Chapter 89

I was surprisingly calm as I asked status. Even looking at the plot we had over five minutes before intercept. Elias spoke first. The missiles had come from an apparently damaged frigate on the far side. The shields were already being cycled to full charge. Haily informed the bridge that the missiles were Black Crows, a common missiles used in the Union. She detailed the yield and I input it into the simulator…not great but we would most likely survive.

Francis was trying to comm the station and the damaged ship that had fired the missile. At five minutes to impact Zoe asked to start evasive maneuvers and to launch fighters to intercept the missile. We had no weapons but our two fighters did. I asked her if she and Elias could get the fighters into space in time and she commed Evira and Stavros to get them ready for a cold launch in three minutes. The two shuttle techs said they were on it. Finn was my other fighter pilot but he was much better at flying shuttles than fighters. Zoe and Elias were by far the best pilots I had so losing them from the bridge would be an issue.

A cold launch meant the shuttles would be hot starting their reactors while the Void Phoneix supplied temporary power to get pre-flight checks done. Elias and Zoe zipped from the bridge and Haily slid into the pilot chair. That was her job, 3rd in line to pilot the ship. She was just muddling her way through the certs. Nero came onto the bridge and looked around confused for a moment before going to the engineering station. Shortly after Vicky Charity, my logistics officer came onto the bridge and took over navigation and sensors.

3 minutes 19 seconds to impact.

Arthur Davies who had been off duty was half-dressed and crashed into the sensor station. Not a great reaction time from him. His cabin was only 11 meters down the corridor. Francis excitedly said he had someone on comms! Thank god. They could divert the missiles once they were informed who we were.

He handed the comm to me and I told them in very concise sentences we had been sent here by General Briggs of the Union. I was getting close to getting them to stand down when our fighters launched. My mind processed the error a second too late. If they had alerted me that they were launching I would have had them remain. They were flying Sappirean fighters. The angry voice on the other end cut comms.

Although I was angry with myself I had to deal with this. Francis tried to get them back while I ran plots and hull rotations to make sure any missiles that got through would hit the strongest part of our new armor. The fighters rushed to meet the threat and I focused on sending an alert to the crew and passengers through Julie. The red alert lights that had indicated that everyone should get their skinsuits on had been on since the missiles were detected. Now Julie informed them about the impending impact.

2 minutes 4 seconds to impact.

We gained a little time by altering our vector but at the speed we were going it would take many minutes to loop around. Francis said he got someone else on the comm. Apparently, there were two factions on the station. My mind processed this info and I immediately informed Abby to get her marines suited and to the drop shuttle and for Finn to get the shuttle ready for departure. I would be ok with taking a few missiles if I could get close enough to the station to safely deploy the marines.

With their new combat armor taking the station would be easy. The fighters were engaging the missiles and I watched the plot. They only had one pass to get all four. Two missiles immediately burst in an explosion and the fighters tried to reorient themselves to track the other two. It looked like Zoe managed to get her second but Elias missed and was trying to circle with Zoe for the fourth. Everything considered they did amazing. One missile shouldn’t overcome our shields.

Arthur turned and informed me four more missiles had been fired but a quick comm from Zoe said they had plenty of time to deal with this new wave. Arthur said the class frigate had eight tubes but it looked like the damage had taken out the other four. So he didn’t expect any greater number than four missiles per salvo and it also looked like they were being dumb-fired as well, with no evasive action.

4.3.2.1

The missile struck the shield and the *Void Phoenix* jolted. Nero quickly gave a real-time engineering report. Six hull breaches…all just micro-cracks…bots en route. One shield generator overloaded and another had failed. Bots in route to see if the second could be repaired and restarted.

Francis got my attention. He explained the situation at the station from his conversation. The truth of the situation was that there were two factions on the dark site station. One was the frigate that had fired upon us. It was the last ship to arrive here and had a complete core meltdown, jettisoning it when they arrived near the station. The captain of the frigate only had 6 crew left alive, the entire engineering department had been killed as well as most of the crew.

The station had 15 people still on board. Led by Lieutenant Kara Briggs, the granddaughter of general Stanton Briggs. At least that answered one question for me as to why the general passed along the information of this dark station to Francis. He wanted his granddaughter rescued.

My thought was this was Union nepotism at its finest though. The general had placed his granddaughter out here well away from combat in a position of authority to pad her Union naval resume.

I looked at the plot of our approach, keeping the station between us and the heavily damaged frigate. I commed Abby who was in the drop shuttle with 5 other marines in our new armor. One of the marines had stayed on the *Void Phoenix*. I asked her how her marines would be with engaging Union personnel. Her response was quick. No problem at all, they had fired upon us first and the Union no longer existed. Most of her marines felt the Union had abandoned them.

I opened communications with Kara Briggs. I told her she was to stand down and give the marines a clear path to the frigate through her station, any resistance would be met with deadly force. The fighters had removed the second salvo of four missiles and no more were coming.

I received a communication from Captain Abington of the frigate. He tried to take command of the situation by saying he was the highest-ranking officer so I needed to stand down and turn my ship over to him.

