

Tanya woke to a momentary sensation of fluid in her lungs, but it was dispelled in moments by a wave of bright white light. The light faded gradually to reveal a shining marble floor veined with gold and silver streaks, following the streaks led her gaze to the edge of the platform, rising uncountable feet over a green-coated floor dotted with metal and carbon-fiber spires that stretched almost as far up as she was. She quickly turned to glance upwards, finding not a ceiling, but a vast blue void over a horizon that appeared to stretch out into infinity.

Slowly, Tanya began to realize where she must be. It had been two decades since she had last been on a planet but that skyline was unmistakable. But how? And which planet? She'd only been on Jord for a short time but it didn't look like anyplace on that frigid dustball, and she didn't think there was any construction this big on Logi either.

"New Pallas." A voice said behind her, as if in answer to her unstated question. Tanya spun around to spy a tall golden-furred vulpine dressed in ornate gilded robes straight out of a historical novel, a pair of white-feathered wings extending from his shoulders. Without thinking the raccoon tilted her head in reverence, though she did not know who this awe-worthy individual was. "Once, the jewel of the galaxy." He waved his hand, and a wave of red fire swept over the landscape.

Where the flames passed there was now ruin, scorched soil and toppled skyscrapers. Tanya gasped, the land looked quite familiar now, too familiar in her opinion. She remembered fire, raining down from the skies, indiscriminate in its devastation. The surreal nature of entering a still-smoking city, picking through the ruins of buildings she'd visited as a small child, finding nothing of the people within but blackened outlines and scattered bones. Her pulse quickened, her breath tightening, bile began to rise in her throat.

"The nova changed all that." The stranger continued. The dead world vanished from view, replaced by open space. The marble floor turned translucent and they watched as a massive ship, easily kilometers long, approached them. Slowly, the vessel passed below their platform, disappearing meter-by-meter into a sphere of distorted space. "Many escaped the stellar fire." He explained, and Tanya realized where she had seen a ship like that before. A Belter clan they'd worked for years ago had appropriated one of the Centauri refugee arks as their clanhold, but the ship vanishing into a wormhole below them was a far cry from the scarred and patched hulk they had docked at, this one had looked fresh out of the printers. "However, they found the galaxy a very different place from the one they left behind."

The scenery shifted again, they hung over what appeared to be the same ship, but now it had been through a great struggle. Large sections of the ark hung detached from the main hull, which was itself pitted with the craters left behind by heavy mass drivers and melted patches of laser fire. As Tanya watched a desiccated transhuman corpse drifted towards them. "Without Pallas' guiding light, they fell victim to the dregs of society. Pirates, slavers, and petty warlords newly emboldened by the splintering of the Federation."

Once again the view shifted to a giant metallic sphere, bristling with missile racks and laser arrays. "The valiant soldiers of the Federal Guard continued to try and enforce the peace," they zipped away to a ramshackle fleet of ships built from jagged scrap. Tanya watched the fleet close in on a wheel-shaped space station, emitting cutting lasers that sliced the station into neat sections that drones fed into a bay on the center ship that gaped like the maw of a massive beast. "But they are spread thin." A flight of missiles from the Federal ship slammed into the marauders, too late for the residents of the station.

Now they hung over a red star, surrounded by satellites whose tattered solar sails still shone brightly even as they collided with one another in an uncontrolled Kessler cascade. “Without the wormhole network this star once powered, the Federal Guard’s mobility is limited, their great ships are effectively confined to a few scattered fortress systems. But hope is not lost.”

“My name is Ronkall,” the stranger finally explained. “I was a system governor entrusted with overseeing a research program on the fringes of Federation space.” Suddenly they were next to a massive wheel station, judging by the Guard sphereships drifting around it the station was wider than most asteroids Tanya had seen. The strips of greenery visible on the interior of the wheel suggesting both a transparent canopy to the station and that much of the interior was given over to parkland, an extravagance unheard of in the modern Tiere system. She tracked a shimmer in space-time from one of the docking facilities on the exterior of the station to a cluster of eleven elongated orb-like craft, similar to the object her ship had gone out to meet so few months ago. The shimmer faded to reveal a twelfth vessel, identical to the others. “Paragravity,” he elaborated, “I believe you’ve already seen what it’s capable of.”

The dozen ships shimmered and began to move, weaving an elaborate pattern in space, without even a hint of thruster gas. Then ten of the ships stopped shimmering and began to orbit one of the still active ships, slowly passing to the second active ship in time. Tanya gasped, this was how the *Dustbin* had been captured, artificial gravity!

“You might be wondering what one of these ships is doing in your system,” the vulpine continued. “Wouldn’t it be more advantageous to keep this groundbreaking technology, and many others my people have developed, to ourselves? No, I say.” All twelve ships shimmered then, and moments later zipped off in all different directions. “It is better that these tools for rebuilding galactic civilization be put to use, by the right people.”

