On the Line

A Starcup Space Station 14 Short Story

Coordinates: 14.22568, 255.654478, Delta Sector,

'All available personnel, please report to the gathering pad. All available personnel, please report to the gathering pad. This is a Blue Level Alert', came the sound of the synthesized voice over the loudspeaker system.

A collection of groans erupted from the stirring figures rousing from their bunks. Their sleep disturbed and moods soured, the formerly resting Unathi all thumped their tails in unison. One by one the bi-pedal lizard-like humanoids rolled out of their bunks and one of them stood taller than the rest. She bore deep, dark red scales with hints of gold flecked here and there among them. Ear-like frills jutted out from the side of her head and a pair of small hard, black horns curled around the frills like ram's horns.

She folded large arms over her broad chest as the other Unathi put on their labor uniforms: dense two layer coats made of an insulating material to keep them warm and with metal attachments for oxygen canisters. They bore yellow and orange colors, bright to be seen for their line of work. She personally inspected each and every one of their clothes before putting on her own. As she donned hers, she spoke in a low, growling, and almost threatening tone.

"Blue Level Alert means one thing and one only. Today's sign-up day. It's going to be our last day as crew together on the lines. We've worked hard, we've shed scale, skin, blood, sweat, and tears. Now we get rewarded for it," she snorted

She turned to face her crew and as she did she ran a finger over the name tag sewn into her uniform. The name read, 'Sets-the-Foundation'.

"We earned our names from our livelihood. We earned respect from the choices we made. Today, we make the choices that are best for ourselves. Some of you may work together. Some of you may get picked and some of you may get forced. Take a contract. Do something with yourselves."

One of the Unathi let out a loud 'whoop' in excitement and Sets turned her gaze to the one who did. The name tag on that uniform read 'Hoists-the-Antenna'.

"Hoists, are you really that excited to go get conscripted?" Sets rumbled.

“No ma’am I’m jussst plum tickled at the idea that we get to get off thisss rock, mhm!” Hoists laughed. The yellow-scaled Unathi reached up and adjusted his earpiece, making sure the clip attached itself to his cobra-like hood to stay stable.

Sets rolled her eyes but smiled before a raised hand had her turn her head. The name tag on the uniform that she looked at said, ‘Patches-the-Channels’.

“Yes, Patches?” Sets huffed.

“N-now,” Patches stammered, “w-we get a chan-nce to actually, l-leave? Like, leave l-leave. We’re not being t-tricked?” The orange scaled Unathi reached up and worried her long, floppy ears that hung nearly to her shoulders.

Sets took in a slow, deep breath and then clenched her jaw. She reached over and put a large, meaty hand atop Patches’ shoulder. “We’re not being tricked this time. It’s an actual alert. Now come on, look alive.”

Patches smiled and nodded.

The work crew of Unathi filed out of their sleeping quarters, jogged through tight hallways, dark tunnels, and around other scrambling workers to get to their destination. The orange flood lights dotting their path flickered with a low electric hum filling the air.

Eventually the hallways and tunnels opened up into a cavernous hangar. Tall, creaking wire frame structures loomed overhead where repairs and refits once took place. The metallic shielded dome overhead closed as the last of a trio of shuttles settled onto nearby landing pads.

Each shuttle bore a different symbol of a powerful corporation emblazoned on the side. Doors opened from each and an important figure dressed in fine clothes stepped out. On either side of each executive were a pair of guards, armed to the teeth with high powered weapons, and layered in thick armor.

One executive wore a smart, dark red and black business suit over their sleek, silver, and metallic humanoid frame. Another was a tall, tanned human that wore a striking navy blue blazer and pants over his form-fitting bodysuit that appeared to have armor padding. The last was an imposing humanoid canid of black fur and wore a military uniform of gray and white with an orange beret on her head.

The executives, with their guards, took a spot on the landing pad in front of the gathered workers. A portion of the pad then raised itself up to elevate the group and with a string of soft notes, the loudspeaker broadcast another message.

“Attention valued employees, today is your opportunity to transcend your designations. Before you stands esteemed representatives of prestigious corporations. They await your exemplary performances in your duties. Serve well and prosper accordingly.”

The first of the executives, the MKC Robot, stepped forward and offered a polite bow. The dim light of the hangar reflected off of their polished frame as they evaluated the workers with a cursory glance.

