Chapter 61

The next two days I spent at breakfast with the command staff going over progress reports. I didn’t like meetings. They seemed to draw out something that took just five minutes to review and approve to an hour long circular discussion. Fortunately right after I had fitness and combat training to blow off steam. My days were then spent all over engineering. Supervising the cradle build, talking with Dorian about the FTL drive efficiency ratings, setting up power feeds and testing our shield emitters, checking in on the hull refits, and tinkering in the robotics lab with Gabby and Eve.

Gabby wanted to do her first male steward bot but I wouldn’t let her yet. She could do simulations on the computer and do small test runs but until she finished her first project, the dog bots, I would hold her back. I wasn’t going to let her leave something half finished. Her fifth iteration for the wolf looked really good. Julie had helped her with the programming of its movements. It played with a happy Zed and it was difficult…if you were not looking for it…to see the issues.

I was most impressed with Gabby’s work on the dog tongue. It looked good and really added that aspect that made you question if you were seeing a dog bot or actual wolf. Gabby was ready to get the other 19 bots into the new fur suit. Eve would help her a few hours each day. If she managed her time well she could do three bots a day.

Before Buckie was due to arrive Abby came to see me. She thought she had convinced Francis Pineda to join us! That was great news until I heard the concession I needed to make. I needed to free Asher Dyson, his two cousins and a fourth man involved in the gang. With them gone the little gang would fall apart and the Union prisoners could get through their sentence unmolested.

Abby didn’t tell him another few thousand navy, marines and political prisoners were inbound. Why ruin our chance to bring someone of good character into the crew? No. I told Abby to let him know about the new prisoners inbound. Not telling him had the potential to make us seem seedy and deceitful. I wasn’t sure if I was even going to free Asher and his cousins. Abby left to find a reply. Since Buckie was coming today Abby was distracted and I didn’t think she would get to it.

I headed down to the Andromeda Class Ultra Fast Courier. The ship’s computer had been stripped, probably one of the actions the pirates took to hide the origins of the craft. I had just received the ship’s schematics and maintenance specs for considerable cost. I had downloaded everything to my PerCom and a large data slate and I was touring the ship.

The engines were impressive…far more advanced than anything else I had studied. I now knew why the plans were so expensive and had been hard to obtain. This ship was cutting edge…what had brought it out to the rim worlds to get captured by a pirate? I wanted to tear into the engines and power core on this ship but wouldn’t have time for a while. I hadn’t examined the ship because I had considered it Samantha’s property…now I was pretty sure I would never give it back to her. It also made sense the incredibly high offers people had been making to buy the ship.

I was checking the fuel tanks when Abby commed me. The passenger ship carrying Buckie had just transitioned. He would reach the station in a little over eight hours. I pulled some engineering bots to come down and work on the courier. I just wanted the tanks purged, cleaned and refilled for now. The ship was space worthy but there were a number of maintenance work that should be done prior to another space flight. I had the list on my PerCom and planned to do most of the work myself…working on this ship would be fun.

I went up to my cabin to change into some nicer clothes and a fresh skinsuit. I went with Abby to the station. Buckie’s ship was docking at Ring C, Bay 9. We got there considerably early and got some food at a vender on the ring. It was considerably greasy…and not very good. Abby started a conversation as I tossed most of the sandwich in the trash. She had told Francis Pineda about the new prisoners coming from the Union. He still seemed open to joining the crew if I freed those four prisoners. Abby said I had a decision to make.

I checked my finances. I was already drawing close on my fund balances, even with selling a tiny bit more here and there. Where did all the credits go? At least the crew salaries were being held in escrow for six months out and the ship was refueled and all port fees had been paid. I quickly paged through all the purchases on my PerCom since we made port. The big ticket items and all the small items did in fact make a sizable bottom line. I didn’t want to draw attention to my ship by converting such large sums over and over. To date I didn’t think the sums were too ostentatious. I still couldn’t decide and Abby said it was my decision and I had to work it out on my own.

The large passenger ship docked and it took forty minutes of waiting for passengers to disembark. Buckie was in the first group and just carried a large duffle bag. He didn’t look crippled, his prosthetic leg was indistinguishable from a normal leg. He smiled, recognizing us and rushed over to give Abby a hug. Abby said the news of her death had been greatly exaggerated. Buckie gave me a hug next. He said I looked great and that he always thought I would make something of myself. Buckie said we should all go and get a drink and toast Adam who was not with us…but not on the ship, in the station. So we went to a bar and had two rounds of shots. We left a full shot on the table both times for our missing friend, Adam.

