

Through the inconceivable depths of space, a single small vessel streaked at speeds immense. Even with the field of negative energy folding space around the craft its' journey had taken years. But now the long voyage was nearing completion, the target system was in sight. The Tiera system, colonized by the Old Federation centuries ago with two rocky planets and one moon of a gas giant terraformed into imitations of Ancient Earth. According to Ronkalli data, the system had a population exceeding 4 billion gene-modded colonists, but as with many stars it had backslid into barbarism with the collapse of the Old Federation.

Thus, the great Emperor Ronkall, in his infinite wisdom, launched Project Paladin to restore civilization to the stars. While sending a proper delegation all the way to bring even one star into the fold was infeasible, a small ship, such as the *Resolution* here, with a skeleton crew of trusted envoys and the seeds of a full nanofactory was just barely practical. According to the mission details saved in the ship's computers, these envoys of civilization would recruit Tiera natives and provide them the advanced technology necessary to become the champions of galactic order their system surely needed. Given the proper tools these champions would surely bring peace and stability to their chaotic system, enabling it to properly join in the Emperor's efforts to restore civilization to the galaxy.

Or at least it would, were it not for one little micrometeorite.

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The ice giant planet Skadi had a sparse population, slushy ammonia-methane seas were not exactly conducive to Terran-derived life, but the stations orbiting it represented the most far-flung outposts of civilization in the Tiera system. It was a hard-scrabble existence, with very little commerce that far from the three terraformed worlds, most of the local trade was oriented around supplying water and raw organics to the few people who'd settled out there. Economic opportunities for newcomers were few and far between.

As the crew of the salvage co-op ship *Dustbin* had just discovered.

On the pretentiously named "Skadi Central Station" a red-haired raccoon transgenic by the name of Tanya Loter tossed a datapad onto the table she shared with her crewmates at the spacer cantina. "That's their final offer. We're not getting any better than that."

An opossum in grease-stained mechanic's overalls picked up the datapad. "Two thousand?" Luke Didelph, better known as "MechRat" to his friends, said incredulously. "That won't even cover maintenance."

"I know," Tanya sighed. "But money's tight here and what we brought in is little better than scrap."

"Seriously?" MechRat hissed. "That air converter was FedTech, they don't make them like that anymore."

"Wrecked FedTech." The raccoon corrected him, "and because they don't make them like that anymore nobody here can repair it. It's just a collectible antique and they don't have the space to waste on those."

"The local credits are backed by water, aren't they?" Their third crewmate, an ox by the name of Brom Boslin, chimed in. "If we cashed them in would that give us enough reaction mass to make it back to Surt?"

Tanya shook her head, “only if we coast and use gravity slingshots for two years. By then something will have broken and we’re likely to suffocate or starve.”

“So we’re stuck here.” Didelph leaned back in his seat in resignation. “Guess I better learn ice mining.”

Tanya picked the datapad back up and started scrolling through apps. “Maybe not, I’ll check the navigation charts. There could be something else out there we can pick up.” She did some quick mental calculations of their ship’s range within a reasonable amount of time and expanded the station network’s radar map of the surrounding space to match. There was a wrecked Belter clanship twenty light-minutes out, but two ships already on an intercept course, most likely there’d be nothing left by the time they reached it. Fifty light-minutes out was a comet nobody seemed to have claimed, she supposed they might tap it for reaction mass but unrefined water was always risky. Then something on the very edge of the screen caught her attention. She tapped on it to bring up a more detailed view and her eyes widened, spectroscopic indications of titanium, carbon, gallium, even if it was scrap that could keep their little ship flying for decades.

“Guys, look at this.” She set the datapad back down and pointed at the object. MechRat’s eyes glazed over, an expression Tanya recognized as a sign he was accessing his brain-computer interface implant, presumably so he could look at it in greater detail than on the screen.

Brom tapped the screen. “That looks pretty interesting, how far out is it?”

“One hundred light-minutes...” Tanya trailed off as she did the calculations. “It would take us five months to get there, ten if we want to have enough mass for a return trip.”

MechRat spoke up. “Appeared out of nowhere just six hours ago.” His eyes came back into focus. “That has to be some sort of Fed stealth ship, or...” He cringed at the thought of another distinct possibility that shook him.

