

Breathing Space, Fading Frontier includes mature content such as adult language, sexual situations, violence, and substance use.

This episode contains parental abuse of a child, childhood neglect, amputation, eye trauma, and audio gore.

Additional sensory contact warnings can be found in the show notes.

Intro plays

I ain't got no home to go to
I ain't got nothing to sell
But my stars will never leave me
Even when I'm sold to hell
I was born under a blue sky
And I'll die out in the black
When I'm gone don't no one mourn
me
'cause my debts will drag me back

Intro fades out

GREY

(narrating)

It was supposed to be a simple job. But in this line of work, there's no such fucking thing.

SENATOR ENDOZA

(over the phone)

I've been able to confirm the information you provided, Grey. And I am very pleased. This comes at the perfect time. I would just like you to commit to the retrieval as well.

GREY

(to Senator Endoza)

You hired me for some nice clean bloodhound work. I don't much fancy myself a prodigal child's chauffer service.

SENATOR ENDOZA

This is a time sensitive matter, and you are on site. I need this done now.

GREY

I already truffle-pigged up your sprog, senator. Way I see it, the only thing left on my todo list is the bottle of Outer Rye sitting on my ship.

Unless, of course, you'd like to renegotiate.

SENATOR ENDOZA

Make your offer.

GREY

(narrating)

Proper negotiation always starts with an insultingly large number.

(to Senator Endoza)

I could be talked out of my evening with that bottle for ... let's say fifty-five double-large. Liquid, no assets.

SENATOR ENDOZA

Done. You can transfer custody to my agents on Ceres. The sooner, the better, Mr. Grey. It's been a pleasure as always. The Northern Republic thanks you for your assistance.

Beep; comms disconnect

GREY

(narrating)

Now that set the hairs on the back of my neck to standing. Clients so eager to part with their precious cash? Suspicious. Double that for Senator Endoza. Since I'd started working for her, getting extra credits out of her required either a suite of surgical waldos or a crowbar.

Typical NR. Yanks have more cake than anybody, but that doesn't mean they spend it. Although being rich does make them feel entitled to muck around in the rest of the system.

But the contract was already on my terminal and I was itching to get my grubby paws on that cash. Well, if I was gonna get set up, I figured I might as well make bank in the process. As a counter balance, I let my usual paranoia off its leash. You've got to live to spend your dosh.

Arcturus was a sight to see. Every mooring, dock, and hanger was packed full. And the space outside was so thick with ships that it looked like you could step from hull to hull without ever letting go of metal.

A lot of 'em were grinners. I'd never seen so many in one place. I didn't know there were so many in the whole system, and they'd descended on Arcturus like skylarks. The place was full of them, moving in little groups through crowds. Their ships all clumped together on the leeward side of the station. And they'd

brought my quarry back out of the void.

Separating the kid from their pack of perries wasn't going to be trivial. Thick as Terminal thighs, they were. Never seemed to part, and their ships were battened tighter in port than belter ships were deep in the black.

For a couple days now, I'd been a silent smoking shadow for the kid, and luckily their routine was regular as a clockmaker's bowels. Local evening was my best shot.

The kid and their grinner friends usually went up to the station's central ring to buy dinner. The central ring was all stores and shops. Lots of bustle. Lots of people. Lots of dark corners. Perfect for lurking.

The loyalty of some low-grade station jacks cost less than a meter of vollattes. And they go on the expense report. Their ears all perked right up when they heard I wanted them to hassle some gridders. Probably would have done it for free. But I paid happily.

With money in their fists, they'd listen to instructions and while I needed a fight, I didn't need people getting hurt. Just a lot of noise and confusion.

I was about twenty paces behind, hiding in me own vollie haze, when my rented jacks squared up on the gridders, shoulders all puffed up with youthful idiocy. The first

swing came quickly and the dust up
kicked off. Just what I needed.

Sounds of a fight begin in the background;
multiple grunts, blows landing

Lots of wide swings. Lots of
innocent bystanders dragged into
the pile, and no one touched my
quarry. 'Cept me.

I ducked a couple of elbows and
body checked the sprog. With my
extra height, and weight, and the
wisdom that comes from years, it
wasn't hard to take 'em to ground.
Pulled my right hand around,
slipped my spur up into their
armpit, and gave them a half dose
of Compound 2.

Just enough to make them loopy but
not enough knock them off their
feet.

Sounds of fighting start to fade out

Cause I'll be damned if I'm
sherpa-ing fifty kilos of dead
weight all the way back to the
Bacall. I held them down just long
enough for the drug to take over,
slung one of their arms over my
shoulders and slipped us both away
into the crowd.

The Bacall's mooring wasn't too
far. And with me guiding the kid
along, we looked like a couple of
drinking buddies after a bit of an
overindulgence, one helping the
other back home. Nobody gave us a
second glance.

LINK

(slurring)
Hey ... I need to go back.

GREY
I'm taking you home, my wayward
ward.

LINK
But ... ship's that way.

GREY
Lots of ships on this station.
Plenty of them could take you
home.

LINK
Ugh. That's a pretty stupid thing
to say.

GREY
Yes well, everyone's a critic.

(narrating)
They made a little bit of a
struggle to disentangle themselves
from my helpful grip, which only
really succeeded in tangling up my
legs and nearly ended up with us
both in a pile on the deck.

This is why I dislike retrievals.
People always make things so
unnecessarily difficult.

Down two corridors, couple of
turns, and we were at the airlock
to the Bacall. I poured my quarry
into the spare crash couch, and
gave them the rest of the dose of
Compound 2. Kid was a lightweight,
slipped right off to dreamland.
And with that, we were ready to
go.

