

CHILDREN OF LESSER GODS...

With eyelids heavy, and his mind foggy, all he wanted to do was sleep.

Thrumming; it was that fuzzy, distant, far off thrumming, he knew.

It had always been the white-noise reason for me nodding off- resonating in their way were the pumps and engines, pipes and grating, creating tones and vibrations that numbed my brain into stupor. Born a space-farer, to spacefaring parents, and yet The Ship still hummed me to sleep at the most inconvenient times.

“The Lunnack,” voicing to himself the name; it passed through his mouth in a slow whisper, reflected off of his pod’s small cockpit and returned to his head a strong and proud title. He knew the prestige, the responsibility of being on The Ship that his parents had grown in their souls when it was launched so long ago. And now he felt it growing stronger too. *The Lunnack* was a smaller, more elegant creation then, a generation ago, but the fact that it was stronger and bigger now just made him all the more earn to preserve it.

Through formal academy, and learning about it through tales, he had learned that *The Lunnack* had been envisioned by the Creators to be a modular and customizable refuge for all occasions. Exquisitely thought out, like that of the voyager that might never return, to be the perfect ship for every need known and as yet unknown for its crew.

From his studies he knew The Ship had been built high up in planetary orbit of his homeworld. He also learned that it was destined to be a vessel of the long distance voyage, the unimaginable exploration, the great survey and the expansive charting. Thinking about the schooling he had received, in mathematics, celestial mechanics, history, and ship mastery, he understood: *over time the Lunnack’s growing and expanding every year was beyond the original creator’s vision. The Lunnack was modified, immensely equipped for most possibilities on our voyage.*

Sitting in his pod with the occasional little shake from *The Lunnack* he grew hungry. Tearing open a food packet he ate and thought on the virtual tour of the *Lunnack’s* food generation capabilities. He recalled how much foresight had been put into the atmospheric systems to make the air clean, the medical labs, the ore processor, smelter and the manufacturing areas. *Once again,* He thought about what he knew and considered, *so much was unknown in the vast wilderness that is space, and the yet Lunnack has been slowly refined into the vast capability that it is now.*

The thrumming thrummed, the buzzing resonated as he finished off his ration. He dropped the packaging to his feet and let the reverberations sooth him into dozing off once more. Looking through his own windshield, his eyes lazily traced down the lines of the long launch tube.

The interior of the *Lunnack* was neat. In every compartment, in every work space the layout was symmetrical, seemingly without anything out of place. Sitting comfortably in his custom-fitted seat, he touched his own pod's hull and then the edge of the displays. His Pod, a small space ship in and of itself, had been manufactured on board the *Lunnack*. It had been designed and tested on board as well before made ready for a pilot. Through heavy eyes he looked over his small and nimble pod, a ship within a ship.

I am a seed in a womb-suit, in a pod in a tube, on the Lunnack! He considered his predicament and then his knowledge of female anatomy. His laughter filled the pod as the parallel images of ship's tubes, and pods veered his mind into the subject of female reproductive organs. His laughter faded into a drowsy kind of smile when something you know is not appropriate, but you still meditate on it anyway.

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There was a great shudder in the *Lunnack*. Jerking slightly, the ship echoed an accompaniment of faraway impacts. The movement, the shaking of his own pod and the sounds brought him out of his drowsy thoughts and straight into alertness.

The fab-metal skin of the Lunnack was being tested in combat, he knew. Watching his communication, atmospheric and electrical lines shake a little in his Pod, he gestured away from his chest and his Pod's systems came to life. He scrolled through the menus to display the *Lunnack's* vital system readouts.

"The *Lunnack* needed worse than that to stop her!" He boasted proudly as he viewed the *Lunnack's* data. Just a few days ago, He and the other Pilots had been placed in low alert. Having just come into a new solar system, The *Lunnack* stumbled across an alien deep space probe. There was immediate cause for concern, but not outright alarm. Soon though, the Ship's scientists and engineers analyzed the alien probe carefully from a distance. From within their own Pods, they circled and swarmed around the alien probe like small predators ready to pounce on a larger wounded animal. They scanned the probe's systems, and wondered about its function. Soon news was passed down that a decision was made to let the alien probe travel onward, untouched. As the *Lunnack* came closer to the center of the solar system, closer to the sun and the critical zone of possible habitation, they observed a planet teeming with life. Soon, the predominant species came up to meet them. Each race proceeded carefully, while they conversed and watched each other.

