Chapter 127

*One-Nine-Seven-Six looked at his screen again.  It was another blip in the adjacent galaxy.  The being, a humanoid male by choice, moved to other screens.  Seven-Nine-One-Seven had his vessel in that universe.  Why had it not responded to the blip?  The ripple in subspace must have reached its vessel.  He moved to another screen and found Seven-Nine-One-Seven had not reported in a very long time.*

*One-Nine-Secen-Six reported the lack of response by Seven-Nine-One-Seven to the Central Control over seventy galaxies away.  The Central Control immediately responded.  He was to go and investigate the adjacent galaxy and report back on the fate of Seven-Nine-One-Seven.  After that, he was directed to investigate the subspace disturbance.  Nine-Nine-One-Secen was being directed to take over his duty in this galaxy.*

*He started to run the calculations and pull his purge ships from the planet below.   The race that once occupied the planet had discovered secrets that could not be learned.  He was created to deal with this.  His massive planet-sized vessel started to rumble as it powered up.  Some of his fellows liked to take species into their vessel as curiosities.  He did not see the purpose.  He preferred completely purging a species, that way, they couldn’t rise again and threaten the order of the universe.  That is why they were created, to protect the universe from upstart races delving into technology that they could not safely handle.*

*He looked at his timer; traveling between galaxies took time.  The emptiness was not always empty either.  He would go into hibernation for this voyage, though.  When he emerged in the new galaxy, he would find his missing companion and then deal with the race that was causing the disturbance.  His tendril ships had all been retrieved.  He slipped his vessel into the highest band of subspace, and the planet below was shattered into a multitude of pieces.  The star at the center of the system was spun and disrupted, instantly becoming a pulsar.*

*The Malevolents, the beings the Sylvan feared, were returning to the galaxy.*

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We were ordered to orbit a moon around a rocky planet for three days while they decided if they would allow us to approach the Gylth homeworld. It was understandable, as we had essentially bypassed their sensor net completely. Even if they let us trade, they were probably going to press us for the technology. From our interactions with the Alliance members to date, the Glyth were definitely the most interested in assimilating new technology. I wouldn’t be surprised if they were secretly experimenting with AI behind the other race’s backs.

Unfortunately, Julie had nothing to hack into to help us find out our fate. Our scanners showed us the Alliance maintained an integrated fleet, and the Glyth maintained a private one. They worked together in defense of the system, but the Gylth ships remained closer to the inhabited planet. The planet that was the Glyth homeworld was a beautiful piece of engineering. Needle-like buildings created interesting cities that were surrounded by lush green forests.

They did allow us to refuel and resupply while they determined if they would allow us to trade. The Gaians not remaining on board left to seek employment in one of the Glyth cities. Apparently, the Alliance had laws that required races within the Alliance to provide employment to other races. From my understanding, I was surprised since the human colony was not part of the Alliance. They were just permitted to establish a colony. There was something more going on than Senator Alfonzo had revealed to me.

We were finally allowed to dock at a station orbiting the planet on the third day. It was their opportunity to scan our ship thoroughly. They were going to be disappointed as we were certain their scans were not going to be able to penetrate our hull, no matter how powerful they were. I ended up giving them samples of the hull to show them their futility. I had already given up samples of the layered hull back at the Ringworld system. Without a molecular printer, that required an AI to function, I had doubts they would be able to produce the layered material.

Damian still wanted about a week for maintenance. He was in new territory with maintaining the subspace drive with phased fuel. The Squirrel physicists were trying to help but just causing Damian more headaches as they wanted to run scans more than help with the maintenance.

I limited the crew’s shore leave on the station and had Abby keep a dozen Marines in suits the entire time we were docked.  The Glyth were constantly contacting the ship requesting a technology exchange.  They were unwilling to give up anything I valued, but we did have minor transactions.  The biggest exchange was the meal bar fabricator that Gabby had repaired, and then we converted it to make a slightly better-tasting algae meal bar.  In return, we were given a wide array of the Alliance’s digital library.  It contained the history, philosophy, stories, and vid shows of multiple Alliance races.

It had been a win-win for me.  I removed the massive useless device, making space for another small lab.  I also got a lot of data for Julie to analyze to figure out the mindset of all the races in the Alliance-their motivations, political leanings, and societal norms.  I tasked two steward bots with converting the data to Julie’s core storage.

As the days ticked forward, Damian kept finding more and more issues.  The maintenance kept drawing out. He was essentially writing the book for phased fuel and the new emitters for traveling in the higher bands—and through all his complaints, he loved it.  I assisted him, and I kept putting off the requests by the scientists to move the experiments further forward. They wanted to explore the feasibility of traveling the higher bands.

