

I

Walking through the forest on this snowy world was quite peaceful, although the reason the forces of the USS Almayer were deployed here were far from it.

We were called here because there were reports of CLF on the colony, and apparently they got their hands on some sort of dangerous alien life form.

But now charlie squad was fighting at the colony's telecommunications tower, and I was being called over to help. In the meantime, though, I could admire the scenery, and all the creatures that inhabited it.

Through the trees, I spotted an arctic hare, poking its head out of a hole in the snow it had dug for shelter, likely checking for danger before it headed out to eat. The colonists had accidentally released the hares onto the colony, and now it was labeled as an invasive species, preying on local plant populations.

As I walked further through the trees, I almost missed the serene arctic fox, with its beautiful white fur, no doubt on the hunt for the hare I had seen earlier. These foxes were, unlike the hares, introduced on purpose by the colony to help quell the numbers of the ever growing hare population.

But of course, my purpose was not to gaze at the wildlife, but to assist the marines in this operation. As I grew closer to the comms tower, the sound of gunfire became more pronounced, until I finally came upon the combat site.

Charlie squad had set a line of barricades in front of the tower, and were all hunkered behind it as they exchanged gunfire with CLF forces.

Upon seeing me approach, the squad leader turned to me. The hail of bullets was so loud she had to yell just to be heard, "Thank God you're here Willard! Our comtech got shot before he got comms up! We need you to fix it while our medic stabilizes him!"

I nodded and yelled back over the sounds of the firefight, "Don't worry, It'll be up in no time!"

And with that, I walked over to the tower to begin my work.

The combat technician the squad leader had mentioned was slouched against the tower, with a corpsman treating him. By quickly glancing at the tower, I quickly determined that the tech had been able to repair the tower itself before being shot, so I moved to the APC that powered it.

Sure enough, the APC had its wires cut. Most definitely the work of the CLF, but it was a simple fix. With the wires fixed, I moved back to the tower, flicked it on, added the marine's radio channels, then returned to the squad leader.

When I got to her she had just finished returning fire, and was crouching down to reload her rifle. She looked up at me while I said, "Everything should be up and running now ma'am!"

"Yeah I can hear 'em on my radio now. Good work Tin man!"

"Do you need anything else ma'am?"

"I think we—" her voice was interrupted by a sudden grenade explosion just 10 feet in front of the cadeline, showering everyone nearby in dirt and snow. She continued, "I think we're good for now! I bet these CLF bastards are gonna retreat soon!"

The corpsman that was treating the comtech moved to us, "He's stable, but they hurt him real bad," He turned to look at me before continuing, "he's gonna need surgery! Can you do that Willard?"

I replied, "I can, but this area is far too dangerous for it! It would be safer to bring him back to the FOB and treat him there!"

The corpsman nodded and turned back to walk down the cadeline, checking for wounded. The SL turned to me again and yelled, "Alright, since you're heading out, take a marine with you so you don't get ambushed on the way back!" She then turned to a marine who was shooting over the line, and raised her voice even louder to be heard, "Hey Stanley! Go back to base with Willard, make sure you don't get killed!"

The private finished his burst of rifle fire before crouching down and heading our way. I then moved toward the comtech before placing him onto a roller bed, and quickly exiting the area with the private.

As the sound of gunfire around us died down, we slowed down a bit. I periodically checked to make sure the comtech had enough peridaxon in his system.

As we walked back to the FOB through the trees, Stanley turned towards me. “So you’re that animal synth, right?”

“You could say that, yes. I was programmed with all the knowledge that the fields of ecology and biology could offer. Species, ecosystems, anatomies, behaviors, and defense mechanisms. I harbor a deep appreciation for all animal life.”

“Why the hell would the USCM need an animal robot? No offense.”

“None taken. The USCM wanted me because marines deal with animals a lot more than you may think. We travel to many different colonies, each with their own unique ecosystem. It is not uncommon for some hostile indigenous species to require marine intervention, or for an animal to be, accidentally or otherwise, brought on board the Almayer. My knowledge proves invaluable when dealing with situations like those.”

“Alright then, but what if a colony doesn’t have monster problems? You just sit around and do nothing?”

“Of course not, I am proficient in medicine and engineering, among other things. Also, despite being somewhat removed from nature’s traditional influence, humans are still animals. My extensive knowledge of fauna is not inapplicable to humans.”

With that last remark, Stanley tilted his head slightly and furrowed his eyebrows before looking away. He continued to check for hostiles around us while I continued to monitor the condition of the comtech, silent and still on his roller bed.

