

Born of Aether

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The aetherborn of Ghirapur are a race of pleasure-seekers and adrenaline junkies. With a lifespan of up to four years, they consider the city their natural habitat and parties their playground. Although their lives are short, they also possess empathic abilities that allow them to experience the energies of those around them.

Yahenni, an investor, philanthropist, and socialite, knows their life is near an end. When they host one of their fabulously over-the-top parties before the Inventors' Fair, three unexpected guests arrive seeking dangerous knowledge.



Art by Jonas De Ro

I

I adore getting dressed in the mid-afternoon. There's something to be said about preparing for an all-nighter in the middle of the day, a level of foresight and preparation that can be lost when attending a last-minute party. I'm not dressing for two hours from now—I'm dressing for two days from now.

What kind of host looks like a thrown-together mess sixteen hours into their own party? Hosts who are *failures*. That's who.

The mid-afternoon shines through the curtains of my private chamber, illuminating the solid-gold vanity that dominates my largest wall. The light shimmers filtered and golden on the jewels, trinkets, and treasures abundant that peek from every drawer and glitter from every surface of the immense chest. I am aetherborn; I know when I will die and I know exactly how I'll spend my time getting there, and none of that time will be reserved for idiots who don't think I deserve to look good.

As I adorn myself with my second-favorite broaches, I can almost hear the commotion of the party staff downstairs. The caterers are making good use of my kitchen—organic beings are so fussy about their *food*. Luckily my caterer, Nived, has never failed me. He's currently hard at work in the kitchen preparing for the people with stomachs; a fountain of palm wine, trays upon trays of samosas, pani puri, eggplant curry, and a massive table of desserts (the shriekhand always has a line in front of it, so it must taste good). The rest of my staff right now is busy assembling the canopy on the roof. Long after the meaty tired masses of partygoers will descend to rest, my siblings of aether and will I dance into the night, the day, and the night after, lost to the ecstasy of the celebration.

But that will come later. After two and a quarter seconds of consideration and rummaging through my vanity, I decide on the jasmine-and-aether-infused attar for the night. It's a personal favorite. My reflection catches my eye. I preen. I don't look a day past three!

Even from down here I can sense the happy excitement and sandalwood-scented anticipation of the party staff up on the roof. I've come to pity other species for their inability to sense what we can. "Empathic resonance" is what they called it when my kind first crawled out of early aether refineries fifty years ago. "A curious ability to accurately sense the emotional state of beings in a nearby perimeter." They took great credit for the invention of us without considering for a moment that we invented ourselves. I huff a sad laugh. The only thing we've invented since then are ways to entertain ourselves.

As I dab the attar on my wrists and neck, I watch a tiny piece of my dermis dissipate into a wisp of gentle smoke. The more my hard dermis vanishes, the closer I am to my end. I can see the blue of my aether flowing underneath the crack. I'm struck by its beauty. It's lovely. A gentle reminder to hurry up. I cover it with an extra bracelet.

My kind are innately aware of the passing of time and exactly how much of it each of us has left. It's like waiting for a train. Every noise lifts your head and every gust of wind shifts your seat, but it still hasn't come quite yet.

I'm dressed, glimmering and ready. I have fifty-four days left to live.

II

Properly gilded, I ascend the steps to the roof and hit a wall of sound. There is no better feeling than being slapped in the face with the firm hand of party music.

The canopy casts welcome shade on the plush carpet my staff dragged up from downstairs. The decorators have put magnolias on the tables, dangled them over the sides of the building, and beautiful silks line the rails and decorate shimmering filigree in the late afternoon sun. As I walk I easily refill empty glasses, dodge two humans kissing (I beam at that pair. I set them up at the last party—it's always nice to use my powers for good), direct dwarves to the restroom, and adjust the volume on the domestic-model panharmonicon.

Forget substances and adrenaline—*parties* are the finest vice. I relish the sensation of my guest's pleasure. I have no idea what eating a roasted animal feels like, but I imagine it's something like that. I indulge in my hosting duties, and my guests bloom with praise.

My dear friend and ace pilot Depala (*the* Depala!) sits relaxed and easy on a more private couch. Her hyena rests at her side, happily gnawing a bone while Depala toys with a golden leash.



Art by Greg Opalinski

“Depala, darling, my parties are always brighter with you here,” I hug her earnestly and lean down to give the hyena a loving scratch behind the ears. The hyena nuzzles into my hand.