“I am a representative of CyberSun Incorporated”, their synthetic voice intoned. “With us, your value is not merely data. You become the algorithm that drives us.”

They stepped back and the second executive, the human stepped forward.

“You’ve done the hard work. Now build the future. With NanoTrasen, you are given a new frontier to explore and master.”

He stepped back and the canid’s boots echoed in the hangar as she stepped forward. She looked over the workers with a keen, discerning eye.

“Rexhelm does not recruit.” She barked. “We enlist survivors. Those who do not shrink in the face of adversity, heed the call of honor, and bolster the strength of their comrades find a place to call home with us.”

As she stepped back, the loudspeaker crackled to life again.

“Those who are not selected by the shift’s end will be returned to their default assignment. You will not be notified.”

When the loudspeaker clicked off, some of the workers immediately turned to each other and whispered in hushed tones.

Sets-the-Foundation clenched her jaw tight into a hard line with the soft rumble under her breath. The low hum of the air scrubbers masked her voice.

“Hoists.” Sets growled hushed.

The yellow scaled unathi didn’t turn his head but instead lightly thumped his tail to let her know he was listening.

“Divide the crew across our standard maintenance routines,” She continued. “Something’s off.”

“Wh-wh-what do they m-mean about d-default assign-m-ment?” Patches whined.

Sets growled in response and the unathi crew tensed as she narrowed her eyes. She remembered the old ‘termination details’ on the outer hull of the station.

At the sound of a loud klaxon, a metallic echo pounded through the hangar, and the gathered workers dispersed. Their boots thundered across the metal floor as generators and machines thrummed to life while others shouted muffled orders to each other.

Hoists pointed at pairs of the other unathi and they scurried quickly to their assigned stations to start their work. The yellow scaled unathi put his hands on Patches’ shoulders and smiled.

“Y’all are comin’ with me, Patchesss.” He drawled. Then Hoists looked at Sets. “That leaves y’all the odd one out, ma’am.”

Sets looked over her shoulder and saw the canid executive making her way towards her. “I’m sure I’ll manage, Hoists. Patches, keep an eye on him.”

The two saluted and darted off.

As Hoists and Patches ran towards a nearby cargo elevator, one of Patches’ ears twitched and her head turned in the direction of the walking executives. The NanoTrasen representative thumbed a power cell into what looked like an older model laser pistol. As the unathi climbed aboard, she tugged on Hoists’ sleeve.

“Th-the one in d-d-dark blue...they hav-ve a p-pistol.” She frowned.

Hoists looked in the direction of the executives and shrugged. “Don’t worry yer head over it, Patchesss. It’s probably nothin’. Them execs like to be all flashy ssso it’s prolly just to ssshow off.” He hissed. Then he thought better of it. “If’n y’all are concerned, ssstay close to me. I gotcha.” Hoists winked with a smile.

The shy orange scaled unathi smiled back and the pair were jostled inside the cargo elevator as it ascended. The old metallic frame groaned under the duress of being worked again and for a moment the elevator swayed as it locked in place on the top floor.

The pair exited and jogged along a narrow metal catwalk towards what looked like a simple communications array. Hoists ran over to the power generator, swapped out a

battery that had crusted over with discharge for one with slightly less discharge on its connections, and then cranked it up. As the machine whirred to life, Patches pulled out a small PDA from her pocket and jacked into an interface attached to the array.

Hoists and Patches worked together and within moments the array calibrated as it searched for communications lines to connect to. A small dish at the top of the array fanned out and a single airlock opened so that the antenna could stretch up and out to the surface.

Among the loud clanking of gears, the rotation of cogs, and the grinding of metal, undeniable footsteps rang true nearby. Hoists and Patches turned in the direction of the new sound and saw the sharp navy blue uniform of the NanoTrasen executive. The two bodyguards on either side of the executive walked in lockstep, their boots forced more groans from the metal catwalk, and their visors gave no indication of what they were.

The two unathi stood up straight and the executive waved them down.

“There’s no need to be formal. Continue your work. I’m here to observe.” He dismissed. “I will ask questions if I have any.”

Hoists and Patches went back through the checklist of ensuring that the communications array was connected, lined up, and able to transmit.

“You, yellow one.” The executive suddenly interrupted.

Hoists turned to face the man and made sure that his nametag was on clear and on display.

“Explain to me this contraption. Give me a shortened version. I don't need the ins and outs.”

