

The *Resolution* finished docking with the remnants of Stouton station and Horizon gradually withdrew her consciousness from the ship systems. In a matter of minutes she was reduced from the genius loci of the most powerful ship within a light-year, to just Tanya, small-time scrapper pilot. As she leaned forward in her very comfortable pilot's chair the stiffness of her joints and an uncomfortable pressure on her bladder reminded her of how long she'd been lying there. Idly, she wondered what would have happened if she'd been plugged in for a full day, and immediately wished she hadn't.

After tossing aside a video of her chair's waste disposal systems she wondered where the nearest lavatory was and directions popped up in her head. As she headed over, she called MechRat.

Horizon: Do you have a minute?

MechRat: I'm working on a couple projects here, but I can talk. What's up?

Horizon: Did you know that my pilot's chair is equipped with "auto-burrowing catheters?"

MechRat: ...

MechRat: I don't want to look that up do I?

Horizon: Well I didn't really have a choice. I wondered how long I could stay linked in, and my implants played a video showing how the chair can dispose of waste in graphic detail.

MechRat: Did you use it?

Horizon: NO!

MechRat: Okay, sorry. It sounds like you've got a shadow AI in your implant. Really, it explains a lot.

Horizon: What do you mean by "shadow AI?"

MechRat: Okay, so most BCI implants contain some sort of basic AI assistant to help the user. They can run data searches for you, suggest a particular course of action or tool to use, even warn you about dangers in your peripheral vision. Mine's named "Mic."

Horizon: So what's a shadow AI?

MechRat: Some users want their AI assistant to be as unobtrusive as possible, so they get an AI that operates as a secondary subconscious mind of sorts. Reviewing search results feels like recalling a memory, its suggestions seem like your own ideas, it hijacks your reflexes to make you jump out of the way of a falling crate, that kind of thing.

Horizon: That's what's in my head now? Sounds terrifying.

MechRat: It's not that different from your own subconscious, you don't exactly think about kicking when the doctor taps your knee or about every single muscle movement when you take a walk. Still, there's a reason I went with Mic when I got my first implant.

That gave Horizon pause. Back when she'd flown her first spaceship she had to work hard to remember which controls she needed to use and when, and had to plan out every little maneuver well in advance. Now it was all reflex, she ran through the sequences without thinking and "eyeball-maneuvered" fairly often. But when she interfaced with the *Resolution* she didn't need to train in its operation, she just plugged in and knew how to run the ship as if it were part of her own body.

Horizon: That does explain a few things. How do I get it to stop showing me gross videos though?

MechRat: It should learn your preferences over time. I might be able to change some of your settings though so it doesn't open those things automatically.

Horizon: Can you shut it down?

MechRat: Shut it down? Are you sure? Can you even fly this ship without it?

Horizon: Well, no, probably not. But, could you turn it off while I'm not flying?

MechRat: I can try, give me remote access and I'll see what I can do.

Several menus flashed before Tanya's eyes, and just as she was finishing up in the lavatory MechRat informed her that he'd changed her shadow's settings. Before hanging up he gave her instructions on how to restart it, but advised that it would take several minutes to boot up.

As soon as she exited the head she ran into EyeInTheSky, the raven looked impatient. "Pilot," she commanded. "Your presence is requested at the primary airlock in five minutes. We are meeting with what amounts to leadership on this station."

Horizon twitched uncomfortably at Eye's derision of Belter social dynamics, she was almost afraid to see how her boss might handle the meeting. "I'll be there." She confirmed instead.

"Be sure to wear a helmet." Eye added, striding away on her spindly bird legs.

Within a minute Horizon found a disc the size of her palm and twice as thick that was labeled "respirator helmet" and spent several minutes afterward trying to figure out how it worked. There were several flaps and ports on the device, but no visible buttons or controls. Fortunately, a minute before the deadline Lift and MechRat showed up, their heads covered by form-fitting masks of silvery material with polarized lenses that concealed their eyes. MechRat snorted when he saw Horizon struggling with her helmet device. "Bit difficult without your shadow, isn't it?"

Horizon shot him a judging look, "just tell me how to use this thing, okay?" She said with annoyance.

She could swear he was rolling his eyes under his mask. "Okay, first open your implant's available connections." Horizon blinked, and a floating window appeared next to the device in her hand reading "emergency respirator: pair device?" She focused on the "pair" option and a second later another window appeared giving more options.

"Okay," she said. "It's paired, what next?"

"Hold it a centimeter from your nose and select deploy mask on the menu." MechRat advised her.

Horizon did so, and a set of ports on the side facing her face opened up. A silvery mist flowed out of the device and around her head. Her implant advised her to "remain calm" but it was difficult to hold still while a swarm of what she realized must be nanobots covered her head. Fortunately, the mist coalesced into a solid material before long, and formed clear lenses over her eyes. The device she'd initially activated now seemed integrated with the mask, and she felt confident enough to let go of it. A new readout in the corner of her vision indicated that she had eight hours of oxygen remaining at current levels of exertion.

