

URSA MAXIMA



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The shrieking alarm crescendoed with a violent pop, then ebbed back into a growl before bursting forth again. It was crushing her attempt to focus at her workstation. After twenty minutes of blaring klaxons, Kwak had had enough.

What further frayed her was the engineers. Per usual, they ignored her, scrambling to run every diagnostic they could think of. They shouted over each other, so busy assessing none of them listened.

“Heat shielding is fine, thank God!” One yelled from the catwalk above.

Another spoke over the com. “Atmo is fine, O2 steady. No collapse of ventilation and the seals are all holding.”

Kwak could have saved them the trouble of checking. She had been stationed on Sept Coronae for four years, twice as long as any other staff, and she could tell when an acclimater was off so much as a micron. If the heat shielding had gone, they’d all be roasted to death within seconds. Sept Coronae Station was just fine.

The only real mystery was the klaxons themselves. Why were they going off if nothing was wrong?

Wetting her lips, she took the rare chance to speak at her full voice. “Check the alarm subroutines, see if something is bugged with the alarm system itself,” she suggested to no one in particular. The engineers, researchers, and corporate representatives all ignored her in the best of times, so she expected no different now. The opinion of a xenobiologist was worth nothing on Venus.

So her suggestion to check the alarm system went unheard.

Benito, Sept Coronae manager, crackled over the com. “Company protocol insists that we pile up into the bunker. Everyone suit up and onto the trolley,” he ordered. “You have four minutes.”

A shared groan went up among the staff. The emergency trolley was a hand-pumped cart with ten miles of track leading to a sealed and secure bunker beneath the mountain; It was the rallying point for any emergencies or disasters that might befall the station.

The thought of sitting in that crowded space with a single shared toilet among thirty-eight other grumbling people disheartened Kwak. Being ignored in close proximity might actually be worse than being ignored within the sprawling corridors of Sept Station itself.

Kwak folded her arms and passively observed everyone running by to suit up.

“Last call!” Benito droned. “Trolley leaves in thirty seconds. Get onboard or HR docks your pay.”

Slipping into a maintenance shaft, she slid down the ladder and out of sight. If the company’s excuse for fire drills were anything to go by, a head-count was unlikely. Kwak would simply hide in the manufacturing bay until this was over. The stale reek of sweat might actually clear through the air filters before everyone returns from the bunker. It could be days, and she relished the thought of being pleasantly alone.

The klaxons shut off once the tunnel’s security door rolled shut. Kwak knew the staff, piled into a crowded trolley, were now slogging away at the hand pumps. They would take shifts to keep from throwing out their backs as the trolley crawled deeper into the mountain, which left the station all to Kwak for at least a day.

Reaching the manufacturing bay, she took in the disarray left behind from the panicked engineers. Tools lay on the floor and someone had carelessly left themselves logged in to the fabricator. It blinked, awaiting instructions. As a reflex, Kwak went to log out and shut it back down when a clank echoed throughout the structure.

She froze.

Another clank came, from outside. Something on the surface of Venus was tapping against the bulkhead of the station.

Kwak rushed to a nearby console, scrolled through the exterior cameras, and saw several exosuits. Four men in unmarked pressure suits were pulling out wires and hacking into the airlock’s systems from outside. Panning the camera around, Kwak saw several combat mechs in the distance, stomping in the red dust, securing a perimeter.

Switching the com on, she radioed the trolley.

“Kwak?” Benito answered. “Of course you’d miss the ride. You can’t get in, now. The seal can’t be-”

“Shut up. People outside.” She patched the camera feed through to Benito.

“Oh shit...” a moment of silence hung from the other end. “Looks like a takeover. Must have been approved by the guild during this blackout window.”

Venus couldn’t easily connect to Earth when it was directly opposite the sun. It took nearly four hours to relay a message, and within that window a rival company must be making a move with a mercenary team. Maybe they wanted access to the Station, its database, or even its share of land.

“They are trying to hack into the airlock,” Kwak pushed. “What do I do?”

“Nothing. They wouldn’t make a move like this without confidence. They have approval from the guild and they clearly timed it so we couldn’t get a warning in time.”

She could hear the rest of the staff burst into desperate debate.

“They have combat mechs along the perimeter,” she observed, allowing the concern in her voice to be heard.

“Nah, relax. It looks bad if anyone dies during one of these things. They will leave us alone since they can’t open the vault door, anyhow. As for you, they will likely just ransom you back over. Typical corp stuff.”

