

MEMORY LEAK

A wasteland thriller in the Ashen Silence

Robin V. Belle

Dedicated to June, beloved friend and fierce ally.

And to Willabee, the backbone of Shrike Tabletop, and constant companion.

Thank you for helping with editing and feedback, and every other magnificent thing you bring to my life.

“The old days were long gone. That wonderful world didn't exist anymore. There was no use spending your life whining about it. You had to spit on its grave and never look back.”

— Dimitri Glukhovsky, *Metro 2033*

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1. Mercenary

The “sky” above East Bekton Park was a bright baby blue, painted by white cottony blobs that lazily drifted across it. A faint breeze ran through the trees and shrubbery, brushing a few strands of auburn hair into my face. I scowled, this was all so fucking fake!

I never got what people saw in a simulation of an ancient park, no one alive had ever seen this world! Everything was just a little wrong. The sky was too blue, the clouds lacked depth, the plants and animals uncannily flawless, and the breeze too consistently gentle. It was nostalgia for those who didn’t care to remember things as they really were. So, just normal nostalgia, I supposed.

A ticket here cost me nearly a whole month’s rent, but I wasn’t paying for my entry that day. I looked around, no sign of my contact yet. I stood at the edge of a gazebo, leaning over a railing, surrounded by a circular hedge. Within the overly manicured landscape were a flower garden and a small pond filled with fish that seemed to change colors. My agent had said the meeting would take place at 7:00 p.m., but I couldn’t tell the time there. No clocks. Nothing to indicate a change in the time of day.

I wasn’t the only one waiting - I knew there would be others on the job, but this was my first glimpse of most of them, though one of them I knew. She stood by the pond of fish, watching their shifting hues closely. Arina, an elek with the common shimmering golden irisless eyes, long rounded ears, and a small frame. She wore a cute yellow shawl, a white sweater, and slim grey leggings. We’d never worked together. She was new, but I’d only heard good things.

Meanwhile, lounging in a lawn chair was a yasre with grey skin and a lush plumage of red feathers. They wore robes with the Divine Star emblazoned on the front. A priest? Their long avian legs dangled over the chair’s edge. They lifted their head to look at me, staring intently. I turned away with my cheeks flushed and walked toward the round table in the gazebo’s center.

Someone else was sitting there. Long raven black hair and piercing blue eyes. They wore a white button-up and pants that matched their hair. Something about their posture, expression, and aura declared that ‘woman’ was the wrong label to give them. Human, but unusually flawless to the point that I figured they must have had some work done. They paid me no mind, so I didn’t pay them any either.

I took a seat and my prosthetic leg creaked against the wooden chair. Was this natural? Damn, this place was looking more and more expensive. The seat next to me was occupied by a bag left by someone more trusting than I was- mine was slung over my shoulder.

I set my bag on the table and started rummaging around. I took out a notepad and pen, flipping to the current page. Columns of numbers were assigned to labels. Expenses. Gear, permits, medication, weaponry, armor -everything I would need to get back to work. I had been pulled away from my true calling by the accident. I almost subconsciously rubbed my metal forearm as I did the math in my head. I totaled it up, wincing. I made some adjustments and calculated again. Still too high.

My broker had told me that this job would be a good chance to cover the bulk of it. I thumbed a saint's pendant around my neck and prayed to the gods he was right. I prayed for other things too, usual things, like good health for friends and my family back east. I prayed for myself, too. I beseeched the gods to get me out into the open air again - real air, away from the city and all the bullshit. I begged for the wastelands, focusing my prayers on The Wanderer, and to be able to go back to my old life out there.

I heard footsteps moving into the gazebo's interior. A human woman in fine corporate attire with hair in box braids, flanked by a huge robotic figure with a smooth, featureless head unit. Pinkish fungus sprouted out of each of the figure's exposed joints. The woman looked at my folded hands, "Oh please, don't let me interrupt!"

"I was just about done." I mouthed an amen and sat up.

The other two filed in, Arina nodded and said hello, while the yasre glanced but didn't say anything. We sat in a tight circle around the table, about at capacity. The robot, who I presumed to be a bodyguard, stood over us.

The woman in the nice suit gave a small "hmm" and set her hands on the table. She had this serious demeanor. "Thanks for meeting me this evening. Oren Maklivi says you're the best he has currently available."

I tilted my head and looked at the others. Oren must have been expanding. I replied, "What's the job Ms...?"

“Just call me Z, and this is my friend Hale.” she gestured to the fungal robot, a sporeborn. Hale waved their metal hand on a slight delay. Z spread her arms in a welcoming gesture, “I believe introductions are in order.”

She started pointing to her right and went around the table counterclockwise.

“You’re Dorian, yes?” The brooding and beautiful human figure nodded his head to the side in an affirmative.

“Arina.” The lass perked up and waved to everyone.

“Reverend Temperance, it’s an honor!” The yasre grinned and made a sitting-bowing gesture.

Then me, “Alice! Oren spoke so highly of you.”

“Vulture works fine.” I corrected. The table looked at me. I shrugged. “It’s what they call me.”

“OK, Vulture.” Z continued, “Well you all, down to business. I need something stolen, though the problem is, the owner sees this coming.”

“Who’s the mark?” Temperance spoke with a thick accent. The closed vowels and emphasized r’s indicated Psreidish origin.

“A corporate executive. An elek by the name of Kanra’Las.”

Arina raised her hand but spoke openly anyway. “What corp?” She tried to lower her voice to sound professional, though no one was convinced.

“Does it matter?” Z raised an eyebrow.

Dorian interjected. “Yes, actually. There are different legal systems at play- one hands us off to the feds, another ships us to the lunar colony.”

“I would suggest you not get caught then... but in the fairness of disclosure, STARCAST.” Dorian’s spine straightened and he took a deep breath. The rest of us were a little relieved. Not the worst of the options, but also not the best.

“Is this job STARCAST related?” Dorian replied.

“Most certainly! Kanra’Las is a traitor. At risk of devastating the company. He’s attempting to sell the next year’s worth of broadcasting schedules to our competitor!”

I answered this time. “Which competitor?”

“SBN.” A big conglomerate out east in Saliana, where my parents still lived.

“So why not just have internal security handle it?” Temperance pried, fidgeting with the silver cap on one of their tusks.

“Good question Reverend. The ‘mark’ knows I’m onto him. I work a few rungs below him at STARCAST. When I caught onto him, he destroyed every bit of evidence pertaining to his dealings with SBN. He’s hiding away in his private estate now. If I wasn’t already sure, he’d have gotten away with it.”

“Sounds like he still has.” Temperance’s bluntness got a laugh out of me.

Z pursed her lips, “Not just yet. He may have burned the records, but there’s something I am confident he still has.” She signaled Hale, who produced something from a storage cavity in their chest and handed it to her.

Z held it on display, it looked like a cylindrical memory cartridge, with distinct prongs at the end. Perfectly normal tech.

“So... he has it on a memory cart?”

“Not yet, but you’ll extract it. He has an induction port. This is keyed to take information, not give it.”

I folded my arms, “So we’re stealing a guy’s memories?”

“You’re stealing a guy’s *incriminating* memories.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s beyond my technical capacity.”

“Me too.” Temperance agreed.

“I could probably figure it out... But same.” Dorian was staring at his nails.

“I could do it.” Arina chimed in. We all looked at her. “I’d need some specs, but I figure you have those, right?”

“You would be right.” Z gave a perfect white-toothed smile.

“So that figures Arina, but what’s my part in this?” I was deeply curious now.

“His villa is out in corp-territory, beyond the shield, and sealed off in the wastelands. I’m led to believe you’re an expert on that kind of travel.”

I had to stop myself from beaming, “Yeah. What about the priest?”

Temperance answered for Z, “I do other things you know. A person needs work... consider me something of a demolitionist. Though, I know a few spells too.”

“And Dorian?”

Z extended an open hand to the glowering man, “A fine infiltrator.”

Dorian nodded reluctantly, “And I practice enchantment.”

“Okay, so that settles that. What’s the window?”

The corporate woman held out an upturned palm, “I need this done within a week.”

“Then we need to start today. It’ll take us a day there and a day back travel time. What’s the pay?”

