

I was woken from my comfortable sleeping position by a siren blaring less than a meter away from my fairly large vulpine ears. Startled I leaped out, or at least as much as one can do so in a zero-g sleeping bag clipped onto the wall at six different points. "Hey silver!" Came the voice of the most annoying corvid in the solar system out of that same intercom as the horrid wake-up call. "Get your Barbie-doll ass out of bed. We're coming up on that rock soon."

"I have more holes than you do Cole." If the uplifted raven heard me he gave no sign. Slightly more annoyed than usual I started wriggling out of my insulated cocoon to the door of my cramped cabin. Pausing before the mirrored surface of the metallic door I noticed what Cole had so lovingly referred to as my "Barbie-doll ass", grabbing onto one of the handhold bars distributed all throughout the ship I rotated in mid-air and spread my legs apart so I could see the reflection of what lay between them. That is, a bunch of black fur with white guardhairs like the rest of my body, hence the nickname "silver", but if you looked close enough you might spot my butthole and if you looked really close you could see the opening of my urethra. "Barbie-doll ass", please I look more like a plushie, or one of those non-humanoid animals in Japanese anime. Yes, you read that right, I have no genitals, the twisted corporate bioengineers who spliced human and fox DNA together and extruded the resulting transgenic slush over a calcium-titanium alloy skeleton did not see fit to print me a set of reproductive organs. The vast majority of parahumans had genitalia of some sort even though the geneticists had made sure that they were sterile, but I was part of an experiment of some sorts to see if workers who couldn't waste valuable company time screwing one another functioned more effectively than those who did. It turned out that we did not, without the extra testosterone or estrogen from a set of gonads it seemed that we were less, motivated than those who had semi-functional ovaries or testes.

Okay, we were downright lazy. They could have asked anyone who owned a neutered dog or cat and saved themselves a few million bucks.

Anyways, introspection over I flung myself out the door and into the corridor. Not going to bother with clothes until I know whether they want me to go outside. Isn't like I've got much to hide anyways.

As I was floating up the corridor to the bridge I felt a paw slap me on the rear and propel me into a bulkhead. Looking back I saw a meter-and-a half tall red panda wearing a set of workman's coveralls trying to catch himself on a handrail with his ringed tail. Denal, our mechanic. "The hell were you thinking?" I snarled at him getting increasingly annoyed by the second. "Doing that in the middle of a wide open hallway? In zero gravity?"

"Hey, Argentum, you dress like that and you have to expect some workplace harassment." He was joking of course, when you can't make babies and have no diseases the corp crèche supervisors don't bother to instill taboos about sex. It was practically expected for co-workers to hold orgies in the break rooms, now that we actually had breaks. I couldn't see the appeal of it, me and Denal had had sex once or twice but all I felt was a pain in the butt that made it impossible to sit for half a week. Thank the corps for using us in microgravity. I shrugged it off and darted for the hatch to the bridge.

I should probably explain the name I gave myself, Argentum, or "Argen" for short, is ancient Greek or something for, well, silver. I know, original, but I'm a chemist by training and during my accelerated education I found myself wondering why so many elements had symbols entirely unrelated to their names. There is neither an "a" nor a "u" in gold, or for that matter silver doesn't have an "a" or a "g". So I did a bit of research in the crèche library and found that scientists liked to name things in long dead languages that nobody spoke anymore and after discovering the full names of certain metals in those languages I thought they sounded cool. What? I was barely three years old.

Cole and Aniya were already there. Cole was a raven the size of a large turkey, albeit with a much bigger head. His wings were also modified with small claws at the ends, apparently a small atavism the bioengineers found that dated back to the earliest birds from the time of the dinosaurs, that allowed him to hang onto an overhead handlebar while his feet manipulated the flight controls. Apparently there was a prevailing theory among some of the corps that created us that creatures that evolved in a three dimensional environment would be better suited to navigating the depths of space than us terrestrials. So rather than adding some animal genes to a human baseline genome like most did for their deep space workforce, they took the genomes of dolphins, parrots, octopi, corvids, seals, basically any aquatic or flying animal that showed a decent level of intelligence, and boosted their brainpower until they could operate a spaceship. I don't know how well it worked but I do know that for all his annoying quirks, Cole is a great pilot.