That is what she was afraid of. There was no ransom clause in her contract. The company had disdain for xenobiologists since their presence on any station was merely a legal loop-hole: a tax write off to make the station more friendly to pure research instead of mining and terraforming.

So, the company wouldn’t pay a ransom, and her nephew would feel compelled to. It would end him financially, and if he failed to pay it quickly then it would end him emotionally.

The thought of just killing herself occurred to her. She could make it quick and force both companies to look bad, if only for a moment in the public eye. They could even face guild fines or a sanction.

Kwak nearly chipped a tooth. Was her only retaliation to evoke a fine?

“So, you’re saying I should just surrender?” she glowered.

“Sure? Why not? Hardly the first corporate hostage on Venus.”

The klaxons came back on, screaming away. On the camera, she could see a combat mech in the far distance smashing one of the auxiliary air purifiers.

“They are crushing the redundancy systems. Why?” she asked.

“Uh...” Benito’s voice quivered a bit. “I’m not certain?” The engineers in the background began arguing. After a moment, Benito returned his focus to the com. “There’s a chance they are smashing them because they can’t shut them off any other way. Once those guys are in, if we have no backups, they can shut off the air any way they want. Including the tunnel here.” As he spoke, his voice escalated. Terror was sinking in.

Someone sobbed in the background. “We can’t get out! Only corp can open the tunnel!”

Everyone was shouting. “This isn’t a takeover, it is espionage!”

“They can frame it anyway they like if we die. They could say they were responding to our alarms to try and help us, even!”

Everyone on Sept Coronae could be suffocated. The klaxons had been set off intentionally, possibly through some virus or other means, to flush everyone into the emergency tunnel. Then, the air could be cut off, killing them quietly. It depended on what the mercenaries wanted.

“So, they aren’t here for just ransom, then,” Kwak said, watching as the invaders outside tinkered with their instruments at the airlock.

“Hey, fuck you, Kwak! Gloat all you like, but they’ll kill you, too. You’ll be a witness and then there-”

Suppressing her growing rage, she shut him off. Let them all sit there in the dark, wondering when the air will run out. Her anger had blossomed into rage now, and Kwak’s mental gears were turning with purpose. Taking count she saw four combat mechs in the distance as well as four more exosuits at the airlock. They likely wouldn’t blow the lock wide open because the rush of pressure would destroy the interior of the facility, but they could still cut the air cyclers to kill anyone not in the tunnel.

Kwak needed three things to survive; atmosphere, temperature, and mobility.

The fabricator’s blinking light invited her fingers. It was still logged in, with access to over eight tons of advanced composites just waiting to be arranged and forged into whatever design was specified.

Switching the com back on, the speaker burst with crying and voracious debates from the trolley. “Shut up,” she ordered. “How do I slow them down? How do I keep them from getting in?”

One of the engineers piped up. “Keep rebooting the airlock. It will frustrate them. Might buy you an hour.”

“Give me someone’s admin password.”

After a terse exchange of digits, Kwak began the reboot. She’d need to do it every ten minutes to keep them busy.

“When does this window close, Benito?”

“Uh... what?”

He was clearly rattled.

Kwak spoke louder and more firmly. “When will this window close? When can I contact Corporate directly?”

“The mercs would have a jammer!” he cried.

Kwak slapped her palm in frustration against the console. “Get someone else on, someone who can still think.”

But the com switched off.

“Fine,” she said to the empty manufacturing bay. She walked over to the fabricator, her fingers hovering over the controls. Approximately an hour was all she had to build something. One thing, and one thing only to defend herself.

Kwak closed her eyes and centered herself. With pursed lips, she gently emptied her lungs. All of the stress and chaos deflated from her chest, exhaled for the air reclaimers to eventually filter. Pulling in a new, bold lung-full of strength she renewed her mind toward the problem before her.

The fabricator built basic machines for either excavating, digging, or traversing Venus’ surface. She could make something that moves. And she had spent decades studying things that moved.

Kwak was not an engineer, but as a xenobiologist she studied the greatest engineer of all the universe: God. And God’s system of gradual engineering, trial and recalibration, had been termed as ‘evolution.’ Millions of years of design drafts, failures, and redesigns had created her species and the countless populations of Earth, each perfected to thrive in their respective environments.

But this isn’t Earth, it was Venus.

