

“Three thousand years,” Alyssia grumbled. “Three thousand years, and this is my life.”

She was being bitter, and she knew it. It's not like any of the things she was carrying was particularly heavy, even if she had half the strength she did. It wasn't even that she had a particularly hard life, considering how her kind was normally treated. It wasn't even that she and her kind didn't particularly deserve it, all things considered.

But Alyssia remembered how things used to be. And even if it made her a rather awful person, there were times like now where she kinda wanted those old days back.

She wasn't a fan of the outdoors. Most that remained of The Ascension weren't. The smell of nature didn't particularly have an appeal to those like her. Nature brought too many variables into play. Nature meant things like high humidity. Humidity meant moisture. Moisture meant tarnish. Tarnish meant decay. Decay was anathema to those that sought to transcend such mortal limitations.

Truly, it was a minor miracle that her limbs hadn't completely eroded by now, even with the knowledge and crafting expertise of the height of the Rational Age. She knew of many of her kind that had succumbed to age, brought about by lack of maintenance. She had been fortunate that the worst of her experience so far had been a copper colored discoloration to her casing.

But in the spirit of fairness, she had to admit that discoloration served an unintended purpose; giving a passable human color to her casing that from a distance no one found suspicious. It meant she could walk through streets without much hassle, something vital for when her companion was performing other important tasks and proper timing was essential.

Of course... it always fell apart under scrutiny. Like from Dioceses Guards stationed at ground zero.

They were an assembly of five, and girded for war, with flanged maces hanging from their left hips, single shot black powder pistols on the right, heavy iron armor, and hooded cowls that were supposed to represent their complete submission to God to the point that they had no individuality.

They were present no doubt to oversee the usage of the fireworks that she was ostensibly carrying, as such explosives were considered “restricted items” and therefore potentially dangerous in plebeian hands.

Of course, Alyssia wasn't carrying fireworks or any other “restricted item.” No, she was *truthfully* carrying things that would be no doubt be deemed “forbidden,” presuming anyone within this dioceses even knew what they were.

The leader of the quintet, notable by the gold armbands on the sleeves of his tunic that were visible through the breastplate and forearm bands of his armor (not to mention contradicting the tenet of surrendering individuality to God) held out his hand and ordered, “Where is your master, machine? How are you moving freely?”

It wasn't hard to fake enthralled. It was actually a remarkable way to keep her true intentions hidden, as the process that did so to Ascended like her stripped them of free will and limited their ability to answer anything beyond their assigned duties or obey direct orders.

The hard part more than anything was holding her tongue.

“It's not like it can answer you, sir,” the guard at the captain's right informed. “*It* probably doesn't even know what she's doing.”

Alyssia managed to prevent glaring at the man or visibly reacting. Even if she technically no longer possessed a physical gender, she had chosen her chassis for a reason, and did not approve of her identity being rejected whole cloth simply because it wasn't flesh and blood.

“Show me your arms, machine,” the captain ordered.

Alyssia complied with jerky movements to try and emulate a mindless drone suffering from age. It was what mortals expected at this point. The reason why the guard asked for her arms was no doubt so that he could examine her enthralled bands, the one piece of high technology that the Church of Virtues and their leaders allowed the rank and file to be reasonably proficient with.

At the end of the Rational Age, mortals discovered how to... reprogram those that had

Ascended, and these enthralling bands had been copied in the thousands of years since to make sure those Ascended that still lived were kept under heel. It had been a life saving measure for thousands of her kind, considering that up until those devices were developed, the usual means of dealing with a free Ascended had been outright destruction.

Alyssia would have honestly preferred destruction to the fate others of her kind suffered; a slow decay in a state barely above death as it was, their free will stripped to the point that they were barely more aware than any meager machine... useful only in their knowledge of the past and capabilities beyond human muscle, endurance, and hardiness.

It had been a fate Alyssia had suffered for the majority of the three thousand years since the fall of the Rational Age, and she would never go back. She would die first.

“At the risk of sacrilege, have to admit its easy on the eyes,” the one at the end admitted quietly.

“The Ascended had been known to be vain,” the guard at the other end replied, “For all we know it had been a hideous cow in her life.”

