

<Alex, Real - Dorgon Calls for Aid, Innominate Flight>

They... had a problem.

If they went without warping, it would take... it would take a long time to get to their destination. Not weeks, but certainly not less than a day.

Alex's imparted knowledge started spinning up orbital mechanics, slingshot maneuvers, and the like, but he shut that down. His 'training' categorized that under emergency knowledge in the case of a levi-core malfunction or total failure.

...Which was oddly terrifying...

But their core was fine. More to the point, this *couldn't* be a unique problem to them.

On the frustrating side, he *knew* the standard procedure was simply a jump in closer to the target, but in star system maneuvers were common enough. This shouldn't be that unusual.

And it wasn't.

The core solution?

Fancy flying.

His danger sense *should* give him enough warning to react if he was paying close attention. He'd just been too engrossed with everything else to notice the subtle feeling triggered by the low-power, fast firing attack.

That was another thing they realized. The attack was *incredibly* low powered, but warp bubbles were apparently very easy to destabilize, and the laser had been recorded as having a gravimetric 'flavor' to its nature.

Could the shields be extended beyond the warp bubble?

No... well, technically yes, but the strain and power-drain would pop it almost instantly, causing significant damage at the same time with little gain.

Could he use Life's Active Defense on the warp bubble?

No.

That sent him down a bit of a rabbit hole, and no, he couldn't use it through the shields or even the ship's hull. It simply wasn't enough a part of him to allow the facilitation of that skill, and the magics of his duty station weren't configured to allow the utilization of defensive or offensive skills anyway.

If he'd been in charge of shields, *maybe*?

Regardless, that wasn't going to happen. He had to fly.

John's voice came to Alex along with a growl. "This is clearly a delaying tactic. If they are here, then they know we're here now. Natasha, is the trove moving?"

There was only a moment of silence before she responded. "Not more than is standard for their orbit or that which normal variation would suggest. Either they aren't running or the trove isn't with their ships." After a moment, she added. "Assuming they're even in the system at the moment as John hinted."

That was... fair, actually. They could be off pirating somewhere.

Alex sighed. "I'll try flying us there. I'll start slow. After all, if the bubble pops the slower we're going the less backlash we'll face."

There was general agreement with that plan.

Natasha chimed in. "I'll keep scans wide, looking for more potential defensive buoys. I was keeping a wide look so I missed them, but now that I know what I'm looking for?"

The tone of her words made the rest clear, and Alex grunted. "Sounds like a plan."

He manipulated the ship's mana through the interface, pouring it through the levi-core and wrapping them in a bubble.

They shot forward, no inertia coming into play as space itself slid around them, expanding behind and shrinking before.

It was less than ten seconds before Alex felt it.

He threw mana into shifting the ship, and *barely* moved to the side enough to dodge the initial pulse, but the incoming laser sliced sideways, and he had to change the warp-bubble on the fly.

It wasn't meant for tight maneuvers, and they slowed further, making it easier for the laser to track them.

Alex vaguely heard Pilar grumble about weapons being offline while at warp, but he tuned her out.

His vague sense of danger was *helping*, but he already knew the laser was dangerous, so after the initial warning, it wasn't very useful.

"Speeding up." He added power, shooting them forward, their relative velocity approaching half the speed of light. *There. That should let us avoid the—*

Danger!

Alex felt it coming from multiple directions and didn't feel up for keeping them safe with the sluggish warp-bubble-enabled dodging. As such, he collapsed his own warp bubble, and watched as a cross-hatch of *dozens* of lasers tore through the vacuum just in front of the ship, right where they would have been.

Lenka cursed—something about butter?—and the shield attenuated, catching what attacks came close as they swept back toward them.

Pilar cackled, sending lances of fire back at the origin of each laser, including the one that had been tracking them from before.

