

Horizon could not find the words to describe the sensation of her flight at a quarter the speed of light. The closest equivalence her personal experience held for it would be this one time she had been convinced to try a sport airfoil on Surt. It had been a primitive vehicle, no radar, no AI assist, not even electronic controls. When she wanted to turn she'd had to physically move a mechanical control yoke in the direction she wanted to go. When she'd looked down she was able to see the landscape moving below her. It was a far cry from computerized space flight where the only indicator of one's progress was a countdown on a monitor. She knew, intellectually, that the *Resolution* employed sensors and AI systems far in advance of any other ship she'd flown, and that she could only perceive movement thanks to her extreme velocity and long-reaching "eyes."

They zipped past planetoids, homing in on the tiny habitat of Stouton. As the station swelled in her view Horizon could spy the debris cloud expanding out from it. At a light-minute out she slowed the *Resolution* to a more conventional speed for near-station maneuvers, she could ascertain that an explosion had occurred in one of the residential sections. "We've arrived," she announced on the intercom.

"Very well," replied Princeps. He gestured to the holo-tank and issued orders. "Give me a comm line to the station's disaster relief center."

"There does not appear to be any centralization to their efforts." Eye reported. "They're all calling in to a single emergency channel and then forming task groups."

Princeps snorted in derision. "Fine then. I suppose that'll make it easier to disguise our presence. Inform them we've come to assist."

"Acknowledged." Horizon heard the raven's next statement through their comm channels.

EyeInTheSky: Stouton, this is the *Resolution*, we're here to assist.

Boldfavor: Didn't see you there, debris is a little thick here. Afraid we don't have room for you until we clear it out.

Eye: Is there anything we can do to speed that up?

Coldwin: No blasting! I mean, don't shoot anything, some hotheads tried that before and only made the problem worse. If you've got a spare salvage net or something like that we could use it though.

System readouts popped into Horizon's view before she could consciously think of them. She wasn't even sure how she knew, but she recognized one virtual control panel as guiding the invisible force that had pulled the *Dustbin* towards their current ship.

Horizon: We have something like that, keep clear of the sectors on this map.

A hypertechnology array built into the very superstructure of the Federation ship projected streams of dark energy onto a point in open space a thousand kilometers ahead of them. Slowly, small bits of floating debris coalesced upon the point, attracted by its artificially produced gravity. As the *Resolution* was pulled forward by a similar point projected just in front of the ship Horizon swept the dark energy she was using to clear debris from one concentration of junk to another, accumulating a growing ball of scrap metal.

They approached, closer and closer, things seemed to be going well, they thought they might be in the clear. Then a new alarm beacon came on. **WARNING: Structural integrity failure imminent Sector Y-4**, the location pinged on their readout, showing a section on the habitat wheel close to their ship.

Boldfavor: Dammit, *Resolution*, tell me you've got fresh life bubbles! We're all out.

Eye: Internal inquiry, EVA team status?

MechRat: Suited up and fueled with a dozen bubbles fresh off the printer. This ship is amazing!

Eye: Excellent, prepare for launch in 60 seconds.

Horizon targeted a section of the habitat that was close to the critical region, but in much better shape. She loaded a course that avoided the worst of the debris into MechRat and Lift's spacesuits and opened the cargo bay airlock. They used simple cold-gas EVA thrusters to exit the airlock and head out towards the entry point indicated. It felt weird, tiny sentient beings living inside her body, even if she knew intellectually that her body was really a ship that was just connected to her biological body on a neurological level.

Her radar pinged off a hull plate just as it came loose from the station wheel, centripetal force sent it spinning towards her crewmates. She had no time to warn them, and it was too small to direct a tractor at it, reviewing her options quickly she decided and acted without warning.

The opossum and ox lurched back in space just in time for the hull plate to go sailing past them, their microjets firing in reverse without their bidding. Their responses were immediate.

Lift: What the heck? Why am I going backwards? Whoa! That was close.

MechRat: Princeps? Horizon? Was that one of you?

Horizon: Sorry, there was no time to say anything, overriding your controls was the fastest option.

MechRat: Honestly, you're not the worst person I could imagine entrusting with that sort of power.

Princeps: Focus on the mission, this is still a very dangerous environment, don't waste time and attention on idle chatter.

MechRat (Private message): That guy, for one.

Horizon (Private Message): He is right though, please focus on staying alive.

The two scrappers turned rescuers continued jetting towards the wounded space station and pulled out magnetic grapplers. Within a meter of the station hull they turned their jets off and the grapplers on and let the magnetic forces pull them onto the side of the habitat. Carefully they crept along the outer hull towards the cracking segment. A jet of fog leaking out of a new crack gave them pause, but the sealing of the hole with spacer's putty both relieved them with the indication of living people on board and motivated them further to reach them before they ran out of air. Finally MechRat stopped and pointed at a section of the hull.

