

Lost Country

Second Draft

7/1/2021

Long nights and high winds plagued the southern Hives this time of year and none more so than Polaris as it rose out from the storm wracked grime of the ocean like a mountain of rust and iron. The gyrodyne put down on a rockrete landing pad, tucked in between two deserted manufacturums. Even before the craft's twin propellers slowed and its labored engines sputtered and died, a side panel cracked open through the layer of soot stained ice to deposit Mercator Behesht Savali Czasa out amidst a cloud of billowing synthsilk robes.

He pulled the fur lined collar of his coat tighter about his many chins and neck, festooned as it was with the golden chains of his rank and causing them to jingle in the wind.

Behesht was a proud man, born of meaningful stock from the upper-middle tiers of Hive Varangantua. Generations of being so close to the planet's ruling class had engendered him with a permanent look of disdain as he scrutinized the edges of civilization before him. This was the third port he'd been to in this sector and, if the Emperor was beneficent, it would be the last. These habitation collectives that huddled at the various gates along the curtain wall of Hive Polaris like congealed plaque between a giant's teeth, were dangerous. Both outside the attentions of the Arbites and unable to pay the prices needed to interest Enforcers, they were governed by the strong and the dangerous.

That was why he had brought Puwlo.

"What now, lord?" The strongman burred. Behesht looked back, then up, at the former ganger. The enormous man's mouth produced too much spit, a side effect from his many muscle grafts and augments. Steam was rising off of his mostly bare upper torso, his hide a patchwork of tattooed sigils that only Varangantua's lowest hive-scum would understand. Puwlo wiped a line of saliva with the back of his hand, the studs that pushed out from his knuckles glinting in the spotlights illuminating the pad.

Behesht untucked a perfumed kerchief and held it under his nose. His skin was ringed with precious metals, from his hooked nose to both overlaid earlobes and they were already starting to sting in the cold.

“We find her.”

The arc welders scattered sparks in streams that cascaded down into the bowels of the motor-pool. The building was packed with travelers and their vehicles as they sought refuge from the ice. A storm was rising up from the ocean, quickening the onset of night as it swallowed the sun. Anyone caught beyond the Hive’s outer wall would likely die a freezing death.

Behesht squinted in the gloom, searching until his eyes rested on a Ridgerunner class exploratory vehicle. Along its pitted and pockmarked hull was a string of ident numbers and the word “*NIX*” emblazoned in surprisingly delicate script just below the vehicle’s heavy stubber next to the cockpit. Behesht exhaled a grateful plume of air that crystalized almost instantly and approached.

A man, rakishly thin, his spine slightly bent beneath a once-ornate jacket, now threadbare, had his back to Behesht as he watched over the Ridgerunner. Behesht cleared his throat, “There, now, my good fellow, are you the one they call Khoja?”

The man did not turn but Behesht noticed he was oddly twitching.

Unaccustomed to being ignored, Behesht repeated himself, louder, “I am in need of a *Repossessor*? Are you Khoja?” When this didn’t work he nodded to Puwlo who stomped forward.

“Scum! The Mercator is talking to you!” The bodyguard pushed the man who stumbled forward with the surprising whine of servos. Puwlo stepped back, as surprised as Behesht as the *servitor* turned to regard them with a rictus frozen face, the skin stitched to crude cybernetics.

“Seven hells—“ Puwlo said, hastily making the sign of the Aquila.

“Odan doesn’t talk much anymore. I’m Khoja.” A thickset woman slid out on a dolly from the Ridgerunner and stood. She was a short, dark skinned woman crisscrossed with scars that seemed to intertwine with tattoos. Her black hair was shaved close to her skull, streaked with gray. She looked about fifty, possibly older, her pale blue eyes surgical as she picked apart

Behesht and Puwlo. She wore a thermal vest that left her arms bare to the cold. She didn't seem to mind.

Behesht was having trouble not gawking at the servitor. A single eye, overgrown with cataracts, peered at him without comprehension. He had never seen anything like it. No one should dress servitors in such a manner. This was a freakish mockery of what had once been human, like the scarecrows the lower hives placed to mark their territories, utterly ghastly—

A loud *snap* of two fingers drew Behesht's attention to Khoja. "What have you lost?"

Behesht recalibrated toward the woman and began again. "I am Behesht Savali Czasa—"

"Of the *Promethium Subtilis*, I recognize the stamp. Far from Varangantua, aren't you?"

Behesht's looked down at his own his chain and the disc of embossed platinum that bore the sigil of a promethium drill. "Well, yes, you are attentive—"

"Nine years ago, your Merchant-Combine lost a tanker out of Ixtok. I was the one that found it."

"Indeed! My predecessor recorded your involvement as integral in its recovery. You saved us quite a sum, I can assure you. That is partially what brings me here today!"

Khoja took a rag from her belt and started wiping the grease from her fingers, "Lost another ship?"

"No; a prospector expedition on its way to Polaris."

Khoja nodded toward the gates slowly closing in the distance and regarded the pale grey clouds rushing inland. "A halestrom's coming. The freeze out on the wastes will kill an engine if you're not careful and you'll be buried under chunks of ice bigger than this fella you've brought with you." She nodded toward Puwlo. "Your prospectors will be dead before dawn... my condolences." She turned back to her Ridgerunner.

Behesht glanced at the horizon through the wall, his expression contorting as he considered what to do and how much to reveal. "It's not the prospectors we need back. It's what they found."

Khoja took out a heavy wrench and began loosening bolts on a rear wheel. "The cold doesn't care. You'll have to wait until the storm dies down."

“That could take days!” Behesht protested knowing full well the erratic behavior of the planet’s tortured weather systems. “There are... there are expectations I have been charged to satisfy. I was led to believe you were the best!”

“Look, young’un.” Behesht spluttered in protest but she didn’t let him interrupt her, “I am *the* best. And I’m telling you I won’t risk my runner or our hides out there. When the storm breaks, we’ll take your business.”

Behesht stamped his foot in unrestrained frustration. The woman was clearly mad with that servitor, but this far from Varangantua that wasn’t a surprise. He cleared his throat, “I can’t wait that long!”

“We’ve got work to do. Now ‘git!” She absently spat which made Behesht take a step back. The servitor tilted its head to the side, its drool a frozen icicle off its jaw augmetic. It shuffled toward Khoja and lifted the massive wheel with a whine of servos buried inside its arms and back.

Behesht turned on Puwlo, gold capped teeth bared, “What do I pay you for?”

Puwlo took a massive step toward the Repossessor, cracking his augmented fingers with a sound like rusted hinges. He towered over Khoja, “Take the job, ice-sucker.” He threatened.

Khoja’s only response was to exhale a cloud of steam. He was a full head and shoulders taller and twice as wide. He smiled cruelly, revealing rusted iron pegs wedged into his gums where teeth should have gone.

Khoja’s expression worried, she took a step back. Puwlo’s grin widened and he advanced. He was accustomed to people fearing him.

