Chapter 73

*Lazarus (Aston) was ancy. The Void Phoenix had dropped out of subspace mid-voyage and the ship had rung with something he was very familiar with, combat. The very dull thuds didn’t last long and he was concerned that someone else might be trying to take his ship. Maybe it was a mutiny? That seemed unlikely as all the crew he had interacted with seemed very happy. It was a few hours before Dora, the chief steward came and told the passengers there was nothing to worry about. She said they had dropped out of subspace due to a contaminated fuel issue. The engineers were cleaning the intakes now and would switch over to another storage tank before reentering subspace.*

*Lazarus listened to the utter bullshit. Braddock said the explanation given could have explained the thuds through the hull they had heard. Lazarus just stared at his young and naive engineer before the boy looked away. The boy had been in enough combat and boarding actions to know better. It was definitely a firefight. If the engineer recognized him at the dinner party maybe he was altering course away from a possible ambush. He smirked. That wouldn’t work as Lazarus had the Sylvan tech in his luggage and on his ship. They should be able to calculate the Void Phoenix’s course and intercept them.*

*His crew only had a single subspace disruptor. That was the hole in his plan. If his crew didn’t activate the device at the right time on the correct vector then he would have to come up with something else. It was frustrating waiting. Braddock was enjoying the steward bots and VR while Lazarus stewed. The intercept should be the day before the arrived in the Ragnhild system so he had time. If they missed then they would pick him up in the Ragnhild system and he would come up with a new plan.*

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The SLUMBER program was not what I had expected. It was just a massive orgy. No objectives, point tracking, or goal other than pick whoever he wanted from the dozens of women and fuck till he got bored. He did try a woman with short black hair and brown eyes and an athletic build but her compliance with everything he asked her to do turned him off. After that, he just watched others fornicating and waving off women who approached him. He did get some interesting ideas for sexual positions but this hedonistic VR simulation did not really turn him on.

He exited the program and cleaned up. It was still early so he spent time with Eve, Claire, Celest, and Amos. His cabin was pretty large but he decided to make it larger by combining it with the empty cabin next to his. That would spread things out a bit and he could also install more security around his daughter that way. He spent some time with Eve going over the details before sending the plans to Abby for review and alterations.

He then went to the staff meeting. Everyone was pretty somber so I took the reigns. I was implementing required emergency VR drilling for all crew members. They could complete it solo or in groups. Everyone needed to demonstrate competency in all three aspects I programmed, environmental, piracy, and passenger. Julie had the scenarios ready to go and I encouraged everyone to complete one every few days to stay sharp. I left it to Abby to schedule sims with the entire crew in VR.

Suruchi spoke about the well-being of the passengers. Some concerns were raised but she thinks overall the situation was handled well and it shouldn’t adversely affect the Void Phoenix’s reputation too much. I nodded and wondered if any of the passengers had a clue about what really happened.

Nero gave an update on repairs to engineering and said Gabby had managed to get 11 of the wolf bots back to full functionality. Nine were scrap metal now. That was good and Abby detailed where she wanted them stationed on the ship. A few more items were touched on before the meeting came to a close.

Fitness and combat training was next and I was dialed in and broke Hanno’s arm when I got too aggressive. Abby pulled me off to the side to talk with me. She first apologized for the umpteenth time for her security failure before. Then she said I was doing extremely well at presenting myself as a captain but I needed to dial down my intensity a bit. During an emergency, it was ok to be the badass captain. But right now, training with the marines, I needed to build camaraderie and trust with them. The same went for my interactions with the rest of the crew. She didn’t want me to become too hard, cold, and retreat within myself. She knew I was hurting but I needed to remain objective in my actions, the best captains were able to do that.

I showered in my cabin and set a time to meet with Francis. We had an interview scheduled before meeting Jane Doe. We arrived at the captain’s dining room and found Andrei Curran and his massive steward bot already there. Some refreshments were laid out. The man was sweaty and looked uncomfortable. I let Francis ask the questions as this was his forte.

Francis focused on the statues first, asking why he had moved them to his cabin. During the line of questions, Andrei changed his story twice before caving and saying he feared Jane Doe. He thought she was going to steal them. She was a collector and buyer like he was. I met eyes with Francis. So maybe Jane and her crew were after the artifacts. Andrei had obviously been a mess with worry once he learned Jane Doe was on board and asked me for protection. He would pay, of course, 100 Sol credits for the remainder of the trip. He even offered to sell the statues back to me at a discount. I didn’t really like the man. He was pompous and arrogant but weak-willed when cornered. I took his money and had Abby handle the additional security.

Francis and I left and talked about how to approach Jane Doe. Francis would take the lead again during the interview. We spent the next few hours going over the battlesuits, implants, and shuttles contents. Francis was looking for clues while I was examining the technology. I was thoroughly impressed and planned to try my hand at making my own powered combat armor in the future. The suits had dozens of compartments containing items for combat, survival, and stealth. With my improved alien plating, I could probably make something slightly better than these advanced suits. I would need to upgrade my electronics fabricator and 3D printer and also purchase the raw materials. I was running cost estimates on the equipment and materials when Francis interrupted me.

Unfortunately, Francis didn’t make any connections from what he found. He was certain the group was from the inner system but whoever they worked for was not evident. Ok, it was time to go play our hand and see if we could tease out some information from Jane Doe.