With a slight buzz we returned to the *Void Phoenix*. Abby said she would give Buckie the tour and I could go about my captain’s duties. That went as well as could be expected. Buckie seemed in high spirits. I hoped Gwen would be as well when she arrived tomorrow and was released. The funds and paperwork had already been submitted. My buzz was active so I decided to go to cabin and lay down. Normally I would spend an hour our two with Celeste before going to my cabin for the night. Being a little drunk I decided best not to see Celeste tonight.

I was laying on the bed and Julie materialized next me prone and in lingerie. She said do you want to play a game? I asked why was she in lingerie? She said Eve had said I was fair game now. I sat up? Fair game? Yes Eve had said she had accepted her role as my daughter so the role of my lover was up for grabs. Julie admitted she didn’t have a body but she could function well enough in VR with her full sensation suite. Maybe adding a holo projector for Julie in my quarters was a mistake?

I was a little stunned and took me a moment to respond. So Eve was passing me off to her BFF? I looked at Julie, her pose was that of a seductress and she rubbed her bare thigh from her knee toward her groin. If I didn’t know she was a just a program I might have been turned on. I needed to talk with Emon about Julie’s current disposition. I think one rogue AI in Eve was quite enough for me. How did I get myself into these things? I told Julie we should solidify our friendship first before moving on to anything…more intimate. How about we play the game. Julie put on a great big smile and said she could get Luna and Eve in the game in twenty minutes! At least with others around in the game I could put off Julie’s advances.

Well that didn’t quite go as planned. Julie put on her best efforts in the game to continue her seduction of me and Luna and Eve encouraged her! It did seem that Julie and Luna were good friends. That made sense as Julie oversaw her education. The administrations didn’t slow our progress in our search for the necromancer. Luna made level 7, and the rest of us made level 9. We also found a cabal supporting the necromancer in the village. Before I crushed the leader of the cabal we learned the necromancer was a lich, the old wizard king.

I visited Celeste in the morning before the staff meeting. Shinade asked why I hadn’t stopped by last night and I was honest with her. She just nodded and let me hold Celeste for a bit. I think my relationship was slowly mending with Shinade. We were at least talking now when I visited with Celeste. Shinade was nursing Samantha’s boy. He seemed to be doing well. I kissed Celeste and handed her to Shinade’s free arm and other breast.

The staff meeting this morning actually went quick. We were preparing for some early arrival passengers and the hospitality staff was anxious to prepare deck 7. It looked like Abby was feeling it as well. She had probably spent the night reminiscing with Buckie.

Training also went quick, well relatively, just 90 minutes. Buckie was there and out of shape. Abby secretly told me that he had been fairly depressed before receiving the call from her. He had been through a lot but he would get back to his old self. After training Abby was taking him to Doc to start the procedure to regrow his leg…probably the reason for the short training this morning.

I spent an hour with Damian on the FTL drives. We reviewed everything and the ship was ready to go. I went to the robotics lab next to get lost in my work and wait for the call that Gwen’s transport was in system. Gabby had finished half the guard dog refits. They looked great…well the three that were in the lab. I worked on Eve’s upgrades. Lost in my work Eve came and found me much later…almost twelve hours of straight work. I asked her if the transport had arrived? No, but Cori had sent dinner to my quarters and Shinade was wondering why I hadn’t stopped in to see Celeste. So rather than comm me Eve came to see if I was ok.

I looked at my progress with Eve and she was showing some excitement. It was getting there. Because of the extra strength of the alien layered hull plating I could create pockets in some of the ‘bones’ without compromising the strength of the structure. These pockets could house the processors and memory banks that bordered on the illegal. Well they were illegal in just about every portion of civilized human space.

Eve asked when? I told her a few days into transit to the Ragnhild system we would do it. I was basically going to completely disassemble her. It was going to be a traumatic experience for both of us.

Julie appeared in the room in her white navy uniform. Julie said the prisoner transport had transitioned into the outer system. It was five hours late but at least it got here. It would soon be time to reunite with…a friend from the past.