Now, if and when anybody noticed
the kid was missing, having a

departure record of a ship beating feet a few minutes later was gonna look suspicious as hell.

Which is why I'd registered with the local tower under false papers, and a fake transponder, and when I did leave, my vector was very obviously headed toward Mars in a huge hurry.

When I was sure we were off the Arcturus scopes, I turned off the transponder entirely and started a more leisurely burn toward Ceres. It was a decently long trip, but the kid would be out a while.

I enjoyed my last chance to smoke in peace.

Vapor noise as GREY smokes

LINK
(groggy)
What the fuck?

GREY
Good morning, sleepy head.

LINK
You! Fucking-- Ow!

LINK tries to stand and bumps their head; sounds of a struggle as they move against restraints

GREY
May I humbly suggest you take it easy? I strapped you in for the high g maneuvers. Wouldn't want you to hurt yourself flailing about.

LINK
I remember you, Grey.

GREY

Well, a face this beautiful is not worth forgetting.

LINK

A face like a catcher's mitt that's been dragged behind a donkey for seven miles.

GREY

You wound me, Maestren Link.

LINK

A donkey who's been ill lately.

GREY laughs

Would it behoove me to ask 'Where are we?' or is this not that kind of operation?

GREY

Oh, behoove away. This isn't black bag, kiddo. I'm just doing the school run.

LINK

Ok then, where are we?

GREY

You are about an eighth of the way back home to Terra. I'm about halfway to a lot of money for very little bother.

More technically we're a few hours from Ceres.

LINK

Ugh, Ceres? You couldn't take me someplace nice? Mercury dayside? Surface of Venus? The interstellar void?

GREY

Tell you what, next time around,
you can pick the handoff location,
hm?

LINK

A lot of money, huh? I'm a little
shocked. I know what I'm worth.

GREY

I guess your mom really wants you
back home.

LINK

(laughs)

A snake wants a warm rock now and
again but that doesn't mean she
loves it.

I don't suppose I can convince you
to let me go? Pretend you never
found me. I've got a Taurus credit
chit half full and I could give
you these boots. They're very
nice.

GREY

Hmm. I'll keep the deal I've got,
thank you very much. My feet are a
bit bigger than yours.

You made a devilishly good hunt,
though, Maestren Link. Running off
to the grinners was a stroke of
genius. They're a goddamn black
hole.

LINK

Glad to know running for my life
made a fun game for you.

GREY

Of course, I knew you were off
playing grinner ever since you up
and vanished from Tethys. Not many
places a person can disappear so
completely in this system. Unless

they get spaced, and rich kids don't eat vacuum without a little money changing hands first.

Sure enough, there was a ship in and out of Tethys with papers so rotten the ink probably sloshed on the page. So, grinners for sure. When all of them started showing up at Arcturus, it was only a matter of time before you--

LINK

You dust-licking well-diver, I could not possibly care less about the technical details of how you ruined my life, okay? I just want to go home.

GREY

That's where we're headed.

LINK

Not Earth. The Brave.

GREY

I'm sorry?

LINK

The *Brave The Darkness to Conquer It*. Ya know? My ship.

GREY

I knew you'd absconded with a pile of your mother's money but not enough to buy a whole ship. Is it the exchange rate?

LINK

You don't get it.

GREY

Oh please, I've seen plenty of prodigal rich kids in this line of work. Always running off to the belt and beyond, looking for a

good time away from your parents'
prying eyes. I'm sure you had your
fun.

LINK

'Fun' isn't it, Grey. I found a
place where ...

Pause

OK, How did you figure out this
was your life?

GREY

Excuse me?

LINK

Well what made ... you're a dog
walker, right? That's what they
call you?

GREY

That's the lingo. Cause we do all
the unpleasant little tasks. Walk
the dog. Pass messages. Make
deliveries. Find what's lost. Find
things out. Uncover secrets.
Acquire things. Legal or not.
Moral or not.

We make things happen, for a
price.

LINK

Right so, How did you know that
being a dog walker was for you?
And not like ... whatever it was
you did before?

GREY

Hah! What I did before was dodge
knife blades and air debt in the
corridors of Lunawlins every day.
So when I saw a way off the
greencheese, I jumped and never
looked back.

LINK

I'm familiar with the feeling.

GREY

Sure you are. Silver spoon like you, running from mummy cause you're bored of the posh life.

LINK

Ugh. If you say so.

GREY

I caught your trail off Tethys, like I said, but you skived off, what? Two years prior?

LINK

Yeah, so?

GREY

So, I didn't catch one scent of you during that time, and I'm very good at my job. There wasn't a scent to be had. Where were you?

LINK

Ugh. What? So the next time a 'prodigal rich kid' makes a run for it, you'll know where to look?

GREY

(laughs)

Sure, sure. But also, if you were some place or places where even I couldn't find you, then you must have been right out at the fringe.

Places like that can be interesting. You must have some good stories. And we've got time.

LINK

I started as a NoGo. Marched my ass down to a Jungle and hired a sweet old geezer to show me the

way. Blue Giant. She was a nice one. Probably would have taught me everything she knew just to have someone to talk to. I kept her well stocked in starshine by way of thanks.

GREY

Uh huh. And what'd they call you?

LINK snorts

Oh, Don't try to tell me they didn't give you a NoGo name. Every void wanderer I've met has got a name. Alloy Engine. Black Betty. Steel Coffin. Bell Thruster. If you ran with them, you had one. What was it?

LINK

Spin Gravity, Spinny. Blue never would tell me why she picked it. Still bugs me.

