

Jerald shivered as he climbed into the cabin of his rig. He regretted, once again, that he'd chosen lynx biomods instead of snow leopard with its heavier fur when the Company had offered them upon his emigrating to Surtur. He'd had the impression that hydrocarbon mining would somehow be warmer, but no, the executives weren't wasting any of the valuable gases on heating up their workers, while they stayed in their well-insulated bunker offices. He let out a misty sigh and slammed the door behind him before slotting the starter chip into the dashboard.

The mining rig began the laborious process of starting up, giving Jerald time to wonder who had driven this rig before. The colossal walkers largely ran themselves, but he hadn't used this particular rig before, to his trained eye it was subtly different from the others. Usually the Company put a driver on a single rig until either the driver or the rig was taken out of service, however that might happen. His normal rig had gone in for maintenance the day before, and this one had been available. He wondered to himself if its last driver was still with the Company, or if they'd found some way out of the Company's leonine contracts?

Almost automatically he reached for the throttle and set the rig in motion. Six legs lifted and set themselves back down in alternating pairs as Jerald steered slowly out of the refinery yard. The radio crackled. "Rig 23 be advised, there's been reports of raider activity in your sector recently."

Jerald paused before transmitting his acknowledgment. Was that what had happened to the rig's prior driver? He quickly checked the rig's rudimentary weapons systems as he responded. "Warning received, any advice?"

"Shut off your radio as soon as you're clear of the refinery. They can hack you while it's on." The dispatcher replied. "And don't be shy about shooting back."

The lynx driver grimaced. "Roger that."

It took ten minutes just to leave the yard. Jerald kept the radio on for half an hour as he trudged away from base, shivering in his parka. By the time he remembered to switch it off the drive system's waste heat had finally started to bleed into the cabin. He glanced at the autopilot's map, four hours to the drill site. He strongly considered taking a nap as the endless white fields stretched before him, hypnotically tempting him to close his eyes for just a moment...

Jerald blinked awake as the rig jolted to a stop and the autopilot announced "you have arrived". He looked out the window towards a field of ice that looked no different from the frozen plains behind him. However the sonographic readouts showed him the presence of a large lake of liquid underneath, almost certainly the blend of methane and ethane that the Company paid him to harvest. He swiveled in his chair for the "interesting" part of his job and started up the drill controls. Almost as soon as the screens started up he was inundated with red warnings about ice coating the drill arm, with a groan of predictable annoyance, he sealed his parka as best the cheap garment could manage against the biting wind and swung the door open.

Quickly slamming the door shut behind him dislodged a few ice chunks from the window set in the door. Jerald turned towards the gantry that led to the drill arm and glanced down towards the snow covered metal floor. Cautiously he swept away a patch of snow with a booted foot to confirm that it was, indeed, hiding a trail of treacherous ice. The lynx lifted his wide boot to knee height above the gantry, and brought it down with as much force as he could muster, bringing a satisfying crack as the blunt spikes drove into the ice.

Even with cleats stomping across the frozen gantry was painfully slow, Jerald was starting to feel as frozen as the steel by the time he reached the drill arm, folded up against the rig's massive gas tank. The lynx looked at the icicles hanging from the arm's joints, glanced down at the small plastic scraper the Company had issued him, and groaned. He cursed the Company mechanics who had let this rig lie idle so long without making any effort to curb the ice buildup as he whacked repeatedly at the nearest icicle.

Jerald was working on a particularly pernicious chunk of decimeter-thick ice when he happened to glance up and spot at least half a dozen specks of light in the sky. He was fairly certain there weren't any birds this close to Surtur's poles so he angrily punched the ice chunk, causing a small flake of it to crack off, and turned to run back to the cabin. He slipped on his fourth step, just barely catching the railing in time to avoid slamming face-first into the gantry, and continued shuffling more carefully across the gantry. By the time the cabin was nearly in arm's reach he could see the rig's AA gun swiveling to track the raider drones but not firing without authorization from a living operator. Was that the wind? Or was it the engines of the drones coming in?

Frantically the lynx yanked open the door and removed his glove without bothering to close the door again, he stabbed his frigid fingers at the touchscreen and pushed every "fire" button he could see. His ears rang with the explosion of the gun firing automatically, unmuffled by the cabin walls. Disoriented by the sound he reached for the door handle just as his own gun's blasts were joined by the staccato fire of machine guns and bullets pinging off of the rig's hull. Now rightfully scared for his life, Jerald struck out with his arm like a snake and yanked the door back before curling into a ball.

