

Full Organic

The shaft quivered in the trunk, its tip buried a full hand into the dense wood. I crouched, scanning for the source. I was low to begin with, and wearing my hooded cloak, so there was a chance they never saw me. Plenty of wildlife scampered off on hearing the noise, could be one of them was the target.

I sat stock still, moving only my eyes. I held my breath to listen. There, off to the left past the clearing. That's two hundred meters – no bow can shoot that far in a flat line. I saw it hit the tree dead flat, no declination whatsoever.

Two men emerged into the clearing walking towards the tree, and making no effort to be quiet.

"There it is. Told you." The one on the right said, pointing at the tree.

I exhale slowly. They have no idea I am here. Yet.

"It would have gone five hundred if not for that tree," the left man countered.

"There is no 'if' in the bet. You lose."

Leaves and twigs crunched beneath their boots as they approached. I was squatting on my heels not ten meters from the trunk. It is too late to move now. I slowed my breathing and pulled a fade, nice and easy. Few people can do it, and fewer still as good as me. By the time they reach the tree I am a blurry haze. Their sensors pick up nothing but ambient forest life signs.

The shooter sets down a massive powered bow, then places one hand on the trunk and the other on the shaft, then begins to pull. Must be new here. Nobody pulls anything out of Stonewood. That is some bow he has.

"Give me a hand. Wait, why are you laughing?"

"You'd have better luck splitting concrete with your bare hands. That arrow is now a permanent part of the tree," the other replies, still laughing.

"A tree this hard, my arrow a fist deep. You know it would have gone the distance."

"Yes. But I knew you could not do so here. Lines of sight are not what you are used to. These forests bend them." A blue insignia shone on his plated armor suit. I call him Blue. He is in his early forties, with sandy blonde hair worn in a messy side part. He has a boyish demeanor.

"The folklore," the shooter said with disdain. His epaulet bore a faded orange stripe. He is Orange. Mid-fifties, with close-cropped hair that is black with graying sideburns. He stands ramrod straight with an air of authority.

"You expect me to believe that tripe? The bow sight is not calibrated properly, that is all. No hocus pocus required."

"Yet what do your sensors read? Turn them to full power." Blue casually leaned a shoulder into the tree and crossed his inside foot over the other.

Orange stared into the distance, trying to focus on his heads-up display. He shook his head a few times, as if clearing cobwebs. He walked slowly in a circle, holding his forearm out in a scanning motion.

"What trickery is this? He you led me atop a geomagnetic anomaly?" He spat. "I won't pay."

"Oh, that's bad form," Blue replied. "And no, it is not magnetic, well not *geo*-magnetic. These forests emit something, but I'll be damned if I could tell you what."

Orange kept scanning. He stopped when his forearm was pointing directly at me! It took all my abilities to prevent an adrenaline spike that would all but give me away. Orange furrowed his brow.

"Did you get something?" Blue walked over to peer at the readout.

"A bump over there, but now nothing to show for it."

"Get used to it." Blue patted him on the shoulder and turned to go.

"Hang on." Orange hesitated, fiddling with some virtual dials on his display. "My suit is first-rate, micron precision at half a kilometer. Plus I don't believe in ghosts."

He started walking towards me. I had less than ten paces to think of something. I can fold my appearance into near nothingness, but not my mass. If he walks into me, he will not need sensors to know I am there.

I am prospecting on this planet unofficially, which would translate to 'illegally' in the eyes of these two. Early birds like me typically move on when a big mining cartel moves in, but I have special interests here. Their cartel will tell you they run a reputable civilian operation, but everyone knows that is a thin veneer for the military might they can muster. If they find me, I will be jailed and fined at best, or shot on sight and left to die if they do not feel like doing paperwork. We are a long way from anywhere.

