

Horizon regained consciousness back in the medical bay of the *Resolution*, a quick glance around confirmed that she was in a perfluorocarbon tube again based on the curved visuals. She brought up her BCI communications.

Horizon: I'm awake, you guys managed to catch me I take it?

MechRat: Oh that's such a relief, we were getting a bit worried.

Lift: I flew out and grabbed you for the last leg. The ship seemed to work harder to rescue you after you got hit by that bit of scrap. Started tossing junk around to clear a path.

Horizon: Actually, that was me. I managed to integrate with the ship remotely, didn't know that I could do that.

MechRat: Hah! I thought that was the case. Was there a lot of lag?

Horizon: Hard to tell, everything seemed to be operating in slow motion.

EyeInTheSky: Pilot, now that you are conscious you are required to be on watch. The captain wishes to leave as soon as we've wrapped up negotiations with the Stouton elders.

MechRat: Hold on, she'll need to be in medical for another 14 hours minimum.

Eye: She just confirmed that she can integrate with the ship remotely, did she not?

Horizon: I did.

The raccoon closed her eyes and reached out for the ship about her. In moments she was no longer confined within a half-meter diameter cylinder, rather she was floating in open space. She had no need for oxygen, no worry about a surface below her feet, she was free.

Horizon scanned through her internal cameras for the rest of the crew. MechRat stood by a nanofabricator that was extruding a space survival package while his eyes indicated his mind was elsewhere. Lift had last appeared on the internal cameras five minutes ago, guiding a pallet of identical survival packages out to the station. The two "new members" of the crew were in a conference room in heated discussion with a couple unfamiliar figures.

She recognized one of them as one of the people who'd been knocked out when she exited the airlock, a white-furred mouse in a wheelchair that looked like it had been hastily assembled from spare parts, an oxygen tube leading up to his nose. His face was frozen in a surprised expression, her shadow suggesting the lingering effects of tetrodotoxin without the benefit of leukosynths to clear it out as she had. A flat electronic voice emanated from a speaker on his lap. "...And isn't it convenient that your pilot single-handedly killed those pirates and destroyed their ship?"

Principes kept his expression carefully neutral. "She assured me that the explosion was not intentional, some variety of self-destruct system no doubt intended to conceal any evidence of their origins."

Another one of the stationers, a younger badger femme in an armored space suit, slammed a gauntleted fist on the table. "And where is this pilot now? Surely if she could slay two battle-suited pirates while unarmed and full of puffer poison she could make this meeting."

Horizon accessed the ship's intercom and had it play her voice in every inhabited room on board. "Pilot Horizon reporting in from the medical bay. After half an hour in vacuum I'll need to spend another half day in a perfluorocarbon tube full of medical microbots but I have a BCI that can access the intercoms."

All five people in the conference room turned towards the concealed speaker from where her voice had emanated, though only the paralyzed elder's eyes moved. She took some satisfaction from the glimmer

of annoyance on Princeps' dyed face. The elder spoke up again, "Pilot Horizon was it? May I ask your version of this story?"

Horizon took the equivalent of a deep breath before speaking. "I did not intend to kill those pirates. I do not have much combat training but I was very recently given a number of very advanced implants. One of them is a shadow AI that has reflexive combat applications and was ordered to incapacitate them as quickly as possible. Apparently killing was more expedient than knocking them out without permanent harm, activating their dead man's switch."

The battle-suited badger chimed in. "Our militia gets applicants every so often who think a head computer means they don't need to do any drills. They're no match for an MMA master but have a bad habit of sending other rookies to the infirmary after matches."

"No offense," the AI she was plugged into volunteered personnel data scraped from Stouton's data mesh. "Colonel Meline, but I'm fairly certain my augs are a few centuries ahead of anything your people have available. Anything available to this star system really."

The third stationer, a brown-headed young mouse whose fur suggested some mixed heritage, perked up. "Wait," he seemed to realize. "I thought you said that you came here from a system still within Federal control to help us, that takes years, decades even. How did you only recently receive these augmentations?"

Horizon was taken aback, she hadn't realized that Princeps with his obsession with maintaining some sort of secret identities might have devised some sort of cover story for them. Now that she thought about it they might seem more credible if they presented themselves as the *Resolution's* original crew rather than some random scavengers who got press-ganged into replacing them. She was still trying to think of a way she might rectify her error when Eye spoke up.

"We applied many of our augmentations while in hibernation en route to your system." She composed the lie seemingly without effort. "Upon entering your radio shell we were able to evaluate the situation in the Tiere system and worked out the most useful implants to accomplish our mission."

Princeps leapt upon his secretary's story, seeing an opportunity in the lie. "Our medical bay is fully capable of installing implants all throughout the body. At the moment we also have a dozen spare injection-ready leukosynths that can be implanted at even the most basic of clinics. We're prepared to offer them to your station."

Colonel Meline's eyes widened at the mention of the medical microbots. "Leukosynths? Aren't those the blood robots that oligarchs use to live forever?"

The aged rodent, identified by computer as station elder Mys, spoke up. "Immortality seems a fool's errand to me." He paused, letting everyone hear the whirring of his oxygen pump. "But if these leukosynths can restore me and the other elders to mobility, I might be persuaded."

