Chapter 135 Managing a Fleet

Fourteen days in subspace would have the fleet emerge on the edge of an orange dwarf star.  The star system was supposed to be completely empty of planets and only have a handful of asteroids.   Once again, the Void Phoneix arrived first to scout the system for danger.  The Void Phoenix was only in subspace for four days, giving us ten days to scan and explore the system.  From the scans, Elvis and Elias found one interesting feature.  A derelict spaceship that had no power.  Without our sensors, we would never have found the ship.  It was half the size of the Void Phoenix and was clearly some type of explorer’s vessel from an alien race.

I put Abby in charge of boarding and searching the craft with her bots.  She spent three days going over procedures and protocols for the mission.  She tasked four old bots for the mission, refitting them. I planned to leave any bots we sent out behind.  I was probably being overly cautious about destroying the bots, but it was best to be safe after the alien spore probe scare.

The Void Phoenix was definitely the most versatile ship in our small fleet.  Our one remaining shuttle delivered the bots to the ship, and Abby controlled them as they entered the ship.  The ship had no atmosphere, and we found no crew bodies.  One of the bots finally found some sealed organic waste.  It was enough to run a carbon date on it.  The ship was 35,000 years old.  It also did not have subspace drives, so it got here through regular space.

The computers on board were binary matrix storage, according to Julie.  Abby had powered one terminal, and Julie was decoding the data.  There was not a lot of salvageable data on this bridge terminal. It was determined to be the captain’s log after Julie managed to translate the data.  The translation was somewhat broken as we lacked linguistic data points.  There were a series of nineteen captains in the log books.  They had been sent on a mission to the nearest star to their home system. Their home system was experiencing massive solar flares and would not last long.  They were the reconnaissance ship for a massive colony ship set to leave a decade after them.

Finding the star in the charts did not take much, and it was still actively flaring from our deep-space scans. The star was 7.2 light year’s away. Julie hypothesized either the colony ship never left the planet or they figured out this system could not support the rebirth of their civilization.  Elias suggested it might have been destroyed in transit since their technology was so poor.  It would only take a small failure of minor navigation error to have the colonization fail.  Julie ran the probability of the ship making it here at less than 5%.  This explorer ship had made it here, but from the captain’s logs, the ship was most likely automated as the crew died out partway through the trip.

It was an interesting archaeological find but not something we could spend time on.  We searched the ship for any valuable technology and found nothing.  The battleship and tanker arrived, and we refueled and serviced their systems.  Seven days later, we were entering subspace again.  This leg it the trip was the most dangerous.  We were exiting into deep space after an 18-day subspace trip.  This was because the following jump would get us to an Alliance system where we could purchase fuel.  The route, plotted by Elias, was saving us nearly thirty days of subspace travel, bypassing systems that had a high probability of being able to resupply us.

The Void Phoenix, once again, arrived early.  The only interesting thing in the range of scanners was a rouge comet.  It was 65% ice if we needed to process water.  The battleship and tanker appeared slightly off of their expected transition, and it took five days to bring the fleet together.  We had a large number of mechanical issues with the tanker as well.  The subspace emitters were failing faster than anticipated.  Damian transferred over to the ship to help work on the drives.  He had improved the battleship’s efficiency in every subspace jump. That was beyond impressive without access to a space dockyard for an overhaul. He really did know the engines of those old ships.

Now I needed him to work the same miracle on the tanker.  The wear and tear outpaced our replacements on the emitters and everything from life support to artificial gravity systems.  As the fleet was floating in deep space, I was trying to decide if we should abandon the tanker and purchase a new ship in the next system.  The Alliance should have something comparable in size, but learning how to man an alien ship would take too long.

I had been too optimistic about my crew’s ability to keep the tanker functional.  We just lacked the support ships and personnel.  It had taken me years and lots of funds to get the Void Phoenix automated and for it to require so little crew.  Suruchi also advised me to move my command to the battleship.  It may not be the best ship in the fleet, but it had the most people, and they were starving for leadership.  There had been five deaths on the last leg.  Three from an engineering accident where a team of three engineers got caught in a hull breach and suffocated.  They had their skin suits on, but the concussion from the explosion had knocked them out, so they were not able to get the hoods over their heads and sealed.  The other two deaths were from a murder-suicide.  It was a love affair gone wrong, according to Suruchi.

It was frustrating, and I felt responsible for the deaths as the pseudo-admiral.  The engineering mishap report was a water tank flash froze, cracking the unit.  Water leaked into an electrical conduit causing a spark that ignited a liquid oxygen tank leak.  The safety procedures were followed closely enough.  The main culprit was the sensors on the equipment had all failed.  The sensors said the water tank was empty, so they didn’t think the freeze could have expanded the water to rupture the tank.  The ozone detectors for that section of the ship were missing, so the sparking electrical wires were not detected.  The pressure sensors detected the oxygen tank leak, so the three engineers and bots were sent in for the repairs. As soon as they added atmosphere, a small explosion rocked the ship, bursting hull seals.

