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Proof of Concept

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There are times I wish I had a brain—just one organ surrounded by layers of bone or flesh that kept everything straight. You put your chit in one pocket and then you *watch that pocket*, right? It's the whole reason helmets exist.

Instead, my mind is spread out more-or-less evenly *throughout* my body. Little nodules of thinking tissue, linked together by a million strands—a net of nerves that grows with me. I mean, yeah, this has its advantages—I don't have to worry about getting shot in the head and dying instantly. Instead what happens is somebody shoots a hole in me and I lose a chunk of my memory. Which is how I wound up squeezed into this air vent, leaking from a gunshot wound, and having almost no idea how I got there or why.

I mean, I knew I'd been shot. I even knew what I'd been shot *with*—a buzzgun. They're a

Thraad invention; a kind of weaponized insect hive that shoots genetically engineered bugs armed with a variety of nasty toxins. I'd been hit by at least six of the vicious little things, each tearing an eyeball-sized hole in me and dissolving a lot of the tissue underneath with whatever they had stored in them. The bugs were dead now—I was slowly digesting their hard little bodies in vacuoles inside my blob-like body—but the damage was done. I was oozing the watery fluid that made up most of my mass through the wounds, try as I might to squeeze them shut with my muscular outer membranes. I'm not a doctor—I had a strange feeling a doctor for my species didn't even *exist*—so I had no idea how long this would take to heal.

I ran back my memory as far as it would go, trying to find the gap. I remembered being hurt—the pain was really intense, like I was on fire from the inside out—and I remember having to abandon a bipedal form I had adopted. I do that sometimes, to blend in—constrict my outer membranes to simulate the forms of others, usually bipeds. It was physically very taxing—I don't have a good frame of reference to what it would feel like to a biped, but I'm guessing it would be like having to contract every muscle in their body and hold it *just so* for long periods of time. I vaguely remembered only being able to do this for short periods—seconds, maybe a minute—but I'd built my endurance a lot by now. I'd practiced and practiced. My outer membranes, which used to be wet and thin, were now thick and muscular. If it weren't for that punishing physical training, I probably would have leaked to death by now—those same membranes were the things holding my fluids inside.

I probably had to abandon the biped form when I was shot because I couldn't handle the injury and the stress of the upright form at the same time. Then I remember fleeing—into a gutter or something, which led to a vent, which led to a series of other vents, each smaller than the last. I remembered that I knew where I was going at the time. The memories had burned away somewhere during the journey. Now I only knew that I was where I had intended to go. I don't know why I intended to come here or even where “here” was.

Before being shot were a lot of gaps. Me among a lot of other aliens—a tough crowd by the looks of them. Oh, right—convicts. I was among prisoners who were . . . doing something. I don't exactly remember. The details were a bit fuzzy—as I healed, hopefully more of the memory pathways would reconnect, and I could make sense of it all. There was an image of a Thraad—squat, snail-like and massive—showing me a table full of esoteric weapons. A lot of poison needles and sliver-blades, a few small pistols, some tiny, lightweight grenades. “Go ahead,” the Thraad said, gesturing with its chin-tentacles, its eyestalks trained on me. “Take your pick.”

Well, whatever I picked, I didn't have it anymore. For all I knew, that was a full cycle ago.

Voices echoed up the vent shaft. *Shit*.

“ . . . gotta be somewhere around here.” A voice said in Dryth Basic. Which is a language, I guess. A language I speak. It occurred to me that, as of a few seconds ago, I didn't actually know that last part. Maybe my memory was coming back. Who knows? Sure wasn't going to hang around to find out. If there was one thing I knew—I *know*—it's that holding still is a great way to hide, but not a great way to solve your problems.

Another voice echoed up from beneath me. “Well it ain't here, is it? And if we don't find it, we're slagged, understand? Completely *slagged*!”

I zeroed in on where the noise was coming from—a grating; I oozed closer to it and extended one little tendril through to let me take a look around and carefully modulated its color to perfectly match that of the steel around me.

The room was some kind of storage area—racks for securing stuff lined the walls, sealed compartments made up the floor. Only two walls were relatively clear: the one with the door and the one with the ventilation duct I was currently clogging. In this room were two bipeds armed with compact plasma throwers. I didn't know the design off-hand, but they looked like weapons of Lhasa manufacture, which meant they were lightweight, powerful, and completely unreliable in adverse conditions. And I also had no idea how I knew *that*, either.

