Chapter 107

We locked onto the station, and the bridge was going to have two people keeping track of our friendly neighborhood space elves. Our advanced scanners gave us a complete three-dimensional layout of the ship. They had twenty-nine elves on board and minimal weapons from what we puzzled out. It was a pure spy ship.

I requested to rent one of the four internal bays at the station. They were all currently occupied. I didn’t want to be moving our fighters to their new launch tubes. The launch tubes had been built deep enough to hold two fighters each. One was port side, and the other was starboard. The reasoning was not to add two more fighters to our complement but to have a backup location in case of battle damage to one of the launch tubes. Each tube had it’s own magnetic and physical clamp for its fighters. Since the fighters had no reverse flight mode, they had to be loaded by my exterior maintenance bots into their tubes.

Although Zoe said she could fly the fighters in by approaching head-on, doing a 180 flip, and gently decelerating into the clamps. If I told her no, then she would want to prove that it could be done. I told her that it was a fantastic idea and I would work her method into the flight simulator for pilots to practice.

While in my captain’s chair noticed Zoe doing overlays of various other heavy fighters to see if they would fit in our new launch tubes. She wasn’t being stealthy about it all as my chair looked directly down on her station. She was working hard to sell me on *Warpath Interceptor*. These were heavy fighters built for speed to intercept other fighters in deep-space combat. She was playing the footage of them in action on one screen while she worked to get the fighter into the tubes on the other. The specs on the fighter showed they could operate in deep space and in the atmosphere as well. They had a relatively low operational time, though. Used for strike and retreat missions. Loadouts were a single heavy forward laser and eight heavy missiles.

It was a combat fighter for engaging other fighters, corvettes, and even frigates. I started to come up with possible upgrades… Nice try, Zoe! I did my best to ignore her terminals and focus on my own tasks. I was getting closer to building my first test iteration of Celeste’s playmate bot. I was going to fabricate the frame while we were in port and see if my miniaturizations would work.

I mean, where would I even be able to buy a *Warpath Interceptor*? They were built exclusively on the shipyards orbiting Saturn in Sol.

Edmund and a handful of marines departed the ship to explore the station. Edmund was in search of any Brotherhood presence, and the marines were doing recon. Suruchi sent her own agent, Vickey Charity, our ship’s logistics officer. Vickey was going to see the market for the Suruchi’s art work. Since this was not a populous system, I doubted selling sculptures was going to be profitable. On the other side, Vickey was looking for investment opportunities in the form of cargo.

Our next port was eleven days away in the Makabre system. It had a large ocean planet and forest moon orbiting it. The Tuleth was the local race of amphibious humanoids on the ocean planet. And the forest moon had another sapient race called the Redlouts, but they did not have spaceships. The Tuleth hadn’t colonized the moon due to the lack of water. The Tuleth did have spaceships and space stations. The Brotherhood data did not have any other systems noted as being populated by the Tuleth but theorized they had multiple systems since their fleet orbiting the planet was likely not built locally.

The Tirani had listed the Tuleth as being open to selling fuel and supplies at a distant station. You were not allowed to approach the ocean planet. My issue would be if they were hostile to humans. The Brotherhood and humanity as a whole had not done any favors for human reputation.

Of course, our next destination was all dependent on whether or not the Squirrel would conduct a trade with me. Right now, Suruchi was working with Mozzie to establish an open channel of communication. Mozzie had all the specs for the hull plating, and we would give samples and all the analysis we had to date. They would have to figure out the manufacturing on their own.

I cracked a smile on my next shift on the bridge. I was only doing 4-hour shifts while we were in port just to go through my documents and approve things. Zoe had left her screens running of a vid from Earth that appeared to be about fighter pilots. The fighter the squadron was flying was of course, the *Warpath Interceptor*. The series was called *Hazard Squadron* and followed them as they navigated a war. I had lost my faith in vid series after the terrible ending to the pirate vid, so I was not going to get snared. The interceptor was an impressive craft, though.

Edmund kept sending me updates to my PerCom while I worked. There was no Brotherhood presence on the station, but there was an info drop. The Mourau were managing the drop, and the last pickup was thirty-nine days ago. There was no intel packets in the drop currently. He said this was good news. Even better, none of the ships the Mourau were on the lookout for were the Void Phoenix. So we were currently outside of their search envelope. This was great news, and maybe we would be lucky, and the cloaked Sylvan ship was not looking for us either.

Damian, my FTL engineer, was having issues with the quality of fuel we were loading into our tanks from the station. It was at 92% purity, and we had paid for 97% purity. It was for our lesser reactors but I didn’t want to ignore it, especially at the price I was paying. I called the vendor, and after a lengthy conversation and some veiled threats from me, I purged my tank, and they refilled it. A very happy Damian kept taking samples during the fill and the purity never fell before 97.2%.

When my crew returned, I waited for the compiled debrief from Suruchi and Abby. I was down in robotics, assembling my first attempt at a fully functional child bot playmate. I was called to the meeting and found Suruchi, Abby, and Kara present. Suruchi went first. The best trade goods for the Makabre system was going to be carved shell sculptures. Suruchi was figuring a 120-150% increase in price. The next product would be data slates loaded with vid programs from other races. The Tuleth were fascinated by how other races lived.