I refused, as we were already transitioning the Union shuttle to prepare for the extraction. The increased maintenance and unknowns of this first stage of phased fuel and higher band emitters were enough for them to study.

It took two weeks in port for Damian to feel comfortable to try the engines again. Our long stay and maintenance were believable as we had transitioned so far inside the system. Julie also was able to delve into the laws of the Alliance and find why they didn’t seem to have much in the way of espionage. The criminal act of espionage on another Alliance member or free trader resulted in the forfeiture of significant assets and rippled politicly with sanctions.

I think we were fortunate that they didn’t have more modern computer systems that Julie could have hacked. They would have seized the *Void Phoneix* if she had been discovered, and my command staff would have been doing manual labor for a decade. The strict inter-Alliance laws were what held the union together.

Julie had also warned us about going to the planet’s surface even if we wanted to see the marvels of the needle-like superstructures. Local law superseded Alliance law on planets whose population consummated more than 87.5% of the total. And for an origin homeworld like this planet that just needed to be 50.1% of the total population. The Glyth laws were obscure and easily manipulated, so I ruled no one could travel to the planet. Using our sensors to render the planet’s surface and create a VR environment would have to do.

The time in port was well spent by the crew. They rotated to the station for R&R and to experience other cultures. A lot of our manufacturing proceeded, and we completed 24 Black Widow Spider bots. Gabby even had her first model bot for the Pyruk. She was having trouble getting the spindle-like legs strong enough to be used effectively in combat. Because that was how Gabby thought. If she was recreating the Pyvuk, then the bot had to be useful.

Her design was to deliver the bots in space to an enemy hull and then have the bots swarm to weapon emplacements and destroy them with a self-destruct. Since they were over four meters in height, they couldn’t be used inside a ship. Her problems stemmed from the weakness of the limbs, and she didn’t want to change the cosmetic nature of the bot at all.

I spent half a day giving her suggestions which she irritably shot down one at a time. Finally, she liked my segmented idea. The legs could be made out of small segments of the alien hull material. Being in segments would allow the bots to cushion their own impact on a hull, making delivery easier. The legs could curl up on themselves for storage as well. These bots would be one-use bots, so they just needed to survive long enough to land, get to their target, and detonate their payload. The Squirrel were working on designing a stealth torpedo for Gabby to deliver eight of these creations to a target. Gabby had also come up with a name for the bot, *Kamikaze Tick*.

Elias had worked endlessly to figure out the new physics of the subspace drive into his navigation calculations. He was still upset that his calculations had been so far off. Elvis, the AI responsible for interpreting the alien sensor data, volunteered that it was his fault for providing faulty data. Elias still blamed himself. The problem was there was too much fluctuation in the new subspace field the new emitters created. The solution they came up with was using the alien sensors in subspace to continuously reorient the navigation data.

Elias wanted to make a 17-day subspace trip with the new drive to reach a tiny outpost manned by the Alliance. His philosophy was to go big or go home. The route would be a direct route instead of following the curvature of the galaxy’s spiral arm. So not only were we making a massive jump, but we were saving time by cutting the corner.

It took Elias the entire two weeks in port and getting Damian on his side to make the jump. The issue I had was we would be in an area of deadspace. If the drives failed and we were forced out of subspace, there would be no nearby star systems. Nero came into the conversation and we were going to stockpile spare emitters and parts for the subspace drive. This jump, if successful, would mean we would be one jump away from catching up to the Union exodus fleet. I think that is what overrode my normal safety first judgment. Getting this pursuit over sooner rather than later.

I had the crew prepare for the journey as if we were going for a 180 journey. I viewed it as some healthy paranoia for provisions, life support, and fuel. I even approached the passengers and gave them the option to get off there. After I explained the danger, they eagerly joined the Gaians. Well, maybe I over-explained the dangers, as having fewer people meant fewer resources. The Tirani Marines, who got sick during long durations in subspace, almost decided to join them, but Mozzie had overheard me talking to one of the inconvenient passengers. It took me two hours to explain to Mozzie in private that I was trying to scare the passengers off the ship.

Elias was the most excited person on the bridge when we left the station. I had put the safety of the crew in his hands. He was extremely confident. As we made our way out to the outer system, I had Celeste in my lap on the bridge. Amos was milling around Zoe’s pilot seat. The Glyth were shadowing us as we approached their sensor net. They were beyond curious as we constantly picked up sensors rolling off the *Void Phoenix*. I smiled to myself as the vector we were on was taking us into deep space. When we entered subspace on this vector, it would look like we planned to make a dozen hops in subspace. We had probably taken on enough supplies to do just that.

We transitioned while watching live video of the bridge of one of the Glyth cruisers shadowing us. Although we did not have audio, the body language of the feathered aliens made it clear they were in disbelief.

It took two hours before all stations went to standby mode. So far, we had detected no problems.