

Princeps was showing a document on an e-paper sheet to the Stouton representatives, they looked somewhat uneasy about whatever was written on it. Elected Colonel Meline scrolled down to a particular clause in the document and tapped at it with annoyance. “What do you mean by ‘support’ here? That’s rather vague, don’t you think?”

“After you’ve rebuilt from this disaster we might at some point in the future have need of supplies from your humble station.” Replied the wolf. “We will only take what we need, and nothing you can’t bear to part with.”

Elder Mys wheezed through his teeth and spoke through his vocoder. “Those are incredibly vague terms. How do we know you won’t decide you need the entirety of our hydroponics harvest, or all our ships? The Nebula Company at least demanded specific tribute for their protection racket.”

Princeps turned to his secretary, “the Nebula Company?” He asked.

Eye paused for a few moments, Horizon presumed she was consulting some sort of internal database. But before the bird could answer Horizon interjected with her own response. “They’re one of the bigger ‘pirate clans’ out there wandering the void. Somehow they got hold of a Federal Guard base ship and like to use its mass drivers to extort Belter habs.”

“My reports indicate that they’re descended from a mercenary company that was contracted by the old Federal Emissary to Tiere for peacekeeping in the outer system.” Eye chimed in. “After contact was lost with Centaurus a division of the Federal Guard stationed here defected to them and took their equipment with them, including a base ship though there’s little to no information on how operational it is.”

Meline grumbled, “a hundred and twenty years ago they showed up at our doorstep and started demanding food and minerals from us, or else. They came back every eight years to extort us again, demanding more and more each time. Fifteen years ago a bunch of us decided we’d had enough and rigged up an improvised railgun, put a sizable hole in their hull and they backed off.”

Eye blinked a few times, doing the math in her head. “You said this was fifteen years ago and they came back on an eight-year cycle. Did they return seven years ago?”

“Yes,” the colonel confirmed. “Me and the rest of the militia used up the minerals we would have given them on building more railguns and magnetic shield generators. We exchanged a few rounds of fire and they decided to leave us alone.”

Princeps’ eyes lit up. “Is it possible that their agents could have sabotaged your station and kidnapped my pilot?”

“That would explain where they got those suits.” Horizon chimed in. “I’ve never seen anything like those before, three hundred year-old FedTech would make sense.”

“I suspected as such,” Meline added. “Though now that I think about it, if anyone in this system might be able to pose as representatives of some sort of resurrected Federation, it would be them.”

“Come now Suli,” Mys replied. “If Nebula could do what we saw this little ship do outside our station, they would have used it more directly.”

Principes stared at them, evaluating his options. “Is there anything we could do to convince you that we weren’t aligned with these raiders?” He finally asked.

“Yes,” vocalized elder Mys. “Grandson, do you have the data on the Nebula Company’s prior tributes?” As his assistant unfolded a tablet and started scrolling through it for the data indicated the elder continued. “If you destroy the Nebula base ship, we will sign your treaty, but we will amend it to specify material assistance not exceeding half the lowest amount we ever paid to Nebula.”

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Twelve hours later the *Resolution* departed Stouton space, Horizon exited her medical tube, with no bent ribs this time, and headed to the conference room in person wearing the new jumpsuit MechRat had made her. Gradually the whole crew filed in, MechRat dashing in last. An elongated spheroid rotated in the air above the table, Horizon recognized it instantly, as did the opossum apparently.

MechRat blanched at the sight of the old Federation ship. “We’re not actually attacking that thing, are we?”

“Why not?” Principes asked, the dyes now washed out of his fur and back to his natural gray coat.

The engineer mentally manipulated the table’s hologram, a representation of the *Resolution* appeared next to Nebula’s base ship. “This is us, you see?” Then the new ship shrank until it was 1/100th the size of the older one. “And that’s us to scale.”

Lift raised an eyebrow. “That thing’s huge! You sure it’s not a space habitat?”

“That’s essentially what it is.” MechRat confirmed. “A cylinder habitat with a conversion drive shoved up its tailhole. It’s intended less as a spaceship and more as a mobile home base and shipyard for thousands of Federal Guardsmen on century-long tours of duty. They built them by melting whole asteroids, the kind of ostentatious display of wealth that only the Old Federation could manage.”

“Size is not everything though.” Principes retorted. “Their technology is centuries behind that at our disposal. You said yourself that they rely on a *reaction drive*.” He said those last words as if it was hideously outdated simply by the entry of the *Resolution* into the system.

“That’s just the thing!” MechRat objected. “Their drive plume is as wide as our ship, they could blast us to monoatomic plasma with their backblast alone.”

The wolf grinned and turned smugly to the crew’s raccoon pilot. “Horizon, care to share that theory you shared earlier?”

Horizon cleared her throat with a hint of nervousness. “It’s just a hypothesis, really. But I took a look at their route here.” She focused and the holograms of the two ships were replaced with a map of the Tiere system with a long oval path traced from the outer system past the star and back. “They’ve followed this comet-style elliptical orbit for nearly two centuries without deviation. Even when they skirmished with another pirate clan or fought with a rebellious habitat, like Stouton, they kept on moving and broke off the attack when they were out of range.”

“And why might they do this, pilot Loter?” EyeInTheSky asked with cold patience.

“I had a hypothesis,” the giant planets and the star in the Tiere system were highlighted in blue.

“They’re slingshotting, coasting without power with the aid of the system’s biggest gravity wells. I don’t think their conversion drive is operational.”

“Do you have any more evidence to support this hypothesis?” MechRat asked skeptically.

“You mean aside from the fact that they haven’t ditched this trash heap system for more fertile grounds?” Horizon retorted.

MechRat nodded once. “I’ll give you that. But it’s still conjecture, and even if so they’ve still got a ton of conventional weapons and a small armada to use them. Sure, we can maneuver like nothing else and our gravitational shields are equally effective against beam and kinetic weaponry, but they’ve got enough guns to smear us before they get in range of our gravitic weaponry.”

“Surely you can think of a way to extend the range of our weapons, can’t you?” Princeps grinned with amusement.

“Oh please,” the opossum said, exasperated. “The gravity generators are based on physics centuries, no, millennia ahead of my own understanding, and all the ship’s information on them is beyond my clearance. All I know is a bunch of 90-cubic meter black boxes somehow manipulate dark energy.”

MechRat’s eyes lit up as those last words escaped his lips. “Wait, that just might fit, would need a power supply, maybe the AKV’s reactor...” His gaze unfocused for a few minutes, and when he was back with them he had a smile that almost reached up to his ears. “If I can get access to a few specs, I might have a solution.”