Together we hit Pluto, Terminus, and Rogers. We parted ways there. I realized two NoGos staying together so long would attract attention. After that I hit the Jovian system. Ganymede and Io. Had a spot of trouble with the Taurus bulls on Europa. Nearly got my head bashed in.

Decided to change things up for a while and signed on with a freighter making cargo runs from Ganymede to Titan. Got my rating as an EXO-welder after that and did a contract with the Arcturan dry dock, slapping armored hull panels on frigates.

GREY

Shit, kid. I guess you weren't just playing at being a spacer.

LINK

I was certainly trying to be the real thing.

GREY

(narrating)

Before we knew it, we were at Ceres.

Getting aboard the station without being noticed wasn't trouble. Ever since the storm, the place wasn't exactly running in tip top shape. Where Arcturus was a buzzing hive, Ceres was just ... lost. Like a starving man wearing a suit from a better time.

No one was working the tower. What ships were moored were all wrecks, killed by the same solar rays that had hit the station. In the past, a place like Ceres would have had a weapon scan and domestic security. Not now. I hitched the Bacall to an empty airlock and grabbed my gun from the ship's safe.

(to Link)

OK kid, we're gonna go for a little walk.

(narrating)

I looked at the airlock's atmo levels. Never usually a problem in a place like this. But with the station looking for all the world like it was haunted, I didn't feel like taking chances.

(to Link)

There's a spare exo suit in the rack. Put it on.

LINK

Your concern for my safety is touching, Grey.

GREY

The contract doesn't explicitly say you need to be alive, but I think it's implied. Look at me. You don't get to be this pretty without a heap of caution. And at the moment, I trust the local 8vac about as far as I could swim in it.

Fabric rustling; sounds of Link and Grey donning suits

(narrating)

We both got suited up, helmets at the ready, and I cycled us into the station.

Airlock cycling sounds

I'd been worried that Link might just do a runner the moment we got here, but I think the sight of the corridor beyond the airlock might have made them think twice. Or maybe they had a different plan.

I checked my suit radio and to my shock somebody was pinging my private commdress.

Pinging noises

I knew some people on Ceres, at least I did before. It pays to know people everywhere. I recognized the signature. Farza. That was lucky. Signal source was nearby. I led the kid that way.

It was dark. Lights aren't expensive to run. If those were down, things on Ceres must be getting very bad very quickly.

(to Link)

Well, on the bright side. The rents are probably cheaper. Never seen a station downturn this quickly.

LINK

Yeah, this could have been Arturus if the Family hadn't stepped in.

GREY

The Family?

LINK

Yeah, the Peregrination.

GREY

Right.

(narrating)

We walked through the empty halls. Doors and hatches left open and unsecured. There were plenty of signs of life, just not recent. Old food wrappers, discarded clothing. It looked like people had cleared off in a hurry.

I spied a light ahead, a couple of locals, looking a bit worse for wear, sitting in the wreck of what used to be a shop. Farza was standing a little way off. She still had all that hair. Like the mane of some wild animal. Never knew how she fit all of it in an exo-helmet.

She was expecting us, spotted me straight away.

Farza isn't good people. She's got the morals of a feral cat and the

empathy of a Gila monster. She mixes business with pleasure. She's predictable in her evil. She'll betray anyone for profit, but not for fun.

And strangely, she never ever lies. So naturally, I quite like her.

FARZA

Grey. I can't believe I'm happy to see a face so tragic.

GREY

Farza the magnificent. What are you doing in this rat hole?

FARZA

Just my amazing luck; I moved my op here just two months before the storm.

GREY

Then let me rephrase: what are you still doing here?

FARZA

Either I'm being a helpful neighbor or I'm luring the locals into trusting me. Maybe both. Who's your perrie friend?

GREY

My latest job. I'm playing truant officer. Farza, this is the kid. Kid, this is Farza. Farza the Secret Seller. Good person to know if you're careful with your coin, and your words.

FARZA

High compliments from the likes of you, Grey.

LINK

Uh, hi.

FARZA

Very pleased to meet you,
suspiciously-unnamed-individual.

GREY

Now now, no freebies.

FARZA

Loosen up, Grey. The kid looks old
enough to talk for themselves.

LINK

Yeah. Ms. Farza, what happened
here?

FARZA

The storm, short stuff. What else?

LINK

But, Ceres was fifteen degrees
further off axis than Arcturus
was. Right? How is it worse here?

FARZA

Grey, you got vollies?

GREY

Always.

FARZA

Hook a girl up.

GREY

(narrating)

I pulled out my pack and cracked
the seal on a vollatte for myself,
then slipped the rest of the pack
to Farza.

Sound of FARZA lighting a vollatte; inhale and exhale before
she sighs contentedly

FARZA

Ran out of these a week ago. The
storm itself wasn't so bad, kid.

Killed some of the ships in port,
blew out some comms, but at first
it looked like things were going
to be alright.

And then we lost 8vac.

LINK

The whole station?

FARZA

Whole station.

Takes another drag off the vollatte

For thirty three and a half hours.
Now, there's enough slack in the
station that should be all right.
But people lost their cool.
Started to bug out. Even when the
air came back on, every ship that
could fly was selling seats off
station and they were selling out.

GREY

Can't expect the average punter to
act rational when the air runs
thin.

FARZA

It's disgraceful. We belters are
supposed to be better than that.
And it didn't end there. The ones
who ran left shit behind. Of
course, some people got greedy and
thus ...

GREY

(narrating)

She pointed across the way where a
series of bullet holes punctured
an internal bulkhead. No one had
even tried to patch them.