She smacked her head. No, not the planet. Think of the *specific* environment. Not on a planetary scale, but a smaller one. The habitat. Sept Coronae Station. The interior. Support pillars, cramped chambers, grated gantries...

A cave. Sept Coronae Station was just a large, sprawling cave composed of winding tunnels that junctioned and overlapped.

Kwak knew what to build. What had God engineered to defend a cave? Her choice was clear.

The Bear.

In a flurry of motion, she opened the user interface for the fabricator. Having spent years peering over the shoulders of the more privileged staff, she had enviously watched them mold entire exosuits and treaded vehicles so her fingers found the motions familiar.

First, the skeletal framework. At about nine-tenths of Earth’s gravity, Venus could support a big bear.

“Ursus Arctos Horribilis,” she mumbled to herself with a smile. The North American Grizzly bear was aptly named. Synchronizing the fabricator with her personal data drive, she imported the specs for a grizzly skeleton and instructed the fabricator to produce the bones from tungsten carbide. Osmium composite joints would assure reliable movement. Lastly, endothermic pads of smart silicon would fill the gaps.

The fabricator hummed to work. Pulling from its material vats, it deployed sonic waves to suspend the elements into place, as focalized microwaves forged the metals into shape. It was a controlled, compartmentalized anvil worthy of Vulcan himself.

Sparing a moment, Kwak glanced back at the exterior camera. She could see from their exasperated gesturing that the corporate mercenaries outside were livid. The door’s rebooting sequence was stalling them, for now.

Returning her attention to the fabricator, she queued up carbon nanotubes filled with paraffin composites for muscle. Her bear would be *strong*.

As the skeleton formed, Kwak scrolled through the fabricator’s basic recipes. If her beast was exposed to Venus’s atmosphere directly, it would suffer a shock of over four hundred degrees celsius and the pressure shift would be one hundred times that of Earth. She needed heat shielding in the form of exterior plating and insulation.

She’d also need to fit inside. Her bear had to be a closed system to avoid hacking. Pouring through her archives on Grizzlies, Kwak opted to build a basic suspension chamber in place of its internal organs. She could operate it from there, curled up in temper-controlled gel. She imported the schematic of a life support harness from a harvester and dropped it into the center of the bear.

Kwak would be its organs, its guts. And the vascular system could easily be converted to pump lead-bismuth for interior cooling.

Because her grizzly would be nuclear.

Rapidly, she queued up multiple tasks for the fabricator as it vibrated and smoked to keep up. She was burning through a fortune in resources. This poor engineer’s login would land their entire family into debt.

She snickered when she saw the login was Benito’s.

Stepping away from the console, she activated the door reboot sequence early. She needed a full ten minutes of freedom. She then scrambled back up the ladder out of the manufacturing bay and into the living quarters.

It felt great to be at a full run. While she performed the company required exercises daily, she still never got to run free. It was liberating. Her heart beat with excitement and her mind swelled with the prospect of her impending ursine.

Stomping through the mess hall, she nearly slipped on spilled ento-chili. The klaxons had caused people to fling their lunch trays in panic. They were still down there. Trapped, vulnerable, and at the mercy of cold corporate mercenaries that had likely petitioned for this job; the attack on an unarmed Venus station filled with civilians.

Her suppressed rage shifted to something cold.

She reached the security locker. Within sat sensitive diagnostic equipment, corporate missives for Benito, and most importantly the fusion batteries.

She pressed her thumb against the reader and it turned red, squeaking at her with annoyance. Trying again, she realized that the station lock down had revoked her access.

Hammering a palm against the locker, she cursed. She needed a power source, and the fabricator only knew how to hook up to the proprietary battery design the company sanctioned.

Eyeing over the locker, she weighed it in her mind. It was part of the interior hull of the station, made of some sort of heat-resistant composite, and the doors were secured with metal shanks. A steel pry bar would bend before these doors would ever give.

Perhaps an excavator exosuit could force it open?

She laughed when she realized the excavators were all powered by fusion batteries. Fleeing from the locker, she scrambled to the docking bay where the surface mechs were parked. The lights flickered on as she entered. Several large mechs silently stood, scorched and dirty from excursions.

Climbing up the back of one, Kwak tugged open the battery hatch. The fusion battery, yellow and orange, waited. She knew tugging an activated fusion battery would expose her to radiation but now was not the time to care. But she did need leadened gloves just to handle it without burns.

