

In the Dead of Night

Alison Luhrs

From set *Aether Revolt*

In an effort to quell a renegade uprising, the Consulate of Ghirapur forcibly confiscated all unapproved devices from the inventors of the city. Access to energy sources was drastically cut, and a mandatory curfew was set in place.

Yahenni, an aetherborn socialite and philanthropist, is minutes from death. Desperate for someone to be with them in their passing, Yahenni stumbles through the abandoned streets past curfew in search of the one thing every aetherborn is supposed to be guaranteed: a party before they die.

I



Art by Jonas De Ro

I need *someone* to be with me when I die. I need a hand to hold what is left of my shoulder together. I need someone to witness the fact that I existed and then did not. A caring voice to whisper “You’re safe. It’s okay, Yahenni, let go when you’re ready.” I need anyone. *Anyone*.

I’ll find someone else if it kills me.

It is dark and I am the only person shambling under the eaves of the Weldfast. The thoroughfare is empty, the stalls closed and abandoned. There are no lights to keep me company save those emitted by my own body. No inventors (Emergency Ordinance 89-A), no aether (Emergency Ordinance 89-B), and here I am like a drunk bandar searching vainly for someone to celebrate with me while I die. I had

been confined to my penthouse for too long, and with Emergency Ordinance 89-C in effect, certainly no one was going to come to me.

I can sense only one other being on this street: A starving gremlin lies under a cruiser parked to my left, pupils wide in the night and belly sunken with hunger. It's been following me for the last twenty minutes. I look away. We both smell of death.

Every aetherborn deserves a Penultimate Party, but no one celebrates anything these days.

I feel the back of my left hand burst in a cloud of dissipating aether. It's a calming release that eases the tension. The rest of my body yearns to escape with it. It would be so easy.

I trip over a piece of crushed delivery servo. Part of my foot is left behind with it. I hear the stalking gremlin scurry toward it and feast on the meager bits of myself that are left behind on the shell of the servo. There's a common warning among aetherborn: gremlins won't hunt, but they will gladly wait.

I stumble on. I have fifteen minutes left.

What was I before I lived, I wonder? Did I spend my eternities floating through the Conduit? Did I power cities? Feed gremlins? What mundane forever awaits me when I die—

It hits me at once. A train that arrives in a silent crash.

I'm going to die alone.

My panic causes me to stumble faster. Toward where, I have no idea. If I open my senses (which, oddly enough, have never been more acute—thumbs up for necrosis!) I can sense people hiding in their apartments. All of them are sour with unease. Spread out and secluded. What used to be the best night district in the city is boarded up, shut down, barred closed in accordance with the citywide curfew. The only sound on these streets is the patter of my footsteps as I stumble searching for any sign of a gathering. No curfew will keep me from my birthright. I earned a final celebration, and I will find it if it kills me.

I look behind me to that gremlin. It looks back in hunger. I start to panic.

It's actually happening. I'm going to die alone.

I'm going to die alone.

I'm going to die alone.

I hold my more complete hand against a building to balance myself and begin to stumble faster. My dermis is loosely containing me...I'm held together by clinging bits of smoke and crumbling ash. I halt myself and focus my senses. In the distance I can smell the wet wool of despair, mineral-tinged determination, resilient tamarind—

Wait! I know that tamarind!

I stumble toward the empathic scent. It's a few blocks away.

II

As I've grown older, I've slowly become more and more aware of the exactness of time I have left. I imagine it's the same sense that tells beings with organs and junk when they need to eat or if they have the flu or when they need to pee. When I was a few weeks old, I knew I had something like four years left. When I was a year old, I knew I had about three years and a month. And a while ago, I knew I had exactly twenty-two days. I now know I have twelve minutes left. I know and it is terrifying.

The scent of tamarind grows stronger. I can see the walls of the Museum of Invention up ahead. It's been coated with dozens of Consulate banners in the last few weeks, but square on the front of the building is a bare patch where the banners had been ripped down. In its place is...something. I move closer, and through the dark I make out fresh paint glimmering in the starlight.



Spontaneous Artist | Art by Viktor Titov

I recognize it as the symbol of the renegades—an upside down Consulate symbol with elaborate flourishes emptying out of the bottom. They call it the leaking spire. A symbol of hope that aether is meant to be returned to the people.

From across the street I can make out a human figure putting the final touches on their graffiti.

My heart sings—I know this person! It's Nived, my favorite caterer!

