

Horizon continued outwards, away from the outer system, away from the Resolution, away from captivity. She heard nothing else coming from the damaged starship, whether that meant the rest of the crew was incapable of sending a message, or if they were just preoccupied with their wounded she had no idea. And, she realized, she did not care.

MechRat was dead, Lift might as well be, Princeps and his secretary had caused them nothing but trouble since they'd met on that fateful day on Skadi station. She wondered how long Lift had been reduced to that state, when had Princeps decided he didn't need the big ox's brain? Horizon considered herself fortunate that the so-called commander had deemed her piloting expertise useful enough to keep intact, but sorry that MechRat had not lived longer than his own usefulness. Had he resisted openly? She wondered, or was his small body simply not considered useful enough to keep in a decerebrated state.

After a day of near continuous burn Horizon considered her options. Word spread among the Belter communities fast, people would know about the strange starship throughout the outer system. Logi was right out, Princeps' clan was based there. She did not think she was ready to visit Jort again, just yet. That left Surt.

Yes, she considered. The gas giant with its many moons and asteroids would be the ideal place to disappear. There were plenty of job opportunities for an experienced scrapper with the complicated orbits and its moon Surtur was terraformed, if barely. And it was right between the inner and outer system, Stouton would be five AUs away from the planet at the closest.

Horizon set course for Surt, she did some quick calculations by hand, ignoring her shadow's offered assistance, she wanted to forget the whole past month and everything that had happened. 2,173 hours with the fuel she had. That elicited a sigh, flying around with gravity drive had spoiled her. At least she'd have time to think.

She spent the rest of the first day sleeping, she had no more energy for anything else. When she woke, the loneliness began to set in. There was nobody else for light-minutes to go in every direction. Of the last five people to enter this ship, she could very well be the only one left alive. She wandered around the ship, taking in everything the others had left behind. The photos of Lift's herd pasted to the galley walls, the dents from that time MechRat's new compressor spun out of control, Princeps...

Horizon paused as she passed by the passenger cabins their investor cum commander had appropriated for the first trip. It was locked, but those locks were no barrier to her, she and MechRat had installed them after all. All she had to do was press her fingertips to the scanner and say "crew override" and the door slid open.

She scanned the room carefully, it was hard to believe the place had been lived in. The oligarch had neatly made the bed up so that it looked pristine, there were no clothes or personal affects strewn about. Tanya's first thought was that Princeps had moved everything to the *Resolution*, but knowing him she did not want to take any chances that he might have left something nasty behind.

First she checked the closet, it had been cleared of all the articles of clothing she'd seen the wolf wearing on the few times he'd left his room during the trip to the wreck. With a shrug she looked in the fold-out desk and its associated drawers. The network terminal built into the desk looked intact, and dusty, while the basic tablet they included for reading books and the like was clipped into its charger. Tanya felt around the edges of the tablet, it stuck out from the holder slightly, but that wasn't

particularly unusual for such a cheap device. Still, it was a little annoying and she popped it out to try and re-orient it more securely.

She raised an eyebrow, she did not remember stashing a data card under the passenger cabin tablets. She picked it up gingerly between two claws, it didn't look like anything she remembered buying, wary that it could contain a virus she started up the tablet, deactivated the wireless antennas, and slotted the card in.

A second after the card was inserted a message popped up on the screen. Connected, 1206 bytes remaining. Tanya checked to make sure the wireless was deactivated on the tablet, and the message remained there. Then she slapped herself as she realized what it meant. The card was not a data card at all, it was a qubit reservoir. That tiny little wafer contained over nine thousand little particles that were entangled with matched particles somewhere else in the universe. She could send a message to whatever held the paired particles, and it would receive the message instantly, but every character of that message would break the quantum link between eight pairs of particles. It was like the detonator MechRat had attached to the black hole bomb, but far larger. Tanya considered the possibility that MechRat had left it, much like he'd likely left that strange orb, but she quickly realized that it was more likely to belong to Princeps, or more accurately his house.

She popped the card back out and decided that it could be used as evidence that she was connected to his disappearance. So she stuck it in her pocket and scoured the room for any other signs that the oligarchic wolf had ever been there. On finding nothing else but some dust she moved into Eye's room. The raven had kept her cabin equally spartan, but Horizon found a small device plugged into the wall socket. It looked like a plug, but with no wires leading out, wireless power? Without a second thought she yanked it out as well.

Upon removing the small articles she set a cleaning drone to vacuum up any remaining traces of either passenger and examined the devices. The hard shell of Eye's device had no seams or fasteners, so she took a small saw from MechRat's workshop, even with her enhanced strength it took several minutes for the hard plastic shell to yield. Inside, she found several 3-dimensional circuit boards and a small antenna, not likely a power supply then, but a small wireless computer.

She stared at the broken device in shock, was it a hacking module? Had they been hijacking the *Dustbin's* systems this whole time? And then there was the QComm module, what was on the other end of that thing? They were dangerous to remain on board. Quickly she swept the pieces of the plug and the QComm card into a bag and ran to the airlock. Horizon did not pause to don a spacesuit, her new mods ensured she wouldn't need one, and as soon as the outer doors cycled open she chucked the bag out into the void with all her strength.

As the bag of electronics dwindled into a minute prick of light she slumped against the inner door and let out an airless sigh of relief. Horizon slapped the button to close the outer doors and felt the air flow back into the small chamber. When the drones were done cleaning she ejected their dust bags out the airlock as well. She finally ate something after that, a couple of preserved ration bars from the ship's stores.