“That’s more like—” He slid forward without warning, his heavy boot skidding forward on a patch of frozen chemical runoff. The big ex-ganger tried to catch himself but could only manage going down on one knee.

About elbow height for Kohja.

She flattened her hand into a wedge and lashed out, striking Puwlo’s windpipe. His eyes bulged and he collapsed, hands groping for his neck.

“This isn’t up-hive.” She said to Behesht. “Cheap muscle doesn’t make you a big man and no one here is going to take your job. I’ve been as polite as I’m going to be.” She kicked Puwlo in the head, knocking him out. “Come back after the storm.”

Behesht made a strange kind of giggling sound, clearly unnerved, and withdrew a data slate from the folds of his coat, “Your record and reputation are unparalleled amongst the Repossessors and I have been authorized to offer *thrice* the rate for the immediate recovery of a containment unit large enough for one person to carry.”

“What part of ‘no’—”

“The prospector team was in a trawler that we believe was attacked as it returned from Blackbolt Peninsula. I’m told you were one of the few locals that escaped that cursed place during the *Break*.”

Khoja’s eyes widened in surprised. Behesht stepped forward with the data slate, pleased to have cracked some her icy exterior. He might not be a fighter but he knew when a deal was close at hand. She considered it a moment then took it, scrolling through the information.

“They’re in an ice-crawler?”

“Yes, very expensive, this class possesses various bafflement projectors so as to slip past the Regional Defense interdiction zeppelins.”

“So, this job’s under the table is it?” She said with a grin.

“Salvage rights have already been cleared with the proper authorities in Varagantua.” He insisted.

“Then why the bafflement projectors?”

“Paperwork, often, does not reach the outer regions and... we do not have the time.”

She scoffed at this but kept reading, “They’ll be invisible to auspex. Even me and Odan will have trouble if they’re buried in the snow.”

Behesht wrinkled his nose at the servitor and the concept of it having a name. He pulled out a small, reinforced, cypher, “This contains their coded frequency, you will be able to narrow to their position to within a kilometer.”

Khoja tucked the dataslate into the crook of her arm, “Anything could have happened to

them. Waste tribes, ice pirates or, Emperor's teeth, they might have just all gotten drunk and turned on each other. There are a lot of unknowns, Mercator Behesht."

Puwlo's eyes fluttered open and he groaned.

Behesht nodded jovially, "There is a considerable bonus due to the mitigating circumstances *and* the expedited nature if you can ensure delivery within the next solar rotation."

Khoja turned to look at her servitor, "What do you say Odan?"

Puwlo cradled his head and slowly stood next to Behesht. The ex-ganger and Mercator exchanged a look of bafflement as the woman seemed to be listening to the servitor as it stood there, dumbly, twitching.

Then she nodded and extended her hand to Behesht.

"We'll take the job."

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The *NIX* sped across the soot stained ice, great fishtails chasing the wake of the chain wrapped wheels. Its headlamps cut through the growing darkness, alone on the ice, leaving the dirty glow of the Polaris outer wall behind them.

A great plume of ocean spray crashed into the front of the speeding ridgerunner, congealing like phlegm across the visor canopy. This close to Polaris, the ocean was mostly chemical runoff from the Hive's refineries.

From the cockpit, Khoja took a long drag from a kaffstik, the cheap plastic crackling between her teeth as the small charge ionized the narco-stimm. She looked through the duraglass visor which gave her a wide view of the frozen world beyond while she worked the controls. Next to her, Odan sat in the co-pilot's throne, now plugged into the cogitators with heavy rubber cables that stuck out of the ports at the base of his skull.

Khoja blew a cloud of vapor that swirled in the heater unit's exhaust. "Going to have to hurry if we're going to beat the edge of the storm."

Odan's teeth chattered as his brain interfaced with the cypher. She looked at one of the cartographic screens. "We'll make for Veschek Point, only way we'll get shelter in this and, with luck, old Aleksii'll let us in and give us passage."

Nudging a dial, she broadened the screen's reference to show "Blackbolt Peninsula", almost a thousand kilometers to the north. It was a broken chain of islands, most of them sinking since the Break that had killed the region and broken it off the main continent. Khoja and Odan had been children.

"Remember the Festival of Saint Apphia, Odan?" She mused. "Your father managed to hunt down a walrex... Double portions for the whole town! Remember?"

The cogitators started rattling, making Odan's teeth clench and yellow foam collect as it fed in trajectory data based on the *NIX*'s long range sensorium. She glanced at the navigation screens and quickly altered their course.

"We stole the priest's bottle of tarasuk, the one he kept in the pulpit... With that girl, what was her name? The pretty one, with the red hair?" Looking out, she saw past the coastline. A few of the mega-tankers were making their way toward Polaris-nul, their holds brimming with raw promethium from the deep sea refineries. The halestrom was picking up speed as it made landfall.

They would need to be fast. A halestrom could pummel an armored transport to slag in minutes, the *NIX* wouldn't stand a chance. "Lower heating units by ten percent and give it to the batteries," she said idly, pulling her hood over her head.

The temperature dropped considerably. She heard Odan's antifreeze reservoirs, where his kidneys should have been, start pumping.

Khoja looked at his exposed back, the loose flesh covering chem-reinforced muscle wrapped around steel cabling that ran up his spine and into the fist sized hole in his skull. She'd been there, had watched the Enforcer smash Odan's head in with his electro-club, ending the fight that Odan had been trying to stop.

“You never could mind your business.” She muttered. Odan twitched, maybe a feedback loop. “And kill the lumens.” The cockpit darkened save for the burnt orange glow of the console as the headlights split the rushing dark beyond the visor.

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Behesht hissed against the welcome burn from the imported amasec he treasured in his flask for such excellent occasions and pretended not to notice Puwlo look pleadingly for a sip as he held a rag to his broken nose. They were in the overseer’s office above the motor pool, having bribed the man for some privacy as Behesht notified his masters that Khoja had been successfully employed. The chamber was covered in stacks of receipts, work orders, all on flimsy scritta, soiled rags and random mechanical parts.

“Word from Varangantua is promising.” He placed the vox receiver back in its beaten metal cradle. “Once the device is back in our hands, we can negotiate with the Techpriests of Nearsteel and I’m sure even you can imagine the sum. We’re lucky they didn’t find it first.” He clapped his hands in delight.

“What do we do now?” The bodyguard shrugged, sullen. Behesht assumed the bodyguard had physically recovered from his thrashing but psychologically would still be on the mend.

Behesht contemplated, looking out through the grime covered view panels. The Polaris locals were hunkering down in the speakeasies and flop houses to weather the storm. It would get violent.

But! He had the coin to buy a room for Puwlo and himself and enough space to keep the scum away. They might even have some—

Someone below them suddenly screamed.

“What was that?” Behesht turned but Puwlo was already between him and the door. The screaming intensified. Suddenly autogun fire drowned everything out.