Ahhh, *Nived* ! What a guy! I haven't seen him since my party before the Inventors' Fair! Extravagant buffets, intimate catered meals...there's nothing Nived can't cook for. I had booked him for my Penultimate...

A wave of sadness rushes over me. With everything being as it is, I had to cancel my own Penultimate Party. *I had to cancel my own Penultimate Party .*

"Nived!" I scream-whisper from nearby. Nived jumps and looks at me with eyes wide. His face is painted and a jerry-rigged meat-cleaver-arm apparatus is strapped to his wrist. I'm delighted. Look at my friend, the hooligan!

He puts a finger to his lips. Shh. Freak out later. I wheeze and stumble closer. Seven minutes left. My legs give way as I reach Nived. My voice is wavering. Talking is difficult, but this is deeply important. This may well be the last being I ever encounter and it is time to atone while I can.

"Yahenni? Is that you?" he asks while rapidly packing up the last of his paint. He kneels down to my place on the ground.

"What's left of me," I pathetically kid. "Glad to see you doing your civic duty."

"Your *body* , what's—"

"I don't have long. Nived...I wanted to apologize, darling."

"What do you have to apologize for?!"

The tide of anguish washes back over me. I have so little time left. I need to make my words count. I place my hand on Nived's shoulder.

"I'm sorry...I canceled...less than a day prior to when my party was scheduled..."

"...Are you serious?"

My body shivers in weakness and frustration. "I'm dying! Of course I'm serious!"

"You are ridiculous—"

"I'm very respectful of cancellation policies."

Suddenly our space is flooded with empathic stench.

"HOLD IT RIGHT THERE!" shouts an authoritative voice from around the corner.

How did I not sense them?! A massive Consulate enforcer ("The Honorable" my ass!) rounds the corner of the Museum alongside an armament automaton. Their eyes are locked squarely on Nived. "You are under arrest for defacement and vandalism!"



Art by Joseph Meehan

Nived tries to bolt, but the enforcer throws a device at his shoulders. From above, four spheres lower from nearby rails and emit a brilliant blue spark of energy. Nived screams, seizes, and topples to the ground.

"NIVED!"

I feel a sudden sob escape me. My body—Nived's body?—My body?—*hurts* with a stinging pain and my heart fills with acrid fear. Physical smoke floats away from my friend's singed clothes. *My empathy may kill me*, I think distantly through the haze my friend's (my own?) terror.

Ignoring my cries, the Consulate enforcer walks over and stands over the body. I catch the enforcer and their psychic scent. Their presence is like standing near a deep crevasse. A sudden awareness of absence. This enforcer standing over the body of my friend (the best caterer in Ghirapur, *you bastard*) is an empty well, filled only with a distant scent of sadism and shining brass. I am too weak to run, and the fear of my friend is drenching my senses.

The scent of brass warms with dark curiosity. I wish I could vomit. I wish I could purge the stink of this person's heart from my insides and spew it on the ground.

I see Nived move slightly, and the enforcer hits the energy device again.

Everything smells of terror and morbid pleasure and I can't do anything.

Nived tries to move.

No one is here to help. We're alone.

The enforcer activates the device again. The vivid lights of dangerous aether arc toward my friend's body. Nived is completely still.

"Leave him alone," I weakly assert.

The enforcer doesn't move. It's too dark to see, but I feel them languidly smile. They zap the unconscious body again.

"Stop it! You'll kill him!"

I heave myself up with all of my strength and attempt to rush the enforcer, but stumble to the ground. I'm too close to my own death (three minutes). The enforcer turns and looks down on me. I am a handspan away, smoking, crumbling, falling apart.

The enforcer kneels down to my level. The glow of my escaping aether lights up the cruel lines of their face from below, distorting the planes of their empty smile. "You're that Yahenni...right? Seen your picture in a press report." I shiver. "I'm looking for six individuals that are sympathetic to the renegades' cause. One is the daughter of the criminal Pia Nalaar."

My head spins. I met this daughter...Chandra was her name? I saw her only a few weeks ago. What had she and Nissa done to warrant this much Consulate attention in that short time, I wonder.

The enforcer stands to their full height and sneers, "I'll finish off this scum here if you don't tell me what you know." They kick Nived's unmoving body.

I bristle.

The Enforcer kicks him again, "What's one unconscious renegade to you, weakling?"

Pulling from the last bit of strength I have, I rise up. My leg shivers on my one remaining foot and my right hand itches in fury. I look the Consulate enforcer in the eye and whisper with my dying breath—

"He's my caterer."