“She’s fond of you, Yahenni,” Depala says with a trusting smile. “Finding time to relax now that you’ve retired?”

“Somebody keeps up with the news awful closely,” I chide while refilling her glass.

“Usually just the racing results, but I sift through the business news too.”

My family line made our fortune as investors. I announced my retirement as soon as I knew I had less than sixty days left. Bold investment strategies are much easier to make when you don’t live to see the outcome.

I take a seat at her side. “You’ll be attending my penultimate party in a month then, I assume? It would be a hell of a bore without the best pilot in Ghirapur.”

Depala smiles, hand absentmindedly petting her hyena. “Wouldn’t miss it. Aetherborn customs are the best.”

“I agree wholeheartedly. We simply don’t have time for anything less, darling.”

Depala’s mouth tightens. Her brow furrows as her eyes dart for anyone who might be listening, “So... you aren’t going to put it off?”

I can’t help but bristle.

“I know what you can do, Yahenni,” she says with a meaningful look.

“I’m not willing to go those lengths, Depala.” I pick at the crumbling dermis on my arm. I’ve known for some time that I am capable of essence draining, but I’m not willing to use it. It’s a rare gift that

is best kept unexpressed. I couldn't steal the life force from another sentient being just to cling to life past my expiration date. What would my friends think of me?

"It's an option," she says flippantly. "I don't know how it works, how much time you'd get from... someone else. I wasn't sure if you'd consider it."

"It's crossed my mind, but I want to go out the old-fashioned way," I force myself to say.

At that moment, Nived, my caterer, brings over a bottle of Depala's favorite beverage. So thoughtful—he's almost as good as I am.

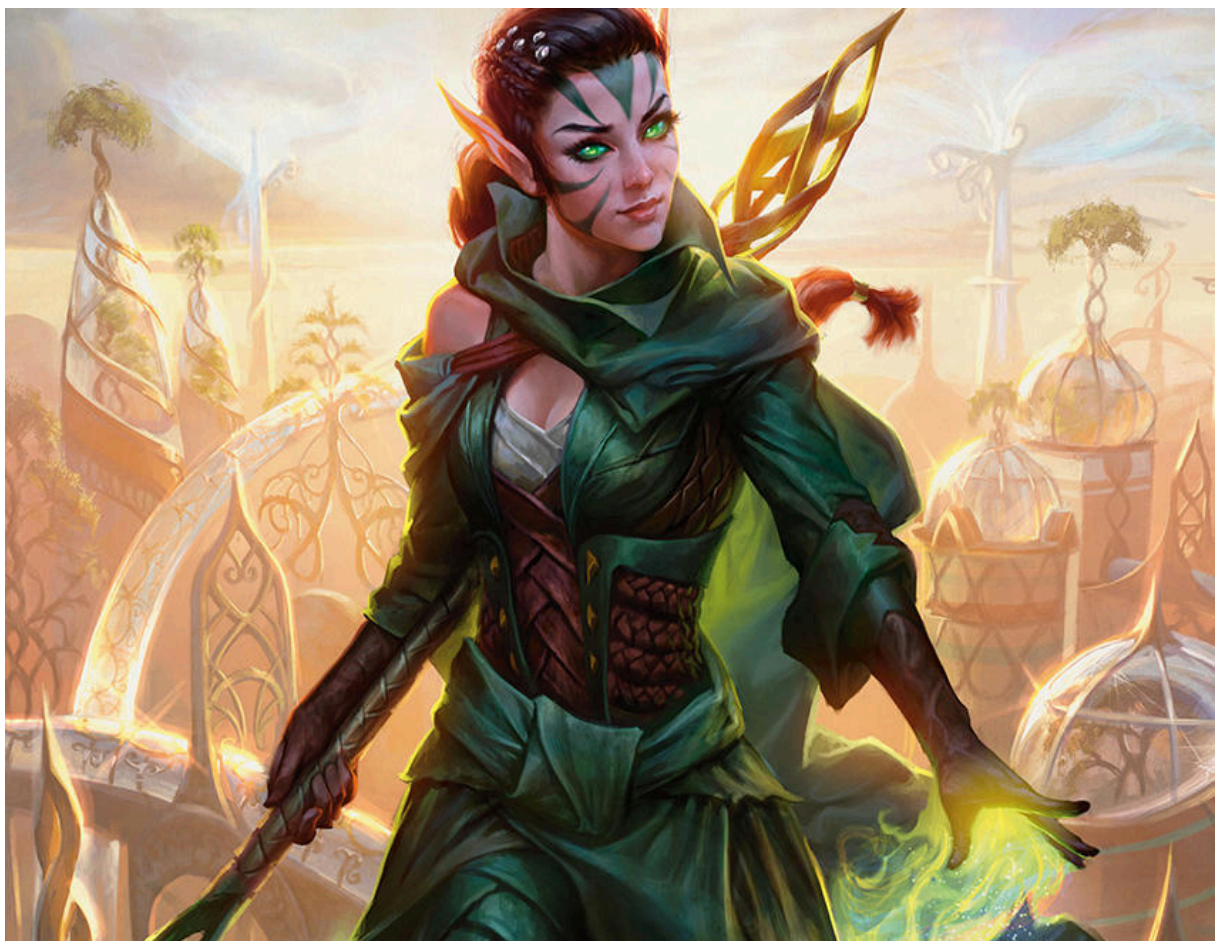
"You're a good person, Yahenni," Depala says once we're alone. "A few extra days isn't worth the guilt of doing so."

