When we got everyone in the game I was surrounded by five scantly clad women. Julie was our paladin. Gwen had selected a priest healer. Gabby had chosen a dual-wielding swordsman. Luna was our thief. And finally, Eve was acting as our mage. I was a massive half-giant man who looked to be surrounded by a harem of beautiful women. I was fortunate that Julie’s advances were put on hold while we got Gabby and Gwen acclimated to the game.

I had purchased a dedicated server to the game as a vice for me and a favor to Eve. While we worked in the game Julie let me know some of the other crew were also playing. She had the server closed to passengers though. I mean the server could host over a million players and the world was massive so the crew playing was fine. I asked if any of the male crew would be interested in joining us and Julie said most dungeons only allowed 6 players. I actually thought if we had five people she would have said dungeons would only allow five party members. Julie did have editing privileges for the game afterall.

While the group was helping Gwen and Gabby gain some levels by killing low-level undead Julie and I talked. She was asking if I could allow her to puppet my new steward bot Claire. She had the argument that it would be easier to interact with Celeste and Amos. Although she had a hologram emitter in my quarters it had limited range. In order to best utilize her programming for developing young minds she wanted the ability to interact physically with the children. By Eve’s actions, standing off to the side and eyeing our conversation, I could tell this was planned. If I didn’t know better I think Eve wanted her friend to have a physical body.

I told Julie I would think about it. Julie gave us an alert that the ship was transitioning out of subspace in one hour. We said our goodbyes to Gwen and went back to work in the real world.

I spent time getting dressed with the help of Claire while Eve tended to Celeste and Amos. Clean-shaven and in a new uniform and clan skin suit I entered the bridge. I paused briefly. The entire bridge crew was here and in pressed uniforms with fresh haircuts. I had expected my pilot and copilot to maintain their loose nature. They seemed more the free spirit type and just getting them to wear the ship uniform had been a choir according to Suruchi.

I sat in my captain’s chair and asked for the status before the transition and each station promptly gave their reports in order and professionally. I asked the question to the air if I accidentally walked onto a navy ship. It was Zoe who turned in her chair and responded respectively that when on duty they would be as professional as any navy bridge out there. They had talked amongst themselves and with Abby. Even though they were a passenger liner they would be the best possible crew. They had been working hard on the simulations Julie and I had prepared and it was eye-opening.

They promised they would be the best crew possible. Abby was also starting everyone on a training program for fitness and combat training. Abby had sent me a request to do this with all non-hospitality staff and I had made it optional. Apparently, the entire crew had signed on for it. Well after a few of Abby’s sessions they may regret their decision. I also felt maybe this was a reaction to losing three crew members and maybe the stiff formality and discipline may wane after a few weeks.

I decided to test my bridge crew and sent new coordinates to come out of subspace. Generally, a ship came out of subspace a good distance from large masses to put as little stress on the subspace engines and make the transition as safe as possible. I moved the point much closer in the system. Earlier I reviewed the data with Damian in engineering and this transition was perfectly safe for our ship. Yes, maintenance would be higher but we were going to save about 90 minutes of travel time in the system.

The crew, to its credit, got the update and started communicating the changes amongst themselves. Wow, I actually felt like a real captain. An alert went through the ship by Haily saying the ship was coming out of subspace and two minutes later it happened.

Well coming out of subspace so far in the system I found out usually meant one of three things. One, you were attacking the system, two you had a shipboard emergency or three you were just an idiot. It took about 40 minutes of comm traffic to get the navy ships in the system to back off from their intercepts. Elias thought it was all pretty funny until a small cruiser launched a wing of 8 fighters. After the stand-down order was issued all but 2 of the fighters broke off their intercept. The two fighters still on approach would be our escort.

Well, this system didn’t get much traffic so it was all understandable. I had been on the bridge for four hours and decided to get relieved. Zoe would take the captain’s chair while Elias moved over to the pilot chair.

I checked my PerCom for my schedule. Claire and Julie worked together to send me where I needed to be and when now. That had been Eve’s job in the past but I had always just done whatever I wanted thinking of the schedule as loose suggestions. We had a ship staff meeting in twenty minutes so I went and headed to that. I was early and the food was already set out. I filled a plate and as I ate I realized that Cori was probably the best addition to the crew I had made…well Suruchi had made.

I was pondering asking Cori to come to my quarters to prepare me a personal meal when the staff trickled in and soon the meeting began as Julie’s hologram announced it was time. Abby started by going over more new additions to security protocols. Then Nero gave an update on the hull plating refit. 8% of the exterior was finished and we had material to fabricate another 4%. We had been making use of the alien hull’s radiation shielding property to insulate internal areas of the ship so we were falling short of expectations on the hull refit. The shield emitters were now at 89% effectiveness. He didn’t think he could do better and thought we should hire a shield engineering specialist. He had also finished all the security modifications that Francis and Abby had asked for after the incident.

I asked questions until I was satisfied. Nero was becoming a good lead engineer. He still had a ways to go in his education but he was organized and good at managing people and bots. I mean it helped that we had some damn good bots that could do a four-fold amount of work of a human but he scheduled them efficiently too.