“Get behind the desk, lord.” Puwlo ordered. Behesht nodded, feeling sweat trickle from beneath his wig. He knelt behind the desk, his fingers overcome with tremors and useless as he tried to stopper his flask.

The screams grew closer, just down the stairs from the office now, louder and louder. He could hear the *whoosh* of close quarters weapons. He could smell ozone. He felt his pantaloons dampen.

Then quiet.

Then heavy metal shod footsteps, marching up the stairs.

Puwlo leaned into a fighter's stance, the coils of muscle beneath his back twisting.

A shadow grew across the office door's threadbare curtain.

"Well then, come on!" Puwlo challenged. There was a pause before the door was kicked in, the lock exploding, plex-glass shattering.

Behesht covered his face, watching through the crevices of his chubby fingers from beneath the table. He could see Puwlo's legs rush forward and engage with something wearing a long tattered cloak.

Puwlo roared but then his heavy augmetic hands landed on either side of him.

His legs kept moving forward even as his head landed behind him, his mouth still open, his eyes twitching before resting on Behesht.

"Terra's grace!" Behesht gasped.

A sickening heartbeat later and the table was lifted off its anchors and hurled against the wall. Behesht held up his hands and squeezed his eyes shut, "Please! I am a Mercator of the—"

"I already know who you are, Behesht Savali Czasa." The voice rumbled up through a vox emitter. "Such an error you and your masters have made."

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Veschek Point, a single tower sitting atop a finger of rock pushing through the pollution stained glacier, glowed through the storm. Khoja's hands moved over the controls of the *NIX* and navigated the toxic snow drifts, zigzagging expertly by skill, instruments, and a diminishing amount of luck.

It was difficult, even after a lifetime of racing against the elements on the ice wastes. Not only did a driver have to worry about random pockets of soft ice, fractures that might open up

and swallow you or equipment failures, Khoja also had to keep the furnace burning hot enough to melt the ice buildup. All of it cost the only thing that could keep you alive out here; promethium.

And the *NIX* was running on fumes.

The panels were all adopting the same critical red glow as they passed the “zero” mark. She wasn’t worried, too much, for she knew the *NIX* better than she knew her own limbs. Odan and her had cobbled it together and she knew the Ridgerunner had a few more precious minutes to get them across the threshold. If they were lucky and the Emperor was feeling generous.

“Keep it steady, Odan, we’re getting close.” She said over her shoulder, unbuckling her restraints.

Odan’s arms latched onto the secondary controls as she pulled herself up to the cupola and unwound the locks to the hatch. Pulling her thermal hood up and fixing her goggles, she took a massive breath and raised her head into the halestrom.

The wind was roaring. A billion needles broke out as the moisture in the capillaries of her exposed skin flash froze and burst. She ignored this and withdrew a wrench from her belt and started hitting the spotlight fastened to the cupola ring. The ice build up around the hinges cracked and she turned it toward Veschek Point. She depressed the activation trigger in a series of timed pulses.

A skull sized chunk of ice hit the front of the *NIX* and shattered. The storm was almost upon them, a cold death not much past that.

“Blast it, Aleks!” She muttered, hitting the trigger again.

Hoar frost was creeping across her goggles, the lower part of her face going numb. Real panic started to creep into her but she smothered it with the determination you needed on the ice.

Finally, the tower responded, matching her pattern in greeting.

Breathing a prayer of thanks, she quickly climbed back into the *NIX* and slid back into the pilot throne, relishing as the heat returned feeling to her body.

“Looks like Aleks’s not too drunk to have forgotten to post a lookout.” She grinned, throwing full power to the engine.

Outside, the engine thundered louder than the storm, launching the *NIX* directly toward a looming glacial wall that seemed to materialize out of the night. As Kohja accelerated, plasma-flares buried in the ice ignited, boring a hole through meters of frozen build up revealing an ancient, rust covered portal. It irised open like the mouth of a whaladax and swallowed the *NIX* whole.

Khoja stepped off the boarding ramp and into the empty loading dock of Veschek Point. It was little more than a turn off of the main tunnel which continued onward for hundreds of kilometers northward. In the past, this tower would have been filled with travelers heading to and from Blackbolt Peninsula's rich mines. The *NIX* was the only vehicle here now, coming to a rest next to a small promethium station and some neglected looking service machinery.

Ahead of her was a bulkhead door which creaked open, revealing two panicked looking juves, one holding an ice shovel, the other an archaic laslock rifle which he pointed at her.

Khoja stopped and crossed her arms, annoyed.

"Declare yourself!" Squeaked the shovel wielding boy. He cleared his voice and tried again, "Declare yourself or we'll burn you down!" The other juve menaced with the laslock to emphasize the point.

"All that might do is warm me up after the trip I've had, boy." Khoja said calmly pointing at the laslock. "A las is a stupid weapon to use in this cold, you're powercell's gone dead." The juves, confused, foolishly checked the weapon and saw it glowing a healthy green.

When they looked back, Khoja was pointing a compact autogun at them.

They stood there, stock still when the deep booming voice of Aleksi echoed from the doorway.

"Khoja! You old drifter!" A veritable giant nudged the juves away and stomped toward Khoja, plucking her up in a massive embrace.

"Put me down Aleks!" She laughed into his black and white streaked beard. He gently placed her back on the ground.

"What's it been?"

"Six years!" Aleksi said, raising his hands and counting on augmetic fingers.

Khoja glanced at the juves, “Then these must be yours?” She said as they slowly lowered their own weapons. “I didn’t recognize you Leonik, and Iguur, you both have grown so much. How is your mother, how is Myrratta?”

Aleksi’s expression stayed the same but something in his eyes seemed to die, “She was taken from us, Khoja.”

“Waste tribes.” Leonik spat.

“Myrrata wasn’t the only one.” Aleksi said, reaching over and patting his son on the arm. Khoja pretended not to see the juve brush a tear from his face.

There was a shuffling behind her from the *NIX*.

“And look! Odan’s still kicking around.” Aleksi said, a note of gratitude in his voice to change the subject. He stood over the servitor and bellowed, “How are you, old friend?” Khoja winked at Aleksi’s sons who looked in horror as their father actually *touched* the servitor as he slapped Odan so hard that his stabilizers groaned in protest.

“Let’s get out of the cold and something hot to eat, aye?”

“Thank you, Aleksi.” She turned and saw Odan begin to shuffle back toward the Ridgerunner, no doubt a subroutine was kicking in. “Odan’ll stay here, the *NIX*’s machine spirit likes him close.”

Aleksi nodded, “You’ll need promethium too, I’ll bet.” He pointed to his sons who were still gawking at the unusual servitor, “Boys, help Odan with what he needs and reload those plasma charges on the tunnel hatch.”

Veschek Point had a modest refectory above the generators which made the single room a welcome and pleasantly warm place. As Khoja and Aleksi walked in, she saw that besides an extra layer of dust, nothing had changed since she’d been here last and she doubted anything would.