Art by Jason A. Engle

Without planning, without a second thought, without consideration to the conscience at the back of my mind, I claw my right hand and *pull* from the enforcer's neck. The brilliant light of essence leaks from their skin and into the grip of my hand.

The Consulate enforcer screams, and the exhilaration I feel is matched by a boundless wave of pain.

I can't help the cry that bursts out of me in tandem with them. *I feel everything the enforcer feels.* They are dying and it feels like *I* am dying and it hurts and it is miserable and I am simultaneously both killer and killed.

Through the enforcer's screams, I remember the vengeful cruelty they relished only moments before. I need to finish this if I'm going to survive.

After an endless seven seconds, I open my hand and the consulate enforcer falls to the ground. Their lifeless body lies beside Nived's unconscious one.

My everything is tingling. A bubble of panicky post-pain anxiety rises within me. Why did that hurt?! Why did I feel everything that this awful enforcer felt as they died?! When I drained essence the first time I only felt the pleasure of *life*, why would this be different?

The answer settles a leaden weight in my mind. The first time I drained something's essence it wasn't a *person*. Today I killed a *person*.

...I am a murderer.

The thought feels distant. It's overshadowed by what has happened to me physically. My body feels strangely...glutted. Pleasantly stuffed. I have two hands. I have two feet. I stand at full height and stretch. The gaps are filled, and my dermis feels slightly more complete. The urgency feels relieved. I'm...full? I think? I take stock of how much of my time is left.

Twelve entire days.

Oh.

I have bloated several minutes into twelve days at the cost of a life. I did what I had to do to survive. I killed to save myself. Didn't I?

A noise brings me back to the present. Reaching out I feel people moving quickly toward us—the enforcer's backup must have overheard. I scoop up Nived's body and hide him safely behind a nearby empty stall. Hidden by the barricade, my mind lurches from thought to thought.

What if I don't have to die? What if this is the solution I desperately needed? I need to lean in. I need to be calm and I need to not *worry* about this and I need to accept that if I'm going to kill to survive, I may as well kill the bad people.

...But if that is the rule I choose to live by, then I myself deserve to die.

A private whimper escapes me.

I can't allow myself to be weak. Not now, when I've found a way to cheat the inevitability of death. I am sick of waiting for that awful train to arrive and take me away.

I have twelve days! I can do so much in twelve days!

But if I want to do something with those twelve days, I need to find the people whom I can proudly fight alongside. If I work with them and kill the bad guys, then that would negate my crimes in the eyes of my peers, wouldn't it?

The lie comforts me. My mind is set. I need to find the renegades. I need to find the daughter of a criminal. I need to find the elf with endless eyes.

There is only one person in this city who knows more about its hiding places than I do.

Gonti.



Gonti, Lord of Luxury | Art by Daarken

III

After getting Nived's unconscious body back to my penthouse, it takes a full hour of enforcer-dodging, alley-sneaking, and stair-descending to reach the private residence of the infamous crime lord Gonti. We aetherborn are vain as a necessity, but Gonti's vanity knows no price tag.

Through the grace of my minor celebrity (if you ever want to be popular, get rich and donate most of your money to people with sad stories; then tell the news about it), I am let into the hideout without much conflict. This residence is essentially a palace disguised on the outside as a warehouse. The security at the door nod their head at my request to speak to Gonti, and they agree to lead me to them.

As we walk I can't help but gape at the sheer *wealth* of the place. I would normally call it tacky, but honestly, this level of pompous cash-flinging is a thing to be respected. Gonti's residence is a marvel of stolen opulence; bedazzled filigree, embezzled decor. I enter a vast entry hall, at the end of which is a boardroom table, and between me and it is massive room of plush carpet and luxurious couches. Reclining on the couches are a mix of recent renegades and old-timers of the crime syndicate. They sip tea and trade secrets while their eyes follow me as I am escorted through the hall. An automaton delivers food and comforts to the guests all the while. If there were ever a place to be stuck during a curfew, this would be it.

