

On the other side of the now-lockless door was pure chaos. Fourteen others stood scattered around the room in varying states of boredom; The Exorcist saw Sazalo out of the corner of her eye lighting up one of his damned cigarettes again. Laris was there too, glancing quickly at her with a mixture of surprise and curiosity before turning her attention back to a map of sorts.

Lunar tumbled through the doorframe behind her. “Would you look at that, darling! The whole gang’s here!”

The Exorcist, however, had eyes only for the various machines strewn throughout the spacious office. These were never-seen-before goods, after all. Some were from tales she thought to be simply fantastical, like the massive robotic replica of a flaming eye (belonging to someone named Sauron, if she remembered correctly) her shipmate had mentioned before. She had been told that few could stare it directly in its eye, but The Exorcist found herself sizing it up with no problem. Wires poking out of its edges sparked every so often, almost setting the wobbly pile of blueprints to its left ablaze.

Other knickknacks, unlike the robotic eye, she had never even heard of. A spoon-sized oblique prism rested upon a windowsill, dusted heartily with green sparkles. It proved to be nearly impossible to lift, having been firmly glued to the sill. An elegant box tied carefully with a dark yellow ribbon and a note bearing the words “NOT FOR YOU” was next to it; The Exorcist immediately pulled the ribbon, bracing for an explosion of sorts. Instead, a flower bud, pulsating rapidly and sweating a thick purple juice, sat upon a bed of neon-colored vials and at least thirteen small cogs. A putrid scent wafted into the air, causing a short girl next to her to cringe and scamper away.

In the far corner, a group clustered around an unnaturally long mirror, tall enough that even The Exorcist could see her entire reflection from across the room. With a couple of brisk strides, she peered over everyone’s heads to find herself atop an ornate plush armchair, a leg and an arm draped over the armrest and a different arm tightly grasping an equally ornate staff. She changed her vision to another eye, which informed her that there was no seating to be found where she stood. Still, The Exorcist fixated on the mirror, which now played out a scene of her polishing one of her pistols. In actuality, though, her hands remained empty.

Immediately, she tore herself away from that dangerous mirror. Anything that altered reality couldn’t be trusted—she’d learned this when the Sin of Greed had tried to brainwash her into wandering forever on the Greed Gear in the Circles of Hell. Around her, some others evidently had not known this; she saw Laris, whispering into the mirror at some unknown entities, murmuring words like “Seleni” and “Endo.”

Never one to dwell upon her thoughts, she continued her survey of the area, stowing away whatever she could when she was sure no one else was watching. At last she reached the behemoth of a desk, stacked with so many papers that she

could seldom see the actual wood. A circular object caught her eye, all metal shards and colorful buttons. Etched on the small screen was an incomplete message, “Gravi Ovr dri,” in flickering pixelated letters. *Gravity Overdrive*, The Exorcist thought to herself. She’d seen these interesting little gadgets before, when she was parading around a destitute little rock some had the audacity to call a planet. The rock was not originally that small; the GO had in fact shrunk an actual planet into that size. They were used to shrink such space-occupying items, in order to prevent a violent explosion when a larger object collapsed. GOs were rare enough that The Exorcist had never managed to properly get her hands on one; what a half-completed one was doing here, she didn’t know.

Halfway through her pillaging of the desk’s contents, an eye spotted a discolored paper sticking out underneath some mound. It seemed to be a list of sorts, as suggested by the words “TO DO” written in sharp letters at the top, with only its first few items crossed out. She scanned the list quickly, waiting for some mythical secret to catch an eye, but nothing ever did. She neared the end of the sheet, barely even processing the words anymore, when a section of bluebonnet-blue words stopped her. “MAKE SURE MY DREAM-SHIP DOESN’T DISAPPEAR WHEN I WAKE UP,” it read, aggressive and bold. *When who wakes up*, The Exorcist wondered to herself, an eye on her upper arm showing her an image of a cherry-red alarm clock displaying two countdowns side-by-side, one of a couple of minutes and the other of an hour or two.

The mound on the todo list stirred, and a folded wing rested on top of a nearby cushion.

And suddenly, the Gravity Overdrive and the list and the clock made sense. The mound was the infamous Wizard, fast asleep until the first countdown ran out. He had been working on the GO, presumably in hopes of whittling *The Wizard’s Wife* out of existence. The second timer was how long he had until the whole thing imploded, ensuring that space bodies close to the ship would become triggered and sending a ripple effect throughout the universe.