“10,000 Standard Astaelian scerns down for your whole team. 50,000 additional for each of you upon completion of the job. Plus anything you grab while in the villa”

All four of us made eye contact. It was good money.

Temperance rubbed their upper lip against their tusks. “What do we know about the estate?”

“I’m afraid that will be on you to figure out. Kanra’Las kept most aspects secret, even the coordinates took some backchannels to find.”

The priest scowled. “So we’re just supposed to hit a rich asshole’s fortified house with no recon?”

I sighed, “I think I know someone.”

The meeting concluded. We got the drop box in which we’d leave the evidence acquired. No further contact with Z beyond that -the usual protocol. Dorian basically disappeared, but Temperance and Arina kept talking. I joined them for a bit, agreeing where to meet later, but I slipped out early. At that moment, I was desperate to get out of that surreal fever dream of a place.

The sky of East Bekton Park bent into the edge of a hemispheric dome. Sets of double doors lined the exit. I rushed to the least crowded exit line, and passed the security check to make sure I wasn’t taking any of the “wild” life with me. Then, I was out.

The interior dome gave way to the gargantuan dome of shimmering amethyst hexagons that surrounded all of New Bekton. This field of energy shielding the city from the rolling clouds of ash above, turned black by the night. The idyllic sounds of “nature” were replaced with the buzz of traffic and life across the megacity. Ahead, the sprawling ring of lowtown. Behind, the ritz and glamor of the midtown and uptown rings. In the center of it all, the grand spire that shot all the way into orbit. The smell of chemical exhaust hit my nose. It wasn’t my favorite, but at least it felt more honest.

I caught an aircab and considered where to go to find my contact. It was Thursday, so I had a pretty good guess. “Lowtown, Ria’s Sanctuary!” I shouted over the driver’s music.

Ria’s was a large rectangular building. A former mineral refinery, which showed in the pipework and venting all across its structure. It had been around for a few decades, definitely longer than I have.

The line wrapped around the side of the building, and I took my place. People of all shapes and sizes -some with no apparent modifications, others transformed into entirely new creatures. One that looked a lot like an old-world giraffe, another with three sets of wings. With Ria’s Sanctuary, the only rule was ‘no men allowed.’ Everything else was fine.

It took me an hour to get through the queue. It was almost 11 now, and I hoped the person I was looking for would still be there. Some girls with matching glowing hair offered me a bump of Frost. I declined respectfully, though they didn't know what to make of me saying it would make me sick. They started talking to me about dosage and safety, which I sat through patiently until it was our turn at the bouncer.

Haelga was at the door tonight. Good, Haelga knew me. They were big, even for a primas-ika. I always wondered if they had gotten muscular-skeletal work done, but it never really felt like my business to ask. Their blueish scales and orange horns were illuminated fuschia from the light of the club's airlock. A sharp-toothed grin,

“Vulture! How ya doin’ girl?”

The girls behind me looked a little envious that I was recognized. I relished it, “Haelga! It’s been a while. I’m alright, just working!”

“Are you only working tonight? Kal’s gonna get mad if I keep letting you in without you buying any drinks.”

“Have you told Kal to start stocking things my system can process?”

“Actually, yeah! I told her to get some Korvuni Blue. It’s a wine but don’t let that fool you, it’s intense. Nothing alchemical or anything that’d be an issue for you org-” They stopped themselves.

“It’s fine, organic isn’t a slur. Not a bad one at least.” I really felt no shame in my condition, though I appreciated their care.

“Right.” They looked at the line of increasingly irate women and nonbinary people behind me. They handed me a headset. “You’re good to go in. Catch me on my break!”

“You know I will!” I probably wouldn’t, but no need to spoil the moment.

The airlock closed behind me, enough people to cycle. Under the environmental shield, it was more of a formality, available for emergencies. Some people made use of the complimentary lockers inside to stow some belongings and change into their clubwear. We could all feel the thrumming bass of the music within. Someone pressed the cycle button. It ran its process, and upon completion, the interior door popped open.

I stepped out and was hit with a wall of sounds that moved everything around me. A heavy, pulsing bassline that drowned out the melodies above them. I worked on my headset, meant to help talk over the noise. To my left, the bar, to my right, a sea of people on the dance floor. I stopped by Kal at the bar and played nice. Ordered the Korvuni Blue, which tasted like fermented citrus, and hit like a truck. Haelga made a good call.

I paid for the whole bottle, took it, and traversed the floor from the outskirts, along the tables on the far side. A sea of bodies writhed to the music, currently being spun by a DJ with skin made of gold. Resobeat, this style was called. Not really my thing.

I stepped to the side of two yasre passionately making out. One's feathers had been shaped like a mohawk and the other was seemingly normal, aside from an extra set of yellow and red eyes. I tried to get up somewhere high and look around, but before I could, my headset came alive, "Alice!" The voice I was looking for, but I didn't see the source. I did a 180-degree turn, and there she was.

She was sitting at a table, beckoning me to come over. Small for a human, though for all I know, she had done that on purpose. Yellow hair that formed into trills, matched with bright red spots on her cheeks that gave her the aesthetic of a long extinct cockatiel. She wore a sweatshirt that hid her frame, which was contrasted with black shorts. Her boots were up on the seat. Birdie.

I approached the table as she shooed two others away. She sat up straight and looked very happy to see me. Good, I was worried things might be weird. "Alice! I haven't seen you in so long. Or, I think they call you Vulture around here?"

"You checking up on me, Birdie?" I smiled through the awkward feeling in the bottom of my stomach.

Birdie frowned, "We had such a good time a few weeks ago. I guess I just wanted to know you were real... That I didn't make you up."

I fought a blush. She was sweet. Too sweet, that was the problem. "I don't come around here often."

"Right, haha. Probably not a lot to do for you. Or maybe you're just busy."

“I didn’t know you’d want to see me again.” That was a lie, but it seemed like a better thing to say.

“Of course I did, silly!” Birdie motioned toward the crowd that was completely unaware of our presence, “They’re all nice but it’s so rare to meet someone with your... mystique.” Her pupils were dilated.

“I had a question to ask you.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, I’m trying to get into a villa in corplands. I had a feeling you might have some info on it.”

Her look of adoration dropped like a stone, replaced by something raw and hurt. I tried to convince myself I didn’t see tears. “Oh... so this is about work.”

“It’s a good take, I’m sure we could get you cut in.”

Anger now, “It’s not about money you fucking-” She took a breath. “I thought you liked me.”

“I do.” That much wasn’t a lie, I thought she was delightful.

“Then why did you disappear like that? I gave you my number.”

Because I suck. “I got sucked into work. I haven’t been talking to anyone really.”

“I don’t know if I want to help you, Vulture. Maybe you should leave.” She folded her arms and looked away.

I looked away too. Then I reached into my jacket, a refurbished violetcoat from my army days. I pulled out a napkin and unfolded it. It was her contact info, with a beige-pink lip stain mark from where she had kissed it.

When she saw it, that smile came back. Some part of me was glad. “You kept it.”

I nodded.

She swirled the edge of her neon-colored drink with her finger. “Okay, fine. Let’s go back to my place. You can tell me the details.”

I woke up in Birdie's bed with her tangled around me. My head was fucking killing me. The digital clock on her nightstand said 6:54 a.m., but the lack of natural lighting made it hard to verify. I lifted my head as best I could without disturbing her. My eyes adjusted to the faint power lights of electronics scattered across her spacious bedroom. The brightest of them was the dim yellow glow of the powered-off liquid immersion tank in the corner. My eyes rested on my bag and prosthetics, placed on a chair in the corner.

I looked down at her, nestled into my shoulder. Still fast asleep. She was clutching my good hand, or I would have run it through her hair. She really was beautiful. I stared at her body for a moment, physically gifted too. The night before was fun. Lovely, even. Some part of me still couldn't shake the feeling that I was going to let this woman down.

The clock struck 7:00 and a shrill alarm sounded. She stirred, crawled over me, and turned it off before returning to my side. "Morning, Alice." she eventually muttered into my skin.

"Morning, Birdie." Her hair trilled when I used her name.

She was quiet for a bit. Her hair flattened, "Are you going to ghost me again?"

There was this pit in my throat. The awareness that comes to one when they realize that they had almost made some terrible mistake, only to be pulled back from the brink by chance. Perhaps by fate. "No, I think we're past that point."