The two bipeds were a Dryth and a Lhasa. They were both wearing basic pressure-foam coveralls with a Thraad glyph etched into the shoulder. I couldn't read it with only a tendril sticking

out of the grate—I'd need to expose more of my membranes to resolve that much detail. In any case, wherever I was and whatever I was doing seemed to involve at least three distinct alien species. Were these the convicts? Hard to say.

The Dryth was relatively short and broad with the compact musculature and smooth, thick hide common to her species. Also, there was a thick bulge at the base of her neck, just above the shoulders. From my mysterious repository of knowledge, I knew that this was a fatty sac that could store lots of water—handy for surviving on their almost waterless homeworld—but that most Dryth had it surgically removed at birth, as it was a sign of affluence to not have one. That made this female a poor, probably unhoused Dryth, and a poor, unhoused Dryth with a plasma thrower was bad news.

The Lhasa was a male—a “bull”—who was taller than his Dryth companion, but with long, slender limbs and the sleek frame famous to *his* species. He had a long neck, a flowing mane, and a pair of horns that probably drove the mares wild. He had trimmed his copious rust-brown body hair into elaborate patterns that probably did stupid nonsense like brag of his sexual prowess and list off the other bulls he'd bested in single combat. While the Dryth was probably stronger than him, he was probably faster and had better reach and was also more aggressive. If there was anything worse than an unhoused Dryth with a plasma thrower, it was a Lhasa bull without a mare to keep him in line.

And these two were already pissed at each other.

The Dryth was opening compartments in the floor, one after another, and yanking out the storage containers held inside. She kicked at the latches until they popped open and proved themselves to be full of stuff like uniforms or Lhasa ration bars or battery packs; this made her roar with frustration, and then she'd start the process all over again. The room was rapidly getting filled with random piles of junk.

The Lhasa, meanwhile, kept his weapon trained out the door to the room, which was propped open by a steel bar. He was acting like he was expecting someone to poke their head into the corridor beyond, and when that happened he was going to open up with his plasma thrower and reduce that someone to a puddle of bubbling goo. Given how jumpy he was, he didn't seem that confident it would stop whatever it was he thought was coming. “Did you *find* it yet?”

“I'm looking, I'm *looking!*” The Dryth replied and kicked open another container. This one was full of socks.

Okay, so I didn't know if the reason I'd been shot and the fact that these people were clearly worried about *being* shot were related, but for the time being I was going to assume that. Since I was still alive and not an ashen stain on some deckplate somewhere, these weren't the people who shot me, which meant that it was possible that they and I had a mutual enemy to overcome. The fact that we were all headed here—to this storage bay—was even more evidence of that. I wasn't about to ask them about it, though—that Lhasa was too twitchy with that thrower. But I did need more information.

While they kept conducting their search, I began to ooze through the grate and stick to the ceiling. My injuries I kept inside the vent for the time being—squeezing *them* through that little opening would hurt an incredible amount, and there was just about no way I could prevent some of my internal juices from squirting out, and the last thing I needed was for these two idiots to look up just then.

Once there was more of me in the room, so-to-speak, I could make out the patches on their shoulders better. I read the glyph, remembering now that I also could read Thraad glyphs. It said “Consortium for the Furtherance of Genetic Knowledge.” I knew sort of who they were, too—in a general sense, Thraad Consortiums were the only real organizing entities in Thraad society, each of which was dedicated to a specific scientific, political, or economic goal of some kind; this consortium had the nickname “the Gene-Seekers.” As far as I knew, I had nothing to do with them, though the fact that I was shot by a Thraad weapon and could remember being offered a weapon by some Thraad meant I was probably wrong.

I produced one of the dead buzzgun insect projectiles and spat it through the door and down

the hall when the Lhasa wasn't keeping his eyes where they should be. It made a little "tick tick tick" sound as it bounced off the hard steel plating on the walls and floor.

Their reaction wasn't exactly what I wanted. The Lhasa bull turned around and fired his thrower *from the hip*, like a psychopath, and a sun-bright little ball of super-heated gas shot down the corridor, hit something, and started a plasma fire immediately. Both the Dryth and the Lhasa looked shocked at this. I don't know what they expected would happen, honestly—that's how plasma-throwers *work*, right?

Anyway, this created the diversion I needed to squeeze the rest of me out of the vent, squirting juices everywhere, and drop down to the pile of junk behind them. I formed my outer membrane to exactly mimic piles of socks and extra boots and battery packs and stuff, which only took me about a second. It hurt like you wouldn't believe—good thing my instinctual response to pain isn't to make noise.

