Chapter 138

The next stop was a small Alliance system with a habitable moon.  The moon was slightly larger than the Earth norm.  Although the moon had an atmosphere, the surface temperature was almost always below freezing.  The people lived under the shifting ice sheets on the surface.  It was hard living, and the stations offered very little.  I decided not to waste the fuel to travel to the space stations.

We remained on the system’s edge, refueled the fleet, did our maintenance, and planned to enter warp seven days later.   It was two days longer than I had targeted, but the new crews were still getting accustomed to their ships.  My new ship captains had been pulled from the bridge crew of the battleship, and I was already getting complaints from the Nyriad crew.  I did a comm call with Kara to review the myriad of complaints.  The solution we came up with was to put the best Marine on board in the captain seat.  All three of the captains on the alien ships had gone on serious power trips.  Either they were trying to impress me or just terrible captains.

To be fair to the temporary captains, none of them had any leadership training in the Union and didn’t have very good role models when they served on the bridges.  I told all three of them they would remain on board their assigned ship and be given a second chance after they completed the twenty-eight leadership modules Julie prepared for them.  If they failed after that, then they would never command again.

Our next subspace trip was thirteen days, and I finally had time to relax a little.  I managed to get back in the Sword and Sorcery game and level up my barbarian with Nero’s thief.  I chose to play with Nero because he was the only crew member with a lower-level avatar than me.  Nero was not very good at the game, but we had fun making a mockery of the quests and somehow accomplishing them through pure luck.  Need a damsel rescued?  Well, you should have specified you wanted her alive when you posted the quest.

Celeste was talking at dinner, saying she couldn’t have fun anymore.  Julie would alert the nearest crew member if she was getting up to mischief.   They would then intervene and lecture her.  Even Eve, who was back from her extended time out, was doing a better job instilling values in the kids.  I smiled at my daughter and told her it was time to grow up, but she could always have her fun VR.  She was still years away from being allowed into the full dive VR, but she could use the helmet for now.

Danielle was pregnant with a boy.  I was excited, and Doc said he was healthy.  We were thinking of naming him Dartanian.  Danielle was still obsessed with purging all the back doors into Julie’s programming.  She was finding out how complex programming could be made.  She estimated she was around 12% done at this point.  The hardest part was finding the rewrite coding.  This lets the programming repair damage to itself.  Unfortunately, it also reinstalled the back doors she purged.  Everyone she tagged was a victory for her.  She would have to remove all the rewrite code in one sweep once she identified all of them.

The Zoe and JJ relationship was still burning, and I started to allow conjugal visits since they were officially married.  JJ was still trying to convince us to join Godfather or at least talk with a representative.  Edmund had looked into the data from the Brotherhood, and they deemed them a threat to the integrity of human survival.  I still did not know what to make of them.

On the voyage to the next system, things started to come together.  The subspace transmitters in the ship were working, and all the ships were on the correct vectors and at the expected speed in subspace.  It made me think that perhaps putting a Marine in the captain’s seat was a good move.  They, of course, knew shit about three-dimensional combat and tactics, but they were not on warships.  Maybe Marines would make good first officers in my fleet?  I didn’t have to hold to some antiquated concept that in order to be an officer, you needed to be groomed and selected by your DNA and how well you kissed someone else’s ass.

We exited subspace in the Alliance system of Grr’enthier.  After a scan, I had my fleet form up and head in the system.  Our three Alliance-purchased ships would dock for maintenance.  The Void Phoenix would ferry those from the battleship who wished for shore leave.  I was not about to spend so much money on fuel moving the battleship in the system.

This system was home to a feline-like race.  Nothing close to the Wren species who were actually genetically altered humans.  This species actually were apex predators on their jungle planet.  From the records, they only reached space with the help of a first contact with another Alliance race about 300 years ago.  They made terrible engineers and scientists and were only good at combat.  At least, that is what one Alliance admiral put in the notes on the system.  Still they had large stations filled with experienced Alliance engineers, and I wanted my ships looked over by some expert engineers to see how my Nyriads were doing.

I remained on the Void Phoenix and worked on the subspace engines with Damian, who was back on his feet.  He had been angry with me when he woke up.  I had asked Doc to make his appearance younger.  I had said to make him appear 60 instead of 160.  She went overboard, and Damion thinning white hair was now a thick dark blonde, and almost all his wrinkles were gone.  He looked in his mid-forties.  I checked his SNAIL data, and it projected he would maintain high cognitive ability for another two decades.  There was only so much science could do for the neural connections in the brain.  Eventually, there would be a decline.  He had a full array of organ replacement as well with muscular rejuvenation as well.

Damian was still mad at me and Doc until I saw him leaving Vicky’s quarters one morning with a massive grin.  When he noticed me, he just grunted and said she was having trouble with her shower.  After that incident, Damian was in a much better mood—all the time.

