

Horizon spent the next week contemplating the strange orb she'd found in her pocket. She was certain that MechRat had left it there, though she'd never seen his handwriting, but still had no idea what it could be. For all she knew it could be anything from a data storage device to a small nuke, and the writing on it asked her not to bring it up to anyone who could tell her what it might be. But at the very least thinking about it distracted her from dwelling on how many people she might have killed. The thought of speaking to MechRat about it crossed her mind a few times, but if he had wanted her to keep it secret he probably didn't want to talk to her about it either.

By the end of the week it was irrelevant anyways.

Tanya was lounging in her hammock bag in a daze, when an alarm flared in her head. "Security breach in cargo bay 3," it stated. "All combat-capable champions report to bay 3 and neutralize threats." Horizon leapt to action, tearing through the hammock she'd brought over from the *Dustbin*. She ran down the hallways on autopilot wondering what could possibly have boarded them this far from the civilized regions of space. Could Nebula Company survivors have some sort of space stealth technology? Maybe the Federation had arrived to reclaim their property? Or was it one of those aliens MechRat had been so worried about?

She was still speculating as she rounded the corner to the cargo bay and gasped in surprise, it wasn't any of those things. Instead, Lift stood over MechRat's body, which lay twisted and bloody on the floor. The ox turned to face Horizon as she entered, "threat neutralized," he said in a nearly robotic monotone.

Horizon stared down at the opossum, clearly he had not gone down gently. The side of his face was caved in and his neck was twisted at a harsh angle that made it seem unlikely that he was faking it. "What?" She tried to ask, "why?"

"Disobedience." Horizon spun around to see Princeps stroll in, followed by Eye. "It would seem your friend decided to take advantage of the security clearance we had to give him so that he could develop those weapons. He attempted to insert a virus into the *Resolution*'s systems that would have forced us to leave the system, or worse." The wolf paused to ruffle the feathers on Eye's head possessively. "Fortunately my secretary uncovered his plot before it could be executed."

Slowly, the raccoon lowered herself down to get a good look at MechRat. She tentatively reached a pair of fingers towards his neck. "Is he... dead?"

Princeps nodded. "My readouts indicate no heartbeat or brain activity, by the standards of Tiere system medicine he is unrecoverable. Unfortunate, I would have liked to interrogate him, it's possible he could have been salvaged after a bit longer in conditioning sims." He turned to glare at Lift, "perhaps I should have been more specific in my orders."

The ox said nothing.

"Oh well," the wolf shrugged. "I guess you don't need to have opinions, do you?" He turned back to Eye. "Were there any other pressing issues we had to deal with?"

"Engineer Didelph downloaded several terabytes of high-security data from our system." The raven replied. "It is likely to be stored on his implants but there is a possibility he made backups. There is also the issue of the modifications he made to the *Dustbin*."

“Indeed.” Princeps turned to the ox, “Lift, did MechRat give you a large quantity of encrypted data?”

“No.” Lift replied simply.

Horizon’s mind raced, she didn’t know for sure that the orb was a data drive, or that it was given to her by her deceased crew mate. But if she was ordered to tell him, what could she say?

Princeps turned towards her. “Horizon, did you?”

“Not,” Horizon said cautiously. “Not to my knowledge.”

“I see.” Princeps replied. “I’ll need you to examine those modifications he made to your old ship. Report anything that looks unusual to you.” He turned and started to walk away. “Lift, put MechRat’s carcass in a stasis tank. Try not to damage it further.”

Lift hefted the opossum over his shoulder one-handed, no care or deference awarded to his fallen friend. Horizon watched him pass, looking for any sign in his expression of her long-time crew mate and friend. What had Princeps said? That he didn’t need to have opinions? Did that mean the control systems in their implants operated to different extents in each of them and the big ox had been left with no free will left? She recalled he’d been rather quiet since the day they received their implants.

Horizon noticed a certain raven hadn’t left the room yet, watching her. Keeping her eyes on Eye she slowly stood back up from her crouch next to the blood stains left by MechRat’s corpse and headed towards the docking module connecting them to the *Dustbin*.

The strange sphere that may or may not have been given to her by MechRat weighed heavily in her pocket. She knew she had to do something to hide it from Princeps, could she hide it on the *Dustbin*? Horizon linked momentarily into the *Resolution*’s security feeds, there was nothing visible on the older ship, it might be a temporary hiding place at least.

That decision removed whatever lingering doubts she may have still fostered. Investigating her old ship was now something she wanted to do, rather than a command. Horizon entered the airlock to the *Dustbin* and keyed in the passcode she’d memorized so many years ago.

It felt weird stepping out of the artificial gravity of the *Resolution* back into the weightless space within the *Dustbin*, yet also familiar. The transition was like nothing she had experienced before, generally when docked to a station with centrifugal gravity the force extended onto their ship, but here the gravity provided by synthetic singularities in the deck plates apparently dropped off almost immediately beyond the hull. Still, as she sailed through the air towards the cockpit she found herself clinging closely to the walls, self-consciously she wondered if she’d been in gravity for too long.