I reach down into the ground through my feet, probing urgently. There it is, a root from the Stonewood. I channel all my energy up into it, and quickly locate the trunk. Orange has already taken two more steps. He is only one meter from my position. I find the arrow point. Its sharp tip attracts like a beacon. I generate power between my hands, flexing every muscle I can, then send it all into the arrowhead.

The arrow shifts position noisily. Orange stops dead in his tracks. He looks at the arrow, then at Blue. Blue laughs and shakes his head.

"This whole planet is an anomaly. You'll be out here all night chasing ghosts if you follow every shape on your sensors. This forest is alive in ways we do not understand." Blue resumes leaning on the tree.

"I'll pay you the difference," Orange says flatly.

"What?"

"You set me up. I'm not paying five hundred marks. I'll pay the distance I came up short, in meters."

Blue considers this, then nods.

Orange walks back to the tree and snaps off the exposed shaft, then starts walking back toward the clearing. Blue shifts his weight off the tree and follows.

I hold my position for a full ten minutes beyond the point at which I can no longer hear them. The extra caution is warranted, since I am in 'full organic' mode. Everything I wear is woven from fibers that were once alive. I left everything else back at my ship, thus I only have my senses as inputs, which do not reach as far as those in their suits.

Moving around in this mode carries risk, but the payoffs are too big to ignore. The most valuable assets on Magnolia cannot be detected by inanimate objects like sensor chips nor lasers. The shimmering entities I communicate with will connect only with other organics. They are the only non-corporeal beings that I am aware of, and they have asked me not to reveal their existence yet. I dubbed them Nolians – it rolls off the tongue a little easier than 'sentient non-corporeal beings from Magnolia.' In exchange for my discretion, they help me locate otherwise undetectable and rare ores that carry a hefty price on the exchange.

I do not know where I got my peculiar ability to feel and manipulate life energy, but it has served me well over the years. The few friends that know about it each have their own pet theory, from native bloodlines back on Earth to which star I was born under. Whatever the reason, it has given me an intuition that has saved me on more than one occasion. However, this is the first time I have communicated to others with it.

I had first come to Magnolia a few years before the big players got involved. It is a big planet, one-and-a-half times Earth standard, with double the landmass. The planet sits near enough to its sun that no ice caps exist at either pole. Lush forests and dense jungles dominate most continents. The oceans cover just under half the surface area, but contain many times the volume of terrestrial seas since these are hundreds of kilometers deep.

The beauty of the planet is beyond compare. Whether you prefer beaches, mountains, plains or any other biome you will find an idyllic version of it here. Several resort companies followed on the heels of us prospectors once word got out. Their operations are centered mostly around the equator, several thousand kilometers from my location.

Unfortunately, or perhaps inevitably, word of its mineral riches also spread, attracting the attention of the cartels. Each is a massive mining company that also has the military might to occupy any planet and hold it by force if necessary, but it rarely comes to that. The cartels have all the legal and political clout to 'establish regulated operations' in the eyes of the home worlds, and bring some semblance of society to the planet. Once they move in the game changes from finders-keepers to subcontracts and commissions. Most of us operate in both modes out of necessity. The main sticking point when working with the cartels is that your ship gets boarded and inspected regularly. Which brings us to why I am here unofficially – I am mining a new element that as yet remains 'of unknown origin' to the exchanges. It is near Lithium on the periodic chart, and is a hot superconductor, thus wildly useful and expensive. It is also utterly undetectable by any means known to us. The Nolians, on the other hand, can find it easily. I have made more money in the past eighteen months than in my entire career up to that point.

I had felt the presence of several Nolians before the two brutes arrived. I was in the process of bridging to one of them when the arrow struck, scaring it away. I doubted it would return, so I set about

healing the tree, using a process shown to me by some of the first Nolians I had met. This will be both a goodwill gesture and a calling card. I will leave an imprint of my energy signature on the patch, which will hopefully be noticed by others.

