Chapter 83

Suruchi had turned down numerous offers for a private voyage from the Ederne system since we hadn’t registered a passenger route. Some offers were somewhat enticing, 1500 Sol credits for a three-day trip to a neighboring system for 56 passengers. Another offer was for 19 people and 12 shuttles to be transported to the Ragnhild system, 2400 Sol credits. These offers didn’t stir me to change my plans. I had some confidence no one was searching for us from the Brotherhood with Edmund’s intel but knew that confidence had a shelf life. It was a six-day trip to the Vinita system, with plenty of time to work on the next phase of *Void Phoenix’s* upgrades. I was already sketching out hull modifications with Julie for possible weapons and defensive emplacements. A secondary goal of these changes would be to alter *Void Phoenix’s* profile, making it unrecognizable. Once we passed the Union we were going to need to find a safe port that would help and keep the modifications secret. This meant either an alien species or a fringe element of humanity.

Abby, Buckie, and Francis were putting together a massive list of marines who they thought were a cut above in terms of ability and character. When we reentered the old Union space we would start to reach out and see if we could recruit our target complement.

The staff meetings for the ship were much shorter now that we didn’t have passengers. It gave me more time to train with the marines. We also started doing whole ship VR emergency sims. It was fun to be the captain in these scenarios. When we beat Julie’s ‘not everyone can live’ scenario but marooning most of the crew on an arid desert planet and coming back for them she got a little bit more tricky with future sims.

We would have all 12 stealth combat suits ready when we reached the Anderson Research Station. The camouflage skins were coming along. I had to admit it was not going to be as good as the original from Jane Doe’s suit. Our exterior skin only had 144 light node points per square centimeter. Jane Doe’s suit had nearly triple that amount. Even my new fabricators couldn’t match the core worlds manufacturing for the chromatic cells used to create the camouflage. Well, I could match it but lacked the software to utilize them effectively. My compromise had been the 144-model which used minimal processing power and reacted quickly to the background of the suit to blend in. The alien hull material already masked the suit's thermal, radiation, and power signatures extremely effectively.

Our stealth suits needed to be customized to the individual. They added 0.3 m to a person's height. The heavy suits would be more of a piloted suit. Individuals could be between 1.75 and 1.9m and change between suits. If we had individuals outside this range we would have to build a custom heavy suit for them. I told Abby height was not a criterion for recruitment. Competency and character were my top conditions to join the crew of the *Void Phoenix*.

The pressure was on me to finalize the design of the heavy suits.

The heavy combat suits were just that, heavy. Many times I had to scrap my design with Julie because the units were getting too big as I added more functionality. We finally set maximum dimensions. 2.5m was going to be the maximum height. Most ship corridors were between 3m and 3.5m. So this would allow them to operate comfortably on human vessels. The width would be limited to 1.2m, once again to maintain function on most human ships. So now we were trying to fit everything I wanted into this size package. What I really needed was a better power source. So I had begun to dabble with the alien generators. After just three days into the trip, I got it into my head to equip the heavy suits with their own shields. It would be anything too drastic, just a unidirectional forward shield that could be powered on and off. So I needed to add the miniature version of the alien emitters in the shoulders and hips.

I was getting ahead of myself though. The specs for the possible shield were off the charts. Even under heavy fire, it looked like the simulations would make my suits invulnerable from the front while their power held out. That was why shields were not equipped on suits in the first place. The massive power requirements. The alien generators would solve this problem but manufacturing the fuel for the suits was my largest hiccup. I believed with the alien hull fabricators I could build more generator housing units. Then the rest of the components looked to be copyable. The solid fuel rods…I was delving into the archives that Eve was sifting for me in hopes of learning the process. It was going to take time. The one benefit was while I was working on the heavy combat armor design I could put both hull fabricators back on task to refit the outer hull of the *Void Phoneix*.

