Chapter 72

Francis met me in the cargo bay. We talked for a while about the shuttle. He had already tried breaking into it and failed. They had tried electronic bypasses and disassembly of hull plating without effect. They had t resorted to brute force as they didn’t want to damage the shuttle.

I looked over the shuttle. It was large, about 30% larger than my marine drop shuttle and I did not recognize the make, model, or class of the shuttle. I checked my PerCom records and nothing matched. It was advanced by the design and I think there were even subspace models recessed in the hull. I would need to pull them out from the inside in order to confirm my suspicions. Walking around the shuttle I just decided we would cut a hole in the front, near the pilot's cockpit. That should minimize any security measures but would do quite a bit of damage to the electronics.

I brought in one of the large exterior bots to do the work and both myself and Francis dressed in powered combat armor. Abby sent down two marines to act in support in case there was a surprise when we cracked the shuttle.

The bot latched onto the shuttle like a lamprey and cycled to its cutting tools and soon sparks were flying. It took a lot longer than I thought it would. I had the bot cut me a small piece of the hull and went to my lab to analyze it as it was going to be an hour or more for the bot to finish.

Huh, the hull sample had a lot of similarities to my alien hull plating. My hull plating was superior but not by a large margin. The shuttle hull had an interesting addition that was interesting. It had a micro honeycomb layer with capsules of expanding foam. It was essentially a self-sealing hull from stress cracks. Large tears in the hull would not receive enough foam to seal though. It was a curious addition and I thought it may be useful for shuttles or escape pods. It wouldn’t be useful for larger ships.

I got back to the cargo bay in plenty of time before the shuttle was breached. The shuttle emitted a heavy gas when it was finally opened and I cycled the cargo bay to vent it outside the ship. An analysis indicated the gas was a neuro paralyzer. It was probably some type of anti-theft device. Since we had suits on it was harmless to us. We sent in a steward bot puppet controlled by Julie next.

I immediately regretted cutting through the shuttle nose and the forward electronics. This shuttle was extremely advanced and the cockpit had multiple consoles for its electronic devices. Maybe I could repair the damage? There was only one bot on board the shuttle. It appeared to be a simple humanoid chrome-coated service bot. Rather than risk if the bot was more than it appeared I had Julie remove its power core and battery. I then had Julie disconnect all the power systems on board before she opened the rear cargo access.

It turned out that had been very lucky of us. There were two recessed turrets by the cargo access that were connected to batteries. They were powerful enough to do some serious damage to our suits. Another hidden turret was found on the port side door. We were very careful as we cleared the shuttle and scanned for any other surprises but everything came out clean.

I started in the cargo bay where there was a massive roll of canvas. We unrolled it in the cargo bay to reveal a nebula painting. I usually did not think too much of art but this caught my attention. I told Julie to have the bots hang it in the gym as it had the only wall big enough to hold it. I could have put it in a passenger area but why share it with them when someone may recognize it?

The cargo bay had a lot of crates with tools and surveillance equipment. Francis kept asking questions I did not have the answers to. We logged everything and had it moved to the storage on the upper decks. The shuttle had four cabins in a small corridor leading to a common room that connected to the cockpit. The first room was actually an armory. It had three alcoves for charging power armor and a wall with some very advanced weaponry according to Francis. Francis said the women were definitely from the core worlds. The other three rooms were modest cabins.

Each cabin had a sizable wardrobe and jewelry collection. If all this jewelry was real then there was a small fortune here. Each woman’s room had dozens of outfits for every occasion. I had heard of women hoarding clothes but this was the first time I had seen it for myself. I ordered all the clothing to be deep scanned, cleaned, and stored in crates in one of my private storage rooms. Once again I was slightly worried someone might recognize something so it was best not to sell these in the stores on deck 7 even though most of the clothes looked to be brand new and never worn.

