Our fleet was spread out and in the inner system. We could not get away and I watched the dots multiplying on the radar as fighters were launched from the enemy fleet. The admiral of our fleet ordered us to a rally point, but the freighters wouldn’t make it before being overtaken as ETAs went up on the screen. One of our battle ships was also pretty slow from damage. I would have jettisoned our salvage but I had to weld the makeshift containers to the skeleton frame of our cargo canister racks.

Samantha consulted me and we decided on a vector away from the rally point, we were not the only freighter to do so. We went at freighter speed not utilizing our max modified speed. We hoped they would only send a token force that we could handle. Then by the time they realized their mistake we would be too far out.

It was very tense while we waited and three hours later it looked like we had two gunships and six fighters on our vector for probable intercept. There was another freighter close to us so we guessed we would have half that number. After comming the other freighter, we diverged vectors from them. Two hours later, we only had one gunship and three fighters following our plot for intercept. Perfect. I started running fuel estimates for them with the bridge crew. We had forty-eight minutes to engagement range.

Ok the fighters would only have about one-third their fuel when they got to us by my estimates. The gunship would have plenty of fuel but the fighters would be low. Samantha had the pilot slowly increase our acceleration like we were stressing our engines to get away as planned. The fighters would have to practically empty their tanks to catch us now and we had the lasers for the gunship.

The fighters stopped accelerating letting the gunship handle us, the best-case scenario for us. Samantha had us go to max burn forcing the gunship to come at us in straight line making the laser targeting easy to hit them. I ejected the covers off the lasers and opened up with lasers at max power. The gunship was soon vaporized by our surprise attack and the trailing fighters broke off. Thankfully, the fighters had no missiles as our targeting was crap for point defense. Two of the lasers were showing red but that did not matter right now.

I watched the end of the large fleet engagement on long range sensors, the battleship that was damaged had surrendered after thirty minutes. All freighters except for ours had been captured or destroyed. Of our remaining fleet, one battleship, three cruisers and numerous small ships escaped to FTL but were greatly damaged by torpedoes and missile attacks by the com reports we listened in on. Samantha said that was only about a third of our starting fleet escaped and they were all damaged. Our course was set for a small mining colony far away from the conflict. We would refuel and wait to hear if this Sapphire fleet ended the war which was likely in my opinion.

After my duties in getting our ship into FTL I went to check on the prisoners and question them with Samantha. We had 11 woman and 12 men now. We had 13 engineers, 5 marines and 5 officers. Most of those killed by Eve in the escape attempt were marines. Samantha was direct with them. They were going to win the war so as long as they behaved and they would be able to return to their Empire. We told them our fleet lost the second engagement but we escaped. Samantha left and I got them food and more medical supplies. I told them I would get them into better cells when I had time.

A week later in transit and with the help of my life support engineer and Eve I made twenty-four individual cells. Each cell had a shower timer for 10 minutes a day, a toilet, sink, bed and comfortable chair. Eve printed out books on request for them, just novels though.

The cells were in blocks of six, allowing socializing. I kept the men and women separate still. Eve was my prison guard which sucked as I realized how much work she had actually done for me. We still had another 37 days in sub space as we were headed to the complete opposite side of the Union. I asked Samantha to drop off the prisoners but she declined. She didn’t want new orders if we docked at a Union port and I agreed that was smart. At least the sense of duty had left her.

I did spend about an hour everyday talking to the prisoners. They had complaints that I listened to and sometime addressed, well for the women anyway. They wanted cameras turned off while they showered which I denied. But I did get them spare clothes and had Eve wash their clothes every third day. I even gave the prisoners an officer meal every third day as a reward for being good, no more escape attempts hopefully.

We were twelve days from exiting sub space when the power core had some disturbing readings. It took me two hours to find the problem. The fuel mix intake exchange filters were put in backwards and then they were recalibrated to zero, so they never showed the mistake. This allowed impurities to build up in the core. Checking the maintenance log, I found it was my dead engineer, well she hadn’t been educated on the core maintenance. It was a really poor design for the part. The fact it could fit in backwards was just idiotic. I told the captain we had maybe three days before we needed to drop out of sub space and then it would take two days for the core to cool down and another day to tear down, clean and rebuild.

She decided to land on a dark planet. A dark planet was a mapped large mass that speed through space and did not orbit a sun. There were millions of such objects mapped. The faster ones were comets. This was one of the larger ones as it was 2440 kilometers in diameter with no records of density or shape. It was noted some 300 years ago. We were so far off the normal space lanes that it wasn’t a surprise it had no further data on the object. Taking time for an in-depth catalog of such a body was not a high priority for the Union.

The prisoners had lots of questions as we exited FTL, and when I switched off grav plating and put most systems in low power mode. I told them we were waiting for parts not wanting to admit my ship had to stop due to poor maintenance. I had become partial to two of the prisoners, a tall red head named Shinade of Irish decent. She was one of the marines but always smiled and had a fantastic body, yes I checked her showering security video as I did everyone’s and then deleted them after confirming no suspicious activity. She wasn’t shy and sometimes when I stopped in to talk she was barely dressed. Now I know her flirting was probably just an attempt to get me to lower my guard and escape but still her attentions to me were flattering.