I reach down into the ground once more, this time without worrying about hiding my appearance. I locate the arrow head again, then summon all available energy to push it back out of the tree. After several long minutes of intense concentration, I hear the soft thud of it hitting the ground. I pick up a handful of dirt and leaves then begin a new process. I draw in life-giving energy from the surrounding forest while chanting melodically, which infuses the mixture in my hands with the energy. I pick a random song each time I do this, since I feel silly chanting only in 'oohs' and 'ahs.' Thankfully, the specific words do not matter, it is the rhythm and the focus that do the work. I smile, recalling how one of my more irreverent friends called this 'spiritual karaoke.' When the material begins to visibly sparkle, I reach up and fill the hole in the trunk, pressing in as much as I can. I feel relief in my body, and from the tree. I smile more broadly now, then return to my ship.

I had landed the day before, in a clearing at the edge of the forest, next to a cliff that offers a partial radar shadow. A large geologic anomaly also exists nearby at shallow depth, further masking us. I refer to my ship in the plural now, since it harbors three Nolians. They inhabit most shipboard systems, and have learned to interface with the main computer. They approached me several months ago, and requested to join me on my ship. I was stunned by this turn of events. These enigmatic beings are so elusive and self-sufficient, what could I possibly offer them? I recall the conversation vividly.

"Please explain your motivation for boarding my vessel. You realize it will often leave this planet, and cut you off from the others, right? What are your goals?"

"A ship is the goal. Movement. Interface with corporeal systems. Advanced materials. Learn."

I was still baffled, but the picture became clear over the following weeks. They had evolved over eons to exist in concert with the world around them. Each could live for centuries or even millennia, wanting for nothing. Their culture shares music, poetry and other harmonies of energy for which we lack words. Their world lies on the fringe of the galactic arm, in a sector largely devoid of comets and asteroids, allowing for long periods of stability. The images they shared were as close to nirvana as I could imagine, leaving me even more confused why they would want to join my imperfect existence.

"Yes, your conclusions about our former state are correct. Then ships arrived. Everything changed."

For all their powers, their awareness of the universe ended at the boundaries of Magnolia's atmosphere. The presence of beings from outside served as a wake-up call on several fronts. Not only did they learn their worldview was incomplete, they also realized their abilities had peaked, and were bound to a single planet. They also watched as the new visitors began to move in ways they could not, using energy coupled to machinery. This epiphany was the last straw, eventually converting the holdouts that change was upon them. They must adapt to this new arena.

This is how we came to our agreement. Once they understood my livelihood, they introduced me to Lithonium, which I would use to finance their goals. I would grant them passage on my ship, and teach them its ways. I am also contracting to have a ship built for them, which is no small feat since every moveable part must be robotic. A few close friends back at my home port are the only ones to know the

details. The dockyards and shipbuilders think this new ship is for a disabled person who needs everything on remote control.

Once they have a ship and can communicate in our language that will all change. I have warned them not to go head-to-head with the cartels, but to start diplomatically by invoking the Indigenous Beings Act. It will probably not evict anyone, but should offer a path to establishing their rights on Magnolia. It will also serve as their coming out party to the galaxy.

I have not decided if I want to be around when that happens. Fame and notoriety cause more problems than they are worth. Nobody knows it is me selling the Lithonium at the exchange, I'm just a number and an account. I pay extra for this privilege. On the other hand, I do not want to sell out the Nolians by turning tail. They will need an ally. An ally that can stay alive, which is the part that worries me. Cartels can make anyone disappear in the most plausible of accidents at any time, any place. They will need a reason to want me alive. I am still working on that part.

Sunrise the next day is brilliant. After breakfast with the Nolian trio I prep for a full day in the field. I need to get ten more kilos of Lm and I can pay off their ship, and leave a tidy sum for me. (The exchange required an atomic symbol during my first drop, so I got to pick it.) A quick scan indicates no movement outside. I open the door and hesitate. Something is knotting up my stomach. Dammit, I don't have time for this. But I know I cannot ignore it, so I sit down, rest my hand on the threshold and gaze into the distance. I go still and my vision blurs. I see plated armor. I blink a few times, but the image holds. I will have company today. I cannot risk having them surprise me as they did yesterday, which presents a conundrum. I will need to take a long-range sensor, yet this very device repels Nolians. I need a solution. I go quiet again. Five long minutes later an idea presents itself. I grab the necessary items and depart.

