Chapter 118

We exited subspace far outside the system of the fungal race. It was a precaution, as the Tirani archives were pretty thin on their interactions. The fungal race had organic spaceships and had only colonized this one solar system.

There was a language translation program in the Tirani archives that was extremely simplistic. The fungal race only used seven tones, and the vocabulary was limited to sixty-eight words. My new Squirrel linguist, Hyrena, was excited to communicate with the species. My xeno specialist Dr. Zaire was also fascinated with the race. Sapient fungal life forms were not rare, but ones that had reached space on their own were.

Our scanners found a lot of slow-moving craft with low footprints. Elvis, the AI in charge of the sensor translation, said the spacecraft had lower mass than normal spacecraft and was adjusting the resolution. We waited on the edge of the system for nearly four hours before the fungal race responded to our communication. Hyrena sent our requests, and we waited another three hours as they sent the requested payment. They wanted organic samples of our food and plant life. Due to the Squirrel transport requests volume, we separated from them in our bartering.

Somehow Hyrena managed to get permission for us to move into the system. Dr. Zaire indicated why this system had been left alone. The fungal race must be so ingrained in the ecosystem of the planet that the entire surface would have to be bescorched to eliminate them. Even then, they could probably survive millennia under the surface, waiting to emerge again. The effort to take the two inhabited worlds with a toxic atmosphere and then terraform them was not profitable for other races—yet.

We were asked to orbit over a moon with the two Squirrel transports, and an assortment of food and fuel samples were sent to us. The samples were sent to Damian, Doc, and Dr. Zaire. Being in closer proximity to the fungal planet communicating with us increased the speed of communication as they were using radio frequencies. I waited for the results from the testing. Damian reports on the fuel came back first. It was not great, but we could set up a micro refinery on the *Void Phoenix* and make it viable. We started to negotiate volumes and our exchanges with fungal people for the fuel. It was going to take at least a week to refine the fuel, so I ordered our engineers to start manufacturing parts for the refinery. The refinery was actually going to be powered by impure fuel, so we had to get enough volume for both.

The bio paste had many problems. We were given six samples. Two of the samples had too many toxins for humans. Two samples were viable but not conducive to the human pallet. The remaining two were 70% carbohydrate and 30% protein. They were digestible and deemed safe by the Squirrel but only slightly more palatable than the algae bars from the Squirrel.

Gabby suggested we try to incorporate the substances into the meal fabricator that she had repaired. A team of ten scientists and engineers got on it. The device had some food processing capability but not a lot. We ordered a few tons of the edible paste and crossed our fingers that they could make it work.

We never had any face-to-face interactions with the fugal race. We had kept all our micro-organism safeguards in place. This was due to humans first few contacts with hostile fungal organisms. Most species of fungi release spores to replicate and spread. If these spores overcame the human immune system, the victim was in for a very unpleasant treatment—as long as the speed of the infection wasn’t too rapid.

I was surprised when I was presented with a plate of blue crackers covered in a yellow paste four days into our orbit. The fact it was an engineer presenting me with the sample and not Cori made me hesitate. Doc assured me it was safe to consume. The cracker was crunchy and tasted like carrots, while the spread tasted like bitter apple sauce. Not a terrible result but the engineer said six crackers at a meal would cover my nutrient needs. They were still working on similar products for the Tirani and Squirrel. The combo had a slightly unpleasant aftertaste, but at least the crew wouldn’t starve.

We ended up spending eight days in orbit over the moon. The Squirrel transports would be spending another twelve days to fill their holds. Dr. Zaire almost wanted to remain in the system to study the fungal race. Although they processed information at a slower pace than humans, they were intelligent. We had also resupplied for a pittance of everything we got in return. They mostly wanted to experience new organic flavors. One thing I learned that I wish I hadn’t was that one of the pastes they sold us was bio waste for their species. It was processed on their planet before it was barreled, but we were essentially consuming digested remnants.

I had spent a lot of my time with Damian and the refinery during our stay. We kept tweaking the equipment to try and get the fuel purity high and higher. We only succeeded by 2.9% but to engineers, that was a huge success that required celebration.

The fungal pit stop was a success, as it gave us enough food and fuel for extended operations. We still needed to have more successful resupplying stops in the future, and I desperately hoped the human colony on Juniper-44Z would have more palatable foods.

We wished our Squirrel allies well as they continued to resupply, and we headed to the outer system to safely enter subspace. The voyage was going to be a trip.