The other woman I liked, Vanessa, had medium toned skin with silky black hair. She was of average height but had green piercing eyes that seemed to glow in the dark. She had strong Mediterranean blood. She was also playful in conversation, making bad jokes and constantly asking about my personal life. She had been a technician for the fighters and shuttles. No engineering training, just basic refueling and maintenance.

While we were waiting for the core to cool down I took Vanessa to our flight bay with Eve acting as escort. Although the bay was organized, it was just packed with shit. I put her to work, asking her to get three shuttles, all that could comfortably be operated with our supplies, in order and have the bots put the rest of the shit into the storage containers outside. Well, the other prisoners clamored to help as well but I turned them down. I was eyeing letting Shinade out but realized how stupid it would be to let her out. Vanessa was supervised by three bots and she would work 10-hour days and I planned to give her the better meals as compensation.

On the first day of engine cool down Samantha said the scans of dark planet showed a lot of interesting things. The bridge crew figured out it had been part of a planet millions of years ago, probably orbiting a star and had been thrown out of orbit by a massive explosion, but not a super nova. That would have destroyed the planet and it seemed relatively intact. It had ruins on one of the surface exposures and they wanted to explore the alien ruins. There would not be much left in my opinion but they had a human's curiosity…hell I wanted to go too.

Well, the captain was more than a little shocked to find Vanessa in the shuttle bay working. I got some major dressing down but then she just agreed it was fine if I had a bot scanning her work. The captain, life support engineer, navigator and sensors officer took some weapons and each was wearing a salvaged powered combat armor suit. The six suits of marine EVA suits I had procured had been stored in one of the containers and had salvaged after the fleet engagement. I had to remove six computer safeguards on the suits and put basic programming modules in them to get them functional.

None of the explorers were versed in the suits and they were moving slowly but that was fine as we had plenty of time. They boarded a standard shuttle as the marine drop ship was still packed with escape pod stuff. We only had the drop shuttle and two transport shuttles in the bay and the bay was already looking much more organized thanks to Vanessa. I declined her request to bring in one of the damaged fighters to work on.

I was assigned to the bridge to monitor communications. Not like I had a ton of things to do. Well, I used my time on the bridge replacing terminals, deck plating, screens and whatever else I could upgrade from the cruiser salvage. I had six external hull bots working on the hull, five engineering bots inside and twelve general utility bots. Fortunately, I had Eve helping give them all directions and work assignments.

It took them 37 hours to return to the ship. They explored three ruins. The civilization was humanoid from the skeletons. It looked like after the planet was thrown from its sun the population rebuilt and lasted a few hundred years before dying out. The cities were built deep into the earth and the subterranean structures were immense. Samantha had caught the archeologist bug and decided they were going to spend two weeks exploring. Three-day trips and two days of rest on ship. The artifacts they had recovered so far were remarkably interesting technology that relied on crystalline computers. The crystal structure allowed them to still have some function after being unattended so long.

I got curious and set up a lab to explore the tech in my spare time. The bridge upgrades made Samantha happy with me. It was not enough to get some intimate time with her though. I was fairly sure she was spending time with my life support engineer as she spent more time on the bridge than engineering.

So, I was now being bounced around, archeologist, prisoner warden, bridge officer, head engineer. My life was so busy and I was getting burned out even utilizing stims. I tried to tell Samantha but she was too engrossed in her discovery of the ancient civilization.

It took me just a little examination to find a way to power the crystalline computers they brought back and soon I was working on the language. It was more melodic and had tonal inflections embedded. Finding some children educational programs on a device they brought back greatly accelerated my learning the language, well creating a translator device anyway.

The prisoners during this time were becoming restless. They knew the FTL drive was good to go and yet we remained. So, I told them about the ruins and the crystalline tech. Two men and one woman wanted in on the research I was doing but I waived them off. I gave them my results but did not plan to include them but then they started giving me insights I had not thought of. So, I released them to help for just two hours of collaboration.

One of them managed to open the cells again for another breakout attempt while my crew was out in the ruins. Now I had programmed Eve to shoot to kill and I had installed two hidden turrets I salvaged from the cruiser's armory since their last attempt. It was carnage. After the bloodbath there were just two men left and five women. It really had been an ambush on my part and I had hoped they would not take the bait. I had hoped they were genuine in wanting to help with the alien tech. Vanessa was terribly upset with her fellows. Shinade had been injured, she had a hole through her torso and I made an effort to stabilize her after the coup attempt.

We did not have a medical suite on the ship. I had a lot of supplies and found a marine’s field medic kit in salvage. That allowed me to have Eve treat Shinade. The scanner said she was stable enough but required further medical aide. Well, if she didn't move maybe she would live. I sterilized her cell and just hoped she lived. Even with the escape attempt I was still attracted to her.

When Samantha returned she was not happy. Just seven prisoners were left and three of them were injured.

Well at least they had brought back a lot of artifacts including three alien bots.