of any help."

"And you'll be taking a cut of whatever we find, I take it?"

Her giggle was girlish, "That's capitalism."

## 6. Omen of Death

Joporis Wuri considered himself something of an archivist. He didn't deal with books, records, dataslates, or even liquid information. He recruited people. It wasn't his job to ask why, so he never wondered. Once every couple of weeks, figures in dark clothes would wheel in a new stasis tank. He'd collect the name, species, gender, nationality, and augmentations. Anything he'd need to identify a sleeper on command. Occasionally, he'd be ordered to wake and release one. In this way, he served his Community.

He kept a sketch of his old boat crew at his corner desk, a reminder of his past life. Next to it, an etching of him with his wife and child, a reminder of his current one. His office was cold and dark, save a few lights around his workstation, and faint ones from the window adjoining the sleepers. He wore a thick winter coat, would read a book, catch up on the radio, and spin in his chair sometimes. He made good money, but the days were long and often not much happened.

When someone came to the door and gave the passphrase, he hardly thought anything of it. Today it was a younger-looking human with black hair in a short, swept cut. Her features were feminine, but on the androgynous side. Notably tall, with slight curves accented by a sleek onyx and tan bodysuit. Her eyes shifted in color with her expressions. He smiled to greet her. "Hello!"

She did not meet his formalities. She simply said, “I’ve got a rez order for you,” and handed him a slate.

He smiled and nodded, pressing the scroll button on the side, reading through. He got the serial number and sat down at his terminal. It took him a few minutes to get the information. The woman kept staring at him the whole time. He found the record, one Chantal Thareksdottir, a flashing red alert just under the name. He swiveled around, “Sorry, I’ve got a Do Not Rez order on this one. I don’t think I can-”

Without skipping a beat, she repeated an override code, a string of letters and numbers. He typed it in while listening. “I can try, but this kind of prompt usually can’t be-” The code was accepted. “Oh.” He did a once-over on the code. He had seen these; weren’t they reserved for someone higher up, like The Merchants?

She pursed her lips and her eyes turned yellow “We good?”

Joporis swiveled back to his desk again. He wanted to say something friendly but he felt this creeping unease around her. “Just let me know if you need anything. I’ll start the rez.”

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Mara stumbled on the first step down, looked back to make sure she wasn’t noticed. The dark basement facility was cold and wet; she wanted to get out as soon as possible. She walked through rows of people of all shapes and sizes. Each of these people had done something wrong to their Community. They would sleep for years, or maybe forever.

Mara found herself unable to care. These people knew the rules when they joined. She just needed to find the one they were looking for. She wandered into the back, where the lifers were lined up in their living tombs. A spore construct with crablike legs and claws had moved a tank to a resurrection machine and was scuttling back to its charging station.

When plugged in, the tank came alive in a sickly yellow-white light. The woman suspended in the liquid within was naked, as all the husks were. Also human, a few years younger than Mara, perhaps. Tall, lanky, pallid. Shaped like a plank of wood. Neck length brown hair that hadn't grown an inch since they put her to sleep. Mara had to pull this switch to finish the waking process. She did so gleefully. This was the best part.

Mara had been led to believe that this process was quite painful. Though she would never know, because she would never make a mistake bad enough to end up here. It's said the longer you're under, the more it hurts. That your senses come back to you in a rush, and you're overwhelmed and blinded. The woman in the tank thrashed and reached for the breathing tube shoved down her throat, and tried to rip it out.

Mara's eyes turned green and she gave a soundless laugh. It was like the writhing of a bug with a broken exoskeleton. The sleeper managed to get the tube out, but she quickly found out that that was worse. She began to suffocate on the stasis suspension, which was draining at its normal, slow pace.

Mara began to wonder if she was going to drown in there. Could husks drown without the tubes? She casually eyed a couple of other tanks for potential replacements. The husk's reflexes took over, and she rose to the top for a gulp of

air, accidentally taking in some clear slime. Mara hadn't laughed this hard in weeks. Even for a rez, this was good.

The awakened sleeper ripped out cables that were stuck along her spine. The fluid had nearly drained by now, and she collapsed onto the metal grate below her and started coughing up stasis fluid and wailing in pain. Mara pressed the button to lower the glass. She grabbed a towel from a rack and threw it over the wretch, who laid there for a while.

"Good morning, Chantal!" Mara grinned.

Chantal got to her arms and looked up. She blinked a few times, confused and overstimulated. "I—" she vomited. The grate drained most of it. The constructs would need to wash the towel. "They weren't going to wake me."

