

This is not my flat. I fling my cup and press my hand against the panel. This time, the strange energy I feel flows more freely. It takes only ten seconds or so to activate the panel. Rush right. Spook the posh bitch heading home with my pedestrian unawakened slippers. Find the lift. Coax energy into the button, which is faster. It dings open immediately because it was already there. Thank you, posh bitch. I push the lowest button.

No wait, that's the cellar. I frown. One squiggle for single digit floors, then two squiggles for each floor afterward. The squiggle looks like 'down' so I presume it must mean 'under?'. Yeah, and the number squiggles are mirrored so it must be the below-ground levels. I press level oh. I think it's the ground floor, yeah.

My bladder tries to force its way up as the lift drops. Fast. Must be a tall building. The doors ping open.

Flash of light. Sounds. Impacts. Parts of the ceiling, splattered with blood. Pain. Very brief.

Death count: 3

Qualia points acquired: 2 (new violent death)

Total available: 16.

Leather seat.

"That motherfucker trapped the lift's ground floor exit? In a residential building? What a savage; very rude."

"Beer?" Chronos offers.

"Don't mind if I do."

Morag serves me a pint of ale in a glass stein of simple make. She manages the foam perfectly so I give her my begrudging respect. I take a sip. Not only is it amazing, it's at the perfect temperature again.

"If the god business doesn't work out, you can always open a bar," I offer.

"Fortunately, it pans out... every time," Chronos jokes.

Fucking puns from a god. I suppose that's all my simian intellect can appreciate.

"Whose apartment is this anyway?" I ask. "How come I'm being killed on sight? Isn't this against the rules?"

"It is your apartment. I had someone prepare it for you, as well as... financial resources."

“Where’s the cash?”

“I suppose I can share that it will be in a ‘chip’ as this concept already exists in your mind. Simply sending energy into the chip will bind it to you.”

“Okay. And for the killer?”

“It is not against the rules to send a killer after a target, even if this target happens to be you.”

There is something peculiar about the wording that makes me believe I am missing some context.

“I don’t suppose you can do anything about it?” I ask, with little hope.

“Nope! But you can.”

Suddenly, I realize I could technically die after two minutes without fail for a hundred loops, and eventually find something to buy with all that qualia that would get me a way out... but no. No, there must be a way. Clearly everyone here has a better body than I do, but it still takes time for the killer to catch up. There must be ways for me to escape. The killer is faster, stronger, more prepared. Fuck, they even have drones, I think? But what do I have?

I have time. If there is one path out, a single, one chance to escape, then I can find it. And then use it.

Every time.

My gaze sees the third corpse. Looks like someone cleaned a raspberry jam leak with my fucking clothes. But that’s the thing. I don’t even feel that terribly upset here. Because nothing, nothing can permanently stick.

I will get out.

“Can you tell me more about the flat I’m in?” I ask.

“I can only answer specific questions,” the god reminds me.

“Are there weapons?”

“Not as such. I asked for a safe place and resources so that you may be acclimated.”

“Ok, ok. I think I have some ideas. Send me back.”

I push myself through the ghost memory of getting pulped. The soul thing, I can feel it. A part of me knows I should be in a worse mental state after everything that happened. I died,

violently. Several times. The memories are not dulled, they're just distant. Separated from who I am by a gap that shouldn't be there. I can also feel a presence to my right, beyond the wall of the flat. That's posh bitch going home. No wait, I'm being rude for no reason. Renaming her as 'neighbor' in my head. I manage to open the door in only a couple seconds then I'm out after grabbing the cash chip.

"Hi," I greet neighbor. "Lovely evening we're having."

She replies something in a sing-song language I don't recognize. The emotion I get from her is just surprise so I elect to believe this is a polite greeting. I'm still running anyway. The lift obligingly opens. This time, I press up. The highest floor possible.

It doesn't work. I pick another with a longer series of symbols and the lift takes off. Maybe I need some sort of ID to even access my floor? If so, how does the killer even get in?

The door opens on a flat expanse of ground: the roof, as I was hoping for. I take a step out and —

"What the... wow."

I didn't get it. I really didn't get it until now. I saw an 'alien' but I didn't properly register what it meant. I see it now. Skyscrapers in endless rows, climbing, climbing, all around, distant ones like thin needles. Some of them hang like stalactites from higher up instead, stopping at a bottom floor that tapers down to a soft curve. Some must be *miles* long. I stretch my neck trying to see the end but they're lost in a sea of lights and colors, and even though there is no sky there is so much light, so much green. Titanic growths of ruby, emerald, sapphire leaves, some thick, some as light as crystal, some even transparent! And there, yellow leaves with deep black flowers. They crawl over every structure harmoniously, embracing them, avoiding windows and the uncountable bridges crossing the abyss between the buildings. There are lights as well and, at least for now, the merry explosions of fireworks. Music fills the air in a distorted cacophony, drums and brass reverberating. Flying, well, cars, form thin lines crossing the sky in short parades. There are even people on the trees. There are people everywhere. It's... it's wonderful. It's so wonderful. A cave or miracles.

