Chapter 124

Suruchi had spent a lot of time reviewing the exchange rates relative to human-controlled space.  If we tried using our metal stores, we would suffer almost a 40% loss in value.  Our best bet was to liquidate artwork.  I had all my personal jewelry from the planetoid.  It was removed from the aliens before their biomass was recycled.  I don’t know if it could be considered grave robbing.  But we needed currency.  We also had some of the shell sculptures remaining.  Suruchi also ventured that technology was valuable, unique technology.

I didn’t want to give this Alliance of races something they might be able to turn against humanity in the future.  I quickly selected beer of alien artifacts for Suruchi to sell and then called in Nero and my engineering department heads to brainstorm what technology we could offer for sale.  The group started putting forth a number of possibilities.  Some of the alien force field tech.  This alien tech was used primarily to seal corridors on the Void Phoenix in case of a hull breach.  We spent a good hour discussing other applications of the tech and if it could be upscaled for combat or starship defenses.

The technology was related to the planetoid alien tech and was the basis of all their crystalline technology.  Over half the engineering department heads voted against offering it for sale.  Instead, it was offered to sell part of the alien hull plating that helped increase the radiation shielding.  Once again, the suggestion was cut down in the vote.  It would be the building block for developing the advanced hull we also used to build our bot frames.

Every idea was shot down one after another.  Gabby offered that this Alliance of alien races openly shared their technology between themselves.  This was confirmed by the fact multiple races crewed their military vessels.  Since the border was close to humans, Gabby argued that they would eventually get access to human technology.  She brought up the scans from the massive shipyard of ships available for sale.  Twenty-two ships were of human manufacture.  Gabby suggested we cherry-pick advances from the Brotherhood.  Small advancements that hadn’t been dispersed yet to the rest of human-controlled space.

She brought up the Armageddon bot schematics and began pointing out various suggestions—microsensors, nanotube musculature, and the non-Newtonian fluid that housed the delicate electronics.  Julie had found out that the Alliance of alien races had heavy restrictions on AI not serving as a ship core.  So that had hampered some of their tech development.  Their bots were very basic and not very advanced.  We prepared a half dozen bot advancements.  They were minor on the scale of things, and some of the innovations might not be new.  My engineering team prepared the proposal for the technology sale, and I went to see off the rest of the crew, who were ready to explore the station.

Julie gave everyone a rundown of the local laws and what they could bring to the station.  All tier 2 AIs and above were outlawed.  That meant almost every *Void Phoenix* bot couldn’t leave the ship.  I was surprised to find Suruchi in the cargo bay with four crates of goods.  She was going to go and test the local auction markets and see if she could find anything that might be salable in human space for a huge target.

After Suruchi started the flow of the Alliance credits, we were able to start making purchases. Damian oversaw the refueling, and the purity exceeded our requirements. The Alliance had extremely tight trade laws. Quality over quantity was always the standard. Cori was experimenting with new ingredients from various species. She was going to ensure we had enough food stores to keep everyone fed for four months and enough variety to keep the crew happy. Cori sometimes bemoaned her culinary skills were wasted on a bunch of Marines with the taste buds of an ameba. But she also happily served them every meal.

My Xeno biologist, Dr. Zaire, was also having a field day. He was working with a number of other xeno-botanists on the station. He was exchanging knowledge with a number of scientists and getting other interesting samples. This came with numerous requests to expand the botany labs on the *Void Pheonix*, which I denied vehemently. If I was going to add space for anything, it would be more capacitors for the weapons.

Gabby’s trip to the station had her visiting me to explain the Alliance’s view on bots. There was an Alliance because the races had all banded together five hundred years ago to deal with an AI uprising. It wasn’t clear where the corrupt AIs spawned from, but apparently the same insidious virus that caused them to rebel occurred at the same time. I had my theories and called in Edmund Asir. He started digging through the Brotherhood database.

The first human contact with this region of space was 1,219 years ago. Twenty-eight probes over two centuries followed. Then humanity sent unsuccessful colony ships for three hundred years. Failed colonies stimied humanities expansion in this region of space. So seven hundred years ago, humanity was blocked by a vast array of defensive species. The Brotherhood continued sending probes for another two hundred years—stealth spy probes. Hundreds of probes over two hundred years, but right when the AI war broke out.

Edmund connected the dots that I had already had. The Brotherhood had seeded the AIs in this region with the virus. They had probably hoped each species would be weakened so humanity could roll over them. Instead, the species found common ground and banded together to bane AIs. So it was a huge misstep by the Brotherhood. Edmund laughed because eliminating AIs only slowed their technology development. Only in the last century had AIs been allowed back on spaceships.