But where to find them?

Tearing through every cabinet and container, Kwak spilled the contents of the mech bay out onto the floor. Kicking items around, she shuffled through tools and parts but could find no insulated gloves.

The klaxon returned, but only briefly before being shut off. They were through. They were inside, at the entrance of the base. Seven compartments away.

She had taken too long and missed her ten minute mark!

She hoped they would move cautiously as they progressed. But no matter what, she had mere minutes.

Snatching a pair of wire cutters, she sheared down the side of her jumpsuit and tore it off. She then bundled it together into her hands and climbed back up the mech's spine to the battery.

Reaching in, with her jumpsuit acting as an improvised oven mitt, she wrenched the battery free. It sparked in protest, but sat in her hand.

The ladder was another challenge. Wrapping the battery as best she could, she tied her bundled jumpsuit into a sling. Heavy and searing, it thumped against her chest as she climbed. By the time she reached the level above, it had burned her back in several spots.

But nobody lives on Venus without getting burned.

An echo came down from the far hallway. They were in the antechamber, through the interior door. She had one last option to slow them down, but she could only make her move from the manufacturing bay. This meant she had to cross the hall and risk being seen.

Huffing for breath, Kwak crouched into a sprinting position. Then she bolted.

“Under authority of VG, Sept Coronae Station is no longer property of-hey!” the nearest exomerc called out. “We got a live one!”

She could hear them running after her, their boots stomping down the hallway. But their pressurized exosuits made them slow, and as soon as she got to the manufacturing bay she smashed the emergency glass next to the door and pulled the alert seal.

Every door and port within the Station slammed shut within a fraction of a second. It was the final option for anyone attempting to survive an atmo breach. She was sealed into the bay and the four mercenaries sealed into the main hallway. Every door throughout the station was now just a *wall*.

She could focus on her creation in relative peace.

Within the fabricator, the skeleton was complete. Black and glistening, bundles of nano-tubing were affixed to it like muscle. Her fingers, though burned from the battery, still navigated the interface fine as she continued her work.

Stealing a mere moment of amusement, Kwak contemplated which roar she should pick for her bear.



Major Saffron did not like where this was going. Everyone at Sept Coronae Station was supposed to be in the emergency bunker for easy pickings. Seeing an old naked lady run down a hall did not bode well for a smoothly executed plan.

And now all of the doors were sealed solid.

“Heavies, report in.” Despite it all, his tone remained professional. They had turned off their recorders for the operation, but he still had a reputation to maintain among his team.

Within his helmet, each icon for the four heavy mechs outside turned green.

“New orders. My fireteam will hunker down and pressurize the interior. It will lessen the burst when you crack open the side of the station.”

“Sir? You want us to cut through?”

He hated being questioned, but he understood the severity of his order.

“Correct. Stack up on the Eastern wall. Manufacturing bay. Cut through the hide. Everything else in here is sealed, so only that bay will be compromised. How copy?”

The silence lingered for a moment.

“Yes, Major. Sit tight, bunker busting coming right up.”

It was like the old days during the settlement war: bulkheads of colony stations torn open by mechs as the crushing heat of Venus incinerated everyone inside. No screams or bodies, just evaporated flesh swirling about in burning jumpsuits.

He gestured to his three other men to hold position. Backing into the wall, they magnetized their exosuits to the metal supports. If something went wrong, and more than the bay was compromised, they at least wouldn’t be thrown about.

Using a pirated admin login, he tapped the computer on his forearm to begin pressurizing the habitat to match Venus. It would certainly kill the woman and likely anyone else hiding in the station proper, unless they had a pressure suit.

Now it was just a matter of waiting a few minutes.

In his visor he saw the combat mechs outside approach the station. Opening their clawed arms, they tore at the composite hide. Everything shook with each slash, and dust shuffled free from the rafters above.

“Don’t pop it just yet. The atmo is still climbing. Give it another forty seconds,” Saffron said, watching a tin cup on the floor flatten.

He would have preferred to take the station undamaged. The ransom of the staff in the tunnel would also have been nice. He’d already worked out how to starve them of air and render them unconscious. Only a few would have died. But here he was, ordering his team to tear up a perfectly good station bay with a valuable fabricator. Scoring a fabricator with its atom vats still relatively full was a massive payday. Such a win could make him a Lt. Colonel.

The wall shuddered.

“I told you to wait,” Saffron chastised.

