

MACRO COOPER BY OWYN CADIEUX

THE auto-pilot chimed for Damian's attention after he'd finished his meal—rice and septic-grown beans. The company ship—a hulking, pickup-style, twelve-cylinder—had arrived at the client's address: a lone lithium mine just off Jupiter's moonfield. Already parked on one of the few landing platforms was a wholly different kind of ship.

Painted a glittery forest green and sporting two—completely ornamental—triangular wings was the first MACRO Cooper that Damian had ever seen. Its boxy frame and two-door construction was reminiscent of the hovercars he'd seen back on Earth of the same brand, but this was no hovercar. It was a spaceship. Easily five tons, maybe ten, and equipped with all the newest bells and whistles, the MACRO Cooper was the most expensive spaceship ever to be on the market. It even had its own warp core, usually reserved for commercial vessels.

And here it was, alone, on a cold, empty rock a million miles from Europa.

Damian put the company pickup down on the adjacent landing platform and suited up. As he disembarked, two figures in similar spacesuits approached on the landing platform. One had her arms at her sides uneasily, as if she should be doing something with them. Her face was framed in her helmet by long, dark hair and her expression was one of constant dissatisfaction. The other was a balding man, the hair that was left swept across the scalp in an attempt at a side part. Despite his striking likeness to old terrestrial snapping turtles, he walked with a self-important confidence. He was the first to speak once they connected their audio channels.

"You must be Damian. I'm Mr. Clearwater, but you can call me Titus. And this is Vicky—"

"Victoria," she interrupted. Titus paused for a moment, as if shocked with a hefty amount of static. He began again.

"She's the chief supervisor. If you'd like, Damian, we can get started right away."

"Sounds good to me," Damian agreed. He never liked to spend long on-site for contracts like this; they tended to be a depressing sight. Too many non-union workers this side of the asteroid belt. Wherever the unions weren't, the bureaucracy could get to you. Titus turned back the way he'd come, motioning for Damian to follow. He did, leaving the pickup on the landing platform sporting his company's "DIGITAL FORENSICS" banner. It looked like a bruise on the landing pad's face next to the MACRO Cooper.

Titus led the way for Damian and Victoria to the office buildings excavated into the rocks of the lithium asteroid, not far from the landing pads. The gravity wells installed in the floor hummed as the airlock cycled. Titus made sure to fill the silence with chatter about the last time he'd been back to Europa (for tea with some vaguely important figure whose name Damian didn't recognize). Damian nodded and made attentive noises despite his rapidly decreasing appreciation

for the man. Victoria said nothing. She made no eye contact, instead standing in all but open hostility away from Titus. The light flipped to green to indicate a safe atmosphere. Damian had his own oxygen meter installed in his suit, self-calibrated. He checked it before pulling off his helmet and they proceeded into the structure.

The place felt empty. Bases like this were usually the hub of an asteroid mine, complete with dorms, a cafeteria, and rec rooms. In this one, many of the lights in the rooms they passed were off, the spaces unoccupied. They passed a locker room with some twenty small metal doors, all open save for one. No dust had collected in the open cubbies, they hadn't been vacated for long. The control office was near the mine's proper entrance, which was hidden beyond another airlock. Damian felt the occasional *whirr* and *chunk* of heavy machinery resonate through the floor now that they were closer to the real work sites. Titus held the door as they entered the control office, where direction could be given from a bird's eye view and the heavier machines could be switched off in an emergency.

Damian was not surprised—only terribly disappointed—when he looked across the camera screens before him and found no humans at work. Instead, a troop of bulky, four-legged constructions of matte metal and carbon fiber diligently buzzed about in the various sites, operating larger machines with their fully dynamic arms and hauling ore back and forth in the cargo beds installed on their backs. The Krynnic K-160 was a remarkable machine and was still changing mining after ten years in circulation, but his job was proof enough that they and many tools like it had plenty of faults. Most often when they malfunctioned it was from programming mis-inputs or radiation interference, but even the smallest mistake could lead to catastrophic errors in tools this complex. In the worst cases, it could be lethal. Damian preferred his own toolbelt, full of pieces that were either fully analog or programmed by him personally to perform a single function. With machines and people, Damian found that a moving part meant a point of failure.

“So what went wrong again? I read the report, but telling it two different ways might help with the work.”

Titus shook his head ruefully. “We’re not sure how, but the Krynnics sent a batch to the wrong location yesterday. We have a waste chute that empties outside the gravity wells and they sent it there.” His voice was prickly with vexation, “that was three and a half tons of ore.”