FARZA

This place isn't civilization
right now.

GREY

What's the topline?

FARZA

Stable. Almost everyone has
turtled up close to the core. Some
people are still out here, making
trouble.

Another drag off the vollatte

So keep your ears open. Don't
expect lights or network access,
we're running on minimum power for
now.

LINK

What about the reactor? Has
anybody sidelined the containment
and rebalanced the mix for the
lower output?

FARZA

I don't know the technical bits,
but supposedly it'll hold.

LINK

Well, I hope you're keeping an eye
on it. In a lot of ways, running a
power plant below spec is worse
than overloading it.

GREY

How do you know about reactors?

LINK

Cause I'm a fusion technician,
Grey. You know, on the Brave.

GREY

(narrating)

I shot Farza a glance, and caught
her side-eye me. I could see just

a shade of a smirk.

Fuck. That would cost me. Never
should have let the kid talk.

(to Farza)

I've got a meeting to get to. I
need directions. Can you help an
old friend out?

FARZA

Where to?

GREY

Corridor 42 Grey 17.

FARZA

That's in the 8vac deadzone.

LINK

Wait, deadzone?

FARZA

Less people, less air. So we cut
back the circulation in the outer
sections to bare minimum to
conserve power and O2.

LINK

That's like cutting off a leg to
keep from starving to death.

FARZA

No one asked for your opinion.
Anyway, take that corridor two
spans leeward and talk to Nandri.

GREY

Nandri?

FARZA

We put him on guard duty so he'd
be out of the way. Bit of a
cracked engine bell.

Another drag off the vollatte

You'll love him.

GREY

Fair enough. Want to tag along?

FARZA

Thanks but I'm not playing
sidekick, Grey.

GREY

I've got the Bacall. Don't mind
giving you a ride back to
civilization.

(narrating)

Her lips curled up at that. She
knew was I was trying. If I take
her along and I could make sure
she doesn't talk about me and the
kid.

FARZA

I'm staying.

GREY

Farza the martyr. I didn't take
you for the type to give your li--

FARZA

You can never see past the end of
your nose, dogwalker. Ceres is in
the shitter right now, but nothing
stays the same forever. And I'm
here when few are. So when the
place puts itself back together, I
can have my claws dug in all over.

You know what they say. "Buy when
there's blood on the streets."

GREY

Even if it's your own?

FARZA

Fortune favors the bold.

LINK

Okay, what makes you think this place will rebound?

FARZA

The bones are fine and a place that can hold air is always worth something. Look at Tethys, it's got a bigger GDP now than before the cull.

LINK

It's an outlaw port. They sell ... people there.

FARZA

Free market at work. Everything's worth something to somebody.

GREY

Speaking of, what's silence cost these days?

FARZA

For how long?

GREY

Long enough.

FARZA

I want a marker. And the other two packs of vollattes you're carrying.

GREY

Conditions on the marker: I don't violate NDAs and I don't work Venus anymore.

FARZA

What happened on Venus?

GREY

No freebies.

FARZA

Fair enough.

GREY

(narrating)

I slipped her my last two packs
and we shook on the exchange.

(to Farza)

Farza the majestic. It's been a
pleasure.

FARZA

Be seeing you.

GREY

(narrating)

I grabbed the kid and dragged them
down the corridor. They started to
saying something but I squeezed
their arm a little till we were
well away from Farza and her
companions.

LINK

What are you grinning about?

GREY

Farza could have raked me over the
coals there, but she slipped up.

LINK

Yeah, is a marker not a big deal?
That's a favor owed right?

GREY

Yes! And it's a huge deal. But she
has to keep her mouth shut or I
don't honor it. So now anybody who
wants to buy the news that you and
I were here has to outbid how
useful I might be to her. And I am
very useful.

Besides, I love owing favors.

LINK

That doesn't sound right.

GREY

Think about it. People owe you something: money, a favor, anything, and they loath to look at you, cause you hold something over them. But if you owe them, you're their friend, cause they want to collect some day. Makes 'em feel safe around you. And Farza's a good one to owe. If this place is still standing in a year, she'll be running it.

LINK

Well what about when she calls the marker in?

GREY

Then I either do it or I break my word.

LINK

Doesn't that cause trouble?

GREY

Hah! Do I look like the type who's put off by a spot of trouble?

LINK

Don't ask me what you look like, Grey. I'm having a bad day and I'll actually tell you honestly.

GREY

(laughs)

You were at school on Luna, right? In the towers?

LINK

The Aventine Academy, yeah.

GREY

Ahh. That's not even over the horizon from Lunawlins. You picked up a bit of the patter.

LINK

I liked the way the locals talked;
language as a full contact sport.
Honestly, you may be a miserable
pile of character flaws, but at
least you're fun to listen to.

GREY

(laughs, then a long
pause)
I walked an actual dog.

LINK

What?

GREY

You asked how I got into this.
I walked an actual dog. That's how
it started.

LINK

You're shitting me. On Luna?

GREY

No word of a lie. I was skiving
around the back door of this
restaurant, looking for a handout,
and the owner sees me. Probably
takes pity on me. Offers me ten
credits if I'd take her Pomeranian
down to the public garden for it
to take a shit.

I'd never seen a dog before in my
life, but for money like that? I
nearly bit her hand off jumping at
the job. You ever see a
Pomeranian? Like a ball of fluff
that can look back at you. But me
and the mutt got along OK, and I
keep coming round to walk her.

Soon enough, the owner's asking me
to run messages and find stuff
out. She recommends me to a

friend, who recommends me to their boss, who recommends me to ... well, you get the idea.