An hour later I walk past the same Stonewood. Barely a scar remains. I stop and take a reading, organic style. Not here. Move north. Another quarter hour of walking brings me to another small clearing, bounded on one side by a pile of boulders, perhaps a few hundred in number. A distinct urge tells me to stop here. I put down my gear, and locate the highest ground within eyeshot. I pace off two hundred steps in that direction, then set up the long-range scanner in passive mode, atop a rod two meters above the ground.

I return to the site and verify I can see the scanner through my old analog glass scope. The next step is a leap of faith – I hope that I am far enough from the scanner to not interfere with the Nolians, but there is only one way to find out. I sit facing the glass, ensuring I can see the sensor without moving. I see green on the status display. I go quiet and reach gently outwards.

I am surprised by immediate contact with several Nolians. They are agitated and are all sending me information at once.

"One at a time," I say aloud, and then hold that thought for several seconds. The cacophony settles, then one 'voice' emerges.

"Too much."

"Too much what?"

"Too much others."

"I cannot make them leave."

"Hurry. Our ship. Make ready."

I have not sensed this level of urgency before. I wonder what the cartel did to trigger this. Regardless, I still need to find the right rock first."

"I need more Lithonium to get your ship, as we discussed before."

They direct my attention to a large boulder behind me. I walk over and place my palm on it. I am about to ask if I have the right one, when my arm begins to vibrate with the answer. I am also made aware it is nearly pure Lm. I push on it – this thing must weigh two hundred kilos! This rock could set me up for life. I step back and look again – it is utterly indistinguishable from every other rock around. Good thing they told me the exact one. How am I going to carry this out... uh-oh. The Nolians just bugged out. I run back to the scope. The sensor display is all red, contacts to the south.

I roll up the gear and run to the sensor. Contact is now at five hundred meters, inbound. I break down the sensor and begin moving away from the bogeys.

Damn! I did not mark the rock. I cannot see it from here, I have to go back. I run as quietly as I can through the forest, keeping an eye on the inbound party. Down to three hundred meters, and heading directly towards my site. They are moving too fast!

I run the last fifty meters in a crouch. I locate the stone – it still rings in my hand. Got it. I place an encoded passive reflector the size of a pinhead. It will only echo back if the proper key is sent, hopefully that is enough to evade their sensors. Contact now at two hundred – they must be running in augmented suits. I have to move now!

I run low, directly away from them. I put in one-fifty by the time they reach the site. They pause briefly. My thermal shadow will still be visible. Double damn. If they put eyes on that spot I will never get that rock out.

"It's the same signature as yesterday," I hear through my sensor. I recognize Orange's voice. I keep running, holding the device up to my ear.

"You're guessing," Blue replies. "Thermal signatures are not that specific."

"Not thermal. The same band that healed that tree."

Oh shit. They can read that now?

"Say what?" Blue retorts. "So if that energy didn't come from the tree, then what is it?"

"Exactly. I intend to find out."

I have put another fifty into them while they were talking, giving me a two hundred meter gap back to the site with my rock, through dense forest. I have not used anything detectable since then, I should be able to disappear.

"We came in from the south. Split up and move north. Shoot anything that moves," I hear Orange bellow.

I see two dots now, moving more slowly. I slow my pace just enough to allow me to think. Can they detect my essence, my life force? I doubt it. The healing energy manifests as a physical wave – the sparkling is a visual side-effect. If my eyes can see it so can their sensors. But I did not do any healing at that location. What about outreach energy? I imprint that with my own ‘fingerprint’ to be recognizable to the Nolians. I put the same signature on the healing material. They consider this my true name. I will have to watch that now, or pick another way to identify myself during outreach.

