Chapter 58

*Andrei Curran was an acquisition specialist. He purchased unique items for clients or sometimes for himself that he would sell for substantial profit at the correct time. He was in the Arana system trying to get two paintings from the famous deceased nebula painter Fabian Fortunas. Fabian Fortunas was his artist name, not his real name. He was at the auction house preparing for the auction when two statues depicting some humanoid aliens came through for verification. At first he thought they must be frauds as he wasn’t familiar with the race scuplted. But after the dating work by the auction house was completed he became very interested.*

*He followed the objects as they were posted with the auction house’s scientific findings. They were old, very old, and in perfect condition and to top it off they were aesthetically pleasing. He was having an internal debate to decide if he should buy them himself or turn one of his past clients onto the works.*

*He was guessing these statues would exceed 200,000 Sol credits at auction. He did a quick search of his competitors that were currently in system. Jane Doe and Caesar Laternius. Caesar was a pompous ass, well more of a pompous than himself. Jane Doe was an outsider and her name a blatantly obvious alias. He had encountered her twice before and she bested him both times. Once acquiring an ancient storage device from Earth and the other time in competition for a 24th century earth painting.*

*Fortunately the seller hadn’t posted a buyout on the statues. Andrei searched for the seller. He knew his contacts at the auction house were a dead end. Unlike most auction houses this one kept their sellers anonymous. He knew the objects must have come into the system recently. His contacts at the import authority had 28 merchant traders come into the system in the last month. It took him a day to track down information on these ships and only two seemed possible origins for the statue. A few bribes later and he had the security video of all departures from the ships. Nothing.*

*His next thought was passenger liners. In the last month… 126 ships, damn, well it was a busy system. Passenger liners sometimes carried cargo beyond their passenger cargo. He began to filter the ships when an alert popped into his PerCom. The seller had posted a buyout, 300,000 Sol credits. A sense of urgency overcame Andrei. He could pull together that sum but it would be tight. The question is how much could he sell it for? If he travelled toward the core worlds he might be able to double his investment but balancing the transportation cost…*

*He worked in tandem, liquidating assets and searching the passenger liners for the statues origin. Six passenger liners seemed possible but one stood out. The Void Phoenix had sold a sizable sum of precious metals and was recruiting from Bastille. So the captain, Devon Wellspring, was probably from the old Union. It took a little effort to get the video from the cargo unloading from the Void Phoenix. But jackpot, one of the auction house’s employees was on the video receiving a crate big enough to hold the pair of statues.*

*Making a spur of the moment decision Andrei pulled the trigger on purchasing the statues at the 300,000 Sol credit buyout. It felt right, like he had just gotten a fantastic deal. As if to affirm this he got a message from Jane Doe asking to acquire the statues from him. She was probably fishing to see if he was the one who had purchased it. Well gloating was not beneath him. He sent her a message, 600,000 Sol credits. He was sure even her couldn’t pull together such a large sum and as if to confirm he didn’t her back from her.*

*Now to book passage to the core worlds. Andrei amusingly found that the Void Phoenix was headed that way. The irony of this made him chuckle. He booked passage in one of their luxury cabins. He was also hoping to get some time to see if maybe this Captain Wellspring had other artifacts in his cargo for sale.*

*Jane Doe was more than a little furious. Her real name was Lydia Romasko. She was an agent of the Brotherhood. The Brotherhood was a network that spanned all of human space. They had ancient roots in the Yakuza from old Earth. Her job was to acquire interesting objects and send them to Earth for research. She had virtually unlimited funds to do her job but had mis stepped. She was very interested in the statues and thought she could easily obtain them at auction.*

*The seller put up a buyout price of 300,000 Sol credits and she didn’t think any of her competitors would bite on it. She was actually in the Arana system to acquire an item from the planetary governors vault through stealth. Then that idiot Andrei bought the statues. He must have stretched himself financially thin to raise the funds.*

*It took her just twenty minutes to find the statues origin. It had cost her 10,000 Sol credits for the information from an auction house employee. The Void Phoenix, a newly registered Europa Ambassador Class Passenger Liner. Then she got an interstellar message she dreaded. Her superior had ordered her to acquire the statues. She wished she hadn’t forwarded the auction house data up the chain of command. Of course she was still expected to get the artifacts from the governor’s vault.*