It's so fucking wonderful it almost made me forget the killer.

"Right."

With deep regret, I tear my eyes away from the breathtaking spectacle. Ok so this may be architecturally impossible given the little I know of material science but maybe my first instinct was still correct. If an alien residential tower has a lift, stairs, and condescending neighbours, then perhaps it also shares something else with human buildings: fire exits. I race to the edge. Ok that is... quite a drop. I can see a massive bridge acting as a sort of platform below though, upon which people stroll. I think there are food stands as well, and balloons. Are those holograms? They sure look gorgeous. Alright, focus. Focus. Fire exit. The roof isn't that big because we're in one of the thinner towers. I would have also expected, I don't know, transformers and AC units or something, but the roof is flat with just a basic guardrail. Writing on the ground and arrows suggest there must be machinery but,

honestly, I don't see anything. Second corner, half a bridge then an abyss as deep and bright as the sky was. Third corner, just the abyss. I'm not panicking. Not yet.

Fourth side. Half a bridge and the abyss.

No fire exit. No stairs. Nothing. I could technically get over the railing to try and get down using the window panels as handholds. Maybe a world-class climber could manage it. I'm in good shape for a cellist but this is far, far beyond me. And the elevator is gone. Wait, this building has a cellar. How does that work? I look down again and spot stairs in the 'bridge'. So it must have several layers, hmm.

Something flashes away from under the platform. Was that a train? Ok, ok.

There is only one decision left to me. I need to —

Death count: 4

Qualia points acquired: 1 (violent death, very clean)

Total available: 17.

“— decide how to die,” I tell Chronos.

He nods knowingly.

“The ultimate choice. Well, except for you. Orange juice? Freshly pressed.”

I'm impressed to see Morag squeezing half oranges on a shiny chrome juicer with the precision and care of a neurosurgeon. The juice is delicious.

“Thank you, Morag.”

She stares at me and I don't know if it's a glare. Everything feels like a glare when someone has the infinite expanse of the interstellar void instead of eyeballs.

“It's delicious,” I helpfully add.

A short nod confirms that I'm still in the green. My new corpse is lying on his chest — my chest? — missing the front half of the head from what I can tell. The entry wound is just in the middle of my poor head, from the back. The dark hair looks wet, but it still lacks a pool of blood.

“The sands swallow it. Otherwise it would be too messy,” Chronos elaborates.

“Convenient.”

"It *is* my domain."

Right. Riiiiight. Hmm.

"Tell me, would I have access to the cellar? If I have a flat to my name there."

"In this district? Basement storage often comes with ownership."

"Ok. New plan. Yeah, new plan..."

Grab the chip. Leave, take a right.

"Hi, neighbor."

Shock, disbelief coming in waves. I think I'm getting better. It would definitely help if the killer went after me themselves instead of sending drones. I'm pretty sure I saw them the first time but then it's either drones or they shot me from behind, or both. The lift opens. I try to press basement 1, no dice. Basement 2? Dice. My bladder climbs up uncomfortably. Hey, at least it's still inside.

The door opens to a dark corridor, dim blue lights leading left and right. I step out and do not explode which is a novel and welcome experience. Funny how people tend to take explosion-free housing for granted, the entitled bastards. I run right because that's where I saw the stairs at the bridge level. There are plenty of small doors to my right where the main body of the building should be, which I assume are the cellars. At the end of the corridor, I find what I was hoping for: an exit gate. With a panel. A beep, and it unlocks. I am out. Elegant pink stone stairs lead up to the bridge with its music, warm light, and people. This level has arrows and squiggles I still cannot read but I recognize numbers and a repeated sign. I rush ahead, not just because there is cover but because I think I know what I'm going to find, and I do. Locked gates with some sort of reader. Behind, a platform with benches, and then arches hovering over emptiness, held together by a technology I could only have dreamed of. Or is it magic? Hard to tell.

I take out the chip, then send energy into it. Unfortunately, it doesn't seem to work. There seems to be some sort of feedback I am having trouble identifying. Someone walks by, sending waves of astonishment and curiosity, but with the same underlying haughty disgust I experienced from dear neighbor. There is definitely something with me that the locals don't appreciate. I catch a floral scent and the wide shoulder of a man in deep blue clothes, purple hair forming a waterfall behind his back giving me a wide berth. I'm the background loser in some over-the-top anime.