I am walked in through this entry hall past the scattered rogues and ne'er-do-wells and brought through a glittering set of doors. This room is painted to look like a pastoral paradise—leafy trees and meandering streams, a mural of the Great Conduit winks down from the ceiling above. Glittery pens line the walls, and inside the cages is a small petting zoo of animal constructs. A mechanical fox and filigree deer playfully prance on thick rugs nearby. Ugh. I despise purposefully eccentric interior design. Try as some might, you *just can't* mask boring taste. Through the next set of doors is a dazzling acrobat practicing poses while dangling from the ceiling, and through another door from there is an endless apothecary of the finest aether attars. The connecting halls are lined with cabinet after cabinet of shimmering devices without a mass-production seal in sight. All secret, all stolen, all safe from the Consulate's eager hand.

At the end of this lavish maze is a foggy glass door. The security stands to the side and motions me to walk through the door. As I do, a waft of steam washes over me and I realize I am standing in front of a large, deep pool of warm water; a bath of what smells like jasmine aether attar. The walls are pounded copper, and my reflection is infinitely and hazily echoed by the glow of myself and the aetherborn seated in the water before me.

Gonti sits submerged, their face covered with a gilded mask. At the center of their chest is a curious metal lump.



Art by Vincent Proce

Odd. I don't think I was supposed to see that.

My mind whirls as Gonti gives off a burst of empathic surprise and quickly rises. Baths are not unheard of for our kind...but one gauzy with the glow of stolen aether certainly is. I wonder what it would be like to relax after a long days' work in a tub full of the same stuff I'm made of. It must have the wonderful yet temporary kick that a dose of aether attar will give...but for the entire body. No wonder Gonti stays rich. It must take a lot of crime syndicate funds to maintain *that* habit.

As I internally muse, Gonti covers up in an exquisitely soft-looking black robe.

I imagine conversations between healthy aetherborn must seem fast by organic standards. An innate empathic understanding leads to discussions being more about why someone is feeling something versus how. Little time is wasted, and language isn't terribly poetic. Poetry is for people who have to explain what they can't say.

Gonti straightens their robe and tilts their head.

"You smell of guilt. It reeks."

Damn. I thought I was doing a good job hiding it. Cards on the table, I suppose. "The Consulate pushed me to my limit, darling, and this is the result."

Gonti leads me into what looks like a more private version of the plush-carpet-and-couch room I came through initially. I read them as they observe my own emotional state. They're considering my air of

curiosity and weighing if it's worth it to inquire further. In an instant, I feel Gonti tilt toward dismissiveness. "If you are looking for protection I cannot offer it. I have enough trivialities and trifles that eat at my time."

"I'm looking for something that would help both of us," I say, projecting earnestness.

Gonti is intrigued at that. They cross the room to a large couch in front of a beautiful statue. The art piece nestled on a stand behind them seems to be made of the sky itself. I don't want to know how valuable it might be. They sit gracefully on a couch in front of the impressive object.

On the surface Gonti's scent is impatient, mildly frustrated, but underneath lies a base scent of desperation. Sour anxiety. The scent finishes on a note of dread.

Their train must be arriving, too. I wonder how that shiny new heart works.

I project tentative graciousness. A tang of mischievous coriander.

"You seek rebellion?" Gonti asks.

"I seek the humans Chandra and Pia Nalaar."

Some aetherborn are gifted at lying. I feel as Gonti floods their aura with a haze of grassy ambivalence to prevent a surface emotional reading. They don't trust me. I respond with a breeze of camaraderie and violets, "We are helping each other if we help them. Besides..."

I lean in and speak quietly enough the security outside won't hear.

"If you tell me where they are hiding, I will keep the secret of your manufactured heart to myself. Certainly wouldn't want the Consulate confiscating that."

The grassy ambivalence evaporates into alarmed, acidic pepper and a distant disappointment in foolish security guards.

I project overwhelming trust with an undercurrent of jealousy. Gonti responds with a nod and dalscented self-satisfaction.

That jealousy I put forward can dog-whistle my secret. I feel Gonti now calculating how much more of my dermis I have compared to when they must have seen me in the press reports last. They give a sudden burst of surprise as they realize what I can do.

"Essence drainers are rare," Gonti replies, "I've only ever had two in my employment. How did you discover it?"

"On my own. Not all of us are lucky enough to have built our own hearts."

I don't care if they sense my lie. I was four weeks old. A dwarven friend of mine brought a hyena to a party...I petted the creature and it just happened (It was an accident. It really was. Depala understood and she forgave me all the same.)

"Quit dwelling, Yahenni. How does it feel *when* you do it?"

