

I can't keep the datasheet, or access to my accounts but I can fill and keep the chip, which has a max capacity of 500 credits. Unfortunately, I find out that the robbers' chips don't contain credits but 'scrips' from a marketplace I have no intention of finding, at least not in this loop.

I still have an assassin on my ass. I am not sure if he has tracked me down yet but I have to assume he has since I've accessed my bank account. I have no illusion I could stop a professional with one taser and my attitude, so I use the power of money: secured limo, express train.

The Endernet is weird. It is compartmentalized, much more so than any national network of websites I know to exist on Earth. Here, the barrier isn't just the language but citizenship, and credit access. Entire environments are locked behind IDs and that is just what I, as a nobody with no connections and no real awakening, can access.

The next morning, I leave a coldly polite Tori before pickled vegetables duty can begin. Nya asks for a donation. I am happy to transfer directly from my bank account seeing as I won't use it this loop anyway. Her office is stuffy and decrepit during the day. It reeks of everlasting impermanence, like she's never made it her own.

"Is this how it works? Protection for money?" I plainly ask her.

Nya's scarred features twist with hostility.

"The Church of Mercy is here for everyone, but mercy should be answered with commitment. You are here for a reason, because of the choices you made that led you here."

She pauses. I feel her emotions swirl like angry clouds. Shame rises to the front before she can force them back under her control.

"You can't expect me to believe some people aren't here because of the choices others made for them," I tell her.

"Perhaps," she answers. "But we expect those who decide to get back to the fray to compensate us... for the service."

"Fair enough," I reply. "Allow me one more question?"

"No."

"Do any of you actually want to be here?" I ask.

She flinches. Something brushes against my skin, like pressure but without touch. It's a little disconcerting.

"Be careful," Nya growls, eyes low.

I stare. Somehow, I don't think she will actually strike me and I'm willing to bet on it. I can afford to take minor risks.

"Adi doesn't give a shit about asylum seekers getting robbed in the next alley; you only talk to your guests when it's time to pay.."

"Get out."

I shrug, My 'limo' has arrived anyway. I find it in the delivery bay where we usually load the crates of food we processed. It looks like a chrome brick that's gone through two world wars and a cricket tournament.

The back door opens. I enter and find an eerily familiar setup, only the seats are impeccable in sharp contrast to the exterior.

"Steev Plentiss?" a voice asks from the front.

"Ah."

I am talking to a sapient potato. An eye rotates from the creature's center, then fixes me with unblinking intensity. Not a potato then, but a brawny, swarthy humanoid with muscular arms and a complete lack of neck. It really looks like a potato. Or a walnut, I suppose.

"Ah, yes. Do you need my ID?"

"Please, and yes," the creature replies.

I notice that the driver uses a subservient version of formal Enderlithian. It makes me feel all fancy. I press my ID on a panel. A beep later and I am kosher.

"Thank you sir. We will now depart. The trip is expected to last 17 standard minutes."

I recline in my seat, internally whining at the lack of bubbly. There are windows, or so I think until I realize they're actually screens showing me the car's exterior. I return my attention to the pilot who happens to have cables running down what I assume is its head since it sits atop its body.

"Say, do you mind if I ask you some questions?"

"In order to protect client confidentiality, I have been modified not to interact with, or remember interactions beyond the immediate scope of the drive."

"Sounds like you do mind."

"Not at all, sir, as I do not have the capability to mind."

"Errr."

I guess I'll ask later. I wasn't worried about Nya, but I'd rather not get dumped on the street right now. The limo, of course, flies. I shouldn't be surprised, but the takeoff still makes me grip my seat. The simple walls of the church fall away to show the district in all its simple glory, lit by massive ceiling lights. I was expecting a dump from my brief experience getting run down by the local variant of chavs, yet it appears I let one bad experience taint my perception. This part of the Betweens is... fine. Not great, not a steaming pile of shite. It's a bustling, well-lived in spot showing small shops, some larger buildings that might be administrative, restaurants from the eclectic humanoids sitting at tables, and just, well, people. Children with their parents play in a green sphere located near the center, with planters climbing all around. Clothes dry on hangers on the many balconies. It doesn't smell too bad. It's just a lower-middle class residential district that wouldn't be shocking anywhere on Earth, were it not for the human variants and occasional splashes of high tech. Then the limo turns into an access gate open through a thick wall. A few other levitating vehicles dash in and out. We settle into a lane, and then I am slammed against the back of the seat.

