

# VULTURE'S CITY

A DAY OF LIFE IN THE ERA OF SILENCE

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To my friend Coralie. A true child of the wastelands. Your enduring spirit is what the world will need most in the coming years.

“...she always had the feeling that it was very, very, dangerous to live even one day.”

Mrs. Dalloway, Virginia Woolfe

I drew a breath and lit the flame. The smoke cloud that filled my lungs was thick and harsh, accented with a citrus twinge. I held my breath and stared upward. From my rooftop, I had a perfect view of the glittering amethyst hexagons that made up the dome-shaped environmental shield. Above it, a rolling tide of grey clouds with orange blots where the persevering dawn struggled to break through.

I exhaled a little too late, and coughed for ten seconds at least. My vision went white and the sounds of morning dissolved into a dizzy, oxygen-deprived hum. I glanced around in a half-high, half-conscious haze to make sure I hadn't made a scene in front of a neighbor. Of course, no one was up there that early. My mornings on top of Pier 17's stacks were usually solitary, and I liked it that way.

I took another drag of the joint, it was a decent blend. Most heavier drugs don't work on me, because of my condition. This strain was homegrown by one of my neighbors, Uri. She was former clergy, and the naturalistic botany she practiced in service of The Gardener produced a smokable plant that my system could process, unlike the synthetics carried in stores. I'd had stronger, but the convenience was compelling. I took one more drag, put it out, coughed again, and blinked slowly. My vision was a little blurrier and my mind drifted a little. I closed my eyes.

I reached into my pocket and grabbed a small stone. I closed my palm around it, and began to murmur prayers. I prayed for the usual things. I prayed for my parents back east, for money, for good health, and for good fortune on the next excursion- that sort of thing. Then I sat in silence, listening to the beating of water against the mercrete dock and the distant caws of a port raven.

In the stillness, I began looking at the scene through the lens of an imagined resograph. Not a detailed image, but rather the very threads of reality that wrapped around it all. I saw the rectangular outlines of every tower of makeshift apartments, and the expanse of the city beyond them. I saw my place, its roof, and the little nook I had made for myself. At the center was a girl with one arm, fairly tall even when kneeling, with a bowed head. She

was Alice Talin. She was me. Moments of peace had been rare recently, but from this point of view, it didn't seem so bad.

A shout from the street below pulled me back into reality. I opened my eyes and peeked over the roof's edge. A delivery kid had dropped a package and exclaimed loudly. I unfolded my hand and glanced at the stone. It was teal, with a compass icon etched into its face. An icon of St. Kathon, the Pathfinder. My mother gave this to me when I turned 13 'so I would always find my way back to her'. I smiled and tucked it into my pocket; it was always with me.

I wrapped the cloth underlay of my prayer setup around the rest of the components. I carefully lifted the bundle and made my way down the roof hatch.

My apartment was cozy, in the way that cozy doesn't always mean comfortable. A former storage container converted into a tight 1 bedroom, the same as the rest of Pier 17. I kicked down the folded stairs and made a careful descent. The hatch's seal hissed behind me, a little strained. I'd need to replace the tubing soon. I did the cost calculation in my heard and felt a knot form in my stomach. Money was never easy, but medical expenses had left things tighter than usual.

I set the bundle down and flipped on the radio, tuned to Dr. Swell's talk show. Swell, an energetic DJ on a pirate frequency, had a bent for conspiracy theories. He was rambling on about a discrepancy in caravan records. He claimed this proved that the Empire was making traders disappear. I didn't know anything about it, but it wouldn't be surprising if true. I continued, half listening as I got dressed for the day. I had work later.

For someone with my condition, jobs are hard to come by. I couldn't receive the chemical surgeries required to get specialized work, and even normal jobs were harder without the ability to metabolize potions. When I lost my arm in the war, I couldn't get a replacement; normal employment became the object of distant dreams.