“Sol-destroyers are not real, Luke.” Tanya replied in annoyance.

“But they are!” The opossum retorted. “Fifteen billion years and Old Terra is the only planet to birth interstellar civilization? I don’t think so! Besides, the Federation wouldn’t have been so restrictive on EM emissions if they weren’t scared of something.”

“They’re a fairy tale,” Tanya insisted. “But even if they weren’t there’d be no point to rocketing out to this thing. There’s plenty of better ships that can reach it before us, even if they started out from Surt.”

“Excuse me,” the three spacers turned to see a grey wolf dressed in a well-tailored black jumpsuit, flanked by a stern-looking raven in a blue dress with a shiny new datapad strapped to her waist. “I overheard some of your heated conversation and couldn’t help but wonder what you were talking about.”

“There’s a wrecked Federation ship at the edge of the system.” Tanya and Didelph turned to stare at Boslin. “What, you said we can’t reach it in time anyways.”

“Interesting,” said the wolf. “I was starting to think this trip might be a waste of time.”

“Excuse me, who are you?” Tanya asked.

“Oh, where’s my manners.” The wolf held out a plastic business card. “Irvine of House Lupus, of the Logan Lupines.” He gestured to his raven companion. “This is my secretary, Ms. Melene Corus.”

“Logi? You’re a long way from home Flatlander.” Didelph picked up the card and stared at it, Tanya guessed he was reading the RFID data in its integral chip. The raccoon tapped the table emphatically in his direction. “No offense meant.”

“It’s fine, it’s been twenty years since I saw a proper horizon.” She introduced herself and her crewmates. “Now what’s your angle Mr. Lupine?”

“Well,” said Lupine. “I was getting a little bored at home so I thought I’d go on a tour of the planetary system, starting out here on the fringe. While I was at it I might look into business opportunities for my House.”

“Pretty sparse pickings, isn’t it?” Tanya replied.

“Yes indeed.” He confirmed. “But then I happened to overhear your conversation about a potential Federal Guard starship.”

“Only a possibility,” Tanya was reserved. “All we know for sure is there’s a few hundred thousand water-credits worth of scrap just outside our reach.”

“What if you had a matter conversion drive?” Lupine grinned.

All three spacers looked at him in astonishment. “You have one of those?” Didelph spurted out. “What are you doing in this scrapheap system then?”

“Crossing the planetary system in a matter of weeks seemed a better use for the family monopole cache.” Said Lupine. “So, if I were to loan you my yacht’s drive we might reach the Federal ship before anyone else from the inner system then?”

“With a conversion drive we could get there in less than a month.” Tanya exclaimed. “But what would you want in return?”

“Well, my drive alone is worth more than any spaceship docked at this station. I think a triple crew share and first pick of any artifacts would be appropriate?”

“So you’d get half the total haul? No way!” Didelph burst out before his crewmates could voice any of their own objections.

Lupine’s expression stayed stoic, even while Corus turned her avian glare on the scrapper team. “We’ll think about it.” Tanya said. “Let me give you our contact information.”

Corus copied the contact data on Tanya’s datapad to her own and turned to leave, her boss lingered long enough for one last comment. “I hope you consider my offer carefully, there’s plenty of other hungry spacers out here too.”

Once the two were out of earshot, the *Dustbin*'s crew started to confer in whispered tones. "You're not seriously thinking of taking that offer, are you?" Said Didelph.

"We don't have many options do we?" Tanya replied. "It's a really good deal, there's no way something better is going to come along."

"That's just it," Didelph continued. "It's too good, there's no way he's not going to betray us once we get there."

"You're being paranoid again MechRat," Tanya retorted. "He's a rich kid from the inner system, it's just a chance for him to get some shiny new toys."

"No way, it's too convenient." Didelph insisted. "We find the find of the century and this guy just shows up offering us a means to get there?"

Tanya tried to figure that out. "The ship, or whatever it is, would have shown up on the station's readouts four hours ago. Maybe he spotted it then and went looking for crews who might be interested in checking it out."

"That makes sense." Brom finally spoke up. "I'm with Tanya, this is the best opportunity we've had in months. I say we go for it."

Didelph grumbled. "I guess I'm outvoted then."

"I'm afraid so." Tanya nodded. She started making the call on her datapad. "I'll try to talk him down to a double share."