

SKY OVER SALIANA

A negotiation in the Ashen Silence

R. Val, Shrike Tabletop

To Marli,

No matter the time, no matter the distance, there will always be a place for you at my hearth. My friend, my kindred, may your new path lead you to all the wonderful things you've always deserved.

“That which can be destroyed by the truth, should be.”

— PC Hodgell, *Seeker's Mask*

85 Summer 1011, St. Kathen's Day Eve

The Cloudbreaker Ascension departed from a port in south-westside Saliana every day at 5pm. Heavy repulsor plates lifted it into the air, where several engines and rotating upper discs would keep it aloft. It would remain airborne until 3am the next morning. It had followed this pattern for all of its 10 years of operation, without variance. Today, it departed at 5:17pm. A slight difference noticed by almost no one but the most time-conscious of passengers. Those few were shut up with complimentary drinks. The one who was still irate, Elise Peryz, was assured that the delay was merely to accommodate a VIP.

This did little to settle Elise's rage. Wasn't **she** a VIP? She'd spent hundreds of thousands, maybe even millions on her trips aboard the vessel. The Cloudbreaker Ascension never once delayed departure on her account. She looked out the window. They were still passing through the heavy layer of dark grey clouds that capped the city. Her drink shook in her hands.

Worse, her 5:15 appointment was late. She paced the private room that was costing her hundreds of demori a minute. She looked to her personal security, a Primas-ika named Orda. The bulky reptilian with off-white horns and greenish scales fixed one of their ornate braids of faux hair. They looked out the door, looked back inside, and shrugged.

Elise's face grew red. "Fucker better hope he shows up or we're getting the money spent today back in teeth!" Orda stood there and listened to the tirade that followed. Several minutes, and an exhaustive list of expletives later, she finally calmed down. She collapsed into a plush rounded chair and took a sip of her drink, a Saint's Moon. Too much creamer, not enough mint.

Sometime later, there was a firm knock on the door. Orda peered out the view slit, and nodded to Elise. She stood up and she checked herself in a mirror. Her 30s had been kind to her, and she had some freckles that added to her youthful appearance. Her age was betrayed by the look in her dark green eyes. The look one gets when they've seen some things. She fixed her auburn hair, kept in a half bun. She gave Orda the go ahead.

The bodyguard opened the door just as The Cloudbreaker Ascension, true to its name, cleared the cloudline. The private lounge was flooded orange with natural sunlight. It blinded everyone inside for just a moment. All their eyes had grown adjusted to the relative darkness at ground level. When Elise's vision returned to normal, she was confused.

The electronic message had mentioned a man, hadn't it? She was certain of it, several uses of "he" pronouns. The person that stood before her was the pinnacle of beauty. Men could be beautiful, sure. Yet what of the long, raven black hair? The fair, perfectly kept skin? The thick lashes above piercing blue eyes? The slight curves accentuated by an onyx and light blue bodysuit? He stunned her. She found her face growing hot, but tried to regain her composure, "Are you D-"

"Dorian, yes. Ms. Peryz?" He had a faint but distinct Astaelian accent.

Elise nodded and turned around, processing the new information. She forced sternness into her voice, "You're late."

"Am I?" Dorian glanced at a clock on the far wall. "Oh, I guess I am. Well I guess I'm lucky. I almost didn't make it."

"And where were you?"

"Talking to the pilots! It was pretty funny, I met one of them outside and we got to talking. I ended up meeting the whole crew. They almost forgot to launch the ship." He laughed and smiled, and made his way to a matching chair across the coffee table

"You-" Elise stood on the edge of a rant, but she caught herself. This was business. Further, she wasn't sure she wanted to end up on such a beautiful stranger's bad side. She took a breath and sat down.

"May I offer you a drink Mr...?" She nodded to Orda, who headed toward a minibar on the side closest to Elise.

Dorian shook his head and sat up. "You don't need to know that. And none for me. Not when there's business to discuss."

Elise's lip twitched, "You have me at a disadvantage. You appear to know my family name, and, well-" She picked up the glass on the coffee table. "Surely we can get you something."

"No thanks."

"Besides a drink then! Wizard's Select, Charge, Vibe, the bar is fully stocked." Elise smiled reassuringly. "No regulations this high up, we're out of Saliana's airspace."

Dorian pursed his lips and looked up at an ornate modern chandelier between them. "A cigarette, polyspice."

Elise waved a hand toward her bodyguard, “You heard the man, polyspice!” She looked back to their guest, “Orda rolls their own, you’ll love it.”

Dorian folded his arms. “We’ll see. I didn’t come here to smoke, Elise. Are we going to talk business or should I go see what’s happening with the holiday prep out there?”

The host’s smile was pained. Her brow furrowed. “Yes, of course. The message that preceded... you were looking for medicine, yes?” She leaned over towards a secured briefcase on the table and began to unfasten it.