Alex dove into the sub-warp controls, letting his sense of danger guide him. It was like walking blind-folded near a bonfire. *Away from the heat, Alex.* Except that instead of a bonfire, it was an angry mob with torches... he was still blind though. *Avoid the heat, Alex!*

He did his best, Lenka's shields keeping them safe from the increasingly powerful blasts that he couldn't avoid, and Pilar was relentless, even if she was grumbling at how inaccurate his maneuvers made her aim.

That actually gave Alex pause—mentally if not physically—and while he kept moving forward, he hunted through the connection points of his magic until...

"There!" He spoke loudly. "Pilar, your duty station should be receiving projected movements. They won't be perfect but—"

Pilar barked a laugh, and three shots fired, each unerringly streaking through the vacuum of space over the next seconds before pegging defensive buoys at what must have been over a thousand miles.

Alex leveled out the ship, bringing them back on course, and shrouding them in a warp field once more. "Nicely shot."

"Thank you. That was very helpful telemetry."

The rest of the crew were exchanging words of congratulations, but Alex wasn't about to get distracted. There was still a *long* way to go before they reached their destination.

They proceeded thus, Alex ducking, dodging, and maneuvering around incoming anti-warp fire until it became untenable.

He would then drop the warp-bubble and move into far, *far* more finessed flightwork, specifically aiming on keeping the ship just within tolerances to learn at a deeper level just what the Innominate could take.

On one level, it was foolish. The shields could take the defensive buoy fire quite literally forever—Lenka's modifications and skills working through the ship made that even more true—but it was stunningly excellent training if he took the attacks seriously.

He wasn't perfect, but he did improve.

Moreover, Pilar was beginning to learn his style of movement, letting her—along with the aid of the information he was sending her duty station—perfect her shooting despite the moving platform of the ship.

Even so, it was *exhausting* work.

Alex was having to be *on* mentally more fully than ever before, and there was greater and greater temptation to just let the shields do the work as Pilar took out the in-range buoys.

He didn't let it happen.

This was utterly invaluable, and he leaned *hard* on his new Spherical Sense, along with his Stress-Introception, Advanced Kinesthetics, and Basic Cognition - Magical.

The last one seemed odd at first until he realized that he was effectively translating the impulses that he *would* be sending to his body into magical manipulations.

Thinking on that definitely made him worse at it, so he let the knowledge fade to the background once more, letting his instincts lean on and learn from his skills.

Still, what should have been a five minute jaunt across the star system at a reasonable-magnitude warp turned into *six hours* of full-focused training. And they couldn't start spinning up the next jump either.

Alex created water and ration bars for himself at need, using his Shaped Force Burst to finagle the latter as he chewed and swallowed.

He had the presence of mind to pull more Life from his dadao whenever it got close to full, effectively increasing his own Life regeneration rate.

The greatcoat was a boon and a half, keeping him perfectly comfortable despite both his lack of physical movement and his great exertion.

There was a moment when he wondered if they should be trying to take even better advantage of this situation, going slower, resting, and really trying to get the most from the opportunity. It was then, and *only* then that a bit of his implanted training came to the front of his mind.

This was apparently a very common tactic for defending any region of space. In fact, it should be expected any time they accepted a mission to go to a potentially hostile star system, so long as the hostile force was technologically and magically capable... and sapient.

...That would have been *lovely* to know beforehand, but given his still muddled memories, he wasn't surprised it had taken that long to surface.

Regardless, at long last Natasha informed them that they were within close range of the trove that she'd sensed.

It was, in fact, a 'dark' asteroid about twenty times the size of their ship, on an elliptical, out-of-plane orbit in the otherwise largely vacant system—excluding the defense buoys. It had apparently been strip-mined centuries earlier, but that didn't really affect them now.

Without Natasha's skill, they'd *never* have found this thing.

Even with her skill, even knowing exactly where it was, they couldn't see it save as a moving dark spot among the background stars, one that was only about 10% as big as it should have seemed.

