Chapter 128

We were headed on a vector into deep space.  I had butterflies in my stomach after we stood down from stations. No problems had been detected, but taking this risk was outside my strict mindset of safety first.  Maybe my personality was changing, and that was what was causing my butterflies.  Most likely, I just wanted to end the pursuit of the Union fleet sooner, rather than later.

Damian had assured me repeatedly that he could keep the drives running for the seventeen-day trip.  Elias was also confident he had sorted out the variables of traveling in the higher bands of subspace.  With constant scans by Elvis, we should also be able to discover any discrepancies in our path while in subspace.

My focus turned to the solid-state holo emitters for the hull now that we had proof of concept. The completed miniaturized units were functioning on the heavy Gorilla battle suits.  Rather than run new power lines to the hull for my hologram emitters, I planned to mount them next to the subspace emitters. We could only power one set of emitters at a time, but I didn’t think we would need to disguise the *Void Phoenix* in subspace.

The Squirrel scientists that had been helping me with implementing the holographic technology were moved to other projects.  Namely working on getting the shuttles and battle suits ready.  Abby and the Marines were constantly drilling in both VR and on deck six.  They were focused on prepping out numerous possible scenarios and coming up with contingencies for when things went wrong. Eve and I even joined them on deck six to break in my new power armor a few times during the trip. My skill with the Badger suit was starting to lag behind the Marines, so I had Julie prep some VR programs for me to practice.

It was just me, Julie, and Eve working on the exterior hologram projectors.  I found the ideal size was about one cubic meter for each projector, and I would need 208 of them embedded in the hull.  The minimum was 97, but with the 208-unit configuration, each emitter overlapped with another.  This meant we could take one emitter offline to service it while still maintaining the illusion.  It also meant we could hold the illusion if with sustained minor combat damage.  Since the hologram emitters exceeded the subspace emitters, I would have to run new power cables anyway.  Well, Nero would be tasked with supervising the task. He still hated making large-scale changes to the *Void Phoenix*.

The emplacement locations were finalized just a few days into the trip, with Julie doing the optimization modeling in VR.  Somehow she had managed to keep the aesthetic look of the vessel.  I made it so the units could be easily removed and replaced. This meant they needed to be coated in the alien hull material and stealth coating, and the slot they inserted into also needed the alien plating. So far, we had not received much impact damage, but with how risky our operations seemed, I planned to do everything I could to maximize the ship’s defenses.

This got me thinking about my daughter and galivanting across the galaxy with her on board. I was keeping her safe, but maybe finding a planet or space station to raise her would be better. I briefly considered dropping Eve and the children off at a planet but decided I couldn’t do that to them. I was going to be present for Celeste’s growing up. She was extremely bright but, unfortunately, somewhat of a bully. Not in a bad way. When she played with Amos, the Wren twins, and the Squirrel children, they always had to do what she wanted. Whether this was a game, harassing the Tirani, or exploring parts of the ship, they shouldn’t.

I wished I could give them access to the VR equipment, but Doc prevented this. The generally accepted principle was age 12. Any earlier neurological development could be impacted. This let me build a special holographic room for the children with the new technology. This let Julie project some fantastical environments for the children to play in.

Halfway through our subspace voyage, I started the conversion of the hull, confident in the altered schematics. We were going to prepare the emplacements for the holo emitters. I still needed more time testing and building them, but I wanted the ship to take them as soon as possible. My largest hangup was the projection range. I wanted the range for these units to be 20 meters. I could not maintain cohesion past 15 meters.

I continued working on the emitters’ engineering and eventually gave up on increasing the range. I would have to increase the size of the holo projector emitter to increase the range due to the area I was projecting. Fifteen meters from the hull still gave the Void Phoenix a lot of available variances. In Julie’s database, we could disguise ourselves as a light cruiser, medium transport, a small station, an alien ship, an asteroid, or hundreds of other ships. Well, we still needed to manufacture and install the projector units.

I had enough material on the ship to manufacture fifty-five holo emitters with our fabricators. I took over all the fabricators to work on my project, to the dismay of the Squirrel and Nero. It was my ship, after all.

Fourteen days into the subspace trip, Elvis detected an anomaly.  The alien sensors detected what was described as a gravimetric river.  It was running along the edge of the spiral arm, and the Squirrel scientists wanted to veer off and investigate it.  It could exist in subspace and not real space, which made me decline.  We did map the entire river, and when the Squirrel zoomed out and put it in as a three-dimensional model, it looked more like a smear.  Or maybe a splatter across 150 lightyears.

The mystery pulled at the Squirrel to unravel, and they came up with numerous theories.  One Squirrel thought the smear might be a sun that was forced into subspace completely and then torn apart.  The mass projections from Elvis showed it did demonstrate the mass a sun spread over a massive distance.  Another Squirrel thought it was some natural barrier in subspace to prevent people from passing it.  That didn’t make sense, as the smear was highly localized.  Maybe there was something hidden inside the disturbance, though. A third guess was it was actually a sentient or sapient being traveling through subspace.  I thought that was ludicrous, as did his peers.  We recorded everything in detail and wouldn’t be surprised if we encountered something similar again.

The journey had been successful, and on the seventeenth day, we exited subspace in *The Sheep* outpost.  It was well off the standard space travel lanes but was a prized system for having a habitable planet with an oxygen atmosphere.  Two races from the Alliance colonized the planet and were trying to coexist with the local hostile wildlife.  I thought it was a novel approach instead of subjugating the planet.  The Alliance had only inhabited the planet for around forty years and was still quite wild.