Damian wrinkled his nose. Waste ejection had been proven an awful practice for about as long as the K-160 had been on the market. The asteroid belt was harder to travel these days because of it, places like Europa and Titan got less sunlight on average than last century, and average temperatures and solar output were dropping. He didn’t bother to ask Titus if he knew, he almost definitely did if he owned an asteroid mine. He probably just didn’t care very much. Why would he when he was making enough to afford a MACRO Cooper? It was still a little surprising, though. Damian thought he remembered hearing about Asteroid Workers United cracking down on that, but Titus certainly didn’t strike him as a union enthusiast.

“I don’t much like these machines, to be honest,” Titus said half to himself, “They give me the creeps a little

bit. Still, I can't deny how much they're improving things around here. I would've just tried fixing them myself if some of my stockholders hadn't made noise about some kind of certification."

"That wouldn't have gone well," Victoria snapped, "Remember when you tried to fix that T-30 yourself?"

Titus shook his head. "That was a special case—"

"Special cases are what you hire *people* for."

He sighed, making a show of his torment in the growing silence. "Do we have to do this now, Victoria?"

She said nothing, but her eyes blazed. Damian said nothing either, thinking about those empty lockers, about people who might never find mining work again.

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Some time later, Titus had excused himself to look after his administrative duties and Damian was combing the instructional code for the K-160s in search of errors. Victoria had her back to him, monitoring work while bouncing her knee and rubbing the same part of her palm with her thumb over and over.

What Damian found was odd. Not only was the pathing implemented wrong, there was an error indicator from the program, overridden with the admin password. Not only was the program set up wrong, but it must have been knowingly. He pasted the code into his list to bring to Titus. Maybe it was the owner of one of those empty lockers who sabotaged this. He made a mental note also to check pass-through, the clause for human presence in a worksite. Protocol required he check that section whenever the code was altered in any way.

"Did he fire everyone else?" Damian asked quietly, hesitant to break the silence carried by the humming electricity around them. Victoria tensed even more.

“Who?”

“I’ve been to a few other asteroid mines this year, a lot of them are running on skeleton crews now. This is the worst I’ve seen, though.”

“We had a crew of twenty at the start of the year. Last month we were down to five. The rest quit. I don’t have... bills still need paying.” The bouncing knee stopped abruptly, as if noticed and suppressed.

Damian shook his head, taking his hands from the bulky keyboard before him. “Some days I wish we lived back in the 2100s, y’know? Before people moved out past the asteroid belt.”

“No lithium stations, huh?” Victoria said, “What an idea.”

“Why do we keep giving them everything?” Damian threw his hands up, “They have enough already.”

Victoria made no move to get back to work. Neither did he. The electric hum dominated for far less time than it seemed, right up to the moment Titus burst into the control office, comb-over flapping with urgency.

“They’re trying to send another batch to the waste chute. Shut it down!”

Damian scrambled forward and flipped the guard off the stop button, slamming his hand downward. Onscreen, a K-160 left unmonitored, approaching an open-top cart with glittering lithium ore, froze in place halfway to dumping its load. Victoria, turned, suddenly tense. She looked ready to pounce on the controls.

“Victoria,” Titus said, trying to catch his breath, “Can you go down there and redirect that cart? We’ll run a manual reset once that’s out.”

“Going into the worksites isn’t in my job description.

I don't have the waiver anyway." Victoria's voice was cold, on edge. "You know that."

He threw up his hands, then looked at Damian hopefully. When he shook his head, Titus huffed.

"Just make sure those things are in pass-through mode, then. I gotta do everything here." He swung the door out, walking down the hall grumbling to himself about "lazy fuckers."

Victoria shot up as soon as the door swung back closed and shooed Damian out of the control seat. He fended her back as he typed the command, trying to explain he could set the machines to pass-through himself.

"You don't get it! Pass-through isn't programmed right. Let me reset it!"

Damian felt his stomach drop as he stopped himself too late from pressing the ENTER key. Victoria's eyes were welling

with tears as he relinquished the seat, stunned. "What do you mean it's not right?"

"I didn't actually want to!" She sobbed, "We weren't supposed to need pass-through anymore!"

Damian stood, grabbing Victoria's shoulder. "What did you do?"

Tears streamed down her face and he realized belatedly that his own cheeks were warm with them. Titus cycled through the airlock into the worksite.