After what seemed like an eternity the machine gun fire stopped and Jerald almost dared to look up. But the AA gun's blasts were soon joined by a new sound, an annoyingly high-pitched alarm screaming "possible missile detected!" Startled to action, Jerald leapt up to the screen and stared intently at what it showed him. An unusually large drone was veering off from the rig as a small elongated object fell towards him, the targeting computer highlighting the descending object with a "critical priority" tag as it ignored the other drones and found a firing solution for the thing it had decided was a missile. But as the lynx watched the object unfolded a set of membranous wings and swerved to avoid the incoming shots.

Jerald followed the strange winged thing's descent, at first terrified, but soon more intrigued. He could see no sign of a drive plume trailing behind it, and it was flexing unlike any missile or drone he had ever seen, making him wonder who had made it and from what? It almost reminded him more of something he'd seen in extreme sports instead of a mechanical device, like a...

The lynx remembered where he'd seen that kind of thing before. Frantically he looked around the screen for an icon he'd never seen before, but if it existed now would be the time. Cursing himself he poked a button he hadn't intentionally clicked since training. "Voice controls activated." The computer announced.

"Stop attacking!" He shouted.

"Command not recognized." The computer replied.

"Cancel targeting solution!" He tried again.

“Unable to comply.” The computer said, firing off another shot that the flier barely dodged.

“Why not?!” Jerald asked skeptically.

“Sorry, I didn’t get that. Could you be more specific?” Jerald was getting reminded rapidly why nobody ever used voice controls.

He took a deep breath and tried to speak more carefully. “Why can you not cancel targeting solution?”

“Anti-missile point defense supercedes organic commands.” The computer explained.

“That’s not a missile!” The lynx shouted. “That’s a flight suit! It’s a person!”

The AA gun’s next shot caught the flier square in the center of mass, shredding their wing membranes and sending out a reddish cloud of mist as they tumbled to the ground, far away from the rig.

“Command not recognized.”

Jerald stood there in shock, staring where the figure had fallen while the gun finished shooting down the remaining drones. Only snapping out of his reverie when he heard the computer state “all targets destroyed.”

The lynx sighed, switching the voice interface back off and wondering what he was going to do? It wasn’t likely the flier had survived that blast. The AA gun fired explosive canisters that burst apart into shrapnel mid-air, it could shred flesh as easily as it shredded aircraft wings, if not more so. He might be able to recover the body and turn it over to any family they might have, but the Company might not like having to pay restitution to their clan if they felt vengeful. On the other hand the Company might want to identify a raider who had assaulted their property.

A glance at the clock settled the issue temporarily. He’d lost a lot of time fighting off the raiders and clearing off ice, if he wanted to get the job done before midnight he had to get back to work fast. With a sigh he turned back to the drill controls and triggered them again. With a great creak and groan the drill arm unfolded and reached out over the great patch of ice. The sonogram showed him a shallow pool of ethane within reach of the drill arm, barely enough to fill his tank. However, further from the “shore” there was a far deeper pool, enough to fill a dozen rigs. Company safety regs did not recommend venturing that far onto a gas field while there was still “lower-hanging fruit” so to speak, but the greater pressure would fill him up more quickly. Considering the Company’s penalties for short loads it was an easy decision to make.

Jerald swiveled back to the rig’s mobility controls and pushed the great walker forward, just a dozen massive paces or so, but a significant distance regardless. He stopped over a rocky outcropping suspended in the ice, then quickly he swiveled back and slowly, carefully, aimed the drill head at the precise angle to penetrate the well without shattering its ice cap. This was the tricky part, the whole reason why the Surt Company needed good drillers, one wrong move and the rig would sink into the ice in a cloud of flammable hydrocarbons. He took his time placing the drill head, even with the greater pressure it would take hours to fill the tank, no matter how many minutes he spent getting the angle just right. Finally, he felt confident enough to start the drill.

The rig shook with the vibrations from the drill’s rotation, grinding into meters-thick ice. For several teeth-grinding minutes Jerald watched the drill descend, waiting for any signs of cracking that could

spell doom. But it sank into the frigid hydrocarbon liquid under the water ice and began siphoning it out, without incident.

Jerald breathed a sigh of relief and watched the tank fill up. His eye wandered back over to where the flier had crashed, and still lay. With one more glance at the tank fill meter he figured that it would keep running by itself without any need for his input and prepared himself to go outside again.

