

Floating in the vacuum of space is an odd feeling, but I think the peculiar nature of the light is what I will remember most. With the distances unblurred, everything is both unknowingly far off and weirdly neat. The greenish planet still waits below us, red dots showing the embers of a long war. The Three Thrones war if I remember correctly. Enderlith itself is but a small dot in the distance, one I only spotted because SilSil kindly pointed it out for me. I am not yet allowed to pilot my own booster but it's ok. The Telleria — that's the ship we're boarding — is about building sized and rather intact for a derelict. It looks like some retro NASA design all in white and shiny chrome, with small windows bordered by black rivets. It is also unlit. The team does a preliminary inspection by floating around the ship and checking items off some list. I try to use the booster manually after SilSil gives his blessing. It's just too easy to spin and too hard to stop but at least it's fun.

“Ok mudboy, enough barrel rolls. We're moving in. SilSil?”

“On it! On it!”

I am rudely interrupted and stabilized. The airlock here is small, forcing us to enter by two. I am in the first batch with Sethri, the booster left outside.

“So, do you feel anything?” he asks.

I focus my perception then patiently sweep the ship. I'd say I can feel around 5 to 6 meters all around me, and up to 15 in a tunnel if I focus. It doesn't take all that long to go over the entire ship, but it does leave me with a mild headache, not much, just a strange pressure.

“I feel something alive. Not a human or anything that thinks but... a presence. Several small presences, rather,” I say, picking my words carefully.

“That could be part of the environmental suite. So long as none of them feel hungry?”

“No, and none of them should be larger than a...”

There are no cats there so out of despair, I show dimensions by waving my arms around.

“Hmm, that's definitely bigger than Nature's usual plants. Alright let's keep an eye out. And mudboy?”

“No removing the helmet,” I repeat in a tired voice.

“Wow, Vargo, he remembered!”

“I am surprised myself,” the woman replies from outside.

“Ok, let's move in.”

There is air here, though no gravity. The interior is just as white as the exterior, but it's clearly more lived in. Dust floats around but there is little debris near the entrance. Everything is tidy. The light of our lamps cut cones of radiance into the darkness of the unpowered ship.

“We’re going to check what Mudboy found first. Vargo, Stone, with me. SilSil, keep the engines powered just in case.”

“You got it! Got it, boss.”

We follow a white corridor to a sealed door. I find traces of life here: a shivered potted plant, still fighting against its inevitable doom, wrappers, tissues, pens and a disposable spoon float to and fro. Sethir opens the door to what must be the environment room. Dead projectors look down on the decrepit remains of the greenery. Only the mushroom patch still thrives. Some of them seem bioluminescent.

“Is this worth anything?” Vargo asks. “Never seen this one.”

“It’s used in medications medications for calming people without too many side effects,” SilSil explained from the side. “I forgot the price, but maybe?”

“If we get quarantined because it’s some sort of plague spreader...” Sethri warns.

“No! Look at the ship manifest.”

“Hmmm.”

In the end, Stone packs the mushroom. In the meantime I look at a nearby wall.

“There is... something there. Behind,” I say.

The mood tenses up immediately. A tiny blue flame adds itself to the light of our torches.

“Vargo if you roast me with that...” Sethri warns.

“Old man...”

Vargo speaks a rapid fire tongue I don’t know yet. It’s quite hissy, but Sethri replies in So-Sah.

“I don’t think it’s anything that bad. Look at the blueprint,” he continues, pointing at a document he pulled from a side satchel.

We spend a few seconds pondering upon a 2m wide map.

I have no idea what the fuck I’m looking at. I mean, it has to be a map of the spaceship but...

“Ah, I see it. And look!”

The flame of her thrower shows electric cables disappearing into the wall. I can only assume it’s not supposed to be there.

“SilSil?” Sethir asks.

“You won’t get it open the normal way unless the ship’s powered. Are we recovering it?”

“This rust bucket? Never.”

“Then I guess Stone’s your man.”