"So, we'll do this again?" the trills were back.

I glanced at the cluttered room and tried to trace a walkable path with my eyes. "Maybe at my place next time, but yeah." I disentangled myself and retrieved my clothes from the edge of her bed. She tried to help me get dressed, and I gently warned her off. I made my way over to my bag and my limbs. I had daily maintenance to do, but that could wait until I was back at my place.

"So where did we leave off on the Kanra'Las villa?" I said while fitting on my arm.

She was wearing a bra and her shorts from last night. She retrieved an infoslate from a library near the tank and was pressing the scroll button to look through it. She danced over to me triumphantly and delivered in a singsong tone, "This should be allll you need."

We stepped out of the door from her bedroom/office, and into the living space. A long metal table was covered in papers and the empty bottle of Korvuni Blue we had brought back with us. The room was lined with other furniture. At the far end was a well-stocked kitchen and pantry. Birdie explained last night how this was once an interrogation chamber. She made sure it had fallen off official records.

I looked through the tablet. This definitely was everything I was looking for. "This is so thorough."

"It's my job, I know things." she pointed to the shelves lined with round sports ball-sized fungus drones. The original, less intelligent counterparts of their sporeborn cousins. "They learn things for me."

I was impressed. I glanced at the doorhatch and she saw me looking at it. "Heading out?" she seemed sad, but a different kind.

"I've got to get to my apartment and shave and shower. Do my daily things. Where are we by the way?"

"The Stacks, off towards the edge of a pier, underground."

My expression was slightly suspicious, "I also live in the Stacks."

"I figured, I've seen you around but I didn't want to overstep my bounds... I was glad you sought me out."

I looked at the door again, then looked at her. "We're meeting at the Hungry Reihn's near the Lieni Market around 11 a.m. to talk about the plan." I felt the unfamiliar pounding in my head, "Get some food to work off this hangover maybe. You wanna come with? I'm sure they'd appreciate your insight."

She smiled like she'd just won the best prize at a festival booth.

2. Waster

Clearing customs was never easy, especially when carrying gear. Imperial authorities ran you through every obstacle they could. Bureaucracy like a multilayered puzzle box with a solution that was lost ages ago. Maybe when the gods fell silent. Even its owners didn't know the answer, leaving only approximate answers to survive into today. Most of them involved putting crystal coins in the hands of the right official.

I had learned to play this game well. However, most of the officials I had worked with at the West Gate Customs had been replaced in the year and a half since I had last ventured out. I knew better than to ask what had become of them.

They basically let Dorian pass through without issue. I had developed suspicions he came from some kind of money or influence. They gave Temperance and Arina a harder time. A high-ranking officer asked them numerous questions.

Temperance was let go first. Members of the clergy faced less scrutiny under the Empire's pro-church stance. Arina went longer, they figured she was Inerlesian by her look. I stepped in and greased his palm with a 100-piece. When he started asking about why I had an old royalist jacket on, years after we lost the war to them, I added another 100.

He let us pass, and we proceeded to the gate. It was a huge metal structure built into one of the energy hexagons. It was sealed but as soon as it struck noon, a klaxon sounded and the solid wall began to lift. Imperials with guns waved us on and watched for any unauthorized entry or exit from wildlife or people. Before we knew it, they grabbed some caravaners and had them against a wall. We got out of there before they started firing.

There were a lot of differences between a city-state like New Bekton and the wastelands. For starters, once you clear the shields you either need protective rebreathers for the ash-poisoned air, or augmentations that filter your lungs and nose. Second, and what people expect less, is how cold it gets away from the heat of generators. Out into the sunless lands that remained when our world was wounded. You had to bundle heavily, and maybe invest in a personal heater.

Arina seemed used to this routine. Temperance perhaps overbundled for the Spring climate and ended up wearing an extra jacket tied around their waist. Dorian didn't wear anything besides a form-fitting white bodysuit with some armor plating built in. He tried to hide how much he was shivering.

We rounded the road from the gates toward a line of vehicles guarded by armed constructs and a heavily bundled thickset elek with a red racing helmet. We talked about the weather (bad) and the current season of a radio serial we had both been listening to (good, but not as good as last season). Then I got down to business and told him I needed a car to take us into corplands.

He said he couldn't do that. I asked how far it could take us. He insisted no further than a given latitude and a range of longitudes. I considered pressing the matter, but it was clear this was as much as I was going to get. I handed him the downpayment and let him take the blood ID from my index finger, to charge me for any additional miles.

He showed us to our vehicle, a bit larger than the standard dust-buggy but it seated four. It was sealed, so we'd be able to sleep in it if we needed to.

I took driver because I was the only one with experience with ground cars. Temperance took the passenger to spread their legs, and the other two got in the back. There was ample space for our equipment, though we kept some up with us. A few guns, some of Temperance's explosives, and a spherical package that Birdie had handed off to Arina after our breakfast meeting.

She unwrapped it to reveal a purple spore drone. It was covered in white spots, which had earned it the name "Dotty." Arina powered it on with its control slate and ran it through some paces, moving it back and forth near a visibly annoyed Dorian.

I turned on the radio. Driver's choice, so I flipped to Dr. Swell's talk show, on the pirate airwaves. Swell was doing a fan favorite segment Seris Uncovered where he reviewed the audio drama Seris Rising and compared it to historical information about the real early families of the Parathan Empire. Temperance changed the radio to some folk music and shrugged when I glared at them, "I'm a few episodes behind."

Arina broke the deadlock and swapped to some kind of high synth-driven pop music. She looked pleased. Dorian had headphones on and didn't seem to really mind our squabbles. I looked at a hand-drawn map posted on the dashboard, and measured where we were. 6 hours to go.

I took us off the main road. Fools took the highway. Any scavver worth her merits had a competent internal sense of the stretch of wasteland they operated closest to.

The terrain outside shifted from the outskirts of the city, with its ash farms and refineries, to that liminal space where you'd see the occasional building or compound, to the open wastelands. I gazed out my reinforced window at sulfur marshes, jagged rocky terrain, and petrified forests. Life. Real life. I stared dreamily at a couple of boars fighting over a patch of shrubbery's gnarled berries. Authentic.

There was a lot of time left before we got there. I glanced at Temperance. "So are you still ordained?"

Temperance looked down at their robes, "Yeah."

"Any particular aspect?"

"Champion of The Reaper."

I whistled. "A burner huh?"

Temperance's brow furrowed. "That's not what we call ourselves, but my primary duty was to release the souls of the dead."

"By burning them."

"Occasionally I have to get more creative, but fair."

"Makes sense though."

"What does?"

"I feel like burners tend to have the least scruples about shady stuff. If I see a priest in crime, 9/10 it's a champion of Our Lady Death." I made a reverent gesture with my good hand.

Temperance looked at my arms. "So why the simple metal?" they pointed to my prosthetic right arm.

I appreciated people like Temperance, who were forward enough to just ask. It was better than the people who stared and averted their gazes when I looked back.

"Ever heard of Nuralis Syndrome?"

"Happens to humans, right? Means chems and augments are like poison to you?"

“Mostly humans, 1/100,000 of us. Genetic. More often chems just don’t work or make me a little sick.”

“Do mechanicals not work?”

“With some really risky surgeries they could, a lot of the prep process is more alchemical than people realize.”

“So why the merc life?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, if any of us three are blown apart, shot, or whatever, we can get patched up with a healing potion or some time in a clinic.” They wiggled their fingers. “Only two of these are originals. Seems like you have more to lose.”

I thought for a few moments, “My parents wanted me to play it safe. I was a freshman in college when the war broke out. They moved overseas to get away from it. I signed up for the Royalists as fast as I could.”

Temperance gave me a look. It hadn’t ended well for the soldiers of the old monarchy.

I continued unphased, “I guess I’ll tell you what I told my folks when I signed up. That I don’t think a life lived in fear is a life worth living. Doctors gave me 20 years to live when I was born. I’m 28 now. I can take care of myself. Stuff like this helps me afford that.”

Temperance gave a single “Ha!” and then took a more understanding tone, “I see your point. Guess that’s all we can do.”