The next three hours passed sluggishly, Horizon was barely able to follow it once she was sure they didn't suspect the *Resolution* of collaborating with pirates, or at least lacked convincing evidence of such collaboration. After another ten minutes her attention wandered away from the meeting and towards her old friends. She caught Lift as he was picking up another load of survival packs from MechRat's lab.

“Hello,” she said through the intercoms. MechRat looked up.

“Hey Tanya,” the opossum spoke, blinking to regain focus after spending a significant amount of time in VR. “I tried to speak to you earlier, but the network said you were busy. Did Lord Princeps finally give you a break?”

“I can talk while working,” Horizon replied. “However I was busy talking to the station representatives on board. Colonel Meline was getting suspicious that we were somehow responsible for the disaster.”

MechRat snickered. “She wouldn’t have been elected if she wasn’t a bit paranoid.” He let his eyes drift upwards in thought then. “Though I suppose it’s not too far-fetched. There was an explosion in one of the life support plants, and given the camo-suits it’s starting to look like sabotage was likely...”

“You planning your election campaign?” Lift cut in. “It’s only been a couple days since we got this ship and the implants. He couldn’t have known we’d be in a position to help when it blew.”

Horizon did some rapid calculus. “He’s right. Even with that yacht of his, Skadi to Stouton is a four month trip at best. He’d be way too late to take advantage of any chaos generated by the station blowing.” She decided to change the subject. “Now, you said you had something you wanted to talk to me about?”

MechRat perked up, a sure sign that he was about to talk about his second favorite subject after conspiracy theories. “While I was churning out these kits I started working on new suits for us. Considering what you just went through I figured it was best to start with yours.” He sent a sizable data packet to Horizon. “Take a look through that, tell me what you think of it.”

She opened the files he sent, they appeared to be schematics for a jumpsuit that looked very similar to the one she’d just been issued. For the most part she couldn’t discern many differences from her current suit, but she was not particularly familiar with the internal workings of Federation smart fabric. There were a few strange devices on the feet and wrists that stood out to her though. “Are those directional thrusters?”

“Cold gas only.” MechRat confirmed. “Fueled from a series of small pressurized bladders dispersed throughout the suit.”

“Where on the suit?” Horizon asked, suspiciously.

MechRat accessed the schematic she was viewing and highlighted some subtle pouches in the fabric she’d barely noticed. “Each thruster has a primary cell flush with the lower arm or leg, as relevant. However they can be recharged in flight from dorsal or ventral reserves.”

“Dorsal and ventral reserves?”

The opossum looked a bit sheepish over the security cameras. “Over the small of your back, and stomach.”

Horizon glared in her perfluorocarbon tank, even though she knew he couldn’t see her. “How much flight time?” She asked, moving on.

“The leg cells can do five seconds when filled to capacity, three for the arms.” MechRat replied. “The reserves depend a bit on whether you want to conceal it. Between ten and eighty seconds.”

She considered the information, it was still a fraction of the fuel capacity of any EVA rig she’d flown, definitely for emergencies only. Though she was pretty certain that if fifteen seconds of maneuvering thrust couldn’t help her in the limited time given by her implant’s oxygen reserves she was pretty likely screwed. She’d coasted for most of her recent vacuum time and only needed to maneuver when that piece of junk hit her. “Anything else of note?”

“The collar contains a bank of hologram projectors so you can easily disguise yourself without resorting to dyes or masks like we tried before.” MechRat highlighted some small devices that looked almost like bulbs. “I’m putting them in all our suits.”

“Good,” Horizon added. “That mask was kind of itchy.” She did a little searching and found that the intercom had a hologram projector, some mental fiddling later and a meter-tall version of her head appeared in the engineering room between the engineer and the cargo loader.

“Yeesh.” MechRat exclaimed, leaping back in surprise. “You could have given us some warning first.”

“It wasn’t particularly high on my priority list.” She replied. “What else?”

“Well, I added some range boosters for your BCI, you should be able to remote integrate with the ship at double, maybe triple your current range. We’ll have to test that once we’re safely out of here. Also I stuffed computronium into every spare pocket in the fabric, your shadow will have access to a few extra processing cycles.”

Tanya’s hologram looked agitated at the mention of the AI in her head. “I don’t know if I want that thing to be any more powerful than it already is. I told you what it did back on the pirates’ ship, didn’t I?”

“Look, Tanya.” MechRat said attempting to placate her. “Your AI shadow is not your enemy, no more than your biological subconscious is.”

“My subconscious has never broken my own hand or bashed an unsuspecting transgenic’s head in against a ladder.” She retorted.

“You don’t know that.” The opossum replied. “You’ve never been kidnapped before now, have you?”

“Well, it wouldn’t know how to kill two camo-suited pirates barehanded.” Horizon knew she was reaching, if she’d been trained how to do that the old-fashioned way she might have done it.

“Because you didn’t know how to do that, before you got the shadow.” MechRat explained carefully. “Didn’t you pay attention to your psych-shaman? The unconscious mind can do wondrous, or terrible, things if it feels it has to. The AI’s only difference is that you can consciously turn it off.”

Horizon suspected, deep down, that he was right. “There’s no need for more than twenty seconds of thrust, do something else with the space.” She shut the hologram off and turned her attention back to the negotiations in her conference room.