

We arrived at Ceres without further incident two days later. Sure enough, Denal had managed to conceal the evidence of our skirmish with another ship fairly easily. The sensor pod it turned out had taken the brunt of the damage and was easily enough detached and smashed to cover up the melted instrumentation, we jettisoned the most melted pieces and stowed the rest for recycling once we got back to the manufacturer, might as well not pay full price for a replacement. The few scars on the hull were scratched over with chunks of rock from our cargo hold to simulate meteor impacts. Still there was a sense of apprehension as we disembarked from the ship and passed through station security at the second largest port on the biggest dwarf planet in the asteroid belt. Nearly two hundred thousand parahumans called Ceres home, the biggest concentration of our kind in the solar system, there were even a couple humans, mostly trade reps or ambassadors attempting to write out some manner of treaty with the Directorship.

Government out in the belt varied a great deal, most of us had been accustomed to rule by whatever corporation had fabricated or bought us and had little experience with governing ourselves. While most human children were taught how their government worked in childhood and how to participate in it if they were among the lucky minority to live in a democracy, we had to seek out how government worked on our own terms or try to hammer one out through a lot of trial or error. Asteroid habitats vary from direct democracy to fascism, and everything in between. In the case of Ceres the corporations had used it as a base of operations in the belt and naturally several different corps had constructed their own processing plants and even regional administrative offices. Because few humans were willing to travel several months out to the asteroids, or more importantly sign the legal waivers disavowing their employer of any legal responsibility in the case of their gruesome demise, many of the administrative tasks ended up performed by parahumans. The end result being that when the revolution won us freedom from the corporations Ceres already had a vast bureaucracy running things fairly smoothly. The highest ranking administrators of the different corps, once the humans had been killed or shipped home, all got together and decided to change the various "human only" rules their corps wrote so that they applied to parahumans as well, and otherwise set up shop like their former owners had done save that they now paid their workers. After a couple months of trying to handle a payroll of several thousand on a system intended for a few dozen they laid off half their employees. However they also allowed the "grey market" that had inevitably popped up to operate in the open, and in fact focused their layoffs on the merchants and hobbyists who they had a fair idea were earning an income on their own. These people were allowed to rent shops in the common areas of the habitats, cutting out some administrative costs and giving the Cerean Directorship, as the conglomeration of ex-secretaries called themselves, an additional source of income besides the money from exporting their extracted minerals to earth. In addition the layoffs left the Directorship with a sizeable fleet of surplus spacecraft that they no longer had the manpower to operate, they were going to scrap these vessels until some bright manager came up with the idea of offering some of the laid off miners loans to buy the extra ships. You can probably guess which category me, Aniya, Cole, and Denal fell under. So yes, not exactly the best system of governance ever, but we had one of the lowest crime rates in the belt, or so the propaganda department claimed.

Anyways, that brief history of Ceres does not do justice to the wonder that is the market caverns. As the corps mined out the dwarf planet they dug huge holes miles beneath the surface in order to get to the largest concentrations of mass in the asteroid. These tunnels were at least two meters tall to accommodate the miners and their equipment but the caves that had held the most valuable minerals often reached five meters in height and a football field or two in length or width. Since there was plenty of pre-existing living space in the worker barracks and tunnels many of these caverns had been reinforced with long titanium columns and filled with multiple levels of storefronts, the .028 gravities making it easy for most people to simply jump from one level to another through holes in the rickety paneling placed in front of shops so the customers had something to window browse from. It's rather incredible, in a ramshackle slum kind of way.

This day me and the others were leaping about in what we knew as "public" clothing, in my case a green plaid knee-length kilt ("regimental" style, not that I had much to hide) and a black canvas vest, Cole a sort of jumpsuit that left his wings and legs completely uncovered, Aniya an orange shirt and a "quad" of jeans that was specially designed for tauri, and Denal a pair of tight synth-leather pants and an open white shirt. Yes, fashion isn't quite a high priority out here. We were carrying the remains of our destroyed sensor pod in three separate bags and headed for a dealer we had looked up on the asteroid's local network. We found them in a three-floor warehouse on the east wall of the cavern, alongside a number of other shops that sold spacecraft parts, one would think those would be located near the docks but Directorate rules were that any merchants not working directly for the Directorate itself had to reside in the market caverns. At least they had delivery services and installation teams. We found a sales rep, a heavy set spider monkey hanging from the ceiling racks by his tail, and dumped out our collection of parts.

"Well," he stated as he picked over the remains with all four of his primary limbs. "It looks like you beat this up rather thoroughly. You say a meteor did this?"

That was our story and we were sticking to it. "Yes." I simply replied.

"Surprised your point-defense didn't stop it. You guys looking to replace that too?"

Denal offered an explanation seemingly spontaneously. "Our computers glitched, the start-up program for the auto-guns was omitted from the command queue. We managed to fix that though."

The salesman snorted derisively, "computers, nearly two centuries of use and those humans still haven't figured out how to make them work reliably. We don't sell ship grade computation materials or programs but I could give you some recommendations." Denal took a list of stores with decent electronics on his wrist device, he probably wouldn't actually buy anything but the gesture would throw off suspicion. "Anyways you probably want something a bit sturdier than these factory-standard sensors. I happen to have some brand new pods with carbon nanotube reinforced superstructures, fresh from the fabricator. A tad pricey, but I could give you 8-15,000 qcoins worth of store credit from these parts."