His cleats hit the ice with a soft “crunch” sound as he dropped from the rig’s boarding ladder. The cat carefully strode over the ice, one step at a time, in the direction of the downed flier. He paused for a second when his eyes spied a crack running beneath the rig’s feet, but he concluded that it must have been there a while if it hadn’t collapsed already and continued on.

He found the blood splatters staining the ice five meters from the body, growing from small red flecks to frozen pools as he came closer. Jerald felt the bile rise in his throat but forced it back down out of fear of having to deal with frozen vomit on his face for the rest of the day. The flier lay face-down in the snow, wingsuit flaps blowing in the wind. He could not tell sex or species from this angle, but he noticed a large socked tail laying on the ground next to them.

Jerald knelt down next to the body, reluctant to lift it now that he was so close. He didn’t know if he could stand to carry them back to the rig and transport them back to base as originally planned. After a minute of consideration he decided that at minimum he had to look the person he’d killed, unintentionally, in the face and reached down to flip them over.

He was surprised by how warm they still felt, and wet. The lynx quickly threw the body onto their back and leapt back in disgust. The body’s chest was a red mess, too thoroughly shredded to make out any features on the right side, though on the left her white jumpsuit bulged out in what looked like a female breast. Their, her, helmet had been shattered on the right side, showing mangled red flesh and skull. Her legs were twisted at unnatural angles that no parahuman bones could accommodate. This time he couldn’t hold it back, Jerald turned away and retched what remained of his breakfast onto the steaming snow.

Jerald shook his head wildly, trying to shake the drops of vomit from his whiskers before they froze. As he was trying to make up his mind on whether to turn back and try to remove her helmet, he heard a cracking sound behind him. Before he could spin around he felt a burning hand grab him by the ankle and drag him to the ground.

The lynx lifted himself off the ground and looked back to see the corpse holding him fast while trying to drag herself closer with her free arm. Her broken legs flailed wildly in the air behind her, as if she was trying to shake them back into place. Jerald screamed as he remembered a dozen holofilms of the Collapse and its horrors.

“Let go! Let go!” He shouted, kicking at the living corpse’s head, but only deflecting off her helmet and receiving a gurgling cry in response. She flipped back over onto her front and dragged herself up his supine frame, digging clawed fingers into his heavy clothes.

Jerald froze as he stared into the eyeless fury of the woman he’d shot out of the sky, bloody carnivore teeth glistening under the shattered visor of her helmet. He hadn’t expected this to be how he died, but who would these days? He made a futile last attempt to fend off her undying strength with his arms before accepting his inevitable demise...

And then a loud series of cracks drew his gaze back towards his rig. A vapor cloud rose around the gigantic walker as it seemed to lean into the ice. Then he saw the rig's hind feet rise off the ground, it was definitely sinking now!

The downed flier grunted and reached back for her leg, with a sound more like bending metal than anything bones should make she forced it back into shape. Then she leapt awkwardly to her feet, turned away from the sinking rig, and ran at impressive speed for someone with recently broken legs.

Jerald laid there, stunned, for a moment just watching his job sink into the ice. Before he knew it all there was left was a cloud of evaporating ethane and cracks heading straight for him. Moment passed he stumbled to his feet and started running as well.

He ran, faster than he had ever run in his entire life. Cracking sounds behind him motivating him like no gym teacher had managed. He felt himself forced to pant more and more as he ran, but he dared not stop to take a breath. His vision swam from oxygen deprivation and lactic acid, but he kept running. To stop meant death. But he could not run forever and finally he collapsed to the ground, unable to run any more, and blacked out.

Jerald woke an indeterminate time later, the sun had already slipped beyond the horizon but the gas giant Surt glowed like a lantern overhead, far brighter than the moon orbiting his homeworld of Jord. A crunching sound brought his head turning to the side, and what he saw left him both relieved and perplexed.

A woman with a lightly furred head, a pointed snout, round ears, and dark circles around both eyes was eating some kind of ration bar. She swallowed her mouthful and spoke. "Oh good, you're awake." She stood up and approached him. "I was wondering if I'd have to carry you all the way back home."

Jerald started to lift an arm, only to see that he was wrapped in a heavy sleeping bag. Confused and wondering what was going on he looked around frantically. Behind him he spotted the side of a mountain, he remembered seeing a mountain range on the map to the well site, but that had been kilometers back hadn't it? The raccoon took another bite of her ration bar, prompting the lynx to ask "I don't suppose you have any more of those, do you?"

"Yes," she said dryly. "But given how much biomass I have to replenish after you shot me down, I think I'm entitled to the rest of them."