Those days, my tasks came from men like Oren Maklivi, who fancied himself a talent broker for those who couldn't turn to conventional means. If you needed something recovered from the wastelands, and you couldn't turn to legitimate means, you hired a contractor from the underworld Community. If the Community wouldn't touch the job, you called someone like Oren to find help. At the end of this chain of channels and backchannels were freelance scavengers like me. Scavvers, they'd call us. People brave- or desperate enough to go into the wastelands alone.

Yesterday, I got word via a messenger drone that Oren had work for me. I was expected to leave the city by the end of the day. I slipped on a simple shirt and pants, earthy colors. I had tucked the joint behind my ear while I worked on my jacket. Genuine leather was expensive, but my parents enjoyed modest wealth. They had it dyed a patriotic Astaelian purple and had a gold gryphon sewn into the right shoulder. They were so proud the day I enlisted. I didn't like how the shoulders rested on my frame- much too masculine- but I had missed my parents since they moved. So I kept finding excuses to wear it; I balanced the look with some makeup.

Swell had swapped to music. Something from a musical construct that went by Chytri Ganoda. Not my style, too synthetic and poppy. The tech was impressive, though. Those units were getting smarter by the day, it seemed. I finished carefully putting on a bit of eyeliner and switched off the radio.

In a fluid, well-rehearsed motion, I grabbed my prosthetic off the table and worked it onto the stump where my right arm was. Some careful mechanical rigging had allowed me limited motion with the digits. There were slots for modular inserts on the wrist for tools and the like, but I didn't have anything installed today.

Next, I opened up my work bag and checked the contents. I had some climbing gear, a first aid kit, a space heater, and wind-shielded tenting in case I had to spend the night outside of the border. I had a communicator and a couple of power cells for basic chatter. Then of course the complex mix of metal bars, screws, and wiring that made up my crossbow. The weapon's frame collapsed into a metal rectangle and was bundled with some bolts covered in electrical wiring. Finally, a rebreather; a small metal mask

that wrapped around the lower face. A must-have for open-air exposure - even in the city only the foolhardy walked without one. My kit was simple as most scavvers went, but traveling light kept me nimble.

I packed up my things and slung the bag over my shoulder. I began to move toward the door but remembered to feed the fish first. When the food hit their water, the three of them shifted to a pleasant magenta, and they began to feast. I flipped the switch on the light and stumbled my way through my dark apartment. Furniture had to be inventively placed in a space as small as this, and walking it blind was an exercise in memory.

At the front hatch, I pressed the unseal button, and waited for it to depressurize. I winced as my eyes adjusted to the brightness of the hazy morning. The cloud cover was heavy enough that it didn't take long, but for a moment everything seemed so bright. I was now outside, on top of the scaffolding that stretched alongside rows and columns of improvised housing that stretched along the docks. I'd seen one of my neighbors take a nasty spill on a rusted out step, so I always went down slowly. Inspectors didn't often make their way out here.

I passed by Old Man Rorik, sitting with his airlock open and horn music coming from inside the unit. He gave me a nod and a smile but didn't say much else. We were a neighborhood, but a lot of us kept to ourselves. Most of us preferred it that way.

Overall, I enjoyed my time there, and it was affordable as New Bekton went. Some rent control policies from the old administration were still in effect. My unit was one of the cheapest in the city, which worked for my strange and inconsistent income. My landlord was as nice as a housing baron could be, he even cut a hundred off my rent when he learned I was a former Royalist. There weren't many friends of the Empire in this ring of the city.

At the bottom of the scaffolding, the dock was a mix of mercrete and metal plating. New Bekton was a city on an island, which placed a limit on its growth. To avoid unnecessary infrastructure spending, the old Royal government sanctioned a group of piers to become emergency housing. That was 70 years ago, and any chance of a permanent solution under the

new Imperial government was even less likely than under those before them. Pier 17 a fact of life. It wasn't always the worst thing that they were.

I crossed the pier to a group of skimmers. Vehicles that resembled a larger brass tube and a smaller steel tube fused together. Some of my neighbors were rich enough to own one of them, sectioned off in a private parking lot. Otherwise, the floating cars were the property of the Wakenfern Transit Authority. I picked the one closest to me and got inside. The interior was fairly simple, with a bit of graffiti on the dash. Just some tags, nothing interesting. Certainly, it was clean and comfortable enough, albeit barebones. The radio worked, and that was enough for me.