Next thing I know, I'm flying to Terra and being asked to do all kinds of stuff. Hunt people down. Spy on rival corporations. Pay people off. Never once do I admit that I have no idea how to do any of it.

I'm making shit up as I go. But somehow I pull it off. And I get a reputation. And ten years later here we are. I know what I'm doing now. Or I thought I did.

LINK

So you didn't set out to do this?

GREY

I was just looking for my next meal. I never had anyone to watch my back. Look after me. I had to do it myself.

LINK

I know you won't believe me when I say this. But I know how you feel.

GREY

Sure.

LINK

I do, Grey.

GREY

You have a family. You have everything I never--

LINK

You don't know what my childhood was like--

GREY

Oh didums. Did the velvet cushions chafe your arse? Did all that fancy food hurt your tummy?

LINK

It's not the material ... You don't know what it's like.

Sound of something striking metal

GREY

(narrating)

My ears perked at a sound ahead. Someone idly tapping against a bulkhead with a boot. When I peered around a corner I saw a seated figure leaning against a wall, suited but with their helmet tucked under their knees. A shabby looking gun was draped across their lap.

(to Link)

That must be Nandri. Keep your mouth shut this time.

(narrating)

I set the palm of my left hand on the butt of my pistol. Link rolled their eyes but didn't seem to protest. We approached the figure, who didn't even rise as we drew near, but a pair of coal black eyes peered at me from under thick brows.

NANDRI

Hail and well met, traveler. What business have you in the land of the dead?

GREY

(to Nandri)

I'm looking for a box of beauty. Not for me obviously. For the kid. They could certainly use it.

LINK

Fourteen miles, Grey.

GREY

Quiet.

NANDRI

Valiant through your quest may be,
I'm afraid it is my charge to
guard this door against those who
would trespass beyond the river of
memory and find themselves where
the air does not flow.

GREY

You're Sir Nandri, right?

NANDRI

That is my name.

GREY

OK. Sir Nandri, is there some way
I could convince you to set aside
your charge and allow us to pass?
I have credit chits burning a hole
in my purse.

NANDRI

I have nowhere to spend credit.

GREY

(narrating)

I gave Nandri a once over. His
cheeks were beginning to hollow
from lack of food. His skin was
pale, shades of a dark purple
bruise forming along his hairline,
but his eyes and expression were
alert. Alert and holding back some
sadness. Some pain.

(to Nandri)

Perhaps not money then.

(narrating)

I undid the latch of my right
glove and stowed it. Holding my
bare wrist with my other hand, I
slid back the door of the

compartment that fed my spur,
retrieving the canister of
Compound 2 within.

(to Nandri)

Does this appeal?

NANDRI

A potion?

GREY

Aye.

NANDRI

What of?

GREY

Full dose? Slumber. But half or
less will fill your head with
pleasantly fluffy pink clouds. Ask
the kid.

LINK

Fuck off, Grey.

GREY

Would this be payment enough?

NANDRI

An acceptable bribe, good sir. I
will take it gladly. You are far
kinder than those who came before.

GREY

Those who came before?

NANDRI

Terrans by their accents if not
their uniforms. Brutes. Who
accosted me for only carrying out
my charge.

GREY

Northern Republic?

NANDRI

To my eternal shame. I cannot tell
one Terran from another.

GREY

Right. Well, thank you, Sir Nandi.
Enjoy yourself.

Sound of door opening, closing

(narrating)

We passed through Nandri's
bulkhead and into the corridor
beyond. With no 8vac, the air was
still as the grave. Every bulkhead
and door closed tight. No lights.
No sound. A land of the dead for
sure. I felt a nervous tingle up
my spine.

My client, the senator, had sent
agents to take the kid the rest of
the way. By why choose Ceres for
the hand off? The place was
teetering on the edge of collapse.
And she'd agreed to the huge
payment? No haggling? I suppose
that was just a parent's priority
but ...

(to Link)

Why would now be a good time for
you to be home?

LINK

What?

GREY

The senator. When I sent her your
lat-long, she said the timing was
perfect. What's special about now?

LINK

I'd be the last to know.

GREY

Well, she's your mum. You don't
know?

LINK

We're not close. We are the
opposite of close.

GREY

She's still your mum. Family.

LINK

For some people, water of the womb
can be as thin as acetone.

GREY

Family is family. Right?

LINK

Hah. Spoken like someone who's
never had one.

Pause

I won't go back.

GREY

To what? A Penthouse? A private
orbital?

LINK

To the control of my mother,
poster child for self-obsessed
narcissism, too powerful to fight,
too rich to threaten. I'm not a
person to her, Grey. I'm just a
thing.

From the day I was born, ok, I was
useful for photo ops and lines in
her government bio. That's it. Put
me up in a pretty outfit every
election cycle, then ship me back
to a boarding school on the moon
the rest of the time.

Do you know what it's like to have
no control over your own life? I
couldn't pick my school, my
classes, my activities, my
friends. I couldn't do anything.

Speak for myself. Think for myself. I couldn't be me. I didn't even know who I was. My entire childhood was spent with her telling me who I was, making me be that person. Just an extension of her.

And any little infraction, step out of line, try to assert even the tiniest degree of autonomy, and people like you come out of the woodwork to set me straight. Put me back in my box.

I don't know what she wants me for now, but I know I'm not what she says I have to be. I'm me, Grey. I'm Lieutenant Link Ekaskin. 2nd Reactor Technician of the *Brave the Darkness to Conquer It*, a hearthship of the Family.

I found my people. OK. I found a me that I can be happy to be. And you want to drag me back.