Over twenty-nine thousand sensors and gauges on the battleship were due to be changed out. Too many to complete without a long stay in drydock, so we were doing our best. The fabricators had higher-priority jobs. We switched over to SIC procedures.  This meant all repairs in the future would be done as if the ship was in combat.  This meant full suits for all repairs and SAR teams on constant standby.  Since we didn’t have the personnel, it meant many civilians would be forced into training as SAR teams.

When Damian got to the tanker, he didn’t give me good news either.  He said it was a lost cause.  The ship was too far gone from the last subspace trip, and the maintenance was going to get exponential over the next few jumps unless there was a complete overhaul.  That was a month or more in a human spaceport or longer in an alien spaceport as they worked to fabricate the replacement parts.  The lead engineer who had royally fucked up the drives was sent to the battleship to clean the waste recyclers.

Eventually, we transitioned into subspace, and I remained on the Void Phoenix.  It was selfish as I wanted my daughter on the safest ship in the fleet and have the ability to run if we encountered an overwhelming force.

We arrived in the Alliance system and quickly verified our friendly status with the locals.  The only ships they had for sale were small traders good for short subspace trips. The fuel purchase went smoothly, and I was in negotiations with pre-fabricating parts for the tanker when Elias informed me the tanker had dropped out of subspace four days early.  My blood went cold as Damian and nine other men and women from my Void Phoenix crew were on board with the tanker’s operations crew.  At least with the subspace transponders, we knew they had run into trouble.  We waited, and the transponder transmitted in binary pulses to communicate with us.

The news was not good. The FTL subspace drive was damaged beyond repair.  Damian was severely injured.  He had tried to play hero and prevent the cascade failure.

I ordered the Void Phoenix to prepare to rendezvous.  Elias ran the navigation while I rushed to finish all the maintenance on the FTL drives,  we had been in the system for days, but I had not finished the regular maintenance work since I had been spending a lot of time negotiating with locals.  I was trying to do too many things.  I took a lot of shortcuts to get us back into subspace as quickly as possible.  I did many things I never would have done before to get our medical suite out to a friend as quickly as possible.

We used the high band subspace for the 18-hour trip.  It was frustrating as communication was just one way.  The messages kept coming. They told us two crew had died and four others had been injured.  Damian was in semi-stasis and would live.  When we finally dropped out of subspace, I ordered a hard dock for the tanker ship, not bothering with the shuttle, which would take only slightly longer.

We would take their entire crew on board and abandon the ship.  It was tense as I waited for Doc to give me the verdict on the old engineer.  It was not good.  Burns to most of the right side of his body and probably brain damage.  He had been trying to manually shunt coolant fluid to save the components that were overheating in the failure when the accident happened.

I went to the medical bay as the crew handled transferring what fuel we could salvage and got everyone settled on board.  Damian looked terrible, and Doc put him on nerve-deadening agents to wake him. We had a short conversation where he admitted that he had been stupid.  I joked and told him now that I was investing SNAIL treatments in him, I expected to get another decade of work out of him. He tried to laugh and say I shouldn’t invest so much in an old engineer like him.

Doc said he would be under for at least a month while she rebuilt his nervous system and epidermal layers.  Since he was already back in a forced coma, she asked if she should do a skin rejuvenation to make him appear younger.  He had previously turned it down, saying a man should look his age.  I told her to make him look 60 instead of 160.  I was sure he would appreciate it when he woke up.  He always complained that he never had enough time to finish everything anyway.

The Void Phoneix was suddenly lively again with the addition of seventy-nine people.  Security was once again an issue.  It took us five days of focused maintenance to get back into subspace.  When we returned to the Alliance system, the battleship would have been there for three days on its own.  Hopefully, we would not get any more surprises.  We were getting so close to home—the Bradbury system.

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Rae’Ver’s fleet was starting to crack at the seams.  The humans had been cut off for too long from their support system.  Supplies were dwindling; he had lost the battle of attrition and still had not forced the Void Phoenix out of hiding.

He needed to resupply, but he couldn’t ask the Brotherhood.  Desdemona and Lazarus had escaped, and even though he had burned them with the organization, they had also burned him. Katsu Oshiro had been removed from power by the organization.  He strongly suspected they were also building a fleet to come after Katsu Oshiro.

They were making progress, but the losses continued to be high for their victories.  They had killed a number of Squirrel in the last months and mapped out the four hidden bases.  His scientists had even developed a device to see the asteroid cities in something they dubbed gravimetric shadows.  Even more concerning was the planet.  Dozens of population centers were also hidden in gravimetric shadows on the surface but did not seem connected to the Squirrel.

The smartest of his human scientists believed the system’s star was powering the obfuscation of the planet’s cities which appeared to many different races.  He was still refining the device’s resolution, but his guess was from the architecture of the structures varying from settlement to settlement.  He did not believe the sun was powering the Squirrel asteroids, though.

According to his scientists, the Squirrel were powering their devices with conventional fuel.  The fuel transport that managed to sneak past him had resupplied the asteroids.  From there, they had refueled the other bases by traveling in the gravimetric shadows.  Now he didn’t know how long the Squirrel could remain hidden.  All their attempts to create weapons to cross the bridge into the gravimetric shadows had failed.  At least they could track the shuttles moving between the asteroids.

Rae’Ver had to decide soon what to do. His hold over the human fleet was waning without supplies and a visible enemy to focus their frustrations on.