The beeping of turrets indicated our arrival to the FOB as we stepped out of the forest. I turned to Stanley to thank him, “Thank you for your escort. It was much appreciated.”

“Sure thing,” was the reply, as Stanley quickly hurried away.

I brought the comtech with me behind the safety of the cadelines of the FOB. A groundside doctor had deployed, but a quick peek to his work station revealed that he was busy, so I decided to do the surgery myself. A quick check with an analyzer showed a fractured chest, and it didn’t require a body scanner to tell what organs needed fixing.

I had just finished closing the rib cage after patching up the organs when I heard the familiar sound of a pulse rifle outside the FOB. I quickly fixed the bones and sealed the wound before making one final check to make sure the patient was okay. Moving closer to Stanley, I couldn’t clearly see any target that he was aiming for as he swept his rifle through the trees back and forth as he fired. I was almost five feet from him when he suddenly stopped firing, and dropped to his knees. With that confirmed I put him down on a bed near the doctor’s workstation and hurried out to see the source of the gunfire.

Outside, I could see private Stanley outside the FOB; firing into the treeline by his lonesome. I opened the cadeline marking the edge of the FOB. I looked to make out what Stanley was firing at.

Analysis: Scaly, reddish tan hide. Quadruped. Running speed 26 miles per hour. Four 3-inch claws at the end of each appendage. Front facing eyes.

Conclusion: Species briar wolf. Carnivorous diet. Predator. Hide resistant to normal small arms fire. Recommended deterrent: Armor Piercing ammunition.

INVASIVE SPECIES DETECTED

The briar wolf was on Stanley before he had even fired one full magazine from his MK2 pulse rifle. It pounced on him and slashed his chestpiece, then the side of his face with its long claws. I sprinted to Stanley, now incapacitated, as the creature bit onto Stanley’s arm and began dragging him back into the forest.

Stanley had been well outside the range of the FOB's turrets, and the wolf had dragged him another 30 feet away by the time I reached him.

While briar wolves normally hunt together to take down large prey such as rhynths, they are sometimes known to hunt smaller prey alone, which they bring back to the pack den.

As I got close, the briar wolf let go of Stanley's arm and began to growl at me. Protecting its kill. Alone I would be unable to successfully fight a briar wolf, but if I could collect Stanley and run him back to the FOB, the turrets should be able to ward the predator off. I moved around the wolf and Stanley, making sure to keep my distance, until I was behind the two and facing the FOB.

First I had to buy time to pick Stanley up. I took a step forward and the wolf tensed into a pouncing position. I calculated. I took another step and the wolf pounced. I dodged to the side. While the wolf recovered I quickly scooped up Stanley into a fireman's carry and began sprinting back to the FOB. I could hear the wolf behind me as it broke into a sprint to pursue.

The briar wolf's long claws allow it to dig its den alongside other members of its pack. In this snowy environment it helped it crunch through snow and find purchase on the permafrost below. I heard the crunching of snow and growling grow closer and closer as I ran to beat it to the safety of the turrets.

I burst through the treeline into the open area surrounding the FOB. Only 15 more feet until turret range. Only two marines were patrolling this section of the cadelines, and they both turned to look at the commotion. I kept running. 10 feet. 5 feet. Just as I stepped into range I felt claws dig into my backside. The entire weight of the briar wolf pushed me to the ground. As I fell I shielded Stanley from the blow. With my face pushed to the ground I heard the turrets lock, then fire a stream of bullets. As the turrets fired I began hearing rifle shots in addition, no doubt from the two marines who took notice.

The sustained fire grew too much for the animal, and I felt the weight of it lift off me as it ran back into the forest howling. I picked myself up off the ground and retrieved Stanley before hurrying back inside the cadeling to treat him. I brought

him to the doctor's station and laid him onto a bed before beginning to treat him. The two marines who helped ward off the wolf approached and began asking what happened.

II

Stanley, now conscious, laid in a bed next to the one the comtech rested in. He turned to me and asked, "Hey, how bad does my face look?"

The briar wolf left a line of four parallel claw marks across the right side of his face, beginning near the base of the ear and ending at the right side of his mouth. It had just barely missed his eye. I replied, "I've seen worse before. Not many can say they've survived an attack from a briar wolf. Besides, you'll have an interesting story to tell people back home. Anyways, I must be going now."

The doctor had applied nanopaste to the wound the briar wolf had left on my back, and I thanked him as I left. Now I had to inform command about what happened. I spoke over my radio, "Command this is Willard reporting in, there has been an incident at the Forward Operating Base that might shed some light as to what we are dealing with."