The question halts me. After the incident with the enforcer, I recognize now that Depala's pet was an anomaly. It is a very different thing to kill a person. I can feel their death, for one thing. But it also feels like when I introduce an up-and-comer to the person who will change their life. It feels like when my friends dance for hours under the stars. It feels like my business partner closing a deal, it feels like rich rose-scented elation and the grateful cinnamon glow of a young researcher receiving a much-needed grant from me. It feels like the lightning strike of two future lovers looking at each other from across a crowded room.

It feels as if all of that...and it also feels like unparalleled suffering. The shock of my own birth. Depala's scream as I accidentally killed her beloved pet. My firm losing more money in one night than most see in a lifetime. Empathically experiencing my neighbor's depression through the wall our houses shared. The grief of being young and not understanding why Farhal, Vedi, Dhriti, Najm, all of my aetherborn family kept dying and dying—

My two seconds of musing is interrupted by a scoff. "No wonder you stink of guilt," Gonti chides.

"My inner life is none of your business."

I'm met with a slap of charmed amusement. Honey and cashews—how quaint they think I am.

"If you feel like killing again, you may be of use to our city. With the curfew in place and the restrictions on aether imposed, my employees are deeply hindered in their ability to continue business. We innovate, of course, but the fact remains that the Consulate's mandatory curfew and confiscation of our personal property is a curse on our city. Ghirapur needs the renegades to make a collective move. I will tell you where Nalaar is and you will warn her and her renegades that I'm sending the Consulate to their hideout."

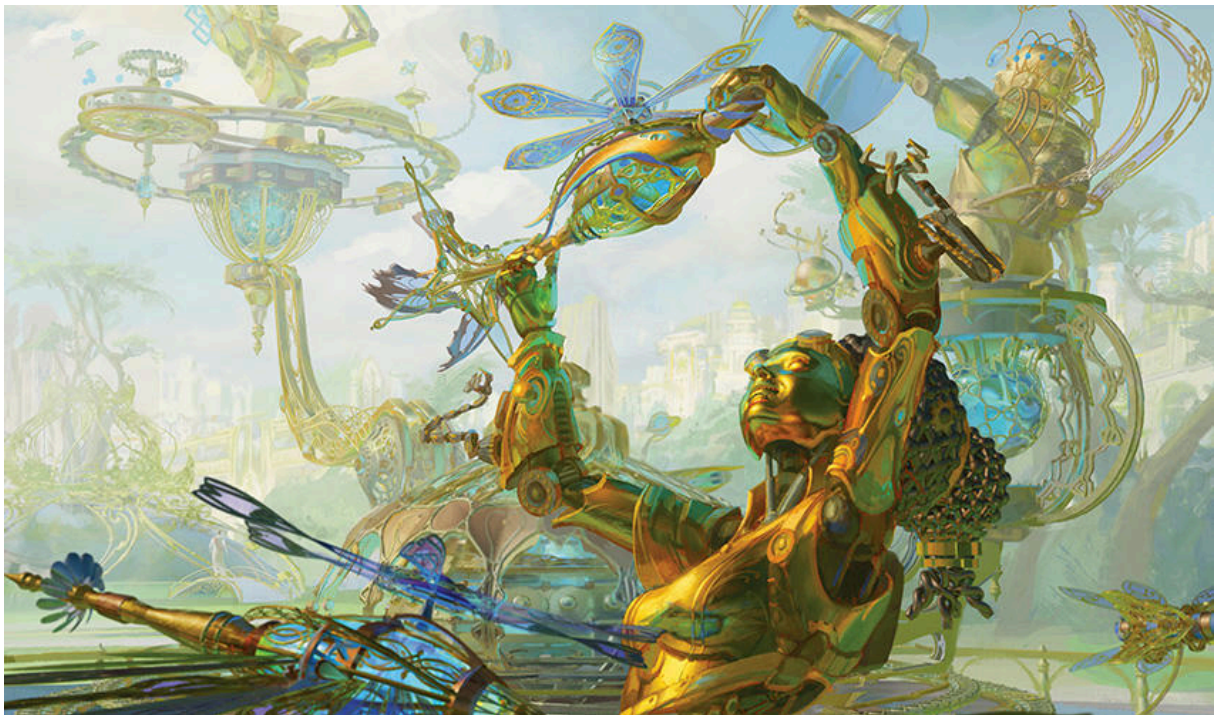
I sit up straight. "Why?!—"

I'm met with dominant and offended agarwood, "They need to be urged into action. Give them a warning to force them into making a move against the Consulate. If they attack first, then fewer of my fighters have to die."

I back off with hushed compliance. You don't become a crime lord by being bad at bargaining.