"They weren't. I did."

"W-who?" She regarded her liberator through blurry vision. Stasis blindness was a well documented condition, usually not permanent.

"You don't know me, but I know youuu." The intonation of a child playing a game. Mara rubbed her shoulders - it was so frigid in there. "Can you stand? I don't want to be here anymore."

Chantal tried to get to her feet and stumbled. Her muscles hadn't deteriorated, that would defeat the point of stasis, but it took a while to get reoriented when you were down for that long. She held out a hand for Mara to help her up, but no hand was offered back. With prolonged effort, she finally got upright.

Mara looked up and down, the other woman was a head taller than her. Also, her cock was out. “Let’s get you dressed.”

The two of them walked toward an antechamber on the far side of the storage room. The metal sliding doors hissed aside, and for a minute, the cold of the stasis pods blended with the room temperature chamber. The lighting was intentionally dimmed, a blessing for Chantal.

She rubbed her eyes and hacked up another glob of stasis goo. “You really shouldn’t take out the breathing support that soon,” chided Mara, with an offhand tone that sounded more like reminding a roommate who had forgotten to clean dishes.

The awakened sleeper was too dazed to process it. “How l-long?”

“Since you were out?” She glanced at the dossier tablet again. “Two years. It’s 1011.” They grabbed a one-size-fits-all jumpsuit and threw it at the naked woman. “I’m seeing more than I need to. Get dressed, Chantal.”

“Rook.”

“Excuse me?”

“My callsign is Rook. Call me-” A dizzy spell brought her to the ground. She tried to work the jumpsuit on. “Call me Rook.”

Mara rolled her eyes. “Okay, Rook. Anyway, get dressed. This place gives me the creeps, and I’m hungry.”

\*\*\*\*\*

A few hours later they found themselves in a cafe in Lowtown. “The Gem of Saliana,” a few districts down from the warehouse where the sleepers lay dormant. Out the window, hundreds of people crowded a busy market street, with vendors set up under tarps. Mara was swirling her finger around a glass, and Chantal had her head low; lights were still a lot. The Lieni music playing over old speakers made the headache worse.

Mara had read so much about Chantal-Rook-Whatever. She had expected such a long and sordid dossier to come with someone more interesting. Yet the woman was just sitting there staring at the ground, bouncing her legs and shaking. So very boring, and there were few crimes worse than being boring. Time for Plan B. A solid vial was retrieved from Mara’s messenger bag. “Take this and get your shit together.”

Chantal’s icy grey eyes bulged with recognition. She snatched the vial out of her savior’s hand, lifted her hair, and plugged it into a metal port at the base of her neck. The fluid transferred in a numbing rush. In just seconds the pain, terror, and confusion all faded into nothing. Blank was a drug true to its name.

After a few seconds she sat up. “Thanks.”

“I’m not here to do charity, Rook. I need you present. Can you work with that shit in your head?”

A pause. “I \*only\* work with this shit in my head.”

Mara blew air out of the side of her mouth, and folded her arms. “Of course I picked a junkie. It was on the slate, I guess.”

A construct designed to mimic the appearance of a waitress took their orders. Rook picked up the conversation when its sensors were out of reach. The drug in her system made her speech monotonous. “Why did you pick me?” Mara found the trancelike tone cute, in the way a big eyed pet was cute.

“A few reasons. Most importantly, I have a file full of your past jobs. 28 confirmed kills, two multi-target contracts. Even for a full fledged Hunter it was good. I’m not easily impressed but... It’s good. I need competence.”

“Competence for what?”

A toothy grin, Mara’s irises shifted to a blood red. “But my dear, of course killing.”

“Half of Cold Storage is Hunters. Why me?” Surprisingly willful for someone so high.

“I don’t have time to explain everything to you, and more importantly I don’t really want to. I have several targets who need killing and an operation that needs sabotaging. I looked for people who might have ties to the Front-”

“The ARF?”

“Is that a problem?”

“Is this an Imperial contract?”

“Does it matter?”

“You read why I went under?”

A plate of acid-shell clams stuffed with yak cheese were brought over, the appetizer. Neither of them thanked the waitress. They waited for it to get out of range again.

Mara gave a forced shrug, “So you bodied a dignitary. Politics isn’t really my deal. Don’t think of it as working for them, think of it as working for me.”

“You’re young for a Merchant.” The upper echelon of their Community.

“More of a Courier.” Spies.

