Chapter 105

Desdemona Rouse had just received updated orders on exiting subspace in the Tirani system.  She tapped her comm pad and brought up her assets.  She was the lead Diamond agent in this rim sector of human space.  Her orders were to facilitate Operation Solidity.  She had seen plans for the large-scale operation, but not everything was in place.  Generally, the Brotherhood hated allowing star nations to merge.  They might think they could break away from Earth’s oversight and challenge the power core worlds if they got too large.

*But that was her mission and she would do it.  Disappointing, as she was just getting closer to finding the Void Phoenix.  She reviewed her lists of tasks and dispatched orders to her two supporting cruisers.  They would handle some important tasks to initiate interstellar wars and tip the balance so the correct side won.  She checked her messages from the station. The local agent had said Hanson Gammon’s ship attempted to board the Void Phoenix and failed.  He had some videos from long-range scans.*

*Desdemona was speechless.  It was actually true.  A large merchant had captured Hanson’s ship.  Well, wasn’t that just a ball of shit she didn’t want to deal with.  She packaged the video to be sent back to Earth.  The Brotherhood didn’t have any relays in the Tirani system, but one of the cruisers would be in human space soon.*

*The agent on the station, Hassim Morain, was requesting permission to join her on her ship as well.  It said he had an elf named Sha’Lua and a male human named Lazarus who would like to meet with her in regards to Devon Wellspring.  She weighed her options and then started setting up security.  Elves were notorious for being cunning.  She knew they had dozens of agents in human space, maybe hundreds. But she couldn’t pass up an opportunity for this intel.*

*As the shuttlecraft approached her ship, she almost ordered it destroyed because she felt some foreboding.  It was allowed to dock, and she went down to meet her guests with six men in battlesuits at her back and wearing a shield belt.*

>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>

*Rae’Ver steep out of the shuttle behind the two human men and Sha’Lua.  His own ship was cloaked and hidden away from the Tirani station.  They had been on the station just two days before finding Hassim Marain. Lazarus showed some utility in getting the man to his rented room on the station. From there, Rae’Ver forced himself into the man’s mind. He found when he recovered from his first encounter with the Void Phoenix, his powers had reached new heights.*

*As long as he was close to a human or elf he could mentally dominate them. He could even influence them at range, but that took subtlety and time.*

*The six guards in power armor concerned him. He might be able to take three…maybe four out but six was beyond him. The human woman in front of them was in charge, hopefully this was the leader. Thankfully Hassim confirmed it with a brief exchange of words.*

*The woman was Desdemona, and she was extremely cautious. He probed her mental defenses, and she had none, just a strong personal will. She even jumped at his probing and the guards moved forward but she held them back with a hand. At least she wasn’t aware of the Sylvan ability to dominate minds. It was rare, even among the first citizens. Even his power had just been more of an influence before that wave of power had knocked him out.*

*The group turned and Hassim and Sha’Lua fell in step with Desdemona. Three guards to the right and three guards to the left. He decided to wait until they were all sitting. Sometimes when he dominated a human, they got weak in the knees.*

*When they were sitting in a large conference room with high-back chairs, he made his move as refreshments were being served. Her will was strong, but he cut off her motor skills while he clamped down on her spirit. It took almost two minutes to seal away her will behind his mental walls. She had been strong, and maybe she could have even learned to harness the power herself if she was trained. It was too late now. She was his as long as he kept his awareness active.*

*The first thing he had her do was dismiss the guards. Then he wanted to know more about the Brotherhood and what his new ship was capable of.*

>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>

The first two days in subspace I spent with Elias.  I was trying to figure out the best route to stop by the Squirrel.  My engineer brain was craving more data to solve the subspace puzzle.  I would have been better off if I had never found the subspace research on Jane Does shuttle.  Fuel wasn’t the problem.  The problem was the Squirrel hated humans.  That meant some deception.  I had the holoprojector on my bridge, and we had a ten Wren and a Tirani on board.  So if we had a face-to-face, we could avoid meeting them.

I researched the race, and they did look like squirrels from Earth.  Five-foot-tall humanoid squirrels! I didn’t understand how that evolution track occurred, but I just accepted it.  I planned to offer them the hull plating technology.  They were not a violent race and not expansionist.  They were highly social and free traders.  Maybe we could unload some of Suruchi’s art.

