Chapter 86

The 10-day trip to the Anderson Research Station was very productive.

With Celeste and Amos growing up so fast I started to work on the series of aging bot playmates.  I brought up all the preliminary work on the project. I made three frames and fabricated all of them with the alien hull fabricator machines.  The target was now set to have the bots look 5, 11, and 17 years old. I made the decision to keep each iteration female.

At first, I had to overcome a mental hurdle.  I wanted each bot to have complete functionality…strength, memory, and power.  Unfortunately, miniaturizing everything quickly became a nightmare.  The first thing I reduced was the strength of the bots. I had wanted the five-year version to be as strong as the adult version so it could protect Celeste.  I finally reduced the amount of mechanicals and carbon fiber tubules, saving a ton of space at the cost of the 5-year-old version bots' strength.

The next compromise I made was the power core.  For both the 5 and 10-year bots I dropped the power core completely in favor of rechargeable battles…saving even more space.  This allowed me to incorporate the complete AI and all the synthetic flesh. As long as the bot acted human enough it should pass as human unless it was scanned. The power charging port was going to be a fold of skin where the fake belly button was located. The bots would be anatomically correct but have no functionality in regard to the anatomy.

When it came to the AI I was not certain if I should go with the evolving AI like I did with Eve…not sure if that experiment worked out. Or if I should do a seeded AI capable of minimal growth. Julie was lobbying for the evolving AI that she wanted her and Eve to create together. Yeah, nothing could go wrong there! I planned to do multiple test runs and build the bots when the children were around four years old so I had lots of time to tinker.

The ‘playmate bot’ was just one of the things I worked on during the voyage. Somehow Haily and I…mostly Haily with Eve’s help…powered and tested the two massive sensor modules. Apparently, Haily was learning the actual alien language but still relied on Eve’s rough translations. The spoken language was not overly complex. Thirty-seven different sounds comprised the language in a slightly higher pitch than normal human speech. Since Eve could access millions of hours of video from the crystal archives Haily had a great reference…the actual voices of the long-dead alien race.

The written language was more difficult. It was a mix of an alphabet and hieroglyphic images. To make matters more difficult the written language evolved over time while the spoken language remained standard. The numerical system…well it was just easier to use the computers to translate all the arithmetic to base 10.

Haily was treating the sensors like I treated the alien hull fabricators. Not really understanding their function but just follow the complex alien instruction manual to get it working. Haily was currently focused on calibrating the two sensors with each other. The issue she was finding most difficult was the aliens had actually used more than two sensors when they calibrated. We also made to move the sensors further apart to help Haily. And by further apart I mean we were only going from 20.56 meters to 23.69 meters. That was the maximum we could do without doing some major ship structure work. Haily spent the entire voyage getting both sensors welded and fixed in place with brackets between the two modules. She knew once they were calibrated they couldn’t be moved more than 1 millimeter or the data would get too divergent the further away from the ship.

Haily was hoping that maybe within the next year she would have success but asked for help constantly from me. I did help when I could and Haily didn’t make any overt attempts to seduce me. Eve was actually Haily’s go-to person and once she was troubleshooting with Eve in my cabin when I came in. Haily excused herself and went to her bridge shift.

With my time being so stretched I brought my shuttle techs, Stavros and Evira, down to the courier ship. Damian, the FTL engineer, also joined the little party. The courier ship was in need of maintenance and I just was not finding the time. Stavros and Evira had tons of free time and were more than happy to get more certs and service the luxury courier ship *Caladrius*. I had hoped to spend time unwinding while working on the courier ship but I was juggling way too many things concurrently.

Miguel was having some success with the other seeds. After he had gotten the optimal soil, light, atmosphere, and temperature narrowed down from the purple seed which he named the *purple phoenix feathers* after the name of the ship and the color of the grass. It was given a Latin name as well and his research was sent off to Earth for cataloging. Even though I had not participated in his work my alias, Deven Wellspring, was listed on the paper as a contributor. So far no miraculous compounds were found in the grass. It did grow densely and was soft, making it nice to sleep on though. Miguel Asuni hoped maybe the remaining seeds would produce something notable.

My VR time during the trek was limited to certs, observing certs, and getting my own practice with the new stealth suits. All 12 were finished and the fine-tuning process and alteration stage were still in progress. They were powerful though. Not as good as the Brotherhoods in terms of visual stealth but superior in all other aspects to those suits. I was starting to consider abandoning the heavy suits in favor of just building 24 more stealth suits. Gabby talked me out of that. She said I should at least wait until we recruited our complement of marines before committing to a decision. At Anderson Research Station she was planning on sending out long-range communications into Union space to get the ball rolling.