“Couriers can recruit Hunters now?”

“Normal Couriers can’t.” Mara waved her hand. “Listen, this is above your pay grade. Do you want the job?”

“Why would I?”

“Well, first off, it’s any time among the living before going back to your existential prison. That noble had a *lottt* of friends who want you gone for good. Strictest Do Not Rez I’ve ever seen without just killing a Merchant.”

“And?”

“And if you help me out, maybe I can have some records expunged. Lose your files.” Mara stared out the window. “I’ve got some plans. I could use a girl with good aim.” They made clear and direct eye contact with Rook. “But you work for me.”

“And I’m hitting the Front?”

“Not JUST the Front if it makes you feel better. I’ve got an Inerlesian Great House, and now even a corp involved.”

The waitress brought their food. They ate in silence for a while. Rook pondered her situation.

Halfway through eating, Rook put down her fork and wiped her mouth. “No,” she said with a mouthful.

Mara put her fork back in their salad. Not a word they were used to. “What?”

“I won’t do it. I’m not your pet.” Rook forced a straighter posture than usual, she sat much taller than Mara. “Put me back.”

An unbecoming rage swelled up in Mara, but she remembered she was in public. “Hey, I can get anyone to do this. I just think you’d have a personal interest in it.”

“Why? You know my record with the ARF. What’s keeping me from stopping you?”

Mara sighed. Repeating herself was so very tedious. "Freedom, and I can throw in a good commission. Enough to start a new life." She pulled a stack of papers out of her bag. "Just take a look before you make a dumb decision."

Rook took the files slowly and started flipping through. Mara felt a little disgust when the Hunter carelessly smudged it with food. Rook shook her head and nearly handed the stack back. Then she stopped on a line, a name. Another moment of silence. Long, pallid fingers tapped the edge of her table.

She handed the papers back. "I'll do it. What's the operation window?"

Mara wrung her hands and held her head high, triumphant.

## 7. A Heaven, Buried

When Arina was young, she had terrible anxiety. Who could blame her? At such a young age, the sky had fallen for real. So many nights, Torinn held her as tightly as he could. When most of the kids her age wanted more space from their parents, she was always in his or Salee's shadow. With time, and the best therapists they could afford with their modest fortune, she had gotten more comfortable with independence.

When she walked out of the KAS Detention Center, he held her as tightly as he did all those years ago.

They stood there for a while. Temperance, Maev, and Gallin'Vir gave them some space for their moment. She wriggled free and smiled warmly at him. She only

came up to the top of his abdomen. Her bruises were healing but present. “Are you okay? Did they hurt you?” He was ready to burn the entire building down.

“Dad, it’s okay, I’m fine. I wouldn’t say they were nice, but their doctors did pretty well patching us up, at least.” He stared at her injuries. “It’ll heal up soon. I’m pretty lucky, considering.”

“That was a dumb move Ari. Your mother would have been so worried. *I* was so, so worried.” His attempts at sternness were undermined by a current of relief and joy.

Arina raised an eyebrow, “Dad, she knows what I do for a living. Who taught me how to shoot?”

He conceded, Salee had spent a lot of time with both the kids on a firing range. She had repurposed a barn they had no use for. Both of them needed to be able to defend themselves.

“The woman’s 22, and she did a damn fine job!” Temperance saluted the young Varan. Arina waved them away. Both they and Maev broke off from the other three. Business for the Front to discuss, surely. Arina looked back at her father. Torinn was nearly trembling with worry.

“I told Mom I was going out for a job. I mean... sure, the drop was dumb, but...” She looked back to Temperance, who had the cocky face of someone who had just made history. She looked at her father with big eyes that had absolved so many childhood mistakes. “Don’t tell her?”

The emotional space opened, and they remembered those standing around them. Arina looked past Torinn and saw Gallin’Vir, fidgeting and staring up the Voidspire.

She almost skipped toward him, waving the protected tome like a prize. “I believe this is yours!”

The doctor graciously accepted the case and looked around for any onlookers. He stuffed it into a bag. “Yes, yes, thank you. Perhaps we should move this reunion somewhere more... private.” He looked to Torinn. “My workshop?”

\*\*\*\*\*

Several hours later, the bodyguard stood on the stoop of Gallin'Vir's house. He wanted to smoke, but Arina had insisted on standing out there with him. It didn't feel right. He stood with a foot on the brick wall behind him, arms crossed. She mirrored him, trying to make it seem nonchalant. They had greeted some of the collaborators already, and were waiting for two more.

