Chapter 51

I was on the bridge monitoring engineering as we prepared to exit subspace onto the periphery of the Arana system. Henry was the only other person on the bridge. Henry spoke clearly and confidently, “Exiting sub space in 5…4...3…” The ship shuttered and the vid screen of the gray expanse of subspace changed to black dotted with white stars. We were back in normal space.

I went over the engineering alerts scrolling across my screen. Henry added with irritation, “Sub space disruption…it was a sink…I think. It wasn’t on the navigation data.” His voice changed to whiney as he finished.

I was working on accessing the damage to our FTL drive from being ripped into normal space from subspace. The ship shuttered from an impact. Henry said in a panicked voice, “Deflector shields are encountering debris…no…just a cluster of rocks.” He tapped feverously on his terminal. “Mapping a route out of the debris field…”

Irritated and almost ready to yell at Henry I said with restraint, “Expand your scanning range. If this debris field was not on the navigation charts them someone put it here and caused the subspace disruption on purpose.” Henry looked at me and his eyes nearly popped from his head but he returned to do his work with intensity.

Shinade came barreling onto the bridge still struggling to put on her maternity skin suit, “Why the fuck was I naked!” Her outburst was interrupted as Henry pushed the scanning data to the main 3D holo tank.

Henry said with a little excitement, “Two gunships and one destroyer on an intercept. No IFFs. Probably pirates. Distress call sent to the Arana system. We are 88 light minutes out from the system though.” I nodded.

“Nice work Henry. How long to intercepts and weapons range?” I asked as I moved to switch my own station to the navigation view from engineering. Shinade was studying the plot on the holo tank. Nero came onto the bridge and slid into another engineering station and got to work. I pushed all my engineering work I had completed so far to his terminal with a few taps.

Julie materialized on the bridge next to the holotank. She looked very similar in appearance to her paladin in the VR game but was wearing a white navy dress uniform with a knee length skirt. She spoke to everyone on the bridge, “Three hostiles detected. Evasive maneuvers advised.”

Henry’s jaw dropped seeing the ship’s AI projection and Shinade just said, “Well that’s new. I am going to go get into one of the fighters. I am going to call Finn to get into the other fighter.” Finn had been practicing in the fighter simulators as well but he was terrible. He had trouble thinking in three dimensions. I didn’t do well in the fighter simulators either because I lacked instinct…I always tried to calculate the best course of action and that led to a delay in combat…a second or two on a capital ship didn’t matter much…but in a dogfight?

Eve commed me from engineering, “I finished the first set of resets and purged the lines. What else do you need or can I…” The ship jolted and everyone was thrown forward a step.

Nero pipped in, “Hull impact! Decks 1, 2 and 3 losing pressure. Deflectors and inertia compensators out forward starboard! Sending bots to stabilize and replace units.” Excellent Nero. Very concise. I flipped my display to find Tora. She was in aft engineering. I commed her.

“Tora we need you on the lower decks. We have a hull breach and Nero is sending bots but it would be better…” Henry interrupted me and yelled with a squeaky voice.

“ETA on gunships is 6 minutes…the destroyer… 9 minutes.” He breathed like he had just sprinted a mile. The boy didn’t do well in adrenaline filled situations. I cut comms to Tora. Stavros and Evira had prepped both fighters and they were ready to launch and I switched the video to the fighter bay. It was humorous to watch a frustrated and very pregnant Shinade try to squeeze into the tight cockpit. I flipped back and looked at the escape plots. Since Henry had been occupied, Julie had prepared two different routes out of the debris field on her own initiative. I studied both for a brief period and then selected the second. It would take longer to clear the field but would put the debris between us and the oncoming ships.

“Launching!” Came across the bridge speakers. Shinade was leaving the ship? What the fuck!

“Negative!” I said as sternly as I could over the comm. The entire ship lurched again from impacts. I couldn’t focus on Shinade at the moment. Henry was taping away. It was Julie who answered the question on my mind.

“Space mine detonated. Loss of pressure on decks 1 through 6. Moderate damage to…” I interrupted her.

“Are there any more mines?” I asked impatiently. Her hologram turned to me.

Julie said, “Two more mines detected but none on our escape vector. Ship’s maneuvering has been greatly reduced…” I waved her off and returned to my terminal. I sent Tora orders through her PerCom to get as much maneuvering restored as possible. I sent our doctor, Andie, to see to the passengers.