Hoists smiled and held his hands up like he was showing off a prized collection.

“Thisss here’s one of finest communications domes. Thisss bad boy here can transmit all the way out from the underground to the highessst point of orbit for thisss world. Now what we’re doin’ here is-”

“Save it.” The executive huffed. His eyes went to the nametag on the uniform. “Hoists-the-Antenna. You’re taking too long.” He snapped his fingers and pointed at Patches while looking at her nametag. “Patches-the-Channels. Explain to me what you’re doing here. Keep it short.”

“Y-y-es sir. As H-Hoists said, we-”

The executive rolled his eyes and rubbed the bridge of his nose as he sighed loudly.

“I asked for a short explanation. By the time the two of you finish speaking the project will be completed.”
“Hang on now,” Hoists interjected. “We’re just followin’ through what ye asked of usss. If’n ye give us just a sssecond we can make sure all yer inquiries are-”

The executive snapped his fingers and all the air was suddenly driven out of Hoists’s lungs. The butt end of a rifle struck his diaphragm and with a wheeze he dropped to his knees. Hoists’s head clanged off of the metal catwalk and blood started running from his nose. Patches immediately ran over to him.

“Please! Please we’re s-sorry! Just let us explain!” Patches pleaded.

The executive’s face visibly brightened with a condescending smile. “Oh? So the stutter goes away under duress...mostly. That is fascinating.” He took a step forward and put his left hand in his pocket. Patches backed up and her eyes widened with fear as she looked at his covered hand.

He stopped his strides and raised an eyebrow at the orange scaled unathi before realizing. “I see. You’re quite observant, Patches-the-Channels. Though your aim is a little off.”

The executive opened his coat and the laser pistol was on the right side of his body.

“Now that we’ve got that out of the way...Explain. Quickly.”

Hoists coughed and started to stand up before one of the bodyguards stepped over to him. The looming figure cast a dark shadow over the unathi who grit his teeth.

“Is that a hiss I hear? Oh threats just won’t do...” The executive turned his head towards Hoists and the bodyguard raised the butt of his rifle up again.

“It’s an advanced communications array! The channels c-can log in, l-lock on, and send signal nearly in-instantaneous-l-ly!” Patches panted as she tried to interpose herself between the bodyguard and Hoists. “The project w-will allow for the transmission of-f d-data and even aut-autonomo-mously. Information is r-relayed even if a crew is in c-c-critical condition!”

The executive smiled and motioned with his head. The rifle came down with a loud crack, Hoists went down on to the catwalk with a metallic clang and a groan of pain.

“Please stop!” Patches shouted. “I-I already explained! We can d-demonstrate but I need him to h-help me!”

Patches reached for Hoists and then found herself staring down the barrel of a laser pistol.

“Are we interrupting something?” A digitized voice came from the end of the catwalk.

All eyes turned to the new voice and there stood the MKC Robot, the CyberSun executive, with their hands on their hips. Their visor displayed a human expression of curiosity, a synthesized expression with a brow raised.

The NanoTrasen executive slowly put his weapon back into his coat and his guards turned with their weapons held in a defensive posture. The man narrowed his eyes at the MKC executive with their escort and sighed.

“Not at all. Just a miscommunication.” He shrugged.

Patches, with tears in her eyes, reached down to and helped bring Hoists to standing.

Hoists couldn’t take it anymore.

With a roar he lunged for the NanoTrasen executive and grabbed the back of his neck with one hand. He clenched tight and slowly raised the human off of his feet, his muscles shaking, and blood drooled from his mouth.

“Y’all pointed a gun at my crewmember… *my friend!* And that jussst won’t stand…” Hoists growled.

The two NanoTrasen bodyguards turned to face the yellow unathi and with two sharp cracks of energy the CyberSun escort shot the bodyguards with disabler rounds. Electricity arced over their armor plates, crackled, and dropped them to the catwalk, convulsing and unable to act.

The CyberSun executive folded their arms across their chest and watched in silence.

Hoists reached into the executive’s coat pocket and snatched the pistol before tossing it over the railing. With the man struggling, the yellow scaled unathi walked to the other end of the array. He dangled the man over the side and looked down.

The elevator to the array was fifteen stories up. Below them came the sounds of grinding, hungry gears, billowing plumes of hot ash, and the roaring of electrical current through turbines.