On a night like this; everyone stayed in the refectory. Several men and women were sleeping underneath tables as several more got deep into their cups topside. Aleksi let them find refuge under his roof despite their poverty for he had a soft spot for such creatures.

It was this charity for the lost that had welcomed Odan and Khoja as children when they had wandered out of the storm the day of the Break. He had taught them a trade, they owed him everything.

A woman raised her cup to Khoja, “Been a long time!” The woman’s words passed through what few rotten teeth she had left making a slight whistling. Khoja knew her.

“Has been, Milaani, too long.”

Aleksi pulled out a chair and pitched his enormous bulk onto it. Khoja took off her thermal coat and settled onto a stool across from him, eyeing the room’s triple thick pane of armaglass that offered a view of the wastes.

“This is Khoja, fellas.” Aleksi said from his chair as he addressed the others in the room in various states of inebriation. “You’ll be quick to know that she’s the best Reclamator in Polaris, probably on the whole planet. She’ll be with us for the next few days—“

Khoja coughed politely then shook her head, “No time, at dawn, I’m gone.”

Aleksi’s smile descended, laugh lines contorting into a scowl. “You’re going back then, eh?”

“There’s a Guild trawler that’s lost its way out in Blackbolt country. Pay was too good to say no.”

Aleksi shook his head and took out a flask, taking a pull before offering it to Khoja. She shook her head so he drank again. “Don’t grox-shite an old shoveler like me. You *wanted* to go back. Why?”

“Nothing like seeing old friends.”

Aleksi brushed the comment aside, “There’s nothing out there but storms, the warp-damned Waste Tribes and the Regional Defense forces keeping watch—“

“And a trawler that’s going to pay me enough to buy you out from this place three times over.”

“I’m serious, Khoja, there’s something strange happening out there. This is the third halestrom in a fortnight.” Aleksi pointed out the window, “They’re coming in hard and fast and out of nowhere. I’ve still got some pull with the Atmosphaeram Guild in Varagantua and they say they can’t track ‘em save that they’re starting out in Blackbolt.”

“Not the sea?”

He shook his head, “It makes no sense, unnatural like—“

“Like the Break. ”

Aleksi shrugged, “Feels worse this time, but, my memory isn’t what it was.”

Khoja considered this; “That means the interdiction zeppelins will be anchored?”

Aleksi pulled at his beard, “I tell you, we’re on the verge of starving and you’re already plotting. Emperor’s short hairs.” He laughed. “Yes, it’s customary for them to ground their floaters during halestroms, everything along the interdiction line.”

She leaned back, “That’s how I got to be the best, Aleksi.”

Aleksi nodded, putting his flask away. “Why go back now, Khoja?”

Khoja rubbed calloused fingers together, feeling the pain in her joints. She tried to find the words to explain the feelings that had suddenly risen when the Merchant-Combine envoy had offered her the job.

“I’m getting tired of it all.” She nodded to the window. “Losing Ordan, all the shite that goes on in Polaris. You know, half the time I find someone lost on the ice the bastards fire at me? I don’t know how you’ve made it this long, but the cold’s finally gotten to me.”

Aleksi shook his head with a wry smile, “I can’t believe it.”

Khoja pressed “I can take this job’s coin, that and what I’ve saved, and buy a spot mid-Hive in Varangantua, maybe open my own shoppe. Get Ordan some new parts to keep him going. I’d like to see Blackbolt before it’s too late.”

Aleksi cleared his throat and leaned back, resigned. “Alright, then. Take the tunnel, it should put you out as close as you can get to the border.”

“And the cog-heads don’t know about it?” She said with a grin.

“No, they don’t.”

“Then this will be the easiest skate of my life!”

“A good one to end it all on, I guess.” Aleksi’s smile suddenly dropped as he noticed something out the window.

“Someone’s out in the storm!” Milaani suddenly yelled, spilling her drink.

Khoja turned.

A figure was slowly working toward the window through the ice and snow, back bent, robes whipping about a rail thin frame in the gale. It marched, ignoring the chunks of ice falling from the sky. When a halesone twice its size struck, it didn't even stumble.

"Holy wounds, how's he standing!" Someone else shrieked.

The hairs on Khoja's neck raised, this was wrong.

She stood, hand to her pistol, when the thunderclap of a laslock went off from beyond the doorway. Everyone stopped what they were doing, looking to one another as if they could find an explanation in another's own confusion. Something was *very* wrong.

"My boys—" Aleksi started but was cut off by a scream. A scream that tore through the vocal cords of a young man.

Everyone leapt into action, flipping tables to create makeshift cover and pulling out all manner of weapons. Khoja cleared her pistol as Aleksi pulled out a compact single-shot grenade launcher from a thigh holster under his coat.

"It's the *damned* tribes, come back to finish the job!" Aleksi shouted.

All eyes were on the doorway, dull lights casting shadows down the staircase. Milaani, closest to the door and with an ancient slug thrower in both her hands, peered into the gloom.

"I see something?" The older woman mumbled.

"Stay back, Milaani!" Aleksi shouted but not before something with double jointed limbs skittered up the stairs. Milaani fired instinctively as it leapt over her, the blast briefly outlining a red, armored, body.

The creature landed on iron spiked hooves, its body low, hissing through a skin tight breathing apparatus while bulbous eye lenses twitched and swept around the room. Bladed limbs thrummed with subsonic vibrations that made Khoja's stomach turn.

Milaani stumbled and fell. There was the wet slap of organs on the decking, she had been gutted as the monster passed over her.

Khoja sucked in air and aimed.

"Emperor's grace, *KILL IT!*" Aleksi bellowed in rage.

Aleksi's people opened fire. A fuselage of solid shot and las beams erupted but the creature seemed to merely *flicker* through the barrage, running into the nearest man and stabbing its weapons into him over and over.

People moved back, screaming, their shots going wide. These were not warriors or soldiers, just waylaid tradesmen and the jetsam of the wastes. The ice jackal was among the feed birds.

But Khoja and Aleksi were both all too familiar to battle. The bigger man drew a bead on the creature, ignoring the blood that splashed across his face as the mechanical creature killed another of his friends. Khoja raised her pistol and fired; once, twice. The rounds *pinging* off armor plates but it got its attention. It leapt at her, blades outstretched. Khoja rolled just as Aleksi fired over her.

The grenade hit the thing's carapace like an Arbite's bolt round, exploding a heartbeat later in a rush of black oil and debris that sliced through Khoja's cheek. She fell to the floor with a grunt but was satisfied as their enemy died in pieces.

Wiping blood out of her eyes, she caught her breath.

"What in the Throne was that?" Someone cried.

"*Ruststalker*." Aleksi said, disgusted, as he racked back his weapon and reloaded. "Why in all the hells is the Adeptus Mechanicus here?"

Khoja realized at that moment it must have something to do with her job.