Suruchi planned to purchase ten thousand data slates from this station and have Julie upload 24,000 hours of programs. Julie’s hologram popped into the room and said that would be a violation of copyright patents. I just looked at Julie, and she then stated as long as we were just selling the data slates and not the vid programs, it would be ok. If we forgot to format the data slates before handing them over…

Abby said the marines on the station didn’t find anything alarming. No one out here was searching for the *Void Phoenix*. She wanted to make sure and have Mozzie mingle with the Tirani on the station. If we had a bounty, then the mercenary-minded Tirani would know.

Suruchi said she was still prepping Mozzie to contact the Squirrel. Abby added there were only about fifty Squirrel on the station. This was just a port of call for their larger long distant traders. They didn’t sell or buy very much here. The good news is it would be easy to contact them as they had a trading office here.

The next day Mozzie went to the station, head filled by Suruchi, to mediate a trade with the Squirrel. Afterwards he planned to visit the wing of the station where the Tirani operated. Abby had five marines on station and six more marines in Badger armor on standby. This was in case the Tirani did have any type of contract on the *Void Phoenix*.

We received updates from the marines watching Mozzie and he was inside for two hours at the trading post for the Squirrel. He then walked the length of the station and spent three hours with the Tirani before returning to the ship.

Mozzie had his bear grin on as he debriefed us on his encounters. The Squirrel were not able to formalize anything, but he did receive an encrypted code that would allow us to travel to Squirrel space and not be attacked. From there, we could negotiate. He also let slip that the captain was human, and it didn’t seem to faze them. I wasn’t so sure in Mozzie’s ability to read other races, so I was skeptical about the last bit.

Then he got to his three hours with the Tirani. He was happy to report he got some feminine companionship, and he could now give better feedback to Gabby on how to improve his personal bot. Talking about sex was not taboo in his culture. We spent a few minutes telling him that this venue was not the proper place. He had just spent too much time with the marines.

Mozzie checked the database and talked to a few mercenary captains, and there was nothing about the Void Phoenix circulating. He was even more excited to offer us the next tidbit. There were a handful of freelancers on the station. These were Tirani mercenaries that took solo jobs, usually as bodyguards. Mozzie thought maybe a few would want to join our crew. Mozzie was certain all had to do was show them the Badger combat suits, and they would sign a contract. Abby liked the idea of adding more of the bear men to ship. Kara also put in her vote in favor of the addition.

I voiced my objection. I didn’t want to build some very expensive personal bots and suits for rental marines. Unless they all wanted to share Mozzie’s personal bot…. Mozzie laughed. Most freelancers were female, they had that motherly protective instinct that made them great bodyguards.

I waived the problem over to Abby. She could do the interviews on the ship and have Doc do medical workups on the applicants. If any were actually interested, I would want long-term contracts. Mozzie offered that five years was usually the longest a Tirani would sign on for. Abby noted that and had a huge grin. She is probably already figuring out how use the Tirani to whip her human marines into shape.

I went to the bridge and called Elias there. I had the data disc from the Squirrel, and we needed to figure out where our next stop would be. We activated the holotank and brought up the star charts. The Squirrel’s trio of systems was a 15-day subspace trip. It was roughly in the direction we were already headed, but I would have to backtrack to four days to resupply in the Makabre system. I would bypass the system, but I wanted to offload all of the shell sculptures. The Makabre system should have also been in the path of the fleeing Union fleets, so it might actually give us intel on how far behind we were.

Well, there was no timetable for meeting the Squirrel, so I planned to stop in the Makabre system first. We were not hard-pressed for time. Elias sat at his station and began to run the numbers for jumping from the Makabre system to Squirrel space. I went to my cabin to play with Celeste and Amos.

On the third and fourth days on the station, we had a number of Tirani come on board for interviews. I didn’t take part in the interviews and just waited to hear the results. There was a practical portion because when I went to the gym for a circuit and a run, I found seven Tirani were with Abby, Buckie, and Mozzie in the combat ring. Buckie came over and said after this, they would be doing some sims in VR, but he was way too excited and left before I could talk with him. Five of the seven trying out were females. Maybe Gabby wouldn’t have to make any modifications to the Tirani bot.

I was in the robotics lab later in the day assembling the playmate bot when my PerCom beeped. I went to a vid screen, and Abby introduced the five newest members of the crew. One male Tirani introduced as Zarko. The other four were female and were introduced as Aerna, Nosawa, Aribara, and Konia. I asked Abby about the two that failed to make the cut. The male had a temper problem and Konia had issues with him in the past. The female wouldn’t sign on unless we could guarantee we would drop her off in Tirani space after the five-year contract.

Well, all this meant was I had to build five more specialized Badger suits and five more specialized Gorilla suits. But I guess having a squad of Tirani mercs in your employ is like saying, ‘Hope you never need them, but if you did need them, you are glad you have them.’ It was not like I was hurting at all for credits.

On the fifth day, we detached from the station having never gotten an interior birth to complete the launch tubes for our fighters. Maybe at our next stop, we would have better luck.