I flipped to Dr. Swell's show, now interviewing an ash farmer. I caught the conversation in the middle so I didn't entirely get what was happening, but it seemed that they were discussing the ethics of a new alchemical pesticide used on ash yams. Specifically, its effect on the wine supply. Yam wine was a wasteland staple, the segment would do quite well.

I reached for the ignition, a hole a couple inches wide next to the control stick. I stuck my left finger in and winced as the needle pierced my skin. I withdrew my finger and held it tight while the machine processed my reading. I had registered when I got my license, like most kids. It would reference my genetic material and charge it to my account. I couldn't remember my balance but I was certain I had enough for the day.

The simple dashboard **display displayed** a simple "Welcome" to an old name I mentally blurred out. "Enjoy your ride!" and the vehicle hummed to life. I buckled in and flipped the brake lock. With a slight lurch, the skimmer lifted off the ground, orienting with me in the brass passenger tube on top, and the propulsion tube on bottom. I did a quick check for other vehicles, drone traffic, and everything else they train you to be worried about in flight school. I pulled the stick and began the climb to travel altitude.

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Different parts of New Bekton had their own unique energy. Pier 17 was a fairly chill place where people laid low. The same could be said of the

adjacent South Lowtown, which had other low-income housing. North Lowtown was different. It was no nicer than any other part of the outer ring. The affluent parts of the city were the middle and center. However, the people in North Lowtown were hungrier than their southern counterparts. They had more drive. Maybe it was the focus on commerce.

I left my rental at another WTA station and started walking. I kept my head down to avoid the constant stream of **posters ads**, and stayed close to the edge of the sidewalk, doing my best to stay out of the way. Several buildings on the street had been closed down in a police raid. I craned my neck and looked for uniforms. Imperial blues, not New Bekton Law Enforcement olive. Grabbing people for questioning. Best to get moving quickly. I darted a sharp right down the recently renamed Courage Lane, part of the new admin's initiative to promote patriotism.

There were a few nice businesses here, I often went down Courage to shop on an off day. The Azure Cat bar played soft Nur Fasaani folk music out of its opened airlock to my left. A young woman with spliced on gills and a clipboard started to talk to me about corp recruitment. I did that hand gesture that is polite enough to acknowledge the person but firmly communicates "not today." My eyes wandered to a couple pop-up market stalls called for passersby on the right. I eyed a particularly cute doll in one of their displays, but the pathetic jingle in my coipurse reminded me that I didn't have enough money for a detour. Those stalls hiked up their prices anyway. The shop I needed lay just beyond.

Korvun's Finest Apothecary was an unassuming old house that had been converted into a storefront through some questionably legal remodeling. Zealously placed signs advertised it as "New Bekton's premier apothecarium." They often opened late so I was hoping I had not come too early. The flashing "Open" sign rewarded my faith. I pressed the bright red button on the airlock and waited for it to cycle. These commercial ones were required to be larger than personal units like the one on the front of my place, unsealing them often took longer.

The airlock opened and I entered into a small waiting room with a bunch of lockers and seats. Most commercial buildings were required to offer shelter

in the event of environmental shield failure. The interior chamber of the airlock had the painted image of a small plant rising out of a pile of dirt, colorful little bulbs hinting at fruit to come. It was a cute logo, I figured the shopkeeper's child made it, apparently they were going for an art degree at the city's premier University.

Inside, the storefront was arranged to promote serenity. There was no overhead lighting. Instead, what illumination there was came from the interior lining of glass cases filled with plants. The lights were celadon green, and cast a vibrant glow across the room, a thematic attempt at representing moonlight. In the shadows, menacingly lit by the lowered lighting was a tall and lumbering figure. I heard the metal floor thud and clack with heavy clawed steps as they approached me.