I followed the road as best I could in the dim light afforded by the cloud cover. Sure enough, signs warning of private property ahead began to line the roadway. I made a hard right and watched for drones and spotter towers. Corporate territory was well defended and authorized to use force. A privilege they exercised gleefully. I did my best to keep near the border signs but parked us behind a stone formation that hid the full frame of our vehicle.

We disembarked, unloaded the cargo, and I set the car’s safety mechanism. I bent down to the ground and scooped up a handful of ashy dirt. The others looked at

me like I was insane when I took off my rebreather and took three deep breaths of the air. It was a bad air quality day, and it smelled like it. It was heavenly.

I touched the rock and held my pendant. I prayed quietly while they waited, though I heard Temperance join in their own prayer. I righted my posture and turned to the crew. The four of us were finally ready to make the run.

These people were entrusting their lives to me. I wasn't going to let them down. I blew my nose clear of ash and put the rebreather back on. "Alright. Some of you may have walked off-road in the wastelands before. Nonetheless, I'm going to act like it's yours' first time."

I started pacing "I am going to lay down three rules that you will obey if you want to stay alive." I counted with exaggerated finger motions, " 1. When I tell you to do something, you do it. There will be no discussion, no debate. Obey me. 2. If you see something coming at you that isn't one of the four people here, you shoot. Corporate soldiers, Imperials, marauders, wildlife, the fucking Helping Hands Brigade, open fire. 3. If we come across a ruin, do not touch *anything*. No matter what you think it's worth. If it looks like a good haul, tell me. I'll look at it, and I'll even let you keep it. That's how nice I am. IF at any point there is somehow a conflict between Rules 1, 2, and 3, prioritize Rule 1."

I spun around to face them, "Any questions?"

Nobody said anything. Dorian started walking.

I shook my head and we made our way into the corpland border.

I pressed my back against a half-destroyed granite wall and held up my hand. The voices outside were still talking. Too far and too metallic to make out details. It sounded like bursts of radio static in conversation with each other. Three? Yeah, three voices. I stuck my head out very slightly. Nice armor, armed well, and a mounted turret on their truck. Corporate for sure, couldn't make out which one. No way we were taking them. I tapped the worn wall with my metal fist. This wasn't going to hold up against turret fire.

So the next question, what do we do? We could have left out the back and hoped they didn't see us. Too much open land, and not enough concealing terrain. Taking them out already wasn't an option. That left wait, but that depended heavily on what they were doing out here. If they were just passing by, why stop here? If they

were a patrol, they were probably going to check this structure. So, how thoroughly?

I looked at the rest of the tower structure above us. Early Parathan Imperial as best as I could figure. The solid granite building would give way to blends of basalt and decorative marble later in their reign. There were two more floors, partially exposed by a collapse in the structure. I wouldn't trust the top floor but the middle floor didn't look too bad. The stairs went in the collapse, so we'd have to get creative. I made a mental path of things we'd have to climb to get up there. Quietly, if the gods were kind...

One of the metal voices was getting closer. My choice was made for me.

I motioned the others to follow and made my way from a pile of ancient, hardened sacks of grain. Next, I grabbed a rusted wall sconce and used it to swing up to the protruding lip of a column. Then I leveraged myself into an alcove in the wall, and from there I could reach the second floor. I grabbed it, solid enough on this side. Praise the gods. I wriggled my way up and started helping the others following the same path. Arina was almost too short to make the last jump, Temperance and I had to help her up.

We got up just as the patrolman reached the threshold. A gust of wind blasted us from our vantage point. I tried to quiet my breathing, which was amplified through the mask.

We heard him talking, clearly now, "Yeah I heard it too. Sounded like something running around in here. Praise." There was a quiet that followed, I heard each heavy step of his boots. He got closer to the edge of our floor. Arina was sticking too close, I pulled her back by her legs.

"Don't see anything. Same empty tower. Orders? Praise."

There was some second end of the conversation we couldn't hear.

"Yeah, probably vermin. I'm headed back. Praise be." The boots began stepping away, then past the threshold. Temperance started to stand up, and I whacked them on the back. I made a down motion with my hands. We weren't clear yet. I waited until the truck's combustion engine came to life, and drove away.

I peeked my head out of the window on our floor. "Clear." Sighs of relief all around. Everyone started standing up. "Careful, I don't know how much I trust this level." I tapped the ground with my foot and a stone brick shifted. "Actually, I don't trust it."

Dorian stepped off first, with no regard for the drop. He landed like a cat. Fall augmentation? Arina and Temperance went down with a little more caution. I checked around for any unscavenged swag. No use. This place had been picked dry centuries ago. I went down next. It was getting dark outside. I considered making camp here. We were about half a day away from our destination, and we'd have to use lanterns to go much further right now. Too visible.

Scavvers had rules against spending too much time in Parathan ruins. I wasn't particularly superstitious. I didn't think the demise of the Parathan Empire was some curse by the gods or anything. At least no more a curse than that inflicted on the rest of the mortals of Vian. There were more... Wait. Something in Dorian's hand. Something small, metal, pipe-shaped. It didn't come in with us.

I rushed over, "What do you have?" He looked up and down at the object in his hand. He tried to put it away. I asked again, nearly screaming. "What do you have?"

I forcefully grabbed his hand and pried it open. I shrieked when I saw it. A brass rod engraved with runes that were faintly illuminated blue. I grabbed it with my metal hand and ran outside. Dorian roared after me. "WHAT THE FUCK?"

The rod began to emanate a high-pitched whine. "RULE 3!" I shouted back.

I threw the rod as far as I could away from the tower. It detonated in a huge red flash.

I felt firm hands pull me back and spin me around. Dorian was screaming at me. "YOU FUCKING IDIOT! I FOUND IT! IT WAS ENCHANTED!" He punched me, aiming for my nose and instead jamming my mask deep into my face. I stumbled, confirmed nothing was broken, then I pushed him back. We struggled, I hadn't realized how much I wanted a chance to knock sense into this prissy idiot. I got him in a headlock for a second, he drove an elbow into my gut. Temperance pulled him back. I went in for a punch but Arina charged into my abdomen, trying with all her might to hold me there.

The anger fizzled, and I looked back at Dorian. I clutched my knees and tried to breathe, "Do you know how to read Serish runes?"

Dorian was trying to catch his breath too, “I took a couple courses in university... one course.”

“Parathan hand grenade.”

Dorian started walking towards it.

I held up my hand. “No telling how many uses they charged that thing with. You’re lucky I caught it before we all got blown to the gates of Atharas!”

He didn’t say anything, just stormed inside.

I called to everyone, “We’re not staying here! Get your things.”

—

3. Thief

We made camp in a concealed crevasse we found. Celadon green rays of moonlight reached down and graced us. I was pleased with such a good omen. We packed up as soon as it was light enough to see without extra lights.

We were getting close now, this was the run. I consulted the map Birdie had given me carefully. We geared up.

Arina took the backpack-sized communications relay. She had become the on-ground tech of our operation. The rest of us took receivers. She activated Dotty and had it fly upwards as far as it could go in control range. She grabbed a rifle and sat on her tablet while the rest of us got ready.

Temperance had a bag full of different explosives and solvents. A small sack of cremation capsules too. If all went according to plan, we wouldn't need to burn anyone. They insisted, nonetheless. They clutched another rifle.

For Dorian, it was a pistol, a set of knives, and not much else. Though their enchanter's gauntlet could do almost anything they needed it to. His was an impressively ornate construction. Like something an old-world knight would have worn, but covered in modern runework.

Two-handed weapons were no good for me, but I had other options. I pressed a button on the side of my arm and two beams popped out of the metalwork. I fashioned a piece of flexible steel cable between the edges of it, loaded a bolt, and fired it into a purple cactus. Full impact, nearly went clean through. Temperance laughed and cheered. I smirked. For good measure, I also kept a blade in a hidden compartment in my leg. Finally, I grabbed a pistol from our arsenal. Just in case.

After an hour we had all finished prep. I looked at Arina. "What you got, A?"

"Compound in sight. Walled and sealed from the top like we expected. I count two guards at the front gate. Couldn't get close enough to get a count of the inside. Ravine a quarter of a mile away. Probably where drainage is."

"I'm so glad I'm not going with you." Dorian was putting a blue worker's jumpsuit over his clothes.

I craned my neck towards him, "Good point. Are you going to be okay getting in on your own?"

“They’ll let me in.”

“How do you figure?”

