

The Cat Companion

by Robin Kenny

It had been hours and hours before the cat found me laying on the damp ground. Like the fool that I was, I'd left the Lander by myself to take a PANOgraph of the planet's horizon from the cliff top. Apart from the obvious carpet of trees to the horizon, this planet was a prospectors' wet dream.

After central registration, my shares in the company would skyrocket to be worth billions... trillions. At last, a life of luxury and wealth, every conceivable fantasy, was finally within my grasp. Years of loneliness and sacrifice finally paid off. I was daydreaming like a fool, so of course I fell off the cliff edge.

Anders was out testing soil for the next two days and here I was, not ten metres from the shuttle, but fifty straight down. An embarrassment for any professional explorer. But my problems merely started there. My back was almost certainly broken: no feeling below the waist. Incredible pain in my chest: the ribs. And my right arm and hand were tingling numb. Oh yeah, I'll eventually die of embarrassment for sure.

My safety beacon had been lost on the way down. Remind me to send a strident letter to the manufacturer: the fabric loop on their equipment belt is crap.

So, I just lay there. Even the effort to take a breath and yell was too much. After an hour the sky began to darken and the stars brightened. Odd, to think I'd been to ten of those.

It was fully dark when the first grunts and growls came from the bushes. Why hadn't Anders missed me? I don't know. He can get very involved in dirt. Obsessively involved. Still, couldn't he just make a phone call?

This planet hadn't scored highly on the Maxwell scale so the maximum mass any animal should be was five kilos. I didn't dwell on the fact that a spider doesn't need to be heavy to be lethal.

A rustle from the bushes.

Something scampered across the dirt on a multitude of legs, tickled as a hairy thing climbed up my chest, over my face, my closed mouth and an eye. It happened so quickly I barely had time to panic. The thing promptly crawled away to some appointment elsewhere.

Guaranteed shakes tonight.

Then something came out of the bushes directly at me. It made a weird dragging noise. Small puffs of air placed it right beside my chest. Then pain, as a tiny fang or claw dug into my side and the animal mounted my chest. This was it, I could feel poisons infiltrating me. The end of my brilliant career.

Then purring.

My left hand moved awkwardly to my chest. I couldn't see a thing in the dark, but yes, there was the short hair of a cat. It's head turned and nuzzled into my palm. Tiny ears twitched as it demanded affection. Where in the seventy two Hells, did a cat come from?

Even though this was certainly my end, it felt good to have company. My very own sentinel, keeping vigil until the end. Oh, go for it, Kitty.

Obviously, somebody had lost the animal here on some previous expedition. A cat was a serious breach of quarantine. Cats in the wild might only live to a couple of decades but they upset the balance and destroyed local fauna. Your basic four leg environmental Armageddon - except - I remember the local DNA had the wrong helical twist and should be inedible to terrestrial animals. A mystery never to be solved for a question never to be asked. I didn't care, I felt better already. So here's the hint: don't die alone. It sucks.

Another rustle from the bushes.

The cat tensed and painfully dug its claws into my skin as it shifted weight in readiness to leap. When it stood, the fractured ends of my ribs ground together. Oh, no. The pain was too much already and it wanted to jump? I tried to feebly push the cat off but it was totally focused on the foliage. It shrieked a challenge so loud and terrible my ribs vibrated in resonance and it felt like spikes were being driven into my ears.

Heedless to my distress, the cat pushed off in a massive leap in the direction of the other animal. The push was agony.

Rage: vicious and deadly serious. The two animals shrieked and roared at each other like nothing I'd ever heard in my life. It ended with dead quiet. After a time I sensed the cat had crawled to my side again. My left hand groped in the dark and what I found was distressing. The cat was covered in thick warm fluid: blood - from the coppery smell of it. It wanted to be on my chest again but I could tell it was badly hurt. As I awkwardly twisted to lift it up, I could feel blood matted hair and flaps of skin hanging loose from its body. It tried to purr but the sound came out wrong. All I could do was hold it as softly as I could and let the warmth of my body relax it. Damn. A tiny claw sank into me as it settled. I hate cats.

The next thing, I was looking up at Anders' ugly face.

We seemed to be in the spaceship infirmary and under acceleration.

"What time is it?", I asked.

"Twenty six o'clock. What, you didn't think you were in Heaven?"

"Not with your face." I looked around. I was on a bed with more than the usual number of pipes and probes going into me. "Get the Doc."

Doctor Pallet hove into view.

"You feeling some pain, Mister Indestructible?" Pallet asked.

"No. No pain. Just wondered if I'd be a good candidate for power-legs?"

Doc and Anders shared a confused look. Doc patted my shoulder.

"Why would you need that?"

Anger made me lift up. "Because my spine..." I was part way out of bed, all by myself, when the realisation hit. My back and legs were fine.

Doc said, "You do have deep bruising on your chest, back and the thighs, but other than some cuts, you're okay. Mild trauma to your bones with several micro fractures. They're healing well."

I did not expect this. Suddenly, I looked eagerly about the room.

"Where is it?"

Anders had a look of dread. "What?"

"It was on my chest."

Anders and Pallet exchanged a worried look. Doc asked, "What do you remember?"

"This cat. Out of nowhere."

Anders came closer. "You were jabbering about a cat when we found you. We didn't find any cat."

"Well, let's go back down there and find it!" I was ready for action.

Anders surprised me by pushing me back onto the bed with a strength I'd never have guessed at.

"Son," he began. He'd never called me that before. "We found something attached to your chest. It was... was..." He almost choked on his words. Doc took over.

"A parasite. Some type of slug. The skin was translucent and we could see... your blood circulating inside. It stuck you in a few places and was drinking away."

I lay a few moments thinking this over.

"Did it have fur?" Anders shook his head while Doc mouthed 'no'. But I knew it had fur. Unconsciously my left hand went to my chest and suddenly I could feel the most powerful illusion of fur again. Clear as daylight. It was programmed into my hand.

But it had helped me.

"Wait, despite all that, was it hurt? Like in a fight?"

Anders stiffened. "Yes, it was pretty torn up. Disgusting thing."

"Where is it now?"

"We killed it. Tore it off you and burnt it good. It's gone."

Pallet added, "This was days ago. You were sharing blood and needed to be quarantined, after all."

Something about my face made Pallet stand back. He beckoned to Anders and they both walked away. The Doc whispered, 'Leave him for a bit.'

There are no view ports in the hull, but channel 4 had a tail view of the planet.

It was already a small ball.

So what was the creature? Why did it help me, for I am in no doubt it had repaired my shattered body and protected me during the night. I puzzled long over this. There had to be some commonality in anatomy between us for it to work.

The way the others looked at me...

Fifteen years working together, now they couldn't look at me in the eyes.

I knew my life as an explorer was over. Hunting for a fortune while avoiding real human contact was a truly pointless existence of selfish wants. I'd kidded myself about the personal cost. I now realised I knew nothing of sacrifice.

Talk about a guilt trip.

It didn't seem right to let this planet be raped. Being the senior partner with a 51% share, I can block the sale of any mineral or exploitation rights. We were a private business that sold our own discoveries, not a contractor or employee. It was time to buy out the rest of the guys and dissolve my company.

I had more than enough money in my coffers to do this and buy a decent camper and settle back there. It's a reasonable method to keep the planet safe, both by a personal presence and with a legal shield.

I owe it to the cat.

After all, that's what friends do.