"Are you alright, sir?" the potato-driver asks me.

"Just caught off guard, don't worry about it," I reply.

This place isn't designed around people who don't have physical awakenings. I really need to get on it. As soon as I can. The limo flies through a tunnel, the opposite cars just darts of lights passing us like falling stars. I just watch. I think I'll grow jaded before this is all over but, right now, things aren't too bad.

I see very little of the train station besides the fact it's built vertically and absolutely massive. Narrow corridors guide me to my train with no time for pause. Everyone else is moving fast too, most of the time with little to no luggage. People are perhaps a little richer here than the place I just left so I'm getting stares again. A bald child with deep blue eyes almost talks to me before his father drags him away with a polite smile. I don't think I mind that much anymore. The clothes I printed protect me from too much scrutiny, marking me as a local.

The trip is short by virtue of the train being really fast. We're very close to the edge of the station. Sometimes, we see the outside through gaps in the surrounding walls, and the planet below. It's night there again. There are lights, but there are also fires, entire lines burning like soft embers. I find myself wondering what sort of hell it must be on the ground if we can see it from up here. There had been mention of a war, but I haven't had the time to research it yet.

My destination is around fifty kilometers away.

It's the docks.

I'm not leaving the station, at least not right now. The docks are situated near its middle, a spherical opening with structures extending out like the long lashes of a titanic eye, the

purpose of which I can only guess. An impressive number of spacecrafts wait around it, endless motes visible only by their lights on the starry background of space. Once again the proportions and distances mess with my earthly brain. My best guesstimate is that most of them are 'kinda far' but there is a tail of inert ships extending out in a messy cloud until I can no longer see them. Most of those are fairly small relative to the impossible frame of Enderlith, but there are a few exceptions: a luxurious liner here, a massive, stocky cargo ship there, and slick silvery blades showing the sword of Law, one of the gods, on a white background. I assume those must be the local army. Or police. I haven't found out where everyone stands for now. I follow directions and lifts through utilitarian tunnels, glass panels sometimes showing me grotty shanty towns made of old ships floating not far from the docks themselves. My destination is a side office near one of the many warehouses, a simple metal box only marked by the company's name in neon sigils: Sethri Derelict Operations.

I think Sethri and I both surprise each other. His derelict operation is a small business, hence why he's interviewing me himself in a dimly lit, narrow office that smells faintly of burnt herbs. He's an old man, from his wrinkled skin and the white hair of a wispy beard. The rest I'm not sure how to interpret. First, he's over 2m30 so I basically reach his solar plexus, but he's also very thin. His eyes are unusually wide, his skin pale, and his ears remind me of a bat's. There is a soulful quality to his gaze that I find a little relaxing, even with droplets of perplexity seeping from his soul.

I wait. He checks my ID again. I wait some more.

"So, Mr Plentiss, do you have any proof that you have reached a soul awakening?" he begins with a soft voice, softer than I expected, and higher pitched too.

I send my soul towards his.

Hi.

The jump is spectacular and I can confirm that he is, indeed, really freaking tall.

"You... how did you do that?"

"Second awakening?"

"Second soul awakening? That is... quite rare."

He looks at me again as if I were a snake. I know that look. He wants to know why I'm not fitting in his boxes.

"Look, I've been trapped in a place with no ambient ki for a very long time. I'm just trying to rebuild my life right now."

"I see. Is that why you have no physical awakening at your age?"

"That's correct," I reply.

"Are you... from a great family or something?"

"Nope."

"Is anybody going to come for you?" he asks, eyes narrowing.

"I don't think so and if there is, they'll definitely kill me and no one else," I reply, skirting the truth.