MechRat: Lift, tap on that but be very careful not to break it in.

Lift: I know what I'm doing.

The ox brought one armored fist down on the stressed hull metal, causing it to buckle inwards. Surprised, he jerked his arm back and nearly lost his balance on the hull.

Lift: Okay, maybe I don't yet.

MechRat: You've got augmented strength and a powered exoskeleton with very little training. You're lucky you didn't cause another hull breach.

The cybernetic opossum pulled a couple devices out of his suit's tool belt and strung a wire from his helmet to a box-shaped microphone/speaker in his hand. He pressed it up against a thin patch on the hull and waited for a minute.

MechRat: I can hear at least three voices in there, two of them shouting in panic, the third seems to be trying to calm them down.

Princeps: That is not ideal, panicked civilians are unpredictable. Try to calm them.

MechRat: I can try, switching speaker on now. THIS IS THE *RESOLUTION*, WE'RE RIGHT OUTSIDE! WE'VE GOT LIFE BUBBLES!

Several seconds passed as MechRat listened for a response. After about a minute he spoke to them again. Following multiple exchanges through the hull he readdressed the rest of the crew.

MechRat: Okay, here's the situation. There's four adults and about a dozen cubs in there. Seems like it was part of their creche. Unfortunately the only airlock in their section has a busted inner door and the safety locks sealed the outer one.

Horizon: Shit, any of them have spacer mods?

MechRat: The cubs and all but one of the adults, though they don't want to risk more than a minute of vacuum exposure for the little ones.

Princeps: So we cannot save them?

MechRat: That depends, how powerful are our lasers?

Horizon: You'd better not be thinking what I think you're thinking.

Horizon sent over the data regardless, and though she had doubts about the plan Princeps approved it. MechRat warned the occupants to hyperventilate for a minute and move away from a 2 by 2 meter square on the hull, then Horizon used a low-power laser to carefully cut a hole big enough for Lift to fly through with the life bubbles. MechRat then directed Lift towards an aging rabbit and three small cubs of varying species and the two stuffed them into the airtight polymer sacks they'd brought, fitting the three cubs into a single bag. Once they'd sealed the bubbles and opened the attached air bottles they floated over to the remaining cubs and their space-adapted caretakers. The remaining adults helped herd the other cubs into life bubbles before getting into their own, through her crewmates' helmet-cams Horizon watched a deer hybrid slip into torpor before Lift threw a bubble over her.

MechRat: That's all of them, Lift you get the old guy and the sprouts over to Resolution ASAP. They could use our medical tech.

Lift: On it.

Princeps: Fix them up and move them to whichever ship is taking the refugees. Eye, inform the other ships that we're taking in wounded for treatment.

Eye: Understood, relaying message.

Boldfavor: That's some good news, you've got some impressive tech there, glad you're using it to help us.

Coldwin: We picked up a few people who were in vacuum for over an hour, they appear to be in torpor but haven't woken up in hours. Think you could take a look at them?

Horizon: Commander, we have the best chance of being able to help those people out of any ship in this area, I think we should give it a shot.

There was a long pause before Princeps responded. The silence gave Horizon a funny feeling, as if something was snaking through her guts, searching for her secrets. She focused on the cameras for the

hallway leading from the cargo bay to the medical bay, Lift was carrying the two life bubbles of survivors as if they were filled with nothing but air, despite one of them squirming a little. When he got to the medbay and set them down on a couple beds the dedicated medical AI dropped armatures from the ceiling that cut the sealed bags open and began examining the occupants. The old rabbit was still unconscious, and a voice from the ceiling directed Lift to set him in one of the perfluorocarbon tubes. While one of the cubs leapt off the bed and started running around the room, pursued by a ceiling robot attempting to take his temperature.

Curious, Horizon attempted to access the medbay AI to find out what procedures it intended to perform, only to be rebuffed by a “not authorized” message. She tried to inquire who had access, which prompted a request for administrator credentials. Which was when Princeps finally made a decision.

Princeps: This is Princeps, commander of the Federal Star Paladins assigned to Tiere System. We will provide medical assistance to all injured survivors. Though we make no guarantees we may be able to resuscitate some of the recently deceased as well. We can accommodate no more than 50 survivors at a time though, please form an orderly queue for transfer and re-uptake.

Horizon was surprised by the change of heart in their oligarchic leader, and couldn't help but feel some suspicion. As he made this announcement her cameras caught the medical robots injecting screaming cubs with some gray substance she could not identify.