“They’ll let me in.” he fit on the gauntlet.

I didn’t have any real counterpoints, “Fair enough. Do you need any bundling?”

“It’s better this way.”

I nodded, and looked at the other two. “Well girls, let’s get moving.” One last glance at Dorian, “Divine Will be with you.”

“Yeah sure, whatever.”

—
The three of us started to make our way towards our entry point. Dorian would hold back until we made sufficient progress, then make his way toward his side. I tensed up, but there was something of a thrill in all this. Back in the saddle. Everything was on the line. It was time to prove I wasn’t just a common merc.

I took us through a petrified forest for cover. There was something so beautiful about trees standing so resolute, centuries after they had died. I broke a branch off of one that fell and used it as a walking stick. I looked around. As I suspected, the patrols seemed to stay closer to the estate.

In the ravine was a sealed grate, sure enough. I stopped the other two. It was being guarded by another spore drone. An off-green slimy one. Also floating. I waited to see what its route was. It wasn’t leaving. I ditched the stick and loaded a bolt outfitted with copper wiring and a battery, aimed, and fired.

A hit. The drone’s mechanics were pierced and it caught aflame. It plummeted to the ground. The stench of burning fungus was sickening, even through the rebreathers.

The smell of the drainage leaking from the grate out into the ravine was worse. I pulled on it hoping for an easy break. No luck. Kanra’Las wasn’t fucking around with security.

Temperance set down their bag and pulled out a vial of yellow-orange liquid. “Ah, it’s nothing. I have this, just stand back.” Arina and I both obeyed. The yasre applied

a few drops of the liquid to several points across the grate's surface. The solution hissed and bubbled, and it was like watching centuries of wear and tear happen in real-time. Strong metal turned to rust, and Temperance gave it a good yank. It ripped a hole into it. The displaced bars rattled on the dusty ground. All of us could fit inside. They beamed, "I thought about putting 'door-making specialist' on business cards once." They gave the 'after you' gesture with their arms. I went first.

Climbing into any kind of active sewage system was one of the least pleasant things any person could experience. We kept our rebreathers on but the smell of mortal waste of all sorts fought against our filters. Arina wretched a few times, and I was worried she was going to throw up into her mask. Our clothes and environmental gear would need triple sanitation when we were done.

I followed Birdie's map faithfully. These underworks were shared by a few local installations. A right turn would have taken us to a colonial processing center for KAS Extraction, a left too soon or too late would take us to another drainage output on the other side of the plains. I found the correct turn and we wound our way towards the estate.

We found our access ladder. The sewage was less present but wafted down the hall toward us. I thumbed my communicator. "Hey D, we're in position. What's your status? Praise."

"V, almost to the delivery entrance. Keeping my mic hot." Dorian sauntered up the side road to the delivery entrance at a steady pace. He knew the inhabitants were aware of his presence, and he wasn't going to give them anything to be worried about.

"...Are you done talking? Praise." Vulture's voice was a bit too high, no control over resonance. Needed more vocal training. Maybe he just found her annoying.

He stopped and sighed. "Yes, I'm done."

"You're supposed to say praise or praise be if you're completely done. Praise."

Dorian rolled his eyes and made an obscene gesture that no one but the resograph cameras could see. These fucking losers. "Yes I'm almost there, I'm keeping the mic hot. I didn't think I needed to tag my statement. Praise be, or whatever."

He made his way up to the entrance. A single metal door next to a large cargo shutter. There was an intercom and a blood lock. If they had been professionals

about this, they would've gotten the means to open the lock. They didn't, so he pressed the buzzer. He waited and internally recited the character profile he'd established.

A woman's voice came over the door's speaker, "This is private property, state your business."

He adopted an accent like something he'd heard in the southwest, "G'Evening ma'am. This is New Millennium Enchantment and Repair. We got a service request and they sent me out."

"We didn't call for an enchanter."

"Well sure y'all did! Why else would they send me out here? I got the order right here in my hands" he waved a clipboard to the resograph watching him. "Says right here ya need us to fortify the enchantments on the ebonsteel support beams in this fancy wall ya got here!"

"I don't know what you're talking about. I'm going to need you to leave before I have to call security."

Good. Dorian only played games he knew he was going to win. Having them come to him, or having them let him in, the same outcome. Still, he was enjoying the sport of it.

"Well, golly ma'am. I don't know if my boss would like it if I went all the way back without the job being done! I don't think your boss would like it much either if the magic failed and, merciful Council forbid, a part of the wall goes down. You'd be dealing with open-air exposure, wild critters, marauders—"

"Okay okay. I'll call the security chief and they'll come meet you."

Dorian grinned. Victory. "Glad to be of service, ma'am. I promise I'll be faster than a crawler through mud!" He turned off his mic.

I looked at the others. "Crawler in mud. That's our signal!" We gathered up our things. Rebreathers back on, though more for anonymity than breathing safety. I began to climb up the ladder, then Arina, then Temperance.

We reached the hatch. I pushed it open and slid out onto the pavement. When we were all up we closed the hatch. The whole place was surprisingly bright. Sterile

white light panels had been installed at the base of the wall, and more hung from the metal framework of the glass roof. We were behind a shed. I peeked around the side. A lush green meditation garden, marked with a spiral pattern of stones toward the center. Birdie's interior map was accurate. I would have to ask her how she sourced it. Temperance peeked out from behind me. "Rather pretty," they observed.

I ducked back behind the shed. "Artificial. Did you see anyone?"

"2 guards, a custodian, and it looks like a busser from their kitchen."

"Guardhouse should be to our right... follow me."

We ducked left into the shrubs that bordered the garden. Not too far from it was a pool cleaned by a tread-mobile drone. It paid us no mind. Arina rereleased Dotty and had it fly into an exposed vent. When a guard wandered too close to us, she had it start blaring noises through its loudspeakers. They ran towards the vent, and we slipped past toward another shed. Close to the villa itself now.

One sentry between us and the front door. We could go around back but that would be close to where Dorian was distracting the security chief. The sentry stood in place. Fuck. I felt Temperance's long talons on my shoulder. They gave me that kind of diagonal head bob that's meant to say 'I got this.'

Temperance stood back. Spellwork wasn't their forte, or they would have pursued becoming a full-fledged mage. They took a long breath and closed their eyes. They focused on chanting. Drawing on this kind of power took a mix of concentration and the right set of invocations. Something beyond themselves began to push at their mind. The Barrier that all spellcasters must pass. They focused harder and imagined themselves pushing a pin through that Barrier. Power began to seep out, and they grabbed it.

Magic manifested into the Threads of reality. Either modifying them or creating new ones. They focused on the Threads and felt their natural resonance flow around them. The energy flowed into their hands, which began to pulse and glow. Soon, their whole body was enveloped in the shimmering field.

Neither Vulture nor Arina could focus on them. Cloaking spells didn't turn the caster truly invisible but rather bent the Threads around them so that looking at them directly became impossible.

“Can you all see me?” They made a couple of rude gestures and stuck out their tongue. Vulture and Arina shook their heads and turned their heads out of discomfort. “Good, then grab onto my shoulders!”

The other two complied, though with a bit of extra effort. Soon the shimmering field spread around us as well. Vulture tried to look at Temperance. No luck, like butter sliding on a hot pan. The group turned and started walking. Making a wide U shape around the sentry with their back turned to them. At one point he started turning his head in their direction, but it was like he couldn’t completely. He didn’t seem to mind.

They made it to the grand natural birchwood double doors. Alice grabbed a doorknob and stared at the metalwork. It looked like Restoration Age craftsmanship. Rich bastard. Vulture tried it. Unlocked. Dumb Bastard. It opened inward. She looked inside for any immediate sentries. She made a motion to Temperance and Arina, and let go of the priest’s arm.

It was an open floorplan, very modern. Contrasted by centuries-old decor. Paintings of nobles, and a couple of landscapes. Even some Parathan era swag, like a grand blue vase that had been apparently reassembled with bronze. Temperance looked at Vulture, and saw in her eyes the hungry look of a scavver who was staring at one of the biggest hauls of her life. Then a shake of the head and her focus was back on the job. Temperance appreciated Vulture more than other would-be crew leaders. She had good priorities. This was too clean to risk with extra loot. That was the safe play. Though, maybe if the team got some extra time...