The voice of the commander responded "Go ahead Willard, we're all ears."

"One of the privates at the FOB was attacked by a briar wolf, a non-native species to this planet, it could be that this was the alien species the CLF are thought to be harboring. It could have escaped from the facility during fighting, or might even have been released by the CLF."

I took the time to inform the commander about the briar wolf's resistant hides, as well other characteristics of its biology.

"Alright Will this is some pretty great stuff. I got some new orders for you. Get to alpha squad, they've breached into the colony and are getting close to where we think those aliens are. We need you there."

Following the trail that alpha had created wasn't hard, as it was filled with the bodies of CLF soldiers.

When I made it to alpha squad they were all gathered around an airlock, an engineer fiddling with the door wires.

One private saw me and called to the others, “Oh shit, here comes the treehugger!”

A couple of his friends chuckled when he said it. I looked to the private and said, “I assure you, I am no ‘treehugger’ as you put it. While I do try to avoid violence, I understand that sometimes a life must be taken in order to preserve another, as tragic as that may be.”

“Sure, whatever you say, treehugger.”

More laughter.

The squad leader called out, “Alright, get it together. This is where these alien things are supposed to be. Get ready to blast ‘em as soon as they show their ugly mugs. Make sure you’ve got AP loaded, CIC says it might be some wolves or sumthin.”

The alpha specialist, a pyro, took out his rifle and looked at the SL. “I bet you a twenty it’s fuckin’ bugs.”

“I’ll take you up on that.” He turned to the engineer working on the door, “Hey Jenkins, you ready to blow it open?”

Jenkins readied an access tuner, “On your mark sir.”

“Alright everyone get your weapons ready!”

I stood behind the men as they all trained their rifles on the door. All chatter went quiet as we waited.

“Pop it open, Jenkins!”

Jenkins pulsed a wire and the door flew open, revealing utter darkness.

I stood watching, waiting for any sign that would allow me to identify the creatures. Then, through the door, I could hear faint chittering slowly growing louder.

Immediately I began processing the noises through my memory banks. Within a second I had identified the threat.

The SL turned to the squad smartgunner, and told him, “**NVGs on, give us a visual.**”

The smartgunner nodded and reached up to turn his headset on. I turned to the SL to inform him.

“**I’ve identified the creatures, it’s a species of-**”

The smartgunner’s eyes widened as he saw through the darkness, and he yelled out, “**BUUGS.**”

All at once every marine began firing into the gap, the gunfire deafening. Through the door, massive eight legged spiders the size of large dogs came rushing through. Bullets flew every which way in an attempt to stop the spider tide before they reached the marines. One managed to get close enough to leap onto a marine and sink its fangs into his arm before being shot off by another marine.

The SL yelled, “**Spec, flame the damn door!**”

The specialist rushed to holster his rifle and pull out his flamethrower. Once he did, he moved forward and expelled a wave of fire in front of him, covering the door. With the flow of spiders staunch, I moved to help the bitten marine, now fallen on the floor.

The SL turned to Jenkins, “**Seal that door back up before the fire dies!**”

Jenkins hurried to comply while I crouched down to treat the injured marine, the one who referred to me as a treehugger. I could see from his dog tag that his

name was Liam. He looked up to me and asked, “How in the fuck did the CLF get giant fucking spiders?!”

“That is currently unknown, please keep still while I stop the bleeding.”

I pulled out a kit from my lifesaver bag and applied it to his arm before giving him a pill of dylovene. I kept looking at Liam while I talked to command through my headset.

“Major, Alpha has made contact with the creatures. Its species is a type of arachnid, much larger than that found on Earth. They carry venom and are very territorial. Fire is an effective weapon to use against them.”

I could feel my radio buzz as the major replied, “I hear you Willard. Got any more info for us?”

“Yes sir. For an arachnid to reach such incredible size, it most likely required a large increase of oxygen in its environment, much like what led to the size increase of arthropods during Earth’s Carboniferous period. We could attempt to suffocate the spiders by enclosing them in their den.”

“That’s a great idea Willard. We’ll see if we can get something organized. Keep an ear out for orders soon.”

“Of course, Major. I will keep you informed on anything else we learn.”

Liam looked up to me and asked, “Wait, those things are poisonous? Am I gonna lose my arm?”

“Don’t worry, the pill I gave you will neutralize the toxin. Also, they’re venomous, not poisonous.”

“Yeah, whatever, just keep me alive, robot.”