A scream laced with static erupted from the stairway.

More were coming.

Her fault.

Khoja saw them rushing up the staircase. They ignored what few rounds that actually hit them before falling on the dwindling number of men and women still alive.

Khoja pulled herself up, unloading into one of them as Aleksi batted another with the stock of his launcher with a roar of defiance.

It wouldn't be enough.

They needed to run. She could at least save Aleksi. Maybe his boys? The *NIX* could fit ten—

The figure outside in the storm caught her eye as she realized she had forgotten all about it. He was a man with an impossibly wide smile with chrome teeth. He regarded her and placed a hand on the armaglass, like he was waving at her. There was a pulse of energy, a high pitched sound and then the pane shattered. Shards of armaglass cut through the room, eviscerating Aleksi and two others where they stood. The howl of the storm rushed in a second after, plunging the room into sub-freezing temperatures.

Aleksि slowly sank to his knees, arterial blood fountaining out of his body, already starting to freeze on the metal floor. He looked at Khoja, as if she could explain to him “why?”

“I’m sorry!” She whispered, her lungs burning from the cold.

Then Khoja was on her feet and running. This wasn’t a fight, this was a massacre. These were *Adeptus Mechanicus* agents, far beyond anything anyone could fight.

She rounded the stairway and flung herself down them, ignoring the pain that lanced through her knees. The weapons fire was becoming scarce, just one or two poor bastards left as the Ruststalkers cut through them. She knew she would not, could not, let guilt slow her. Survival was the only thing that mattered now.

“Odan! Fire up the engine!” She yelled into the communicator on her wrist that linked her directly to the servitor’s brain.

She activated the blast doors when she reached them, not waiting for them to completely open, she sidled through, wincing as the freezing steel stuck to her skin and opened a fresh cut. Only then did she realize she’d left her coat.

The *NIX* was sitting right where she’d left it, its engine rumbling, hatch open and waiting for her. Around it though she saw the two corpses of Aleksi’s boys. The Ruststalkers had followed her and Odan in, using the hole made in the ice by the plasma charges.

Iguur had died fighting before being gutted. It looked like he had been trying to defend Leonik who was sprawled next to him, his arms filled with plasma flares as his father had instructed him to replace.

The bleating of the machine-language carried down the stairway behind her and she bolted. Reaching Leonik's corpse, she grabbed two of the plasma flares, breaking off some of his frozen fingers. She yanked one of the ignition caps off.

A blast of heat made the ends of her hair curl as her arm crawled in a rash of blisters. She turned and threw it. The Rustalker that appeared at the door actually caught the flare with a metal talon, some misbegotten instinct. The half-meter column of plasmic flame burned through its faceplate, molten metal ran like wax down its body, and with a gargle it collapsed, spasming and thrashing.

"Drive!" She yelled, stepping onto the boarding hatch and pulling out a magazine for her pistol and pocketed the other flare. The ridgerunner rolled forward, picking up speed when, suddenly, impossibly, Odan slammed the brakes.

Khoja smashed her head into the side of the hatchway, dropping her pistol and falling to her knees. "Frozen shit! Odan what was that—"

A pain filled scream filled the *NIX*. Khoja's eyes widened. That was Odan's voice?

She looked up and saw him, spasming against his restraints. Spittle and lightning danced across his body before he finally collapsed, like a doll with its strings cut.

A voice drifted across the loading dock.

"Greetings, Repossessor Khoja."

Khoja looked out from the hatchway. It was the man that had broken the armaglass. He stood in between the blast doors, two of the Ruststalkers hunched over, ready to pounce on either side of him. On his chest was the crimson cog, a death's head skull at its center.

"I am Aquisitus-Apex, Thalatha-56. You possess knowledge that I require." He said this while stepping over the still twitching body of the cyborg she'd killed. His tattered red cloak barely covered gears, cables and metal joints that were his body. Only his face seemed human, she could see now it was bolted to a metal skull. The flesh was strangely healthy, his cheeks crawling with rosacea, his expression an obscene smile like a child's toy from some warp-spawned hell. Two yellow lights burned in the circles of empty eye sockets.

"I have no quarrel with the Adeptus, master Thalatha-56. I have a Warrant of Procurement. My search is legal."

“I am coded with holy writ and charged with the recovery of divine technology, your legitimacy is irrelevant.” A scorpuk tail with an evil looking weapon mounted to it whipped out from behind him. “Your servitor is under my power, Repossessor, you cannot escape... You will give me the channel codes of the trawler belonging to the Merchant-Combine Promethium Subtilis.”

Khoja licked her lips, dry and brittle, “I have a legal contract, I can show you—” She reached for something in the dark of the hatch, something she rarely needed to use.

“Mercator Behesht is dead, as will all who hinder the will of the Omnissiah. The channel codes... Or I will lengthen your interrogation beyond the scope of necessity.” He held out his arm, a dozen fingers unfolded; gleaming blades and needles.

She wouldn’t die easily.

Her fingers found the stock of the gun, “I can show you—“

When Odan suddenly vomited a stream of green and black fluid all over his console inside the *NIX*, guttering the electricity that had been binding him like a votive’s flame in the wind.

The *NIX* lurched forward, under Odan’s control again.

Thalatha-56’s expression turned from its leering grin to one of exaggerated shock. Khoja didn’t wait for a second chance and she yanked out a webber-gun from its holster and doused the Martian priest.

Thick cords of quick-bonding strands unravelled from the nozzle of the gun, expanding into a web and fastening around Thalatha-56, binding him to the ground. He roared in surprise and a garbled static command which unleashed the waiting Ruststalkers who bolted after the *NIX*.

Khoja turned away, slamming the hatch shut. She heard the cyborgs scrabble against the hull as she quickly moved to her pilot throne, grabbing the controls and all but kicked the pedals to maximum throttle.

The *NIX* jolted forward, chewing up grit from the loading dock’s floor in a great spray. She stole a glance at the rear visual augers and was satisfied to see one of the Ruststalkers fall under the debris, rocks and gravel as lethal as a hail of bullets.

A vibrating blade suddenly stabbed downward, almost into Khoja's face. A Rustalker was on the roof of the cockpit. She clenched her teeth and wrenched the controls. Leveraging the brakes with one arm and feeding more acceleration with the other, she sent the ridgerunner into a lateral spin. Anything not bolted down flew across the interior. Khoja bit back nausea and braced herself.

They hit the tunnel's wall with such force that the Rustalker's arm was wrenched out of its socket before being launched into the rockcrete and ice then churned up under the *NIX*'s wheels. Khoja exhaled and straightened their trajectory, blasting forward and into the dark of the traversal and to the safety of distance.

Left in the wake of the Ridgerunner's escape, Thalatha-56's inferior arms sprayed a mild acid over the strands of webbing, freeing him from the ground. The Repossessor had proven resourceful, an expected consideration based on the reputation she possessed in the lesser Hive of Polaris. He would compensate for such an error.