I made my way toward the far end of the room, where the sole occupant was dusting some shelves. The custodian had his back to me. It was as if the gods had ordained this run. I kept low, to avoid being seen through the wide windows. Temperance held back and Arina was messing with the tablet. I closed the distance quickly. I opened my arms to grab him.

He started turning around.

Fuck. Impulse took over, I swung my metal arm in a punch. It connected with his skull and he tumbled back into the wall. He slumped, and blood started to trickle down the side of his head.

The other two ran up. “Holy shit,” Temperance said, mirroring my thoughts. I held out my hand to Arina, “The mirror you have. Now.” She passed it. Temperance

held up his head. I held it under his nose. Still breathing. That was going to need some treatment though. At least-

A rifle's hammer clicked.

I looked over my shoulder. Arina was holding a gun to a woman in a nightgown. Our intel said his wife was supposed to be in Sidersberg. His wife who was a human... This is an ele... younger too... Ah. I stepped forward and tried to reassure her. She shivered at the sight of blood on my hands. "Please don't scream." An empty appeal to a foregone conclusion. She let out a piercing wail.

The gun fired and the woman went to the ground in a seizure. A fake bullet stuck to her and sent an electrical burst through her. She'd live but it'd hurt for a while. I nodded to Arina who had a look in her eyes that indicated that was her first time doing that. I tapped her on the shoulder and led us up the stairs. I heard shouts, followed by alarms. The bad outcome. I loaded a stun bolt.

Up the stairs. One door guard, armored. He raised a gun. I raised my wrist and ducked. I fired just a second before him. The bolt struck him in the chest and the rifle's shot went wide. He started convulsing on the ground, but would probably be fine. Probably. I checked behind me. The others had gone to ground. I smirked. We might be able to take this. I tapped my communicator. "D, how are you holding up out there? Praise."

No answer.

With worry, "D?"

Static

I looked to the others, who were looking down the stairwell. Arina called out "I count at least 3 more. They sound heavy." I started eyeing the hallway we were in. I tried the door to Kanra'Las' room. Locked, figures. I tried the others. No luck. I eyed the available furniture for cover. A few tables. Antique wood, but nothing that'd take a bullet.

"T, got a smoke grenade?"

They looked at me like I said something dumb. Then reached into their bag and grabbed a canister. Activated it, and threw it into the center of the room. A plume of red-grey smoke began to fill the hallway. Perfect. These two weren't soldiers but

I figured we had a fighting chance. I stepped back and loaded another bolt. Lethal this time. Pistol in my other hand. Let's go.

I heard a click behind me and the opening of the door behind me. I spun around. The deafening bang of a gunshot. I felt a deep heat in my abdomen. Blood soaked the clothes around my gut. An elek standing with a pistol in his shaky hands. Blonde hair, balding. Kanra'Las. The pain caught up to me. I crumpled to the ground.

Temperance screamed and rushed towards me. I couldn't think or see straight. It was like I was viewing the events through a few layers of removal. There was an Alice on the ground, bleeding out, but I was watching her from way high up. From the sky. Maybe from the void. I tried to remember the advice I had been given for this back in the service. My mind was too cloudy. From my aerial view, I saw guards swarming our position. Then I saw nothing.

Ice-cold water splashed my face. For a moment it was like I was drowning. I thrashed weakly, like a caught fish. "He's alive." some distant voice said Then I felt someone grab my jaw and pull my mouth open. More water went down my gullet. Some instinct took over in me and I drank it greedily. There was so much pain in my abdomen. I had never understood why people wanted water when they were dying, but it made more sense now.

My vision returned to me. The two armed men who had been dousing me with a bucket of water left the cell. The cell. I looked around, my vision blurry. Pain too serious to think. The others were there. Or at least so I thought. Temperance ran up to me. Arina stood over. I saw Dorian in the corner of the large dark holding cell, arms folded. "Where... were you?" I spat out blood and groaned in pain.

"I was hiding. Key, *was.* Until someone started blowing up my radio and gave me away."

Some twinge of regret, muted by the agony. "S-so-sor-" I was shaking.

Temperance shot their head back "This isn't the time. She's hurt." They looked at me. "Healing potions don't work on you, right? They tried to apply Formula Y and it just wouldn't take."

I nodded. I thought about dying. About my soul. I wondered how soon I'd get to see the beautiful land they said the gods took us to. I looked at the priest, "You'll burn me..."

Temperance shook their head. "No, I won't. I don't burn the living. You're not dead yet girl, come on. Stay with me."

"Can't you just magic it or something? You're a priest right?" Dorian was sitting and sulking now.

Arina agreed, "Yeah you could! You showed us that cool cloak technique out there!"

Temperance frowned. "Healing magic is difficult even for a full-fledged mage. The Lady of Magick doesn't like us messing with the forms of others." They paused, "I can try. Arina, keep her awake and alive. Dorian, just brood, I guess."

The young elek ran up. "What do I do? What do I say?" She looked terrified. I imagined what I looked like from her point of view, pallid and dying.

"Just ask her questions." Temperance was chanting something to themself and wringing their hands together.

"Okay... Hey Vulture. It's Arina! You're going to be okay. Just focus on my voice. Look in my eyes. My mom says she likes my eyes... Sorry, I'm nervous."

"It's okay... They're... a good shade of gold." I offered. I was having trouble staying conscious. Maybe I could just sleep.

Temperance smacked my face firmly a couple of times. "Hey, no sleeping. Arina, keep her awake at all costs."

Arina jumped and ran up and repeated the face-smacking motion, though hesitantly. She looked like she was about to cry. "Hey, please stay awake. Uhm- tell me your name."

"Alice..."

"Okay, great, what's your last name?"

"Alice... Mercier-Durante."

There was a pause. I knew I had said something I wasn't meant to. It didn't matter. I gnashed my teeth as Temperance put their hands in my wound. After a second they pulled back and tossed a piece of metal to the side. "The bullet is out." They

poured some of the water bucket on it. Then put their hands back on my wound. A strange warmth filled my side.

“Okay... Alice Mercier-Durante. Where are you from?”

“My family is from Saliana... I grew up in New Bekton... s-since I was f-f-four.” I was shivering.

“That’s a long way to go. Why’d your family move out here?”

“Doctors. For me. Organic.”

“That makes sense. Your parents must love you a lot.”

“They do. I was... I was their only...” I screamed, something sharp in my side, almost like getting shot again.

Temperance made eye contact with me. Yasres had such intense yellow and red eyes. “We’re almost there Alice. Just hold on.”

Arina kept going, “You... were in the military right? Violetcoats. So was my dad! What was your battalion?”

“11th.”

“The Hand of Providence right? I never served, too young, but I heard a lot about you all!”

“Y-eah.” the pain was disappearing. Not like shock. Like the wound itself was leaving me.

“Almost there.” Temperance was massaging the wound now.

Arina looked up and tried to think of something to say. “Okay, Alice Mercier-Durante, tell me about some music you like.”

“Guitars... Folk instruments. Big fan of Natasha Irinde before...” Her turn towards Imperial sympathy was well known.

“Yeah, I was too.” Arina consoled.

The pain was still present, but lessened and dull. Like being poked with the blunt edge of a pen. I looked down, and it had been replaced with a bulging mound of flesh. Temperance looked up at me. “It should be safe. It’ll probably leave a scar. I am not a professional healer.”

I smiled weakly, “Thanks.”

They stood up and went to take a seat on another bench, panting to catch their breath. My bench, I realized, was covered in blood.

Arina did the same. Then she started sobbing, which triggered a look of disgust from Dorian.

We stayed there in that scene for a while. I rested my head against the wall. Dorian glared at Arina’s sobbing, and eventually, Temperance went over to console them. I realized their nose was bleeding. “You good, T?”

They nodded, putting an arm around our youngest. “Don’t worry about me, V. Get some rest. You lost a lot of blood.”

Arina stopped crying, going to that sniffling phase that often followed. Dorian eventually said something to her. “Is this your first job?”

The elek raised her head. “No, I’ve done a couple... No one’s ever gotten hurt before. We just took some stuff. Maybe we fired guns over people. Ykno.”

He scoffed, “They put me with amateurs.”

I turned my head, “Hey, leave her alone. She’s been doing fine.”