That brought Tanya pause, what could he mean? He couldn’t possibly mean...

“Yes, Tanya Loter of clan Procyon.” Ronkall addressed her directly. “You are one of those people. You know how terrible things have become, you fought against us when you thought we were a threat to your people. Those are qualities suitable for a champion of civilization.” He held out a hand covered in glistening fur to her. “Become one of my paladins, bring peace and prosperity to the stars, end the pointless suffering and strife that plagues Jord and its neighbors.”

Tanya tensed on hearing her former homeworld’s name, and being reminded of why her sub-clan had left. The city-state where they’d lived had gotten in a trade war over exports of some high-nutrient vegetable to the orbitals, which had become irrelevant when a meteor flattened their city’s subsidiary farmlands, along with a sizable district of the city itself. Officially it was ruled an accident, a miscalculation with nuclear charges, but everyone knew it had been aimed. It had seemed so pointless when she was thirteen, and it still seemed petty when she was thirty-three. She took his hand.

“Excellent.” With those words, the ships, the stars, even the void itself, faded into oblivion as the raccoon lost consciousness again.

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Tanya’s eyes crept open, everything was blurry, distorted, like she was looking through a curved lens. She inhaled to take a breath, but it felt like swallowing lukewarm soup. Puzzled, she lifted a hand to her face and found a surprising amount of resistance, it was like she was in a swimming pool.

She felt a current flowing down towards the floor beneath her, and then she felt air on the tips of her ears. She was immersed in liquid! Tanya reached out for something to grab hold of, and felt only smooth crystal, all around her, forming a tube that held the fluid in place around her. The fluid level drained down almost to her eyes, shouldn't she be drowning? She reached up to try and find some handhold to pull her out of the liquid but found a cap covering the top instead.

A large dark shape approached the tube from outside, Tanya scrambled more desperately, whether to catch the other's attention or to ward them off, she didn't know. But either way, the result was the same. The cap was wrenched off the top of her tube and a meaty hand reached in and grabbed her.

Tanya leaned over the edge of the tube and coughed up clear fluid. Another hand helped by slamming into her back and forcing the rest of the fluid out of her lungs. The pain of what felt like multiple cracked ribs cut short multiple successive gasps as she blinked her eyes clear and she was relieved to recognize the face in front of her.

"Lift?" She managed to squeak out.

Brom Boslin, known to his crewmates as "Lift", nodded his horned bovine head. More gingerly now, he lifted Tanya out of her transparent aluminum tube and set her down on the floor. "Sorry," he apologized, eyes widening. "I'm a lot stronger now, I don't know my own strength, literally."

"What?" Tanya lifted her head and tried to look down at herself. The first thing she noticed was that she'd lost a few kilos, while not skinny she now looked like an athlete with a healthy amount of body fat over the muscle. The second was that her chest had partially caved in where she'd been slammed into the rim of the tube. "Oh..."

She rested her head on the floor again. Brom started tromping around looking for something to help her while she slowly turned her head to scan the room. There were more tubes in there, she could spy a pair of clawed feet floating in one, had they all been immersed? She noticed a warm feeling in her chest and carefully reached a hand out to touch it, worried that meant internal bleeding. Instead she felt sharp pains that felt like slivers shifting beneath her skin.

Her muted cry of pain brought Lift back to her side, arms full of things that looked vaguely medical. He dropped them as he exclaimed "your chest's fixed!"

Tanya lifted her head again and confirmed that her ribs had returned to their normal shape. "How could..." even as she asked, the answer popped into her head from past stories. "Nanobots, they must have given them to us so we could heal faster."

Lift examined his left arm and flexed his muscles. "Not all they did. I'm a bit stronger now." He picked up a metallic splint from the clutter he'd dropped and bent it ninety degrees. "This is carbon nanotube-impregnated titanium, I shouldn't be able to do that."

He handed the splint to Tanya and she found it near-impossible to bend back into shape. A red light blinked on in her periphery vision, leading her towards a tube containing a familiar-looking avian. "Corus?" She asked rhetorically, then turned to look around. Besides her own tube and Corus' there were three more; one was torn open, as if something inside had exploded, the second was empty, the third held a male opossum, still as the grave. "Luke?!" She exclaimed, rushing over to the tube. While

running she slipped on a patch of fluid and fell forwards, sliding towards Didelph's tube and slamming her face into the side.

"I think he's okay." Lift stomped up next to her. "You were just as stiff as he is when I woke up and, well..." He pointed towards the wrecked tube. "Then the green light on your tube turned red and you started moving."