And I'm going to die if I don't manage to unlock that damn... ah, here it is. I just had to keep pushing energy for a few seconds without stopping. At least it doesn't feel tiring.

Now if this place is user-friendly... I place the chip against the locked gate's reader. A prompt pops up, with two options. On a hunch, I press the left one. The gate opens and I'm on the platform.

A train arrives, slowing down. The chrome and glass frame makes it almost see-through. I almost race in, which saves me as the door stays open for about a second, then the damn train goes off so fast I half-crash on a seat with a delicate upholstery.

There are three people in the car, all like models from some futuristic event. The purple-haired man looks like the archetypal doomed musician, with pale skin and sharp features. There is also a massively muscular man with elaborate face paint, close-cropped hair, and dark glasses hovering over his face, and a woman with frizzy golden hair whose perfect face turns away with disgust. I feel annoyance from the artist, outrage from the woman, and nothing from the muscle lad who's given some distance by the other two. The woman actually stands and struts away in a wave of perfume. As for the artist, he turns his attention to a transparent sheet of something crystalline I assume must be electronics since I doubt he would actually pull a mirror. I look around. We are moving very fast, so fast the next stop comes quickly with no one getting on. Music, people, and light still fill the air. We are still surrounded by skyscrapers extending up and down until I lose sight. The number of people contained in this place, even assuming one per apartment, must be... I don't even want to think about it.

Anyway, I got out. I successfully got out. I'm alive and I have money. The killer might be after me but I have not been alive for this long before, so I assume they're at the very least delayed.

Now what?

I'm facing three major issues. No, wait, I'm facing three major, *immediate* issues. One, I don't speak the language. That might not seem like much of an issue but I can't read it either. Most famous destinations on Earth make a token effort to use Roman characters. Here? Squiggles everywhere. They really look like a succession of nicely decorated circles placed one after the other. Ovals, rather. They must be super hard to read from afar though.

Ok, enough. Focus. Must be the adrenaline crashing down. I can't understand or read anything, leading me to the second point. I don't know anyone here. I don't know where to go. I don't have allies. Bloody hell, I don't even know why anybody would want to kill me off without so much as a proper insult. I just got here! And I don't know where to go next. I guess, I was so busy with surviving the very short term, I didn't think of what to do afterward. What I know is that I must learn the language, which should be fairly easy thanks to the cheat skill, and at least get some help but there comes the third issue: people look at me like I'm a rabid ferret and I think I know why.

It's probably the body awakening thing, at the very least. I can tell pretty much everyone around is faster, taller, and — if I have to be honest — much better-looking than I am. If someone fished a lice-riddled peasant from some 13th century rat ditch and dropped them in modern-day Harrods, they'd probably get about the same welcome. And that's a problem

because if people's first reaction to me is disgust, I'm going to struggle to get any courtesy, much less help from a stranger.

I wish I could talk to Chronos, but I assume it can only be done outside of the loop, dammit.

I look up. Nothing has changed except that the train seems to be going upward now. Inside the comfortable interior, I barely saw the change. Unfortunately, a woosh of air announces the presence of newcomers. I look up, feeling a vague sense of annoyance.

Two guys in futuristic white armor with kite shields and spears. They look halfway between knights and the personal guard of some insane dictator. I don't need any soul senses to smell trouble.

"Ah shit it's the fuzz."

Fear claws at my chest, an instinctive response. It doesn't matter that I've done nothing wrong. I'm weak, ugly, and I can tell this is a sin here. I don't want to spend one year in prison.

They talk to me with a voice modulator that turns their speech low and mechanical, an additional impersonal touch on top of their face-covering helms. I'm so done for.

"I'm sorry," I tell them. "I do not understand you."

Annoyance. Impatience. Unexpectedly, the guy I can't read speaks up. The cops exchange a few words with him. He... doesn't speak the same language as they do but they seem to understand perfectly well. Eventually, the train stops, and this time it stays stopped. One of the cops makes a come hither gesture towards the exit.

My chances of escaping, or resisting, are just like my chance of becoming the archon: just a flat nothing. I stand up to follow. They don't even check if I'm doing it. Now the emotions from the passerbys are even more filled with disgust.

