

4. The Voidspire Job

The poster looked exactly as she had imagined it would. Bright pastel pinks gently faded into dark borders, dotted with sparkles and 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 Ganoda! Live in concert, one night only. PAS Stadium, Summer 52nd. Tickets on sale now!"

It took every ounce of willpower Arina Varan had not to make her way halfway across New Bekton just to get tickets. Chytri had come onto the scene in the last few years, a poster child 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 turned 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. She was in a courtyard covered by a tremendous metal ceiling broken by tasteful archways at regular intervals. Water fixtures, statues, and even a few synthetic 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 of sticky residue from her 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 put 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 went white. When it passed, she looked in the mirror. She no longer saw her own face, but rather 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, Arina quickly approached 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, she saw an avian, a Yasre, in a jumpsuit similar to 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 black 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, an opal talisman 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-facing 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 left would take them to the employee 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 they went 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 herself. "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 head and an impression of a smile on an electronic face 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 absolutely 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 anger. “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, so 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 me.”

“Let me just get my things.”

The bot wasn't so easily fooled, and its face turned into a bright red sheet as its speakers blared an alarm. Unnatural 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, Arina 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 connected to the torso.

The blast of synthesizers that came from the construct was like a howl as its 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, frantic shouts could be heard 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 of 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 been grabbed. “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 the 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. Naturally, Lowtown where most of the people lived. Millions upon millions, it was such an 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 own prep.

Arina ignored them. “We’ve got a big day today Dotty, are you ready?” The drone was named for the little white spots across its mauve 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 colorful 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 herself 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?”

Temperance 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 stone 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 were at the security station, but the alarms within suggested more soon.

They opened fire with pistols and simple rifles, 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. Slate 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. “Are you hurt?”

“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 of minutes like that was bad. In the distance, they could hear shouts in two directions. Likely, the Voidspire’s security and Yender Medical’s soldiers 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 somewhere nearby that shook the ground they stood on. “Or the tower will take care of it! What the fuck did you even do?”

Temperance looked back at the young elek and kept pace, “Electrical charge on one of the power cells.” As if on cue, the power went off 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 blasts 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 habitation 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, half burned off by some hissing 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 face for playing cards. "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, 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 burnt 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. She'd killed before, but no one had said this was a hit job.

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.