Tanya carefully stood back up, surprisingly she didn't feel any pain, nor were there any signs of bruising that she could find. "So, does that mean Corus is awake now too?" She caught a small twitch of movement in the raven's tube. The raccoon stepped more carefully towards Corus and looked inside her tube. At least one large black eye was wide open, but she was barely moving otherwise. Tanya's own eyes opened wide and she started searching the control panel. "Hold on, we're going to get you out!" She shouted in an attempt at reassurance.

One of the buttons on the tube's control panel read "manual release" and Tanya pressed it quickly. Only for a synthesized voice to call out "Warning, perfluorocarbon still draining."

Tanya blinked, the word sounded somewhat familiar. Something about a liquid breathing apparatus for high-g maneuvering? She breathed a sigh of relief. "I think that means the fluid in these tubes is perfectly safe." She saw that the liquid had drained to almost eye-level in Corus's tank. "Maybe we should wait for your tube to do whatever it's doing, instead of panicking."

When the fluid got down to the raven's neck Corus spoke up, voice slightly muffled by the aluminum. "Please remove your mammal glands from my sight."

The raccoon glanced down, in the excitement she'd failed to realize she and Lift were dressed in nothing but their fur. "Sorry," she mumbled to the raven. "There any clothes around here?" She called to her crewmate.

The bull fumbled around the shelves and slid open a closet, there he found a rack holding up some shapeless white robes. "Let's try these." He slid on the largest one and tossed another to Tanya.

Tanya donned the robe, she found that when she pressed the hem to the fabric on the other side it clung loosely, feeling somewhere between static cling and velcro. The breast bore a logo consisting of three circles; a large yellow one, a slightly smaller orange one to the right, and a much smaller red circle below them both.

After a couple more minutes Corus's tube was completely drained and the transparent aluminum cylinder retracted into the floor, leaving the raven standing there. Tanya handed her another robe that had sleeves wide enough to accommodate her feathered wings. "So you two were impatient and wrecked your cylinders?"

"Well the last time we were conscious we were being sucked into a mysterious exostellar ship with command of gravity." Tanya retorted. "I think you can forgive us for a little freakout."

"With impulse control like that, it's no wonder you were so far in debt when we found you." Corus scanned the room with her large avian eyes. "Where's Mr. Lupine?"

"I'm here," a door on the far side of the room from the cylinders slid open, revealing the wolf. He was dressed in a white uniform similar to the robes they were wearing, but formed into a single-breasted jumpsuit instead. "You can relax."

Corus turned towards him and snapped to attention. Tanya looked at him quizzically instead. "What's going on?" She asked.

"Didn't you pay attention during orientation?" The wolf chided her. "We've been recruited into something much bigger than ourselves. Given a chance to make a better universe for ourselves." He strode towards MechRat's tube and tapped it. "I was planning to wait until you were all done but it seems Mr. Didelph will be taking a while in there." He sighed, "I hate repeating myself."

"You woke up before us," Tanya stated. "Why?"

"It would seem," Lupine enunciated slowly. "That the ship recognized my leadership ability and appointed me commander of this program."

Tanya perked an eyebrow, Brom inhaled in surprise. Corus asked what was all on their minds. "Forgive me, Mr. Lupine, but you said the ship appointed you?"

"Yes, Ms. Corus." Lupine confirmed. "It would appear that the *Resolution* struck some of our system's all-too-plentiful space debris and took severe damage. It was able to repair itself to some degree but the crew were a total loss. In their absence it took us in, applied medical torpor, and evaluated us in a virtual reality so it could assign us the appropriate roles." He pointed to his secretary, "intelligence," then to Brom, "heavy marine," to Tanya, "pilot," he tapped MechRat's tube again and sighed, "engineering," then he pointed to himself, "and command. Once it assigned those roles it installed the latest Federal Guard augmentations to help us perform those roles."

Tanya rubbed the spot where her ribcage had imploded. "That would explain a couple things. I know that Lift got some strength mods and I've got nanobots, what else did it implant in us?"

"We all have regenerative nanotechnology, that used to be ubiquitous in the old Federation you know." *As well as brain-computer interfaces far more advanced than the primitive thing in Mr. Didelph's head.*

"Wait," Tanya stared at the wolf's mouth. "Your lips didn't move when you said that last sentence, and I heard it as if you were millimeters away from my ears."

*Smart one,* Lupine said silently. *I'm going to bring up your heads-up displays now.*

Tanya blinked in surprise when ghostly green letters and numerals appeared on the edges of her vision. She tried to focus on "aug's" and found the word expand in her view then, open a sub-menu that listed a series of strange devices: BCI, super-myoglobin, absorptive collagens, reflex myelination, vehicular control rig, NiTan reinforcement, leukosynths...

Before she could go further into any of the implants she noticed a pulsing alert to the side of her HUD. *Please select a username, this name will be used on all networks connected to your implant so be wary about including real names in your username.* She considered for a moment, then remembered the edge of the virtual planet she had seen, and wrote in *Horizon*.