We were going to finish this 10-day leg of the trip and stop at a Drusi outpost.  Well, an outpost that had Drusi at it.  There were also four other alien species that worked on the station.  I didn’t understand how humanity was so uncooperative with aliens.  Each species brought its own uniqueness. The Squirrel, for example, were able to think more abstractly and beyond just three dimensions, according to the Brotherhood notes.

The ship was still lively, even without passengers. That happens when you have a crew full of life-loving marines. The hospitality crew had events going on every night. I even attended a few with Danielle. Now that Celeste was talking, she wanted to explore the ship. I let her play with Tora’s boy once and had to separate them. Celeste treated the poor boy like a pet, pulling his tail and ear until he cried. Maybe when she got older, she would be better. I would have to work on her bot playmate soon.

Six-day onto the ten-day subspace trip, Gabby finished the female Tirani steward bot for Mozzie. She was upset because she asked for footage to show the bot’s functionality, and he denied her. He also complained about the fur on the bot. It was too soft. Tirani women only had soft fur on their chests. This had her steaming for days in the robotics lab, so I cooled her by letting her build and use a generator for a Venom Queen. Of course, she called it a Black Widow and referred to the Venom Queen as the ‘base model.’ I think she was trying to stir a confrontation, but I wouldn’t bite. In the end, all the bots were mine anyway.

We had a large group in the cargo bay as Gabby ran a demonstration of her new toy. The bot did exceed expectations with a 30% increase in speed and a 5% agility increase. This was from the generator and extremely durable parts. It was a very scary beast. If I ever saw a few of these nightmares coming at me, I would run. The successful test meant Nero and engineering could start making ceiling alcoves for the bots to hide in. Gabby referred to them as nests. I don’t think my trips to the bridge would be the same, knowing four of the bots were concealed in the ceiling above the door.

The first Gorilla suit was being put through testing on the trip as well. After I had assembled it, I handed off the project. In the evening, while playing with Celeste, I reviewed the data with Julie. The entire first suit was going to be scrapped after the testing was done. We were learning that simulations didn’t always play into the real world 100% accurately, especially with this monstrous suit.

Due to its mass, it kept destroying floors and walls, even with the gravity turned down. The real-world combat was just too messy. Reluctantly I decided to build 24 Badger and 24 Gorilla suits. The Gorilla suits would be stationary for ship defense, while the Badgers would be reactionary.

The updates to the cradle were also not going perfectly. Apparently, during some of the ship upgrades the schematics had not been properly updated. This caused a two-day remapping of the entire ship to take place to make sure all our engineering schematics were correct. We even found a secret compartment from the activity. It was just under a 200 cubic centimeters but it had some old data chips. It looked like 150-year corporate espionage to Julie. The data had the shipping routes and profit margins for a trading company that no longer existed. We copied the data and destroyed the chips.

The second problem with the cradle update was we couldn’t remove the fighters in subspace to make and install the launch tubes. I blamed myself on missing this. So most of the work we were doing was just prep work.

We did map our second subspace planet. Once again, I decided to avoid exploring it. We just logged it for future study.

I now felt comfortable enough with Kara Briggs to completely hand her oversight of the bridge’s crews cert program. Nero had engineering, Suruchi had hospitality, and Abby handled the marines with Buckie. Crew members needed to pass competency in their field, maintain certifications, attend group VR emergency sessions, and complete individual space survival tests. It was a tickle of credit bonuses that added up. One thing could be said the crew of the *Void Phoenix* was well compensated. Kara was a solid first officer, and I was happy to have her on board.

Reviewing the notes that Edmund was sending me was becoming a full-time job. My VR playtime was eliminated as I studied the material from the Brotherhood and tried to figure out what their ultimate goal was.

It was clear they wanted to control humanity. They always held the most advanced tech close to the vest and used it indiscriminately. The most disturbing find was the Armageddon bots that we had fought were still two generations behind the current ones. Hanson had ‘procured’ them a Mars recycling factory. They were listed as being destroyed, according to Edmund, on the hard documents he located. I still felt confident in our Gorilla suits ability to handle them…once we worked out the bugs.

During the last few days of the trip, I returned to the work of my three-phase bot playmate for Celeste. The youngest version was coming along. It wasn’t going to be acting as a guardian bot but it should be an excellent playmate. I was surprised when Eve came down to the lab to help me with the design process. She said she was interested in it to make sure Celeste had the best companion possible. She even wanted to help design the base personality for the bot. An evolving personality like hers.

I didn’t have a problem with this request. The playmate was not going to receive the same processing enhancements and memory that Eve received, though!