Gap check – holding at two hundred meters. They are moving more slowly now, which gives me hope. But I am heading away from my ship. I gently veer west, intending to shake them and make a big loop back towards the south. Ten minutes later I see them alter course as well. They are tracking me in a crude manner, unfortunately it is effective enough that I cannot return to my ship. It must remain hidden until I get that rock on board. I have to drop them cold.

I want to ask for help, but cannot risk sending my true name out into the spectrum right now. I need to turn into something else. I get an idea and scan the map on my device. I spot what I'm looking for, and head west at a full run.

I have three hundred meters on them when I reach the stream. It is about ten meters across, and runs south to north. I wade out into waist deep water and go quiet. I reach out gently, using a different signature. I cross to the other side, continuing my disguise. They are only one-fifty away. I was in the stream longer than I thought. I power down the sensor, just in case something readable sneaks out past its shielding. I pull a fade and run south along the far bank. After three minutes of intense effort, I stop to catch my breath and power on the sensor.

They are both standing at the point I exited the stream. I am now four hundred meters away. At this distance the forest energy will interfere with comms.

“... here. Then another one went that...”

“... sure? What if...”

“Track the new lead? ... go home empty...”

“... back. Recalibrate...”

I have to believe they do not know I am eavesdropping, thus are telling the truth. I climb to a rock outcropping to gain a better line of sight. The two dots are now retreating. I hold the sensor overhead and point it in their direction.

“Come back tomorrow first thing,” Orange says.

“First light.”

I only have a handful of hours to get that rock. I lower the sensor and follow a full half kilometer behind. I tense when they pass back through the site with my ore – to my relief they do not break stride. At best they can toss a few motes out on the ground to capture signal, but nothing big enough to call home. When I reach the site, I pull another fade using yet another signature, and walk quietly through. If they pick up that signal at least it will not look like a repeat visitor.

The rock remained untouched. I stare at it, contemplating its worth. ‘Snap out of it,’ I tell myself. that kind of thinking will not solve this. I run through options. A hover tram would be detected instantly. I could break the boulder into chunks and make several trips. I do the math – to fit into the available time window I would need to take fifty kilos on my back each trip. My footprints would be so deep they could follow by braille. Even if I am already gone, they will know my only covert landing site. I exhale in resignation. The payoff outweighs the loss. I decide on a simple wheeled dolly and plan to make one trip.

I regain the clearing an hour before midnight. I find the rock and roll it onto the composite frame of the dolly, and strap it down with thick twine. A few Nolians join me as I start to roll out of the clearing. I feel a tingling behind me, and am thrilled to see the leaves crushed by the dolly wheels spring back to their original shapes. Small electrostatic dust devils obscure the tracks. This might work.

“Sensor talking!” One of the Nolians screams.

Damn. The cartel’s sensor motes are firing, and seem to be daisy-chaining a signal back towards the south, probably to a larger relay. I should have thought of this. I pull for all I am worth. I might only have minutes at this point.

I saw the first cartel ship’s running lights about halfway back to my landing zone. Then I see several more, all heading towards the clearing. Why such a big response for an indigenous creature? Who is this Orange?

The Nolians stayed with me, relaying information. The cartel ships released search parties, one in each cardinal direction. If they are moving with augs they can reach me in less than ten minutes.

“Help,” I send urgently.

“Must hide.”

The Nolians direct me westward towards a series of unstable sandstone cliffs, part of the complex that extends south to my ship. I have used their bulk for years as a blind, but I would never venture in close without good reason, those regions are too prone to collapsing. I am not sure I would even send a drone in there. Yet I found myself running with a dolly behind me straight into the maze.

