

The opossum in the perfluorocarbon tank stirred, took a quick look around, then made a call on his BCI. Both Brom and Tanya saw the call notification on their HUDs, Horizon, who'd been exploring her own BCI, picked up first and subvocalized her words.

Horizon: Finally, you're awake!

MechRat: Tanya? Is that you? Where am I?

Horizon: Relax, you can breathe, it's perfluorocarbon. It'll drain out in a few minutes.

MechRat: The breathable liquid? I'd heard some clinics and high-g ships used it to keep people alive, where are you?

Horizon stood up from the table where she'd been sitting and grabbed a robe, she'd already figured out how to reconfigure the smart fabric of her own into a jumpsuit using her BCI's wireless interface. She walked up to MechRat's tube and waved at him.

Horizon: We got up hours ago. What took you so long?

MechRat: Hours? Really? What kind of augs did you get?

Horizon: Well, I got a BCI, like you. Also I heal fast, my bones are made out of memory metal, my reflexes are a lot faster, I can pilot this ship with my mind, blunt force barely even hurts me, and I can stay conscious in space for an hour.

MechRat: An hour, really? Most spacer mods can only handle ten minutes.

Another icon in the call menu lit up, indicating Brom had finally entered. "Hey, how do you guys speak without moving your lips?" They heard it both audibly and in the BCI call.

MechRat: Try to think about saying it without actually talking, it's simple.

Lift: Really? Just like that?

MechRat: Yes, like that?

Lift: You heard that? Guess I should be more careful about what I think now.

Horizon: I would say so. We were just discussing our augs, what about you?

Lift: Uh, I'm a lot stronger than I was before, it says there's some sort of machines in my blood, I think that's armor under my skin, oh and there's mention of an exoskeleton? Maybe I'm getting a new powerlifter?

MechRat: So it sounds like we've all got a BCI and leukosynths, that makes sense considering they are supposed to have been ubiquitous in the Federation. It looks like they removed my old one completely and inserted a bank of processors running down my spine. Silvers! I could brute force hack my way into the Jord federal bank now.

Horizon: Is that all?

MechRat: No, there's something here called "morphic tools."

The opossum held a hand up in front of his face, and before his eyes his fingers began to split open revealing an array of small picks and graspers that changed configurations as he focused.

MechRat: So I'm the engineer, Tanya's a better pilot, and Brom is muscle. You seen the rich kid and his pet bird yet?

Horizon: Yes, Corus woke up right after I did, apparently Lupine's our commander.

MechRat closed the call after that, they just stood there in silence until his tube finished draining. Once it opened he took the robe from Horizon and threw it on, seconds later it transformed into a jumpsuit and turned a more familiar dark blue shade. "Run that by me again?" He asked, out loud.

Horizon explained what Lupine had told them about the crew dying in transit and the ship apparently designating him the new mission commander. “Huh,” he thought out loud. “That’s certainly suspicious.”

“What?” Horizon asked. “You think he’s lying?”

“I’d be more worried if he wasn’t.” MechRat replied. “Did he say what kind of augs he got?”

“Actually, no, I don’t think he did.” Lift considered.

The opossum thought some more, “okay, okay. What did the simulation show you?”

Tanya cringed. “Death, devastation, planets and ships alike left in ruin. Refugee arks going through wormholes and getting raided by pirates. I’d rather not think about it please.”

“Wormholes?” Lift asked. “All I saw was some pirates getting blown up and this ship getting launched.”

“Huh,” thought MechRat. “Well, it might just be that my implants were more complicated so it had to keep my mind occupied longer, but I saw a lot more than that.” He nervously looked around the medical bay, making sure they were alone before lowering his voice. “But until I figure it out, be careful what you say over the network.”

“Any particular reason why?” Horizon asked.

A bright red icon flashed over all their HUDs and they all heard a voice in their heads.

EyeInTheSky: All crew report to the bridge, we have a Class C emergency.

