Chapter 104

Our time in Drusi space was coming to a close after three weeks. We had done everything we could here in terms of preparation for our deep space expedition. The fuel pellet conversation would be completed in 40 hours, and then the Brotherhood ship would be hauled away by the Drusi recyclers. I doubted it would go straight to the furnaces, though. We had stripped the ship of everything I thought valuable, but the Drusi would probably be able to learn a fair amount from what I was leaving behind.

The most unsettling thing from the last few days was Gabby working on the Tirani female steward bot. It was great practice for her, and she received medical files from the envoys to help her with the frame, synthesis muscles, and movements. She was so into the project that she even watched videos of Tirani’s copulating in the robotics lab, which made me cringe. They were quite forceful with their partners. She argued that this was the most important aspect of the project since Mozzie would be using it mostly for this activity.

I didn’t interfere with her research or her approach. I had met Mozzie and liked the big bear man. If Gabby could make his time serving on the ship more comfortable, then I was all for it.

The stealth mock-ups of the Void Phoenix were handed in. I had requested and obtained samples of the two spy ships the Drusi had destroyed. The project team found one minor sensor-dampening alloy to incorporate from the alien hull samples. It wouldn’t be a large improvement over the Brotherhood’s stealth hull but we added it anyway as we had not started fabrication or refitting. No action could be taken until we shed our disguise but the numbers looked good to me, and I green-lit conversion of the Brotherhood hull we had salvaged.

Cargo space inside the Void Pheonix was still at a premium. We still had plenty of space in the void spaces between out hull and the disguise. An issue arose when Suruchi had crates moved to the void to store her artwork purchases from the Drusi. It took four days of sitting down with Nero, Abby, Suruchi and Vicky to sort out where trade goods, spare parts, and military crates were stored on the ship. It had been so much easier when I was the only one making the decisions. I kept my secret alien stashes off limits to be moved in the discussion.

Abby had contracted Doc and Scrubs with muscle-enhancing supplements. The Drusi had all the components to manufacture the drugs. These large-calorie, hormone-driven injections quickly grew muscle mass safely. Maintaining flexibility and control was up to the marine. I had decided to partake as well. My training with the marines and the supplements I was being given by Doc were filling out my physique. Danielle enjoyed my new physique. The only drawback was I would have to build myself a new suit of the Badger combat stealth armor when I reached my optimal growth.

I admit I took the drugs so I wouldn’t slip in the combat training. I was actually finding it fun to document in my head each opponent’s moves and the likeliness they would use which move. Combat wasn’t as random or crazy as they portrayed. There were patterns and paths to victory…kind of like chess with your fists.

My first Gorilla battlesuit was being built just before departure. It was more complex than the Badger suits and was still being tested in VR by the marines and Julie. The Brotherhood power source looked promising. The issue was the fuel cells only lasted 48 hours when the suit was operating at full power. My choice to correct this was either to double the fuel housing, or build in a way to swap them easily in the field. Since we only planned to use the heavy suits in boarding actions, the latter option was the easiest. I didn’t want enemies to have easy access to the reactor feed so we spent a lot of time working on security and additional safety measures for the quick exchange of fuel pellets.

The suits operated well in VR, a squad of four in the suits could easily match twelve in the Badger suits…well, if they could catch the Badgers. The heavy forward shield on the battle suits that Hans devised could take serious punishment now that we had a high-yield power source. When Julie ran sims with one Gorilla against one Armageddon bot, the Gorilla won 6 out 7 times! This was going to be my answer to the Brotherhood, 24 marines in Gorilla suits and 12 marines in Badgersuits were a virtually unstoppable force. We were still tweaking opticals and HUD displays on the Gorilla suit but the first fabrication run was almost complete.

I had checked in with Edmund, and he was lost in his new power. He was uploading copies of documents to Julie as they were unlocked. It gave a fascinating look into this Diamond agents operations branch. The agents were tasked with collecting, research, technology and individuals in specific fields and sending it back to Earth and Sierra Nevada. Sierra Nevada was a red star in a dead system. Apparently, there was a secret Brotherhood base buried under the rocky surface of a dead useless planet.

Edmund guessed they were building a secret colony for humanity there in case Earth was overrun. He also guessed it was not the only one. The branch of the Brotherhood was charged with supplying it, though. Unfortunately, much of their stolen research and technology was scrubbed after it was turned over to the central facilities. I did find a reference to a race of small aliens that had made ‘substantial progress’ in subspace knowledge. They didn’t interact well with outsiders.

The race was called the Squirrel after a small rodent they resembled from Earth. They only controlled three-star systems, and it was just a few week side trip for us. I was considering maybe trying a technology exchange with them. The Brotherhood planned to eradicate the entire race in 20 years, according to Edmund and just sift the ruins for new tech. They were pressuring them currently in order to force technological growth. That was a common tactic. Find an alien species that had promise, attack them and force them to develop innovative technology, and then commit genocide on the race and take innovations.