"About time you got yourself ready." Horizon turned to spy Princeps and Eye approaching the airlock door. Eye was wearing a respirator much like the others, but Princeps wasn't. Instead, he had bleached his fur from its prior gray and tan hues to solid white. "I understand you might not be particularly attentive to your appearances, but that doesn't mean the people we're meeting won't be. We cannot afford to be recognized."

Horizon turned away to stare at the airlock door and stand at what she hoped looked like attention, trying to ignore how uncomfortable her helmet-mask felt. Her discomfort must have been noticeable as she got a BCI message from MechRat.

MechRat: I'm working on a device that can cover our faces with a lifelike hologram. I've got enough processing power in my implants but the rest of you are still a challenge.

Horizon: Keep me updated.

The airlock door slowly unsealed itself, revealing seams that previously had been invisible to the naked eye. The group entered a small chamber with an equally well-sealed door at the far end and waited as the inner door closed back up. Air cycled out of the lock until they were at equilibrium with the station on the other side, then the outer door finally opened to reveal the rather rusty-looking outer airlock of Stouton station. They heard the thuds of multiple bolts before the door itself gave way to the station on the far side.

"Huh?" Lift looked around in confusion. The inner airlock door was wide open, safety locks should have prevented that, but a malfunction like that was practically to be expected on a station so damaged. It wasn't until she looked downwards that she came to share the bull's alarm.

Half a dozen unmoving figures were sprawled across the floor. All of them with graying fur or similarly fading feathers and scales. None of them were visibly breathing, but Horizon was experienced enough to know that wasn't a guaranteed sign of death in a region of space where oxygen mods were commonplace. She leapt forward to help them without a moment's thought of what could have caused their state.

A feeling at the back of Tanya's hindbrain attempted to warn her, but she reacted too slowly and a needle-dart sank into her chest just as she was trying to duck. Looking around for the attackers she spied Princeps, MechRat, and Eye lying prone on the floor in defensive crouches while Lift stood with a heavy arm raised, two darts sticking out of it. MechRat yanked a dart out of the stiffened fabric of his jumpsuit, "armor mode!" He shouted, accompanied by a digital signal.

Horizon felt her own jumpsuit turn rigid around her torso and limbs, though the joints remained flexible. The smart fabric forced the dart out but she noticed to her horror that unlike the one that hit MechRat, there was a spot of blood on the tip. An alert popped into her view informing her that her leukosynths had detected a toxin, while they attempted to identify it Tanya felt her chest grow numb. Her respirator's oxygen readout jumped wildly, first dropping due to elevated stress levels, then rising due to rapid onset paralysis. She tried to get back up to her feet, stagger back through the airlock into the ship, like her crewmates.

Eye leapt to her feet and flapped wildly back across the airlock. Lift stood tall, letting his armor absorb the following shots. MechRat scrambled on all fours back into the safe haven of the *Resolution* while Princeps calmly stood in Lift's shadow, his lapels rising to form an improvised face shield. Horizon took an unsteady step towards the airlock, then another.

A cord that felt as strong as a titanium bar coiled around Tanya's waist, wrapping itself tight in a way that only micro-servos could do. She was yanked off her feet and dragged across the floor, away from the ship. Lift started to reach towards her, only to stiffen when another voice shouted "retreat!" And then to slowly walk backwards into the airlock.

In a panic, Tanya kicked out, her foot connecting with a hazy figure that appeared to be the same color as the station wall behind it. *Adaptive camouflage!* She realized, whoever had snagged her was much better equipped than your average poor Belters. But they didn't give her time to wonder who could be so equipped, another figure stomped down on her free leg and bent it at an odd angle. Tanya screamed

in pain as her lower leg should have broken, but the alloys the Federation ship had replaced her bones with bent instead. Another figure, or possibly the same one, pinned her arms down and grabbed at her mask, the nanites held taught, reforming bonds as quickly as they broke.

“The Hel is this shit?” The figure trying to remove her mask protested.

“Just scrape it off!” The other one retorted. The first one unsheathed a knife and started slicing at the nanite mask, flicking off drops of silvery goo as they came off. Tanya tasted blood in her mouth, her face felt hot from the leukosynths trying to repair the damage her kidnappers were carelessly inflicting. Her leg felt rather warm as well, now that she thought about it.

Horizon’s free leg snapped back into place as her localized fever activated the memory metal. She kicked the back of the figure trying to remove her mask. The blur fell forward onto her and she tasted fresh station air as the mask was completely removed.

She felt a second needle-dart pierce the side of her exposed neck. Numbness spread up her face as she saw them place a primitive plastic mask over her muzzle. Tanya smelled the rotten egg scent of hydrogen sulfide and lapsed into torpor.