"You'll find the younger Nalaar and her associates in a safe house within the Statuary Garden. Tell them they are unsafe. Frighten them into action. You are a monster now, so frightening people should be second nature. *Do* try not to drain them, Yahenni."

Our conversation lasted all of two minutes.



Art by Kirsten Zirngibl

IV

The following day I walk purposefully to the Statuary Garden to find Nalaar's hideout. Moving in the daytime is easier than sneaking around at night, but the presence of the Consulate is still stifling. No one lingers on the streets, and the pace of life is even more hurried than before. The journey from my penthouse to the Statuary Garden is rushed and quiet. If Chandra and Nissa (and company) have done enough to upset the Consulate, then they must be worth helping. May as well spend the remainder of my days being helpful.

The Statuary Garden is a massive arboretum near Aradara Station. Two dozen huge statues of graceful curved metal line the walkway, each representing Ghirapur's most famous inventors. The tradition of immortalizing inventors started with the Aradaras themselves—the mother-and-son team who perfected the aether-propelled train. To have a statue here is the highest honor an inventor can achieve. The Aradaras created their train only shortly after the aether boom, and the statues of those who discovered the aether refining process stand near behind them in the garden. I'm oddly touched as I watch the sun shine weakly through the thin clouds on the faces of the people who inadvertently caused the creation of my race.

It's strange; since nearing my expiration date, my senses have increased tenfold. The ebb and flow of emotion is like walking through a museum. The art is plainly laid out and easy to spot from afar. I use my senses to try and locate the hiding places of my friends. From high up an immense statue of a Vedalken inventor, I feel a shimmer of anxiety and uncertainty. It must be them.

I walk casually toward the statue and start to climb a ladder around the back. This thing is huge. I find myself wondering why I never built something this tall when I was employed.

A clunking noise. I freeze. A repurposed security automaton is patrolling through the garden toward the station. Stupid no-emotion-having hunk of garbage scared the aether out of me. I'm fairly confident the machine doesn't notice me and I climb upward.

As I ascend I do an internal check. Eleven days are left. How much time do I gain with each life that I steal? Is it safe if I only do it to the Consulate? Will I have enough time to do enough good once all this is over?

I'm hit with an excruciating body ache. The force of it nearly causes my hands to let go, but I'm so close to the hatch near the top. I hear just above me:

"There's something coming up the ladder that doesn't have a brain."

Rude.

The voice comes from a person who feels of rain on stone and a lot of unanswered questions. "I've never read anything like this before...I think they know you two?" The person sounds masculine and is in the compartment above speaking to someone I also can't see. The pain of whatever is happening to me halts my progress upward.

"Open the hatch, dammit!" A feminine voice. Is that...marigolds...?

The curious petrichor person continues, "Whoever it is was sent here from a crime lord."

"I believe it would be best if we listened to what they had to say." I know that scent! Neroli! It's Nissa!

"Nissa! It's Yahenni!" I yell through the pain of whatever the petrichor person is doing to me.

I hear a scuffle above. My body ache vanishes and I hear the rain-scented one again. "Chandra, let them in."

“Yahenni!” Chandra yells while opening the hatch and pulling me through. The space at the top of the statue is strangely sizeable. There are five cots stacked in the corner and a pile of cushions on the floor as a makeshift bed-nest. A bag of gear lays in the corner, and a wooden staff rests on top.

A stranger in an even stranger cloak looks me over as I climb inside, their mind buzzing with curiosity. I actively decide they are well-dressed but nosy.

I wave a little. “Hello Nissa, hello Chandra.”

The elf smiles. She’s just as alarmingly pretty as I remember. Chandra stands nearby and waves in return. “Hey, Yahenni. Thanks for the party before.”

“Happy to have you there. I heard you found your parent.”

“Yeah, we got her free. She’s meeting with some other renegades now.”

I shake my head, “Shame she had to deal with that Tezzeret fellow. He’s dreadful.”

“He’s a tool,” Chandra spits.

“You can swear in front of me, darling, I won’t tell your mother.” Chandra smiles at that.

I see behind her two other humans—a human in a dark dress (is that fur on the edge of the collar? How barbaric. Who does that?) sitting relaxed but irritated in a chair, and a beefy, sideburn-laden human watching the outside through a gap in the walls.

“This is Yahenni. They’re someone we can trust,” Chandra says as an introduction to the group. I lift my head in grateful pride. “Yahenni, this man is Jace, this woman is Liliana, and the man in the corner is Gideon.”