I'm uncertain if she's right.

III

Three women stand outside the entrance to my flat. Mrs. Pashiri I know instantly (one of the most famous inventors in the world, as well as the fiercest board game enthusiast I know). To her right is a young red-headed woman in an out-of-fashion wrap (that style is from *years* ago— does she go outside?).

On the other side is the most fascinating person I think I've ever seen.



Art by Willian Murai

Her eyes are endless, a brilliant green from center to lid, a vivid beauty that is betrayed by an uncomfortable stance. It is tragic for someone who *looks* so interesting to be so tense. Her dress is decorated with brilliant flowers (are those real?) and cut in a way that it could fit only her. Had I any interest in romancing persons, I would be tempted, but to me her allure is strictly in terms of social gain. My goals as a host are to make my guests happy, of course, but being seen palling with interesting people is always a bonus.

“Yahenni, my friend,” Mrs. Pashiri says, “this is Chandra and Nissa. Chandra, Nissa, this is Yahenni. They are an investor for young inventors in need and one of the most generous philanthropists I know. May we join the festivities?”

“Absolutely, Mrs. Pashiri.” What an introduction. I’m internally blushing.

I hold open the door for the elf. “*Gorgeous* eyes, darling,” I compliment as Nissa enters. She smiles tightly.

The red-headed one stands awkwardly outside. I look at her dubiously and turn to Mrs. Pashiri.

“That is Pia Nalaar’s daughter, Chandra,” she says.

I stand aside and let the daughter of the most dangerous person in Ghirapur enter. “The party is upstairs, so let’s chat where it’s quieter,” I say.

I lead them to my patio in the back on the ground floor. Mrs. Pashiri catches my ear as we walk.

“Pia Nalaar was captured, you know.” I did not know. This is unusual for me.

“Pia doesn’t make mistakes like that. Tell me what you know.”

We walk, and Mrs. Pashiri explains the situation. Potted plants and a cheerful fountain line the exterior of the sitting space, and four weathered seats are enclosed in the middle. The sound of the party on the roof trickles down and provides a nice cover for our conversation. I let them sit and wave a staff member to supply drinks for my guests as Mrs. Pashiri finishes filling me in. I mull over the arrest of Pia Nalaar.

“I’m afraid I’m at a loss,” I say, “I don’t know where the Consulate would take prisoners of Pia’s standing.”

Mrs. Pashiri nods, “I see.”

“I apologize. I take great pride in making use of my connections, but this one is a dead end for me.”

I feel a hot wave of smoky anger to my right. “If it was your parent you’d help us,” Chandra jabs.

“I don’t have one of those,” I say with a flippant shrug. Chandra’s frown tightens. She feels foolish. She really shouldn’t—it doesn’t bother me.

My waitstaff returns and I distribute a cup of palm wine to Mrs. Pashiri and a glass of wood alcohol to the elf. I’ve found in my experience that elves tend to appreciate the stronger stuff—a trait I admire and envy greatly.

“There may still be people of use to us here,” Mrs. Pashiri adds, taking her cup with gentle, weathered hands.

I think on the guests upstairs and begin running through my connections.

