Breathing Space, Fading Frontier includes mature content such as adult language, sexual sitautions, 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 grinners. 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 grinners, 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 vollate; 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 grinners, 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.

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