The lynx's eyes widened as he recognized the white jumpsuit the raccoon was wearing, and spotted a broken helmet lying on the ground nearby. He squirmed away from her as best as he was able, wrapped up like a burrito in the sleeping bag. "Please," he begged. "Don't eat me."

The raccoon snorted. "You're not my type."

"But," Jerald blathered. "You're a ghul!"

Before he could blink the raccoon had crossed the campsite, lifted the lynx off the ground, and thrust her masked face into his. He could smell the remnants of dried blood as he stared into her brown eye. Now that he was close he noticed that her right eyelid was closed, and oddly flat. "Listen very carefully Company man." She said. "Ghuls have malfunctioning leukosynths that autocannibalize their own

flesh, driving them to seek out the nearest convenient source of replacement biomass.” She opened her eyelid, revealing a hollow socket with what looked like a pus-filled blister glistening on the back. “As you can see, mine are working perfectly.” Jerald’s tufted ears picked up a growl coming from the raccoon’s midsection, and she dropped him with what seemed like embarrassment.

Jerald watched her bend over a pack of some kind and pull out more ration bars. “Who are you?” He couldn’t help from asking. “And why did you save me?”

The raccoon gulped down a bar before turning back to answer. “You can call me Horizon,” she said. “And it’s what I came out here to do.” She snapped the other bar in half, “as ungrateful as you were.”

“I didn’t know you were a person!” He tried to apologize. “The computer thought you were a missile, and wouldn’t let me shut off the target lock.”

“That figures.” Horizon squatted down next to Jerald and held out half the bar. “Typical Company disregard for parahuman life.”

“I don’t think they expected somebody to drop on top of one of their rigs in a wingsuit.” Jerald suggested as he wriggled his arm free of the sleeping bag.

“I kind of doubt that.” The raccoon crunched up the other half of her ration bar. “So, what did they tell you we were? Pirates?”

Jerald noted the Belter twang she put on that last word, he paused as he tried to recollect how she’d pronounced everything else. He could have sworn she was Jordian like himself. “Raiders,” he replied.

“What? Like this is the wastes?” Horizon asked in response. “No offense, but that was a lot of hardware we threw at you for what, 90 kilos of food?”

“And about a hundred kiloliters of ethane.” He added.

Horizon sighed. “Now why would we want to steal that?”

“It powers everything on this moon.” Jerald claimed. “Heat, lights, engines...”

“And a microliter of the tritium the Company is siphoning out of big daddy Surt up there could power the entire Friendly Society for a year.” The raccoon pointed a thumb at the gas giant hanging overhead. “Fusion isn’t exactly lost technology you know.”

Jerald blinked in surprise at the mention of the one humanitarian organization the Company grudgingly allowed on Surtur. “You’re with the Friendlies?”

“For the past few months at least.” Horizon confirmed.

“And you were saving me?” He asked. “You knew the ice was going to cave in?”

Instead of answering directly she asked him a question. “What did you think that metallic mass you parked on top of was?”

Jerald was confused for a moment, he had parked the rig next to a boulder suspended in the ice, a boulder the size of... “That was a rig?”

Horizon nodded. “They had two rigs out here a week ago. When one went under the other one’s driver bailed out and ran. Fortunately one of our drones spotted him and we picked him up before the hypothermia left him totally irrecoverable.” She sighed. “Such a waste for something that they don’t even need.”

The lynx looked up at the planet, he could almost swear that he saw a Company skimmer streaking across the clouds. “But, they need to save the tritium for spaceships. You can’t burn anything on a ship. It would deplete the life support.”

“Don’t I know that.” Horizon sniffed. “But the truth is, the Company could easily power every ship and station in the Tiere system, plus every village on Surtur, Jord, and Logi. But they prefer to keep their customers hungry.” She turned her head to look towards something Jerald couldn’t see. “We should get going.”

“Why? What’s happening?” Jerald asked. He fumbled for the clasps to the sleeping bag before finding and undoing them, allowing the cat to spill out into the snow.

“Our pickup is incoming.” The raccoon explained. “Unfortunately a Company patrol is moving to intercept them. We’ll have to move to catch up to them first.”

The lynx scrambled to his wide feet. “Why can’t the Company help us?” He asked.

“Aside from their casual disregard for life?” Horizon replied. “Their patrols are pure attack craft, no cargo or passenger space. Friendly drones have modular pods for disaster relief. You’d be frozen solid by the time the Company got a transport out to you.”