Suddenly there’s a commotion at the front door. Nissa jumps, Chandra looks on with curiosity. From our place on the patio, I can see a gaggle of aetherborn burst through the front door carrying a chair with a rapidly dissolving aetherborn up top. The aetherborn atop the chair is glowing with the bril-

liance of near-death. Their dermis is dissipating, and they are more smoke than form at this point. It's embarrassing. I look away.

"*It's my penultimate party!*" they yell with enthusiasm. The motley group heaves the chair and moves the living wake up the stairs toward the roof.

Chandra looks at me with amusement, "Do you know who that is?"

"I'd rather not," I say, picking at the place on my wrist I covered earlier in the day. A tiny wisp of smoke escapes. I hate watching myself die like this.

Chandra places her hands on the table with purpose and stands. "*Welp* . I'm going to start asking around. Nissa—"

"I'm fine," the elf replies softly. Her energy is cold and bitter with unease. She is *not* fine, so I decide to intervene.

"Nissa, was it? Follow me; you *must* tell me where you found that ensemble."

IV

We ascend the stairs until we reach the floor just below the rooftop. I lead Nissa out to the balcony. What sort of host would I be to have an uncomfortable guest at my own party?

"You seemed to want an escape," I remark.

The elf crosses her arms. "I'm fine," she repeats. She's still not fine, but her curiosity spills over, "What's a penultimate party?"

"The last thing we aetherborn do is die, so the second-to-last thing we do is throw a penultimate party with mandatory attendance. If one doesn't have enough friends, one hijacks someone else's celebration." I motion toward the roof, the sound of the party and the dying aetherborn cheering upstairs. "This loser is, unfortunately, welcome to stay."

The elf doesn't respond. She may not speak much, but her energy is incredibly easy to read.

"Now then. On a scale of one to wishing for death, how much do you hate parties? Be honest."

"Eight. Nine. Whatever a baloth gnawing off my leg is."

I make a noncommittal noise. "That bad, huh?"

Those incredible eyes unfocus. She remembers something, and the aura around her has a tinge of bitersweetness.

"We used to have parties back home."

I quietly refill her cup, "And what did you do at them?"

"We would talk, reconnect. Sometimes we would hike somewhere special."

"Do you still go to parties in those places often?"



Blighted Gorge | Art by Jung Park

Nissa is silent. I sense those places aren't there anymore. "Well, then. What can I do to make this particular party easier for you?"

"Could we go sit somewhere separate?"

"Darling, I'd go to the ends of the city for you. Platonically. And only if you asked me to nicely. And only if it's not raining or anything." The elf is amused by this. I sense her relax, a bit. Her energy picks up with the change in song upstairs. How sweet. She likes music. I ignore the puff of my own dermis that dissipates off the back of my neck. "Let's head up to the roof. You stick with me—the people-watching is *exquisite*."

I sense Nissa's apprehension and gently clear a path through the crowd. Along the way upstairs I greet a new guest and quickly pass a handkerchief to another guest with some samosa crumbs on their face. The party has reached a natural lull and the attendees chat pleasantly with one another. I lead the elf to the end of the canopy sectioned off by a strategically-placed barrier of potted plants.

An attendant approaches us as we sit. I accept the vial of attar they pass to me and catch their ear, "Have someone lower the volume on the panharmonicon for my guest and stick to the slow stuff." There is no greater treasure than an accommodating waitstaff.

"This may come off as presumptuous, but you don't strike me as a city girl," I say smoothly. The elf cracks a small smile. I sit back on the couch, "You've never encountered aetherborn, have you?"

"No. Tell me about your kind," Nissa says softly, with earnestness. She is the most active listener I have ever actively watched listen. Her gaze is only mildly disconcerting.

"We are a sentient byproduct of the aether cycle. Our families lay claim to areas younglings pop up and then adopt whoever stumbles out. From day one we are fully formed and have a shelf life of anywhere from four weeks to four years."

"What you describe reminds me of elemental beings I've encountered," Nissa says, brow furrowing.

"You've encountered more than I have, in that case. All I know is what I am."

“I don’t understand.”

“Understand what?”

She tries a gesture, but the meaning is beyond me.

I feel a bit awkward. “Is there something wrong?”

She tries another half gesture, then pauses, thinking over her words. She finally arrives at a sentence.