I smiled and looked up, they were a couple feet taller than me. "Morning Haela!" I said warmly. Haela was good people. They were a Primas-ika, tall and bulky reptiles. Their scales were a light grey but shone green in the light. Their curved horns were slightly outlined and the gold caps on them reflected a little shine, and their long false-hair was braided around their shoulders. Haela smiled, revealing a mouth full of glistening sharp teeth. "Alice, my girl! How's your week been?"

"Ah you know how it is, a couple jobs here and there. How's the shop?"

This exchange was fairly routine. We talked about our days, my days in Pier 17, my social life, their work, their child's career, and more. Haela began to retrieve my usual medication. They pulled out a couple of jars of different colored herbs and began to powder them up with an old-fashioned mortar and pestle. I enjoyed Haela's shop for the focus on artisanal craftsmanship at fairly reasonable prices. What's more, not many people were experts on my condition, especially ones that I could afford without insurance.

"So..." Haela signaled the change in subject to more direct business, "Have you been spending more time outside the shield?"

The dim light of the room hid me paling. We were doing this again, "Yeah, professional requirement."

Haela's sharpened teeth made a hissing sound of admonishment, "You shouldn't be out there."

"I know, I-"

They continued without pause. "The wildlife and other hazards aside, the air alone will corrode your lungs."

"I wear a rebreather, Haela." I tried to give a thoughtful smile. Haela was a kind soul, just opinionated.

The aged Primas-ika laughed, "Bah, rebreathers. You think a waster wears a mask every day and doesn't look different when cut open? At least they have tinctures and cleansing pills. You've only got the—" They stopped to count. "Two, two lungs my girl!"

I stammered, "Haela, I- I- I get it. Thank you for looking out for me but it's what I'm doing for now." I wanted to defend myself, say I was good at it, say that it made me feel alive. I chose to leave it at the assurance.

Haela sighed, "Of course. I'm going to add some Moran's Root to your supplements. It promotes respiratory health. Take a double dose when you're out in the wastes. You're 27 right?"

"Yes," I was surprised they remembered, I was only vaguely aware that they were in their 50s.

"It's been a while since medical school, but if I recall, humans stop replenishing cells at a positive rate around that age. Most folks would just take a regen potion but..." They paused thoughtfully, as if deciding something internally. They moved on from the thought, grabbed a handful of a root and shaved off a few flecks into the gathered ingredients before them.

"I get you." I nodded. "Maybe I'll win the lottery and kick it in Nur Fasaan." We both did that little small talk laugh where nothing said was very funny

but we were trying to keep it light. I appreciated Haela, they had been my go-to since I could make my own medical decisions.

People with Nuralis Syndrome don't tend to live long. It was rare, one in ten thousand for humans was born without the ability to process advanced alchemy and augmentations. The things that kept most city-dwellers healthy without natural sunlight or good food sources. Doctors didn't give me long. I wasn't supposed to live long past 20. The gods had been kind to me, and I tried to repay that gift with my service when I could.

My parents had been protective of me growing up, I wasn't allowed to do much because they were worried I'd get hurt in some way that I couldn't fix without a potion. Though they were proud of my military service they had frequently urged me to take a support role. They went overseas during the war, and never found out about my arm. I almost bled out because the medic didn't know how to apply normal bandaging without a healing salve to seal the wound.

Haela would sometimes check the scar and apply ointments and creams to try to return the skin to normal. They were the closest thing to a doctor I could see; most wouldn't know what to do with me. Without the ability to integrate into chemical society most people with Nuralis Syndrome were left on the edge of civilization. "Organics" they called us, because we were more or less the same as the day we were born.

Haela finished mixing the bowl and started pouring it into a small machine that placed the blend into small pills. When done, it produced a bottle of a month's worth of supplements and vitamins. They looked up at me, "Do you have enough hormones?"

I thought about it, and shrugged, "No harm in stocking up." Gender transition for most people was as simple as a specially prepared drink or a salve. Some chemically assisted surgery here and there. I wasn't so lucky, I had to rely on direct hormone replacement and old-fashioned surgical techniques. It was my life, though. It wasn't like I was going to give up my identity. Haela was great for that too, they had a biolab in the back.