The Exorcist had to leave, and she had to do it FAST—the Wizard would not appreciate so many intruders on his beloved vessel. But unless she could make it to her ship, all the way in a hangar somewhere, and do so without her or anyone else waking up the Wizard, it would be impossible. Her next best option would be to negotiate her way out, something she was neither skilled at nor inclined to do. But if she could get some of the ship’s parts in her hand, maybe leaving would be easier than she thought...

Before she had a chance to shout in its ear, a hand tugged at her sleeve. It was the short girl from earlier, the one who had moved away from the disgusting flower smell. “Yes?” The Exorcist snapped quietly, keeping some eyes still on the snoozing Wizard.

“Sorry to be a bother, but I’ve noticed that you’ve been staring at that desk for an awfully long time,” she replied, one eye shut.

“And why does it matter?”

The girl smiled. “I’m Alyss! And I was just wondering.”

The Exorcist sighed. “The Exorcist. I won’t be shaking your hand, because we’re all in danger if this conversation lasts any longer than strictly necessary. The Wizard-” she motioned to the mound “-is going to kill us all once he wakes up. Run along, kid.”

Alyss didn’t move. “Why are you trying to wake it up then?”

“So I can negotiate with it. Anything else?” The Exorcist rubbed a hand on her neck, exasperated.

“Are you going to wake him up and have him see everyone milling about?” The girl had somehow found a cup of coffee, which she now sipped as she looked over the cup with a piercing magenta eye.

The Exorcist paused, for she, in fact, had not considered her environment to impact her imminent conversation. Perhaps she could restrain the others with some sort of magic, something to make sure that no one ruined her magnificent plan.

The smokey, spicy whiff of magic drew an eye to Salazo, looking as haggard as ever. “Hey-o, magic man! Just who I was looking for. Say, could you magic everyone into invisibility right about now?”

Salazo flicked his eyes upwards for a second, just long enough for a sneer to develop. “You again. Why should I help?”

“The owner of this ship wakes up, and we all die.” The Exorcist pointed to the mound, then the countdown. “Time’s ticking.”

He puffed his cigarette for a second, long enough that she considered sending a bullet through that cigarette in order to get his attention. Finally, he pointed to a man in a green cape examining potions. “He’s the magic man you want.”

The Exorcist approached the green man. “Magic man, I need your help.”

The man turned around slowly. “I go by Caelix. How may I be of assistance?”

She explained her theories to him, gesticulating with an increasing urgency. If this Caelix was going to be uncooperative, she might as well shove everyone in a corner herself.

Thankfully, they were open to the idea, albeit after she had spent a considerable amount of energy passively aggressively reiterating her points. “I warn you, however, that I am only able to manipulate the surroundings for a finite length of time.”

The Exorcist shrugged. “Now or never, buddy.”

Caelix went to work, shifting ground matter and loose trinkets. The Exorcist, in turn, went around to the others, compacting them into a corner and demanding them

not to worry. She was in charge of this, after all, and before long, it was only her and the still-sleeping Wizard.

“Wizard, wake up!” The Exorcist screamed, brandishing a pistol (she had no plans to use it, but it gave her comfort to feel the familiar weight in her hand).

The mound stirred groggily, taking its time to stretch and roll out its joints, and finally rewarded The Exorcist’s bravery by slamming its face down with an extremely angry *THUMP*.

“You...wake me...” It snarled, smoke streaming out of its nostrils.



The Exorcist strode right up as far as she could go. “Let me dismantle your ship.”

A huff. “And why...should I let you...this is my hard work...are you...a thief...”

“Well, it doesn’t seem like you’re going to be sticking around on it for much longer—everyone can see you’ve got that GO half-built. Give me the parts, and I’ll give ‘em a second life. You wouldn’t want to see your hard work zapped into nothingness, anyway? Plus, I’ve made it past so many of your blasted ship-tiers that I deserve a little something, don’t you agree? I’ll even let you have your first pick of the goodies!” She exclaimed, practically jumping up and down with anticipation.