The second day of her flight she ate another ration bar for breakfast and started sorting through MechRat and Lift's stuff. She retrieved a few collapsing crates from the cargo hold and set them up in the corridor between their cabins. They didn't have that many clothes, and a majority of them were worn with burst seams, but when she picked up a pair of MechRat's overalls she found herself

overwhelmed with memories of interrupting him during his maintenance work, grimy lubricants spraying all over the opossum's fur. She was never again going to experience that with him, she was alone, all alone.

She didn't want to file away her dead comrades' stuff, she didn't want to be alone with her thoughts, she just wanted to move on. If only she had a hibernation rig, spacer mods included the ability to enter a torpor for extended periods, but it was risky without a source of external water and oxygen. Though, she considered, she didn't have conventional spacer mods, Horizon searched her implant's database for her new tolerances.

Under her leukosynths' settings she found an interesting option: Stasis. When she looked for more information it explained "suspends life functions for set period or until external stimulus triggers waking. Activates automatically when life signs indicate critical condition."

Tanya's mental eye focused on the second line. Was it possible that MechRat only looked dead? It didn't matter, she didn't have the resources to mount a rescue yet. He would have to wait, at least until she confirmed that anyone was still alive there.

She put everything back, it wouldn't do to let things drift around when the burn ended, and set the *Dustbin*'s computers to ping her implant with an alert if they came too close to any significant masses or received a message from traffic control. Then Tanya secured herself in her hammock and opened the stasis function's control panel. First she set a timer to wake her six hours before she estimated the ship would enter Surt space. Second she set her implant to wake her if the ship pinged her with an alert.

That handled, Horizon started the countdown sequence.

5...

4...

3...

2, wait, would she be able to react in time if an emergency happened?

1...

ALERT: APPROACHING HIGH GRAVITY BODY

Tanya blinked in surprise, since when was she anywhere near any planetary bodies?

ALERT: TRANSMISSION FROM SURT TRAFFIC CONTROL

Confused, Horizon checked the date on her internal clock, it had been forty days since she went into stasis. Forty days, passed like a second, but still not enough time to reach Surt. What was going on?

Horizon listened to the transmission, "unidentified ship, please adjust your vector. You are on a collision course with Surt. At your speed the impact will cause massive damage to the surrounding space."

Reflexively Tanya responded. "Surt control, this is Pilot Loter of the *Dustbin*, moving to comply. I was in hibernation." She tore her way out of the hammock and floated towards the hallway.

Realizing that the *Dustbin* should be under thrust at this time she grabbed at the door frame and flung herself toward the cockpit. This close to the destination they had to decelerate, the autopilot should have triggered it automatically. She slammed into the back of her pilot's chair and barely noticed the pain of impact as she swung around behind the controls. In seconds the display pulled up the ship's velocity and she gasped in horror.

As Tanya tried to manually trigger the deceleration sequence she called traffic control again. "*Dustbin* to Surt control, autopilot failed to initiate deceleration. Attempting manual override, give me a vector."

"Understood *Dustbin*, transmitting vector." The vector appeared on the monitor in front of her seconds later.

Tanya reached behind her for the cable that would plug into her neck. Once the neural feedback loaded she studied the vector given by traffic control and began making calculations. The vector they wanted her to follow would bring her past Surt, but as she calculated the burns she'd require to redirect her little ship she realized she wouldn't make it. She'd still crash into the gas giant.

Tanya disconnected from the link to reply. "Surt control, that's not going to be possible with my hardware. Can you give me an alternative?"

There was a long pause before the reply came, longer even than light-speed lag could account for. "*Dustbin*, we're sorry, but it looks like our only other option is to detonate your craft before impact. Please decelerate at maximum burn."

Detonate? No, that couldn't be possible. She'd gone too far for it to end like this. Horizon plugged back in to evaluate her options. The conversion drive was capable of 30 Gs of acceleration, but even if that could halt her she wouldn't survive that degree long enough. Anything more than that and the reactor would overload, then traffic control wouldn't need to nuke her.

But, maybe that could work to her advantage. Horizon spun the ship around to point her rocket nozzles directly at the gas giant and unjacked again. She raised one arm to the controls for burn, and the other reached for a covered button at the base of her seat. As she reached down her hand brushed against the orb in her pocket, and she considered what to do with it. She couldn't be sure what state she'd be in when they retrieved her, if they retrieved her. How could she ensure it stayed in her possession.

With seconds to go before she needed to trigger burn, Horizon opened her mouth as wide as it would go, and forced the strange sphere in. She gagging as she punched the burn sequence and flipped open the covered button. The sudden onset of intense gravity forced the orb down to her stomach, wearing her throat raw. As she was pressed into cushions that felt all too thin now she felt the tingling of her leukosynths trying to repair the damage as quickly as it accumulated.

"Reactor containment failure in 30 seconds." The console intoned mechanically. Using her neural interface, Horizon transmitted her plan to traffic control, her voice box had been almost flattened.

"*Dustbin*," the response came quickly. "You do understand that even if you don't get vaporized by the blast we'll be scraping paste out of your pod?"

You might be surprised. Was her only response.

“Reactor failure in 10 seconds.” The console stated. Horizon reached one heavy, flattened finger towards the button, and depressed it.

An explosion rocked the cockpit, pushing it the slightest bit against the thrust-simulated gravity. And then it shot forward, away from the gas giant. Behind the detached capsule the remainder of the *Dustbin* detonated in a burst of radiation. And then Horizon, Tanya Loter, knew no more.