**Chapter 155 Celeste POV** (This was an alternate choice for the second arc format, following the teenagers instead of the engineer with dialogue; just one chapter of it, though)

Celeste slid into the pilot’s seat of the shuttle.  Amos numbly took the co-pilot seat.  “She is not worth your time.  Are you sure you don’t want to see your father?”  Celeste ran her fingers quickly over the terminal in practiced motions, “His shuttle will be landing ninety-seven minutes.”

Amos focused on the preflight checks, “No, I do not consider them my parents.  Let us just get back to the Void Phoenix.”

Celeste tried to cheer Amos up and softly said, “Neon cloned Julie’s core.”

Amos attention snapped to Celeste, “Really?  Already?  He said it would take a month.”

Celeste smirked, “Neon convinced Julie to help him do it. I was going to surprise you, but you needed the good news.”

Amos rolled his eyes, “You mean you convinced Neon to convince Julie.  She wanted to be back on the Void Phoenix.  Never knew an AI could be nostalgic.”

Celeste just smiled as Neon had a crush on her and was easy to manipulate.  Celeste laid in a flight plan back to the civilian shipyard where the Void Phoenix was moored.  Amos confirmed the course, and then they did a micro-jump.  Being Devon’s children meant they got a lot of leeway.  Taking a military-grade shuttle out for a ‘test flight’ was one of them.  That was as long as Abby or Desdemona did not catch them doing so.

The shuttle entered the dark side of the asteroid.  They had befriended all the Squirrel workers in the flight control room.  As they docked in the private shuttle bay, two Tirani Marines came to secure the shuttle.  All advanced technology was strictly monitored, and she was sure their ‘test flight’ had been closely monitored by the sensors in the system.  Celeste moved up over to the pressurized hangar for the secret project.  Amos was following on her heels.

Amos reminded her to check her skinsuit and emergency oxygen as they moved through the airlock sequence.  She rolled her eyes at him.  They grew up listening to their father go over safety procedures daily. She did it without thinking, but he always reminded her. Like she was the one who needed looking after.

Emma met them on the other side of the airlock, “We have a problem.”

Celeste looked at the Emma.  Emma was a picturesque human beauty.  She was too perfect in her looks and mannerisms.   Then again, she was a bot.  Emma had grown up with them as a child bot, and then her AI had been transferred to this teenage bot frame.  Deven had designed the perfect synth, and Emma’s programming had evolved in the last fourteen years.  She was just as good as any bot found in the core worlds, if not better.

Celeste sighed, “What is the problem now, Emma?  Did we not get the time on the military hull fabricators?”

Emma had a grin on her face, “No, all the series D7 hull plates have already been delivered.  Dartanion stole the Slipstream fighter.”  Emma was waiting for Celeste to go ballistic.

Instead, she asked, “The same one we were targeting, or was it one of the Marines?”  They harassed the Marines non-stop to help them stay on their toes.  When they were successful, they were given stick time on a Slipstream fighter.  Flight training in VR was fun, but pushing a heavy fighter in real space was a real rush.

“Yes, he took prototype D2.  They are already looking for it,” Emma said smugly. “

Celeste stormed off toward the Void Phoenix.  The rebuild was mostly completed.  They just needed to finish sheathing the hull in the newest stealth coating.  That and do about a million things on the interior.  They were supposed to have over one hundred engineering bots working in the interior, but the new Fateweaver-class ships were being rushed into service for a series of missions against the quadrupeds, and the Squirrel had to pull the engineering bots to the military shipyards.

Celeste rushed on board to the two fighter bays on the top deck.  The Slipstream fighter was there, and a grinning Dartanion.  Dartanion was her younger brother and an absolute idiot.  “Dart!  What the fuck?  Why did you take the fighter today?  The plan was to take the two prototypes AFTER dad gave us the Void Phoenix. The new hull is not even finished!” The new hull had gravimetric shielding. This prevented the powerful sensors from penetrating the hull.

Dartanion’s grin fell off his face, “Come on, Celeste.  It is not like they were going to let us steal two prototypes and leave the system with them.  This prototype has a 7% improved acceleration and the new capacitors for the quicker firing of the main grazer.”  Celeste’s angry stare had him cringe.  “Maybe I can put it back?”

Celeste growled at her brother, “Comm Neon.  See if he can cover your tracks. And make sure the hull plating is obscuring the system sensors.”