By most observations I was healthier than most organics and I credited that to the apothecary's amazing work. They were not cheap, which I was reminded of as I handed a small pile of crystalline coins to Haela. They did the math, made change, and we said our goodbyes. On the way out I stopped by the little shrine to Iudan, The Healer. I whispered a small prayer of thanks for the bounty. Haela went back to work and I slipped out the door.

I walked out of Haela's shop's airlock and popped one of the pills. I washed it down with my canteen. The hormones I'd need to take at home with one of my syringes. I stood off to the side of the stoop and lit my cigarette again. I took my first drag and exhaled into the air as pedestrians avoided me. For all the faults of the new Imperial government, they had eased restrictions on public smoking in the city-states, which was fine by me.

Then I heard it. "Adrian!" I stopped dead. "Adrian!" the voice repeated in my direction. I looked around, hoping they meant someone else. In a panic my neck whipped around, looking for the source. I reached for a pistol that wasn't on my hip. My breathing was fast. I cursed my illness, that I couldn't transition like others, with their fancy chems and surgeries. I cursed myself for forgetting to shave that morning and wearing such a masculine jacket. I cursed the gods that would put me in this wretched form and insist I live with it. One last time I heard it, like the invocation of some kind of old and vile magick, "Adrian!"

I located the voice, an elek standing about 5 foot tall. He had prematurely grey hair, those trademark pupiless brass eyes, and long, rounded ears studded with earrings that protruded a few inches from either side of his head. He was doing the thing that eleks do where they stand on the tips of their toes and ponder the situation. Then the recognition clicked, I knew this man. He cocked his head and slightly frowned, I could see him reacting to the look on my face, and considering if he had made an error. He carefully and apologetically, "So sorry ma'am, I think there was a misunderstanding."

Panic and rage washed over into relief and joy, "Tar'Il?" I said, though the voice that came from me is not the one he probably remembered. He

perked up, “A-” he stopped himself, and considered the situation. I was just glad this was a friendly face, the worst case scenarios that had been flooding my mind drifted away. “Alice, my name is Alice now. It’s been years Tar’il!” I was smiling, in part because it helps cis people feel comfortable after an incident, but also because I was just so happy to see him.

“No shit!” Tar’il laughed. “How’ve you been? Is this where you’re holing up these days?”

“Yea, I live over in Pier 17. Cheap waterfront property is too good to turn up. Landlord’s nephew was another violetcoat.”

“Good on him! You know what battalion?”

I frowned and looked away, “The 21st.”

“Oh...” Tar’il trailed off for a second too. Everyone knew what became of the 21st at the end of the war. After that mournful instant Tar’Il tried to recover. “Well hey, I was just about to head to a Hungry Reihn’s a couple blocks down. You want a bite? I’m buying.”

I rolled my eyes, “Do you live here?”

“No no, just visiting.”

“Of course you are, that’s tourist food. Come on, there’s a cute little cafe that just opened up on Victory Boulevard.”

We spent the next couple hours catching up. We talked about our time in the war, my arm, our old CO. We had been in the same unit for a time. After the Royalists lost most of us scattered to the wind. Most of us took our skills wherever we could get paid. Tar’Il was in town for work, and we had been luckily in the same place at the same time.

He said he worked in security and I said I worked in reclamation and we kept it at that. It was best to not ask questions about these sorts of things. We discussed the completion of the space elevator at the center of the city, how

New Bekton had gone from a port town to a tech hub because of the changes in the tax code. The sorts of conversations you have with an old friend you know you won't see again for a long time.

When we left the cafe, Tar'Il pulled me aside. We stood by the side door of the cafe in an alley. Tar'Il waited for a drone to pass by overhead, then looked at me. "So, you keep up with the Front at all?"

That cold headrush of disappointment hit me as I realized what was happening.

He continued, "We could use someone like you Alice. Not even out there in the wastes, we need fighters right here in New Bekton!"

"I don't do that anymore Tar, and I don't appreciate the feeling that you just wanted to give the sales pitch."