As to how they knew how big it was?

Well, as soon as they came within two thousand miles of it—and their course was obviously deadlocked on the base—defenses fired up, with turrets of all kinds firing from all across the surface.

Worse, it was 'to whom it may concern' fire rather than directed, making it *far* harder to meaningfully avoid.

Still, Alex did his best as he continued his approach.

Lenka's shields and point defenses came into more prominence, as the more powerful incoming blasts could be diverted, deflected, reduced, or even negated by smaller attacks coming from the Innominate, and the shields were utilized more and more.

Pilar systematically worked her way from the largest threats downward, darkening the shields over the suite of automated turrets, keeping them from returning fire for important, brief moments even if she couldn't outright destroy them.

Finally, they came close enough that Juba asked for permission to 'smash and grab.'

Practically as soon as it was agreed, pods launched from the Innominate, one with a human inside, circling a central pod along with five others. Juba had explained that each of the other five held assault drones, mechanized magical weapons platforms that did very poorly on their own, but with a skilled specialist like Juba? They were *incredible* force multipliers.

The central pod—which magically tethered all of the others to itself—had both their means of propulsion and a powerful short-term shield, sacrificing longevity in exchange for nigh invulnerability for a short duration.

Regardless, the cluster tore across the last hundred yards, Pilar raking the enemy shields right ahead of them to prevent point defenses from targeting them even so.

Then, apparently somehow the pods meshed with the shields and were allowed through. Alex caught a whiff of the power at play, and it spoke of meshing and non-harm? He wasn't close enough to get more.

Alex didn't really understand, but he didn't need to.

The reports started coming in shortly after that, even as Alex continued to fly in close, dodging what he could while allowing Pilar to hammer the enemy shields and occasionally slip a shot through to remove a turret from the fray.

Alex was keeping them close enough that Pilar was able to add the point-defenses to the weaponry assaulting the enemy facility—when they weren't needed to counter incoming fire—and though the close range made it more difficult for Alex to dodge any particular shot, that very proximity kept the Innominate within far fewer firing arcs.

In all honesty, the flashing lights of hostile magics being exchanged in the form of sci-fi weapons fire was making it difficult to concentrate on his danger sense.

That gave him an idea, and he closed his eyes, shutting out a large source of stimulus.

From the perspective of the ship, he'd diverted the external camera feeds away from his station.

He quirked a smile and spoke to himself. "Fly, don't look just fly."

Natasha's snorted chuckle told him that she'd gotten the reference.

He took a moment to comment on it. "I'd not have thought you'd have seen many old American movies."

She grunted. "You know, in one version of his story, he landed in Russia."

Alex hadn't heard that. "Oh?"

"Yes. He helped us take over the world. Stalin adopted him and everything."

"What?" Alex twitched in surprise. "That can't be true."

He could *hear* her shrug in her tone. "In Soviet Russia, everyone reaches the potential seen in them. Nothing else is allowed."

Alex could hear the joke in there even if he didn't quite get it. It was entirely possible that it was a word-play that didn't translate well, but before he could respond, he had to jerk the ship sideways.

He was getting distracted.

John cleared his throat. The sound came to him clearly. "Maybe we save the banter until *after* the firefight?"

Alex sighed. "Sure, sure."

Natasha huffed. "Fine, fine. The trove is still in there."

It didn't take that much longer to wear through the asteroid base's shields, and when that was done, Pilar went on a bit of a rampage on the near surface.

John calmed her down even as Alex came in to stop right beside a small hangar in the side of the rock. Juba could come there once he took over or disabled the base.

In theory, they should be able to harvest the weaponry from the asteroid, among other things, but not if Pilar destroyed it all.

The woman grumbled, but she conceded that they were right, and so she powered down the weaponry for the moment.

That, of course, is precisely when the pair of pirate warships jumped into the system, barely five thousand miles from the asteroid.

Things were about to get *very* interesting.