Aniya couldn't be more different, she was a rescue taur. A four-legged, two armed centauroid of mixed human, wolf, and possum heritage designed for both heavy lifting in the low-gravity mines out here in the Belt, and bailing out fellow workers whose suits sprung leaks. Above her waist she looked like a lot of parahumans, anthropomorphic torso covered in black fur with a lupine head, but below she looked like one of her natural kin, except considerably larger, like the size of a fully grown horse. And a peek under her pressure suit would reveal a bit of her possum genome, a prehensile (but mercifully still furred) tail, and a pouch big enough to accommodate an adult human or most parahumans. Yes, a nice soft pouch modified to seal airtight around a small hose that would supply a distressed miner with oxygen as he calmed down all safe and warm in a secure pocket of flesh. Oh dear I was rambling wasn't I?

Right, so there I was on the bridge with the rest of the crew of the nameless prospecting ship we'd managed to get a hold of sometime after the combination of violent raids on corp bases and legislative action on the behalf of sympathetic lobbyists that won us our freedom. The monitors were displaying several different views of an asteroid a couple kilometers in diameter that our scanners seemed to indicate held a promising concentration of mass. The plan was simple, latch onto the rock, toss out Aniya and whoever happened to draw the short straw with a load of mining equipment, prop up a burrowing mass driver over the masscon, and drill until it got within a few centimeters. Then they'd chip off some samples, I'd analyze them in my lab, and if the mass was something valuable dig it out and take it back to Ceres for sale to one of the local fabricators or the freighters supplying earth with needed minerals.

"We should arrive in a little more than half an hour." Cole announced to the rest of the crew. "Better get ready." Knowing his tricks it was more likely we'd be there in fifteen to twenty minutes, whichever unlucky bastard had to go with Aniya wouldn't have much time to suit up.

Aniya glanced at me and Denal and shrugged. "Might as well get it over with." She pulled three straws out of her suit pocket with her right hand while she held onto a rail with her left. She grabbed one straw in each of her free semi-prehensile forepaws so that they all appeared roughly the same length. Cole flapped over and took the one in her hand before flying back to his console, leaving me and Denal to take the ones in her paws. I looked at the one in my hand, it was barely five centimeters long, I compared it to Denal's, his was a full cm longer. Dismayed I floated over to Cole, sadistic corporations, his straw was seven cm.

"Guess I better get dressed." I said dejectedly as I let the losing straw fly off. Aniya plucked it out of the air and put it back in her pocket. Then she held out a foreleg and drew me close to her. She bent over and looked down at me with an amused expression on her wolfish face.

"Come on, I'll let you sleep in my pouch tonight if you don't complain too much." So maybe going out on that exposed hunk of rock wasn't so bad after all.

For once, that avian bastard gave us the correct time to arrival, I spent fifteen extra minutes standing in the airlock wearing the light pressure suit that was sufficient for parahumans of my model to survive in the vacuum of space. One of the perks of being built rather than grown being that we have a much greater tolerance of low pressure than humans do. If necessary I could remain conscious in hard vacuum for up to ten minutes, more than enough time for a nice rescue taur crewmate to drop her pants and shove me in her pouch, but I wasn't going to take any chances. Space is a harsh, unforgiving environment, under the supervision of the corporations we lost ten percent of our number every year. I don't know the mortality rate now that we're free but I would bet pretty good odds that it's still rather high, definitely above birth rates now that the corps aren't popping a thousand of us out of the tanks every quarter. We used to have two full time miners but then Billy ignored the warnings of an incoming radiation storm and got his brains fried, his share of that haul bought us a 'bot with enough sense to scurry for shelter at the first sign of cosmic rays.