Stone is, in fact, the man as he has some sort of laser cutter that slices through the wall like it’s butter. As expected, there is a hidden compartment but contrary to my expectations, it’s still alive, powered by a generator cube that glows green in my vision. Rows of watery tanks line the walls, occupied by sluggish shapes.

“Does that produce electricity?” I ask with some doubt, pointing at the cube.

“No, pure mana...” Sethri replies, voice dreamy. “Ah and those are shimmerlobsters. They’re used to manufacture hallucinogenics. We can’t sell them but there’s a bounty on their disposal.”

Vargo whistles.

“Looks like Mudboy just paid for himself.”

And I did if the mood of the crew is any indication. While the team gets to work, I am allowed to play outside with my booster under SilSil’s benevolent supervision. The tiny fae runs around the station with what appears to be a large magnet, seeking out screws and other errant floating debris. Apparently they can be a major danger in space if left unchecked. Over the next hours, the team pulls the ship apart to recover some of the more complex pieces of machinery: a computer here, parts of the engine there, some of the more advanced elements of the environment suite still hosting some sort of algae. All of this is carefully stored in, or wrapped around our ship with a tight net, until Sethri declares our prey properly deboned. Then we carefully tug it in the direction of the planet.

“It will fall within three days and disintegrate in the atmosphere,” SilSil explains. “That way it won’t be a danger for navigation.”

“Aaaand won’t it fall on someone?”

“There won’t be anything solid left by the time it lands in the ocean,” Sethri explains in a darker voice. “And I’m pretty sure anything that could fly away from the surface already did so.”

“What’s the planet’s name?” I ask.

“Founder,” Vargo swears.

“It’s called Founder?”

“No! No, Founder is... it's the Founder! The person who Built Enderlith!”

“The first Archon,” Sethri explains. “And the planet is called Obis.”

“Oh, ok.”

“You cannot be for real,” Vargo says, manic. “Next you'll tell me you don't know about the Celestial Court.”

There is a silence, one I elect to break.

“I know about the court. I know about the 108 gods.”

“Alright, oof. I won't ask you to name the 12, or the 18. I can't even remember all of them myself.”

“He already told you he was cut off from... many things,” Sethri says. “That's enough now.”

The two exchanged some rapid fire words in their hissy tongue of theirs. Eventually, Vargo lets out a small 'sorry'. We start back towards Enderlith shortly after, the girl's aura bubbling with guilt, frustration, but also annoyance and curiosity. I think I'm not out of the woods yet.

The trip back is just as boring but at least SilSil lends me an old pad filled with terrible fae romance where every character seems obsessed with money. I sigh in relief when we decelerate, but tense when the others do. There are people near our berth. In white, fancier suits than our own, they hang around like vultures near a struggling body. I feel their souls as we come to a stop: eager, annoyed, feverish. They're looking for a confrontation.

It happens almost immediately.

“So, old man, heard you found yourself a soul awakened?” the larger one begins.

His two hench people snicker.

“Or are you lying to save your voidling ass?”

“Dockmaster had no problem with our candidate. Bring it up with them if you've got doubts,” Sethri retorts. “They could use a good laugh.”

“I'll show you a good laugh,” the leader barks.

His attention turns to me.

“So, are you a charlatan, stupid, desperate, or all of the above?”

I gently push my soul towards his own, ready to deliver an important message.

Not a charlatan.

He reels back, the gesture comical in the vacuum of space.

“Woow, the space mutts found a real one? How much do they pay you? I can double it. Malevolence take me if I lie. Triple it!”

The crew tenses. Even if I were not in a loop, I'd still refuse. I may have many flaws but greed to the point of stupidity isn't one of them.

“Sorry,” I reply. “I fear you can't afford my services.”

“He can't be paying you all that much.”

“I'm not talking about money.”

The newcomer radiates fury behind his helmet. The relief of my new team is palpable. Even Stone, who is normally tightly controlled.

“And unless you have important business, step aside,” Sethri concludes before advancing.

To my mild surprise, the three stooges do let us go through with all the kindness of hungry wolves spotting a toddler rolling by their enclosure. I wait until we're through the airlock to ask the obvious question.

“So, what was that about?”