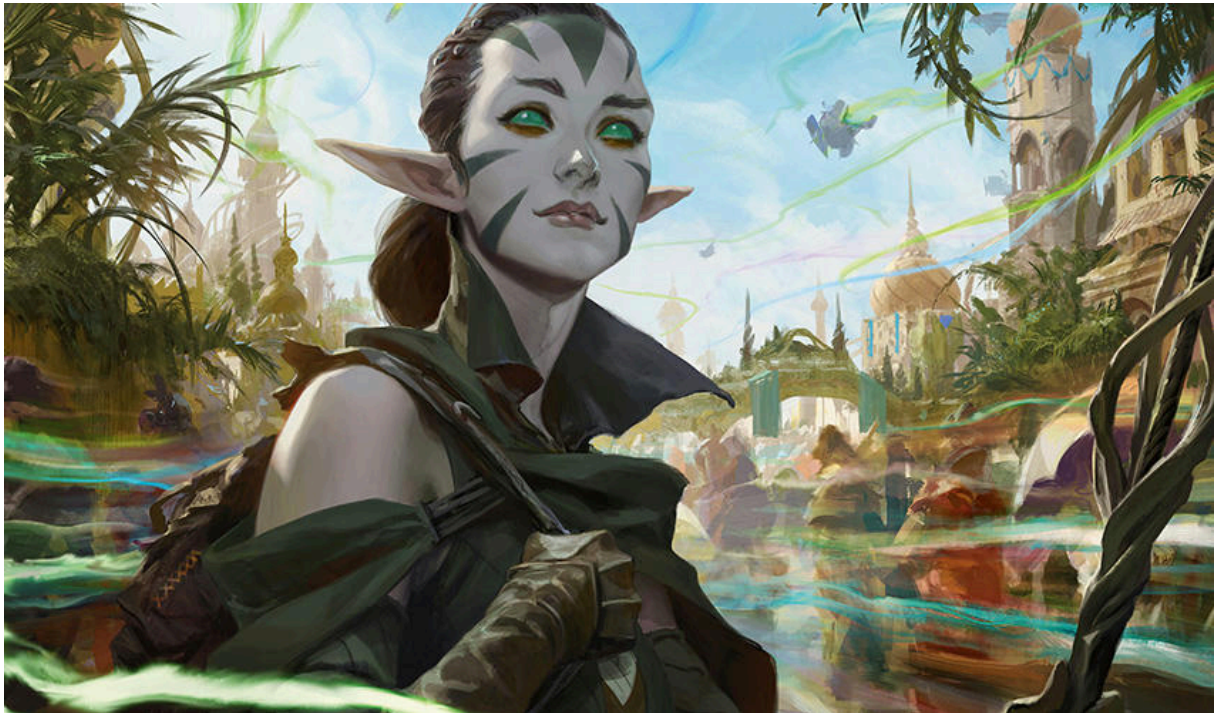
“I don’t understand how something of nature can be native to a city.”

“We *are* the city. I’m made of aether, and one day, I’ll return to it. Nature is all around us, it just may look different than what you’re used to.”

Nissa makes a small noise. She had clearly never thought of it that way.

During the pause in conversation I silently point another guest in the direction of the restroom.

The silence persisting, I watch Nissa close her eyes. What is she doing? Her face seems confused. Ear tilts as if she’s listening. Does she hear something I don’t? A corner of her mouth lifts in a smile.



Art by Wesley Burt

“I feel it. This world is structured. Cyclical.”

Somehow, this elf can sense the nature of my home.

I sit back, at ease. “The Great Conduit is always present, even here in Ghirapur. My people are proof of that. Our wilderness doesn’t care if this city is crowded, its rhythm continues all the same.”

A full smile climbs up Nissa’s face.

I lift a nearby elven pitcher. “More?”

“Yes please,” Nissa responds automatically. I refill her cup. She may be unwilling to disclose much, but I can feel her buzzing with wonder. I must be full of revelations tonight.

V

I hear a commotion downstairs and stand. Nissa sets down her cup and looks at me with a question in her endless eyes. Age has heightened my ability to sense, and I know immediately what is wrong and where.

I stop myself from running down the stairs (I fall apart more with exerted effort) and make my way purposefully to the restroom on the floor below me. Guests part the way, and I realize that Nissa and now Chandra are following in my wake.

At the end of the hall in front of the bathroom stands an imposing member of the Consulate security force. The bathroom door is clearly locked and he is attempting to shove his way in. This enforcer is tall—nearly the height of the potted tree next to the door. His clothing is old but the hemming new; this man is no stranger to physical confrontation. The weapons at his side are not fit for street patrol, but the jingle of keys against his armor betrays his position. He must work in the prison system.