“Sir, that wasn’t us.”

Saffron was baffled. “Is the bulkhead buckling?”

“Sir?”

He heard fear. He switched to the outside mech’s mounted cameras. Something was pushing *out* of the manufacturing bay’s wall. Claws pierced outward like a horrid beast tearing open its womb.

“Go loud!” Saffron yelled. “Naked bitch has a fab mech of some sort. She’s going to run for it.”

The mechs stepped back, their shoulder weapons powering up. His men were seasoned in mech-to-mech combat and knew what to do. No escapees.

Another, longer shudder ran through the base, followed by a roar. Not just a roar, but all roars bundled into one. It coursed through his body and up his spine causing his knees to slacken.

It sounded like a thousand bears, each species at once, condemning him to hell. Saffron broke into a cold sweat when he realized she was not going to run.

“Opening fire!” His mech pilots unloaded their salvos into the opening just as a fabricated mech-bear rushed out to them. The oxygen caught between its synthetic muscles burned, its optics glowed an unholy light, and its microscopically vibrating claws tore open the first mech. The pilot couldn’t even scream as the flaming beast plucked him out and sundered him. His blood boiled away into Venus’ air as the cybernetic hellbeast reared high. Hurling half of its victim, it knocked another mech’s shoulder cannon away.

“Kill it!” Saffron screamed helplessly. “Kill it!”

His men were used to firing upon lumbering mechs like their own. Their bipedal vehicles were a result of escalating marketing and manufacture, the clumsy products of an arms race.

But they had never fired upon a thing that moved like a bear before. It circled them, causing their firing arcs to cross and hit one another. When it climbed up the back of one of the mechs, it drove it down into Venus’ rocky surface and smashed it flat.

Saffron saw that he was against a union of resources, ingenuity, and savagery, all forged into a single entity. He was stupefied as he watched his last mech fall, the occupant’s head sheared away by the bear’s metal jaws.

Remembering himself, he gestured for his fireteam to untether themselves from the support strut and ready their flechette rifles. As he formed a plan to spread out and secure chokepoints, the sealed door before him punched inward.

This monster had no interest in preserving the base. It didn’t care about anything but their destruction. Saffron had heard tales of Earth’s bears. So many fables and poems had been written about them and their dual nature of peace and brutality. If their cubs were deeper in a cave, an invader was doomed.

And here he was, in a tunnel, facing down such a beast.

Prying open the bay door, the searing bear squeezed its front half in and swiped at him. The claws sang as they went by, slashing the support and leaving their mark.

He didn’t have to tell his team to open fire. They unloaded round after round into the thing’s face, sparks everywhere. It was on fire, clearly not built to last in Venus’ heat.

“All we have to do is outlast it!” he shouted, falling back as it advanced. His men followed, but the bear mech was swift. Snagging an exosuit, it pulled the man in and avalanched over him toward the remaining three.

One of his men dropped his weapon in terror, ran to the far door, and pounded fruitlessly. The bear shuffled into the hallway, deeper and deeper, gaining ground as Saffron frantically reloaded.

But it was soon over.



Benito openly wept with relief when he emerged from the evacuation tunnel. It had been two weeks of stale rations and unpleasant company. Corporate eventually sent a rescue team after the boardroom battle had finished, so the wait for freedom was over. Lawyers had won the day.

Wandering about in a pressure suit, Benito surveyed the ruins of Sept Coronae Station while most of his staff drifted to the medical shuttle.

Bits of mercenary were smeared all along the main tunnel. Four combat mechs were shattered just outside the remains of the manufacturing bay. And out there, several yards beyond the station, sat a blackened bear. Perfect with ears and a tail and everything.

Stupefied, he walked out to it. It sat like a bear would, as if satisfied with honey, looking out into the red haze of Venus' hateful air. Approaching, he saw that it had been melted and fused into a singular statue with several of its claws missing. Likely embedded in the mechs.

Wiping his glove across the bear's smooth belly, he could see a faint figure suspended inside. Crouched like a fetus was Kwak, controls still in her hands. A thousand things had killed her: suffocation, starvation, dehydration, heat, radiation, and physical duress.

But it was her, curled peacefully, in a metal tomb of a bear. Her monument.

"Jesus," an approaching engineer said. "HR's got to vet our people more carefully."

Benito nodded in agreement. "Yeah, they do. Kwak was the only one who ever belonged here."

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