The jewel of the system we were in was the massive blue and green planet.  I remember doing some brief research on the world called Magnus Gaia.  The possibility of a world this size evolving such a vast and varied amount of life was essentially zero according to human scientists.  Normal cells would be crushed under intense gravity.  Other planets this size that had been found with life only had microscopic organisms.  On Magnus Gaia, there was a complete biosphere. The fact that life had existed here for millions of years and continued to evolve was beyond miraculous.  The prevalent theory was that life on the planet had been engineered by an advanced civilization.  The only evidence of this so far was large, perfectly square stone slabs scattered around the planet.  The counterargument was these slabs were placed by another race who also came to study life on Magnus Gaia in the distant past.

Harvesting sample vegetation and life was a very profitable venture.  The station exported these curiosities at a substantial profit by taxing them.  I actually planned to purchase some furniture on the station made from a tree nicknamed the steel wood tree.  The steel wood tree grew to over 300 meters in height and the wood was so dense it was just as heavy as steel and just as strong.  It had a blue-silver coloring.  I had become interested in various kinds of wood after we hauled our load for a substantial profit.

I had planned to use some of that lumber for outfitting my cabin but the turnaround time to have furniture created was too great.  It was going to be a small reminder for me that humanity was ruthless in its expansion.  Now, the message would be slightly different with the addition of the steel wood tree furniture.  This would remind me that humans were not the most impressive things in the universe.

On researching, the station had three vendors for finished wood products made from trees on the planet, and the prices were outrageous as expected but I was committed to the luxury investment.  I had a double-sized cabin so I had lots of space.  With Julie’s help, I searched their catalog and selected enough floor panels to cover my oversized cabin, three large bed frames, three executive desks, three executive chairs, three massive armoires, six end tables, three couches, six reclining rockers, and one complete dining room set.  Their station warehouse had everything in stock in a plain style and the hidden hardware to mount the furniture securely on the ships was free.

The furniture would outfit my cabin, Celeste’s future cabin, and Amos’ future cabin. Julie was even to find some discounts and a tax loophole.  The loophole gave me a tax-free amount of 10% of the volume of goods I imported to Anderson Research Station.  The loophole had been buried deep in the tax law and Julie indicated the administrators only utilized it for specific clients and traders.  Julie only stumbled on it by chance from a video…yes the tax was not in the data archives, just hard-printed!  Very devious.

With my personal shopping done in less than an hour, I turned to ship purchases.  I hoped to have all the purchasing done before we made dock.  Then I would focus on trying to hire a few new crew members.  Everything was listed and my gut hurt at the prices.  I started to eliminate things from the list that we could do without until we reached another system.   The hardest thing I dropped was the three power cores for the hoverbikes.  I had promised the crew but paying four times a reasonable price wasn’t in the cards.  I finished with the edits and confirmed the funds to be released.  I reclined in my captain's chair.  We still had 30 minutes till we docked.

At Suruchi’s suggestion, we were going to advertise passengers to the Hercule system.  It was a small industrial system in the Union. I suppose I needed to stop thinking of it as Union space.  It was now a providence of the Sapphirean expansionist empire.  Well, the plan was to only take a few passengers and then refund their tickets at a different system.  That way anyone following us would be thrown off our trail.  Suruchi and Dora were working on this with Francis and Edmund doing the background checks.

The approach to the station was put on the holo tank and forward screens.  The massive ring had been added to over and over again.  The outer diameter was just over 11 kilometers, making it extremely impressive in its size.  This gave it a circumference of 66 km.  The station height was 7 kilometers. It reminded me of the Sylvan city ships.  When it was first constructed it was a much smaller ring and spun to create gravity.  Now it was stationary in its axial spin.  As we docked I was actually excited to explore the station a bit but received an urgent communication from Edmund.

His news was not good.  There was substantial Brotherhood comm traffic.  He hadn’t been aware that there was such a large Brotherhood presence here but it made sense.  The Brotherhood’s first goal was the advancement of humanity.  Of course, they wanted to be the ones reaping profit and controlling the puppet strings.  So they apparently had agents in multiple teams of scientists studying the planet.  The most concerning thing for Edmund was he was only able to access about half of the messages.  These were messages at the lowest operative level, the Obsidian level. So there were higher-class agents on the station.

Of course, my chosen destination would harbor a collection of power-mad humans that would at some point in the future become aware that I had killed one of their agents and start hunting me.  It was now even more imperative that our stay here be as short as possible.  I made the choice to release some of my precious metal stock.  The station was starved for such raw material stock so I was going to get a good price.  The additional funds would go into the ship’s account for future purchases.  My thought was once we altered the Void Phoenix in the future it would make it easy for our pursuers to locate us when we sold precious metals in the future.  I believed this was becoming a calling card…dock, sell rare exotic metal, buy stuff and leave.  So this was going to be my last such transaction so I was going all in.

Since Suruchi had already erred in selling our trade goods I figured she wouldn’t make the same mistake twice.  I spent a few minutes identifying everything I was going to sell…it was substantial and would create a fair amount of space on the ship.  After I sent the info to Suruchi she commed me a minute later and jokingly said she needed a raise.  I of course said no.  She was already making a ridiculous amount. She planned to release the metals in small blocks on the station auction.  This should yield the largest return.  I told her she needed to sell everything in 36 hours. She put on a sour face but nodded.  Julie sent me projections and the numbers were large.  I just hoped we could get the ship out of here before anyone found us.