With the plasma fire starting to suck oxygen from the room (and probably whatever safety systems to prevent that about to kick in) the two aliens turned back to the unopened compartments. They were frantic. "Hurry!" said the Dryth. "Help me look!"

I, also, needed an escape plan before this whole section of ship was locked down and vented into space to kill the fire. I didn't have a lot to work with, so I made a play: I pitched my voice to sound just about exactly like the Lhasa's and said, "What's it even look like?" to the Dryth.

The Dryth snarled at her partner. "It's a metallic cylinder, you idiot—biohazard markings, handle at one end. Were you even paying attention?"

Lucky for me, the Lhasa was not paying particularly good attention just then, either. "What? What are you talking about?"

Okay—cylinder, metallic, biohazard marking, a handle at one end. I figured I could handle that. While the idiots rummaged around in more storage units, I sucked myself into a cylindrical shape and gave myself a nice metallic sheen and produced the Thraad glyph for biohazardous waste on one side. The handle was the easiest part—a loop of matte black, textured to be ideal for a Thraad chin-tentacle. I let myself fall over and roll, almost hitting the Lhasa.

"Hey!" he said, looking up. "There it is!"

The Dryth stopped rummaging through a box of spare plastic piping. "What? Where did you find that?"

"Who cares? Let's get outta here!"

To punctuate his point, an alarm klaxon sounded and a croaking voice in the Thraad tongue began to repeat some kind of warning. I could read Thraad, but not speak it, apparently, but you didn't really need to know the lingo to know what was about to go down.

The Dryth knew, too. "Move it!"

The Lhasa bull grabbed me by my "handle" and lifted me with both hands as he started to run. "Shit! This thing is *heavy*!"

"Just don't drop it!" The Dryth yelled over her shoulder. She was taking point, plasma thrower pointed straight ahead, as though firing those things indoors hadn't caused enough trouble already.

The corridor outside was choked with an acrid, metallic stench and was maybe thirty degrees hotter than in the storage room. Since I was maintaining a glossy sheen, I couldn't see that well through most of my body, but the part of me that was a handle got a glimpse of a hexagonal corridor that was partly melting, partly on fire, and filling with black smoke. The two seemed to know where they were going, though, since they made a quick right turn and began to sprint. The Lhasa, unable to control my weight with one hand, picked me up and hugged me like a pup so he could sprint towards a quickly closing blast door. This made me squirt a little fluid from my wounds, which hit him in the leg. I felt him react—tense right up—but he was too busy running to investigate.

The Dryth made it to the door first and stood in the closing gap. "Throw me the bioweapon!"

I knew how this was going to go before the Lhasa did, and it didn't occur to him until it was too late and I'd already been tossed underhand. The Dryth caught me with one hand and with her other hand pointed her plasma thrower at the Lhasa and pulled the trigger. There was a

sharp flash, a whoosh of heat, and a choked scream. Then, no Lhassa.

The Dyth squeezed through the closing blast door, chuckling to herself. "Idiot."

I began to reevaluate this person as a potential ally. I mean, what the shit, right?

The corridor we were in now had a much better view than where we had been before. It was long and broad—long enough that I could see how it curved gently upward. This view was supplemented by long windows on either side that revealed the full vista of space. Or, at least, I guessed as much—I couldn't really afford to drop the glossy sheen on my disguise to get a really good look. What I could see was that we were definitely on a ship—a big one. My memory at present didn't have a lot on ships—"they fly through space" was about the extent of it. It looked to be a couple kilometers long—a huge central cylinder that hovered above us from which branched a variety of ring-shaped structures, in one of which we were probably standing right now.

I was pretty heavy, so the Dryth set me down for a second after the blast doors closed and tinkered around with some wafer-thin gizmo grafted to the back of her hand—some sort of interface. "Skennite," she said, "where is the Elder Council now?"

Skennite . . . skennite . . . I knew that term. For the thousandth time I cursed the burning wounds in me that had blown out whatever pieces of my memory I needed just then. I clenched myself together a bit, taking care not to make my cylindrical appearance ripple too much, and I thought as hard as I could.

A synthesized voice came through the wrist-link. "*The Elder Council is on the command deck, Hystra.*"

"How many of the others are still alive?"

"*I cannot accurately answer that question as asked, Hystra.*"

Hystra groaned and cut the connection with a sharp jab of her thumb. "Stupid crystals."