Henry once again interrupted my thoughts, “Shinade has engaged the gunships!” Really? A heavy fighter against two gunships. At least Finn had not launched. “She has damaged both gunships!” I flipped to the scans. Well she did do a little bit of damage to one and the other was barely scratched. Shinade wasn’t a bad pilot at all. As if saying that was a sign both gunships opened with mini-rail guns and quickly overcame her deflectors and tore into her fighter. She did her best to spin away and take minimal damage. She took a vector away from the three hostiles juking to avoid aft fire. At least she was leading the gunships away.

“We have cleared the debris field.” Julie said. I quickly looked at all the updates.

“Get the passengers to the escape pods in case we cannot escape. I am heading to engineering to see if we can do a micro FTL jump. Have Finn launch and support Shinade. That should keep the gunships off of the *Void Phoenix*. We still have enough thrust to outpace the destroyer. Ships from the Arana system should reach us in about two hours.” I left the bridge as everyone was working feverously on their terminals.

I pulled up my skinsuit head cover and as I was rushing out I found Emon in the corridor outside of the bridge. “I didn’t know where I should go?” He said a little timidly. “Never been in space combat before.” I sighed.

“Take an engineering station on the bridge and help Nero assign bots to issues. I have to get to engineering.” I arrived in engineering and began to reassign my own bots. I needed to work on some safety bypasses to get this micro jump. I was thirty minutes into my work arounds when the ship shuttered from another impact. Henry yelled over the comms.

“Two more gunships powering up and firing in front of us!” I was torn from trying to jump or go to the bridge to plan some evasive maneuvers… It was just two seconds later when the hull exploded to my right and I was sucked out into space. Missiles? Who the fuck programmed missiles?

I flipped open my soft helmet and logged out of the simulation. Julie had said she wanted to increase the difficulty of the first emergency simulation me and Eve had prepared for the crew. Originally it had just been a force out of subspace and some debris impacts that needed repairs. How it had escalated to pirates and stealthed ships with missiles? Oh…it clicked in my head. Episode 120…or 121? The pirate comedy that Julie had started watching with me and Eve. It was almost exactly the same scenario when they tried to abduct the planetary leader’s daughter for ransom.

Since I was now effectively dead I watched the remainder of the scenario play out. Shinade ran out of fuel and was destroyed and Finn followed shortly after. The escape pods launched and the pirates did their best to collect as many as possible before the defense ships from the Arana system arrived. All the pirates got away with 70% of the passengers and Emon…he had boarded one of the escape pods the pirates snatched. The *Void Phoenix* had sustained major damage. What a dumpster fire.

I would have to talk to Shinade about launching her fighter without permission. She was probably going to be pissed that I started her naked in her bed for the simulation. I was just trying to impart the importance of sleeping in your skin suit. Henry…he did ok…well ok for Henry anyway. I reviewed Tora actions…much better. She was improving. Nero did very well. He was competent. I looked for the data on Gabby’s efforts. She had been working on the lower decks with the bots and she had died on the second impact.

Once everyone had emerged from VR I sent them a message to meet in the captain’s dining room so we could discuss things. I would be the last to arrive as I sent orders for food and drink and was compiling the results.

As I entered the dining room I found Suruchi at the head of the table with Dora behind her. They both looked peeved. Everyone else was crowded around the table eating and eyeing the brewing storm. Suruchi broke the tension asking why they hadn’t been invited to join the crew training in VR? Were they not part of this crew?

I took the blame and it didn’t take me long to talk them down. They could join the next team building no win scenario programmed by a sadistic ship AI. Julie came over the comm saying she thought he modifications would have made it a fun scenario. She had hoped there would be a boarding action with the pirates and she could have controlled the guard bot dogs. Instead, I had messed everything up by escaping and launching the escape pods.

After Julie’s input the discussion actually turned productive as we talked through everyone’s actions and Julie began working on individual training programs to focus on weaknesses discovered…so many weaknesses. We had 32 hours before we actually emerged in the Arana system and I had a multitude of things to do. Shinade did ask about the holographic projection of Julie on the bridge during the simulation. I had planned to get one ordered and installed in the Arana system…it seemed our AI had taken some liberties with the simulation.

I left the group talking merrily amongst themselves. One thing I did note was that Henry and Tora were sitting awfully close together. Well, I had more important things to worry about than crew romances.