He looked back at me, “It wasn’t just her I meant.”

I forced myself to sit up and face him. “Why did you even take this job? It’s not like you need the money.”

“What do you mean?”

“Come on, your whole high maintenance, low awareness, fancy vibe. That’s someone who never has to worry where their next meal is coming from.”

“Not what this is about, but okay. Sure. I come from money. We even have a big stake in STARCAST. That’s why I’m here. What about you Ms. Mercier-Durante? I had you pegged for some poor first-generation immigrant, but I know your family. Made a huge fortune on the terraforming projects out east. You’re telling me that’s not money?”

I regretted my mindless confession. “I don’t take a dime from them.”

“And I don’t take a dime from mine! But the fact that you could, any time things got too bad. That’s what matters. You talk about being real, about wanting the real, but you’re just as fake as me. As the rest of us.”

I lowered my gaze, at a loss for words. I leaned back against the wall of our cell.

After a few minutes, “I’m a Varan.” Arina volunteered, wiping her eyes.

“Good for you, sweetie.” Dorian’s tone was hollow.

“Am I the only one here who isn’t secretly rich?” Temperance half shouted, half laughed.

I looked at Arina, “Varan like...”

“Like Varanskeep yeah. That was my dad.” A doomed city, blamed on the failings of its rulers. A story known to all in recent memory.

“I’ve met survivors but... why didn’t your family leave the country? Can’t imagine you have many friends here.”

“I don’t tell people my last name. I go by Arina Greencroft in my classes.”

Classes. “How old are you?”

“21. I’m a senior at NBU... Or I was. I don’t think they’ll let me graduate if we get booked for this.”

My attention turned to the area around the cell door. A long mercrete hallway in either direction. No sign of any guards. They probably would’ve just let me die. There was a vent but nothing we could reach. “Did they say what they were going to do with us?”

Temperance had recovered, “Something about reaching out to STARCAST security to come pick us up. No one else with jurisdiction, I reckon.”

“Okay, so that can’t happen. How do we get out of here?”

“If I had my glove it’d be easy.” Dorian then pointed a finger at the priest. “I mean can’t you just magic the bars open or something? I’ve seen spell types bend metal before.”

Temperance shook their head, “Healing Vulture took a lot of energy out of me. I don’t think I’m casting again for a while.”

Dorian shot daggers at me with his eyes, “So we’re stuck here because you had to save her.”

“What if it was you?” Arina snapped.

Dorian sneered, “It wouldn’t have been.”

I pulled myself to a stand and wobbled a bit. My muscles were weak and I was lightheaded. “It doesn’t matter. D’s right, I botched the job. So it’s on me to get us out of here. I don’t know how, but there’s got to be a way. Maybe we call the guards, and say I’m dying.. They don’t know I’m healed. Or-” I became acutely aware that none of them were paying attention to me. Something was behind me.

I turned around and faced a purple drone with white spots floating at eye level. Dotty. It adjusted its resograph lens to look at me. “Huh.”

We all looked at Arina, who held up her small hands. “Not me, they took my slate.”

I turned around again. The drone had protruded an exterior metal arm and was messing with the lock. “I think I know who it is.” I made a silent, solemn vow to fuck that woman senseless when I got back to the city.

The lock relented and the door opened slightly. I thanked the drone and Arina and Temperance did too. Dotty, and presumably Birdie, gave an affirmative bounce. I peeked my head out into the hallway. One led to another cell. These cells were decently sized. Why did this place have the capacity to hold like 20 people? I shook the thought from my mind. The other way must lead out. I beckoned for the others to follow.

We stayed low and quiet. There was a resograph above us but it seemed powered off. Another gift from Birdie? The hallway turned. This building wasn't big, we had to be nearing an office. I popped my head around the corner. Yeah, an office. Two guards in there. They were armed and armored, and we weren't either. Though we had numbers. I looked at Dotty, not a combat model. I tried to think. What would we do in the service?

Shock and awe.

I explained my plan through a series of complex gestures and whispers. They communicated back something along the lines of 'you're crazy.' I retorted with a motion that meant 'trust me.' Then I reached into my leg and checked the hidden compartment. The knife was still there. Merciful gods.

I started to move forward. Once I was sure they didn't notice us I stood up. Then I steadily worked up to a sprint, fighting past my body's protests.

I rushed in and picked the one at the desk, a Primas-ika, judging by the slots for horns on the armor and their large size. I started stabbing in every weakness in their armor I could find. Several strikes to the neck. Their arm flailed for their pistol, which I wrenched out of their hand.

I didn't think. I just stood back, disengaged the safety, and fired twice in the chest. Blood spattered on the chair, the wall, and the floor, and merged with some of my own on my clothes. Temperance, Arina, and Dorian were beating the shit out of the other one. They turned her in her swivel chair toward me. I gave her one shot to the head.

With both guards in the station dead, we collected ourselves. I tried to clear my mind of what just happened, and my eyes scanned the office. 6 guards in the facility, 6 desks. I looked at the primas-ika, with a special badge on their chest. Security chief. I figured the dead lady was the second in command. Good... good. I saw a row of lockers and footlockers. Several bags of items were placed on the ground. Our gear.

We rushed over and reclaimed our things. Dotty was inert, whatever remote control was exerted over it having been released. How Birdie pulled this off at such a range was beyond me. Arina grabbed her slate and regained control of it. Temperance began the rites of the dead for the slain security officers. The stench of burning flesh filled the room and set off the smoke alarms. I opened a locker left

open by someone careless. The contents within gave me an idea. “Hey, do any of you know how to pick locks?”

Dorian nodded and Arina raised a hand. Temperance stood up from the burned bodies, “What are you thinking V?”

I stroked my chin. “No way they don’t know we’re coming. We’ve been caught once, and **that.**” I motioned to the piles of ash from the dead. “We tried doing this the subtle way.”

Temperance looked at the lockers. Opened by the other two. Arina fished out a heavy-duty vest, and Dorian was weighing a riot shield in his free hand. The priest got a wicked smirk. “So we go loud.”

I flashed my teeth. “We go loud.”

4. Soldier

Wasteland gear was cumbersome and unpleasant to be in, but a sealed riot system was something else. Even with the armor's motorized movement assistance, every action took a bit more effort than you would expect.

I struggled to keep myself together. My breath was ragged. I needed more blood than I had. I had to get to the end. I had to see this job through. They sat me in a swivel chair and put me in front. We had taken a break to steel ourselves. I was finishing a natural joint that my neighbor rolls, and Arina and Temperance were snorting lines of red powder. Dorian sat quietly with his eyes closed. Meditation?

The break only lasted a few minutes, but it felt like paradise on my weary muscles. I put on my helmet, and held up my shield. I looked at the others through my visor. We were quite the sight in shining armor.

I gave the go. Arina got the door. We were back out in the brightly lit courtyard. The sky above was dark, night again. I made a more deliberate motion to check the area than I would have had to without the helmet limiting my vision. No life detected. A couple of drones that didn't care about us. I suspected the staff was asleep. The guards... "They're in the villa. Let's go."

We moved in a tight formation. Me in front, Dorian to the left, Arina to the right. Temperance was in the back, we couldn't find leg armor for their shape. They pushed my chair. In no time at all, we made it to the doors. Locked this time. "T, got an in?"

"You know it." They moved around us and started fashioning a small brick of something against the ornate knob. "Get back!"

The crew took 20 paces back and dragged me with them. We all crouched behind the shields. The explosion would have been ear-splitting if we didn't have hearing protection. Flame and wooden splinters flew in all directions. A scream of terror rose from within.

We went inside. There was a lot of scarlet and gore. One of the guards must have been next to the door. On the floor was the one who had been standing sentry to the entrance earlier. His left leg and much of his lower torso had been blown off and half-cooked. He was choking on blood. Another scream, I looked up. The mistress was cowering, terrified.

“Stay down!” Arina barked. The low voice was getting better.

I looked at the guard. I felt a sympathetic phantom pain where my own left leg had been. Mine was a cleaner wound though. This...

I unholstered my pistol and shot him in the head. Mercy, of some kind. Temperance bent down to burn him. “No time.” I insisted. “Let the survivors sort the dead out. Let’s go!”