He held his mouth open as he thought of what to say, Eleks were usually fast with their words but he was clearly trying to be careful. "Alice no- I- I'm so glad to see you. I'm in town to do some work for them. I can't tell you what."

"I know." I nodded reassuringly.

"Things are just bad out there, we need people like you."

"Tar, dear, I've had this talk before with others from the unit. I respect what you're doing but the answer's no." I gave that disarming smile again.

"You're a good one, Alice. Don't let the wasteland life turn you sour."

"Hasn't yet," and we laughed, hugged, and said goodbye.

I think a lot about that encounter. How just by happenstance we had been in the same district at the same time. How New Bekton pushes people together by making itself a necessity. It was the last time I got to talk to him. He was shot at an Imperial checkpoint a couple months later.

When my mind wanders I start wishing I had said more. That I told him how much his camaraderie meant to me, even if we didn't keep in touch. Maybe I could have told him that the girl I was fucking makes fake licenses and IDs. Maybe he could have gotten some fake papers for the lash pistol the fascists found in his bag. Would he still be here? Exercises in thought, little more. Tar'Il was gone, another proud son of Astael cut down by those who claimed to defend it.

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There were four main ways out of New Bekton. By water, in the harbor, was common for commerce and shipping. The new Voidspire went into orbit and connected voidships to stations around the planet. Then there was South-Gate, which was mostly corporate convoys and well-licensed caravans. I was foot traffic, so West-Gate was my usual exit and entrance.

Customs and processing had been run by a branch of NBLE until recently, part of the Imperial takeover of the city's operations. Normal business casual attire had been replaced by militarized cobalt blue armor and matching civilian jumpsuits. The atmosphere was more tense here now, I still hadn't gotten used to it. At least in part due to the blood-stained wall behind the main office.

I had my bag on my back and my gear ready. I made sure to stow my Royalist jacket in my bag, and was down to my earth tones. My full-face rebreather was buried in my red-brown hair, ready to be brought down quickly. We were close to the gate now and it made me edgy. The line moved at an agonizingly slow pace, I checked the time on my wrist watch. 8:32 PM. Oren was expecting my return by 9 AM tomorrow.

The main office had a booth in its front and guards nearby in any direction. The old human man in front of me had grafted on a third leg onto his lower torso that he used to sit. I didn't normally find myself envying chemical augments, but as the wait went into half an hour, I wished I could sit the same. At one point this would have been twenty minutes, tops.

An hour later, and I was at the front of the line. The clerk was a woman with greying dark hair kept in a tight bun. This part of the exchange was familiar

enough. I said my name was Alice Talin, she asked if it was spelled Allis like the god, I corrected and said with a C and an E. I handed over my city ID for reference. She asked my business and I gave it, scavenging was no crime as long as you stayed away from unsanctioned areas. She asked for my license and I paused. This was new.

“Do you need to check for class C scavenging?” I went a little outside the drudgery of old power cells and food stuffs of Class C, but she didn’t know that.

“New policy, all salvage licenses are processed upon city exit. We confirm transit tickets too. Tamps down on seditious fraud.”

I clenched my jaw, and went into the recesses of my wallet. I produced a different card than my usual ID, and handed it to the clerk. She looked at it and frowned, “This says Adrian Mercier-Durante.”

“Yes, I’ve been in the process of legally changing my name but the paperwork got delayed.”

Her lips pursed, “So your name is Adrian.”

“My name is Alice, I just need to get it-”

“All official comings and goings from the city must be done in legal name-real name, only.”

“Alice is my real name.”

“Not according to the Imperial Authority of New Bekton.” She paused, and a smirk crept into her expression, “Nor the official stance of the Divinist Church, Mr. Mercier-Durante.”

My face was red from heat, same story all over this fucking city. “This is my fucking job! You’re really gonna-” In my screaming I stepped forward. The Imperial guards were on me before I could even register the metal gauntlets around my shoulders. “LET ME THE FUCK GO!” I bucked. One of them

drew a gun. I saw the look in the clerk's eyes, she wanted it to happen. "Handle him," she waved her hand and threw my IDs back at me.

