Chapter 84

I could see why the fleets were stationed here.  The two planets in the goldilocks zone had tens of millions of people.  With this being the second most populous star system in the entire Sapphire Empire it had a lot of political pull.  We were granted a course that would swing us by the outer system gas giant that had a habitable moon in order to dock with a station there.  This moon had all the prisoners scheduled for trial, execution, or strategic value.  Curiosity had me scanning the publicly viewable prisoner lists as we traveled.  Lots of famous politicians, admirals, and generals from the old Union and other conquered space nations.

The immense fleets in the system were a show of power.  Our plot showed dozens of wings of fighters crisscrossing the system between the fleets.  Elias said they were recon fighters, doing long-range scans throughout the system.  I remained on the bridge for most of the time we were transitioning into the system.  Elias and Haily were very busy monitoring communications and plots. It appeared each fleet operated independently…they each had their own admiral apparently and were each responsible for a zone in the system.

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The station where we were docked for two days was a simple refueling platform for civilian ships.  It orbited the gas giant far from the moon where General Stanton Diggs was detained.  The station processed hydrogen from the gas giant into basic fuel and imported the more complex fuels.  The cost balanced out with the cheap fuel and expensive fuel to something reasonable as a whole.

We were able to sell our cargo.  Even after taxes, the exotic ancient wood generated generous profits for us.  Suruchi said we had luckily hit the market at an optimum time.  Supply was short in the luxury goods segment for the wood in this system.  I talked with Suruchi about what we would haul to the Anderson Research Station for some more profit.  We decided on provisions, small luxury items, and simple bots for the top of the list.  The remaining free space would be filled with feeder stock for the hull fabricators. The entire return from the sale of the wood was to be reinvested in more trade goods and metal stock. Whatever items she picked would need to be delivered to our ship before the end of our 72-hour window.

If my crew had been around a dozen people then we could probably figure out trade routes to make sustainable profits. That was not the case. We were looking at about forty crew currently and planned to add another thirty-some-odd marines.  After we had spent two days docked it was time to talk with the General.  I was a little anxious about the news about my brother.

Francis handed me a data slate with his line of questioning for General Stanton Higgs.  We had paid for two hours of vid communication time with the general.  Francis would spend 20 minutes with niceties and answering any questions the general had.  Then he would ask after the assignments of 34 marines and their last known location.  My brother was 8th on the list.  A few were family members of the marines in my crew.  The remainder were marines that Abby, Buckie, and Francis had identified as possible additions to the crew.

Our bridge would be staged for the interview.  I would be in my captain's chair.  Francis wanted to be positioned behind me on my right.  Somehow Julie’s hologram was worked in to be standing behind me on my left.  All of us would be dressed in our ship uniforms. I just had to be patient in my chair while Francis talked and asked his questions.

The appointment came and we connected the vid.  The man who appeared was not larger than life.  He looked old and tired.  General Higgs’ power was gone from his eyes.  Francis had told me he was one of the more honorable men he had known in upper leadership in the Union’s military.

Higgs recognized Francis immediately and smiled, bringing life to his face.  Francis introduced me and then the two friends caught up.  Francis did have a timer in his peripheral and turned to his questions after twenty minutes.  Francis wove a story that we were being paid to track down a large number of MIA men and women for family members after the war.  It was the truth for me anyway.

General Higgs obviously trusted Francis and offered what he could from his cranial memory implant on the names we provided.  He had been captured 3 months before the war ended so his information wasn’t up to date on the very last Union deployments.  We spent about 3 minutes on each person, quickly getting our intel and moving on.  When we got to my brother I learned he was assigned to the screening frigate, *Fiery Lion,* for the battleship *Thor’s Hammer*.  My brother had been responsible for the deck 4 forward armory on the ship.  He also had a rotation to serve as one of the guard pairs for the captain’s cabin.  I held my position, not showing interest as we received what information we could.  When we got to the end of his list we still had 7 minutes.

Higgs asked Francis for a few favors in the remaining time.  Checking on loved ones and his prized horses.  I didn’t pay attention to this back and forth as it had been two hours and I wanted this to end.  Finally, it ended and I could stretch. The Sapphire Empire had probably recorded the entire conversation and was probably dissecting everything that had been said.  I stood and Francis turned to me and said the last little back and forth was actually code.

I was shocked when he said it was rough coordinates for something…probably a secret depot for marines.  I looked at Francis and asked him if this was why he wanted to talk with the general.  He firmly said no. He was surprised the general trusted him with something covert.  The site should have more up-to-date information and some supplies for us.  It was in deep space, a dark site near the old border.  Francis guessed it was a raiding resupply base for small ships.  The Union frequently raided shipping in Sapphire space.  Francis didn’t agree with this tactic prior to the war.

Francis convinced me we should check out the site.  Higgs wouldn’t have relayed the information for no reason.  After Anderson Research Station we would make for the black site.  I planned to take on passengers at Anderson Research Station so Francis would be responsible for keeping them unaware of our stopover.