We had our first major cultural incident.  Mozzie and a few other crew had taken a shuttle down to the planet to explore the jungle planet.  They hired the local feline-like species as guides.  Mozzie and six other Marines were going camping to see some of the wildlife on the planet.  Large carnivores the locals hunted.  On the first night of camping, Mozzie challenged one of the feminine felines to a friendly wrestling match.  She declined, but his persistence and the drunken state eventually got the feline to concede.  Mozzie got cut up pretty badly, but he also won.

The local laws meant that Mozzie had won his bride.  He unwittingly consummated the relationship in the tent immediately after.  So now my fun-loving Tirani Marine was married to a mostly feral alien cat woman.  Suruchi and Abby had looped me in on the problem.  Mozzie did not want to marry the woman and apologized, saying it was the intoxicated status…which was another part of the local ceremony.  Being drunk was required for the process to be official.  In the end, Doc went to the planet and comprehensively examined the feline.  Her intensive medical exam showed they could not produce offspring.  Therefore under the local law, the marriage could be annulled.

After this incident, we changed shore leave to planets to require a cultural immersion module in VR.  According to Abby, it wouldn’t prevent all issues but may at least teach the stupid out of the Marines.

The reports from the engineers we hired to service our ships came in.  The two tankers were in great shape.  The engineers were doing a great job.  The medium transport had a few issues but nothing alarming.  I reviewed the report and added my own notes to be sent to the crew.  I was much more comfortable with the Nyriad engineers.  I hoped they would join my fleet permanently.  I would need to increase the amenities for the crew on the ships and give their families a planet to settle on…all things I planned to do in the future.

The three ships joined us in the outer system, and we refueled the battleship and The Void Phoenix and entered subspace a few hours later.  Our next stop was in deep space, and Elias had to yell at the other ship’s navigators to get them to log the course.  Fourteen days in subspace, then we would refuel and make another fourteen-day trip and stop at an Alliance system.  Our next stop would be the Bradbury system, the light at the end of the tunnel.

The refueling in deep space went well.  All ships were ready to renter subspace in just four days.  When we exited into the Alliance system, we were welcomed.  I had all the ships head to one of the outer system gas giants for refueling and shove leave on the large station orbiting it.  It had been a month in subspace, and the crews needed a break.  There was a colonized barren planet in the system as well.  All the cities were domed, and there was nothing to go sightseeing for.

Edmund did note he was picking up Brotherhood transmissions in the system.  There were at least two operatives.  One on the station and one on the planet.  They were both low-level Obsidian agents.  I decided to give the origin of the signals to the local Alliance offices.  We remained long enough in the system to find out the agents were aliens being paid by the Brotherhood to broadcast data to an orbiting satellite.  We identified the disguised satellite for the Alliance and were given a modest reward of Alliance credits for our help.

We were starting to get close to human space, so it should not have been a surprise to find the Brotherhood operating here.  After we refueled, I reviewed my credit and material balance.  I had enough funds to operate my fleet for five years.  That was as long as the battleship was converted.  We needed the Squirrel to have succeeded in making the planet accessible.  If it was not, then that would be our top priority.  The mood with the civilian crew was high.  Just two more weeks in subspace and the promised Shangrala would be reached.  Hopefully, I hadn’t promised more than I could deliver.

We entered subspace, and I checked all the beacons…every ship was with us.  The subspace journey was anxious on the Void Phoenix.  A long rest was coming for the crew.  New challenges to settle a planet and establish a human and Nyriad colony.  Suruchi was back on the ship, and I think she was vying for the position of governor.  With all the Sol credits I had paid her over the years and the profits she made for her self-trading, she could probably found her own colony.

My brother was also on board, and the meetings had switched from fleet maintenance to planetary colonization.  We all had no experience and were relying on Julie to help guide us from millennia of human records.  We thought we had a great step-by-step plan.  The bridge stations were full as we exited subspace in the Bradbury system.  The alien sensors started to populate the holo tank and my screens.  Elias was working furiously with Elvis to get detailed scans of the ships that were in range.

Zoe let a long ffffuuuccckkk.  I flipped my comms and ordered Eve to get the children on Caladrius and prepare to launch.  It was the only ship we had with a long-distance subspace drive.  My maintenance had not been spectacular on the Void Phoenix.  Even if I rushed, it would be at least two days before we could reenter subspace.

We were already in full stealth mode, but that didn’t mean anything, as the fleet would arrive behind us in six hours.  They would also know someone had just entered the system from subspace.  Since these were Brotherhood ships, they might even be able to see through our stealth.  At least we were on the edge of the system, and we were a few hours for an intercept.  The entire crew looked to me for direction.  It was time to be an admiral.