A map appeared in the corner of their HUDs and showed a path through the ship’s winding corridors to the bridge. MechRat sighed. “That’s why, because at least one of them could have admin access.”

With the alert icon continuing to blink, the trio strolled casually down the corridor, following the path indicated on the map. The door to the medbay appeared to fit almost seamlessly into the white corridor walls, as they walked they found they could spy the other doors only as the thinnest of hairline cracks. The corridor appeared to be a smooth white plastic cylinder, with a flat floor that provided the most imperceptible traction for their feet. Around one corner Horizon spotted movement and turned to take a closer look. A spider-like robot sprayed some gelatinous material into a gaping crack in the wall. Her curiosity satisfied she dashed back to her friends as they rounded the last turn up to the bridge.

Lupine swiveled in his chair to look at them as they approached. “Finally awake are we, Mr. Didelph?” He commented.

Corus was flitting around a large tank in the middle of the room, in which floated a holographic model of what Horizon recognized as the Tiere system. The raven stole an impatient glance in the scrappers’ direction, then pointed a wing at a red icon departing Skadi’s L4 point. “We received a distress call from a small habitat in this cluster.”

She made a gesture and a flat mechanical voice played from the speakers. “This is habitat Stouton requesting assistance from all ships in range. We have suffered a hull breach, estimated ten hours twenty-six minutes until complete integrity collapse. Estimated survivors: one thousand, two hundred and sixty-three; revision: one thousand, two hundred, and sixty-one.”

“How fast can this ship go?” Horizon asked, to whomever could answer.

“The gravity drive was capable of cruising at 297,000 kilometers per second at full power.” Lupine replied. “Unfortunately with the damage it took we can only manage a quarter that speed now.”

Horizon gasped. “That’s over 99% of the speed of light!” She exclaimed. “Even at a quarter that we could make it in less than seven hours.”

“You’re assuming it can accelerate to that speed at the drop of a hat.” MechRat interjected. His eyes glazed over for a few seconds before he spoke up again. “Huh, guess it can do that, even compensate for inertia so we’re not reduced to red slime.”

Lupine seemed to take notice of MechRat’s blue jumpsuit then. “Aren’t you a bit out of uniform, engineer Didelph?”

MechRat held up a corner of his outfit. “Relax, it’s the same thing the rest of you are wearing. I just changed the color to something that looks better with grease stains.” Abruptly, the jumpsuit turned white, causing the opossum to jump back a step. “Okay, fine, I was going to change it back anyways.”

The wolf oligarch ignored him and returned his attention to the holo-tank. “Returning to the situation at hand. Should we even bother trying to render assistance to this little fringe station?”

“Are you serious?” MechRat gasped in shock. “This is one of the most basic rules of spacer life. If a non-hostile ship is in danger, and it’s at all possible, you render assistance!”

Lupine snorted and turned to his secretary. “Ms. Corus, would you mind explaining why that is a bad idea?”

She sighed and pointed to the holo-tank. “First of all, the area has a great deal of loose debris flying about. The *Resolution* suffered catastrophic damage that killed the entire crew from impacting a small rock at near-light speed.” A bullet point and the word “debris” wrote itself on the hologram. “Second, we’d be revealing ourselves and our technology to everyone in the Tiere system if we went to help, that would make us a target for every pirate and raider within a light-year. Third, though I admit it’s very unlikely, there’s a possibility that this could be a trap.”

Horizon considered the three points and gazed back at her HUD menu, accessing the vehicular control rig system. There was a general systems readout for the *Resolution*, and another tab for the *Dustbin* that indicated control systems were being installed in their old ship as well. The exostellar craft’s menu also displayed one large button that read “integrate.” She focused on the icon, only for a warning to pop up: “caution, do not attempt full nervous system integration while standing. Please be seated or lying down first.” Tanya noticed then a reclined chair that seemed to be made up of gel bags.