The Venom Queen, or now newly named Black Widow, was finished by Gabby with all the upgrades. Since they were much lighter and had less function than the Gorilla suits, the Brotherhood power core could run them at max power for around 96 hours. When they were in standby mode, they drained about 10% of their power over a year. I wasn’t going to allocate any time on the fabricators until all 24 Gorilla suits were completed. So Gabby had her focus on the Tirani steward bot and the seven undercover upgraded steward bots for the luxury deck.

Zoe and Elias had come to me with plans to rebuild the *Caladrius* cradle. The two Sapphirean heavy fighters had been bolted into the space to make room for the Brotherhood shuttles. The only way to get them out was to launch the *Caladrius*. It meant they were not useful in combat.

Their solution was to add separate mini-cradles aft of the *Caladrius* cradle. They had rough markups of their ideas. There were too many problems. The fighters could not be serviced in their theoretical ‘launch tubes.’ A secure and quick access tube would need to be built for the pilots. The fighters could also not be secured back into the cradles during combat as the fit was tight, and they faced directly aft when stored. As I explained all the problems, their faces fell. Julie had listened to the conversation and came up with one option to address the refueling and access for the pilots. It would require creating a narrow shaft by moving two propellant lines used in fine ship maneuvers.

It wasn’t that simple as it was actually a chain of actions to move this, to move that, in order to move this. All to create a 2.6-meter wide shaft down to the space. Altering the cradle and making the tubes for the fighters was the easy part. Maybe two weeks of work just so Zoe and Elias could go joyriding in the space fighters. To service them, we could just cycle them into the shuttle bays.

I asked my two pilots if they were ok sacrificing two lives to save the ship because if they ever launched to defend the ship and the ship had to go to subspace, they were going to be left behind. They unhesitantly said yes. It had me pause as they looked serious. I had five marine pilots on board. Zoe, Elias, and Finn were also certified. I wasn’t planning to leave any of them behind due to poor planning.

I agreed to make all the changes while in transit. We would also build a pair of extendable clamps on the hull that could grab the fighters and hold them to the hull to join us in subspace.

The other problem I had was with the pair of APC hover tanks that were stored in the Brotherhood shuttles. I had wanted to sell them, but Abby begged me not to. I didn’t see any use for ground vehicles, especially once we equipped our marines with the Gorilla battle suits. Why would I ever need hover tanks in space? Since I was a proven hoarder, though, the tanks remained on the *Void Phoenix.*

The *Void Phoenix* finally broke from its docking ring and made its way out of Drusi space.

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*Katsu Oshiro reviewed the latest reports from the rim. He had invested a substantial amount of his resources out there. After losing contact with Lydia Romasko (Jane Doe), the entire sector seemed to be falling apart.*

*The damn Sylvan had violated the informal treaty and not only entered human-controlled space but also destroyed Anderson Station. He had managed to leverage the local star nations to send a sizable fleet to dislodge the elven city ship. That success had surprised him. His intent was to just keep them occupied till an actual fleet from Earth could be assembled. It had been nearly 70 years since humanity had tangled with the space elves. That had been a catastrophe; thirty modern battleships were lost, and numerous valuable officers and engineers. But humanity had advanced its technology a long way with the help of the Brotherhood. Most of those advances were held in the core worlds, but the human race was significantly stronger.*

*He had requested information on the fleet being sent. Six battleships, three carriers, and forty assault cruisers with supporting ships. The problem was that eighteen of the cruisers were not built yet and Earth Alliance only had the naval personnel for the fleet! The recent recession had squeezed resources for the Earth's defense force. The recession was actually caused by Juniper Cartalian.*

*Juniper had sent a subjugation fleet in his sector to eradicate the Polyformus race. The shapeshifters fought harder than expected, and rather than go quietly, they blew up their own moon, destroying the entire human fleet sent! Not only did the admiral lose his fleet, but the Polyforms had survived and were spreading in that region of space, infiltrating other species and human-controlled worlds. It was no surprise when Juniper Cartalian had been retired. Fuckups that big needed to be answered.*

*Katsu felt he was quickly heading down that road as well. He had lost 43 agents and insurgents in that Anderson Station disaster! Even his best agent, Desdemona, was having trouble tracking down leads for his missing Diamond Agent, Jane Doe, and the research she carried. He had even sent her two additional cruisers to help in her efforts. The subspace research was starting to become a secondary concern. Stabilizing the region for future human expansion was his new focus.*

*Katsu had seven different operations in progress for consolidating star nations in that area of the rim. He was going to have to accelerate his plans. The Slyvan presence had disrupted too much. He was about to turn humanity on itself, pitting great star nations against each other to create three powerful star kingdoms. It was irritating as his plan was supposed to have evolved over a century, and now his new timeline was just ten years. It was going to be a destructive and bloody period with man fighting man, but his instincts told him it had to be done.*

*Tomorrow the orders would reach his embedded agents and that region of space would start to burn.*