A few days into the trip and Celeste’s behavior was noticeably improved. Her third birthday was approaching quickly, and I couldn’t believe how fast she was growing. We had been spending more and more time together, and Celeste and Amos sometimes played in the robotics lab while I worked under the care of Eve and their playmate bot. Celeste was always asking questions, and she was used to being responded to with simple answers. I noticed Amos didn’t speak much, but he was always attentive and clearly listening and processing.

Celeste’s behavior management had an effect. Although she liked to hug Tora’s son and the other Squirrel children—a lot—she was much better behaved and only got into trouble once or twice a week now. She just loved fluffy things. I think that was why I found her being carried on Mozzie’s back like a princess regularly.

Tirani males had very soft fur. The females had coarser hair, so that is why Celeste preferred the males. When she could sneak off, she would play wrestle with Mozzie and Zarko in the training room. Amos watched, clearly not as enamored with the huge bear-like men.

Luna was approaching 16 and was a full-fledged member of the crew now. She was maintaining all of our combat armor and even assembling new suits on her own. This meant she was spending a lot of time in the robotics lab with Gabby and me. Zed, the dog, was also a permanent addition. Luna’s job was to assemble the personalized combat suits for the crew.

The six Squirrel marines only received the Geko suits as they didn’t like the heavier suits. At the same time, the six Tirani marines had custom Badger and Gorilla suits based on the operation parameters. The human marines were all fitted for Badger suits. The thirty-three humans all had custom-fitted Badger suits now as well. Abby had a heavy squad of humans with Gorilla suits as well. These eighteen human marines had both a Badger and Gorilla suit. The core of our deployment was these 18 marines with the 6 Tirani along with the 6 Squirrel as recon. I had a customized Badger suit for myself and one for Eve in my quarters as well.

Our Squirrel techs and scientists were always making changes to improve the suits as well. They were a godsend for Nero as they were eager to throw themselves into any project. Nero was finally getting a break as chief engineer. The Void Phoenix was running more efficiently than at any point I had owned it. We were still having trouble getting our six defense grazers and two offensive grazers consistent power, but the Squirrel were slowly working miracles. I almost wished we had taken more of their engineers with us.

I was almost at a loss for anything to do on the long trip to Juniper-44Z. I spent time in VR training and running the Sherlock game with Francis. Julie started setting up the game since we had run all the scenarios to date. Danielle, my girlfriend, had joined us on occasion, but she preferred to play the Sword and Sorcery game with Gwen, Gabby, and Luna. I think they completed the necromancer story and moved on to some type of dragon quest. I knew a lot of marines also played the game, and they had formed a guild within the game. My barbarian warrior was so far behind everyone’s level that I adventured with just Eve when I did play.

The crew morale was actually quite high as we made our into the relative unknown. I was constantly running numbers to make sure we could always retreat to a friendly station that we were certain had food and fuel. The problem was if we didn’t get a full resupply of fuel and provisions, I was uncertain if we could proceed into the fringes of human-explored space.

I was on the bridge and actually fairly nervous as we were about to exit subspace. Thankfully, during the seventeen-day trip here, we had not seen a single shadow in subspace. We were exiting somewhat further in the system than normal. Our propellant fuel played a factor in this decision. I wanted to conserve as much of it as possible, and the humans occupying this system had a weak fleet and an extremely small population of between 200,000 and 250,000.

When the jungle planet appeared on scans, I was just expecting to find a few simple orbiting stations and small patrol craft. That is what the eighteen-month-old Brotherhood archives had indicated. That is not what appeared in the screens. One large station dwarfed six smaller stations on the screen, and two cruisers and seven destroyers were also in orbit over the planet. If the human colony had been conquered, we needed to return to safe space. Most likely retreating to the Bradbury system or an independent station.

Elvis started putting up detailed scans from using the alien sensors in a narrow beam. Our scans were going to come in much faster than the residents of the system. My mind started working around what the station was—Julie put it together before I could. It was four large ships apparently welded together. Two carriers, a battleship, and a combat cruiser. The two carriers were of Union manufacture. Did we find the missing Union fleet?

The battleship was not a Union ship or even a familiar human design. It was not in any Brotherhood registry either. The cruiser was another Union ship—the *Winged Harpy*. Not a cruiser in my brother’s fleet. The carriers came back as the *Star Ravenger* and *Icarus*. Once again no ships in my brother’s fleet. Of course, tracking him down wasn’t going to be easy.

Most of the supporting ships in defense of the planet were also Union ships, but none were associated with my brother. Comms were finally live, and Haily turned to me and said they asked us to identify ourselves to the Union Prime Command.