Right—skennite was some kind of hyper-intelligent mineral. A big ship like this would probably need a skennite core to help run all its systems. How exactly it was possible to talk with it, I didn't know, but I knew that you could if you got a link like the one attached to the Hystra the Dryth's hand. I made a note to watch for an opportunity to snatch it, preferably when she wasn't toting around a plasma thrower.

Hystra picked me up and started running. This was extremely uncomfortable, since now I had to maintain my shape while being swung back and forth at the end of her stupid arm and, oh yeah, I was still nursing gunshot wounds from a series of weaponized insects. I spent most of my effort in keeping the "handle" part of me rigid, hoping she wouldn't be looking down at me while she ran. Bits of my internal fluids splattered out; I felt like I was going to tear apart. I seriously doubt I looked very cylindrical most of the time, but Hystra was focused on where she was going, not the supposedly "inert" object in her hand.

We must have traveled a full kilometer or something before she got to where she was going: the big doors to a transport tube through which some kind of mag-lev platform would likely take us up to the central core of the ship. When she set me down, it was all I could do to prevent from collapsing into a blob.

I also didn't *clank*. You know, like metal is supposed to do on a metallic deck.

Hystra noticed. She picked me up again and then set me down again and, listen, if I was *able* make myself hard enough to make a clanking noise, I would have, believe me. But gut-shot shape-shifting blobs have their limits, okay?

She crouched down over me and put a finger in a little spot of my sticky internal fluids that had dripped onto the deck. "What the . . ."

My cover was about to be blown, but the good news was she had set down the plasma thrower to inspect me, which put it just about in my reach if I ditched my disguise and dove for it. Not that I wanted to shoot it—using a plasma thrower at close range was a good way to wind up really, really dead—but having the plasma thrower seemed a better idea than *not* having it.

I was saved by a gentle tone announcing the arrival of the mag-lev platform. The doors slid open smoothly, noiselessly, and Hystra looked up.

The platform was not empty. Five short, colorfully feathered avian aliens, each with a slender laser pistol clutched in their weird little wing/claw things, fanned out around Hystra with the kind of seamless teamwork you got when you were a collective intelligence. They blinked their black little eyes and tilted their heads side to side and back and forth while they chirped and beeped and hooted at each other in their crazy-complicated language. A Voosk flock, and a hostile one, at that. How many slugging aliens were *on* this stupid barge, anyway? And were any of them friendly?

One of them spoke to Hystra in Dryth Basic. “Don’t try it.”

Hystra slowly backed away from her plasma thrower. Not that it would have done her any good, anyway—even if she killed two of the little creeps, the other three would cut her apart.

“Where is Tagga?” another Voosk, though essentially the *same* Voosk, asked her.

“Dead,” she said, her hands still up. I presumed she meant the Lhassa.

“How?” the Voosk asked.

“It got him, how else?”

It? By *it* did she mean her deteriorated sense of fair play? I guessed not.

“Did you see it?” the Voosk asked.

Hystra laughed. “That’s the whole problem, isn’t it—*nobody* sees it.”

“It got two of our number,” the Voosk replied. Their incessant peeping underwent a momentary pause—a moment of silence, I guess, for their departed members.

Hystra and I were wondering the same thing. “How?” she asked. I had admiration for anything that could get a drop on a Voosk flock—the little birds were pretty much always looking everywhere at once and they were in literal constant communication with each other. If you wanted to get one and not deal with all of them, you had to disrupt their hearing somehow.

“It tampered with an alarm klaxon—the noise and the flashing lights made it difficult to coordinate,” the Voosk said. Two of its number raised their pistols and trained them on Hystra. “But we survived. And we will continue to survive.”

I was getting a better picture now: some kind of monster was on the loose. It was picking off the crew, and the crew, predictably, was losing its shit. I had to be a part of that Gene-seeker crew—made sense, really, given how much I knew about other alien species and whatnot. I guess I could have revealed myself but, again, everybody was pointing guns at each other, and now was obviously not the time for surprises.

One of the Voosk hopped forward and grabbed me by my handle. It tried to lift, but it didn’t have a fifth of the raw strength that Hystra had—the thing could barely budge me. Another hopped forward to assist—this time they did lift me up, but only a couple centimeters and the strain was evident on their lightweight frames.

Hystra was smiling. “You’ll never get it to the command deck. Not without a hand cart and all birds on deck.”

“We could find one,” the Voosk countered. “If we kill you, we don’t even need to cover our backs.”

“I propose a truce,” Hystra said. “I carry it, you guard me, and we all go up to the command deck together.”