They led me to a low cave, perhaps three meters tall, and fairly deep. We go back forty meters, at which point the cave makes a hard right and goes very dark. We turn right into the blackness and walk ten paces, then stop.

Ten minutes pass in silence. All my senses are on high alert. I feel an odd energy, one that seems to resonate with the rock I am pulling. Are these caves full of Lithonium? My mind reels attempting to estimate the value of an entire Lm mountain. Voices interrupt my reverie.

“These caves are a bust,” I hear an unknown voice echo from around the corner. “Too many of ‘em, and the signal-to-noise ratio is a joke.”

“Yeah, but we got our orders. Search to the end, by touch if necessary, which I will do. You know how he gets.”

My heart sinks. I have no disguise for physical contact. I listened to their approach, powerless to do anything. They were closing on the turn, when I realized I could not see their flashlight beams. Normally you light up an unknown cave like daylight to better spot hazards, but all I can see is a diffuse light. Now their voices are directly in line with me, not ten paces away, but I still see only a haze.

I look again – there is a glowing veil between us. I sense a familiar energy there. It is the Nolians! They ionized the air and used the charge to suspend a dust curtain, one that can do a convincing job as a cave wall apparently, at least to a flashlight.

I do not know how long I have been holding my breath, but I am not going to start again now. I hear footsteps on the other side of the veil, moving parallel to it.

Thump.

“There. I’m touching the back wall. Let’s go.”

I hear their boots swivel in the sand. Something brushes the veil with a square edge, like the corner of a pack. The illusion shimmers faintly, then recovers.

“Did you see that?”

“See what?”

“Thought I saw a small light where your pack scraped that wall.”

I am still holding my breath.

“Tons of static in the air, probably that. Yeah, see here, my suit registered a little spike of charge. It’s nothing. Hang on. My pack didn’t scrape the wall, I would have felt it.”

Before I have time to panic a large discharge occurs on their side of the dust curtain. I see a bright flash, then blackness.

“Suit power shorted out. I can see the hole. We’re done.”

I hear scraping noises as they drag their feet in the dark, slowly retreating. The Nolians waste no time in urging me to move. I think it is too soon, but I have to trust that they have a plan. We creep back to the cave mouth. I peek out just in time to see the two mercenaries enter the next cave, having already rebooted their suits. Once they are fully inside I start moving low and quiet.

Three minutes later we are back on the main path heading south. Thirty more minutes go by without incident, and I can see my landing zone. No visible signs of compromise. The Nolians press forward. I board in a hurry, with the three in tow. They begin communicating with their shipboard brethren in a furious chatter. They break long enough to tell me they are all coming along for the ride. Fine by me. I seal up and ask if it safe to leave.

“Soon. Many scans now, moving in waves. A trough coming soon.” The reply comes from one of the new arrivals, whose language is not yet as refined as the three that have live on the ship for a while.

The answer surprises me a little. They described sweeps with the big radar dish, which is typically reserved for looking upward. Orange must be quite the big shot.

“Make ready.”

I power up the jump drives.

“Now.”

We jump to a location just outside the system, in the radar shadow of a gas giant. I jump twice more, to be sure we are not being followed, then once again to my home port. I dock in the same shipyards that are building the Nolian vessel, which sits in the next berth. It is a beauty. The builders really came through. I leave the Nolians with my friends, and head over to the Exchange. I know I risk drawing some attention by dropping two hundred kilos at once, but I cannot risk theft or a simple crash destroying it.

I pay off the ship easily, using a miniscule fraction of the Lithonium payout. I still cannot get my head around the amount – about thirty thousand times the lifetime earnings for a regular prospector. Thank heavens for numbered accounts.

Next I meet with some lawyers that I’d contacted my last time here. I need some contracts drawn that can stand up to the cartels. The Nolians know what they want, but their grasp of our language is pragmatic and direct, they have no concept of nuance yet. I am unaccustomed to top-tier services like this, but I figure none of that money would have happened without their help, so I spared no expense.