"I programmed the waste chute error. I did it. I learned the code because I needed to be *fucking useful* so he didn't kick me out! I messed with the pass-through—y'know, like writing death threats in a letter and then burning it... but I was gonna fix it! I was gonna fix it."

She clicked desperately through files, trying to find the default settings for pass-through mode. Titus appeared on the

first surveillance camera. Damian watched, powerless.

“What’s gonna happen if he gets there?”

“They— I—,” Victoria stammered, trying to articulate while downloading the correct file. The bandwidth this far from Europa made the process painfully sluggish. “They go back to work.”

Damian’s heart dropped through his feet. The governing functionality in the Krynnic K-160 was by detecting the passive radiation from the lithium element. Pass-through was necessary because the machines couldn’t discern that radiation from human body heat. Titus entered the worksite amid the frozen machines. As soon as they detected him in their sweeps, he’d be mistaken for a chunk of metal.

“Why the fuck would you mess with that? If you know *anything* about the K-160 it’s that people *die* in active sites.”

“Why do you think I did it? He’s FUCKING US. I can’t *stand* the way he *kills* me every fucking day.” She peered through tears at the screen as the upload began, “I shouldn’t have written it, I shouldn’t have uploaded it. But it was the only thing I could do without cussing him out to his face.”

The Krynnic K-160s whirled to life as they detected uncollected lithium. The one that was about to deposit instead leveled out, reaching its carbon fiber arm down to Titus. He tried to run, tripped on an uneven outcropping of rock. The claw closed, Titus struggling in the titanium fingers.

The file was uploaded, but it had to be compiled. Victoria’s knee spasmed and she drew blood in her palm.

The K-160 had collected the errant piece. The bed began to tilt.

Damian stood, shaking.

The K-160 deposited its load, sending vibrations of the

crushing weight of several tons of ore resonating through the facility. Its smaller, articulating arm pressed a button on the cart. Titus' broken body, helmet cracked and leaking oxygen, was visible for a moment among tons of glittering rock before the cart shot down the shaft to eject the waste.

The code compiled. The machines went still.

Damian still stood where he'd come up from the floor. His tears had ended with the shock. Neither of the two said a word for a long time.

"What did you do?" Damian whispered, unsure what else he could possibly say.

Victoria's voice was cold metal, her face still turned away. "Do you have to report this?"

He said nothing. Legally, it was one of his chief purposes in being out here to report any incident: intentional, semi-premeditated, or otherwise. On the other hand, what did the

world lose without Titus?

"*Do you have to report this?*" Victoria repeated, turning to face him with a tear-streaked, grim face.

"I—" Could he? "I'm supposed to."

She faced him, determination fortifying her eyes.

"I mean—fuck. Who's waiting at home for this guy?"

She responded almost before he finished, "Nobody. He was a washed up prick with no life. Nobody actually cares."

Damian felt bile begin to rise. "I'll see what I can do."

Victoria's resolute expression melted and her body wracked with sobs. She collapsed back into the chair she'd fought to claim.

"Why the fuck did I put that code in?"

“The world’s better off without him,” Damian said hoarsely.

Victoria looked up at him, her expression unreadable amidst fresh tears, “What?”

“He only took. Am I right? The only things he ever gave you were the things the law forced him into. He was a middleman and made too much from being useless.”

Victoria’s eyes didn’t turn to rage, but he saw her try. Instead they looked hollow. “Before the K-160’s he worked us like dogs. I didn’t even know there were unions on the inner planets until last year.”

Damian had nothing else to say, nothing that mattered at least. He took the first step since his fall, a step that brought him to the office door. “Wait.”

Damian stopped, hand on the doorknob.

“I don’t have—” She swallowed another sob, “I don’t have a ship.”

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The company pickup gurgled to life. Victoria perched on the co-pilot seat with her small luggage, flaking off bits of the dried blood caked to her palm. Damian paused, watching the base airlock as if a ghost would appear. He tore his eyes away from it, and they landed on the MACRO Cooper, parked primly on the adjacent landing pad. The stars reflected off its forest green paint and crystalline warp-grade glass.

“What do we do with that?”

Victoria followed his gaze. “What can we do? There’s no way both of us could *pretend* to afford that put together.”

Damian didn’t have a response. Instead, he put the company pickup into gear.

They left an asteroid adrift in space, bearing a shell of lifeless industry. The K-160s within remained dormant, watching for the next piece of loose lithium until they lost power. Atop the shell stood the greatest trophy of the rich, resplendent with cosmetic wings and capable of impossibilities. The shell and its adornment, after some hundred years, rejoined its brethren in the asteroid belt.