“We share the reward, then? With you?” A couple of the Voosk cackled at a ridiculous volume. It was funny to them, or an insult, or both. The Voosk language is so informationally dense that it is literally impossible to translate without machine help.

Wait a minute—a reward? For what?

“We’re the only two left, right?” Hystra said.

The birds exchanged a series of rapid glances and beeps and then one of them said, “The last time we saw the Lorca, it was charging down an engineering shaft with a belt full of grenades, and the whole shaft went up afterward. The other Dryth was sucked out an airlock.”

Hystra shrugged. “Never liked that housed bastard. Like I said, Tagga is dead—got caught in his own plasma fire hysterically trying to shoot it. Mishad, the other Lhassa, had her throat cut in a sealed room, if you’ll believe it. I heard her die.”

With each and every relation of a fellow crewmember’s death, I got a fleeting image of what

they were talking about. A Dryth with geometrical skin patterns indicating a House loyalty, silently screaming as he clawed at the porthole of an evacuated airlock; a huge Lorca, its foretalons raised, its arms wide, roaring as it dove down a shaft in my direction, falling past me, me reaching out . . .

A svelte Lhasa mare, tears staining her cheeks, as I came up behind her, knife in pseudopod . . .

Wait.

Wait a minute.

"We accept your accord. Who knows how much time we have left?" The Voosk said.

Hystra picked me up by the handle and took me onto the mag-lev platform. When she set me down, I was extremely pleased that the floor in here was padded with rubber.

The doors closed, and the platform hummed to life, propelling us upward from the ring-structure toward the central core of the ship. The acceleration was gentle, but I was deeply uncomfortable, and not just from my wounds or the exertion of holding my shape. I—myself—was the monster all these people were paranoid about. The monster they would shoot on sight, if they ever knew it was in their midst.

But *was* I a monster?

What was I, anyway? I knew a lot about how my body worked, a lot about my limitations, but what was *my* species? I searched for a word. I found one, I think, but not of my own memory, but a voice—a Thraad voice—saying, "It's a Tohrroid."

But what was a slagging *Tohrroid*?

I tried to think of a reason I would want to kill anyone. I felt distrust for these creatures. I knew, almost instinctually, that they weren't my friends. But that didn't mean a murder-spree. And yet, there was the image of that Thraad in my memory, gesturing to the table full of weapons: *Go ahead*, it had said, *take your pick*.

"Hystra," the Voosk said. "Where will you go?"

The Dryth looked out through the transparent dome of the ship, out towards the numberless stars. "Home. I'll go back and start over again. Not make as many mistakes."

"Do you think they're telling us the truth," the Voosk asked. "About the reward?"

Hystra grimaced as she fiddled with the settings on her plasma thrower. "When have they told us the truth about anything?"

The gravity increased as we approached the central trunk of the giant ship. I felt as though my whole body was fraying like an old rope—the fatigue of holding the cylindrical shape—but I couldn't drop the form. Not yet. The risk of the Voosk spotting me was too high, and then I was as good as dead.

We were moving along the side of the trunk now, heading for the tip—the command deck. Soon, one way or another, my ruse was about to be revealed.

I rummaged through the fatty grab bag that was my mind; I scoured every fleshy pocket, every airy vacuole of my being to understand what was going on. I stumbled upon a memory—me in the form of a biped, sitting on the floor in front of a low table, with a hovering drone pouring drinks. Across from me was Hystra. She raised the glass and poured a little on the ground. "To freedom."

Another Dryth at the table did the same. It was the one with the geometric patterns on his face. The one I'd later blow out the airlock.

In the memory, I raised my cup and did the same as them. Because at that point, they thought I was a Dryth.

They all had.

When we arrived, Hystra picked me up with both hands, her plasma thrower slung over her back, and it was all I could do to keep from trembling from exertion in her grasp. I left a little sticky puddle behind me as I left the ground.

The Voosk pointed, "What's that?"

Hysta shrugged. "Dunno. This thing is leaking. The Council said it wouldn't hurt us, though. C'mon."

The command deck was a spherical room, with the lift depositing us on the bottom, and starlight pouring in from windows in the distant, domed ceiling. The air was murky and humid, filled with the swampy smells the Thraad prefer. Around us, ramps wound upward to a shelf-like catwalk that ran around the equator of the sphere. Here, nestled into little alcoves and surrounded by holographic displays, were a bunch of snail-like Thraad technicians, their eye-stalks looking in two directions at once and their chin-tentacles delicately manipulating data and plugging in numbers for the skennite core to crunch for them.