He glanced over at his daughter. She had changed from her detention jumpsuit into what he'd come to see as a fairly normal Arina outfit: black everything with flashes of seaweed green underneath her thick overcoat today. She mimicked his stance, but had a pair of over-ear headphones on. She noticed him looking at her and popped out an ear. She gave a gentle “What?”

Torinn caught himself and looked away. “Oh, nothing.” Arina shook her head with an amused smirk and was about to go back to listening. Not wanting to miss the moment, Torinn thought of something to say, “I was at a concert in Crossroads, seemed like something you'd like.”

“Ha! What were you doing at a show?”

“Just trying to expand my horizons, I guess. Even old men could use some new tunes...” A harmless lie, he liked seeming with the times. Salee had always been the cool parent for both of them.

Arina was happy to humor him. “That’s rad! Who was it?”

“I just kind of wandered in between some night errands for Gallin. I think her name was Natasha Irinde?” He was surprised that he had remembered.

Arina wrinkled her nose and lips together, “Ew, Dad, isn’t she like, a fascist?”

A complete backfire. He was so sure he knew what she was into. Maybe she just changed her tastes? She salvaged the moment for him, “Besides, I’m not into that twangy folk stuff anymore. It’s cool and all, but well...” She sidled over to him and offered the earbuds to him. “Try this.”

It sounded like a thousand heartbeats layered on top of each other. Low and intense, pulsing. Joined within a few bars by soaring synthesizers and fast-paced modulated vocals. It overwhelmed him and turned his stomach.

“Oh, this is very good!” He had so little time with his daughter, no reason to spoil the moment. “Who is it?”

Arina gave him a side eye, not entirely buying his enthusiasm. “This one’s new - Cerulean Blade by 17th Writ. It’s a remix, though, they added vocals from that construct er- lady? Lady. Chytri Ganoda.”

A bunch of names were thrown at him at once, and he picked the one he had a response to. “17th Writ... that’s the Writ of Mortality, right?”

She considered it for a second, “Yea,h I guess that’s what they’re going for. I just like the beat. Anything Chytri’s on, too.”

They went back to standing there for a while. A device on Torinn’s wrist beeped. He grabbed the case of vials and took one. When he recovered from nearly vomiting, Arina was staring at him. “Uh?” she said.

“Just medicine,” Torinn replied, though the worry that washed over her face told him this was the wrong move.

“Are you sick? Are you okay?” She took her headphones off and held them in shaky hands.

“I’ll be fine, Ari.” Another lie. “Just something to help offset all the time I’ve spent in the open air. My lungs don’t quite work like they used to.” This was true, just not in the way he made it sound.

She relaxed; he had regained control of the situation. He gave her a smile and she went back to her music and glanced over at him again.

Some time later, a person approached from the sidewalk. Torinn knew her, but Arina didn’t. It was Henrietta, though she must have taken some hair growth agent. It had doubled in length in just a couple of days since they had seen her. Her eyes were concealed by an opaque red visor.

She came up to them and went for the door. Torinn held up his hand. “Password?”

Henrietta took a step back and huffed, “Are you really going to make me?”

Torinn and Arina looked at each other, and then back to her. “Please,” the bodyguard’s daughter insisted.

“By emerald light, in service of the 4th.” The corporate woman stumbled her way through it and nearly said the wrong number. “May I go in now?” That should have been everyone. The three went inside.

The ground floor of Gallin’Vir’s home had been converted into a full workshop. It was wall to wall with shelves, tables, and devices, each lined with experimental brews, different ingredients, and contraptions. Some chemical, some mechanical, some arcane. Gallin’Vir was multitalented. Several metal tables covered in equipment were placed in the center of the floor, carefully spaced out.

Over each table, a simple shaded yellow glow-light, and red panel lighting on the walls. Dust particles danced in the lights. It always smelled of whatever had just been burning last. Currently, burning emerath.

On the closest table, takeout containers had been spread out. Hungry Reihn’s, a diner which had locations across the city’s rings. On the table next to it was a small fire currently filtering out some sort of sparkling clear liquid and heating a couple of green crystal coins. The furthest table looked to be all of the ingredients not currently in use.

Gallin’Vir ran from table to table, almost lost in a trance. On one of the centermost tables was the power cell and what appeared to be some kind of antique globe. He

talked to himself in the high-tempo, staccato chatter of Inerlesian speech. Torinn looked to Arina to see if she understood any of it. She hadn't retained much of the language of her birth parents, but occasionally she understood some bits and pieces. She shrugged.