No one was questioning me. For a second, I pondered what life would have been like if I had stayed in the army. Maybe I would have made a good officer. There was a loud clattering from an adjoining room on this floor. “A, can you check it out?”

Arina confirmed and broke off from the group. Her heart was pounding. She tried not to think about the blood she just stepped in, or that was all over the walls. The drug in her system took over. Now she was less concerned and more disgusted. How DARE this fucker bleed all over her good boots. She’d kill him if the boss lady hadn’t already done it. She bared her teeth and resolved to body the next motherfucker who got in her way.

Dotty hovered over her shoulder, programmed to follow the tablet on her hip. When she was out of the others’ line of sight, she did another bump of her drug of choice today. They called it The Red. Stimulants weren’t usually her thing but she had some from a party, and it had been a hell of a day. Kicked like a mule. Instant, aggressive mania.

The door where the noise was coming from was off in a hallway. Too small to be a bedroom. Too big to be a closet. An office maybe? Didn’t matter. She kicked the door in and ducked to the side. Tablet out, Dotty did a horizontal pass. Resographs only gave the outline of the Threads of reality around a person, but there was indeed a person. They were frantically trying to grab something.

She popped out, rifle up. For an elek, time didn’t move the same. Sometimes if they focused enough, it could slow down a bit. So when she raised her gun and saw the janitor from earlier charging her, she wasn’t terribly surprised. Must have gotten a healing treatment. She saw the ornate sword in his hand, glanced up at the display case on the wall above the desk, and she put two and two together. Not enough to stop him from tackling her, but enough of an edge that she knew how she’d play this.

They wrestled for what felt like ages to her but must have only been ten seconds. Her rifle went off. He knocked it out of her hands. She scratched at his neck, as high as she could reach. He ripped her helmet off. Normally, a human man would easily overpower her. The Red coursing through her veins gave her the strength to kick off. He swung the blade at her, and she felt a sharp pain across her mouth. Her focus faltered and time returned to normal.

She went all in center mass, headbutting his unarmored gut. He doubled over and she ripped the sword from his hands. She kicked him over and held the tip of the blade to his neck.

“Please no! Please! Please...” He blurted out.

He was begging. Did he think that would work? He thought she was weak. Everyone thought she was weak! They all talked to her like she was a little kid. She was fucking sick of it. How fucking dare he disrespect her? She was a fucking Varan. The Red did the thinking for her. She taught him who he was dealing with, and started stabbing. She brought the blade down again, and again, and again. Long after he stopped moving.

She stood up and held the dripping sword in her shaking hand. Dotty stared at her, unmoved. She felt her lips, she was bleeding. Not bad enough to care right now. She grabbed her rifle, put back on her helmet, and left the sword by the corpse. She took one more bump for good measure, stepped over the corpse, and closed the door behind her.

Arina rejoined us and told us the problem had been handled. She had this frenetic energy about her. I figured it was fine, whatever gets the job done. We made it to the stairs, I wobbled out of my chair and began our march up. I held my shield up and everyone did the same. No way they weren’t waiting for us up top.

We were right. Bullets started flying into our shield wall as soon as we were in sight. Three of them, behind deployable cover, in sealed armor. We settled in our position and crouched. Temperance threw a glass sphere over our heads. It landed in the middle of their defenses in a whoosh of flame. One of them caught fire and started howling. Shields down, we opened fire. Two of them went down easily. Bullets across their torsos. The third got a shot off and I heard Dorian exclaim. Arina retaliated with a shot to their neck. They went down suffocating.

6 guards down. That should be them all. I turned my whole body to face the enchanter, “You okay D?”

He was clutching his arm. “Grazed my arm. I’m fine.” He clenched his teeth. “Fuck! Stings though.”

Temperance set another charge on the door to Kanra’Las’ room. It blew open and we charged inside. No one.

“Did he leave?”

Arina adjusted her slate. “Dotty still sees the car in the garage. If he did, he didn’t go that way.”

I started walking around. I took my helmet off. “Intel says there’s a panic pod in the room. Start searching the floor and walls.”

We started doing a thorough search of the place. Trying for buttons, levers, and switches. Anything that would reveal a pod an elek could hide in when he got scared. Finally, a decorative wall panel came loose. I ripped at it until it gave way. Then all four of us pulled the pod out. I looked for an opening mechanism. It was tied to a keypad. Fuck.

“Did anybody see a code? This wasn’t in the briefing.”

We kept searching the room, except for Dorian. He got out of his riot gear and worked on his gauntlet. “Allow me.”

He took out a set of arcane tools, and began to tinker with the keypad. “I haven’t had a chance to actually use this all trip. It’s what I went to school for, you know.”

It was hard to pretend I wasn’t impressed, “Enchancers are something else.”

“I prefer the term arcane engineer... Got it!”

He stood back, and a spectral image of Kanra’Las’ hand appeared and punched in the code. Dorian snapped his fingers and it repeated in a loop. Object memory, I think it was called.

I punched in the code. The pod was unsealed and opened. Kanra’Las was inside cowering, protecting his face. “Whatever it is you want, I can pay you!”

“We’re already getting paid.”

“I can pay you more! I’m well connected.”

“You shot me.” I rubbed my abdomen.

He waved his hand. “And clearly that didn’t stop you! Good for you for rising above such a setback.”

“I think we’re just going to keep robbing you.”

“Wait! Wait! You’ve already devastated my property and killed my guards. I-I could hire you on as my new security team! Clearly, you’re better in a fight. Never know when you might need that.” A desperate, nervous laugh.

I looked at Arina, “Does he need to be awake for this part of the process?”

Arina shrugged and walked over. “Nah.” and she punched him out.

We lifted his limp body out of the pod and put him face down on the bed. Arina grabbed the rigged memory cartridge and inserted it into a metal port at the base of his brainstem.

While we waited, I pondered exit routes. No real opposition left. Any support they could have called in was still hours away. We could just walk out the front if we really wanted. Arina stood up, sealing the memory cartridge in a protective hard case. “We’re fucking set!” She cheered, and Temperance joined in. Even Dorian looked a little happy.

My mind went to the fantastic loot that was all over this house. A grin stretched across my face. We were going to get fucking paid.

5. Epilogue- Scavver

My radio clock woke me up to the familiar chaos of Dr. Swell's morning show. I wasn't sure when, and if, he ever slept, honestly. I moaned, rubbed my eyes, and sat up. The side where I'd been shot ached a bit, and was plenty red still. Probably would be for a long time.

I listened to the radio. Normally, it was music this early, but he had taken a break for a special news bulletin. Something about a group of raiders hitting an estate in corplands and absolutely massacring the inhabitants. Casualties included the entire security team and at least one civilian. He went on to talk about how the government was characterizing the assailants as 'chem-addled.' Swell further alleged that this was a false flag operation to further discredit drug use, which the Empire had been working towards recently. He kept going, and I swapped to a folk station.

I remembered what day it was and hopped to my feet. I washed my hair and brushed my teeth. I glanced at my neglected razor and thanked the gods I'd been able to afford some natural hair removal treatments.

I got dressed and remembered to put my clubwear from last night in my hamper. Temperance, Arina, and I still partied every now and then. Dorian joined us for a night, but no sign of him since. That was okay, I didn't really think we were friends. I was pleased with them all, though. I'd work with that crew again any day. Maybe no good as thieves, but a fine strike team. A valuable skill, in its own right.

Today, I had a different kind of job. I'd reached out to Oren, and told him I was getting back in the scavver trade. He told me about a professor at the University who was looking for someone not afraid to deal in Parathan relics. I said I was the girl for the job.

So I got my first contract since my accident a year ago. I stared at my shiny new gear like the hard-won prizes they were. I got suited up. I even got this cool open-visor helmet that was just my shade of purple. It was magnificent, I loved it all so much. I loved what it meant for me even more. I was a scavver again. A real scavver.

I stepped out into the rest of my apartment. Like the rest of The Stacks, it was a modified storage container that I'd been living out of since I was paying my own rent. I fed the fish, watered the plants, and ate a quick breakfast. I made my way towards the door and remembered something. I stopped at the entryway table and

opened a small crate. Inside was another drone, this one orange with olive-green stripes. A gift from my girlfriend.

I picked it up and set it gently in my bag. The front hatch to my place hissed as it unsealed. I took a deep breath, and I got back to work.