*She reclined in her penthouse on her sofa. Her two companions emerged from the bedroom. Both were tall lithe women of obvious Asian ancestry. The smell of sex permeated the room as they sat on either side of her. She worked well with her two companions who served as bodyguards and lovers. There biological upgrades and hidden cyborg enhancements made them some of the deadliest woman out here in the rim systems. One of the woman wrapped her arm around Lydia and tried to get her aroused with some fondling. No time for that.*

*She started to read her partners in on the circumstances as she worked. She booked the three of them a cabin on the Void Phoenix and accelerated her plans to infiltrate the planetary governor’s estate. It seemed like every job encountered difficulties.*

The adventure in VR was amazing. The upgrades to the resolution and senses from the new module were beyond my expectations. The details and smells and sounds had ratcheted up a 100 times. I noticed Julie wore perfume and Eve had chosen to wear a less modest covering, keeping her muscled abs exposed. We all had kept our avatars and the adventure was to find the necromancer in the dead lands and eliminate him before the waves of undead overwhelmed the towns on the border. Well it was a multi part adventure apparently as we only found a corrupted priest with more clues. That was as far as we had gotten before ending the session.

At the end of the session Julie asked if it would be ok to have Luna join us next time. The young girl had a lot of contact with Julie as her parents had been making sure she spent at least 6 hours a day making use of the education system. I liked the young girl and another member of our party would be helpful. I was a little worried that Luna seeing my aggressive and somewhat bloodthirsty character in the game might ruin her perception of me. Also Eve and Julie in the game had been making obvious sexual overtones toward me…did I want the young Luna to learn from these AI?

I voiced my concerns to Eve and Julie and they dismissed them. Did I not realize what programs people used in VR frequently. Before she could relate what Luna did in her VR I told Julie to lock that information behind a firewall. And do that for all the crew as well. Only myself, Eve or Julie could access that information in the future. I decided to add Abby to that list as well.

I got a beep on the speakers and Julie reminded me I had fourteen minutes to get to training with the security staff.

In the training room we resumed our daily routine. After training Abby said I had a meeting with her Nero, Doc and Suruchi during breakfast. Apparently this was going to be a regular thing for the ship’s captain. Getting updates from engineering, security and hospitality. Abby said I needed to chose an XO from the bridge as well to attend out the group. Apparently Suruchi didn’t want this job as she had her hands full. The breakfast was phenomenal though, prepared by Cori and delivered by steward bots. Cori was still learning the tastes of the crew but I was actually starting to think she was underpaid.

The security update was first and Abby listed a lot of progress. Her staff was integrating well into their functions and she had two large purchase requests. One of them was a high end deep scanner for each of the shuttle bays and cargo bays. The other was six anti boarding spider bots. The spider bots had a variety of models and Abby planned to get the anti riot version that tossed a foam grenade that hardened in 4 seconds when exposed to air. I had to listen for twenty minutes as Abby worked to convince me of the expense. She sounded more like a child begging their parents for a new toy.

I caved and looked at my current funds. I was going to need to liquidate some more assets. I paged through some materials and got them stevedore bots to prep them.

Suruchi was next. She had booked 70% of the luxury cabins and almost all the regular cabins. She had been charging a premium price and expected the voyage to actually make a tiny profit if dining and VR sales were as high as forecasted. She told us of the hiring of the botanist and that he was asking for access to the botany lab. Botany lab? How did she know about that? Apparently she had been meticulous in reviewing my purchases. I hadn’t called it a botany lab of the ship floor plans but she had found it anyway. It was a small room, just 3m by 6m, with two the two long walls for growing. A small analytics station was at one end and the other end housed the stasis room for the alien seeds. I told her when I had time I would bring…Miguel…down there to acclimate him. I was pretty sure Suruchi knew I was hiding something but she didn’t voice. Hell I was hiding multiple things.

Doc went next and she was treating the new crew for multiple issues. She expected everyone to be at 100% in a week or two. She was also in the process of getting the SNAIL unit up and running. Nero chimed in that the changes to allow for its installation she be completed in 40 hours or so. The last thing Doc added was Shinade was due in a week or two and Samantha was due in five weeks. I hadn’t seen either woman recently but I was excited to have a child. I wondered if I removed Samantha from the ship could I mend fences with Shinade?

Truthfully I was slightly smitten with Cori and wasn’t sure how to approach the chef to see if an intimate relationship was possible between us.