Orda handed them both hand-rolled cigarettes, already lit.

Dorian kept his bored expression and took a drag, “I represent an interested party looking to acquire a bulk amount of emarizyne. I’m led to believe you are a person who can deliver on such an order.”

Elise sat back, “On the ground, absolutely not. Up here? Let’s talk business. How bulk of a deal are we talking?” She took a puff and let the mild stimulant rush through her. Excellent as always.

“100 liters.”

Elise whistled, “Of a graft drug? What are you going to do with all that?”

“That feels like an inappropriate question from a professional.”

“I’m just trying to figure out what the odds are I’m supplying an army of supersoldiers.” Elise stood up and looked out the wide 3 panel windows of their private lounge. It was built into the rotating discs that kept the massive vessel aloft. The sun had slipped to the right side of the room and was quickly disappearing from view.

“Would that alter the deal?” Dorian stayed seated. From over Elise’s shoulder, she saw him looking at her. She appreciated it.

Elise turned around and leaned against the prominent windowsill. “Not necessarily, but I’d want in.”

Dorian raised a hand, “Clinical use only.”

“Aren’t there official channels for that?”

A dead stare.

“You’re right, not my issue...” Elise looked toward her reptilian bodyguard. “Orda, what’s $1,735 + 997 \times 12 \times 100$?”

Dorian and Orda answered at the same time. “1,198,135.”

Elise laughed and pointed to the Primas-ika, “Ha, that’s why I keep them around, good with numbers.” A slight blush painted her cheeks. “You too, I see.”

Dorian was unphased. “Break that math down for me.”

“1,735 demori is my current service fee. Operations, admin, acquisition, delivery.” It felt to Elise as if reading off a script.

“And the 997?”

Elise started counting each factor on her fingers. “Current market rate for a liter of emarizyne. Multiplied by 12 because of the backchannels, anonymization, and everything else we’ll need to deal with to get it to you. Then 100 units of that.”

Dorian shook his head. “1.2 million demori is steep. We’d probably just save money finding a backchannel ourselves.”

“You’d spend more than 1.2 million on that kind of operation. Still, considering the bulk order and...” She looked him up and down, “...other factors... I’d be glad to cut it down to 1.1.”

“1 million.”

Elise choked on an inhale of her cigarette. “You’re fucking with me.” the host’s voice cracked, then she started coughing.

“Certainly not, and I don’t appreciate being spoken to like that in a business setting, Ms. Peryz.”

Elise sat back down and picked up her drink. “I don’t fucking care, that’s an unacceptable cut!” A little bit of milky green liquid splashed out of the tumbler. Someone would clean that up.

“Your price is unreasonable. I’m certain I can find an alternative.”

The stranger’s charms had worn thin. Elise clenched her jaw and fought back a yell. “I came all the way up here!”

“Don’t blame me, you chose to do that. 1 million.”

There was a chill silence in the air. Orda looked to Elise, and Elise was staring out the window. The disc had rotated their window out of direct sunlight, and towards the purple hues of the horizon.

“Okay, 1 mil.”

“I’m glad you could see reason.”

“Whatever, so is this wire transfer or cash?” Elise’s cigarette was spent, and she put it out on a tray on the coffee table.

“Cash, but I have some more questions first,” Dorian mirrored Elise’s motion.

“What could you possibly want to know? It’s emarizyne. Use it on recent implants.”

“I want to be sure I’m getting the best quality supply. I have my reputation to think of, and I know yours well.”

“What do you know?”

“Well, what I’ve heard at least, is that your supply isn’t pure.”

“Are you doubting me? Why even come up here if you think it’s bad?”

A shrug. “Your price, outrageous as it is, is still the best available to me. I thought I’d be an adult and ask you myself.”

“My supply is fucking fine!” Elise slammed her free hand on the table in front of her.

“Interesting, I’ve heard of a strange amount of implant rejections. People losing new limbs, going blind, even a couple deaths.”

“Are you a fucking cop?” Was he? Were they compromised?

“No, and even if I was, what could I do? Nothing up here is bound to the laws down there, right?” A smile of feigned innocence.

“What do you want, Dorian?”

“Tell me why I should trust you. If you can do that, we have a deal.”

Elise set her drink down and rubbed her temples. This was turning into a problem. “You’re lucky you have your looks. Fine, but may I offer you another cigarette first?”

Dorian hummed for a second, looked away, then returned his gaze, “Sure.”

“Orda! Another. One for me too. Like the ones from the Korvun trip. Those were perfect.”

The lizard had been fidgeting with one of their horns. They looked away and got back to the minibar. “Aye, ma’am.”

“They’re great. Best help I could buy... Before we proceed, Dorian, I have some questions for you too.”