I don't want to look for another job. This man may be an alien but he's human enough that I can taste signs of despair. Too many pieces of electronics that have seen better days, a cluttered desk with stacks of papers wrinkled by worried hands, the guarded look, they all conspire to paint me a rather clear picture. Sethri's biz isn't going well. My friend Liz would have said it's a red flag but that's ok. I'm only here for a year, max. If I don't die first.

"Well..."

He sighs, then softly swears in a language I don't understand. He shrugs in a gesture akin to a surrender. Hope mixed with resignation radiate from his soul in a way that tells me I already have the job.

"Do you know what we do here?" he asks.

"Your offer said you needed someone like me to process derelict ships."

"Yes. Well, we don't technically need you but recent regulations mean we need someone with a soul awakening whenever processing any ship larger than a shuttle."

"How old is the regulation?" I ask, curious.

Sethri gives me a measuring glance but I'm already in, so I know he'll give me what I want anyway.

"A month old. After the tragedy..."

That's how old the job offer is, which means they haven't had any large prizes in over a month. Might be nothing but I'm guessing it must be biting into the margin of a small team.

"Tell me about the accident," I request.

"I suppose I'd better get this outta the way," he continues. "Have you heard about Aberrant Space horrors?"

"Hmm. No. Sounds bad."

"You don't say," he says with gritted teeth. "Take your worst nightmare. A horror is worse by far. Only reason why they've not killed us all is that they don't reproduce that we can tell and they're, well, not that smart. I assume you've noticed the refugee flotilla around the dock?"

"They're hard to miss."

"There's not just escaping the Three Crowns down below. You also got asteroid prospectors that lost their jobs, pirate attack survivors from one of the outer colonies... Founder, there's even people who came here via *voidships*. Spent a fortune skimming through space only to be left out to drift like so much flotsam."

I frown. That doesn't sound right.

"Surely there's space on the station?"

He huffs, then looks at me again. Those large eyes and soft voice make him less intimidating than he should be.

"Ah, you're serious. You really were cut off then. What, offworld?"

"Yes," I confirm. "I'm new."

"You sure picked a shit time to show up. Just so you know, Enderlith is a nice place to be so long as you're near the surface, but go deeper, and..."

He shakes his head.

"Lots of forgotten stuff. Lost people, it is said. Monsters. Tombs. Traps. The generators that keep the place running. Treasures!"

He leans forward.

"I think the tomb of the Founder himself is there!"

He catches himself.

"But that's just not relevant to us. What we have to do is to survive the Year of Judgment. May Benevolence bless us all. As I was saying, anyway, we don't need you to work. Our job is to get to abandoned ships, recover what's valuable, scrap the rest, and make sure not to leave a screw that could crater another refugee ship half a span down because stuff in space tends to move fast, got it?"

Something clicks.

"That's why the station has this... annihilating field around it. It's to disintegrate flying objects!"

“Yes,” Sethri replies with obvious sarcasm. “But since we can’t all afford oblivion fields built by the Founder himself, I guess we’ll just have to be careful. Company gets to keep the salvage and everything we find, so, if you can feel that something’s alive and it’s not going to meat puppet our skin to eat our friends alive, maybe there’ll be a nice bonus too. When can you start?”

“After we sign. Let’s talk compensation.”

Sethri exhales.

I got a good deal, not with my non-existent hiring bonus since Sethri’s ‘a little strapped for cash’, but by getting a berth and a confidential contract, meaning Sethri pays extra but it’s harder to find me in the systems. I bet the servants of Justice know where I am, but as far as I understand, the loan sharks on my ass don’t have a way to follow. If they do, well, I’m dead, but there is always a next time.

It’s kind of weird, getting used to dying like that. Thank perfect soul for protecting me from PTSD at least.

The bunk I got is next to the one the other members use. I meet them the next hour during an impromptu team gathering in a worn-down break room that smells almost like old coffee. They’re an eclectic bunch, to say the least. I guess I’ll fit right in.

“Alright, everyone, gather up,” Sethri says to the three people who are already gathered. “Here is Steev, our new hire.”

The team shares a look of stunned disbelief. I do not resent it but it’s a close thing.