Words soon devolved into terse exchanges. Misunderstandings and suspicions grew. Language barriers or safety ones, no one was really sure, were erected. Emissaries were sent back and forth and then back to their respected sides.

Where distrust lead to, wasn't inevitable, but it happened just the same; there was war.

A far-off impact once more pulled him away from his thoughts. He knew that there were things out there, flying around in the vacuum of space, that were trying to destroy him and his things in here. It was why He, and his brothers, sisters and cousins were now waiting in their Pods, under high alert. Cued up for launch and ready, soon they'd be pushed into the black, in a gasp of pressurized gas. To go out there and destroy the things that were attacking.

In every birth cycle, our parents, our lesser Gods, made choices. Some of the youth were chosen for manufacturing, some had the ability to heal or to feed others, or design, but I was chosen as a pilot and I couldn't have been happier. We, and the other children that were like me, were the nimble and the quick, the aggressive and the obedient. We were the chosen protectors of The Ship, of our home, of our Lunnack.

As another blast echoed, he questioned why he hadn't been released yet, then there was another impact, another shudder and he yearned to be given the go to launch. Eyeing the *Lunnack's* systems remotely once more, he saw that the ship was still holding its own, but taking damage. Glancing out of his windshield, to his sister in the Pod directly across from his, he caught her eye. Her face was stretched, a prism effect of looking through the two curved windshields. She looked back to him. Her words were written on her face, saying, thinking, the same thing as he was- *why don't we go? Why don't we defend?*

Another ripple rocked his Pod. Like the motion a small boat makes riding over a wave, he rocked from side to side. The Greatest Gods, the ancient, wrinkly and mottled old leaders were the ones to envision The Ship. The Gods conceived of the notion to leave their world, to explore and to catalog. The Gods, his and his planet's supreme Elders, also had other ideas for their ship. The Gods assigned the *Lunnack* to survive among the stars, to mine, to explore, to dominate, and to harvest.

Crackling to life, a voice in his comm system said, "Make ready to launch." Bolting upright, he waited for the seat to adjust to his new position. As the seat was set to his flight profile, he raced over his Pod's systems, looking over his environmental, propulsion, weapons and targeting systems.

They all checked out nominal.

Then another voice, another warning and the *Lunnack's* system's display was cut off in an instant. There was a metal-on-metal "clang!" while the umbilical trunk at the top of his Pod detached. His eyes took in the scene of the thick umbilical line withdrawing amidst the hiss of vapor and gas. As the umbilical locked into the tube's ceiling, he knew his Pod now relied solely on its own internal systems for survival. With the umbilical detached, he glowered at the most important of his gauges, his timer. It counted down slowly now, telling him of his finite resources, his time sensitive predicament, of running out of everything.

Before he could worry on the matter any further, Pods ahead of him leapt from their cradles and down the long launch tube. Soon it was he and his sister's turn, they looked over at each other, one last glimpse, then they were both hurtling down the tube into the vastness of the black.

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Thinking on the beginning of the war, he remembered when his race had approached this particular solar system. The *Lunnack* had come to this specific place in time and space because of a class A planet. Almost twenty-five years ago, their long-range probes and their deep-search arrays had detected a planet suitable for actual life. The discovery of a stable and habitable planet among so many millions was why he and his kind had navigated to the tiny section of the massive spiral galaxy. As his lesser gods maneuvered the *Lunnack* closer and closer to the Class A, one thing became increasingly clear; this class A had a species living on it that was quite advanced. From their analysis of the alien probe, the Class A was not as advanced as He and his kind, but the aliens on the Class A had sent out their own deep space satellites, had launched spaceships to explore the nearby planets and even had an early warning station in the Class A's orbit.

Flying the Pod elegantly, he had every experience that every Pilot survivor had ever known stored in his brain. He thought on war, strategy, on the Class A and on his duty. Combining all of that knowledge with his own innate ability, he flew the Pod like it was an extension of his own self, *almost part of the Pod*. The orb with the stubby wings twisted and turned, slid and then faced the opposite direction of its travel, every move executed flawlessly by his hands.