The fighter bay comms sounded, “That will not be necessary.”  Neon’s voice came over the comms.  “I already moved the old prototype B7 in its place and pushed the design team to work on a build of prototype D3.”

Celeste spoke to the speakers, “Neon, are you board?  Is Julie installed?”

“She wants to be called Chloe, and it is going to take time to adjust her programming,” Neon’s voice came back.  Chloe was the name of the bot that Julie had puppeted on the Void Phoenix when Celeste was growing up, so the name made sense.

Dart asked, “Is dad wise to the plan yet?”

Celeste chuckled, “Come on.  You know dad does not see anything unless it is right in front of his face.  Besides, we have one thousand Squirrel helping conceal the rebuild from him.”

Neon came over the speakers, “Amos, how are you doing?  I just saw the video of you and mother.”

Amos, who normally showed very little emotion, yelled at the speakers, “I am fine!  She is dead to me!  Can we just work on getting this old ship spaceworthy and drop it!”

Ezra and Emil, the two Wren pantherkin walked into the bay.  Celeste addressed them, “Did you get the suits?”

Ezra shook his head, no, Emil shook his head, yes.  They looked at each other and then switched their head shaking the other answer.  The two twin boys were monstrous in size like their tigerkin father, Saabir, but had the coloring and genetic linage of their pantherkin mother, Tora.  Wren were humans that had incorporated cat DNA to appear as catkin and were now their own species.  Genetic manipulation was outlawed in human space, so they became pariahs.  The Wren fled to the Rim of human space.

Ezra finally explained the confusion. “We got seven old Gecko suits for humans.  We couldn’t get any Badger or Gorilla suits.”

Celeste looked angry, so Emil explained, “They are behind on production.  There should have been over six hundred suits in the warehouse.”

Neon came over the speakers, “They were shipped to the planet nine hours ago.  Two hundred of each for the Planetary Defense Force.  That is my fault.  The expedited order came through on comms and was not logged on Battlenet.”

Amos asked, “Celeste, are you sure you still want to do this?  What if dad doesn’t give you the Void Phoenix?  We are almost nine days behind schedule on the refurb.”

Dart added, “Danielle wants us on the planet for the twin’s birthday tomorrow.”  Celeste gave him a hard look.  “Fine, I am still going.”

Danielle was Dartantion’s mother and helped raise Celeste but did not hold much affection for her after she left dad for the planet. Her two young hal-sister’s Nova and Venus were also the cause. Danielle had used the same genetic Sylvan DNA that was in Desdemona’s genome. It is what gave the Sylvan, Rae’Ver, his mental powers. Her father was so angry with her that she left and lived on the planet.

“It is not their fault,” Dartanion said. “Nova and Venus are going to be eight. They are your half-sisters.” Celeste gave Dartantion a hard stare. Celeste always sided with Deven. Dartantion tried, “Eve will be there. You said you were going to ask her to come along?”

“You can ask Eve Dart. Amos, go with him,” Celeste ordered. “She is more likely to come if you ask anyway.”

Emma, who had been listening, said, “Eve is coming. She had her power armor shipped to the Void Phoenix yesterday.”

All eyes snapped to the smug-looking bot. Emma liked it when she had knowledge that they did not. Celeste started to formulate more plans in her head. Eve had access to the Battlenet. She would want them to be as prepared as possible if she was coming. It would not take much to convince Eve to help in the transfer of supplies and equipment like battlesuits.

Still, she needed more crew. She had four impressionable young Squirrel engineers. With Eve, that would be twelve total crew. If she was going to masquerade as a passenger liner like her father did, she would need four or five hospitality staff. She guessed she could always pick them up at a station.

Nine days later Celeste was playing with the chameleon stealth hull. She was able to make the hull appear decently aged. Or she could make it appear sleek, glossy black. The stealth mode could even make it invisible to all non-gravimetric sensors. At least the gravimetric sensors would not be able to penetrate the hull. The young Squirrel engineers were on board and ready to go.

Celeste had planned the big reveal to Deven, her father. The Squirrel were anxious as well. They revered the Void Phoneix and its crew. A big reason why Celeste and her companions were given such free range. She flicked to the six shuttle bays. Two were occupied with Slipstream fighters. They were both development prototypes that would not be missed. Prototypes were usually put into storage in case they needed to be tested again.