I went and trained with the marines.  I needed to blow off some steam and I was actually getting pretty good at hand-to-hand.  I was ranked 3rd among our marines.  Abby and Bucky were first and second of course.  Even when the marines said they were just letting me win because I paid their salaries I knew they were giving me maximum effort.  We even sometimes bet on sparing and I won 90% of the time against them.  I even tricked Abby once with a ridiculous move and beat her…of course, she kicked my ass in the four ‘required’ immediate rematches.

After my time training, I retreated to clean up in my cabin and spend time with Celeste and Amos.  While I was playing I was communicating with Julie’s hologram.  For finding the loophole in the tax law I reduced her ‘time out’ from VR by 6 months.  A very excited Julie started helping me try and locate a few specialists in the station.  I had three crew priorities. First was a specialist that could help with the generator fuel rods for the alien devices.

The second was a shield engineer. I hadn't dabbled with the advanced alien tech yet but the shield emitters were four times as efficient as the ones we were currently using. Reverse engineering this tech could give the *Void Phoneix* a significant defense upgrade.

The third and the most tricky hire would be a software and bot engineer. This person would help maintain our extensive number of bots and also work on the combat suit projects. Since this person was going to have access to such sensitive information I needed someone trustworthy.

I had numerous other needs I didn’t plan to address here. Two pilots for the fighters, a navigation engineer, a power sub-system engineer, a second shuttle pilot, and a xeno science officer.

Abby sent a message to my PerCom interrupting my searches. Francis and Abby were going to be tailing the three hospitality crew that were leaving the ship. They didn’t think they were going to go and cause any issues but better to be safe. I gave them the green light.

It took seven hours to find acceptable candidates for the positions. Surprisingly the xeno science office just kind of fell into my lap. Dr. Abraham Zaire was from the Hyperion Federation. His small human Federation of three-star systems had been annexed and all his funding had been cut off. So he was in effect stranded. Edmund found no communication from his independent research cell on the station to the Brotherhood. Dr. Zaire’s credentials were beyond impressive. Twenty-one doctorates in varying fields of xeno study. Everything from ecosystems to plant and animal life. A lot of his doctorates focused on various alien species, including the Sylvan. So he was about as close an expert as I was going to get.

He was looking for a ride home and not a job. After meeting him on my ship I decided I liked him too much to not add him to my crew. He was in his late fifties and hadn't had access to SNAIL treatments. I tried to leverage that first but it didn’t quite sway him. What did sway him was the tour of the botany lab and the fact we might be venturing beyond human-controlled space and seeing new worlds. At least my agricultural steward, Miguel Asuni, would have someone to work with now.

My best candidate for a shield engineer was from the Scandanavian Collective. It was a few planetary systems near Earth. His name was Hans Anders. Technically he was not qualified as a researcher. His experience was 8 years working on a cruiser’s shielding systems. He now worked on Anderson Station’s shield as the frigate captain he came here on sold the ship out from under the entire crew. He had made a home on the station in the last two years but wanted the life of constant movement on a starship. The interview showed him to be intelligent but not creative. All my other candidates were too suspect according to Edmund and Francis’ quick background checks. I offered Hans the position and he accepted.

I couldn’t find anyone to fill my role to research a manufacturing process for the aline generator fuel. I was beyond frustrated with this as I desperately needed someone to help advance this aspect. I wanted the generators for the heavy combat suits and for my Venom Bots. The few possibilities were either happily employed or Edmund shook his head no.

The software engineer was another hurdle. I ended up hiring a young woman, Danielle Forester. She was 25, born and raised on the station and wanted out. She had certs in bot repair and maintenance and some programming background. She was currently part of a planetary research team. She was responsible for the bots that went down to the planet and harvested samples. The interview with her showed she was brilliant and extremely underutilized in her current position. I planned to use her for just general bot maintenance and get her to work on the programming for the stealth combat suits. Edmund and Francis couldn’t find anything wrong with her other than the fact that she was too smart.

The time in dock at the station was like a doomsday clock to me as I watched it tick up. I didn’t know when the shit was going to hit the fan. I just knew it would. At 27 hours we were resupplied and almost everything had been offloaded. At 31 hours Danielle Forester and Hans Anders arrived on board. At 33 hours I canceled all leave on the station, wanting my crew on board. I had never gotten a chance to explore the station myself. Saabir said there was a large variety of alien species on the station working in the human scientist teams as ‘guests’. I would have liked to see the variety of aliens the galaxy had to offer. At 35 hours all my new furniture was on board and the bots were installing my new flooring.

Finally, at 39 hours the last new crew member boarded with our five luxury cabin passengers with tickets to Hercule. Damian was not happy as he still had a lot of maintenance to complete when we detached from our dock, just 43 hours after docking. I was impressed with the efficiency. I had thought we would be there at least 48 to 52 hours. I opened my Sol credit balance and whistled on the bridge. I was a very wealthy captain, 6,980,910 Sol credits. That was about 35 years of operation paying a full crew complement of 70 as well. Well, I planned to live longer than 35 more years so this wouldn’t be the extent of my funds. I hoped to be able to sell some of the alien tech we were reverse engineering in the next decade.