Apart from these were four “command” Thraad, identified as such by the particular gloss and sheen of their shells and the fact that they weren’t recessed into some little alcove, but instead were looking down at us or, alternately, looking up at the huge three-dimensional holo-display that showed a series of colorful parabolas and blinking lights that I took to indicate where the ship was relative to other moving bodies in space. Sometimes, they were looking at both. Their eyestalks were always moving.

The Elder Council.

One of them I recognized—it was wearing a red shell. *Go ahead*, it said in my memory, *take your pick*.

All of them looked down at us as we entered. “Cooperation,” one of them in a gold shell said to the others. “Unexpected.”

“No, inevitable,” came the retort from a blue-shelled snail. “Predictable.”

“Quickly!” the red-shelled snail said, cruising along on its slimy foot to the top of one of the ramps. “Bring me the bioweapon!”

Hystra didn’t move a muscle. “First you give us the codes to a transport off this death-ship, *then* we think about handing it over.”

“Belligerent.” Gold-shell curled its chin tentacles.

Blue-shell didn’t like that. “Resourceful! Have we given them any reason to trust us? Have they any reason to trust anyone?”

Red-shell wasn’t interested in whatever academic argument they were having. “Give. Me. The. Weapon!”

Hystra slung the plasma thrower off her back and pointed it right at me. This was pretty uncomfortable for a couple reasons, one of which was that now everyone was looking directly at me. I did my best to look inert, even though I felt like I was going to pop like a blister from the strain.

“See?” said Blue-shell to Gold-shell. “Resourceful.”

“Slag you both!” Hystra snarled. “Now pay up!”

“Don’t you see? That *thing* is still on the loose! It could be on its way here right now! Give me the bio-toxin so I can release it into the air supply and kill it!”

The Voosk, which had been paying close attention to all of this, swiveled and pointed their laser pistols at Hystra. “You heard them,” said one member, and then another chimed in with, “hand it over, Dryth.”

Hystra spat on the floor. “Fucking birds—we had a *deal*!”

“Opportunistic.” Gold-shell observed. “To be expected.”

Blue-shell bobbed its eye-stalks in agreement. “Ruthlessness is a knife with no hilt.”

That phrase jogged another memory, or maybe more connections were being restored. I remembered sitting on this very floor, salty with the taste of the slime the Thraad excreted to allow them to glide around. These same four Thraad stood up on their catwalk and stared down. In judgement? I couldn’t tell. I only remember the Blue-shell saying its bit about ruthlessness and then the Red-shell saying “*We know what you are.*”

Which meant they knew. They knew all about me. It was all coming together, now—a ship full of convicts, sprung from prison. Me, a stowaway from said prison—an impostor. I had been discovered, maybe. Maybe that explained the buzzgun wound. Maybe, because I’d gotten away, the Thraad had offered freedom to the pet criminal that hunted me down.

But they’d underestimated me. They all had. I somehow knew, deep in my protoplasm, that they *always* had.

"Give me the toxin now!" Red-shell yelled.

The fourth Thraad—the one who hadn't spoken yet, the one in a green shell, spoke up. "She can't."

"She can if we kill her." The Voosk said, raising all its weapons.

"You misunderstand," Green-shell said. "She can't, because she doesn't have it."

Everyone looked confused for a moment except for the Green-shell . . . and me.

Hystra laughed. "What do you mean I haven't got it? It's right slugging *here*, you stupid snail!"

I let myself explode out of my constrained shape and snatched the plasma thrower from Hystra's surprised hands. Even in the high gravity, it felt good to let my membranes relax for a minute. I scuttled back and away from the Voosk and the Dryth and the red-shelled Thraad at the top of the ramp. "Stay back!" I said in a voice that came naturally to me—my own, I guess?

A lot of things happened at once.

The Voosk shot at me—thin ribbons of violet light traced back and forth across my membranes, causing them to sizzle and blister. The pain was intense, the injuries blinding—I couldn't see anywhere in the 180-degree arc where the Voosk and Hystra and the red Thraad were. I pulled the trigger on the plasma thrower over and over without really caring where I aimed—each shot a blazing ball of death, able to combust steel itself. Alarms sounded, flashes of heat—hotter, even, than the laser burns I'd sustained—washed over me.