She also had old luxury shuttles to ferry passengers from stations and planets. The fifth bay had an exterior repair bot. Securing that had been tricky, and Neon had to hack into the military yards, bypassing Julie, to find one scheduled for an overhaul. He had gotten it shuffled to the civilian shipyard with no one the wiser. The fifth and final bay was an old Union combat transport. It was in rough shape and had seen a lot of action. She planned to have the shuttle overhauled during the journey.

Neon and Amos were next to her on the bridge. The oversized belly of the Void Phoenix had been removed. The ship now looked exactly like a Europa Ambassador Class Passenger Liner. It had dozens of upgrades and was probably the fastest ship in human space. The luxury deck was completely refurbished and the two lower passenger decks were prepped and ready.

Neon spoke, “We have the last shipment of steward bots coming. It will bring our count to sixty-three. We still only have twenty-seven or the target thirty-nine engineering bots.”

“That is fine. Father is leaving tomorrow to attack the quadruped shipyards. We have to launch today whether we are ready or not,” Celeste said.

She opened a comm channel to the Fateweaver. Deven was unaware, but hundreds of thousands of Squirrel would be listening to this conversation to see his reaction. The Void Phoenix had been completely restored. It took her father a minute to pick up the comm. He responded immediately, “Celeste? Good, I wanted to talk with you. I have been reviewing your VR university work, and I think you need to spend more time…”

Celeste groaned as her father reviewed her progress in a dozen subjects to the entire system. And she could not interrupt him as he had set comms one direction. When he was finally finished Celeste immediately said, “Dad, we have a huge surprise!” She waited, and her PerCom beeped green, indicating Deven’s sensor operator had his scanners trained on the asteroid.

The Void Phoenix moved out of the asteroid at slow thrust with hundreds of lights on her shiny new hull. She watched her father’s reaction on the screen. He was tapping his terminal. Neon turned, “We are being scanned.”

It took Deven a moment to respond, “They finally got around to fixing her up. She looks good. I see you have the new hull material on her—and you removed the cradle for the Caladrius. Do you have the specifications for her?”

Celeste wanted to slap her forehead. Her father was so dense. “Dad every Squirrel in the system in watching,” she informed him.

His eyebrows went up, “Oh, she looks amazing!” Her offered with more enthusiasm. “I can not wait to get on board and see her. It will have to wait until after the operation, though.” He looked at the screen and said, “Thank you, everyone for resurrecting her. She means a lot to me.” He then cut comms.

Celeste was angry for a moment and then reopened comms, “Dad, I want to take the Void Phoenix out for a shakedown cruise.”

He focused on her, sensing she was up to something, “No. We can not spare personnel to crew her.”

“I already have a crew. I want to captain her,” Celeste offered in rebuke.

“Absolutely not. You are barely eighteen. Much too young,” he returned.

“The same age as you when you purchased her,” she said smugly as she was prepared to go through her long list of arguments.

Her father knew better than to argue, “No. We can discuss this when I return.” He cut comms.

Neon turned from his station, “The Void Phoenix has been giving a no-fly order on the Battlenet.”

Celeste fumed as she stared at the black vid screen. She turned to Amos, “Plan B.”

Amos groaned, “You know when we do come back after sneaking away, dad is going to lock us all up.”

“Come on, Amos, where is your sense of adventure,” Celeste smirked.

Celeste had to wait until the cruisers all left the system. She then commed Eve on the planet that she was leaving soon. Eve was adamant that she would accompany Celeste to protect her from the galaxy. At least Eve understood that there was adventure out there and staying in the Bradbury system was boring.

Eve’s shuttle docked six hours later, and Celeste moved ahead with plan B. Neon backdoored the system sensors, and the Void Phoenix made its way out of the asteroid and went unnoticed. As they reached the transition point, Eve reached the bridge, followed by two young girls.

“Damn it, Eve! Why did you bring Nova and Venus?” Celeste barked.

Eve just had a smile on her perfect face, as did Emma. The two bots had planned this. Celeste mulled her options. If she returned her half-sisters, then people would be alerted to her plans and try and stop her. She asked, “Where is Luca, did you at least leave him behind?”

Eve shook her head. “Luca is looking at the Slipstream fighters with Dartantion.”

Luca was her other half-brother, two years older than the twins. “Fine, we might as well make this trip worth it then. When I get back, I am going to be shackled and put under Tirani guard for the rest of my life.” She looked over at Amos in the pilot station, “Hit it!”