So this is going to get very old, very fast. I still follow the two plastified gargoyles across empty hallways made out of some gray crystal structure that must be below the 'main street'. Are we inside of a mountain? It seems the party is still going strong outside. Eventually, the pair shoves me inside of an elevator heading down alongside crates, barrels, and what look like trash cans. The gate opens to another empty crystal corridor after a solid fifteen minutes of travel. All downwards. From my perspective. Hesitating, I leave. There are markings on the walls in softly shimmering letters. I'm pretty sure I've seen at least three hundred different ones by now thanks to my new trait, all mostly oval and only differentiated by the loops, crosses, and patterns circling and linking them. I have to come to a tragic realization.

The alphabet is clearly meaning-based rather than sound-based. It's going to be a *pain* to learn. Thank fuck for the cheat. Unfortunately, I am now completely lost. The hallways are labyrinthine and empty at this time of the, well, I haven't seen a sun yet so it's hard to tell, but the fact my neighbor was heading home would indicate it might be evening. I'm starting to tire and I'm thirsty. I call, but there are no replies, just more corridors and more rooms,

most of them locked. It looks like I ended up in some sort of maintenance hub mostly dealing with waste disposal. It smells a bit bad.

Maybe I should double back. I will double back. I turn, press the panel, and it beeps a refusal.

“Well, shit.”

Ok. Ok, new plan: I find some sort of office or mess hall and wait there for rescue. Since I need language exposure anyway, I might as well learn it off the boxes of cereals or whatever alien version they keep around. More corridors, more airy this time. They grow larger. It looks even more deserted.

“Fuck.”

There is a big hangar bay. Hangar door. Looks like it's designed for vehicles. This one beeps open so I cross it, and suddenly, light. I approach a railing, panic a bit, step back because there is no glass that I can see, but I realize I can breathe. It's... space.

I face a planet, dark masses of land and see lit by clusters of light. It's night time over there, but the white light of a distant sun turns the upper edge into a fiery corona. It must be, I don't know, ten thousand miles away? Or not? It feels very close for a planet, yet so large my sense of scale just doesn't process it. I am.. in space? I look left, right. Crystal extending until I cannot gauge the distance at all but it must be tens of kilometers at the lowest, lowest estimate.

“Holy shit.”

I'm on a space station. It's an artificial satellite. And it is massive.

Who built this?

What is it even called?

Where the *fuck* am I?

I try to get back inside but the door is predictably locked. I try to find another way in without success. I wait. I bang on a door. I wait some more, I don't know for how long. I walk.

At some point, I see a robot flying in the distance. There are also distant dots I think might be starships. I can't be sure. They're too far for me.

The sun rises. There are explosions on the surface of the planet, very tiny ones but I assume they must be monstrous on the ground. I'm really thirsty now. I come across another door but it is locked. I don't find any way to contact anyone.

I throw up over the railing. There is barely anything there, but it slows, then flashes, then it is gone. It makes me wonder how there can be gravity here. I am so, so tired. Exhausted.

I think I'm dying.

"Fuck."

The annoying, humiliating thing is... this is my fault. I knew, knew, that if one is lost, they must stop and wait for rescue. It might have worked back in the waste disposal complex, but up here? There is no one. I had every chance to turn and I didn't. And now I'm going to die for it. Die because I knew what to do but couldn't fucking gather two functional brain cells to rub together as soon as the actual situation arose. I am such a dumb fuck.

There is an attraction to the void. I hate being so thirsty my mouth feels like sandpaper. I know that, when I die, I'll return. It's still so scary. I don't know if I can do it. But I have to. It's not a matter of dying now. It's a matter of how. I feel so sick. It hurts.

One last look at the planet. The landmasses are not that of Earth. The light is slightly different, slightly lighter. This isn't my world. Not even a distant future or distant past version of it. I still don't know what it's called.

I tilt over the railing. It still takes a conscious effort not to grab it on the way down. To prolong the inevitable.

I fall fast but then I slow down, because there is nothing pulling me 'down'. Cold envelops me like a sudden brisk wind. I exhale. Crystal dust puffs out, for half a second. A beautiful cloud. For the briefest moment, I feel so very alive, my soul expanding once more like the first time to embrace everything that can be, that will be, as long as I keep going. Space.

Then space devours me.

It doesn't take very long, but it's very, very painful.

Death count: 5

Qualia points acquired: 80

Triumph of escaping the assassin's net: 3

Used money: 1

Took the grav train: 1

First meeting with, and exposure to a Sallurian and their language: 1

Faced hostile law enforcement: 3

Saw the outside: 8

Experienced acute radiation poisoning: 8

Made the conscious choice to end your own life: 25

Violent death, accepted: (fast, messy: space exposure without any protective equipment, then shield disintegration): 30

Total available: 101