Reaching the mangled remains of the Ruststalker that had managed to mount the ridgerunner, he made an assessment and determined its permanent expiration. Then, he noticed its missing primary, left, limb. Looking after the Ridgerunner, his smile slowly split his face and he bit the air in anticipation.

The rest of his servants crept up to him, the last of his Rustalkers. They had been with him at the start of this quest after his master's had detected the activation of the device in the wastes of Blackbolt Peninsula. They would, they *must*, recover it before the Repossessor could return it to the likes of the Guild who would only sell such wonders.

"And she will lead us to it."

Another hour ticked by on her chronometer when Khoja finally felt she could kill some of the acceleration and save the promethium.

"Think you can take the controls?" She said to Odan who seemed to be fully back to himself. He shifted to position and she let go. Khoja was careful to avoid the Rustalker's blade still aimed downward. She took out some sealant tape and wrapped the now inert vibroblade,

careful to not cut herself. She'd leave it in until they were back in Polaris, otherwise she'd risk the heat seeping out of the hull like blood to a wound.

Once the *NIX* was secure, she took a medkit and a mirror and started stitching the gash in her cheek with a small threader-gun. Once that was done she treated the rest of her many cuts, most she didn't remember receiving and finished by injecting an analeptic-stimm directly into her thigh.

When she was done she eased back into her throne.

Aleksi.

Aleksi was dead. The thought burned through her memories of the man that had taught her how to administer proper rites to an engine, how to track on the ice. Who had cared for her and Odan like his own kin and never asked for anything in return.

Lost in reverie, she stared as the spotlights stabbed through the darkness of the tunnel.

She had asked him to bring her back to Blackbolt. He had told her it was cursed. Too many people, like their village, had died. Had told her to forget it, that only death would be out there.

Now they were going back and Aleksi, his sons and anyone under his roof was murdered.

"Aleksi is dead, Odan." The servitor did not respond. "It was my fault... This job has too much attached to it, too many strings I didn't see."

Odan twitched and a tremor in the engine soothed.

"I kill everyone close to me, don't I." She said, dejected. After all, she had been the cause of the fight that Odan had tried to stop. She pulled out her atomizer and inhaled in the narcotic in the hopes of dulling some of the pain welling up in her that had nothing to do with her wounds.

Some time later, she spoke again, "What was that back there?" Odan said nothing. "That bastard said something in Machine, how'd you shake him?" She leaned over to Odan's station.

Odan had been a handsome man when he was alive. With noble features and clear eyes. He had kept his skin clear of tattoos and had been lucky enough that all his scars were in the places only his lovers were privy too. She had loved him like a brother, son and father all wrapped up in one. They had been the last people to survive the Break before Blackbolt Peninsula had shattered.

Now?

Now half of Odan's face was a suffering of wires and metal, his skin stretched taught over a skull she'd spent every crown to piece back together. Too many had called her crazy, none more so the Adepts that had done the work on Odan. But she needed him, even if he was just a reanimated puppet.

And yet, sometimes, sometimes she was sure she could... "Are you still in there?"

They hit a patch of ice and she was forced to grab onto her pilot throne and hobble back down, reverting the controls back to her.

"You still can't drive worth a damn."

She pulled hard to the left and they flew out of the traversal tunnel and onto the coast.

The *NIX*'s chained wheels bit into the ice and picked up speed. Khoja felt a rush of familiarity; a visceral *rightness*, like the ground churned up by the wheels were somehow different from the rest of the wastes. This was of course ridiculous, but she could not deny the feeling.

Black rock rose upward from the ice breaking up the horizon to form islands. It had once been a single strip of land before the Break. Now it was wrenched and mangled along the continent's coastline, half drowned in the freezing ocean.

The halestrom had passed over this region and was now heading south toward Polaris, leaving the sky a putrid green. Yet she could make out another storm forming over the largest remnant of land on the horizon. Picking out details from memory, she pointed.

"There it is, Odan... Home."

Odan did not react save a burble of drool.

She checked the sensorium. The Interdiction border snaked just behind them as a dull line on the screen. The Regional Defense zeppelins would still be grounded from the storm and would be of no concern. The tinge of fear roiled in her stomach but she ignored it and gripped the controls tighter.

Khoja was in her element out here, on the ice. They would make it. They had a full tank of promethium and they knew where they were going. She would recover the Guild's lost casket and get back to Polaris-Nul.

"We aren't a couple of cheap juve skate-smugglers are we, Odan?"

He regarded her with a twitch and a chatter of teeth as she shifted gears.

"Exactly! We're sanctioned Repossessors and we'll see the job done."

The bladder shaped Regional Defense zeppelin was held in place by heavy chains and an anchor. The troopers waited on the zeppelin's parapet trying to keep warm and watching the last of the halestrom disappear to the South where it would batter the iron mountain of Polaris-nul.

Their sergeant, a broad chested man in his mid-fifties, sipped from a tin of caff he'd reinforced with a nip from a bottle of *old foiz* his unit shared. It wasn't regulations, but he was fair to his men who shared this terrible post. Another storm was already picking up speed in the distance. It was strange, to see one so soon, but then everything about Blackbolt was wrong.

He'd sent word back to Polaris of the unusual activity but, as usual, there was no response from either the Regional or Planetary command. There had been a general order sent by the Adeptus Mechanicus in Nearsteel to continue monitoring.

The trooper to his left suddenly jerked back, her helmet sending spiderwebbing cracks in one of the zeppelin's windows. A second later the air was shattered by weapon's fire.

The sergeant dropped behind the parapet, struggling to bring his autogun around, spilling caff all over himself. Bullets *panged* off the armor of the zeppelin, another of his troopers spilled over the side onto the ice.

"Return fire—" The words died on his lips as a Rustalker fell from the top of the zeppelin and cut him in half.

Thalatha-56 stepped aboard the zeppelin as the Rustalker's finished releasing the anchor. After a brief sanctification of the vessel, he would be able to regain distance with the Repossessor. Checking a dedicated monitor on one of his wrists, he saw the Rustalker's limb that was still imbedded in the Ridgerunner was still broadcasting its signal.

This handful of eliminations for the Regional Defense forces would be blamed on local undesirables. Nearsteel, and the Adeptus Mechanicus as a whole, often required such sacrifices on behalf of humanity and, in the end, it was the Guild's fault for trying to profit from the wonders thought lost on Blackbolt Peninsula.

* * *

Khoja took out the small cogitator that Behesht had given her and inserted it into the cradle. There was a buzz as the *NIX* triangulated the location of the trawler on the private Merchant-combine vox channels. Odan's teeth rattled which was followed by the hopeful chime out of the console.

She narrowed the auspex and accelerated.

They skirted the edges of a spoiled iceberg which opened up onto a sheet of ice, black rocks rising like a reef when she saw it. A quad-limbed trawler, forty meters long, was half buried in the ice, one of its legs still pawing the air, another clawing the ground leaving deep furrows in the ice.

