

If I'm given the choice between monastic life and getting killed, fine, I'll convert. Torl lets me shadow him all day long which simplifies things. From his emotions, I can tell he's a little embarrassed, but also weirdly protective which makes my battered heart warm up. The rest of the male refugee monks are more distant, more dismissive, and mostly self-interested, especially our shifty bunk fellow whose greed bleeds through his soul at all times. In the morning we eat a simple porridge with some fried dough, then we get to work.

It looks like the monastery focuses on the processing and transport of pickled vegetables. It stinks to high heavens and also it tastes horrible, but I force the thing down every meal because I think, if I don't, I might catch scurvy. Literally everything else is processed and tasteless. The afternoon consists of chores from cleaning to folding. After that, the monks are allowed to leave but I'm getting the feeling that I'm still being targeted and this place is a haven (as long as I'm through the doors, apparently), so I stay. I am left with far too much time to think during those repetitive chores.

I'm not enjoying this very much.

The reality of the loop is starting to settle now that I'm not trying to escape. I'm stuck here. I'm going to be stuck here for a very, very long time during what might be one of the most fucked up years of this station's existence. I know almost nothing, can do even less. This is the base of a mountain I never intended to climb. I am also cut off. Cut off from my friends, from what's left of my family, and from music. I don't have my violoncello. I can't play with the orchestra, or teach my kids when they show up with their tired parents. They'll never figure out where I've gone.

Sometimes, I hum parts of songs I like, then I wonder if I'll ever forget them. What if I forget all of Bach, Debussy, Saint-Saens? What if I spend a thousand years here and forget *everything*? And would it matter? Maybe it wouldn't matter to the person I'll become. Maybe none of it matters because people are dying here, and I'm not good enough of a musician to make a difference. I'll probably never be. I'm not a genius, just someone with a little talent who worked hard at spreading joy.

It goes back to strength and knowledge. I don't have either right now, at the beginning of a long journey, fingers deep in a jar of fucking pickles. I'm worse off than a child right now, because a child knows the culture they're in.

I guess I'll have to find some happiness in this place. Surely this shouldn't be too hard. It's a big station, after all.

The first night, I come across the guard again. He glares at me but I glare back because I'm in a foul mood, which scares Torl a little. Apparently Mr Guard is a big deal around here.

I learn that the guard's name is Adi from my greedy roommate, who looks very excited about our enmity. He makes a throat slitting sign over a smirk to let me know who he thinks will win.

It's in the evening that things get interesting. We are allowed free time for lectures or self-improvement. I don't attend the sermons or classes. Instead, I find the computer room

and log in the way Torl showed me, and then I watch children's songs on their version of the internet which is aptly called the Endernet.

The computer room is shared with women, one of the few non-discriminated spaces around. Some of the locals mock me but when it becomes clear that I don't speak any language they know, they take an interest, and soon I have a gaggle of mothers and aunties pointing at random things to teach me the words. There are children here too, many of them on the shy side. I become popular because, well, I guess they find me harmless. The babble of their conversations fills my ear until I pick more words, more expressions. After a prompt from me, they all try their best to teach me.

It works. In fact, it works so well that my progress surprises even me. I have a second brain just for language and it is recent because I certainly didn't have this level of success studying Polish fifteen minutes per day on an app. Slowly, their emotions turn to amazement and respect as I collect more and more in the tongue they call 'So-Sah'. Words turn to short sentences, then to more complex forms. The meanings of new words just seep into my psyche without the need for a dictionary. Is this how toddlers learn? In any case, I make fast progress. In the evening, I listen to conversations in the relaxation room. Some people play tile games, others read or meditate. There is even a gym with simple weights which I use, ignoring the surprised looks. Apparently, they can't understand me. Greedy roommate laughs and points, gathering little support. He helpfully gives me little blue weights clearly designed for children with a mocking laugh. Unfortunately, they don't match my needs but I get a solid workout from the warm up weights anyway.

"Are you... sick?" Torl asks the third day, pointing at my chest.

"No?"

"Then why not..."

He uses a word I don't understand for a while, until he flexes his muscles and I feel a burst of energy coming from his burly frame.

Awakened. He means awakened. I shrug. I don't know how to explain that I'm not like them, or if I even should. I am using telepathy but to explore and feel, not to communicate with them. I am not sure it would be a good idea to show what I can do. My control improves, at least, and I soon manage to turn my sphere into more of a band if I focus in a specific direction. There are a lot of people here. Sometimes, it gives me a headache but I still try to pay attention. I get the feeling this will save me in the future. A part of me also wonders if the killer found me, and is waiting for me outside. So I come up with an idea. It is a bad idea. Not in the sense that it won't work but that it is, ethically, bad.