The jewelry would receive the same treatment. Get deep scanned and then boxed in a crate made from the alien hull fabricator and stored. Maybe one day Celeste would want some of this stuff? Well, at least I could always go and find a quick birthday gift in the lot. The common room had a meal prep machine and looked quite cozy. We searched the room but only find some sex toys according to Francis. Finally, we moved to the cockpit and found the ship's computers had been purged when we breached. I had hoped my unconventional access would have prevented this from happening but I was wrong. I did jury rig a power link to the navigation system and that data had been purged as well but I was able to confirm this shuttle had an advanced micro subspace drive good for up to 25 light years. Incredible technology! I added it to my extensive to-do list of engineering projects.

We went through the shuttle one last time and Francis found a storage vault under one of the beds. The bed swung up and locked to the wall to access it. The locking mechanism looked like an archaic tumbler lock from a bad vid. We didn’t mess with it for fear entering the wrong combination may destroy the contents. Well, I had some ammunition for when I interrogated Jane Doe.

Francis and I went to the lab next and he was fascinated by all the equipment as I worked with my engineering bots examining everything we had taken. The suits were by far the most interesting equipment. The armor on them was once again similar to my alien hull but not as advanced. It had some type of dissipation layer for kinetic hits though. That was why the women were probably so confident. Their suits could take a major beating and keep on ticking.

I didn’t understand enough of the alien fabricators to add in the new layer to dissipate the kinetic strikes but it would definitely be smart to replace all the plating on our combat armor. Francis and I took a break to eat and went to the captain’s dining room.

We started talking trying to puzzle out what Jane Doe and her associates wanted. I revealed that we had trackers installed on the ship that I had discovered. I also told him I had a very large amount of alien artifacts and precious metals. I sent him temporary access to my inventory and watched his eyes bulge. He said that was definitely the motive for taking over the ship. He just couldn’t figure out what organization was responsible. There were no traces in the shuttle. The shuttle and equipment were worth at least the value of the *Void Phoenix*. I didn’t appreciate that statement but agreed with him. My ship was worth a lot more than he knew and once all the upgrades were finished it would be… Our PerComs beeped.

Abby was letting us know the funeral services for the three crew members killed were going to happen in forty minutes. We went to our quarters and changed and freshened up in clean dress uniforms. Thankfully the dress uniforms were not gaudy like most navies out there. I spoke about each crew member highlighting their best qualities and then anyone else who wanted was free to speak. Loree spoke at length about her brother Titus. Suruchi spoke as well, apparently, they were seeing each other. Well, I knew he had emerged from her cabin but he had only been on board for a few days. Guess he worked fast. The bodies were dropped into subspace. Once they cleared the envelope protecting the ship their remains would be scattered across a few thousand kilometers…returning their atoms to the universe.

The post-funeral celebration of their lives was held on deck 9. I remained for a while and ignored Haily’s advances once again. Gwen and I talked about her upcoming submersion in the med tank. Twenty-one days being under. Julie and Doc were setting up a VR link for her so she could utilize the system while her skin was replaced, capillaries, and nerves attached. I was excited for her and told her I would attempt to get into VR in the evening to hang out with her and maybe play the sword and sorcery game with her.

Finally, the party broke up and I went to my cabin, alone. Celeste and Amos were being diligently cared for by Eve and my new steward bot. I was drunk and had a strong buzz and almost succumbed to my base instincts with the new steward bot. Damn it, Gwen! She made the thing too attractive! Maybe if I gave it a name I would be less prone to take advantage of it? I started speaking names out loud trying to find something that clicked when Eve asked what I was doing. I told her to try to name the new bot. Eve said she already had a name. It was Claire. Apparently, Gwen had named the new bot without asking me! Eve asked if I was going to have sex with Claire and pointed at my erection. Well not anymore!

I lay in bed after having played with the children for an hour. I had overcome my failures and started focusing on running the ship. The funeral service had been therapeutic to put the loss of my crew behind me. I still felt the sting of my failure but it had been muffled. I had numerous questions to get answered by Jane Doe. Wait didn’t the man at the captain’s dinner look at her with some trepidation and possible fear? What was his name? I checked my PerCom, Andrei Curran. I would have to talk with him tomorrow and I sent Francis a message to set up the interview.

My horniness had passed but I still decided I needed a vent. I went to my old SLUMBER unit and made sure both Eve and Julie couldn’t access it before queuing a dirty program. I just selected the first on the list and went to sleep.