A squeaky male voice interjected, "STOP!"

The scene paused, everyone in line behind me, the guards, the clerk, and myself all waiting with baited breath. An elek with silver eyes and one ear bigger than the other rushed up. The last time I had seen him he was wearing a button up and a professional neckband. Now he was in one of the blue jumpsuits. I didn't know his full name, I just called him Norm.

"She—" He considered how to approach the situation, "They're in the NBLE system. A Schedule J Amended form was filed to bring the two records into sync. You should still have access to it in your files."

The look on the clerk's face I'd only seen in spellcasters trying to conjure some deadly trick. She closed her eyes, and sighed. Her chair swiveled to a terminal next to her station and some keys clacked under her glowing manicured nails. She was quiet for a minute. "Let him go." She swiveled back, "Get your IDs in order, I'm going to file a 7-B to have this nullified. For now, you may go."

The guards let me go, I picked up my IDs in a hurry and scurried towards Norm, who shuttled me towards the gate in time for the 9pm cycle. I thanked him up and down and he was kind enough. "I'd do it for anyone. The blue—" he stopped, looked around, and whispered, "bluebacks just don't remember their mortal nature anymore. I can't help you like this again, get your papers in order... it's only going to get worse." I nodded, and slipped him a 20 piece coin as a thanks. I brought my rebreather down on my face and got ready for the gates to open.

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Across the west bridge I snagged a rental buggy. This part of the outskirts was industrialized. Lots of buildings and small towns that supported factories and massive farms. An hour out it got more sparse. The clouds

were thick tonight, so the only lights were the city behind me and the headlights carving the darkness ahead of me.

I tuned the radio to Dr. Swell's frequency, now in the nighttime show. Swell had been dealing with fatigue so he'd delegated the nightly music show to his apprentice, a mysterious figure who went by The Fizz. The Fizz lacked the manic energy of his teacher, but always had an interesting fact to share about the artist playing. Tonight was Qiaran jazz, I almost swapped off to something more conventional, but the frenetic string bass had grown on me. I did my best to follow the map that Oren drew me into the night.

Off the road, at the edge of the Gryphon's Head Peninsula, named because if you looked at the Astaelian Empire on a map, it resembled a perched Gryphon of old. I took a right and buried the buggy in some shrubbery, accidentally scaring a murder of dust-crows that went cackling into the night. Almost like laughing, ha ha ha, ha ha ha. A wry smirk cracked my lips, I wonder what they knew.

I got out and carried on foot for a while. In the stillness of the night it was just locusts and the clicking of my filtered mask. Technically, the area I was entering was property of the church, but I wasn't in the market for any divine artifacts. My target was a derelict vessel from the Parathan Imperial era. Hundreds of years ago they had heralded the age of alchemy that we still lived in now. An unsalvaged vehicle could be host to so many rare finds. I'd pay my rent for months.

I flipped a light on my face mask and peered into a crevasse formed by a seismic event. Sure enough, there it was. Made sense why it wasn't found. I thanked the gods for my good fortune and wriggled my way in. I heard a clicking noise. Not my rebreather. I froze, feeling my heart nearly pound out of its chest. Random debris? No, that was a trigger. I looked down, staying as still as I could. I looked down, my left foot was stepping on something metal, brass, cylindrical. Recognition snapped into place and I shambled my way out of the opening as fast as I could. Grenade, grenade, grenade.

It all happened in a matter of seconds, and then came the energy blast. Enough of me got out that I didn't die in the blast immediately. The searing pain in my leg, or what remained of it, sent me to the ground. Through the hideous pain and the ensuing rush of adrenaline, I tried to reach for my injured leg. Half-cauterized by the heat of the explosion. I collapsed, my consciousness fading quickly. I realized my head was resting against something, something firm. My own boot, my own foot, my ankle, my knee.

The pain and blood loss took me elsewhere before the horror could really set in. In the distance, I swore I could hear those crows.

Ha ha ha, ha ha ha.