GREY

What an ungrateful cunt you are.

LINK

Fuck you.

GREY

Your mother may be a piece of work, but you've got one. She looked after you. You never went hungry. Never had to work for your meals. Never had ...

(narrating)

I stopped our walking and turned on the kid. Holding up my bare right hand, palm up before their eyes.

(to Link)
Do you see this hand? Looks pretty
real right?

LINK
Uh yeah.

GREY
(narrating)
I let the spur slide out of its
port at the base of my palm. Like
an ice pick of polished steel.
I'll admit it's a bit threatening.

Sound like a knife being unsheathed

(to Link)
Little upgrade. A legacy of my
childhood. Wouldn't have needed to
have the thing replaced at all
except ...

If you're a station rat on
Lunawlins and you want to eat and
breathe. You go down to the bio
reprocessor. Dig through the input
for metal. 2 credits per kilo. If
you got lucky, that was enough for
a day.

Couldn't ever really get out of
the hole, but it could keep you
from falling further down. I don't
know how old I was. I don't know
how old I am now. But I was alone.
No one looking after me.

One day, rummaging through the
input, I cut myself. Didn't even
notice. Couldn't stop working
though, needed the money. Couldn't
even get a bandage to cover it. So
it gets infected. No one around to
take me to the doctor. It gets
worse. And worse. And worse!

And after a couple of weeks, it's in my blood. I collapsed from the sickness and the pain. Nearly died. And me with massive air debt to the municipal 8vac. The only free medical care was to get it lopped off.

LINK

Shit.

GREY

Only got a decent replacement when I started dog walking. Got this particular model a few years back. Useful tool, but I think I'd rather have the original.

So I'm not sure I want to hear about how rough your childhood was.

(narrating)

I turned away, stowed my spur, and started to fasten my glove back into place.

Pause

LINK

Grey.

GREY

(to Link)

What?

LINK

Take a good look at my left eye.

GREY

What?

LINK

My left eye. Really look.

GREY

(narrating)

I looked. It seemed fine at a glance. I had to actually lean in to give the kid's eye a proper shufty. Even then, it was only when they deliberately looked up to one side that I saw what the kid wanted me to see.

(to Link)

Oh, that's a pretty convincing one.

LINK

(sarcastically)

Top of the line. Best money can buy.

GREY

How'd you--

LINK

A defect. Found out when I was 9 that, oh cruel world, I would have needed corrective lenses. So unsightly for the child of a senator.

GREY

But surely--

LINK

But surely, having a team of surgeons carve out the entire eye and installing a very expensive, very painful implant in its place, surely that's a bit overkill, right?

Look, I know you're mad. OK. I am too. I think we both have a right to be.

Pause

GREY

Right. Ok. Shit. Um.

Fuck!

I've still got to hand you over.

LINK

Why?

GREY

Because I can't not. It's not the right thing to do. But I can't not.

It's the job. If I dump it off, your m-- Senator Endoza sends people after us both. I'm sorry, Link. You don't deserve this, but your freedom's not worth my life.

LINK

Grey. Please.

GREY

Look, you got away before. You're smart. You'll do it again. And you won't get caught this time.

LINK

You think?

GREY

Yeah. Cause when you run, you call me and I get you back to your ship. I'm the best. There won't be a trail to bloodhound this time. You'll be a fucking fart in the red spot.

LINK

OK.

GREY

And for now. You keep your head down. Something's up and I don't know what it is. If ... when things go tits up, just run.

LINK

Yeah, I can, I can do that.

GREY

(narrating)

We walked again. In silence this time. As we approached the bulkhead at the end of the corridor, I drew my weapon and made sure Link was a pace or two behind me. The room ahead was an observation gallery for one of the shipways. I could see stars through a series of large windows as well as an unfamiliar low green light.

(to Link)

OK, kid. Helmet on.

LINK

You getting a bad feeling about this?

GREY

I've got a bad feeling about everything. Survival trait. Keep calm, I've got your back.

(narrating)

Helmet on and secured, I stepped into the room, gun at the ready, and the figures within seemed to be expecting me. Three people, all wearing exo-suits but not their helmets, yet. Behind them, several more dark shadows were bodies laying on the floor.

The closest figure's eyes locked on me and their mouth twisted into a grin.

CAMBRIDGE

Grey! Bout time you showed up. We were starting to figure you'd fucked off.

GREY

(to Cambridge)

Cambridge. I didn't think this was an official job.

(narrating)

From Nandri's words, I'd expected Terrans, but Cambridge was with AXE. The Advanced Xenolegal Executive, the underhanded behind-the-scenes hush-hush deny-it-if-we're-ever-asked arm of the same government where a certain Senator held power.

The kind of people who did what needed doing, legal or not. Moral or not. Basically what I do, but bigger budget and badges they never carried.

CAMBRIDGE

(laughs)

Am I ever on an official job? Your part's done now. We'll take custody of Mx. Endoza.

GREY

(narrating)

I put a hand on Link's shoulder as if I would shove them over, but paused. My eyes flicked to the bodies in the back of the room. Belters by the look of them, same sort of clothes Nandri had. Dirty faces, thin arms and legs. Locals. I indicated toward them with my head. One of them had a gun in hand.

(to Cambridge)

Who're they? Run into trouble?

(narrating)

Cambridge exchanged a look with her associates, before turning back to me.

CAMBRIDGE

No trouble. Just setting the scene.

GREY

(to Cambridge)

Of course.

(narrating)

I didn't like this. Nothing about this said custody handoff. What 'scene' were they setting? Why had the senator sent a bloody wet team for a babysitting job?