“What...the hell do you...think you’re doing?! Get me back on the catwalk...NOW!” The executive screamed.

Hoists let out a low, throaty growl and his tail slapped the catwalk. The crack of his tail against the metal reverberated through his body into the dangling executive. Hoists then looked at the CyberSun executive. They gave a polite half bow, turned around, and their escort retrieved the stunned bodyguards’ weapons.

“We have learned something valuable today…” The MKC executive hummed and waved as they walked away with their escort.

“It takesss a gun to make ya feel like a big man don’ it? You feel like a big man? *Huh? Y’all feel like a big man?!”* Hoists roared.

Patches scrambled up to standing and ran over to Hoists. “Hoists, d-don’t d-do this...it’s not w-worth it. I’m okay...Hoists, p-please, I’m not hurt...”

“Please...we can talk about this. Hoists...you do not want to do this. This will be the worst and last choice you ever make…if you do not put me back on the catwalk…” The executive panted.

“‘Fore I make me a choice, y’all gotta answer me jussst one question. Make it quick now. Don’t want no long, drawn out explanation.” Hoists then pulled the executive close to him as the unathi stared right into the man’s eyes.

“How big an ol’ boy are ya?” He spat. Then Hoists opened his hand and let go.

The NanoTrasen executive screamed.

Patches screamed.

Hoists’s tail shot out and wrapped around the man to catch him. The yellow-scaled unathi drew the executive back onto the catwalk. The man’s eyes were blank. Fear had taken him. He was so certain he was going to die.

Hoists-the-Antenna brushed his sleeves off and wiped his mouth of the dried blood.

“I think that’sss our demonstration fer the day, Patches, mhmm. Let’sss go talk to Sets.” He huffed and marched for the cargo elevator, Patches in tow.

Patches took one last look at the catatonic executive and then grabbed hold of Hoists’s sleeve.

The two unathi came to a sudden halt at the cargo elevator. The CyberSun executive and their escort stood holding the platform. Slow and uneasy, Hoists and Patches walked on to the elevator. The doors groaned as they shut and the platform descended.

The CyberSun executive turned their holographic visage to Hoists and a smile appeared on their display.
“Calculated, controlled, and precise. Well done, Hoists-the-Antenna. I believe that you and I will be having a conversation about your future with CyberSun or one of its conglomerates.”

Hoists smiled at Patches and then motioned with his head towards her.

“What about Patches? Ssshe done did a good job too ya know.”

Patches nervously tightened her grip on Hoists’s sleeve and she looked at the executive.

“We shall have that conversation as well.” The executive dipped their head politely.

Even as the platform descended, Hoists felt his hopes rising. Maybe, just maybe, something good could come from this.

The elevator creaked and swayed as it came to a stop. As the doors opened, the CyberSun executive took their leave and the two unathi followed excitedly.

“Routines all done?” barked out a familiar voice as Hoists and Patches turned to see Sets with her arms folded, a smile on her face. In one of her hands she held an orange military beret.

Hoists and Patches gasped as they ran over to her, their tails swaying with elation.

“Y’all got picked! Y’all got a contract!” Hoists exclaimed with a laugh.

Patches took hold of Sets’ uniform and jumped up and down. “W-we might be getting picked too. Hoists…” Patches trailed off and looked at her friend with concern.

Sets raised a brow and also turned to Hoists. “I jussst had to give some...aggressive tactics fer negotiatin’ that’s all.” He grinned.

Sets sighed and gave Hoists an incredulous look. “Uh huh.” She grunted. “Is it a mess I’m going to have to clean up again?”

Patches tightened her grip on Sets and the sound of a synthesized clearing of throat caught all their attention.

The CyberSun executive stepped forward and offered a tilt of their head. “Forgive the interruption but urgency calls for efficiency. If the two of you will follow me please.” They gestured ahead of them and Sets nodded.

“Go on. Go get selected.” She smiled.
As the two unathi sprinted off towards the CyberSun shuttle, the executive took one step, paused, and then looked back at Sets.

“To answer your question, no, it is not one you will clean up. It is already taken care of.”

Sets blinked, astonished but curious, and she offered a polite nod. The CyberSun executive displayed a professional smile, bowed, and then walked towards their shuttle.

Sets turned to the communications array and took in a deep breath.

“Maybe we’ll all get taken care of…” She sighed.