I motion for Chandra and Nissa to hide behind the corner while I approach the man alone.

“Can I help you, sir?”

The enforcer lets go of the door handle and looks me up and down. “A wanted convict is currently barricaded behind that door. They’re coming with me regardless of how you feel.”

“So you came into my party—*my house*—without an invitation?”

The enforcer takes a half step closer and looks down his chest at me.

“Do you want your party to be in violation of noise ordinances?”

“...No...”

“Then don’t interrupt official Consulate business.”

I do not doubt that this enforcer will shut my party down just to get to whoever is behind that door. The Consulate is petty like that. I despise petty.

I turn my back to the pig of a man and find Chandra and Nissa. There’s an easy solution to this. These two are firmly built—they can fight—and for their favor I can provide them something in return. “I’ll give you the information you need if you’ll help me.”

“What do you need?” Nissa asks softly.

“Nissa, I need you to escort this unwelcome guest outside.”

The elf smiles. “With pleasure,” she says with calm conviction. She raises a hand and a gentle light glows in those endless eyes.

Something in my chest sings a little, but the song isn’t for me. My waking mind tells me to ignore the strange humming I feel at a distance. I turn to Chandra.

“Chandra, I need you to help me break down the door when he leaves.”

Pia Nalaar’s daughter looks at me with genuine surprise. She says in a strangely small voice, “Really?”

“Yes really. My body is weakening and I can’t get through on my own. You up for it, darling?”

Chandra’s only response is a slightly alarming, barely contained chortle. It is very disconcerting hearing that sound come out of a young human woman.

A thud around the corner—I lean over and can’t help but let out a small noise of alarm. The potted plant by the door is inexplicably wrapped around the enforcer’s leg and the man is dazed on the floor.

It may be best if I just...not think about the logistics of how this all happened. Either way, I don't have time to care—I bound around the corner and lean down next to the man's face.

"All right," I whisper. "Pia Nalaar. Which prison is she being held in?"

The enforcer groans. I think he broke a tooth in his fall. No matter—he doesn't need to talk to tell me where she is. I open my senses and speak quickly.

"Kohali Prison?"

The man groans, and his energy stinks of irritation.

"Gupha Penitentiary?"

Impatience.

"Dhund prison?"

A distant alarm of spice and salt, blooming into panic as he meets eyes with me. Had I the inability to read his energy I would never have been able to guess the answer from his face. He's good. I pat the man on the head. "Thank you for your cooperation."

I turn to the elf. "Nissa, if you will?"

She walks over and easily hoists the man over her shoulders in a fireman's carry and casually takes him outside. Well, damn.

"How much of this place should I leave standing?" Chandra interrupts, pulling her goggles down.

"Ideally all of it except for this specific door?"

Chandra nods, grinning from ear to ear, and quickly melts the locks with a white-hot finger to the metal. I shake my head. Humans and their party tricks.

I sense Nissa emerge behind me as Chandra finishes. The stink of too-much-attar leaks out of the space between the door and the wall.

"Anyone with lungs go back to the party," I announce to the rest of the onlookers, turning my attention to the guests. Mrs. Pashiri has joined them, and looks on in concern. I move close to them.

"Dhund Prison is where you'll find Pia," I whisper.

Mrs. Pashiri gasps. "Not there," she says, "please tell me he wasn't telling the truth."

I shake my head. Mrs. Pashiri turns to Chandra, "Baral is stationed there."

The air around me instantly rises in temperature. "We need to go now," Chandra says tightly. Mrs. Pashiri nods and the two head down the stairs to depart. Nissa holds back, and locks her gaze on me.

"Thank you, Yahenni, for the conversation."

I nod. "No problem at all, darling. If you are free in a month, you should come back. I'll be throwing the biggest party of my life. Even you wouldn't want to miss out."

She smiles, and in a moment she is gone.

VI

I open the now-unlocked door and am met with a wave of perfumed stink. The door closes behind me, and I turn to see who locked themselves in here. I had sensed caged distress earlier, and sure enough, here sits the source. At the end of the bathroom, sitting on the floor with their back to the wall, is

the dying aetherborn from earlier. Their dermis has almost entirely vanished, and the blue glow of their essence mixes strangely with the light of the setting sun filtering in through the window. Empty bottles of perfume are scattered at their feet.