“Look.” MechRat continued to object. “You think any other spacers are going to be running that same “cost-benefit analysis” on saving them? We’re not flatlanders, we don’t have the luxury of treating people as abstract concepts. Those are our people out there.”

“Doesn’t stop you from fighting so much among yourselves, does it?” Lupine retorted, but Horizon ignored him. Instead she strode over to the gel-bag chair and sat down.

The gel moved around her body, shifting to support her joints and hold them snugly in position. It was the most comfortable chair she’d ever sat in. Now that she was sitting down, she thought, there wasn’t any reason not to integrate was there?

In a matter of seconds the bridge faded from view, replaced by a view of open space. For a moment, Horizon was concerned that she no longer felt her arms, legs, tail, or neck; but as her consciousness expanded new sensations came to replace them. Sensors in every wavelength known to Terran life, docking arms, weapons banks, gravity engines, the primitive but oddly familiar ship docked to her side. It dawned on her, she was the *Resolution* now. New instincts came to the forefront, drives to preserve her hull integrity and the knowledge to operate her systems. She saw the maps her sensors had made of every scrap and pebble in the Tiera system and made threat assessments of the Jordian and Logan navies.

“Tanya!” She heard MechRat’s concerned voice. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” Horizon reassured him.

“You sure?” He asked again. “You just laid down and went all glassy-eyed and...”

“Why did your voice come out of that speaker?” Lift added.

A mental nudge prompted a small window displaying an overhead view of the bridge to appear. The opossum was standing next to her but turning his head towards the camera, where the bull was already staring. Her own body was lying on, or rather in, the gel chair which had now reclined and swelled up to partially enclose her extremities. Horizon paused for a minute, trying to formulate her answer. “I found another thing my implants can do.” She settled on. “It appears I can integrate my nervous system with the ship. It’s like I am the *Resolution* now.”

“Can you de-integrate?” MechRat asked.

Horizon could see the icon for logging out, but wasn’t ready yet to do so. “I believe so, but first...” She pulled up the holo-tank’s display and plotted a course from their current position to the station in distress. “My radar will give me plenty of advance warning of debris so long as I’m under .5c.” She highlighted a rock half a meter in length that the course curved around. “And the gravity drives can turn on a dime.” Then she added threat assessments to the map, there was nothing rated higher than “low” out past Surt. “And I can take on a JSF battle group, on the slim chance that this is an ambush we’ll be perfectly fine.”

“I still refuse to show our hand so soon.” Lupine objected again. “If we appear with this sort of technology now, before we’ve built up our forces sufficiently, my House’s enemies will target my close kin.”

“We could easily conceal our identities.” Corus added, much to Horizon’s surprise. “The spacesuits this ship fabricated for us can be set to hide our faces and species to a reasonable extent. And it would not hurt to have already built up some good will when the time comes to reveal ourselves to the system.”

The wolf growled softly under his breath. Tanya wasn’t sure she would have picked it up without the security mics of her ship body. “And how, pray tell, might we develop good will without revealing our identities?”

“Easy, we use pseudonyms.” MechRat interjected. “I’ve got a couple dozen alternate identities on different networks. We can probably use our ship nicknames, it’ll be easy to remember at least. Though you two newcomers will probably need to think of some. EyeInTheSky seems a bit unwieldy.”

“Fine,” said Corus. “How about I shorten it to Eye?”

The security camera spotted Lift and MechRat shrugging. Lupine sighed, “fine then. I’ll be “Princeps.” Be sure to remember that if we’re really going on this mission.”

“Helmswoman Horizon requesting permission to go underway, Princeps.” Horizon requested as formally as she could manage.

Princeps followed the course she’d plotted in the holo-tank with his eyes for a few moments, then nodded. “If anyone asks, we’re representatives of the Federation reborn. Leave further details to me.” He leaned back in his chair, or was it a throne? “Now go already.”