“Strange friends you have here,” I jest.

“If you think we’re weird, wait ‘til you see the giant cat,” Chandra says.

“...Cat?”

“He’s with Mrs. Pashiri at the receiving line for our grocery rations,” Nissa says plainly.

“I see.”

I don’t.

“There isn’t time,” I divert, “all of you need to leave. The Consulate is on their way to this location if you don’t scam.”

The energy in the room fills with alertness. The four humans and singular elf all share a quick glance with one another. While alert, there is no sense of fear in their scents. Only preparedness.

“If they’re coming we should be ready to fight,” Nissa says resolutely.

“We should decide *if* we want a fight first.” Jace adds.

“Tezzeret might be with them,” the woman in the dark dress states grimly.

“It’s not the kind of fight that you win,” I say with resolution.

The scent of the group immediately splits. A resolute cumin. An internal groan of annoyance. An anxious but confident rotting corpse (wait, what?).

“Why did a crime lord send you to us?” the man named Jace asks me.

How did he know that? “Gonti is the only person in this city that knows more hiding places than I do, so I went to them to find out your location. I want to join the renegade cause, and I knew if I found you all you could make it happen.”

The tenseness of the group isn’t going away. We’ll have to do this differently.

“My penthouse is safe. There are enough security measures to keep you all unnoticed. I’ll take you there tonight, and you can discuss your involvement from there. Neither Gonti nor the Consulate will know you’re going with me.”

“We can trust Yahenni,” Nissa says, solid and firm.

The other group shares a quick glance. Gideon nods, and the rest begin to pack up. The woman in the dark dress slinks up from the bed and looks me over.

“Does your penthouse have more than five bedrooms?” she asks. The woman smells of damp topsoil and an admirably healthy ego.

“Darling, I wouldn’t sleep in a house with fewer than seven,” I respond. She nods in appreciation and holds out a hand.

“Pleasure to meet you, Yahenni,” she says.

I shake her hand, “Happy to be of service, darling.”

I empathically reach out to the area past the statue.

“I’ll go down the ladder first,” I say. “Follow me.”

I open the hatch and descend the ladder. I feel the others follow behind me.

The wind whips my cape. In my malaise yesterday (pre-draining), I had chosen it as my dying outfit. I feel the newly-stolen life course through my being, and my mood catches on sentiment. I warm with bittersweet pleasure. I get to wear this cape again after all.

It’s a long way down. The statuary garden is quiet. The birds that normally roost here are absent; the crowds that normally fill the walkways are gone.

It’s eerie here in the shadow of these inventors. On my way down the ladder, I see the outline of the statue of the great aetherborn inventor Rajul in the distance. They pioneered some of the first medical technology for non-organic beings. Rajul remains an inspiration. It has always given me comfort to see them standing alongside the greatest names of our time. I am thankful that my kind has never been treated as separate from the rest of the city that birthed us. The great looming statue of Rajul is a bold affirmation of our belonging. They did just what every other inventor in here did...and *they* did it when they were two years old.

I am a few body lengths from the ground and feel the others above me discussing and beginning to descend, but my other senses are caught by a sudden drone of noise in the distance that turns my head. I grip the ladder tight and look where the noise is coming from.

My nostalgia transforms into fear.

The roar of an engine is quickly approaching. I see a single Consulate cruiser round the corner through the gardens and accelerate toward our statue. I tense in alarm. The vehicle veers off the main road and barrels across the grass. What are they doing?! The curfew isn’t until later, we’re safe!

Unless Gonti already tipped off the enforcers. If they did, then we are truly screwed. The speed and direction of the cruiser makes it painfully clear that Gonti doesn’t wait for anything after all. The Consulate is coming right for the ladder.

I definitely cannot outrun a Consulate cruiser if I get to the ground.

We'll be trapped in the statue if we all go back up.

I don't have time to weigh moral options.

The car is pointed at the ladder to the statue (does this enforcer intend to ram us down?!)

I turn my entire body around, feet pointed out, left hand gripping the rung (what in the world am I doing).

This is a bad idea. (This is the worst idea—I haven't done anything vaguely athletic in my life.)

I claw my right hand and feel a now-familiar pull in my palm (I'm going to feel them die, I'm going to *feel* them *die* **but I don't have any other options** .)

And I jump down.

And I land on the hood of the vehicle.



Art by Lius Lasahido

Several seconds of anguish.