“Some people just don't like us voidlings as I'm sure you've noticed,” Vargo says, voice heavy with sarcasm. “Oh and keep your suit on until SilSil gives you the go ahead unless you want to get familiar with the concept of 'explosive decompression'.”

“I am not feeling that curious.”

I am once again bereft of my dignity as I dangle between the two voidlings but if anything, they feel very careful about it. So I was promoted from potato bag to grandma's furniture which, well, I'll take it. I do not feel like complaining because the group radiates worry, only calming down after we've dropped our heavier gear in a reserved locker room. The walk back to the office and barracks is done in concerned silence.

“I'd like a word with you after I've done the paperwork,” Sethri says. “If you could wait in the mess hall?”

“Sure thing boss,” I reply.

He winces. Not the answer I was expecting. Inside of the mess hall, I grab SilSil's gifted datasheet to do a quick spot of research, more specifically on the gods while the rest of the crew hovers around like a bunch of spooked hens. There are 108 of them just like Chronos

told me. They're also separated into categories although the guide warns against comparing their respective might and importance. Cutting through the outer layer of religious bullshit, I gather that the main group is composed of 12 members of the 'tribunal' whose temples and avatars have the most sway over the affairs of Enderlith. The vast majority of history's Archons originated from amongst their ranks.

"So, uh, I'm reading up on the gods since it came up in discussion," I say to no one in particular.

Stone doesn't react much but SilSil is immediately interested.

"Yes, it's a good time to talk about the gods. Now is the time to understand the gods since it's the Year of Judgment and everything, yes!"

"It says here that most of the Archons were taken from the Tribunal's avatars but... were there ever any Archons of Malevolence?"

A mistake. Stone flinches, Vargo performs warding gestures with her long fingers, and even SilSil flies back with a grimace.

"Benevolence protect us all and no, no! Never. Of the four aspects of the dark, only Deceit and Indolence are accepted. Even then, I think only Deceit has ever had an Archon."

"Indolence's avatar can't be bothered," Vargo helpfully adds.

"Malevolence and Chaos' avatars are always hunted without mercy. They can never be allowed to rule, not that they would be much interested anyway. Same with the 18 emotions."

"I see; thank you."

This is the next section: 18 gods of emotions ranging from Joy to Apathy and to my mild surprise, even Shadenfreude. Those feel a little arbitrary but what do I know? The remaining 76 gods rule over concepts. Some are independent like Mercy, others are subordinated to associated tribunes like Carnage to War, or Music to Art. I guess Entropy to Time is also a thing unless dear old Morag allied voluntarily. I suppose I could ask next time. As for the 'dragons', time and space, they're barely a footnote. The guide stays a bit evasive about those two claiming they're mostly arbiters of the game. I frown when I see the mythical Founder is assumed to be the Archon of one or the other, but no one is quite sure which. They're just not considered players at all.

"Huh."

Weird.

"Are you ready to convert?" SilSil asks with a smile.

I do not reply. Instead, I point to the door and three seconds later, without fail, it opens to a much-relieved Sethri.

“We have buyers for everything but the shrooms and that’s only because they’re sending us an appraiser. Law already sent the bounties for the shimmer lobsters. Double share for mudboy, unless someone has an objection?”

A vigorous shake of heads later, I’m the proud owner of an additional 46 credits. The rest of the crew moves stuff around using their datapads so I assume bills are being paid. The mood is joyous. Stone shoves a can of something in my hand which ends up tasting like a creamy beer which I quite enjoy. After a little while, Vargo and Stone leave together. I feel like a voyeur when I perceive the warmth their souls emit. Pulling my perception back takes a bit of effort.

Ok so they’re an item. Good to know. Soon after, SilSil sleepily flies to his own room, leaving me with the boss.

“As strange is it is, you really are a complete newcomer,” he grumbles, embarrassed.

“I suppose you’re not just talking about my lack of space walk practice?”

“Indeed not, heh. And look, you’re having me try to speak Kei-Sah. Try to sound more casual, ey?”

“I’ll do my best chief,” I reply with a slight hiss.