The population was under five hundred thousand, and only three modest cities had been built.  Only one aged cruiser and two orbital space stations appeared on our sensors as we entered the system.  Our communications quickly sent out our Alliance-friendly SID, and they acknowledged it.  Finding a planet that a sapient race hadn’t colonized was unusual.  And this planet was no different.  According to the data archives, ruins of a past race that ruled the planet for over 500,000 years had been discovered.  Time had not been kind to the ancient cities, and most evidence had disappeared.  The extinction event was believed to be a planetary war.  The archeological finds indicated a line layer of radioactive waste in the sediment layers.

We were given a docking assignment, and the locals were excited to trade with us.  Our fuel costs were going to be steep, but we had accumulated a large amount of Alliance credits, so the cost was not the issue.  Suruchi was already on comms with the merchant’s guild trying to sell out surplus goods and buy something she could make a profit on.

The planet didn’t have much uniqueness besides the local wildlife.  Monsterous beasts wandered the swamps, and deadly predators prayed on the weak. Thousands of various unique bird species flew in the skies.  Dr. Zaire was itching to get down to the planet and explore.  I gave him my blessing but made sure he observed quarantine protocols with Doc.

When we docked at the station, I talked briefly with Suruchi.  The only export was exotic meats.  They may be trying to acclimatize to the planet’s ecosystem, but that doesn’t mean they wouldn’t profit from it.  Once again, Doc was called to handle screening the food for our varied crew.  There were actually a few flora and fauna species on the planet that the Squirrel could not consume.  I had to limit Cori, the chef, to just ingredients that the entire crew could consume safely.  I didn’t want anyone accidentally poisoning themselves.

The station was extremely spartan, and I made the mistake of volunteering to take all the children to the zoological study on it.  What could go wrong with Celeste, Amos, the Wren twins, and seven young Squirrel children?  Two of the Squirrel went into an exhibit at a dare from Celeste.  Tora’s twin pantherkin agitated a large indigenous feline to attack the glass enclosure and injure itself.  A Squirrel child ate a nut off one of the trees and got violently ill.  And all of this happened in the first ten minutes of our visit.  We were asked to leave, and when I asked Eve why she didn’t help me, she did her job and kept Celeste and Amos safe.

Suruchi did find a viable trade product, the local flora and fauna.  It was mostly Cori filtering out what she found had value based on the human pallet.  We installed a lot of temporary freezers and specialized food storage.  I decided we could max out our cargo with consumables cargo.

I had a request from some of my crew to take the three hoverbikes down to the planet for some fun.  I signed off on it, but Zoe, Elias, and Saabir would have to take four marines for protection while they raced the bikes.  It didn’t take much to get permission from the locals as much of the planet was still wild.  I decided to go with them.  I hadn’t had an opportunity to try the new bikes yet.  I raced Zoe and Elias first and lost by a fair margin.  Saabir took my place, and he was a reckless pilot but managed to come in second behind Zoe.  I let them play and I wandered into the dense jungle in my Gecko armor with two of the Marines following.

The environment was so foreign and exotic.  Yellow and purple leaves dominated the canopy, and the trees were covered in prickly wood. The ground was a rich black soil that teemed with unusual insects and fungi.  One of the Marines told me to switch to thermals.  A camouflaged predator was approaching.  It was a large cat, similar to the one I saw in the zoo.  It stalked us as we left the jungle, back to the clearing.  Unfortunately, the cat decided to see how we tasted and kept coming at us.  One of the Marines used a micro explosive round, and its head exploded.

I was upset with having to kill it, but even more so when we found the beast was pregnant.  We cut the young cat out of it, and I had us return to the station.  I gave the cat to Doc to care for.  She wasn’t too happy but determined it was maybe two months premature and was certain she could save it.  When Celeste found out, she wanted to keep it as a pet.  I had planned to hand it over to the zoo.

Dr. Zaire, of course, thought the cub could be domesticated.  The adult cat that had attacked us was four hundred pounds.  I didn’t want that type of predator around Celeste.  Somehow Celeste found out the locals had already taken to taming the cars and called them Bestets.  Celeste had also named ‘her cat’ Bella already. I guess Doc didn’t tell her it was a male.  It was Eve who said she researched the species on the local database and thought it was possible to raise the large cat safely.  After some back and forth, I caved to Celeste, but it would be spaced if the cat became a threat.

The good news was that Damian had the ship ready to depart in ten days.  We extended the time in port by three more days since the shuttles were almost finished.  We also had our next destination as Poseidon’s Star.  It was a 13-day trip in subspace, but if our calculations were correct, the Union fleet would be parked while they spent 45 days refueling from the local gas giants.  We should catch them about halfway through their refueling process.

Before we left the station, I managed to install the first twenty holo emitters on the hull. All the emplacements were completed to receive the emitters as they were completed.  It helped to have an army of engineering bots at my command. I had been able to procure, at great cost, all the materials I would need to finish the project.  We were playing with the control station on the bridge, projection flash images even with just the twenty emitters.  We were well clear of the station and lone cruiser, so they couldn’t see us as we played at projecting translucent images around the *Void Phoneix*.

The best covering was Gwen, who made the *Void Phoenix* into a guppy, a small fish.  It got a lot of laughs from the crew as we entered into subspace, chasing a memory of the Union.