I spent a lot of my free time on the bridge. Well not free time, just time I could do my work from my captain's chair. With the help of Julie, I had implemented the old Union cert system. This required crew to maintain competencies by completing certs. Even the hospitality staff would have to complete certs. The good news for the crew was I added a small payroll bonus for completed certs and pay raises for those that completed entire modules in other competencies. I cheated somewhat for my own certs as I re-upped my certs in VR under Julie’s administration. Certain portions of certs were required to be in the real world. Having my own AI controlling the testing allowed me to bypass this requirement. Julie did give me a hard time about how I was twisting her programming for my own needs but that I refused to service her needs. This was usually followed by her following me in hologram form in skimpy outfits trying to lure me to make use of the Claire bot again. As long as this was done in the privacy of my cabin I was ok with the good-natured teasing. I didn’t give in to her seductions.

Two days into the trip to the Vinita system a very smug Gabby came to me and gave me the funds to complete payment on her bot. I was shocked and after asking Gwen I found out she had been doing favors for the crew using her engineering skills. She had promised a laundry list of things in return for some advanced payments. I guess a highly-paid crew needed to spend their money somewhere and Gabby was popular among the crew. Gabby was painstakingly working on her steward bot in her free time. I felt a little helpless. I was not her father. Her father had his own steward sex bot and had his daughter reskin it for him… I would have been more comfortable with all this if her steward bot didn’t have the same body shape and height as me. It wouldn’t take the crew much time to realize what Gabby intended either as I was 1.92…one of the tallest persons on this ship.

We successfully manufactured the generator housing components on the fabricators five days into the voyage to Vinita. Eve actually found the alien schematics in the library cubes so that was anti-climactic. We had numerous sized generators to choose from. The internal infrastructure of the generators did require some rare materials which I had on hand from my alien loot. Very valuable materials… I only manufactured six of the microgenerators since the material cost was so high. The power distributors needed a lot of testing to see if they could handle the load. Essentially all I had done was make use of my alien tech to produce more alien tech. I had the new microgenerators but still needed to manufacture the fuel. I needed an expert in the fields of material science, thermodynamics, and manufacturing. Unfortunately, I shelved it so close to completion.

When I slept at night I spent time hunting Moriarty with Francis or in the Sword and Sorcery game with Gwen. We had our first success catching Moriarty…well it was a bit of a cheat as Francis recognized Moriarty’s disguise from a previous game and outed him at the gala ball. It was a somewhat hollow victory.

The voyage had been productive if expensive. Using up my precious metal stores to manufacture the microgenerators might be a problem. That was 24 heavy suits and 28 Venom Queen bots. That was the tacky name I assigned to my new spider bots. Venom Queen. They wouldn’t have venom, just the fast-hardening foam but I thought it sounded cool. I hadn’t worked on their design yet but was kicking around some ideas after Gwen, Luna and I cleared a spider’s cavern in the game. It was one of the scariest things I had ever done in VR. It gave Luna nightmares…and myself as well. It was just too realistic.

The Vinita system was one of the two governmental systems of the Sapphire Empire. The capital system, Agua Azul, was a water world with massive floating cities and two modest continents at the poles. It was supposedly a paradise planet in terms of weather for humans with an abundance of exotic sea life. The Vinita system had two habitable planets and a partially habited moon. The planets were the fourth and fifth from the sun and the moon orbited a gas giant fairly distant from the sun. I was not planning to travel in the system. Just enter the system and pay for the right to talk with Stanton Higgs. And check prices for all the lumber we were carrying in our hold.

I was on the bridge when we transitioned from subspace. I started coordinating the bridge and engineering. Elias swore from his station and apologized. There were six combat fleets in the system. Six very big fleets, each with over a dozen capital ships. We connected to the system comm buoy and had three destroyers meet us to scan our ship. The high security we shortly learned was from a Sylvan city-ship being seen inside Sapphire space without invitation. That sounded too coincidental to me.

I commed Suruchi and asked her to offload the cargo of lumber. It looked like I could make a good profit but more importantly lighting the ship would be good. I began to get refueling permissions to an outer system station. There was no point heading in the system. I wanted to be on our way to Anderson Research Station as soon as possible. We could get our maintenance and refueling done there. No longer than 72 hours here. I tasked Suruchi with getting trade goods…absolutely no passengers…that might be profitable to bring to Anderson Research Station.

Two days later things were looking good and we were just about ready to leave. With Francis on the bridge, we initiated the real reason why we came here. A meeting with General Stanton Higgs.