Now that we had time I could look at my brother's information.  It didn’t take long to find out the battleship his vessel screened for was part of the fleet that bailed on the Union…Nila was on another ship in this fleet, the *Bastion’s Shield*.  So it was probable that my brother had been swept away into deep space with the remnants of the Union fleet. Admirals and generals planning on establishing their own minor kingdoms away from humanity most likely. At least I had some information to give my parents.

The ship unlocked from its docking clamp 70 hours after entering the system.  A 2-hour hard burn and we could transition in my 72-hour window deadline.  As we were burning for the outer system. All hell broke loose.  Dozens of Sylvan War Chariots emerged from subspace.  On the bridge, Elias and Haily relayed information as it became available. My fears were realized when the Sylvan broadcast that they were looking for the *Void Phoenix*.  The Sylvan City Ship came next…it was not the same one I nearly destroyed with the planetoid.  Zoe was asking what she should do and Elias was asking if we should keep the same navigation jump.

I quickly weighed my options. I had not logged our next destination with the Sapphirians. Francis’ covet message said the black site was half the distance between two particular stars.  That meant it might take time to find it…it might have already been emptied as well.  So should I risk that or continue with my plan to Anderson Research Station?  No one should be aware that Anderson Research Station was our next stop.

I brought up the numbers on my screen. We had enough provisions and fuel for about 6 weeks of deep space operation. It could be stretched to 18 weeks. I announced we would be heading to the Anderson Research Station as planned. It was a neutral site and we would offload our cargo and take on more long-term supplies. The biggest issue is the Anderson Station did have a deep space communications relay. So it could reveal our location to interested parties. That was a risk but it could be minimized if we just refueled and restocked. The engineering maintenance would fall behind and have to be done in deep space.

The space elves were too far to reach us and Elias obfuscated our vector into sub-space. This was tricky. When you entered subspace you generally traveled in a straight line. Elias had us traveling in a slight arc…the calculations were mind-numbingly difficult. It was likely we would need to do a course correction when we got closer.

The trip was going to be 12 days. A very long 12 days. After we entered subspace I had the entire crew assemble in the promenade viewing port. There were a few faces I didn’t recognize. My PerCom let me know one was Fiona Agave, our singer. She was young and charismatic. A second woman I had seen around with Suruchi, Kat Foxx, was her assistant that she paid for from her own funds. She wore a business suit and had glasses with her hair pulled into a tight ponytail. I guessed the glasses were some type of interactive computer. No one in my crew should need glasses with the ridiculous sums I paid to outfit our medical suite.

That was as far as I got as Abby said everyone was present. That is except for Zoe and Elias who were on the bridge. I told the crew about the Sylvan pursuit and that at our next destination, the Anderson Research Staton, anyone who wished to depart was welcome to do so with two months severance package. That would be enough funds to get them home.

I answered some questions. The hospitality staff wanted to know if we would be resuming taking on passengers. I truthfully couldn’t answer the question. I told them I planned to but didn’t know when we would resume the service. Inwardly I was hoping the dark site might have enough supplies that we could spend a few months altering the *Void Phoenix’s* appearance.

The entire engineering staff and marine complement said they were with me. ‘As long as they were paid!’ yelled Hanno who was elbowed by Abby. Hanno then added, ‘Even if they were not paid!’ Which got the required laughs. The hospitality crew looked mostly uncertain. But the singer, Fiona, asked if we didn’t take on passengers could she train to be a regular crew member? A few of the other hospitality crew also looked to be considering this.

When I thought about the accommodations of the *Void Phoenix* I could see why they would want to say. Edmund asked if they would get raises if they cross-trained. At first, I thought the Brotherhood spy was causing a problem but then I saw his question about what it was. It was a polite push for me to make the correct decision. Keep the hospitality staff happy while getting them trained. I said yes a small pay increase based on the certs they could pass.

Some people needed time to think and others were on board immediately. It was a long trip and the first few days were hectic. My two shuttle techs, Evira and Stavros Martis were strongly considering leaving the ship. Their young daughter Luna was the reason. I couldn’t make up their minds for them. Luna did come to me and pleaded to convince her parents to let her stay on board. I told her I would not intervene in their decision process.

Abby and Suruchi came to me on the second day in subspace as the craziness of my announcement had finished rippling through the crew. One crew member was definitely getting off on Anderson Research Staton. The comedian, Chip Indale. He had only been doing one show a night during trips and it hadn’t been all that well received as humor is not always universal. A number of people were still in the decision process.

The space elves hadn’t attacked the Sapphirians in the hour we were in racing out of the system. So the true threat level was still in question. I was pretty sure they were seeking the *Void Phoenix* for blowing up the planetoid into their city ship. They shouldn’t know that it was Eve who blew the asteroid but the *Void Pheonix* was the first ship to escape after the explosion. So it probably wasn’t hard to guess we played a role. My best course of action was going to be to hide and get as far away as possible.

Tonight I needed to blow off some steam. I passed on the Claire bot but got my adventuring party together, giving Julie a pass on her timeout for one night. It was time to go all murder hobo on the undead hordes.