

Aboard the *Resolution* a wide variety of constructs skittered and rolled about the ship, delivering parts from the vessel's printers and installing them with their arrays of integrated drills and welders. One construct in particular, though, which had not arrived with the ship from the Ronkalli system, stood waiting in the medical bay for her master to be decanted.

The transparent aluminum wall of the regeneration tank retracted into the floor and the naked lupine body of Irvine of House Lupus, otherwise known as Princeps, staggered out, dripping residual perfluorocarbon. "Welcome back boss." Melene Corus, also known by the unwieldy name of EyeInTheSky, held out a towel for him to mop out his fur.

The wolf took it and began to wipe himself off, acting as if she was not even there. "Arch-damned scrappers." He muttered to himself. "I should have replaced them all with robots."

"Robotic replicas of individuals are illegal." Eye reminded him.

"You're one to talk." He retorted. "Report."

Eye would have reminded him that she was a bioprinted parahuman and not a gynoid, but she had been conditioned not to talk back to him. Instead she pulled up the summary she'd compiled and began to recite. "Repairs at 73%. Paladin Lift in stasis following severe tissue damage sustained as a result of acute gravitational stress. Paladin MechRat in stasis following tissue damage sustained as a result of damage inflicted by Paladin Lift."

"And the pilot?"

Eye shifted topics effortlessly. "Paladin Horizon, status unknown, presumed disintegrated following catastrophic drive failure by the *Dustbin* in orbit over Surt."

Princeps rubbed his temples in frustration. "And what was her cyberbrain conversion status at the time of this little mutiny?"

"49%." The synthetic raven replied. "The conversion process should have continued during her flight to Surt, it's probable she was near 100% when her ship was destroyed."

"That rat was nearly 80% when he mutinied, was he not?"

Eye took a few seconds to pull up the data. "Paladin MechRat's neural matter was 78.8% synthetic at the time, but that was largely due to his exocortex implants. 43% of his original brain tissue remained unconverted."

The wolf snorted. "Whereas that dumb ox only needed a third of his brain converted to become a good obedient soldier. Explain that, analyst."

EyeInTheSky took more than a minute to collate the data and present her findings while her master dressed. "Paladin Lift proved easily susceptible to the memetic programming and conversion of key motor functions was prioritized given his strength was deemed his primary asset. Paladin Horizon and Paladin MechRat's skills with piloting and engineering were deemed important enough to retain intact."

“Hmmpf,” Princeps turned to the door, giving one last set of orders. “I don’t care about this system’s backwards laws. Begin production of robotic replica troops, randomize their cosmetic species and features. If we ever recruit any more paladins make sure they’re 100% converted while still in the tanks.”

“Like yourself sir?”

Princeps paused just inside the door, it seemed like a glimmer of fear passed over his face for a split second before he collected himself and replied. “I’m going to the stasis bays, do not disturb me.”

“Of course boss.” The raven moved into a perching posture as her attention shifted to the ship’s systems.

Princeps took an elevator down to the deck below the medical bay. The whole deck was taken up by aluminum cylinders similar to the regeneration tank above decks, but the microbots in these were different. Rather than rebuilding bodies, these were specialized for maintaining a body in a pristine state for the long voyages between stars, forming microscopic scaffolding within the body’s own cells that held them together against the ravages of time.

The wolf paused in front of one tube, containing the mangled body of what could have once been a fox, his rank insignia in gold. After a quick mental check to make sure the room’s surveillance system had been disabled he spoke, not in his usual rough Logan accent, but in careful Core tones. “My dear cousin,” he said with a glimmer of amusement. “If you had accepted cyberbrain conversion, you might have survived the trip. Good thing I had this backup plan.”

“Princeps” walked past several more Ronkali crew to three that had been empty when the ship arrived in the Tiere system. He studied the crushed opossum, metallic glints of his cybernetic spine showing through his skin. “I have to wonder if this one’s mutiny was a backup plan of your own, though. You were always opposed to Ascension. Did you plan to build up your own empire in this system? Think you could possibly compete with my power?”

His gaze shifted to another tube that held no body, just an exposed brain. “I should have thanked you for this shell,” the self-proclaimed Emperor Ronkall grinned with his stolen lips. “I have to wonder if that primitive servitor of yours would even care if it knew how your brain had been cyber-converted so quickly? I should probably upload your memories anyways, in case I ever need to trick anyone who actually knew you.” Ronkall glanced back at MechRat, “it might be useful to upload you to an isolated system too. Or just stick your head on a life support rig. Perhaps that’ll motivate you to tell me what you gave your raccoon friend.”

He turned to head back up the elevator. “And you had better be dead Ms. Loter. Or I will make you wish you were.”