By the time I return to the docks the place is buzzing. One of the Nolians greets me, talking aloud. It takes me several seconds to process this, having only done internal communications until now. I see a robotic face, looking at me quizzically. As it turns out, one of my shipbuilder friends knows a robot specialist, and they built three units that can serve as housings for Nolians. My original complement of Nolians take residence in them, and the other three have already placed orders. My head is spinning when they speak again.

“We learned ship. Ready to fly.”

“Whoa, hold on there. We need to discuss our game plan first. And with you talking in our bandwidths we need to get you some names.”

I sense a lot of energy chatter among the Nolians. I watch their faces express confusion, then realization. The build team used health care servitors as the template, which support a wide range of facial expressions. The one facing me speaks again.

“I am Sokelia.”

“Pleased to meet you,” I reply courteously. “I am Persephone. My friends call me Seph.”

“I am Terjal.” I recognize his familiar energy signature, and nod. Early in relationship I discovered their two genders, which I mapped to ours as best I could.

“And I am Fleet.”

I show confusion involuntarily, then catch myself. Too late. She noticed.

“You are confused because this word also has meaning in your language. It is not coincidence. The name appointed me by my parents conveys the same. I am fast.”

Now I'm really confused.

"In your native state you are pure energy," I reply. "You are all blindingly fast. To a creature like me your speed is all the same – instantaneous."

All three burst into laughter, another first. It is so joyous I cannot help but join in.

"We have much to discuss," Fleet replies. "It makes sense that one who is locked inside a corporeal body would default to speed of movement. For now, consider my name as indicating rate of change."

"You call it learning," Sokelia chimed in.

"You are full of surprises." I smile and shake my head, and lead them inside. I notice that the galley now has a table and bench seats installed. We take seats and I put the compact containing the contracts on the table.

Ten ships escort us from the jump zone down to the surface of Magnolia. Nice are heavily armed cartel ships, and one is an independent observer stipulated by the Indigenous Beings Act. We invoked the Act before we left to ensure it was logged properly with the authorities, granting us some measure of safety. We land at the main facility, where I can see logos for Cartel Blanche. I had never ventured close enough to see who had moved in, that is one question answered. Their chosen name is a thinly veiled reminder that they can generally do whatever they want. I hide my concerns from the rest.

The landing site is an impressive show of force. We move past ranks of soldiers and ships, enough to give a fancy military parade or secure an entire planetary system. I walk alongside the Nolians to indicate equality. The lawyers and observer follow closely behind.

After what feels like two kilometers of corridors and a dozen lifts, we finally arrive at the conference room atop their tallest building. The room has windows on all sides. I inhale audibly as I admire the view.

"I never get used to it," a well-dressed man with a polished voice says from my left.

"Me neither." I do not know the rules here, so I offer nothing more.

"You must be Persephone. I am Mr. Black." I nod. "Tell me, how did you come to discover the Nolians?"

"I can sense and talk to them in their native form." As long as my anonymity is blown, I might as well garner some respect and dispel their ideas that I am a puppet courier.

He raised an eyebrow, expressing doubt, then caught himself.

"It seems a bit fantastic, yet here you are. Ah, it is time."

We take our seats along one side of the table. The Blanche team files in and fills the other side, save for the center chair. Less than a minute later two security specialists stalk in, followed by a face I recognize instantly. Orange.

I feel my energy spike as I flush with recognition. He stops, looks at a wrist display, then directly at me. For the briefest of moments his eyes narrow, then he snaps on a professional smile and takes his seat. Mr. Black introduces him as the corporate Prime, Mr. McCormack, then initiates the proceedings.

"Mr. McCormack, I trust you have had a chance to review the statements regarding the Act."

"I have, as well as the partial contract they shared."

"We call them Nolians," I say as calmly as I can. "In case that helps ease the dialogue."

Orange, er, McCormack gives me a small nod, then speaks again.