CAMBRIDGE

So, the kid.

GREY

(narrating)

I raised my gun, pointing it at Cambridge's chest.

CAMBRIDGE

The fuck, Grey? You're on the clock.

GREY

(to Cambridge)

Fuck the job, AXEWipe. This stinks. I'm done.

(narrating)

I started to push Link backward into the corridor.

Cambridge's eyes narrowed at me. Nobody had been expecting me to grow a conscience. Even me. Especially me. But they were planning something here, and it wasn't just to take Link back to Terra.

There was a tense moment. I should have just pulled the trigger. She

moved closer and I realized my mistake too late.

Sounds of a physical struggle; grunting

Before I could fire, Cambridge had a hand on the gun and another on my wrist wrenching upwards.

Shots fired

The gunshots went wide.

(to Link)

Link! Move!

CAMBRIDGE

Get the kid. I'll handle this asshole.

GREY

(narrating)

I hooked one ankle behind Cambridge's and took her to the floor, hoping with the extra leverage, I could get control of the gun.

Continued and more intense sounds of struggle throughout the narration

As we fell though, one of her hands moved to her belt. There would be a knife there. That's what I would do. In a clinch like this a blade was bad news. She didn't need any room or time to turn me into meaty ribbons.

Fortunately I shoot southpaw, my right hand was free.

I slammed my cybernetic hand open palmed against Cambridge's bare face. The spur, needle sharp, went through the glove of my suit like

it was nothing. It's built to slip into flesh with all the subtlety of a shadow. Against something as hard as Cambridge's skull it would be pretty useless. But the bone of the eye socket is very thin. The spur broke through.

A wet, meaty noise; continued struggle

I sent the impulse to inject Compound 2, but there was no canister now. Gave it to Nandri. The air pressure of my suit suddenly wanted to equalize with the low atmo around us, and its only path was through the inside Cambridge's head.

Sounds of distress from CAMBRIDGE; noise of a vacuum, flesh splitting

It wasn't pretty.

LINK yells in pain

LINK

Grey!

GREY

The other two had caught Link. One had their arm around the kid's neck, the other had produced a gun from somewhere. A nasty stubby carbine. I tried to untangle myself from Cambridge's corpse, but the damn thing was twitching, keeping me pinned and my own weapon pointed ineffectually at the wall.

No, not the wall. The windows.

This was a very bad idea, but I was all out of options.

(to LINK's aggressors)
Taste Vacuum.

(narrating)
I saw their heads snap around just
as I unloaded a dozen rounds into
the observation gallery window.

Shots fired

That was thick material, intended
to take a lot of punishment, but
every design has its limits. It
hadn't been built for sustained
fire.

Glass shattering; loud sound of air wooshing

The window shattered into a cloud
of glittering splinters and the
world became a roar of rushing
wind.

The decompression hit us like a
freight train.

Sound of debris flying, people grunting in
pain and alarm

Cambridge's body and I went
flying, as did one of the goons.

The other caught hold of a
railing for half a second until
Link grabbed his boot. The extra
drag caused the Terran to slip and
both of them followed.

As I floated into the black around
Ceres station, everything became
silent as the void. Except, what
was that?

Hissing sound of air escaping

Oh yeah. When I'd killed

Cambridge I'd popped a
hole in my own suit
glove. Shit.

LINK

(over suit radio)

Oh fuck. Grey? You there?

GREY

(over suit radio)

Yeah. For the moment, yeah. What's
your status, Link?

LINK

Floating. The ... I don't know
what to call them. Those guys are
dead.

GREY

Good good, that was the idea.

(narrating)

I risked a look back at Ceres
station. I couldn't see any more
vapor plume from the hole I made.
We'd only vented part of the
sealed section.

(to Link)

We need to figure out a way back.

LINK

My suit doesn't have em-thrusters.
Doesn't yours?

GREY

No. I'm really wishing I'd bought
the next model up right now.

LINK

Great. Wait for rescue?

GREY

I mean yeah but I hope they hurry.

(narrating)

I was trying to hold the hole in
my glove closed. It wasn't
working. The suit's estimate for

how long I'd be able to keep
breathing was well, not
reassuring.

LINK

Hey, were those guys from AXE?

GREY

(to Link)

Yeah. Wetworks.

LINK

Kinda sounds like you knew them.

GREY

My line of work's not nice. You
meet not nice people.

I think they were going to kill
you. I ... I don't ...

GREY growls in frustration

LINK

Hey. It's ok. I get it.

GREY

No no. It's cause I'm not sure why
though. Pisses me off.

LINK

Well, if they were AXE, then my
mother sent them.

GREY

Yeah, but why?

LINK

Cause she's an evil bitch, Grey.

GREY

No, why on Ceres? Why now? It's
too risky. If somebody found out a
senator's kid died there then
there'd be ...

Oh.

There'd be an interplanetary incident. The Terrans would be furious. Probably demand something be done. And there's nobody left on Ceres to do anything, or fight back.

LINK

Ahh, so the NRS and the other Earth states can move in. Shit.

GREY

Yep. Ceres isn't exactly in mint condition, but it's still a prize. Terran's would have a foot in the belt.

(narrating)

My suit pressure hit 50%.

(to Link)

Listen, Link. You've probably got enough air to hold out for rescue from the station.

I don't think I do.

LINK

Grey, I--

GREY

Shut it. After I kick it, and you get picked up. Go and get the Bacall, ok? She's yours. She's a good ship. Take her and go back to your family.

God, maybe that'll make up for me fucking with your life.