It was fortunate that the guard captain had been looking at the display on her wrists, because her eyes betrayed her as it delivered a scathing glare in the direction of the guard that had last spoken before she could catch herself. She had actually chosen her chassis based *exactly* on her mortal form.

“Easy gentlemen!”

She knew that voice, even though she dared not look in its direction immediately. It was a surprisingly high voice for the frame that bore it, a very high male tenor despite the presumably large lungs that would come from a man well over two meters high and easily one hundred kilograms.

He wasn't exactly cut from stone, but he wasn't rotund either. More like a block that had been sanded to smooth out the surface and not much else. His hair was a mix of blond and brown, which had the effect of making his hair look drastically different depending on how the light played on it, and eyes that bore strands of green and blue to the same effect.

Dalton Crane, black powder master... at least officially.

“I'm sorry my drone startled you,” Dalton explained, hastily jogging up to the scene. “The dear thing has a few more permissions than others of its make because I can be dreadfully busy. But I assure you, it is still completely enthralled. No fears of rogue Ascended here, I promise.”

“Can you now?” the captain asked suspiciously. To be fair, Dalton hadn't sounded particularly convincing.

“Of course. If it was unbound, I don't think any of us would be alive right now.”

Dalton was right about *one* thing, at least.

The captain relented, and said chidingly, “Well... just be careful how much unsupervised walking around this machine does. Most would not understand or accept its lightened permissions, I suspect.”

Alyssia's teeth clenched even as she did her best to keep her jaw from moving. It was enough to avoid notice at least, and she was allowed to attend to Dalton's side and proceed.

“Easy...” Dalton whispered once they were out of earshot.

She hissed back, “Don't tell me 'easy' while you're not the one they're talking about like you're not a living person.”

“To them, you're not, and that sentiment wouldn't change even if they knew you were unbound.”

Alyssia growled softly, but said nothing else. Dalton wasn't wrong in this case. She knew he wanted to offer further comfort, but didn't dare visibly display anything that would betray she wasn't some nigh soulless machine.

“We wouldn't have even had this mess if you had waited for the shipment,” she grumbled as they reached ground zero for what was supposed to be a fireworks display for the new year's celebration.

“The church was expecting us. Having no one here would have been suspicious.”

She dropped the bundle of missiles off of her back, then the fire extinguisher she had been carrying. “And this wasn't? Do you realize how rare these are? We don't exactly make compressed carbon dioxide on a whim anymore.”

Alyssia was referring to the few pockets of humanity that were allowed by the church to advance human technology, under strict supervision and under incredible risk of extermination if the church thought it was straying beyond the bounds of medicine or safety.

“But it's a required safety feature of working with black powder. Had we not brought it, it would have been suspicious.”

Dalton was a member of one such city, Nouveau Orleans, and was officially licensed by the Church of Virtues to disseminate approved technologies to the rest of the North American continent.

That he was *actually* working for the Rational Revolution wasn't as widely known, and it was that secret that allowed him to work to overthrow the various religious organizations that now oppressed the world.

And why he was allowed to work anywhere *near* the Grand Missouri Cathedral, the heart of the North Central American Diocese, and where the Archbishop of Temperance resided.

The missiles had been carefully sealed in traditional fireworks tubes, both to hide their true nature and protect them from unnecessary damage that would have set them off prematurely.

While Dalton's allies had made great strides in high-tech weaponry... it still wasn't quite up to par with the world that Alyssia remembered.

The shape and design of the missiles also allowed them to be mounted into the wooden racks designed for fireworks, allowing the ruse to continue even longer, and giving both of them a better chance of escaping with their hides intact.

“Think we have enough?” Alyssia asked sarcastically, referring to the five rows of ten missiles that were on the rack thanks to the final shipment she had delivered.

“Have to make it look like a convincing fireworks show,” Dalton explained. “Can't do that with a sparse number. Besides... there's no guarantees the tracking on these things will work reliably. We... haven't had too many opportunities to test them.”

Alyssia had to fight back a laugh, and forced herself not to look if any of the guards might have heard the snort that escaped regardless. She actually *liked* seeing Dalton uncertain, as he was normally so cocky and even arrogant considering how little he actually knew.