"I see it." She said with a smile which faltered as she saw the beginnings of a storm swirling above, thunder booming.

Khoja moved quickly through the snow, special wide rimmed boots keeping her from sinking. She couldn't risk bringing the *NIX* closer as the ice had broken and then refrozen around the trawler, leaving it half in and out. An old Waste tribe attack, detonate a big enough charge in front of a walker and let the sea and the cold do the rest.

Khoja used an air-powered grappling hook to catch a railing, scaling up with the help of the servo powered winch. Pulling herself onto the tilted deck she could see damage from small arms fire and several boarding hooks dug into the trawler's metal hide. The sun was shining meekly through distant yellow smog and was descending into the ocean. Nothing else was out here, except the *NIX*, which meant they were safe for now.

Inside, the damage worsened as she moved through the cramped hallways. Khoja found her first body at the bottom of a stairway. The plastic shaft of an arrow was buried in the woman's throat and continued out the back of her skull.

"Waste tribes..." They claimed to be descendants of the first colonists of Polaris who had built the Hive's foundations. They had ever been a scourge to the region, yet had spared Khoja's own village who they had often had traded with. They travelled where they wished on the ice and lived by their own laws.

Deck by deck she found more slain Merchant-combine serviles and trawler crew. They'd been stripped of anything valuable, in some cases even their heads were scraped clean of hair which the tribals would use for rope.

She found the enginarium, still choking with power and warmth. In it, she found a man that had wedged himself between a plasma conduit and its regulator ostensibly both to hide and to keep the encroaching cold at bay as it seeped in through the broken hull. Surviving had ultimately cost him his life as the radiation from the conduit was cooking him to death. His hair had fallen out, the skin blotched with cancerous welts. He had gone blind.

"I can't do it!" He pleaded to her as he heard her approach. There was a las pistol next to him.

"It's all right now." She placed a gloved hand on his shoulder. "The Guild sent me. Tell me what happened."

He told her everything, speaking so quickly that some of his loosened teeth fell out to clatter on the floor. He and his team had reached an Adeptus Mechanicus site buried beneath the largest mountain of Blackbolt Peninsula, following rumors and myths. It had been buried by rock during the Break. Inside there had been mysterious vaults and strange devices but one had outshone them all.

"They thought it was lost, but we found it! We pried it loose!" He pointed to a simple containment unit next to him. Not large, made from brushed steel, it was unremarkable.

The Waste tribes had attacked them on their journey home.

"Of course they did. You took without giving. You stole from them." She didn't want to condemn the dying man. Most of the jobs in her long career came from fools like this, unable to

grasp that, out on the ice the rules of the universe were different. Had they made an offering first they would have been left alone.

“During the attack, the device— we did something— it awakened!”

“And it did, what?”

He pointed a gnarled claw upward, “It brought the *halestroms*!” He began to weep, his story done. She raised her pistol and granted him some measure of peace. She took the casket and made her way back to the top deck.

The *NIX* accelerated away from the wreck. Behind it, oddly, the halestrom that had been growing in a kilometer wide vortex began to slowly, inexorably, follow the ridgerunner, building in velocity...

Khoja sat in her throne, eyeing the casket between her and Odan in between making minor course corrections on their way back to Polaris. He was eating now, something a servitor did every few days. He supped from a tube of grey nutrient gruel she kept stock in a compression tank. The slurping had been something she’d gotten used to after the first year.

“What do you think it is?” She thought out loud.

Slurp-slurp-slurp.

“Old tech maybe? The guilder told me it came out of a cog facility under a mountain. Something to do with the Break.”

Slurp-slurp.

She checked the console, “We’ll be back to Polaris before nightfall, I’ll let the Guild know.” She started spooling up the vox emitter.

Slurp—

Odan stopped suddenly and vomited gruel all over the console. His arm reached out and yanked the emergency-arrestor and almost sent the *NIX* end over front.

“Sump-spawn!” She shouted, holding onto the controls for dear life as her restraints cut into her chest, drawing blood.

A second later the ground ahead of them erupted with mass-reactive shells, the unmistakable double-explosions chewing up the ice and shattering stone. Kohja hissed, twisting the controls and cutting to the right.

Everything went flying. The casket slamming into her throne and bouncing off.

Checking her screens she saw; nothing. No ice-waste tribal caravan charging her, no ambush waiting behind the rocks. She angled them upward and- *there!*

A Regional Defense zeppelin was bearing down on them, propeller nacelles turning to match the *NIX*.

“Smoke!” She commanded but it was her hand that slapped the counter-measures on the rear of the hood. Dozens of canisters spun off, creating a thick obfuscating cloud and aluminum shreds. That didn’t stop the zeppelin’s gunners who only intensified their attack.

A bolt-round smacked off the hull almost sending the ridgerunner into a spin. Kohja bit her lip and drew blood. Spitting, she checked her console, trying for a way out. They’d clear the smoke in a few more seconds and then they be easy pickings on the ice.

And then she saw something that shouldn’t be.

“Odan, do you see that?” The halestrom had turned course and was bearing down on them fast, filling the sky. Hearing a strange hum, she looked over at the casket where it had landed. Her mind tracked the connections. It was impossible, yet, the impossible was bearing down on them.

She needed a plan.

Looking at the regional cartography she tracked a course that would, *might*, give them a chance to get out of here alive. She pulled the restraints tighter across her chest and risked a breathless prayer to the Emperor above.

“Full reverse.” Her voice was calm, collected. Either this would work or it wouldn’t. “Now!”

The *NIX* slammed to a stop with such force Khoja heard a suspensor crack in the axle as the generatorum strained, pushed further than she had ever tried. Yet, blessed be, the wheels spun and they were rocketed backward. Racing out from the cover of the smoke they passed beneath zeppelin, heading into the halestrom. The zeppelin opened fire but the shells passed over and

around them. Khoja just made out the ruststalkers holding onto the outer railings, adding their own small arms fire to the fusillade.

Her eyes shifted back to the rear vidscreen, able to drive as expertly as the forward viewport. She fed more power into the engine, picking up speed again. The zeppelin banked, trying to keep up as Khoja led it back into the halestrom.

Whoever was piloting the zeppelin realized, too late, as a gust of wind pulled it upward into the storm front as a barrage of ice pummeled the ground and air. Khoja twisted the controls and the *NIX* spun around, now aimed back and away. She smiled as the zeppelin took multiple hits from falling hale before its left propeller ignited on impact.

That would buy them time.

Thalatha-56 limped up the rock formation, cursing the parts of him that could still feel cold. The zeppelin's crash had killed the last of his ruststalkers and permanently damaged one of his lesser arms, forcing him to eject it at the elbow. He still had the trace on the woman's ridge runner, though. He would complete this task and recover the artifact. He would kill Khoja and he would take that servitor back to Nearsteel.