I nodded and looked at the rest of the marines while I continued working. Jenkins managed to seal the door, and was now attempting to weld it to keep it that way.

The members of alpha squad were all reloading their guns and checking their reserves while the SL received orders from his headset.

The SL looked to his marines and relayed the orders, “Command says to stay put and wait for Charlie and Delta to get here. When they do, we’ll surround the place and weld shut all the air vents and doors. We’re gonna starve ‘em out.”

I finished up with Liam before quickly moving around the rest of the squad, making sure no one else was injured. Once I confirmed that no one was hurt I went back to Liam, who was now sitting against the wall. When he saw me he rose to his feet and said, “Hey, thanks for patching my leaks and all.”

I decided to pry about the comments he made earlier, and asked, “How do you define a treehugger?”

He furrowed his eyebrows as he thought, then he opened his eyes wide and snapped his fingers as he said, “ah, you know that older synth model, uh I think its name is like River or something?”

“Yes, I know about that line.”

“Yeah well it’s exactly like that! Always goin’ on about ‘mother nature’ and yoga. Oh hey, eat this shitass tofu because meat comes from like, living creatures, man. Ya gotta be more in touch with the spirits or the chakras or whatever the hell. People like that annoy the living shit outta me.”

“What exactly is wrong with that kind of thinking? Granted I am not one to believe in spirits or chakras myself.”

“Cause they’re always tryna push shit onto you. Why should I change what I eat ‘cause some animal died to give it to me? That’s what we’ve done since we were cavemen. Why should I ‘do my part’ to save some endangered animal somewhere? Shit goes extinct all the time, it’s the way the cookie crumbles, no point in tryin’ to guilt trip something that’s gonna happen anyway.”

“Well, I think it’s in people’s nature to try and better the world they live in, one way or another. They just have different ideas on how to get there, or what that world looks like.”

“Maybe, but shit like that is pointless to try and change. Humans will always eat meat and animals will always go extinct, that’s how it was and will be.”

“I wouldn’t say that so soon. Ancient humans looked at the great oceans of Earth and some said, ‘we’ll always drown if we try to swim across it, and that’s how it will always be.’ Later, humans looked at the stars and some said, ‘we’ll never have the technology to fly to distant worlds,’ now look where we are. Even if it wasn’t possible to change the way things work, why would it be wrong to get others to try?”

“Cause they’re just some animals, man, who cares?”

My headset once again began buzzing as command gave me new orders: “Head back shipside, the marines should be able to handle themselves now. We need to figure out how the CLF got ahold of these things, and you’re gonna be a big help with that. It’s clear this is a much larger operation than we first thought.”

I responded, “Right away.”

Liam stared at me, silent. Before I turned to the SL to tell him I was leaving, I told Liam one more thing, “All beings deserve life, even the ones that you might deem lesser than you. I’m sure that if another creature out there saw you as lesser, you would want them to think the same way too.”

Another quiet walk alone through the wilderness. The CLF force had been wiped out, so I didn’t need anyone to escort me back to the FOB. However, I did keep an ear out for that briar wolf, just in case it was still lurking through the forest.

The only sounds were that of the snow crunching beneath my feet, and the wind as it rushed between the trees of the forest. Plenty of time to reflect and contemplate how this guerilla force managed to get their hands on such dangerous creatures. Maybe they took them offworld and brought them here. They could have bought them off some sort of black market. Or they could have-

A loud cry cut through the trees. My processing identified it as in pain and non-human, but it didn't match with any of the sounds the briar wolf before had made. The source wasn't too far away from the path back to the FOB, and I found it quickly. The arctic fox I had seen earlier, with its pristine white fur, with one of its hind legs trapped in what seemed to be a foothold trap. Similar to a beartrap, but much smaller and not serrated. Most likely it was set out by CLF either to hunt animals, or to distract the enemy to get a clean shot. As I approached, the fox noticed me and went still.

I crouched down to make myself less intimidating and spoke quietly, "Hello little one." I reached my hand toward it, and it began to growl. I pulled my hand back. "It's alright, let me help you." I pulled my jacket off and put it over the fox's head to prevent it from biting me while I opened the trap. While it attempted to get the jacket off of itself, I quickly placed my hands on both sides of the trap and pressed the springs down, releasing the fox, which immediately jumped out. Now free from the trap and from my jacket, it looked back at me. I picked my jacket back up, and I watched as the fox turned and began moving further into the forest.

I put my jacket on and began my trek back again, a smile wide across my face as I traveled through the silent forest.