

Just as the first of the AKV sensor packages was leaving the fabricators Horizon laid down in the pilot's chair and integrated her nervous system with the *Resolution's* controls. She scanned the starscape around them, zeroing in on a cluster of small objects far from any of the system's major bodies. She sent out a radar ping for a more detailed scan and propelled the ship forward, bee-lining for the cluster. The first reflected waves came in within the hour, a half-meter asteroid nearing their path, but with enough warning to quickly evade it. Halfway through their trajectory the radar signature of their destination came back.

A fleet of small to medium-sized ships orbiting a large metallic oblong, the whole armada traveling at speeds that were positively glacial by spaceship standards. The profile matched the most recent sightings of the Nebula Company fleet. Horizon addressed her crew, "Enemy confirmed, arrival in five hours."

MechRat sent out a general message on the internal network.

MechRat: I'm going to need assistance getting the AKVs ready.

Princeps: Lift, report to engineering. Horizon, will you need to remain at your station for the whole trip?

Horizon: Well, as your assistant reminded me, spacer safety regs require a pilot on hand at all times. But, I have managed a remote link before...

Princeps: Go assist them.

Lift: Yes sir

Horizon: Yes, sir.

Horizon gradually split her attention between her (mostly)-meat body and the ship. It felt odd, like she was thinking with two brains in constant communication. After a few minutes she set the ship's AI to run status indicators in the background of her mind and yank her back in if the ship was under a dire threat, it made it easier to run her biological body.

She met up with Lift and walked down to the engineering bay where MechRat was producing the sensor packages and preparing to install them. He greeted them enthusiastically. "Hey guys, Eye too busy to lend a talon?"

Horizon shrugged. "I suppose the commander had something else in mind for her to do." She thought for a moment while picking up an armful of components. "Come to think of it, I was going to suggest that she go help instead of me, but then Princeps..."

"Ordered you to go?" MechRat finished her sentence.

"Yes." She confirmed. "It's kind of weird. You never leave the pilot's station unmanned when going into combat. You'd think I would have objected more strongly to that."

The opossum nodded. "I know what you mean. When he commanded me to give an estimate on the effectiveness of the black hole bombs I just gave it without thinking. Does that sound like me?"

Horizon smirked. "No, you've never been one to respect authority much." She inserted a canister of micro-drones into the ammo bay of one of the missile-like AKVs.

MechRat directed Lift to start shoving the loaded AKV, the size of an elongated groundcar, into the launch tube at the end of the bay. Then he leaned in close to Horizon's ear. "I think there's something in our implants."

"Define 'something'." Horizon stared back at him skeptically.

"Like hidden control directives of some kind." The opossum gestured wildly with his hands. "Think about it, your shadow can already seize control of your body to a degree. What if the Federation also had a means of controlling one's thoughts, influencing their feelings?"

"That's your paranoia speaking." The raccoon picked up another set of micro-drones. But something nagged at the back of her mind. More than once she'd rushed to obey orders from Princeps without even thinking. How did that happen? She wasn't military, or even militia beyond the mandatory one year of alternating weeks required by the habitat where her surviving family had settled. She shouldn't have that sort of conditioned deference to authority. If anything she'd thought of herself as a bit of a rebel.

But then again she hadn't been able to kill with her bare claws before. Horizon continued with her part of the work wordlessly, his words spinning in her mind. When they were done some hours later she turned to leave. "I need to get ready for the battle. See you after."

While she mostly didn't want to discuss MechRat's conspiracy theories any further, there genuinely were things she wanted to get done before they went into battle. Returning to her comfortable chair without the need to test the catheters for instance.