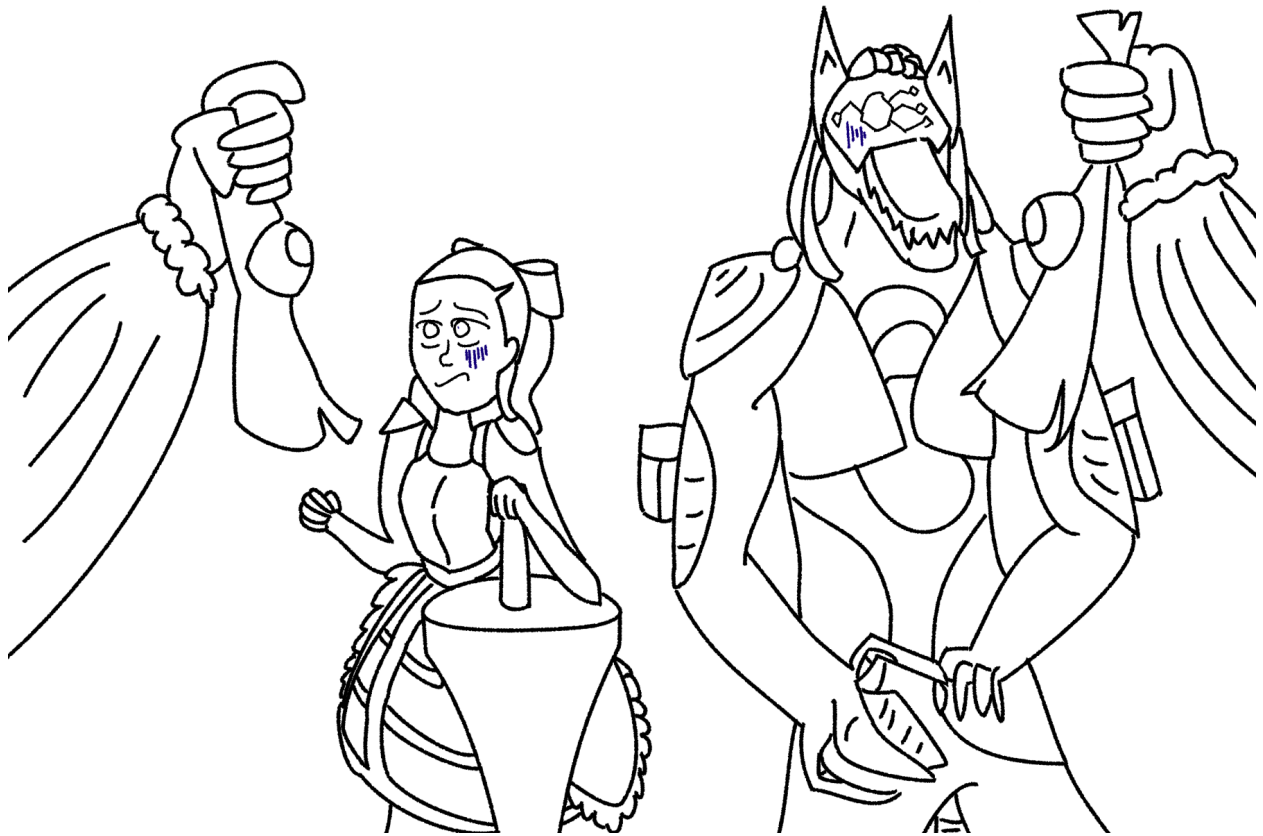
The Wizard stared, pondering her proposition, before dismissing her with a flick of his tail. “You’ve passed...this far...proving yourself...worthy...take what you want...but do so...before the timer...is out...”

And with that, he padded out the door she had come in from.

“GO, EVERYONE, GO! LEAVE *THE WIZARD’S WIFE*!” The Exorcist hollered, relieving Caelix of its magical duties. She joined the fray, dragging out whatever she had stored away from previous levels and whatever she could find in the office to scrap together a makeshift ship. All she needed was something sturdy enough to reach her other ship, the one all the way on the outer edges of *The Wizard’s Wife*. Someone had uncovered a tunnel to space hidden in a bookshelf, large enough for even The Exorcist to squeeze into, and the others were starting to slowly trickle out.

When she saw a pair of pointy green ears approach the exit, she froze. “Mason!” She called, throwing aside whatever was in her hands and pulling out some obnoxiously large shears. “Mason, wait,” she said, chopping off two locks of her hair each adorned with an eye. The eyes blinked at her, not comprehending their new freedom from their owner.

“Laris! Come here!” The Exorcist called. She placed a lock in Mason’s hand and the other in Laris’, not noticing their astonished expressions.



The Exorcist cleared her throat. “It’s, uh, a going-away present. I’ll keep an eye out for you guys if you need it.” She motioned clumsily to the eyes. “Just, erm, tap them. Or something. And, um, good luck, I suppose.”

Before she could think too much about what she did, The Exorcist had already gone back to her creation, and she didn’t turn around until everyone had cleared the

office. Only then did she shove her definitely-unsafe-for-actual-spaceflight ship, featuring “LAERITH XVII” emblazoned in flashy lettering on the bumper, into the tunnel.