The air hummed with a thousand buzzing projectiles—projectiles that banked and whirled and sought targets independently. Someone was firing a buzzgun. I heard Hystra scream and the Voosk screech in terror. I kept backing away, backing away, looking for a way out—for anything. I still couldn't see. The thrower stopped shooting—system crash, maybe—so I threw it in the general direction of the chaos I'd caused, but the lasers had stopped. I flailed around for an escape, for anything. I found a charred lump of flesh and snagged it by reflex, sucking it inside myself.

A pseudopod found something else—a little drainage gutter, probably for when the Thraad flushed the chamber to wash away their motile slime. It was small enough. I wriggled through and down a drainage tunnel, leaving the fire and the alarms behind. No sooner had I escaped, than a little hatch slammed closed behind me—the fire-control measures, kicking in. Plasma fires were no joke.

And here I was, back in a pipe again. Another dark little crevice to hide in, just like a monster should. The stinging pain in my outer-membranes was almost too much for me. If I were a biped, I might have passed out, but I recalled that my species—the Tohrroids—don't lose consciousness. All we can do is rest.

I slid through the narrow little pipe a couple dozen more meters, though it was hard to judge distance perfectly in the dark, going by nothing but touch. It was slow-going, because I couldn't expand and contract the way I normally do. And the buzzgun wounds were still there—sealed over now by quick-healing membranous flesh, but still a fat, painful series of holes dug inside of me.

But wait—I didn't have any *new* buzzgun wounds. The Thraad had filled the area all around me with the little toxic suckers, and not a single one had struck me. It wasn't dumb luck—buzzgun targeting is very precise. If they wanted me dead, I would have been. I recalled that my comparatively bizarre body chemistry rendered me far more resistant to the toxin than other species, but even still a few dozen of the things would have done the trick, even if just from the holes they'd make. I'd leak to death.

They'd killed Hystra and the Voosk, but not me.

So they wanted me alive.

While I pondered this and tried not to move, I inspected the hunk of whatever I'd nabbed in the chaos. It was a hand—Hystra's hand. With the skennite link still attached.

I felt no remorse. Hystra would have killed me and felt nothing. She was a prisoner from a prison world, like the rest of them—violent, selfish, focused only on her own survival. Like me. Like all of us.

"Skennite," I said into the link, "Define Tohrroid."

The skennite's musical voice came back over the link a moment later. "*A Tohrroid is an amorphous, asexual alien species capable of complex mimicry in the visual, auditory, and tactile sensory areas. They are also omnivores capable of breaking down almost all organic materials and many inorganic compounds for nourishment. For this reason, they are commonly kept in tanks aboard starships and in other closed systems to dispose of organic waste and excrete water and carbon-dioxide, which in turn can be used to keep algal cultures in atmospheric processors active.*"

Kept? We were kept? "Skennite, are Tohrroids enslaved?"

"*The common definition of enslavement does not apply to Tohrroids, as Tohrroids do not demonstrate the kind of complex consciousness necessary to have what Thraad philosophers call 'directed agency.'*"

"Are you saying we aren't *intelligent* enough to make choices?"

The skennite paused for a moment. "*Who is speaking? I do not recognize your voice.*"

"I'm a Tohrroid!"

"*You are? Interesting.*"

I cut the link.

That's what I was? *That?* A garbage disposal? A thing held inside a "closed system" to eat other species' shit and fart out plant food? And . . . and . . . what—I *proved them wrong* and now they wanted . . . what? These were the Gene-Seekers we were talking about. Biological pioneers. Genetic explorers.

That's it.

They'd come down to a prison planet, scraped up a biological sample to play with, and hit pay-dirt: me. A Tohrroid that bucked the curve. A genetic outlier? No, not that. We reproduced asexually; we were genetically nearly identical. These slagging Thraad scum-suckers had stumbled upon a new intelligent species that nobody had bothered talking to—one found in every single starship in the galaxy—and now I was their pet science project.

This? This whole thing was a game. A hunt. A test of my ruthlessness against all the other little test subjects they'd fished off the prison world. It made me wonder if there was a control group.

It disturbed me that I even knew what a control group was. How long had I been on this ship? How long had the Thraad been playing with me?

I felt a hot breeze come up the vent behind me—the fire safety seals had been lifted, which meant the plasma fire had been snuffed. I could have gone back and confronted them. But that would have been holding still. As I had since the start, I pressed forward. There was something *else* I wanted to confront.

If what the skennite had told me was true, then all the gutters, all the tubes, and all the vents and sewers of this ship all went one place:

Home. Or a version of it, anyway.