“This here is my second, Vargo. Girl, get your feet off the damn table,” Sethri begins.

Vargo obeys though I can tell she’s uncomfortable. The room is designed for tall humans but Vargo is the same insanely tall, spindly variant as Sethri, equally bald with those massive eyes and bat ears. She considers me with more worry than the others, though her soul remains steady and focused.

The third person is a hirsute, swarthy man with a thick beard. He would be the poster man for one of Tolkien’s dwarves but his proportions are clearly human. A wide, muscular human. His hair-covered arms are crossed in front of his solid chest. All of them wear a dark gray jumpsuit.

“This is Stone,” Sethri continues. “He’s solid. Our manip specialist.”

Stone nods once and that’s all I get from him. Even his soul is a warm pillar.

The last member of the team is, well, a faerie of sorts. I think. A meat faerie, a sexually ambiguous humanoid with shining eyes and large featherless wings twitching in the dim

light. White hair surrounds their head like an electric halo and their soul is a buzz that never stops, ever reaching. Contrary to the others, they have visible implants at the base of their skull going around their neck in an unintrusive silver the same color as my wand.

“And that’s SilSil. Say hi.”

“Hi hi!”

“SilSil is our system operator. If he can’t open it, then nothing short of explosives will do.”

“I deactivate defenses too!”

“That sounds essential,” I comment.

“Right? Right?”

“Ok. Now, Steev here has no experience whatsoever but his soul awakening is actually quite good.”

“How? How?” SilSil interrupts.

“That’s his story to tell,” Sethri warns. “And you’ll get off his back until and if he’s ready to tell it. Steev? Don’t let SilSil pressure you. Extracting knowledge from the unwilling is his calling.”

“Professional bias!” the flying one explains.

“Got it,” I reply.

“Alright,” Sethri continues. “Now, I got confirmation from the Port Authority. We’re good to go on the Telleria *tomorrow*.”

Vargo and SilSil react with clear excitement.

“However!” Sethri bellows. “However, we have to train the rookie. Rookie, have you ever been to space?”

“No.”

Suicide by void doesn’t count.

“Founder,” Vargo replies.

“Yeah. Bring him up to speed.”

“He doesn’t even have a physical awakening!”

“Then you’d better double check protocols if you don’t want him to end up as depressurized paste.”

Lovely.

“This is a mark 27 protective exosuit. It’s adjusted for your very specific... condition,” Vargo says without malice. “The tube on the back contains a breathing mix as well as some of Nature’s patented micro-organisms. It costs a lot of money, so don’t lose it.”

I nod. The suit looks thin yet armored, both futuristic and kind of grubby. It looks much more manageable than the space suits I saw in documentaries back on Earth.

“Once you get into the suit, the skin will need around ten minutes to adapt your body to extra-vehicular activity — that means a space walk.”

“Got it.”

“Under no circumstances are you to remove it. Not if your sensors say the ship’s atmosphere is breathable. Not if your nose itches. Not if your oxygen reserves are low. You remove it when we’re back and not before. Do you understand?”

“Don’t be the reason why the crew gets quarantined. Got it,” I reply.

Vargo stares at me like she’s trying to find the truth behind my forehead.

“Polite, respectful and willing to listen? Are you sure you’re really a citizen?”

“I would very much like not to die horribly,” I reassure her.

“You’d think that would make people listen but no, the tall voidling woman is a disgusting mutant...” Vargo mumbles under her breath.

Her soul stills. She’s testing my reaction.

“Voidling? Is that what you and Sethri are?”

“Which airlock did you crawl out of? Were you in some cryo container in the ass end of the station or something? Someone dug you up?”

“Something like that,” I shrug.

“Sorry. I shouldn’t pry,” Vargo says, suddenly a bit bashful.

Her pale skin turns a little pink.

“But no I’m not prejudiced. You got me fresh off the airlock.”

She laughs, for a while, then I can tell the moment she shuts her emotion off.

“Right. Let’s see how you fare, then, mudboy.”

“You still ok, mudboy?”