LINK

Grey--

GREY

No, it's OK. I've had a pretty good run. This way there's no

loose ends. And don't worry about my body or anything. Just--

Comm beeps

EKA

(over radio)

Lieutenant! This is the *Brave The Darkness To Conquer It*. Report!

GREY

What?

LINK

When you were getting all armed and ready, I turned on the Bacall's greenline. Knew the Family would see it and come running. Brave, this is Link Ekaskin reporting. Captain, don't worry, I'm fine.

EKA

(under her breath)

Oh thank the stars.

(sternly but warmly)

Lieutenant, you have missed nearly a week of shifts. I'm putting this on your service record.

LINK

Aye captain. I'm sure you can triangulate my suit radio, but I got another for you to pickup. Say 'hello' Grey.

GREY

Um ... hello Grey?

EKA

Verified. We'll have you aboard momentarily.

LINK

OK. So I'm saving your butt now. You saved mine a minute ago. But

you were also the one who abducted me in the first place. So I think the math works out that you owe me, Grey.

GREY

Start a tab, I guess.

LINK

Great. There they are. Protocol is to fire out a tether and we can grab hold. Yeah. See? That. I'll go first and do the talking. Stay calm, I've got your back.

GREY

(narrating)

As we were pulled into that Grinner ship, my suit ticked down to 30% pressure.

I held my breath for the last little bit.

Sounds of a cable winding, airlock cycling; hatch opens and closes

GREY

(narrating)

Inside a whole flock of people were huddled about, nervous to see ... us, I guess.

LINK

(taking off their helmet)

Home sweet home.

GREY

Sure, you can drop me back at--

EKA

Lieutenant! How dare you allow yourself to be kidnapped like that. If you'd gotten yourself hurt, I'd have killed you. Rogel,

get them to sick bay so we can
make sure they're well.

LINK

Sorry to worry you, Unty. I'm
fine, I swear. This is G--

EKA

You!?

GREY

(narrating)

The captain's eyes snapped onto me
like a hawk who'd found prey. I
guess it didn't take much to
figure out my role in all this.

EKA

Commander, remove this man's
helmet and space him.

GREY

(narrating)

One of the gridders, a big gal
wearing a pistol holster on her
chest, made a move toward me. And
then Link was there, between us.

LINK

Whoa whoa whoa. No. No! This one's
mine.

EKA

Lieutenant, if you had wanted to
kill him yourself--

LINK

No, Captain. He's my ...

GREY

(narrating)

The kid looked over their shoulder
at me, eyebrows furrowed, lips
tight.

LINK

... brother.

EKA

Since when?

LINK

Right now.

EKA

That's not how this works, Link.
You have to--

LINK

It's how it works today, Unty. I'm
claiming him. We can fill out the
paperwork later. But he is my
brother.

GREY

(narrating)

The captain gave me another look,
eyes still burning with fury. And
then ... no, it must have been a
trick of the light.

EKA

(sigh)

Very well. What is your name,
Linkskin?

GREY

(to Eka)

Who?

LINK

That's you, dumb ass.

GREY

Oh, uh ... Robert Greyfriar.

LINK

Wow. You don't seem much like a
Robert.

GREY

Well Yeah, hence 'Grey'.

LINK

Alright, Grey then. Grey Linkskin.

EKA

Do you understand what this means?

GREY

No! I have absolutely no fucking idea.

EKA

(frustrated groan)

Ulko!

Nibling, will your brother be joining us on the Brave?

GREY

(narrating)

Link and I shared a look, which despite having no words, was nonetheless modulated with a lot of information.

LINK

Grey isn't done wandering, I think. We should take him back to his ship, docked at Ceres, the Bacall.

EKA

Good. We do not have the resources to waste on him at the--

LINK

Do you know what Grey does, Unty?

EKA

I have heard the term 'dog walker' bandied about.

LINK

Yeah. That's someone who does ... well anything really. How'd you put it, Grey?

GREY

Unpleasant little tasks. Walk the dog. Pass messages. Make deliveries. Find what's lost. Find things out. Uncover secrets. Acquire things. Legal or not. Moral or ... no.

Just, I can make things happen. Anything that's not wrong.

LINK

Sounds like someone useful to know. Right, captain?

EKA

I see. Very good. Link, I am glad you are safe.

Grey, it is ... not terrible to meet you.

Eka leaves

LINK

OK. You don't know the Captain but that was a very warm welcome.

GREY

Link, I'm ... I'm not sure I can be a ... I mean, I'm not used to ...

LINK

Hey, I get it. I don't care. You said you didn't have family. You do now. You've got me. We'll figure it out from here.

GREY

Well. OK, then ... you've got me, too. For whatever that's worth.

(narrating)

I wasn't sure what more to say. I don't think I've got the proper words to string together for things like this. But I grabbed

hold of Link's arm and gave them a little nod.

And when they nodded back, they were smiling.

Scene fades out

Thank you for joining us for this episode of Breathing Space, Fading Frontier.

This episode, The Long Way Home From Ceres, was written, directed, and edited by Scott Paladin

Grey was voiced by Vic Collins
Link Ekaskin was voiced by Kasha
Mika

Farza was voiced by Christine
Tardiff

Nandri was voiced by Devin Nelson
Eka Amityskin was voiced by Rue
Dickey

with additional voice work by
Meghan Cross and Emma Johanna
Puranen

Our theme, Blues for the Black,
was composed by Michael Freitag
with vocals by Jeremiah and lyrics
by Scott Paladin.

You can find links to learn more
about our cast and crew in the
show notes and more information
about our show at our website,
breathingspace.lawofnames.com.

Breathing Space, Fading Frontier
is a Law of Names Production