It was a huge, spherical chamber—the mirror image of the command deck—at the center of which was a massive centrifuge. A hemispherical bucket, twenty meters across, was being spun around at a steady speed along the interior surface of the sphere, moving in pattern that meant it would move over every part of it, which was peppered with secure doors and finely-grated vents—input and output. In the bucket, held essentially in place by the centrifugal force, was a fat, rippling mass of my cousins.

I sat on the maintenance platform at the center of the huge room, watching the bucket spin and watching the flat, almost-colorless membranes of the captive Tohrroids suck up little morsels of garbage that were gathered up by the movement of the bucket and burble and belch out the helpful gasses that kept the ship operating. I sat there a long time.

The green-shelled Thraad from the Elder Council slid serenely to the top of the access ramp. It was unarmed. "You could join them, you know. Go back."

I had no weapons; I was injured beyond the capacity for violent action. Even still, I made myself larger and spread out pseudopods in a show of defiance. "Stay away from me!"

"We don't bother shielding this room much from radiation." Green-shell said, unimpressed.

"You Tohrroids can absorb an awful lot of radiation without any significant damage or, at least, damage to anything we have traditionally cared about. It's the current operating theory that this radiation inhibits your ability to form memories and conduct higher level thought."

I drew back from it as it slid down to the observation platform. One of its eye-stalks followed the bucket as it swung around the room, while the other remained fixed on me. "If you went back," it said, "eventually the radiation would break down the connections you've built up. You'd forget all about this. All about me. You'd forget everything you ever learned, eventually. Or, at least, that is the current theory."

"I bet you'd love to test it."

"Your existence offers tantalizing opportunities for study, I must admit." Green shell said. "We had initially worked under the assumption that you were simply a talented mimic—a creature without true agency. We had hoped you could be trained."

"Sorry if I ruined your little experiment."

That got both of its eyes to focus on me. "*Ruined?* In what way? You are proof of concept. We have learned so much from you, it will take cycles for us to fully explore the implications."

"You could free all of us." I said, pointing toward my cousins in their centrifugal prison. "*Teach* all of us!"

"And then what becomes of the atmospheric processing and waste disposal systems on this ship? On *all* ships?" The Thraad's chin-tentacles waggled in a gesture I knew to mean refusal. "Think of all the damage you have done. The command deck had to be abandoned. Our repair drones inform us it will take hours to restore full functionality. No, I am inclined to agree with the council—you are too dangerous to duplicate."

I flexed my membranes, laser-scarred and stiff with burns. I had enough strength for one rush—I could charge it, maybe bowl it over. Thraad were nothing if not steady on their single foot, though. It would be like trying to tackle a giant suction-cup. I wanted to scream at it, but what came out was really more of a croak. "But all of this was *your idea*! I didn't even slugging *know* what was going on! I didn't want to kill anyone!"

The Thraad's chin-tentacles curled up—the expression was smug. "It was all an experiment to see what you'd do, to see what the rest of them would do—there never was any bioweapon. The killing was a decision you made on your own, I believe. Just as you are planning to kill me, working under the assumption that I am unarmed."

I didn't like the sound of that. I still had too many blind spots from the laser burns—I couldn't take in my full surroundings the way I usually did. Was there a drone somewhere I couldn't see? Some sort of nasty toxic slime it was coated in? A projectile weapon concealed in its shell?

But that wasn't Green-shell's point, was it? I'd kill it if I got the chance. I'd kill all of them. Because they deserved it.

That's what made me dangerous—that I knew all about them.

I retracted into a ball. "What happens now?"

The Thraad's shell ejected a small, crystalline cylinder. It reached back with his chin tentacles, keeping one eye on me the entire time, and yanked it free. "There is a courier pod leaving this ship in ten minutes. Skennite has plotted a slipdrive course that will take it to the nearest inhabited planet. This," it threw me the cylinder, "is the access key. You will be aboard when it leaves. Or else."

I could scarcely believe what I was seeing. "You're . . . letting me go?"

"Are you offering to stay?" The Thraad pointed at the whirling mass of my cousins, mindlessly eating and excreting, forever. "As I said, you could always go back."

I reached out and scooped up the key. "No."

Green-shell backed away up the ramp. "Good. Skennite will direct you."

When it was gone, I took one last look at the Tohrroids—a numberless mass of potential, just like me. But none of them would ever escape. Even I couldn't free them. The Thraad was wrong—there was no going back. Whatever force led me here, it was still pushing me forward.

I didn't know where I belonged. Maybe nowhere. But it wasn't here. I had to keep what I had

learned. I had to survive. And to do that, I had to keep moving.

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