Jane Doe was in her cell and two marines and two wolf bots stood guard nearby. I dismissed the guards for now. Jane looked very uncomfortable. Doc had removed her implants and only given her a general painkiller. Francis waited for a few minutes before asking his questions. He started by telling Jane her shuttle had been disassembled. We had the vault in storage but hadn’t accessed it yet. My job was to watch Jane Doe and judge her reactions. Slight anger showed before disappearing.

Francis then proceeded to detail Jane Does public history in the Sapphire Empire. It wasn’t much and probably very incomplete. This caused her to remain unfazed. Then he proceeded to jump to his first conclusion. He said Jane was after the pair of statues and the other two alien artifacts on board the Void Phoenix. Nothing. Jane was a blank book to me. She wasn’t giving us anything.

Francis then made some logical leaps trying to connect her to one of the most powerful organizations in the core worlds. She smirked at this. I guessed Francis was on the right track but just way off on his assumptions as to the organization. This wasn’t working. Time for plan B.

I stepped forward and said we would be diverting to Gamma-Zeta Six. It was a mostly uninhabited system with a tiny asteroid mining colony. They received supplies and exported materials every two years. The next cycle was 14 months away. So maybe I had stretched the truth a bit. It was a large mining colony and transports came and went every two months. But I thought the star system was obscure enough that she wouldn’t know. She did respond finally.

Jane Doe said she surrendered because she thought I was an honorable captain. And I would be breaking my word by marooning her for months in a mining colony. I retorted with the fact that she had killed the mother of my daughter and yet still lived. The forensic investigation had concluded that Jane had in fact killed all three crew members. My statement was like a slap in the face for her. She hadn’t realized whom she had killed or that I had figured out it was Jane who had been rampaging and killing the crew.

Her façade was cracking slightly…no…it was an act. At least that is what my gut told me. She offered to open the vault in exchange for a guarantee to be turned over to the authorities in the Ragnhild system. Finally progress. She gave us the combination and I had a steward bot go attempt to open the vault. We waited ten minutes before Julie confirmed the vault was unsealed. She was logging the contents now. Jane Doe looked pissed behind her indifferent mask now. Then Francis did something unexpected.

He called the guards back in and asked them to bring Jane to medical. After they left he confided he was worried. The vault was shielded…maybe Jane had a hidden device on her that was communicating with something in the vault. I nodded having not gotten to that level of paranoia yet. We went to medical to await the scan results.

In fact, Jane Doe was hiding secrets that the first scans had missed. The marrow in her femur had an array of dormant nanites. Not certain what they did I just had Doc purge them. Then we found a concealed micro transmitter in her molar. Jane crushed it to activate it before Doc could remove it. Jane now plainly wore an angry countenance. With the micro transmitter activated we alerted Abby and the rest of the crew, waiting for something to happen. Three hours later we stood down from the alert.

Jane Doe had changed her tune as well. She said I was in over my head and if I wanted to get out of this peacefully then I should just let her go with the contents of her shuttle. I left with Francis to mull over what had happened.

Francis felt we had played out Jane’s cards. The transmitter, on examination, was short-range and just sent an SOS. Francis figured she planned to activate it once we reached a station or planet to call for help. Since it went off in subspace no one would have heard her plea. We then went to review the contents of the vault.

The vault held some artwork, mostly paintings, and sketches that Francis appraised for being worth a few thousand Sol credits. The real haul was the hard Sol currency. Special chips with preprogrammed amounts, almost 300,000 Sol credits in 1,000 and 5,000 denominations. A frigging fortune! There was also a large amount of data storage devices in the vault. Some of the probably contained clues to what organization Jane Doe belonged to. I would give them to Julie and maybe she could decode them without losing the data. There were also two identical hacking devices here. The same model that Jane had used on Julie to incapacitate her. Incredible…I did begin to think that I was in over my head.

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*Edmund Asir was serving a middle-aged woman some expensive white wine. His family had traveled out to the rim two generations ago and settled in the Union. When he turned 16 his father showed him his family's true legacy. They were part of a secretive group called the Brotherhood. His father explained that the Brotherhood was responsible for advancing humanity and keeping Earth as the central power in human space.*

*He was trained rigorously and became a Brotherhood agent destined to infiltrate the Union black ops command. He had been well along this path when the war had broken out. That was when he learned more about the Brotherhood than he wanted. His missions for the Brotherhood were focused on stealing artifacts and technology before it was lost to the rigors of war. The Brotherhood, from his perspective, is nothing more than a hoarder of wealth and information.*

*He still did his duty and when he was captured in a planetary raid immediately activated his SOS beacon. He was told the Brotherhood would free him. Two days later while in a cell a Brotherhood member did visit him. He was dressed in a Sapphirian captain’s uniform. All he said was Edmund’s services were no longer required. Edmund had to kill two other prisoners the next day. He was being erased. He staged one of the prisoners to take his place by painfully exchanging PerCom ID chips with the man. He really hadn’t thought it would work but due to the multitude of injuries among the prisoners and the hasty processing it had.*

*A few weeks later he was on Bastille and returned to using his real name. He planned to spend a few years and then be released and disappear. Somehow he got an opportunity for early release. Now he was swinging drinks and carousing with middle-aged women for large tips. This must be his reward and he never planned to go back home.*

*The ship had some trouble in its travel to the Ragnhild system. It dropped out of subspace and then returned a few hours later. Suruchi had told him there was nothing to worry about so he resisted his urge to investigate. Then two days later a cold chill went down his spine as his PerCom hard programming picked up a Diamond SOS beacon from a Brotherhood agent. Diamond agents were the agents that worked directly for one of the monarchs of the Brotherhood. Who the hell would send this in subspace…and what should he do about it?*