“Don’t do that! Don’t sound like us. See, this is what I mean. You are a citizen, and unmodified as far as I can tell.”

I frown. He slaps his oversized hand over his large eyes, emitting gentle frustration like a beacon.

“You really don’t know anything. Look, citizens are almost always patricians and their associated families. The patricians are modded, that means their bloodlines have been altered and improved over generations to produce the most, well, perfect heirs.”

“For a certain definition of perfect,” I say, remembering the absolute doorknob who got me tossed out of the damn tube.

“Yes, well, they’re considered ‘base’ humans. But we got several other species on Enderlith, and also mutants like us. People look down on mutants.”

Again with the expectant gaze.

“Didn’t we go over this?” I ask.

“Don’t play dumb, Steev, you know what I’m getting at. Patricians will look down on you for obeying me, an old mutant.”

“Sounds like their problem. I’m happy with the arrangement.”

I can feel Sethri searching my expression for signs of deceit. When he decides to stop, it's not because he's satisfied but because he can't find an answer.

"We will see if it lasts. I hope it does."

"That leads me to my previous question though. You are saying that the wankers who intercepted us are speciesists?"

"They're competitors with speciesism as a side gig. I received an offer to be bought out by their boss after the rule change. It was an insulting amount."

"Ok. Are they going to be a problem? I think it's obvious I don't want people paying attention to me."

Sethri considers the question which means he's not bullshitting me. I can appreciate that.

"I doubt they would take the risk of pissing Law off just to try and put us out of business, but they might do petty shit to get revenge so don't go drinking alone."

"Wasn't planning to."

"Good. I expect our next operation to be in three days or so. Get settled. Ask for help if you need any."

"Got it."

I was planning on spending this loop observing and learning, but obviously getting stuck in a bunk for hours upon hours is just not going to happen if I want to keep what's left of my sanity. My room isn't too bad besides the lack of windows, but it's still barely more than what I had as a student so I hunt for someone to help me navigate the surroundings. Sethri's office is empty, but I hear grunts of effort coming from a room beside the mess hall. Stone's placid soul is alone and focused so I know I'm not interrupting coitus. As expected, I find a garage gym filled with gear that no Mr Universe could ever hope to use, even with enough coke to overdose half the City. Truly, physical awakening is something else. I'm a little envious.

I think Stone could lift a small car.

His dark eyes follow me as I enter. His soul pulses with worry, which is ironic considering the difference in power between us.

"Yes?" he hesitates.

"I wanted to ask you about physical awakening, if you have the time and inclination, of course," I say, testing my luck.

I use just a bit of Kei-Sah near the end, not much but enough to play it off as the request of a banished patrician returning from exile.

“I will wait until you’re done with your workout,” I finish.

“No, that’s alright. I was about to meditate anyway.”

Stone stands, his short stature doing little to hide the fact he’s an absolute unit of a lad. He unrolls a surprisingly nice mat showing a sort of mandala that has seen much use from the faded colors of the thread. Amazing work though. With a gesture of a pan-sized hand, he invites me to sit in front of him.

“There isn’t that much energy near the edge but... it’s still seven times more than anywhere else in the known worlds. And it’s pure. Now. Were you hoping for some pointers?”

Actually I was hoping to get out of here, but this is just too good an opportunity.

“I was hoping for explanations. I did some summary searches but... they all sound like they expect you to already know the basics. All the talk of gate improvements and the like just goes over my head.”

“Wait. Stop.”

Shock radiates from his cracking composure, mirroring his rugged face.

“You don’t know how physical awakening works?”

“Nope.”

“At all?”

“At all.”

I patiently wait for his mind to work through the surprise. Instead of calming down, I am flooded by a sense of deep understanding.

Stone is having an epiphany, and not a good one.

“Wait here. I’ll be back. Give me a moment. Just... wait here.”

I do, mostly because I don’t particularly want to find out what will happen should I refuse. He leaves at a speed that should leave a whoosh of displaced air. Reality is often disappointing.

“I’ll be right back!” he yells from the other room.

“I’ve got all the time in the world,” I reply.

Heh.