The halestrom was above him, darkening the sky and obscuring the sun. Snow was falling and it was picking strength after settling over the outcropping he now climbed. The annals had indicated that this could be a potential aspect of the artifact's abilities. To witness such power over the elements was a testament to the wonders Mankind might one day reclaim.

Thalatha-56 reached the rock's summit, his servos whining as he pulled himself the rest of the way. The crown of the rock flattened out and had the remains of human habitation. He made out freeze petrified buildings, little more than what had been huts and shacks, a few rusted and weather beaten machines inert. The summit split, evidence of a quake that formed a crack where the ocean had rushed in long ago and frozen. Surprisingly, Khoja stood in a thermal suit and coat near the center of the buildings, seemingly waiting for him. In front of her was the artifact, behind her the crack in the summit.

With a hiss he launched himself down into the ring, his many weapons igniting and stretching outward like a scorpis, ready to tear the woman apart.

Khoja felt fear creep up her spine as the Aquisitor seemed to unhinge his body to three times his size, arms splitting and mechadendrites unspooling from beneath his tattered red robes. She pulled her pistol and aimed it at the box in front of her, priming the trigger.

Thalatha-56 reared back, barely a few meters from her, his optical clusters regarding her, his mouth set in a snarl, chrome teeth bared. But he waited.

“This was our home.” Khoja began. “I saw it on the map when you tried to kill us on the ice.”

“You must give me the artifact.” Thalatha-56 insisted, a series of torches igniting.

“I was contracted to take this back to Polaris, but I’m starting to think it was this that did this,” she nodded to the abandoned buildings.

Thalatha-56 nodded as he calculated how he could cross the distance before Khoja could fire, “Yes, the discovery of the artifact required a test. The results were unexpected but the region being so sparsely populated the risk was considered acceptable.”

Khoja remembered the storm, how it had risen out of nowhere and how the ocean had rushed through cracks in the land. She remembered grabbing Odan by the hand and running as their world ended.

“Acceptable?” She asked, feeling the fear die, burned away by a growing rage.

“The Agents of the Omnissiah covet and seek the wisdom of the machine.” He could see how he would do it, now. He would sever her hand from her wrist with a pressurized blade in one of his mechadendrites. He began to align its aim, careful to not draw attention, “No sacrifice is too small in the pursuit of that knowledge.”

“What is it?” She asked, kicking the casket.

Thalatha-56 flinched, concerned as his higher senses detected the artifact’s distress. He raised his remaining human hand, “Do not harm it, Khoja, it is precious. From a more perfect time when our people commanded the nature of every world we fell upon.”

“It controls the halestroms?”

“It can.” He almost had the firing solution now. “In the hands of my masters it can do so much more.”

Khoja nodded, “Then I don’t feel as bad about not finishing this job.” She fired, twice.

Thalatha-56 screamed in rage and horror, lunging forward blindly.

“Odan, *now!*” She ran.

The *NIX* roared forward out from behind one of the structures, shattering the frozen flakboard, its headlights momentarily blinding Thalatha-56. The heavy stubber on its hull boomed on full automatic. Odan’s shooting was as gifted as his driving, death hadn’t changed that, but at ten rounds a second he didn’t need to be.

Thalatha-56’s robes were reduced to tatters, the heavy calibre rounds sparking off his metal body but some buried into cable bundles and sensitive wiring. The Aquisitor bleated static in pain before he turned on the oncoming ridgerunner, aimed his tail at it and fired a bolt of gravitic energy.

The beam kicked up snow, dirt and stone before it hit the front of the ridgerunner and crushed the front end like an invisible fist. The *NIX* rolled away in a mass of tortured steel. Smoking craters all over his body smoked, bleeding oil and lubricants. He spun, looking for Khoja but she was gone.

He bent over the casket, the two holes from the bullets. Turning the lid he saw that it was empty, tether lines pulled from where the artifact should have been. The all too human sensation of confusion slowed his cognitive functions as he turned all around him, scanning the snow.

Then Khoja was on him, coming out of the smoke and snow. She fired point blank into his chest then buried a knife into his face, splitting one of his eyes. He gurgled and choked, backhanding her off of the cliff-face.

Khoja flew back and tumbled down, bouncing off jutting rock and landing on the ice.

It spiderwebbed beneath her. Her arm was broken, her nose and jaw dislocated. There would be missing teeth. She recovered, lifting her head, blood in her mouth, hot and coppery. She groaned, pushing herself up as the Aquisitor landed heavily.

“Where is it!” He all but pleaded, reaching out to her.

Khoja found herself thinking about Aleksi. She thought of her village and how she had left them behind. Of Odan, trying to save her only to be murdered. Death had always been a step behind her and now it was reaching for her.

Thalatha-56 stumbled forward and grabbed her by the ankle with a clawed mechadendrite, yanking her close. “Give me the artifact, Repossessor!”

Khoja laughed through the pain as Thalatha-56 glared down at her. She pulled out what she had taken from the casket; a simple, gray steel, sphere. The Aquisitor plucked it from her, almost daintily, his human eye wide. The sphere began to open, emitting a strange light. So absorbed was he that he completely ignored the plasma flare that Khoja had pulled out with her other hand.

It ignited.

She dropped it between them.

The ice flash-melted in a rush of steam and both Aquisitor and Repossessor plunged into the black water below. Khoja exhaled as her body seized against the cold. She felt the water throb and was satisfied to see Thalatha-56’s body dropping like a stone beneath her. Perhaps he could have used his many tools to cling to the ice above but he was still wrapped around the sphere which glowed all the brighter in the darkness swallowing him.

A shudder hit her body. She was going into shock. She was going to die.

She hoped Odan was alright—

When two vice-like hands gripped her from under her armpits and yanked her up and out of the water. Khoja’s gasped, her body burning with cold. Someone threw a thermal sheet over her and she clung to it blindly, teeth chattering. She was being carried now, and could hear the crunch of stone and ice.

Gradually, she lifted her head to look up at Odan, ice collecting on his bare skin as snow was building up on his shoulders. He was staring out into nothing, the drool from his jaw augmetics forming an icicle as he carried her.

“You...” Was all she could say. The servitor looked down at her for just a moment then back into empty space. She just pressed herself against his reanimated frame which offered her no warmth.

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It was Odan that piloted the *NIX* across the ice. The sun set in the distance, the halestrom dissipating. Khoja patched herself back together in front of a heat vent. She looked over at Odan. And watched his little ticks, the feedback shakes and waited for him to look back at her. He never did. She had just lost her reputation for completing every job. Maybe this was it, the blessed Emperor telling her to finally stop, to sell the *NIX* for parts and head to the warmth of Varagantua.

Or.

Or they could go back to Polaris. Repair the *NIX* and be back on the ice in a few months once she healed.

They hit a patch of ice and began to skid. Khoja reached over and grabbed the control.

“Throne’s grace,” She chuckled and eased into her throne, “You’re useless Odan.”