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She got the alarm just as she was sanitizing her hands, Horizon had barely a few seconds warning before her perspective lurched abruptly into space. Temperature readings on two meter-wide sections of her hull had spiked, consistent with energy weapons discharge from long distances. Algorithmic reflexes directed the gravity drives to lens the lasers away from any sensitive components and she made a general ship's announcement. "Enemy contact made, sustaining laser fire, shields holding." Her security feeds followed the crew as they scrambled to battle stations that had been determined barely days before. She took notice of her meat-body, lying prone on the lavatory floor. "And can somebody drag me out of the head?" She added. "I assure you I have pants on."

Horizon swung her attention back towards the enemy fleet. The smaller ships were masked with a fuzz of radar jamming, but the base ship was unmistakable. The massive cylinder was too hard to hide with mere electronics. She followed the oncoming lasers back to a pair of frigate-sized blobs leading the fleet by five light-seconds. Immediately after she locked the *Resolution's* X-ray laser arrays on them. "Attackers identified." She reported to her commander. "Do I have permission to fire back?"

As she waited for Princeps to respond she spied MechRat struggling to sling her body over his shoulder. Clearly he hadn't received the same degree of strength augmentation as Lift or even herself.

After half a minute Princeps gave his orders. "Energy weapons only. Save the AKVs for now. Show them we mean business." At his words Horizon blasted two lances of invisible radiation straight at the centers-of-mass of the blurred frigates.

The x-ray lasers streamed high-frequency death for several seconds, then one frigate exploded, followed shortly after by its twin. For minutes afterwards the new Federation craft and the fleet of old

ones approached one another silently, tension that felt as tangible as gravity hanging in the void between. Finally Horizon picked up a tightbeam transmission from the base ship, which she automatically directed to EyeInTheSky.

The screen displayed a scarred transgenic of indeterminate species, Horizon guessed a cross between a hyena and a reptile of some variety. “This is commodore Archis of the Nebula Company. Whoever you are, you are going to pay for those ships and their crews!”

Principes smirked at the hybrid across the gulf of space. “We are the Federal Guard starship *Resolution*. You have used stolen Federal property to terrorize citizens under Federal protection. Surrender your illegally seized vessels and you may be shown mercy.”

A minute passed as the transmission crossed the gulf of space towards the pirate fleet and the reply returned. Archis laughed. “You’re those guys with the fancy FedTech ship who showed up at Stouton aren’t you? Federal Guard, Hah! More likely you’re some scavengers who got lucky. The Federation is no more!”

“It may have left the Tiere system for some time, but it is very much alive elsewhere.” Principes postured. “We have come to rectify the injustices that occurred during our temporary absence.”

“Oh please.” The hybrid said dismissively. “Even if you stood a chance against us in that tiny thing, there is no way we would surrender our home. A dozen generations of the Nebula Company have been born and recycled on board our base ship. You’ll have to pry it from our vacuum-frozen fingers.”

“Do not try us commodore, we just might.” Principes fixed Archis with a predatory glare that seemed incongruous with the hybrid’s toothy grin. “Your ships are a dozen generations obsolete. Our ship is considerably newer. You may have heard tell of our deeds at Stouton. I’m sure your agents would be able to inform you, were they still alive.”

Archis flinched momentarily when Principes’ latest words reached his ears, but he held his ground. “I have no idea what you are talking about.” He claimed, then turned to someone off screen. “All right, we tried to be reasonable. All ships full firepower!” The transmission cut out before they could respond.

Horizon picked up the heat signatures of several dozen energy weapons and missiles headed towards her. Her AI shadow calculated optimal placement of gravitic lenses to block the lasers while letting her own beams lance incoming missiles. She was taking so many lasers that she needed to let some of them in through her shields in order to fire her own beams, but at least the *Resolution*’s hull was more durable than most of the pirates’ missiles. “We’re taking heavy fire.” She reported, attaching a feed of the battle map and the damage they were taking. “Can I launch the AKVs now?”

“Launch with preset orders. Fire at will!” Principes ordered, and six egg-shaped craft, bigger than conventional missiles but still too small to carry an organic pilot, sped out of their launch tubes arrayed around the sides of the *Resolution*. Their integral AIs directed the AKVs on semi-random trajectories intended to confuse the predictive targeting of point-defense turrets, their small gravity drives enabling maneuvers the reaction drive-based missiles and ships couldn’t hope to match.