But I don't think I give a shit. Let's call it... a test. A test I'm more than willing to perform after greedy roommate tries to make me fall with an extended leg while I carry a jar of pickles. Good thing I don't trust him because that juice stinks.

That night, I visibly search my belongings for something, then I leave the house key in an unprotected drawer. The next morning, greedy roommate is gone. Torl seems worried.

“Did you hear something?” he slowly enunciates.

I open the drawer and yeah, the key is gone.

“Key gone,” I explain.

Tori swears, then leaves with a speed I wouldn't have expected from his large frame, but I suppose I'm still not used to awakenings yet. I head towards the breakfast room but I get intercepted by Adi before I can get anything in. For the second time, I find myself in green hair's office.

The woman sits far too straight for her relaxed features. I take the opposite chair without waiting for an invitation, which elicits a burst of annoyance, quickly brought under control. Her face hadn't shown anything.

Impressive self-control.

Her scarred face turns to me, her voice a slow drawl.

“I heard you can speak common now,” she begins, very slowly.

“Not very well,” I reply.

She nods.

“I am Nya. Look at this.”

She gives me a datasheet. On it, there is a picture. If I hadn't seen my corpses in Chronos' realm so many times already, I might have flinched. The robe of Mercy's temple is still visible on a ravaged body slumped against the wall opposite of my flat's entrance. The resemblance between the corpse and what had been left of me after the elevator death is uncanny. I guess low physical awakening doesn't help with Enderlithian door mines.

“You are not surprised,” she says, more an observation than an accusation.

I do not reply.

“Oren had trouble. He...”

She speaks but I don't understand the next sentence. Realizing that, she reverts to a simpler common.

“He was bad. He wanted to be good,” she states.

“Is that so?”

I recline in my seat. I sort of wanted to see if 'Oren' would get intercepted, but I suppose the assassin just left a little present. It was a logical choice because he just wants me dead. I should have seen it coming. Still good to know though.

"This place is a refuge," Nya continues. "People come here when they have problems. Some of those people are bad. Bad people can also be here so they can be good later. Yes?"

I wait. Of course, I know what Nya is getting to. I just want her to state it out loud.

"You let him die," she finally accuses.

"He stole my key," I retort, anger rising. "If someone is only honest when all the money is locked away, if someone is well-behaved so long as no one is watching, if someone doesn't hit people when they are not angry, then they are not good people. The moment I leave the key outside, the very moment I let my guard down, he steals. Does this deserve mercy?"

"That is not for you to decide," Nya replies in a tired voice.

I'm more curious than anything. Will she scream? Will she banish me? I don't think so, but I suppose I'm more willing to indulge knowing I get another chance. Surely this isn't unhealthy.

"You do not understand," she finally says. "You are not alone. Many of those who come here cannot understand mercy towards others. Most of them have suffered too much. I can feel you have a strong soul. Do you not feel... empathy?"

"It's because I knew how he felt that I have no empathy," I reply.

Nya sighs, shoulders slumping. I would feel sorry but this is her establishment and I don't think she's doing a great job. Against my expectations, she closes her eyes. Her hand extends towards me, then I feel it.

A monstrous pressure backhands me against the back of my seat. I gasp from every atom of oxygen escaping my lungs because something, something is watching. Someone.

Mercy. A goddess.

Chronos and Moragan's silly behavior made me fail to realize what it means to have gods and goddesses be a part of everyday life. I feel it now. And I understand. There isn't even any anger here, or any emotion touching my own for that matter. What crushes me like a sandal on a cockroach is just attention.

Mercy measures my actions and passes judgment. The verdict is disappointment. Mercy is sad, not surprised, not mad, just sad. Sad and tired.

Sad that while we're all at the bottom of a very steep ladder, we still can't extend a friendly hand to each other, sad that we can't possibly give one word of encouragement and warning to a brother or sister in need.

*You could have told him you knew what he was planning. You could have told Adi. You could have gone out of your way to be kind, but you elected not to. You let the hurt of your past spread to someone else in the present. You believed he could not be redeemed and so, you set him up to die. And now he will never get a chance to change. Ever. Partly because of you.*

The presence leaves and my soul bounces back. Nya waits, expectant. I am not in pain, just deeply uncomfortable and, if I have to be honest, a little filled with guilt. Not because of Oren — I stand by my opinion he was irredeemable — but because of Mercy.

Her house, her rules, and I broke that.

“It appears Mercy extends her mercy upon you, still. You may leave.”

I turn, but curiosity needles me.