Humanity had numerous AI uprisings of its own. Edmund said he wouldn’t be surprised if the Brotherhood orchestrated them all. This made me paranoid, and I asked Danielle to go through Julie’s base code. Julie was a massive AI designed to administer an entire planetary University. She thought I was crazy, but then found half a dozen backdoors into her programming. It only took a single line of base code to create a backdoor. This made Danielle paranoid, and she proceeded to start a line-by review of Julie’s code, all 688 billion lines. It was going to take years, but once she was done, Julie could be used to weed out backdoors and sleepers in other code.

We had actually been extremely fortunate that I hadn’t instructed Julie to try and infiltrate their systems. If I had, then we would have been destroyed. The Alliance had strict privacy laws, so what happened on our ship was our business, but if we had tried to interfere with the operations of the station in any way, we would have been targeted.

As our first few days proceeded, Suruchi was making substantial revenue. We had negotiated generous terms for the technology. We were well on pace to collect enough Alliance credits to get us through their space and catch up to the Union fleet. We were even looking at enough surplus to get materials to build power sources for forty-eight of the Black Widows. Gabby would have been thrilled except for the fact she was working on recreating the Pavuk, the spider-looking race that once ruled this system.

I needed my own project—well, I needed to get some time away from Celeste. Danielle was locked in the ship AI room, and Gwen spent all her free time at the station. She was going into a phase where she asked questions about everything. The constant interruptions working in my quarters and her presence in the robotics lab were wearing on me. Eve, Chloe, and the companion bot were encouraging Celeste to interact with her father more. They told me it was necessary for her healthy development. I figured eight hours a day would be enough, but I needed an excuse. A project somewhere that Celeste could not follow. I was going to explore the planetary ring and see if there was any technology the Alliance had that would help us.

A week into our time docked on the ring, the *Void Phoenix* had earned itself a fairly good reputation. I was assigned a liaison, a Glyth. A mostly humanoid race covered in short feathers. Their sharp teeth indicated in the past they were carnivores. He was very friendly and gave me a tour of the functional parts of the ring.

Lots of refineries for the metals coming up from the planet. The biggest thing I noticed was the vast amount of manpower and lack of automation. The many races seemed to work in concert. I still thought they were handicapped by not using AIs. If the Brotherhood had been responsible for the AI result and putting the Alliance in its current position. They had overcome their AI shortcomings with manpower and cooperation. Their ships were robust, and their power systems and weapons systems were powerful. But if what I was seeing, I know they wouldn’t be able to withstand human fleets.

After material processing, we went into manufacturing sections. They were efficient, but my guide said quality control meant about twenty percent of the parts produced were defective. If they had an AI running the diagnostics, they could find the issues quickly and decrease defects, but my guide didn’t want to hear my input. I was surprised when he walked me through their missile manufacturing on the ring station. Their missiles were immune to ECM and EMP. Now I had found something I didn’t have access to. Of course, the tour was just to show off, and they were not going to give me the tech.

Robotics manufacturing was less impressive. They only produced simple labor bots. Simple programmed bots mostly for hazardous jobs—like harvesting on the planet. One interesting thing I learned on tour was there was enough metal on the planet to build a lot spaceships. My guide let it slip that the Alliance was shipping most of the metal to a system that was responsible for building their starships. With the volatile sun in this system, maintaining shipyards was not feasible. The truth was the sun in this system the sun sometimes got so disruptive that they evacuated everyone for years at a time.

My guide brought me to the museum for the Pyvuk. I couldn’t see Gabby’s fascination with trying to make a recreation and resurrect this race. They were ugly and huge. There was a lot of recovered technology the Pyvuk used when they were alive. The most interesting thing in the entire exhibit was the solid-state holographic modules. The archeologists’ theory was that once the sun started to destroy everything in the system, the Pyvuk wanted to recreate their natural environments.

The devices had been reverse-engineered but not utilized by the Alliance since they required an advanced AI run. It could not animate the projections, but it could fool sensors. If something like this scaled up, we could have the *Void Phoenix* projecting different hulls. In order to get the technology from the Alliance, they wanted something substantial in exchange.

I returned to the *Void Pheonix* and started to consider my options. What could I offer? I decided to go with samples of the alien hull plating. I would let them figure out how to reverse engineer and manufacture it. It took a few days to work out the details and for both parties to confirm what was in the exchange. We had six functional holographic units salvaged from the planet and one partially functional computer. I now had a project to work on.