“That doesn’t seem like how this is supposed to work.”

“Is it not? You seem fine asking me about the ins and outs of my operation, I should know more about yours.”

Orda handed them the cigarettes, Elise lit hers, and reached out with the copper-plated lighter. Dorian extended a hand to catch the flame, and then both sat back. They took intermittent drags between exchanges.

Dorian conceded, “Fine, we can talk about me. I’m fond of the subject.”

“Do you come from money, Dorian?”

“What makes you think that?”

Elise smiled like a viper revealing her fangs. “Well, for starters you’re here. What’s a basic ticket, 10k? The confidence too, that’s someone who never has to worry about where his next meal is coming from.”

A look of surprise on the beautiful man’s face. “I-”

Elise kept going. “The assurance that you have the world all figured out. Does anyone ever challenge you? Have you ever had to admit you’re wrong?”

“A few times. Rarely to a person I’m going to speak to again. Your point?”

Elise waved her cigarette around. “The way you come into my space and try to order me around. It’s so telling. Unlike you, I had to work my way to where I am. I grew up third layer down. Never even knew the color of the sky, the sun, or the environmental shield until I was 15. Your arrogance!”

“Is this about you now? I thought we were talking about me.”

The woman blew air through her nose like an old world bull, “Right, when were you born?”

Another shake of Dorian’s head. “I’m not going to tell you that.”

“Season, don’t worry about day or year. Temprologically speaking, I’m a Spring. We rise above.”

Dorian hesitated, then sighed, “Autumn.”

“A Fall, huh? Explains why you’re so reserved. Gods, stuck up, even.” she chuckled.

Dorian made a motion to stand, “Is this just going to be talking shit about me? I can just go.”

“Ah ah! Professional language, my dear Dorian.”

“Is it professional to kill kids who need medicine because you want to cut your supply?”

Elise nearly dropped her cigarette. “What?”

Dorian took another puff and blew a smoke ring into Elise's face. She held her breath. "You had to have known your tainted medicine isn't just being used by adults looking for a cheap option. One of the rejections was a 10 year old girl who had just received a spinal implant so she could walk again. The drug didn't work, she rejected it and went septic. She died a few weeks before her 11th birthday."

"You-"

"What's wrong, speechless now?"

"It doesn't matter. We don't make the supply, we just connect it to buyers."

"You connect people to a supply you know is unreliable. It's not just the medicine either. How many people have OD'd on the drugs you move?" Dorian's eyes had unfocused a bit, and were pointed in no particular direction.

"Are you telling me you're singing the plight of junkies now?" For all the mystery and promise, some do-gooder. What, was he a journalist? She couldn't figure out the angle.

"No, not particularly, I think they made their choice. Still, regardless of what you think of me and what I know about the world, I know a predator when I see one."

"Yeah, what kind of monster am I, fucker?"

"A parasite. An overgrown leech with caked-on makeup."

"A parasite?" Elise roared. Orda stepped closer.

“You talk about being self-made, but you’ve built your empire on the backs of graves. Adults who made a poorly informed choice? Whatever, such is life. Kids though... kids have died. Even *I* have a line.” Dorian’s breathing was growing ragged.

“So what? A few parents made a bad call. You want to know how many of my childhood friends are still breathing? The number is less than 1. Such is life! Minimizing costs, maximizing profits, that’s capitalism.”

Dorian groaned slowly, “Council’s mercy, spare me the soapbox. You’re not playing the system! You’re perverting it, and exploiting the needs of the poor. Desperate people who need their medication come to you, and you roll the dice... with... their... lives...” he started coughing intensely.

Elise grinned, the moment she had been waiting for. “So what’s one more? Yeah, I’ve got a body count. Who doesn’t, if they’ve lived a little? I knew the whole fucking time, I probably even heard about the girl you mentioned. Didn’t remember because honestly? I don’t fucking care. Morality is a weight around the neck of the foolish and decent. The doomed. And you? You wretched fucking genderfucked freak? Your cigarette was laced with mournroot.”

Dorian’s eyes went wide, he kept coughing, “That’s... murder... you... can’t...”

“So what? It’s a private room, good soundproofing, and a cremation capsule works quickly. My dear, you’ll be a pile of ash on the floor in no time. Sent howling to the jaws of that great celestial hound.” She started laughing madly. “The best part is, it won’t even be a crime. Not one they can prosecute, at least.” she motioned to Orda who was holding an orange capsule for burning the dead.

Dorian coughed once more then stopped. Elise waited for him to drop with an open-mouthed smile. Orda shifted toward the door to check for bypassers.

Instead, Dorian collected his composure and sat up with a smile. “Oh silly me, there must have been something caught in my throat.”

Elise’s jaw slacked open. “You... how?”

