Chapter 42

I needed to ask Eve how she knew if someone was pregnant. Samantha was wearing baggy clothes and if I had focused I might have noticed but still Eve seemed to have a supernatural sense…maybe it was her optics? She could cycle through an array of thermal and light spectrums. I would ask her later.

It was awkward seeing Samantha again. She had tried to kill me in a round about way. We escorted her to a conference room to talk. Eve had programmed the dogs to watch her and I told her that if she tried to evade the dogs or use any of the ship systems I would be informed. I would have to have Eve remove the bots incapacitate program since Samantha was pregnant…before I could forget I sent I note to Eve on my PerCom and she nodded to me once she received it.

We sat in the conference room and the steward bots brought out food. We had used all our fresh food supplies and this was a vegetarian lasagna with some garlic bread from the officer meal selection. As we ate there was a bit of tension in the room and Samantha finally broke it.

Samantha said the others were dead, a failed escape attempt. She went on to explain that she had told the pirates about the ancient civilization ruins on the planetoid to gain favor with them. She then tried to get sympathy from us as she relayed her experiences. Vanessa cut her off and asked why did she kill the other prisoners. Samantha professed innocence and even said she had ordered 2,000 meals left on the planetoid so they could survive until they returned. The sensor operator had tossed the food into space instead of leaving it and that same crew member had programmed the escape pod to crash into the planetoid.

I pointed out that if the escape pod had landed successfully the life support and power probably wouldn’t have lasted more than a month for the population. Samantha seemed to think I would have found a way to extend life support. She was probably right. She asked what was to be her fate now.

I said I would drop her off in the Sapphire Empire with Vanessa. She looked a little panicked at this. I asked her why she was apparently afraid. She knew the Union was dissolved and the Sapphire Empire had tens of thousands of political prisoners and military POWs. Their standard operating procedure was to have those individuals perform a period of service before being released. Anywhere from 6 months to 6 years depending on the harm they did in the war. She was happy to note most politicians got 6 year terms.

As an officer and a captain she was going to get at least 3 years. Shinade interrupted Samantha’s fear of indentured service. This Type of penance was not uncommon in the Empire but the terms of service could always be bought out. She doubted anyone with power or wealth would spend any more that a token night in a cell.

Samantha still seemed uncertain and asked if she could be dropped off in a independent system and be allowed to take her courier ship to a neutral empire. I said I would think on it. Samantha was placed in a passenger cabin on deck 6 and we left the dog bots to guard her.

Walking to my cabin and I was reflecting of the my conundrum with Samantha. I was in the same position as Samantha was. She had feared knowledge getting out about the planetoid so left me and the prisoners on the planetoid…to die…or left us there to wait for her return. I was also worried that Samantha might reveal that I had a cargo hold full of alien technology. Could I risk letting her leave?

I moved to my own cabin for a much needed rest. Shinade wasn’t there but I grabbed my SLUMBER unit. I selected an alien course that Eve had programmed for the university computer. It was on the Flux, an alien race that was more amorphous than humanoid. They could approximate a humanoid form though. They were one of the first races humanity encountered in their star-ward expansion. They lived on a planet 69 light years from earth and didn’t have space travel yet. They ranged in size from a human head to an elephant. The larger the Flux the more intelligent they were. At the largest size they were just as intelligent as a human. That didn’t stop humans from corralling them on their home world and colonizing the rest of the planet with humanity.

On waking I felt pity for the Flux. According to demographic data they were reduced from 50 million to just under a million today. Well I had my own problems. I checked on Samantha and she was in her cabin under guard. She didn’t have enough technical acumen to do much damage but I would keep an eye on her anyway. I sent a drone out to scan her courier ship inside and out for any kind of tracking device.

I met up with Gabby. I decided to work with her today as she had done a great job in the recent emergency. We talked as we worked, jumping from site to site with four engineering bots assisting us. Gabby talked about her progress on the food synthesizer. She had cleaned all the parts and logged the missing parts and the ones that needed replacing. She had a long list of parts that needed to be fabricated and wanted training on the fabrication units. I told her she could use the university VR programs for that and she was slightly disappointed. I told her after she completed the programs I would walk her through a few fabrications to make sure she understood it which perked her up a bit.

The conversation eventually turned to Henry. She wanted my opinion on him and if he was going to remain on the crew. That was a good question. I had been hoping to replace Henry after his lack composure during the flight from the planetoid. I told Gabby that Henry would be allowed to stay but his duties would be limited to just navigation once I found some more crew. Gabby just nodded in thought at that. Eve had said they were sort of a couple…not that she had much options on this ship. We finished up the current task and I let her continue on her own.

As I walked I thought about crew. Where could I find some crew to fill the needed roles? I was definitely ready to dump Tora. She had a rigidity in her mental process that made her a terrible engineer. She was also not the brightest engineer. I had reviewed her sessions in VR and she was struggling with the certs. She had only passed two certs for the job I hired her for, the navigation engineer! As I reached the lower cargo hold I decision to talk to her and she would either have to take a lesser role or be let go.

I found Eve and Nero in the large and packed cargo hold. Nero was working with two bots to reinforce a beam that housed life support feeds. Eve was at the make shift umbilical hatch to Samantha’s courier ship. I walked over to Eve and she turned to me and handed me a data pad. I took it and reviewed it. It was an inventory of the courier’s cargo. Wow! Quite the haul. For such a small craft it was definitely carrying a prince’s fortune.

Eve asked what should she do with the cargo. The ship didn’t have any trackers or booby traps. I told her to crate it all up and put in…one of luxury cabins. I told her not to tell Samantha and also to lock down the courier ship and not give Samantha access. If Samantha was planning to make a break for it with her small ship it would be without her cargo. I went and toured the small ship. It had a pilot’s cockpit forward that was definitely high end. This led back to a small cabin with two large seats that were folded down into beds. The place was filled with crates and a small utility bot was crawling over them finishing the inventory. Behind the passenger cabin was a tiny engineering compartment. There were also two small storage units off of the passenger compartment but both were stuffed and I couldn’t enter them. This was basically a very fast VIP inter system ship, probably for planet to planet transport.

I talked with Nero for a bit and gave him a raise after praising his work to date. Besides his use of the steward bots he was an excellent engineer and his daughter was blossoming into a good engineer as well.

My last stop was main engineering and I went through our ship status. Only a handful of orange alerts left. I left them for Eve and Nero. I needed to select our next destination. We were currently skirting the edge of the old Union and headed toward Sapphire space. There was a colony world of the Sapphire Empire within our range. My data said it had a small space station and a planetary population of a few million. It had no strategic value so it seemed like a good place to leave Vanessa. I commed Henry and told him of our new destination. We would travel another six days before dropping out of subspace and then plotting a new course for the Gunther system.