Art by Ryan Yee

“Way to hog the good stuff to yourself,” I say as a light-hearted balm. I’m more than aware that my quip is a piece of silk on a gaping, bloody wound.

“I’ve got about a minute left,” they wheeze, “I was being tailed by the Consulate and didn’t want to go out in front of everyone.”

“You escape from prison or something?” I ask, my eye catching a broken security anklet on their leg. The aetherborn only groans.

I sit beside them. I know if it were me I’d want company. “Does anyone upstairs know your name?” I ask.

“No. They’re just here for the party.”

“That’s the only reason any of us are here, darling.”

I inhale the wafts of perfume lingering in the air. As the other aetherborn continues to dissipate, their energy mingles with the spilled attar. I’ve seen many of my kin in their dying moments, and it is almost always with an air of triumph. They fought and kicked and scratched and reveled in the glory of *life*, and here they are at the finish line.

I take hold of what’s left of their hand.

I can feel their energy pulsing underneath my palm.

“Did you have a good run?”

The other aetherborn turns their head to me and looks me over. They strain to speak but manage to get out a single affirmation. “You bet your ass I did.”

In that instant I am filled with envy. I have so little time left. My life, this aetherborn's life, *all the lives* of my kind are spent chasing and cramming as much experience as we can into a pathetically small span of time. It isn't fair that we have to burn so fast.

It isn't fair I'm next.

The other aetherborn convulses and emits a dark smoke. Their dermis crumbles and the contained aether escapes and rises in a gentle vapor to the ceiling.

I sit silently under the haze of aether above me. It's lovely.

After a moment I stand and open the window. The stink and the energy escape into the air, into the world, into the Conduit. I turn to the pile of clothes left behind on the floor and gather them along with their jewelry and accessories. A coin purse, a clock, a bundle of Consulate documents. I quickly skim through them—a minor infraction for petty theft. They shouldn't have been sent to prison in the first place.

I crumple the documents up in anger. Those Consulate bastards are just killing us faster.

As I sort the stranger's jewelry and put on one of their bracelets, I'm hit with a sudden thought.

What if I left the party and went out? What if I hunted down the Consulate filth that detained this aetherborn and gave them what they had coming? I'd drained essence (once, accidentally) before; it felt *amazing*. I could do that again. I could do that again a hundred times over, if someone deserved it.

I watch a tiny wisp of smoke lift away from my skin toward the open window.

I think of the unconscious Consulate enforcer left on the street outside my house.

He'll still be there in a few hours.

I could sneak away for a few minutes.

No one would notice.

No. The time will come for that. When it's me on the floor of a bathroom surrounded by empty perfume and bursting from my seams...maybe then I'll do it.

I have other things to do with the time I have left.

I grab one of the half-empty bottles of aether-infused attar and douse myself in it. Vivid determined andric cedar. The jolt of energy runs through my being, the glint of newly borrowed gold shines at my neck, and the rumble of the party echoes from the roof.

I storm upstairs and emerge to a just-set sun and the glow of lanterns in filigree stands. The crowd parts, respectful of my position of power in the ecosystem of my making, and the panharmonicon quiets. I walk purposefully to the main canopy, arms raised with intent. My guests hush and turn their attention toward me.

I yell, "Mark your calendars for a month from now, distinguished guests and undistinguished riffraff!"

My friends and guests cheer. They're like me. They relish their high class and low bars.

"I'm hosting the party of a lifetime here after the conclusion of the Inventors' Fair. I expect each and every one of you to be there, and tell everyone you know that they would be *fools* to miss out."

They cheer. I feel like I could live for ten more years.

"Enough of that, though. You all don't want to hear more about *me*, right?"

The party screams, "*Of course we do!*"

“*Well too bad!* I’m sick of talking! Get on the floor, turn the music up, and somebody open another cask for everyone in here with a liver!”

The crowd loses their minds. The collective thrill of revelry rushes through me and I am lost to its currents. I rush into the storm of people dancing and am hit with a spray of aether-attar someone tossed in the air. The music turns up and the beat of the song drives the movement of the bodies around me and everything feels *alive*. The glow of the aetherborn dimly reflects off the sweat of the dancing mass, soft tendrils of aether dissipates into the sky above, and I am alive I am alive I am alive and in this one singular moment I am drowning in the revelry of existence.