The meeting drew to a close and I was off to meet Yannis at the hull fabricators. He should be settled in by now and if he could work in concert with Saabir I hoped we could get a significant portion of the work started on refitting the hull. I ran into Zoe and Elias on my way down and they asked if they could fly the heavy fighters…they were kids in their excitement. I decided to throw Shinade a bone and told them she was in charge of fighter combat. I should really replace the hull plating on those fighters as well. I shifted my priorities to have that done after we shielded the AI and computer cores.

Yannis and Saabir couldn’t believe the hull fabricators when I showed them how to operate them. I didn’t show them the specs on the armor…they could discover that for themselves. I dodged all questions on where I obtained the devices but told them it was a secret. We then worked to get the dimensions on the fighters hull plating…Saabir asked if we were doing a refit on the shuttles too. Good idea! I mentioned my hover bike and that got Saabir’s attention. I showed him the specs and he was hooked. I had a list of safety features I had wanted installed on the bike but had never gotten around to and Saabir eagerly took on the project. Getting those two going I went to the robotics lab.

It was time to upgrade my first steward bot. Eve joined me and it was obvious that she was excited. Together with the help of three engineering bots we stripped the steward bot, removed some components, installed new components, installed a layer of faux musculature and then went to work of the new synth flesh. We worked methodically and quickly over the course of ten hours.

Powering up the bot I was excited to see it in motion. Of course Gabby walked in as I was running the naked female steward bot through various ranges of motion. She ignored my embarrassment and joined in, monitoring the bots readings from a terminal. I noted only eight minor problems with attachments and pinch points. The robotics suite was really state of the art and I had been able to work out most problems during computer modeling. Awkwardly Gabby ran the bots new sex equipment functionality from her station. Everything worked perfectly!

Gabby asked if I was going to do an update on the male steward bots as well. I only thought briefly before saying no. She caught me off guard by asking if she could work on upgrading them. We had 7 female and 3 male steward bots. I told her fine but she would have to redo the faux musculature for the male bots as men were bulkier. To my slight shock she opened a program and had about half the work already done. I turned her attention to the wolf bots and she showed me her latest. She had a range of eyes that all looked excellent, her mouth work was a work in progress and she had solved almost all her other minor issues. Julie and Eve were working with her to build a basic AI to control the wolf bots and make their actions and movements more life like. I was impressed.

I worked with Gabby to solve the issues on the steward bot for the next three hours. Gabby wanted us to work together to upgrade the next steward bot but I told her it could wait till tomorrow. Gabby showed me she was halfway through her robotics certs as well and I gave her a small raise. I asked her about her progress on the food replicator…yeah she had all the parts but just hadn’t been motivated or had time to get to it. I didn’t think we really needed it with a chef on board now. I told her to get it done if she wanted that bonus I promised her. This got a little light in her eyes.

I left Gabby to go find Cori. I had the munchies. Cori was in the deck 7 kitchen. It was much smaller than the kitchens down on deck 4 but she seemed to have made herself at home her. She had a bright smile when she noticed me and talked about the eighteen varieties of fish she had just received in a shipment and what one I would like for dinner. I decided on red bellied trout hybrid because she recommend the honey lime glaze with it as one of her signature dishes. We talked for a while and the conversation turned to the steward bots. She was slightly concerned that during the voyage she wouldn’t have quite enough help in food preparation.

Oh yeah the guests did seem to monopolize the steward bots. I didn’t think we needed any more than 10 though. I could get some stripped down models that would be reserved for just her use? She seemed to like that idea very much. She wanted seven assistant bots and I nearly dropped the warm buttered bread I was munching on. Seven? She explained three for the general kitchens below and for this luxury restaurant kitchen. She said it was the minimum needed to function on a voyage of ship this size.

I went to my PerCom and adding a human staff would be cheaper in the short run. I didn’t have enough funds to purchase seven chef human chef bots. We went together to a terminal and she sat close to me, hips touching as we paged through options. She wanted them human in appearance to make her feel like she had a staff. That doubled the cost. With her closeness though I didn’t say no as we designed five male and two female bots. At least the programming was limited to cooking and they had no anatomy. I placed the order. I diverted some pre-payment funds from tickets for the sale and set up another transfer of precious metals.

Cori was very happy which made me happy. I didn’t make a move as she went right back to cooking. I retreated to my cabin to get a quick rest in. It had been a full and long day. Eve appeared and asked if we were going to continue our adventure in the fantasy realm? Why not?