"How much?" I asked somewhat skeptical.

"Oh, about 105,000 Ceres qcoins." He said.

"So that's what, 90,000 to 97,000 that we'd need to pay?"

"I think you may have misunderstood me. That's with the best estimate of the credit you get from these parts, normally they cost 120 k."

That price was practically obscene. We had convinced the representative from the Directorate's exports division, which they held a practical monopoly on, to part with 10.8 million qcoins for the gold we had offloaded at the docks, but we still had to pay back over 35 million of the loan we had taken out to buy our ship from the Directorate, plus several thousand a month for routine maintenance and fueling.

He must have noticed the expression of disbelief on all our faces because the sales rep spoke up then. "Tell you what, you must have at least five more sensor pods like this covering each major surface of your fine vessel. I'll give you the replacement and trade in all your other pods for 600,000 qcoins."

I did the math quickly, "so you're saying our intact sensor pods are worth just 21,000 apiece. Is that it?"

He held all four palms up in an open-handed gesture of surrender. "They're long obsolete and most likely pretty banged up from all the flying around in this big field of flying rocks. You're not going to get a better deal than that."

I kind of doubted it, technological progress in the belt was no where near as fast as it was on earth, and there was little demand for spaceship sensors on earth so most likely our pods were less than two cycles out of date even after more than a decade in operation. "I'm thinking more like 500k. These can't be that much better."

"580,000, they really are, both ten times more durable and fifty times better resolution than those old things of yours."

"530, I can tell the chemical composition of a gas jet at ten kilometers with enough resolution as is."

"Okay, five hundred and fifty thousand Cerean qcoins and that is my absolute final offer."

"Fair enough." I keyed up my own wristpad's wallet to transfer 550k to the store's account. We'd still have a bit over ten mil to pay towards our mortgage once the monthly expenses had been paid. I felt somewhat satisfied that I'd been able to negotiate the price down so low. Normally these things went much less smoothly.

Naturally, we got the first indication that things on Ceres were about to go wrong just as we were leaving the cavern. We spotted a holographic poster of a ferret in a pilot's vacuum suit under the words "Missing, information related to the disappearance of this subject will be rewarded." In smaller print the hologram elaborated that the subject had taken out a sizeable loan from the Directorate to

purchase one of their short-range transports approximately a week ago. Three days ago the signal from his ship went silent. This sort of thing wasn't uncommon, the shifting orbits of the asteroids made some signals difficult, but something told me this wasn't an ordinary space trucker. I checked the model of the ship he had bought again, sure enough, it was the same model that had almost killed us two days ago, though it usually didn't carry missile tubes or security-grade lasers.

"You think that was him?" Aniya walked up behind me and put a hand on my shoulder as she asked the obvious question that we were all thinking at that point.

"Maybe," I replied, "what I don't get is why all the fuss over some guy who probably just ran off on his loan." Aniya shrugged and we continued on to the tunnels that would take us back home to our ship.

We got our answer the next day as our new sensor pods were being installed by a team of monkeys and rams. As I was running one of the new pods through its paces with a hand tablet plugged into a socket on the base of the pod and looking at the ceiling in every spectrum the thing could handle, one of the rams doing heavy lifting came up to me. "Hey, you hear about that weasel who went missing?"

"I saw some holo-posters." I stated as nonchalantly as I could manage.

"Well, they say he was a clone of some Directorate bigwig and that he hadn't been dark for two days before daddy had those posted along all the tunnels in the planet." I looked at him in disbelief. A clone? Those were rare luxuries, it cost hundreds of thousands of qcoins just to operate the bio-fabricators used to make them. It would explain though why he had been so foolish as to attack a Cerean vessel, not only did he have an influential relative who could conceivably cover his tracks he was most likely less than five years old, that being when we had managed to petition the United Nations of Earth for the right to replicate ourselves. And just because we came out of the vat fully grown didn't mean that we were born mature, at 28 I pretty much considered myself to have been a complete idiot before the age of eight. Yet the laws treated us all the same whether we were two or thirty-two years old because that had been how the corporations had treated us and the Directors had been lazy. I tried to smile at what I presumed to have been meant as a joke by the technician whose ass wasn't possibly at stake and hurried through the remaining checks. I did not bother to test the other pods but instead bounded back inside the ship to discuss the new situation with my crewmates.

When I told them Denal and Aniya just stood there with a glassy look in their eyes and their mouths hanging wide open. Cole wasn't particularly surprised, "should have known it would be one of those fresh from the tank rich morons."

"So what now?" I inquired. "If we did kill him and the Directorate finds out, I think forced labor until the days we die might be a light sentence."

"We fly." Cole flapped his wings, knocking me and Denal off our feet in the low gravity. "We fill our helium-3 tanks and pick another asteroid that won't turn us over to our new corporate masters."

"Sounds like a plan." I stated simply. "But which rock might that be?"