"I am troubled that you have not shared the full contract with your specific demands. I will state for the record we do not intend to be driven off this planet. We have a track record of working with local beings."

"We are aware of your record, and reputation, Mr. McCormack," the observer interjects neutrally. "We have shared this with the Nolians, per the regulations."

McCormack furrows his brow, suppressing anger. He is clearly accustomed to getting what he wants.

"Look," he speaks with a quiet intensity. "We discovered this place fair and square, not different from any other. We did not invest all this to get evicted -"

"Not evict." Sokelia interrupts. "Join."

He turns to look at her, clearly taken aback. Our lawyer uses this pause to release the rest of the contract. McCormack scans it for a few minutes, then looks up.

"Why? I believe that is the question forming on your lips, is it not?" Fleet asks gently. I am floored by her inflection and choice of words. Quick study indeed.

"Several reasons," she continues. "First, we could have used our novelty status as the first non-corporeal beings to invoke the Act to have you removed from the planet, citing concerns about threats to the ecosystem et cetera. We are not choosing this path. Second, we learned a great many things from the arrival of ships, an event none foresaw. We have lived for eons undisturbed, which we mistook as the way of things. Our entire worldview has been upended. A return to ignorance is not possible. Third, it became clear that we are locked to one planet, upon which we lack sufficient influence to guide the physical changes occurring to it. We realized we need corporeal capabilities to continue to grow and thrive."

"This is why we sought to befriend a like mind, which we found in Persephone. We can now use manifest bodies and move around as you do, both on Magnolia and into space. Yet this is insufficient. We live by the rules of balance. That is our way. The new ship that brought us here, *our* ship, requires specific materials to build and propel, necessitating operations like yours. If we take such things, we must give. Balance. On this we will not bend."

"What else?" McCormack queried. "Your terms are too generous based on those factors."

"The other factor regards your ships and personnel we witnessed upon arrival."

McCormack pursed his lips. *Here it comes*, he thought.

"Are they sufficient to fend off all others like you, should the need arise?"

He sat back in his chair, surprised.

"We are among the strongest, but a coordinated attack by all other cartels might be too much. It has never come to that, we have allies. Why do you ask this?"

"The terms in that contract define a balance we can live with. If others come too, further altering matters, then the balance will be lost. Once they learn of your success here, we fear that possibility is nontrivial. Thus, our final reason is protection."

McCormack looked left and right at his people. They already knew this planet held massive potential, but not more so than any other top-tier asset. What is she referring to? In reply each either shrugged or shook their head. He looked back at Fleet.

"What is so special about this planet?"

"Before I answer, I must make one thing clear. On this planet we speak as equals. You will not become our masters."

"You are making assumptions," he replied with palpable tension.

Fleet looked at me. I wanted to shrink and hide under the table.

"Shoot anything that moves," I said quietly, looking at McCormack.

"We had no idea that signature was sentient, much less a human."

"His position is valid," the observer noted.

"Be that as it may, we fear you could revert to this stance at any time. We have read your histories as a species. We will put our trust into your contracts, but will also demonstrate some of our abilities that you have not yet seen."

The power in the building shut off. No alarms sounded, no backup systems kicked in. McCormack looked at his wrist display, but saw only a blank screen. I took advantage of the distraction and pulled a fade, then walked to the far window. In for a penny.

"You will come to no harm." Fleet spoke as the power resumed. "But from this day forth you will know that we are masters of energy, and fully capable of enforcing contract violations in our home world."

McCormack considered this, then looked at my chair.

"She's right," I replied. He turned to face me, his expression a mix of concern and admiration. "Unless you go full organic you are in their domain."

He considered this for a few moments, glancing back at the contracts and his people.

"Deal. Now tell me about this planet."

“We are the makers of what you call Lithonium.”

My jaw joined the others on the floor.

“You didn’t just help me find it? You *make* it?”

Fleet smiled.

“We still have much to discuss.”