Chapter 38

So Samantha had made it to safety. I was happy she didn’t die drifting in space but couldn’t she have just waited a few more weeks? The man on the bridge introduced himself as the Dread Pirate Axle. I almost laughed aloud but held it in. Axle was the name of one of the pirate captains from my pirate comedy vid I was watching with Eve…just 178 episodes left. He was the suave and dashing swashbuckler pirate in the comedy always seducing a new woman each episode. I checked and the stevedore bots were lumbering toward the cargo bay with their vehicle haul.

I decided I should make a joke on my response and used one of the phrases from the show that the pirates used when they fled the scene when outmatched. Axle looked confused for a brief second and then grinned connecting the dots. So he was a fan. With some bravado I closed the cargo bay doors and lifted off while eyeing the pirate. The ship struggled up off the surface and also to break the minor gravity of the planetoid. We were definitely a stuffed pig and sluggish. Nero was monitoring the engineering alerts on the bridge and I could see a number of red notifications from my seat but resisted checking on them myself. I addressed Samantha who kept her face neutral so far and I said that it was good to see her alive and then cut the video feed from my captain’s chair before seeing her reaction. I rushed to engineering where I could be much more useful. Eve was with me and on the way I was spit balling things I could use for leverage. I said I wish I could threaten to blow up the planetoid and Eve said she could do that.

I stopped cold and looked at Eve as she explained. The planetoid gravimetric drive was empty of fuel but the stabilizers and inertia compensators still had some fuel. Much of the operations manual and work was keeping everything balanced. Eve said she could push the devices and cause a catastrophic collapse. Well I wasn’t sending Eve to do that. She said she could puppet one of the steward bots if I released the control programming to her.

Ok this could work. I told her to get the skinless male steward bot to one of the large exterior hull bots in the shuttle bay. The exterior bot could transport the steward bot to the planetoid operations center. I had Henry slow our acceleration until the bot left. Eve was efficient and just 7 minutes later the bots were released from the shuttle bay.

I had Henry keep me informed with open comms while I worked to get ready for FTL. We had terrible acceleration with our load but only needed about 40 minutes to gain enough distance from the planetoid to enter sub space. I just needed to update the mass profile of the ship and green light functions on the FTL drive. As I was working in engineering Henry yelled in panic that they had launched missiles. Then he said with relief that they were going to miss.

I swore over the comms. They had to be sub space disrupters. A sub space disrupter was a very expensive single use weapon. They didn’t have a very large effective range or last very long but with my slow speed and their fleet of faster small craft…. I wished I was back on the Destiny’s Children at the moment. Then I could easily dump all my cargo and run. I briefly thought about surrendering but canned the idea for now. Best to make every attempt to get away.

Gabby was in engineering with me and fairly calm. She was assigning bots as her father directed her from the bridge to respond to various engineering emergencies. Well at least Nero and Gabby were great additions to my crew. She was so much calmer than Henry’s constant panicked updates from the bridge.

The mass load calculations done I sent them to the bridge. I finished pre checks on the FTL drive and told them to go to FTL now before the first sub space wave hit. We would just have to hope the hull could take the stress of entering subspace so close to the planetoid…too late. A subspace disrupter went off, then two more. I didn’t have military grade sensors but from the data Henry was relaying we were looking at about 30 minutes before the disruption dissipated. Which just meant they just needed to keep firing their sub space disrupters every 20 to 25 minutes. We were stuck to just trying to outrun them.

I checked and the bot was at the top of the shaft already and bringing Eve’s programmed steward bot to the control center in spider mode. We still had some comm relays there so she should be able to control the bots to get it into position.

I checked our shields. Nero had worked on them a bit in the last few months. They looked to be at 22% functionality. I commed Eve and told her to spin up the shield generators and send engineering bots to the emitters to keep them running. Henry was a mess and saying they were comming us again. I told him I didn’t have any time for a gloating pirate right now. I glanced at the plot and gave Henry a new vector. This vector was 94 minutes to escape the subspace disrupter envelope but I was guessing they had more sub space disrupters for our new flight path.