Torinn glanced at the other occupants of the room. Every major player in their operation was there. Maev and Temperance had been here for a while. Then he and Arina. Now Henrietta. They clumped together, admiring the spectacle that was Gallin'Vir at work.

He turned on his heels back and forth, hands moving with reflex and control faster than even most eleks could ever manage. His Inerlesian muttering had blended with Astaelian and some unidentified third language into a hybrid slurry. It was like the sputtering of an old engine.

Maev was not one to wait idly. "Wanna bring us up to speed, doc?"

Gallin'Vir looked up and took a deep breath. "Forgive me. I was lost in thought." He gestured them closer and spun the metal globe. At the same time, he moved a dial on the base. He whispered something to himself and began to speak without looking toward them. "In a lecture last week, we discussed the difference between Astaelian and Parathan power cells... Primarily, the purity of fuel blends." He rushed over to the chemistry lab and retrieved the beaker of sparkling fluid.

He took the two heated coins. He set them on the hard marble table and reached for something. He raised his head and looked at the empty spot on the table, his hand was reaching. He gestured at Torinn. "Mr. Varan, have you seen my mallet?" The bodyguard shrugged. The alchemist sighed and stood back, clasping his left hand around his tattooed right one.

He began chanting something to himself for a few seconds, and his marks began to glow. He outstretched a hand, bright with energy now, and a field of vibrating air around it. He pointed it towards the coins, which became enveloped in the apparent field of energy. With an up and down motion, he crushed them with the force of a large rock. He waved his arm a few more times with fury, until the coins were reduced to a fine powder.

The mage-doctor poured the crystalline particles into the suspension, and a faint celadon aura began to spread through it. Gallin'Vir stirred it for good measure. "In the past few decades, we've removed emerath from our fuel, replacing it with the much more pure- and much cheaper- substitutes. These would likely produce too much energy for even a Late Parathan device to handle. So I'm synthesizing the archaic blend. With better equipment and funding, I could just modify the device itself and—"

Henrietta cleared her throat, "And?"

Gallin'Vir barely registered the interruption. He carried the beaker, now shining as green as the moon itself, and dumped it into the open cap of the Parathan fuel cell. The elek stood proudly, face beaming. "Valued associates, I give you our destination. I give you... Atharas!" He flipped a switch.

A hum like a monastery's daily prayers emanated from the power cell, and the globe responded with the rattle as the base began to visibly vibrate. The sphere of Vian began to turn on its axis. The globe turned three-quarters of the way around before stopping with an audible *click*. Miniature cogs turned as the entire globe split apart from the middle outward.

Gallin'Vir rushed around to observe the development, the rest crowded behind him.. Within the opened globe was a lens, projecting dots of bright blue light that splashed across the room. He pivoted toward the wall and adjusted a knob. The dots of light adjusted with it. "We have it!"

"We have what?" Henrietta was tapping her arm.

"Patience, Ms. Vanderi. Reverend Temperance, behind you is a rolled-up map - would you be so kind?"

Temperance stepped back and grabbed the rolled paper and handed it over, "Here." They had a look of awe-like fascination across their face, and their feathers trilled.

Gallin'Vir unrolled the map and tried to place it on the wall, though he was too short and the map was too wide to do it on his own. Torinn and Temperance helped hold it up.

He thanked them both and adjusted the knob. The lights lined up over the Derilian continent. Some major locations they all knew, many they didn't. "Friends and colleagues, you're looking at a map of every Parathan installation still active before the Judgement. Both public and secret." The alchemist jumped and clicked his feet together.

"Kay... so where's ours?" Maev regarded the map.

Gallin'Vir returned to his speech. "My ancestor worked at the facility we're seeking. He described it as north of the Astaelian province. So..." Gallin'Vir got closer and pointed to the sole light just above the Redpeak Mountains. "...there!"

Henrietta rubbed her temples, “Gallin’Vir. I trust your mind for this, but you still haven’t told me what’s there? What exactly am I supporting here?”

Maev nodded in agreement, “Yeah, I get some kind of city, but this would be a pretty good time to lay out the whole deal.”

Gallin’Vir flipped a few pages in the journal and didn’t look to them while he replied. “They called it Atharas. It was a city for the finest minds in the Parathan Empire. It held the labs of Siderus Yender.”