Jerald paused to consider. He didn’t know if he believed this strange parahuman, but everything she said sounded disturbingly plausible. Though it didn’t rule out the possibility that she was somehow toying with him before eating him... “You coming or not?” She called out, interrupting his train of thought as she strode away, and he followed almost automatically.

The lynx found himself panting after mere minutes of trying to keep pace with the posthuman raccoon. Her stamina seemed indefinite as she jogged ahead of him, even with her smaller feet and a jumpsuit that looked way too thin to keep her warm in this climate. “How,” he gasped. “augmented, are you?”

“I don’t know.” She replied without even breaking stride. “My crew found an old Federal Guard ship and its drones augged us up to the gills without even asking. Some kind of super soldier program.”

“That would explain a lot.” Jerald panted, slowing his own progress to a crawl. “How much further?”

Horizon looked up. “Not far.” She stopped, staring into the sky. “Shit, the Company’s here too!” She broke into a dead run.

As Jerald struggled to keep up he saw that a bunch of the stars were moving rather fast for celestial bodies, and not just moving, but bobbing and weaving around one another. As he watched one of the

stars burst and fell in smoking fragments to the ice below. And Horizon was running straight towards the aerial battle.

“Wait!” He called out, almost tripping on an outcropping of ice. He watched the white-clad figure weave around plumes of rising steam, leaping and somersaulting around bullets hitting the ground. Jerald stopped for a moment just to watch the spectacle of a living wonder of a lost age taunting modern military hardware with her defiant existence. Then a jet of vaporized snow obscured his view of her for but a moment, and when it cleared Horizon laid on the ground, still as the grave.

The lynx froze, uncertain what to do now. He looked around for a possible escape route, but they were on an open field of stark white ice, nowhere to hide. He looked up at the continuing aerial battle, and he saw the mobile stars light up in explosion after explosion. In moments there was only one drone left, and it was flying right for him!

Jerald turned and ran back the way he came, not daring to look back, only to see the drone streak ahead of him. He watched it swing around and descend towards him, and without thinking he turned around again. The lynx was just realizing how stupid it might be to run towards the battlefield when his snowshoe-like paws caught on something sticking out of the ground and sent him stumbling onto his face.

Shaking the snow from his eyes he turned his head towards the thing he had tripped upon. He viewed the familiar sight of Horizon’s body, sprawled on her back on the snow. Jerald looked up and saw the drone circling around him, descending further with every pass. Knowing now that he couldn’t outrun it he poked cautiously at the raccoon’s face. “Horizon?” He asked hopefully. “If you’re still alive, please wake up, I need you.”

She did not respond. The sound of turbines behind him drew Jerald’s attention to stare at a large tilt-rotor drone hovering not three meters away. As he watched a pair of panels began to unfold from the drone’s belly and he heard a voice emanate from its loudspeakers. “You know, you should zig-zag when pursued, force the pursuer to constantly adjust their aim.”

Even through the speakers he thought the voice sounded familiar. “Horizon?” He asked.

The drone responded as the panels it dropped assembled themselves into a box-like shape. “Yeah, you ever use neural induction VR?”

“Do I look like I could afford that?” Jerald responded.

“Fair enough.” The drone drifted lazily towards him. “One of my implants lets me cut out the sensory perceptions of my organic body and remotely control vehicles as if they were my own body. Good thing that last shot came close enough I could fake a hit.”

Jerald stared back at Horizon’s body, now that he wasn’t worried about getting shot he could see that there wasn’t a scratch on her. “So, you’re okay?”

“Yes,” she said through the drone. “Now if you don’t mind, could you load my body into the cargo hold?” The box structure’s door hung open invitingly.

The lynx knelt next to the raccoon and inched his arms under her back and legs, she was surprisingly heavy for her size, which he supposed must be some of her implants. With a grunt he swung her into the drone's cargo hold and ungracefully pushed the end of her tail in. He stood there waiting for a moment before Horizon added "you coming?"

Jerald took another look around, just to make sure there was no one else coming. Once he accepted that it wasn't a hard decision. He still wasn't sure about the posthuman's claims but it seemed like he'd need to go with her for now if he wanted to ponder it later. He climbed into the drone, awkwardly shoving Horizon's comatose body further back to make room.

A dim light came on as the cargo bay door closed. "Raccoon air now departing." Horizon said sarcastically. "Try not to get too handsy in there. My girlfriend can be the jealous type."

Jerald tried to curl himself into a small ball on the opposite end of the bay from the raccoon.