I hope he doesn't execute me; I like it here. I'd prefer to stay for a while so I can see how this Year of Judgment unfolds, preferably without exploding this time. Thankfully, Stone soon returns carrying a degree of resignation that comforts me. If it had been guilt, I was probably done for. He sits across from me with all the joy of someone who's about to teach a preschooler the basics of violin.

"Right. Let us begin from the very beginning. Physical awakening, at the lowest level, consists of drawing ambient energy into your body via three gates. The three gates are here," he says, pointing at my head, "here," he lowers his finger to my sternum.

"And here."

Awkward silence fills the room.

"Not your dick. About three fingers below your belly button."

"I was a bit surprised; I'll admit it."

Stone remains unamused.

"You need to open at least one gate to draw the ambient mana in. Ah, usually it's one of your parents teaching you this when you're... four."

"What can I say, I'm a late bloomer."

"I will finish explaining and then I'll help with the gate opening. Mana is often aspected in the galaxy, that means it's better at being used one way or another, but Enderlith is extraordinary in how pure its mana is, so there is no extra step to take. You draw it in and you're set to go."

"Convenient."

"You have no idea. Being on Enderlith is a blessing many die trying to attain. Now, after you have acquired mana until you feel uncomfortably full, you must exercise. Well-rounded practice is best until the second awakening, then you must select a path."

He picked the path of the legged fridge, apparently.

"That will be for later however. Now, let's get started. In order to help you, I will direct ambient mana towards each of your gates in turn. You will feel a pressure you must surrender to by willingly accepting the energy. You'll see, it's quite intuitive even if it's not very comfortable."

We begin. I close my eyes and try to feel the world around me, failing spectacularly at that. Meditation has always been a chore for me even with my good friend Saanvi's help. Mostly because she smelled really good and we had sex afterward.

Aaaand I'm getting distracted. And my nose itches, but then I feel it. It starts with something like a cold wind against my head, then an invasive sensation, like a spectral hand waving across my brain. It's only because Stone warned me that I don't jump out of the rug. Instead, I try to let it in.

It's not that easy but I try to relax. Stone staying quiet helps me, actually. He trusts me to succeed so I take my time. I just need to let go. It's difficult to do so when you're in a space station doomed to repeatedly die with an assassin on your ass...

This isn't working. I know I can be calm. I just need to think about it: ghostly memories of my right arm flowing like a swan's wing surge to the forefront; never tense, just relaxed power. I know the motions. I know them by heart, repeated over and over again for hours every day over the course of fifteen years. And I love it. My left fingers dance on the wood. A vibrato here. The familiar shape between my knees. The head, resting on my left shoulder. Vibrations. Sometimes, a rosewood peg brushes the skin of my neck.

Yes.

It's like... sounds. Music only I can hear. More of a rush of white noise for now but... it's a start. Like the end of a bow, the sound lowers but I can hear it now. I keep this sound in my mind. I can do it.

Then the cold wind is in my solar plexus. The wind feels stronger here, but also more visceral. Visualizing the cello grows harder but I don't need it anymore, not as clearly. Playing is also a visceral feeling, just like music can be. The strings fade but the drums remain, and the deep shakes of the brass when they're allowed to really play. Then the flow goes lower and I remember. I remember playing In the Hall of the Mountain King for the first time in a true concert hall with proper acoustics. I remember plucking the strings, the sound drowned out and merging with the voice of the orchestra, the glint of pure joy in the eyes of Gary our conductor when we, the many, made one thing of beauty together.

God dammit I miss everyone.

And also, the pressure has stopped. I feel inflated like a stupid balloon. I remember that this is what Stone was talking about.

I open my eyes. Stone doesn't comment when I use my jumpsuit's sleeves to dry my tears and I'm actually grateful for that. Quietly, he directs me to a corner of the gym, and I feel stupid now not having brought any towel, or water, but I get to work with borrowed weights. Gradually, the sensation of satiation disappears, leaving behind tingling and sore muscles. By the time I'm done, Stone is, too.

"Vargo and I, we're going to the commune to buy stuff. I think you need to as well. Come with us?"

"Yes please."