Following his every move, his sister deftly executed her own skillful display, and his cousin on his father's side followed behind her. They were like a trio of birds in the air or dolphins in the sea, flying or swimming like they had the same mind, like they had been born to fly, born into Pods.

Glancing to his timer, the digits still communicated the finite amount of time he had to fly. Pulling his gaze away from its quiet warning he looked to his scanners, his systems and his readouts. His previous acrobatics were to avoid any enemies as he piloted his Pod away from the heaviest space traffic. Dancing away from the launch line and the dense gathering of space ships fighting each other was his and his wingman's best possible chance at survival.

Satisfied with the distance, He pulled up into a crazy "S", then held his turn to face the *Lunnack* once more. Turning his head, He glimpsed his two wingmen, then he lined up a shot on an enemy ship as it too turned on the *Lunnack*. His weapons flared out their destruction without a sound and soon the larger white ship of his enemy was shredding apart in a display of sped up entropy.

Instantly, flaring across his front, a thin stream of light reached out to touch him, but he was skilled and he rolled the Pod over and around to come back onto what had shot at him. As he searched through his windscreen and then his systems, he realized his cousin wasn't as lucky as he. Wobbling away in a lacy arc, his cousin's Pod was venting gas and parts. His cousin's screams cut through his own comm set shortly thereafter, then it was mercilessly cut short by a burst of fire from another of the delta-shaped enemies.

He and his sister went on to avenge their relative. Valiantly they murdered their cousin's killer and the few enemy ships that were in the same squad. Jinxing and dodging, planning and switching positions so that every enemy they followed fell to one of their weapons, brother and sister killed. They were effective and brutal like hawks up in the black, picking out white finches to mangle and destroy.

Calling out her reminder, "Half-life..." his sister transmitted.

Shaking his head in doubt, *it couldn't have been half-life already! There was still too many white delta's attacking The Ship. The skies were still not secure for the Lunnack to begin landing her troops on the Class A.* Nevertheless, a quick glance to his own timer confirmed her statement.

"There are still too many!" He called out to his sister as he fired at another white delta shape, but it dodged his weapons. It fled instead of trying to reengage so he quickly twisted his Pod to follow behind his sister.

Acknowledging her brother, "They fight bravely," she remarked. Hitting her own target, she quickly twisted her pod to avoid the mangled and twisted debris that was once a functional ship. Conveying her true thoughts she shared, "Better than any race we've met so far."

Moving ever closer, toward the planet's outer atmosphere, they pulled away just prior to entering. As their heat shields reflected an arc of heat, they came up underneath a pair of white shapes. His sister and he both triggered their weapons. One delta-shaped blur was raked apart while the other tumbled towards the planet.

Searching for his next targets, he flew for a moments straight and true. His flat gray orb reflected nothing up in the black, so he took his time and then picked out three enemies that flew in a tight formation. Remembering how his sister, cousin and he and flown the exact same way, he imagined that the group in front of him were also related. His long fingers in the womb suit quickly switched off of his short range secondary weapons mounted in his pod's belly, to his long range primary weapons in his stubby wings. Setting up his attack run, his sister following in behind, he acknowledged, "They do fight admirably. I should know this place's name before we harvest it."

“Earth,” His sister said as she twisted her Pod in a tight barrel roll to come up on his other side. “At least that’s what the aliens call it.” Quickly assuming the lead of their flight when the trio of enemies maneuvered to get behind them, he slipped in front of his sister seamlessly, while she guarded his rear and sides

Looking from his scanners and then out into the black of space, he inquired, “And the race we fight?”

Breathing hard over their communications, she pulled into a hard turn, “I believe...they call themselves... Humans.” Then her Pod shot forth its deadly fusillade of munitions and another delta-shaped Global Defense fighter disintegrated. She took the lead and he fell in behind.

His Pod chimed a warning and He saw that his time was critical. Systems within the Pod needed to be refreshed or his Pod would cease to run. But more importantly, he would die. “We are critical love,” He warned his sister.

He heard her Pod’s own warnings as her voice came back over the comms, “Yes.”

Slowing to even with him, his sister looked upon him through the few meters of space, windshields and womb-suit. They held each other’s gaze, then she gestured toward the *Lunnack*, leading the way back toward their massive spaceship.