Several seconds of ecstasy.

Their pain is mine and my elation is mine and it feels like I'm drowning.

It takes significant effort, but I don't cry out loud this time.

The vehicle swerves out of the way of our statue as the Consulate enforcer falls dead on the wheel.

I tuck and roll off of the car.

I hear a crash as it rams into one of the other monuments.

Take a moment. Am I alive? I'm alive. I'm alive and I killed *two people in the same day* and what are people going to *think* of me—

Oh.

I now have twenty-two days left to live.

Amazing. Abhorrent. I'm not quite sure who I am anymore.

"Yahenni! What happened, are you all right?!" a feminine marigold voice calls from nearby. They must have all made it down. I turn to see three humans and an elf staring shocked and concerned at me while the woman in the violet dress somehow manages to gracefully descend the ladder in heels.

The vehicle is crumpled up against the side of the other nearby statue. The enforcer I killed is hanging still and pathetic out of the side. My hands start to shake, and I realize in a corner of my mind that the others with me aren't even remotely fazed by what happened. This is nothing. They've seen worse.

I want to scream.

I want to sob.

I want to go home.

"It's all right, I'm fine." My voice breaks as I reply.

The others ease up as they take stock and quickly refocus.

Chandra nods, turns, and starts walking away with purpose.

Nissa looks from her to me and then runs to help me up.

She looks in the direction Chandra went off in. "I don't think Chandra actually knows where she's going, she just started walking."

I stand and straighten myself out. Shake out my cape.

"Gideon, can you call Chandra for me, please," Nissa says in typical softness to Gideon.

He cups his hands and yells, "WRONG WAY, CHANDRA!"

The redhead in the distance stops and about-turns back toward us. I watch as Nissa closes her eyes briefly and points in the opposite direction Chandra had been walking.

"Tell Chandra Yahenni's home is that way, and have Jace inform Ajani, Pia, and Mrs. Pashiri of our new location," she casually instructs. Gideon nods and walks away from us to inform the others.

I'm left with Nissa.

She lifts me easily and looks on with anxiety. "Are you hurt?"

"Physically, no."

Emotionally? I feel damaged without repair. Nissa is looking at me with tender sympathy...but under her concern is a small ember of surprise. I feel her subconsciously stamp it out. Below the level of her own perception, did she not expect me to be upset after killing someone...?

Her brow is furrowed in honest copper worry.

"Tell me what I can do to help."

I want to shrug, but instead I stand in silent distress. That ember I sensed is dead, extinguished with a flood of Nissa's own empathy. The elf moves toward me, her shoulders falling in compassion. "Yahenni, you have suffered enough."

She closes her eyes.

I feel a distant, tuneless song. A current of energy is delicately lifted from somewhere beneath me—is Nissa doing that?—and channeled into somewhere near my shoulder. I feel a reassuring stream of

my own city's vibrancy pass into me, comforting and pleasant. It doesn't heal, but it helps. A reminder that I am part of a much greater whole.

"I killed two people today, Nissa. I didn't have a choice; they were both going to kill me first. I—" My voice breaks, "I don't want to drain again. When I do it, I feel...everything."

The warm energy passing from the elf to my shoulder feels lovely. I stifle a sob.

"You must think so little of me now," I say more to myself than her. "How can you stand to go to a murderer's house to hide?"

"Because you are my friend," she says delicately. It's quiet, but her mood is picking around the phrase like a bird at a seed. Testing. Touching, deciding, landing at resolution.

Merciful neroli fills the space between us. I pause to decipher the meaning and sense what Nissa is trying to say.

...She has also made mistakes.

I look to the four humans walking our way. They're good people. Maybe they have regrets too.

The gentle energy continues to warm my shoulder. Her kindness allows a thought to bloom in my mind, and I understand it clearly. *These people are like me*.

I will certainly be forced to kill again as they will certainly be forced by responsibility to harm as well. But these people, these renegades...in the end, they help more than they harm. Our suffering is inevitable, but like these strangers, I possess tremendous power to create more good than bad in the world. And when I act on that, in return, won't it *feel amazing*?

I think of my own future death.

I have twenty-two days left to live.

I can do so much in twenty-two days. What a *wonderfully* long life to live.

Nissa's presence is a canopy of orange blossoms.

"Thank you, Nissa."

"You're welcome, Yahenni."

I turn to the others and wave them over as the sweet little river of energy fades back into the land beneath me. "This way to my place."