I delayed sending a response as we used our civilian scanners to make sure there were no active weapons charged. Then I commend him after a brief talk with Francis. I told the captain he had fired on a friendly civilian vessel, an act of terrorism. He was going to be taken into custody and charged with piracy.

He stammered on the other line in fury. His final response was, ‘over my dead body.’ I turned to Francis who gave a curt nod. I said ‘so be it’.

The marine shuttle connected and Abby deployed. I listened to their comm traffic as they moved across the makeshift station. They had taken five wolf bots with them to serve as sentries which was a tactic they developed in VR since their squad had so few people

Abby kept voicing updates to me and I was surprised I was so nervous. We got feedback from Kara that the frigate captain couldn’t detach since most of his power was umbilically to the station. Abby reached the portal and asked me if it was KOS, disabled, or captured. I replied anyone who fired on them was KOS. My previous experience with unruly prisoners had soured me to take any. In my mind, if they fought back then they just asking for their life to be ended.

Abby breached first and immediately the firefight began. Buckie yelled hostile down twice while Lorre mirrored his response three times. That was five of seven supposedly on the frigate. They moved in an alternating advancement pattern to the bridge. Two anti-boarding lasers unloaded on my marines and they reported that their suits were unaffected. Explosions over the comms indicated the emplacements were down and they had reached the bridge.

Hasty charges were set and they blew the door inward. The ship was trash so any damage to the bridge was fine. The charge had been too large and caused a hull breach on the bridge. It was small but the captain didn’t have his skin suit on so was gasping for air while trying to get to the escape pod access. The other officer fired a pistol at the marines and was put down. ‘Bridge secure’ rang out shortly after. Abby had her team search the ship in pairs to make sure there were no surprises.

That was exciting and I almost wished I had been with them. I turned my attention to the station and with Francis by my side opened comms with Kara. I told her we were here to rescue them since that is what I assumed General Briggs had wanted. I would talk with her in person in my captain's room to discuss the details. It was half an hour later when two marines escorted her onto my ship.

While I waited for the Liuetentant I had been busy going over the rough manifest from the frigate the marines were sending me. The frigate had been raiding Sapphire shipping so it was packed with high-end luxury goods. Julie had cracked their logs and the ship had gotten greedy. They had been part of a three-ship team and raided an obvious Q ship. Their sister ships had been destroyed and they barely escaped. Julie found a few security videos from their raids and it was clear how they treated the crews of captured ships that the crew were not good people. Sometimes they let crews go. Sometimes they deep-spaced crews after abusing them. I had no regrets about ordering they be put down if they resisted. These men were not good people. It also demonstrated how terrible the Union was. These crews were allowed to return to the Union and sell their spoils and keep the profits.

Finally, Kara was on board the *Void Phoneix*. The woman brought before me was young and fit and she was pretty but when she sat across from me her body odor was overpowering. She blushed and explained that the few engineers that she had were focused on life support and stretching their fuel reserves. Their sonic showers and clothes washers had been down for months. Kara was excited to be rescued. There had been a lot of tension with the frigate's crew and her station crew.

Six months ago the station’s captain had taken the one corvette the station had with as many personnel as they fit on board. They were supposed to return to get everyone else. But never returned. Although they had provisions and munitions they were running low on reactor fuel. They had retreated to only occupy a small section of the station to extend their remaining fuel but even then they only had 10-12 months remaining. She looked relieved I was her.

I listened to her about how she had taken control in the last six months after her captain had left. She seemed strong-willed and maintained her composure. When I told her most of my crew was ex-Union her eyebrows arched in surprise. I asked her to send me her cargo manifest. She asked for assurances that her crew would not be harmed. As long as they did not create problems I would bring them to safety I told her. She accepted my assurance and sent me the data from her PerCom. Julie confirmed that there was not invasive programs and I reviewed the data while calling for a meal to be sent.

Kara sat quietly while I opened a terminal and went through the data. Food was brought, and cooked by Cori and she indulged while I focused. The station appeared to be a resupply station and minor repair facility. When the war started the station had been drained of a lot of resources…that was why they had issues with fuel. Multiple ships resupplying and no resupply ships. The great news was Kara had a lot of material feedstock for fabricators…even enough to refinish my alien hull and them some. The fabricators on the station were set up for parts for large ships.

I was running some fuel and work projections. I sighed after an hour and looked up surprised to see Kara still here and studying me. I had gotten lost in my head. I told her sorry but we were going to be staying here for seven months. But right after we would be taking them back to civilization. She looked surprised but didn’t voice an objection.

I hadn’t expected this station to be manned. I hadn’t really held out hope of finding it. If we did I had planned to explore mark it and then return after dropping off my passengers. Now I didn’t want to risk docking anywhere my pursuers would find me. There were enough resources here to finish the hull. There was even a large supply of weapons and munitions. The weapons were not great, just old Union weapons but maybe it was time to give the *Void Phoenix* some teeth. There was also the outside possibility that we could accomplish the goal of altering the hull silhouette enough that we would be unrecognizable. Yes, we were staying here for the long haul.