There was a series of jarring lurches forward as the harpoons pulled us down to the surface of the asteroid and anchored us there. The airlock opened and the ramp lowered as we made our way down to the regolith. Aniya gleefully bounded across the landscape carrying some 500 kilos of equipment while I drove a rover with the really heavy stuff. Conceivably the two of us could carry the mass driver between us, but neither of us was experienced enough with maneuvering in microgravity to risk doing so while bouncing around. After half an hour of that we arrived at what our radar indicated was the shallowest point above the mass concentration we were interested in. As we unpacked I prepared a portable spectrophotometer, unlike the clunky devices of the 20th century this device was little bigger than a suitcase, including a specialized computer for interpreting the data. I scooped up a sample of regolith and poured it into a sample cuvette that I inserted into the machine, within a few

minutes the device had exposed the asteroid dust to every wavelength of light known to mankind and its creations, and contrasted the reflections with those given off by baseline samples stored internally. Once I'd analyzed the readouts I addressed Aniya subvocally using the implants in our throats, no point wasting breath when some subtle movements of the larynx would do. *Looks like basic nickel-iron, maybe a little heavy on the iron but not exceptional.*

In my experience certain metals tend to aggregate around iron. Came the wolf-possum's subvocal response. *Some of those are worth quite a few qcoins if I am correct.*

I'm not saying that it isn't valuable, if nothing else we could try to sell the coordinates to one of the big haulers.

Ooh, almost lost your bedmate you asexual dog.

Did you intend to subvocalize that Denal?

No, sorry. Not really.

I cut the horny Asian raccoon off of my channel. Seriously I thought pandas were going extinct from lack of sex or something. I tried not to think of his commentary as I helped Aniya set up the burrower. We set it up more or less exactly above the masscon, whatever it was, and switched it on. The drill bits at the bottom of the machine dug into the asteroid and every few minutes a rock was magnetically accelerated out the top, pushing it slightly deeper in and flinging the fragments far out of the way. Every hour or so I opened a hatch to siphon off some dust for analysis. After the first hour all I could see was an increase in the iron content, as well as some minute quartz and agate crystals. The second hour I noticed the dust was starting to reflect more light between 570 and 590 nm in wavelength. *Don't get too excited,* I told the others still linked to my comm channel, *there's a lot of things it could be, likely just some pyrite.*

"I'm still going to be looking up the price." Cole couldn't use subvocal comms like we did, something about the avian voice box being much differently shaped than the more-or-less human ones we had. "Just in case it is what everyone but you is thinking."

And I think it's time to turn this thing off and dig in by hand and paw. Aniya turned off the mass driver and pushed it over. She then began to shuffle around in the dust with her forepaws, looking a bit like a baseline dog burying a bone.

I picked up a rock hammer and inched towards the two-meter wide hole. *I need a large sample for a density index.* I explained as I attempted to pry out a rock that looked like it would weigh maybe two kilograms. Once I had it loose I carried it over to the rover, there I calibrated a balance to the minute gravity of the asteroid and weighed the rock, quite a bit more than 2 kilos, promising. Then I did a few laser scans to determine the stone's exact dimensions, which I then plugged into my suit's computer with a series of blinks and bites on different teeth oriented to various keys. I saw the results. *Well, it could be gold,* I subvocalized, *or maybe platinum, or lead.* Gold was one of the most discussed elements in the Belt these days, when the corporations had started to mine the asteroids the price of

gold had sunk to levels unseen in human history. But when the revolution occurred gold prices soared above the peak they'd reached during the early 21st century economic recession, until the parahuman colonies declared that they'd be exporting minerals to earth and the price started to decline again. Currently it was hovering somewhere around 50 Cerean qcoins per gram, not quite a fortune but still a significant amount of money for a small mining outfit like ourselves. I personally didn't understand why the humans thought it was so valuable, sure there were some chemical and electronic applications for it, but the market value couldn't account for those practical uses alone. I could understand why platinum was worth more though, a lot of life-support systems used it in catalytic converters. Still, lead was worth something too, a lot of habitats built radiation shelters out of it. I signaled the excavation bot to unfold and prepare to bring up the pieces of the masscon.

The spider-like robot walked over to the site on four spindly legs and positioned itself over the hole where Aniya was digging. As she exposed the concentration of mass that had drawn us to the asteroid a four-pronged claw lowered itself on a winch down the hole. She guided it over one of the larger exposed stones she had drilled out of the asteroid and signaled for it to pull up. As it walked over to the rover I stole a glance at the piece of rock it had pulled out, though mostly grey stone I could see a few spots where the yellow metal shone through. There was a lot of it, three big rocks and dozens of smaller ones, a total of almost a quarter of a metric ton once we'd taken off most of the worthless silica and iron. Over twelve million Ceres qcoins worth of gold, we might even be able to pay off the mortgage on our ship.

If we had known the trouble those rocks would bring us we might have just left them there.