Suruchi was next and detailed the finances of the trip. We were 3% ahead of her most generous projections. She was also in process of getting the next wave of passengers ready for the leg to Ederne. She was having more difficulty finding passengers and high-end cargo though. When I told her our layover was just going to be five days in the Ragnhild system her face soured. I know I had originally told her it would be between 7 and 10 days. She said she would reduce pricing and try to fill the ship. I thought for a second and told her not to reduce the pricing. We would take whatever passengers she found. Also to make sure they went through Francis’ new vetting program. Suruchi just nodded taking notes on a pad linked to her PerCom.

I peaked at the expense and profit report from the trip. The crew as a whole had earned 402 sol credits in tips from the passengers. That seemed high and I asked Suruchi about it. She said the tips were mostly for exemplary service or appreciation in prioritizing passengers. For instance, one couple was going to be getting a direct flight to the planet on the LUX shuttle. Dora and Finn would split the 10 sol credit tip. Dora for scheduling it and Finn for flying. I nodded as that made sense.

Suruchi then asked about our next stop after Ederne. I hesitated for a moment before saying we would be going to the Anderson Research Station. A lot of shocked looks appeared on the crew. I told them our destination also wouldn’t be logged until we were leaving Ederne. Suruchi seemed peeved and asked how was she supposed to line up cargo and passengers then? I told her it was not important. The entire crew would receive a 10% monthly bonus in Ederne I announced. This at least seemed to shut up Suruchi. The meeting finished and I left.

My next stop was in the robotics lab to help Gabby get started on the next male bot. When I got there she had already started. I was a little shocked to see it was the massive male steward that Andrei had contracted for the trip. Gabby said this was the one Dora sent down to be completed next. Apparently, the contract ended when we transitioned out of subspace in the Ragnhild system. I know Suruchi had said Andrei was planning to purchase the bot from us in a prior report. I commed her and asked her about it. She said Andrei didn’t like the price and she got sick of haggling with the man and just decided to nix the deal and keep the bot. She also thought the size of the bot would be a fetish satisfying for some more discerning luxury passengers. I almost quipped, asking if she planned to test the bot after Gabby finished with it but held my tongue.

I helped Gabby upscale her program and fabricate the larger components. It was fun working with her in a hands-on environment. We talked about the task at hand, the male steward bot she was designing and the sword and sorcery game we played last night. I started to feel guilty. Gabby was 16 and was becoming like me. Obsessed with work and not interacting with kids her own age. Luna was on the same path. Would Celeste be the same? At least she would have Amos.

A weird idea began percolating in my mind. I should build Celeste a playmate geared toward helping her build her people skills. I could make the bot four frames, 5, 10, 15 and 20 years old in apparent age. That way her bot could grow with and be her friend and bodyguard as Eve was to me. Should I do one for Amos too? No, they could share the one bot. I did realize this was an attempt to get Eve back. I was missing her presence.

I moved to my design terminal and saved all the work I had been doing on the engineering bots. I never really planned to update them with my advanced skin anyway. I watched Gabby work as I opened four folders for each of the bot's iterations. The 20-year-old version was the easiest as 90% of the work could be drawn from Eve’s schematics. From there I would work backward, designing the 15-year-old version, then 10, and then 5. Each design would be a new challenge to get the parts smaller and smaller. I didn’t get far as Julie reminded me I was scheduled to be in engineering. I figured I had a few years to finish the project before the babies needed a playmate anyway. I assigned the task as a low priority on my PerCom.

I closed the files and locked them. I didn’t want Gabby snooping. I made sure Gabby would be ok without me as she had hours of work ahead of her. She waved me off engrossed in directing the faux working muscles.

I went to engineering and reviewed the subspace engine data with Damian and we talked about efficiency plots, fuel consumption ratios, and minor engineering issues. The old man was rubbing off on me. I liked his way of thinking and our conversations often got lively. He was brilliant in a roundabout way…he called himself an engineering MacGuyver, being able to fix things with parts he just had on hand. Julie interrupted and said I needed to get to the bridge as we were approaching the station.

On the bridge, the entire bridge crew was there for docking. It was different, we were going to dock inside a moon! The moon orbiting the planet had been rich in metal deposits so it had been hollowed out and made into a city of sorts. A very large city. It reminded me of Silverstream station, just on a bigger scale. Our two fighter escorts broke off and docked with another ship. Probably refueling before heading back to their cruiser in the outer system.

Haily started relaying commands to Zoe on our docking assignment from flight control. While this was happening I brought up the cargo bay cameras. Not a trace of the shuttle could be found. Everything useful was locked in a compartment lined with the alien hull material. The only trace of the Brotherhood agents was the nebula painting hanging in the fitness center for the crew. I could always claim it was a replica if anyone asked. Francis and Edmund had assured me that we were safe. Edmund also said he would be able to tap into any Brotherhood comm traffic and let us know if something was going to happen. I was placing a lot of trust in the man. Hopefully, it was well placed.