The cockpit looked much like she’d left it weeks ago, dust didn’t settle much in microgravity. There was one major difference though, a fiber-optic cable was clipped to the back of her chair, terminating between the back cushion and headrest. She followed the cable down to the base of the chair, across the floor, and to the flight control computer at the front of the room. The only external change beyond the cable was a boxy device that connected the cable to the computer. Experimentally Horizon reached out with her implant’s wireless for the *Dustbin*’s network. She saw the same database, antiquated messaging system, and media library she used to access through her datapad, only in her head now. The

flight systems were still air-gapped from the wireless network, exactly as MechRat had set them up. She'd agreed with the paranoid opossum back then, making it more difficult for hackers to seize control of her ship, but now that she had flown a ship with her brain alone from kilometers away she felt inconvenienced.

There was no way to tell what MechRat might have done without physically interfacing with the flight computers. She picked up the end of the cable and examined it carefully. Her shadow identified it as a new Federal Guard model compatible with the port in her scruff. Horizon rubbed the folds of skin at the back of her neck, noticing an odd indentation underneath it with a hard spot that she didn't remember before. She sat down in her pilot's chair, her shadow provided a map in her head for inserting the cable, but refrained from taking control.

The cable head nestled gently under her scruff, magnets secured it to the corresponding port hidden by the loose skin, and a text box in the corner of her vision informed her that her implants were "connecting." After a few seconds her senses were replaced with the sensor readings from the *Dustbin*. It was incomparable to the *Resolution*, where the advanced ship's readouts had felt as real as her own senses, this one felt more like a grid map, more akin to the readouts she'd viewed when she piloted the ship with physical controls. She attempted to report back to *Principes*, only to receive a notification "security protocols enabled: while flight controls are connected pilot's internal communication hardware is disabled."

Horizon started to reach for the cable again, but reconsidered. It would be better to have more data to report when she re-established communications. She swept her attention over all the different sensor feeds, including the external cameras and few internal feeds at the airlock and cargo bay, MechRat had liked his privacy. She spotted a shadow looming over the window in the far airlock, Lift, she realized. He must have been sent to investigate her radio silence.

Thinking quickly the jacked-in raccoon started the undocking sequence, safety protocols slammed the outer doors of both airlocks, sealing the ox in. The locks holding the *Dustbin* onto the *Resolution* disengaged and the ships began to slowly drift apart. Horizon fired the cold gas thrusters facing the Federal ship to help the drift along.

She started to worry that *Principes* would assume she was deserting, she couldn't blame him considering the circumstances, and she was starting to consider doing just that. But the *Resolution* had been able to defeat the *Dustbin* before, without a pilot, just running automatic systems. What could it do with a vengeful captain at the helm? Frantically she searched the readouts at her disposal for some kind of countermeasure. MechRat had replaced the mining equipment and the anti-meteor lasers with more efficient FedTech versions, but it was still no match for the highly advanced ship.

Then she noticed something in the corner of her view, there was one wireless connection available to her, an untraceable quantum link with only one possible signal. She considered it carefully, MechRat was dead, Lift might as well be so far as she could tell, and she didn't particularly care about *Principes* or Eye. That signal might be her only chance.

First she had to put some distance between them, the conversion drive Irvine Lupus had lent them before he became *Principes* flared to life. A pillar of plasma shot out behind the old ship perfectly parallel to the Federation vessel. Horizon considered tilting the stream to vaporize the *Resolution*, but no, it was more important to get as far away as possible. She had barely gone a few kilometers before

the *Resolution*'s tractor caught on to the *Dustbin*. AI-directed gravity slowly pulled the old scrapper back while lensing the exhaust plume away from the Federation ship's hull.

It was now or never, Horizon sent the quantum signal to the remaining black hole bomb.

The tractor cut off instantly, synthetic gravity redirected in an attempt to contain the growing singularity within the ship's hull. As she rocketed away Horizon watched a section of *Resolution*'s hull explode when the singularity evaporated. Fragments of FedTech alloy ricocheted off the back end of the *Dustbin* but the old mining craft had been built sturdy and kept going.

Once Tanya was certain they were out of tractor range she removed the interface cable and listened for signals from the Federal ship. The encrypted network was flooded with alarms. "Crew medical attention required! Drive system disabled! Unknown gravitational anomaly!" She admitted to feeling relieved, the *Resolution* was disabled but not dead, and at least one person on board had survived. But who?

The lingering compulsion to follow the last order she'd heard from Princeps drove her to attempt to report back what she'd discovered. She formulated a quick response, sent it, and jacked back into her ship.

Horizon: Wired interface installed on flight computer, air-gapped from wireless network. Security protocol disables wireless connection in implants when connected to flight controls save for one quantum entangled link to black hole bomb.