Many new virtual screens opened up in Horizon’s view as the five AKVs that weren’t carrying a superweapon launched their sensor drones. She watched one AKV tear a pirate ship to shreds with its

coilguns in holographic detail, gases leaking out the holes stained with dark blood. Others shot down missiles in flight, giving Horizon enough space to fire her lasers at enemy ships instead of their projectiles. They were still dramatically outnumbered, but it looked like they might cause lasting damage before they were forced to retreat.

Then one of the AKVs exploded, having caught a stray laser in the right spot. It wasn't the one carrying the black hole bomb, but the odds that the next one would lose their precious WMD increased all the more. Another AKV intercepted a missile ballistically, increasing the odds to 25%. At that threshold algorithms aboard the surviving vessels adopted a new strategy, abandoning any attempt at further deception the three "decoys" assumed a tight defensive formation around the black hole bomb.

Catching an inkling of the purpose behind the change in formation, the pirates attempted to concentrate fire on the center AKV. However the AIs worked their gravity drives in concert to form a lens shield that redirected laser fire away from the bomb. A flight of missiles streaked towards the small craft that most would consider overkill, the escorts fired back with coilguns and the last couple missiles were intercepted by a suicide charge from one AKV, raising the odds again.

But as the flight of AI-driven craft streaked towards the Nebula Company base ship, a thought dug at the back of Horizon's conscious brain. What had commodore Archis said? A dozen generations had been... "Wait, commander! There's civilians on that ship!"

Princeps glared at his holo-display. "Do not be ridiculous pilot, those are pirates."

"The commodore said they raised their families on the base ship." Horizon retorted. She barely noticed another AKV succumbing to seemingly the full concentrated laser fire of the Nebula base ship. "Destroying it would be a crime against parahumanity itself."

"*Hostis humani generis.*" Princeps replied, her shadow automatically translated his words as "hostile human generic" but she felt there was some deeper meaning. "They are guilty of crimes against parahumanity already."

Horizon gave a quick mental command to the AKV carrying the black hole bomb. The launch bay holding the weapon locked up tight as a bank vault. "I won't descend to their level."

"You have no choice." The wolf snarled, he watched the AKVs approach the base ship, and then start to peel off. "Deploy the bomb!"

The locks on the AKV's bay would take precious time to open, so Horizon took the most expeditious route and directed the AI to slam directly into the great ship's hull. She watched a hull plate crumple under the impact, then after a seeming eternity the base ship began to implode around the impact site. The entire front half of the miles-long ship sheared away and crumpled up into a rough sphere. Finally there was an almost underwhelmingly small explosion that blew the crushed hull away.

Through drone sensors Horizon saw countless bodies tumble out of the exploding mass, in all shapes and sizes. Before she could process consciously what had happened Princeps gave the order to withdraw, and they left the tattered remnants of the former scourge of the Tiera system to pick up their pieces.

When they were a dozen light-minutes away from the battlefield Tanya de-integrated from the *Resolution*. She gasped for breath, hyperventilating wildly as she tried to explain to herself what she had just done. At first she thought that Princeps had somehow bypassed her entirely and sent the command to the AKV himself, but no, she had realized it would take too long to launch and ordered the suicide run. She'd killed hundreds, maybe thousands, of people the moment she had a clear order to do so.

MechRat was right, there was no way around it, there had to be something in her implants that forced her to obey orders from the mission commander. Tanya looked around, she had been strapped into a harness on the wall of the mess hall, it must have been the closest place he could drag her. As she fumbled for the release she felt something press against her hip and reached down to feel it.

It was a metallic ball of some kind, about half the size of her fist. Scrawled on it clumsily in permanent markers were the words "Tell no one!"