“Oh Elise, you talk so much when you think you’ve won. Saying so many damning things. Well, I have a secret for you, too. I have some implants of my own. Mostly cosmetic, but I did get something else installed a few years ago. You don’t seem very bright, but tell me, have you heard of an N-Gland?”

Elise was speechless.

Dorian giggled. “Finally learned to shut up? Good. It’s a bit of a two-edged sword, the augment. On one hand, drugs, alcohol, none of that works on me. Mostly for the best. That’s why I had them installed after all. Perhaps more relevant, it filters out most other toxins...”

Orda began to reach for a sidearm strapped to their hip.

Dorian held out a hand. “You’re going to want to let me speak. You see Elise Peryz, and Orda Clanless... in my home country, they call me a Courier. What is that in Lieni, mesajair?” He didn’t wait for an answer. They all knew what a Courier was. “In truth, I do a bit of information work. Even some hits when I need to. Unfortunately, my client said I couldn’t kill you. Believe me, it would be my absolute pleasure to put you down like a dog. Instead, I’m going to turn you in.”

Elise was gripping the armrests of her chair, “You have to know that any evidence collected this high up isn’t admissible in court. Did Astaelians hear about Saliana Vs. Karden?”

“Yes, that was going to be an issue certainly. That’s actually what I was talking to the pilots about.” his head turned, “Orda, this seems like something you’d know, how high up is unaffiliated airspace?”

“15 kilometers.”

“Exactly, and the cloudline breaks at about 5 kilometers.

Elise was piecing it together. “You didn’t... the crew wouldn’t let you.”

“Believe me, Ms. Peryz, I can be very persuasive.” A sly smirk. “We’re 13 kilometers up. Though you wouldn’t have noticed, right?”

“Orda, kill this bastard!” Elise screamed.

“Ah ah! You might want to stop talking. My friends can hear.” Dorian tugged at his jumpsuit and revealed a black metal square with a couple of buttons and a receiver for audio input. Less bulky than any wire Elise had seen before. It fit under Dorian’s tight bodysuit perfectly. “New kind of comm unit. It’s interesting tech! I’ll probably ask to keep it.”

A banging came from the door. A loud metallic voice demanded to be let in, claiming to be Lieni Drug and Augmentation Enforcement.

Dorian’s smiling teeth were perfectly white despite the smoking, “Oh those are my friends! Well, work acquaintances, really.”

“After all that you’re a fucking cop?” The look in her eyes was wild and desperate. “Orda, kill him!”

Dorian looked to the bodyguard. “Orda, my only target is Elise. Harm me and you go down too, this is your chance to walk away.”

“I serve Elise.”

Dorian gestured them to the door. “And you can serve someone else. Do you think that loyalty goes both ways? She’s a mad dog. How long until she makes you smoke a poisoned cigarette?”

Orda’s face went blank and they considered their options.

“Orda, please. You know I’d never hurt you.” Elise begged.

The Primas-ika did a heel-turn and knocked on the door, “I’m coming out.”

“Let them pass!” Dorian added and stood up.

Elise stood up too and charged Dorian. They fell over the coffee table and onto the floor. The two struggled. She clawed at his face, drawing blood from his cheeks. Dorian’s training kicked in and he punched her where the heart would be if she had one. It knocked the wind out of her and he sprung to his feet. The cops rushed in and tackled her.

“For what it’s worth, I do come from money. But I’ve made my own fortune by ending careers.” Another smile, “Like yours. This is the end of our meeting, Ms. Peryz. If you’re lucky, they won’t go for capital punishment.”

He looked to the officers cuffing the prone Elise, “Make sure she’s unlucky.”

They led her out, and one officer lingered, seeing the claw marks on Dorian’s face. “Do you need medical attention, sir?”

“Just tell one of the bots to bring me a dose of Formula Y. I’ll fix it myself.” the officer nodded and left. Soon enough a crablike droid brought a vial of red liquid. Dorian applied it carefully to the wounds, staring in the mirror so he made sure he got the skin smoothed properly.

The scratches healed nicely, tingling a little as the redness that remained disappeared. He admired himself a little longer. Then he turned toward the room, his room now. It was spacious and quiet. Perfect really. He poured himself a club soda and relaxed on a couch, legs up. The disc had rotated toward the sun again, and he saw it turn a deep orange as it set over the horizon. He admired the heavenly light as it was consumed by the cloudline it hovered above.

It was a while longer before the airship’s 3am landing. Outside he could hear the festivities of the imminent holiday. Maybe he’d go out, meet some interesting people. Live a little. Though he wasn’t feeling particularly social, and the religious festivals had never been his thing. Maybe he’d just stay there and enjoy the alone time. He eyed a music player on the far wall. He wondered what selection a vessel like this might have. Unlike the woman he had just brought to ruin, he had all the time in the world.