Gwen was becoming a real friend. She was practically living in my quarters as she was always playing with the children and helping Eve when not on duty. She was still extremely social though and when she worked she seemed to find time to talk to about everyone as she relayed the crew rumor mill to me at dinner.

Gabby finished her bot on the trip. I never saw the finished product though as she secreted it away in her cabin. I guess the daughter was like her father in that respect. But then again I was being a hypocrite as I had sought physical gratification with the Clare bot.

During the subspace trek the crew was also on me to get the power systems for the three hover bikes they manufactured. Somehow the bikes incorporated the alien hull plating into their frames but when I went and looked at the material stock and the production queues for the machines there was nothing there. So my crew must have snuck the frames in there and altered the records. I didn’t discipline the crew but did have Julie and Francis track down the security video showing them doing their illicit fabrication runs. I played it for them in the background wall screen while they showed me the three bikes up in the shuttle bays. It was best to let them know they couldn’t get anything over on me.

The bikes were much sleeker than before. The specs had improved slightly as well with each bike now configured for one pilot and a single passenger and 90 kg of cargo. They were still working on security features for the bikes. The last thing they wanted was to have them stolen when they took them out for a ride on an unfamiliar planet. I green-lit a budget to purchase the engines on Anderson Research Station.

I was on the bridge and appeared calm as the ship was getting ready to transition out of subspace. The crew was very professional and I noticed Elias had removed all his visible tattoos. The transition went smoothly. It took Elias a few minutes before he sent me an update. We were six light hours away from the desired destination. That was not bad since we had taken an arcing path in subspace. We prepped for a micro-jump and an hour later we jumped and were right where we were supposed to be.

Even though Elias was upset about missing his target I congratulated him on the result. We probably could have stopped earlier in our voyage to make the adjustments but Elias had been so confident we didn’t. In the end, we didn’t lose any time.

The navigation plot slowly filled. There was not much in the system. A yellow sun and two massive planets. It was very unusual to have so little mass orbiting a star. Maybe a powerful alien race evolved here millions of years ago and pillaged their system of resources. There was no time to fixate on it though. Our plot focused on the massive blue and green ball. Orbiting the planet was the Anderson Research Station. It was a massive ring station like looked like a spoked wheel. When it was built a long long time ago by humanity they actually spun the station to generate gravity as grav plating was too costly in terms of energy usage. Now the station had been rebuilt and expanded for centuries.

It was one of the few neutral sites for humans in the galaxy and was staffed by the ‘locals’. The ‘locals’ were the permanent residents of the station. They charged high fees to scientists in order to study the planet below. Somehow the arrangement had worked for so long. The locals only had six destroyer ships and they looked quite old according to Elias and Zoe.

Suruchi commed me and I took the call. She had buyers for all of our cargo already! We had only been in the system 20 minutes and the comm lag was 4 minutes from our current position. Suruchi said she just had to post our goods on the trade net at our asking price and wait. Everything was snatched up immediately. She admitted she should have waited a little longer to get a feel for prices before posting. But we still made 28% over our highest expectations, almost doubling our investment. I didn’t have the heart to ask what we could have made if she had been more prudent in her postings. She commed me back with the reason why the goods were scooped up so quickly at higher-than-expected prices. The war between the Union and Sapphire Empire had cut their normal supply cargo shipments in half. They were just starting to return to normal. Once again our luck was the timing. I didn’t think trading could be this easy.

Haily was on comms with Elias getting us landing vectors and a docking assignment. There were 31 large ships and dozens of smaller ships already docked with the ring station. We ended up assigned to a trader's dock. Our imports were only taxed at 12%. Exports were charged at 60%. This made sense as the station was probably desperate for materials and fuel. They were massive solar arrays in the trailing orbit but this system lacked the standard hydrogen gas giant that typically powered in system space flight.

I walked down to Elias station and privately updated his terminal with our next destination. It was the black site for the Union raids. I figured it would be best to get the plot ready now. Elias eagerly took it and I watched him work. He was doing another curved course in subspace! He must have been so upset with missing his target that he wanted to prove his competency. I bet him 10 Sol credits that he couldn’t get within 5 light minutes of the target. We shook on it and it got a whole slew of betting going. So maybe not a completely professional crew yet.

I sat back in my captain’s seat as we made our way to the station. I connected with the research station and began on my own laundry to-do list.