Chapter 133

The Void Phoenix felt empty the first day we entered subspace. The Squirrel contingent of scientists and physicists had transferred to the battleship with most of the Marines. They just had a lot more space over there to work on their projects, and the Marines were needed for security. Celeste was probably the most upset since she was losing a number of her playmates in the Squirrel children.

I was sad to see my Union Marine shuttlecraft leave. I know I should not find sentimental value in objects as an engineer, but that ship carried me through a lot. After the next phase of advanced testing, the craft would be retired. Maybe I could convince the Squirrel to put in a museum or something.

The crew complement of the Void Phoenix was greatly diminished. Zoe, Elias, and myself on the bridge. Nero, Gwen, Fiona, and Gabby in engineering. Abby and nine Marines for defense. Our additional crew was Danielle, Doc, and Cori. Celeste and Amos were still on board as well but Toro had taken her twin boys to the battleship with her.  Sabbir, the twins’ father, was on the refueling ship with seven Marines.

Not only was the Void Phoenix skinny on the crew, but we only had the Caladrius, and one of the Brotherhood shuttles still on board. The Saphieran fighters, the other shuttles, and all but one of the large exterior engineering bots had also been transferred to the battleship with all the Marine pilots. About seventy percent of the supplies on board the Void Phoenix went as well. My ship lost 16% of its mass, making its acceleration curve greatly improved.

Putting so much of our advanced technology, flora, and battle suits on the battleship was a concern since it had almost no defenses.  That was why the Void Phoneix was going to lead the way and scout for the fleet. We would arrive early in every transitional system to scout for the fleet. That way, when they arrived, we could better deal with coordinate resupply and transmit the system data.

In its new role as a fleet scout, the Void Phoenix was going to rely heavily on its stealth systems.  The thermal signature from thrust was the only issue, as it was not masked in any way. This meant staying at a distance of 200,000 miles from conventional scanners.  Not a problem as our scanners had incredible range, and we just needed to drop out of subspace without using our maneuvering thrusters until Elvis and Elias completed the initial scans.

During the trip, I found doing engine maintenance therapeutic. It has been a while since I had been absorbed in a singular engineering duty on board. Zed was extremely helpful to talk to.  The dog followed me everywhere and listened to all my problems while I worked doing visual inspections and assigning engineering bots to maintenance tasks.  I spent nearly twelve hours a day-cycle working on the FTL systems, getting familiar with Damian’s changes for traveling the higher bands.  In my little free time, I worked on my holographic projection systems. At night I spent my time in VR working on a series of programs Julie was developing for me.

Julie was integrating thousands of space battles across dozens of species to help me work on my space combat and improve my reactionary capabilities. I was also thinking about what defenses I would need to build in the Bradbury system to help defend my family. It looked more and more likely I planned to settle down.

Celeste and Amos spent my workday in school.  Structured learning was important, and they were now old enough to gain the benefits.  Julie and I had designed an education program for the next decade for the children.  They would have the broadest and most thorough education we could offer.  Abby also designed their physical regimen, although she called it playtime.  Giving your children every advantage to succeed is important.

In this subspace segment, Doc gave birth to her son, Neon.  The boy was healthy and going to be exceptional in his own right. I still was torn knowing that the child was genetically engineered.  We had done everything we could to hide this fact, but it would be something hanging over him like Damocles Sword.  He would be killed or imprisoned if he was ever discovered.

My playtime was spent with Abby and the Marines doing short combat suit scenarios and playing very physical games. Abby had insisted I participate, so I did not retreat within my shell and just focus on my work. Some good news was the physical activity carried over to my new life as a husband. Danielle and I tried very enthusiastically to conceive naturally—and before the ship left subspace, we succeeded.

The first star system of the trip we were expecting to be empty, and when we exited subspace Elvis’ scans and didn’t find anything.  We checked the new location beacons on both the battleship and tanker ship.  They were both in their correct place in subspace.  These beacons were going to be a game changer.  Ships would no longer be lost in subspace.  Now we could track them if they failed to arrive at their destination.  We were even getting reports through a series of binary communications using the device.  It was still just one-directional as the alien scanners had not been replicated yet.

The problem would be I would have to give up the alien sensor technology to the greater galactic community.  It was the one massive advantage I had in all my interactions recently.  Knowing what your enemy was doing in real time was a tactical advantage I was reluctant to share.  Elias said he found two probes in the scanning data after he completed his filtering.  Both were inactive.  One was alien, and the other human. He dated the human device to around four hundred years old.  The human probe should have been programmed to burn itself up in a planet’s atmosphere, as was standard practice after it completed its mission.