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Forgetting, for just a brief moment about his training, his education, his objective, all he wanted to do was see them land. Looming ever larger, drawing ever closer, the great *Lunnack* gradually filled in his windscreen. His proximity sensors chirped off the decreasing distance confirming his visuals. Knowing they both would make it just in time, he exhaled heavily and reached up to begin locking into the *Lunnack’s* landing beacon.

Then there was a flash.

Afterward there was a falling apart.

Laid out before his eyes were pieces of a Pod.

In one moment he had hope, and now in the afterward, he knew there was only an end.

Watching with aguish as his sister’s Pod disintegrated before his windscreen, he shook at the sight of it and was yet morbidly drawn to the glittery remnant of what once was. Then, passing through his sister’s remains, a new type of delta-shaped fighter streaked past his cockpit.

He flicked off the automated landing sequence. Straining against his seat’s restrains, and ignored the final warning from his timer. He twisted his Pod into line with the new enemy. The new defense fighter in his sights was a little larger than the others he had fought so far. The new human craft had a third main engine above and slightly behind the usual pair. The ship was longer and flew differently than the others he had tangled with. Besides its regular cockpit, the Global Defense Fighter had a small dome toward its middle, and a painted skull on each of its cantered tails.

Fire-walling his throttles, ignoring his energy levels, he placed himself into shooting position behind and above the human fighter. The moment he did, an arc of fire reached out from the dome on top of his enemy. Knowing there must be a gunner within it, he deftly twisted his Pod around the deadly stream of fire from his enemy and plotted his revenge. His five knuckles clicked under his suit as he depressed his firing key quick and hard. His own secondary weapon systems answered back, but unlike the delta-winged fighter's dome-weapon, his did not miss.

He watched his weapon's fire trace a line from amidships, through the dome and into the third engine. Grinning in his way, he knew he'd wounded the killer of his sister. He watched as the third engine flamed out and the dome became a crystalline mess of depressurized ice. Yet, he held back from killing his enemy, knowing that when you followed to close any mistake that was made was magnified. Waiting behind the Human fighter and taking note of any quirks of its pilot, he watched and waited. The heavy delta-winged fighter hesitated, decided on a tactic and then reversed itself.

Waiting, screaming, warnings; weighing what was best with the immediacy he faced, he gambled and it paid off. The enemy ship fell right into his predicted gun-line. With his own safety systems screaming their final warning, he prayed to his parents, his lesser gods and also to his Elders, the greatest of Gods. *Give me a few more pulses of energy to finish this!*

The fighting of other ships buzzed and flittered about him. The dogfight was a confused engagement with many combatants, but none of it mattered. It was just him and this heavy fighter. Arcing toward the Class A Planet, the wounded delta fighter kept its course, then fainted. He matched the feint. The delta fighter reversed and headed for deep space.

Straining against his own abilities at the quick maneuver, he nevertheless stayed behind his enemy.

He followed. He concentrated.

His targeting system called out its tone then engaged. The last munition from his main weapon was primed.

He smiled a final proud smile and squeezed.

His Pod went dark.

It winked out like a vacuum cleaner when its cord was ripped out of the wall by a running child.

He screamed. He cursed. He punched at his Pod's interior.

The timer read 00:00-1.

The wounded heavy fighter jinxed away as he gasped for breath, slowly suffocating. He clawed at his wombsuit, then at his restraints, trying to breathe.

In just a few minutes his Pod was a lifeless orb, still on its final course and speed, flying away into deep space.

The child-pilot of lesser gods was gone, but more children were coming every minute. More Pods were being manufactured and set in their launch cradles. Their history, their social structure, their complete training regimen was being downloaded into the new pilots. More of the quick, determined and well-trained children were ready to pour forth from the *Lunnack*.

For on the *Lunnack*, they were capable of interstellar, high-speed travel. They had the technological advantage from their human enemies.

They also had the reproductive advantage as well.

Children on the *Lunnack* were born in shifts, a combination of the best genetic material from their parents and accelerated training. The birth-shifts were around the clock schedules, never beginning nor ever ending. In fact the children were being born on a regular schedule every earth hour.

Unlike the humans, that took eighteen years to reach adulthood, from birth to their mature state, the children of lesser gods were adults and ready to fight... in an earth week.

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