“It’s a little humiliating,” I confess.

This is our first mission. The briefing and preparations came without issue and I was not a little proud when Sethri came to check my suit only to find no mistakes made. The issue came with the booster system used to navigate space since artificial gravity apparently stops at the shield.

Simply put, it’s heavy as hell but by regulation, I’m supposed to be wearing it before we leave the airlock. So Sethri and Vargo are carrying me. My feet dangle over the naked gray crystal of the last corridor, the only difference from the rest of Enderlith being the glass window at the end.

“Sethri Derelict team, please confirm your status,” a bored male voice says, quite rapidly.

“We’re ready,” Sethri confirms.

“Good luck out there,” the voice replies.

My suit contracts painfully around me. A short moment later, the airlock opens. We move forward. SilSil controls my booster so the only thing I have to do is... enjoy.

I’m in space! I’m doing a space walk. Wow it’s... so amazing! The constant rumble of distant machines, the chatter of the dockworkers, and the whirr of the ventilation fall away until I only hear the air in my lungs, and the blood in my ears. Perfect silence. It only makes the sight grander.

There is no air here so I can see everything with perfect detail. The docks are even more impressive from the outside as a ring of polished crystal barded with spikes and towers. It’s an edifice that defies comprehension on a station that does the same. How can something so ancient look so pristine and so advanced in an alien, unfathomable manner? It must have been standing here for eons, yet the modern additions around it still look like pig iron grafted on perfect armor.

By contrast, the shanties and improvised space bases floating around are coagulated rust and blood like waste from a wound, yet alive with countless lights, and served by a hive of tiny ships darting all around. The larger fishes still rule over the false sky in tight formations for the military vessels, or solitary grace for the larger ships including a massive golden one that might be several kilometers long. I can see more yachts but also gatherings of warships

that do not bear the sigil of Law. The entire scene is breathtaking, so much so that I barely register the lack of gravity.

“Mudboy? How are you?”

The suit pressure on my body is still uncomfortable. Not that I really care.

“It’s so... quiet.”

“He’s ok,” SilSil babbles. “More than ok. Share the wonder with me!”

With a laugh, I connect to his mind and do my best to send how I feel. I’m not sure if it works but he gasps so maybe it does. Sending impressions might actually be useful for other things. Hmmm.

“Alright. Focus,” Sethri says. “First, we’re going to the ship.”

Sethri derelict owns a small tugboat, barely larger than a bus with a powerful engine and little else. It can hold an atmosphere, but we won’t use it to save time and money. The entire team piles in the back while SilSil rushes to the command seat and I observe the others store their stuff in the overhead compartments. Stone carries most of the heavy stuff while Sethri has an actual rifle strapped to his back, a bulky thing that’s closer to a low tech bolter than the silver pistol I carry on my hip. Vargo has us all beat because she hoists a flamethrower the size of a crew-served weapon. I did ask them about it.

“It’s regulation. There are just too many things that can go wrong with salvage operations.”

At least it’s well paid.

I hope.

“I feel like... something is missing. Like the air,” I say while we depart, a bit worried.

I don’t feel like I’m getting worse exactly. It’s more a sort of hunger.

“Hmm. Your vitals look fine. Fine,” SilSil says and I can feel his concern, but I turn to Sethri who’s darkly amused.

“Our little Enderlithian is experiencing energy void for the first time.”

“Energy what?”

“Ooooh,” Vargo agrees in understanding. “You aren’t feeling the station’s ambient ki anymore, mudboy. That’s what’s happening.”

Huh.

I guess we can get used to anything. Before I can think on that further, I am pushed to the side by the vessel's sudden acceleration. According to the briefing, it will take around two hours to get to the derelict we were assigned which sounds a bit long but I guess space is big. Unfortunately, the ship doesn't have windows. I suppose they're a structural weakness. It makes the trip dull, however. Next time I'll be sure to bring a book. With nothing better to do, I manage to convince SilSil to lend me the vessel's manual so I can at least soak up some technical linguo. I catch Sethri and Vargo exchanging a dubious glance, but they don't say anything.

I chose this group well.