I decided to retrieve both probes as we had four days before the battleship arrived and then six hours after that for the tanker.  The human probe was retrieved first by the Caladrius.  I just think Zoe wanted to take it out for a spin to get her speed fix.  She returned the probe to the ship before heading out for the second.

After confirming no danger, I examined the probe with Gabby in an empty lab.  We disassembled it, retrieved the core, and plugged it into Julie to download the data.  Julie’s hologram explained what she found.  It was a Hermes-series probe.  Sent to deep space in the thousands during the last wave of expansion by humanity.  It had not destroyed itself because the survey ship that was supposed to retrieve the data never arrived.  Survey ships were no longer used, to my knowledge.  In the past, humans sent probes many year’s in advance of survey ships.  The automated probes mapped and searched a system, and then the survey ship appeared at the system’s edge.  The probe transferred its data so the survey ship did not need to travel in system or wait. Then the probe destroyed itself.

It was a mystery why no one had retrieved this probes data.  Nations and corporations spent trillions of dollars on these exploratory missions.  This probe being overlooked for four hundred years seemed odd, even with how far it was from human space.  I returned to the bridge and learned we would have never found the probe without our sensors.   Elias had filtered the scans for any objects that did not appear natural in shape...something other scanners could not do at such extreme range.

Zoe was coming up on the other probe, but it tripped her sensors.  Elias was focused on it, and Elvis said the probe was powering up.  Zoe was already zipping away from it.  It could not match her speed but did try to catch her, burning itself out.  It appeared not to be a probe but a weapon.  Similar to smart mine.  Why would there be just one mine in this entire system?  We scanned the barren planets and gas giants again and found nothing.

Elvis changed his mind.  It was not a reactive space mine.  It was a biological delivery device.  The probe was designed to drill into a foreign ship and release its payload.  Of course, our Xeno-biologist was on the battleship.  I decided we needed to capture the probe.  We needed to know the technology and if there was a way for other ships to spot it, and what the payload actually was.  Zoe returned the Caladrius to the docking berth, and we drew up a mission plan with the Brotherhood shuttle to disable the probe.  We would build a containment box in space, and then pilot bots remotely to examine the alien device.

The battleship arrived as we were getting ready to retrieve the device.  Dr. Zaire was excited and came over to the Void Phoenix to puppet the bots for the mission.  The probe had depleted it’s energy trying to catch the Caladrius and had not recharged its batteries yet.

The probe didn’t detect the Brotherhood shuttle, and Zoe disabled the thrusters.  Bots assembled the containment box in space, and the probe was brought inside it.  Four bots were left to examine the probe.  Zaire did the work, and the results were fascinating.  The probe was partially organic in nature.  The organic shell was a photic array with a high-efficiency solar charging capability. The internals was an extremely durable non-organic crystalline web. The payload that it was supposed to deliver was tiny spores that were durable enough to survive in the vacuum of space.  The probe was over fifty thousand years old and did not get here with a subspace engine.  Although I wanted to examine the crystalline web computer, I decided it was too risky to bring on board any ship. We were going to accelerate the containment box into the sun and only use all the scanning data we obtained.

Zaire hypothesized the probe was looking for a planet with life to deliver its payload.  When it didn’t find one, it waited for a ship to infect.  Although the probe was 50,000 years old, there was no way to figure out how long it had been dominant in this system.  The spores under the microscope had barbs that meant they could anchor themselves in tissue and possibly propagate.  Their genetic sequencing showed four unfamiliar amino acids, but the overall structure looked similar to viruses.

We planned to send all our findings to every sapient race we encountered.  Both the battleship and Void Phoneix refueled and two weeks later we made for our next destination.  It was hopefully a friendly alien system where we could resupply.

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Dr. Zaire returned to his new botany lad on the battle cruiser.  He had spent two weeks going over the data, and he was sure the spores were not dangerous.  The genetic structure, the computer-modeled function of the genes, and the non-aggresive nature of the probe.  Everything pointed to them being some type of symbiote—well, he was not 100% certain of the unique amino acid sequences on the DNA. Humans have 20 different amino acids in their DNA. This spore had 24.  He desperately wondered what the compatibility was with various organic life forms he was familiar with.  Thankfully he had preserved the entire sequencing and now just needed access to a genome printer.

Those four unique amino acids were a hurdle.  He would need a specialist to program the printer for them, but it should be possible. Understanding and documenting new life was his passion. Being the first to discover something so different would earn him accolades among his peers long after he had left the universe behind.