“What if she hadn’t?”

“Then you would be outside the gates.”

I leave, then. It doesn’t look like Mercy shared any details about me even though she should have noticed something unique about my soul. Perhaps she doesn’t care. The reminder that there are other gods here, and that they are tangible entities with direct influence on the game acts like a cold shower. I must not just be wary about the players, but their puppeteers too.

It makes me wonder if the gods can be killed. Maybe someone tried.

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After three weeks (ten days each), I can hold very basic conversations with Torl. He tells me that the place I start in is called the ‘Needles’ and that now we’re in the ‘Betweens’. It’s not even that bad here. It gets much worse in the ‘Narrows’ and ‘Outskirts’.

“We’ll make a proper Enderlithian out of you yet!” he jokes.

Lorn avoids personal questions so I don’t press him. There is a deep sadness to him when he’s not moving along helping people, and I don’t think it’s due to Oren’s disappearance. Some people might have come here fleeing the real world. Others, I suspect, needed a reprieve from themselves. We get a new roommate three days later.

“I was robbed. Robbed!”

I’m starting to wonder if Mercy’s surroundings are not being targeted on purpose. It would make sense to prey on the desperate, especially those who are about to withdraw from life.

“Isn’t there law enforcement here?” I ask. “Like those armored people. The, ah,”

“Defenders of the Temple of Law? Templars?”

“Yes. Them.”

“They do not protect the Betweens,” Torl says in a mocking voice. “Founder, you are so green. Those who live under the dominion of the Temple of Law must observe its rules, the rules of the Archon.”

“But... they’re gone?” I remark.

“Aye, he has likely perished. The rules still apply, and the Betweens can’t really pay the dues so we get a citizen patrol and a sheriff. Not much else though.”

“We could still talk to the sheriff.”

“Aye, you do that,” Torl says. “You do that. But the robbers are local and you’re not. That means what they took off you gets back into the economy.”

“You do not need to explain,” I grumble. “I understand the concept of corrupt law enforcement.”

Something about it bothers me. I am too useless right now but.. I suppose I have ‘time’ to investigate it later. I can almost hear Chronos’ even voice whispering in my ear: ‘you want to solve a mystery? Just do so.’

Patience, Steve, patience.

We watch TV in the evenings, or the local equivalent. There is a war on the planet below, one that has lasted for years. Murders seem common. Sometimes, we watch awakened fights in an arena or in the street, distant flashes of violence and color that end without me knowing what happened. Some of the avatars have made themselves public from what I can understand. I hear rumors of a strange plague, of monsters walking the warrens. The Year of Judgment is in full swing, in all its horror and it hasn’t even been a month, which by the way here last 40 days.

“The Year of Judgment,” Torl explains, voice low and worried.

“Is it bad?” I ask.

“Bad, yes, but then it ends. Archon disappeared ten years ago. Time of troubles. Now, the avatars gather. A new avatar will ascend. Then, order will return.”

He nods to himself but I feel the fear in his heart. He knows he lives in interesting times.

“We will be safe in the Church of Mercy,” he tells me without much conviction.

And maybe he’ll be correct.

A part of me wants to get on with awakening just to see what it's all about, but I keep myself under control. My priority is the language, or rather languages of Enderlith. Nya, Torl, and Adi speak So-sah, the lowest level of common which remains fairly simple, but above there is Kei-Sah which is used by TV anchors, government officials and the like, and then still above that is Ten-Sah, the ceremonial language

The aunties have stopped teaching me. My fast progress spooks them. My reading progress is somewhat stalled because very few people in the monastery read common for anything harder than directions and the occasional announcements. Fortunately, I find tutorial books that use the phonetic alphabet people prefer here in the temple's archives. It really helps.

I miss playing music terribly.

Thirty-four days into my stay, we watch the inauguration of a new town hall in one of the other segments of the Betweens. The Avatar of Law is present. She is a severe woman dressed in black with a low, confident voice that promises betterment and opportunity, for law and prosperity walk hand in hand (her words). Then we lose the signal.

I blink. Then the room crashes into me. And everyone else.

*Death count: 7*

*Qualia points acquired: 175*

*Violent concussive death (clean): 2*

*Telepathic conversation with a lower soul awakening warrior: 10*

*Experienced the Betweens and transition for the first time: 3*

*Mugged and survived: 5*

*Briefly conversed with a mysterious being: 3*

*Made a friend here. Used him: 7*

*Learned advanced common, intermediate common writing: 58*

*Learned some basic Enderlith culture: 2*

*Progress on the second stage of soul awakening: 85*

*Total available: 224*