I didn’t have any weapons…well two heavy fighters without pilots…not that it would do any good against…162 ships were showing! My god Samantha, did you bring every pirate in the region! They were spreading out into a massive net and most had better acceleration than me. Well not all the pirates were spreading out. It looked like there were about two dozen of the larger craft bee lining for the planetoid. Probably couldn’t wait to start looting.

Eve said 30 minutes to start powering up the devices in the control center. Another sub space disrupter went off, resetting our FTL escape ETA. I told Henry to connect comms to me in engineering and opened a channel to the Dread Pirate Axle. He had a smug look on his face and Samantha was no longer standing behind him.

Mustering my own smugness and bravado I told him that if he didn’t let us go I would destroy the planetoid and it’s riches. He laughed at me which I didn’t like very much. Some of his faster ships were already on approach to some of the shafts to the underground cities. Then Henry interrupted my stare down with the pirate. There was a ship dead ahead on our retreat vector. At first I thought it was the pirates but Axle’s look of concern a moment later on my screen gave me some hope.

We both stared waiting for more information. Being closer I got data first from Henry and it’s IFF said it was a Sylvan long range scout. The subspace disrupters must have tossed it from subspace. I was trying to think of a way to turn this to my advantage but the pirates launched an array of 20 fast engagement missiles at the new ship. They didn’t want us damaged but probably didn’t want witnesses either.

Now space was huge and we were far from normal space lanes. A subspace disrupter only had a range of a few light seconds…the chances another ship was just passing through here. Remoter than remote. As if I had precognition another long-range Sylvan scout was thrown out of sub space. I watched the plot as the missiles closed and the scouts tried to get close enough to support each other. They were successful in taking out 15 missiles. Three more were halted by shields on the first craft that had appeared. But the remaining two missiles blow the ship apart. Another wave of missiles was already launched. The pirates were committed now. Maybe the two parties would fight it out and we could get away.

Rae’Ver admired the human called Devon Wellspring. He had learned that was not his true name but it would do to call him that until he met him face to face. Sylvan informants across the sector had been on the look out for him, his crew and his ship but he had disappeared. His scouts had found where he had dropped out of subspace from Silverstream station but finding his next vector had taken time as the trail evaporated.

Weeks passed as he sent out his scouts on hundreds of recon missions in the general direction indicated. Sha’Lua for her part had managed to confirm Devon Wellspring originated in the Union. He had used some banks on Silverstream to pay debts of persons in that star nation. The banks hadn’t given her the names but it was assumed that was his home. The Union was in tatters and being absorbed into other human star nations now. If all else failed he would bring in other city ships and search the now defunct Union for his prey.

His aides were becoming increasingly agitated over the weeks. They didn’t understand the potential of the information this human held. It was their job to remove him from leadership if his actions were detrimental to the city ship. He was not worried though. His five aides couldn’t match his power…he could take on three times their number…but still he remained on alert.

Finally they found the human’s second stop. Again it was in the middle of nowhere. His trail was almost gone now with so much time elapsed. Rae’Ver had a large arc to search for the ship and he doubted he would find the ship now. He had expended a ridiculous amount of resources on this hunt and was becoming resigned that he would need to rely on the web of informants in human space to find his quarry.

He had decided just twenty more days and then he would regroup, resupply and bring in other first citizens and their city ships to help him. But fortune smiled on him. The next day he received an FTL communication. The human ship was located and he was supported by a sizable fleet of small human ships. As he was ordering the scouts to converge on the location and move the city ship he got a second communication. Another scout had been pulled into the subspace sink and the humans had fired on the first scout. He watched the comm feed as they said the ship they were seeking was actually fleeing the other human fleet and then one of the scouts was destroyed. He looked at his navigators plot…2 hours to join this engagement. He looked forward to it and turned his attention to preparing to release his own fleet for a lively conflict.