Temperance scowled, and red feathers bristled reflexively. They let out an angry chirp. Atharas was the name of the realm in which the gods lived. When the gods had disappeared and their Divine Empire collapsed, the Parathan had seen themselves as the inheritors of Vian. Their harshness softened, and their eyes stayed fixed on the map, “Yender, you say... like...”

“Yes, that one.” Siderus Yender. The so-called “father of scientific alchemy.” Gallin’Vir started pacing again. “You see what this could mean? It was buried in the wretched Judgment, but the Parathan once reshaped the world. Guns, healing potions, and electricity. What else could have been buried? What could we discover?”

Henrietta stroked her chin, “It’s certainly a tempting prospect. You know exactly where you’re going? If it’s underground, there are the treaties to worry about.”

“Yes, yes, I’m certain of the entrance. Though we may need to do some negotiation if any of our subterranean neighbors are present.”

“I can help with that. KAS has a few contracts with them. Mostly for the Gregor’s Gorge province, but they could be amended, presuming the locals are open to it.”

“I’ve got the manpower, of course, but I’m needed on the topside,” Maev reminded.

“Yes, Ms. O’Thail’s men will make up the bulk of our labor force. With your permission, I’d like to hold onto Reverend Temperance for a while longer. I expect need of a demolition expert.”

Temperance played with one of the metal caps of their tusks, shortened and cleaned as the temporary augmentations had worn off. “Aye, I’ll do it. If it is as the good doctor says, a whole city was buried over 400 years ago. May the gods be kind, they have decayed and passed on. If not, someone must free their souls. I’ll take the job, and you can give my usual fee to the Front.” They clasped a saint’s pendant in their hands and whispered something. Their taloned hand shot out towards Arina. “Of course, I work with a partner.”

Torinn’s face grew hot. His heartbeat grew heavy. There was nothing in the world he wanted less. Before he could argue, Gallin’Vir replied. “To be quite honest, I was going to make the request anyway. Your work in the Voidspire was impressive, young Ms. Varan.” Torinn’s head snapped toward his employer and he nearly started shouting. He felt a small hand wrap around his arm and he looked down at Arina’s big, begging eyes again.

“Dad, I’ll be fine.”

“She’s not one of mine, more of a freelancer. That’s up to y’all. Kindred Temperance, I can sign off on.” Maev had made her way over to the food and was getting a plate of yam fries.

Torinn's heart stung. On some logical level, he knew she had become a capable professional. He would have gladly hired anyone else with her abilities. She had grown up so much, but she was still his Ari. He would never truly let go of that. What kind of father could? He relented. "Fine. But you're part of my security team. You answer to me." He stepped back. His breathing was shallow, and his heart was beating oddly. He checked to make sure he had taken his meds. Had he?

Gallin'Vir pivoted. "We will be leaving on the Autumn Solstice. Make whatever preparations you need to. It goes without saying, but what we seek to do here is not looked kindly upon by the authorities. None of this plan leaves the discussed parties, not even to our friends or families." He pointed at Torinn. "If any of you suspect a leak or threat, please report it to Mr. Varan immediately. If there are any questions, please speak now. Otherwise, we conclude this meeting." He gave a gracious bow.

No further questions. The rest shuffled out, leaving Torinn and Gallin'Vir. Torinn's vision had gone blurry, and he started choking on his lungs. Gallin'Vir looked at him. "Medicine?" Torinn tried to mouth a response. No air came out. He felt weak. The doctor rushed over and helped him safely to the ground.

"Can you breathe?" Torinn's head shook in panic. Gallin'Vir took out a balm and began to apply it to the throat and chest. He found Torinn's meds and shoved another dose down the writhing man's throat. Torinn had entered that blind-deaf fog of someone just about to pass out. "Hold on!" The doctor was half shouting. When the medicine made it down, it mixed with the balm and loosened the airways. The bodyguard began coughing violently, but he could breathe.

The two of them sat there for a moment. Gallin'Vir quietly checked symptoms, noting new, larger, darkened spots on the ribs. "I need to do a better exam, but I

believe your condition is advancing, Mr. Varan," he said, with a notably flat tone for something so grim.

"Will I make it through this?"

"If we make good time... but even then it's hard to say. Tear Sickness is a recently documented condition. I can only really guess."

Torinn took a deep breath. "I'm in this til the end. What can I do?"

"I'd say avoid stress and exercise but, well, professional hazards. I can double up your dose. Are you certain you want to do this?"

The question was a formality more than a true offer of exit. They both knew what was at stake, for the team and for them both. They both were doing what they needed to do.