Chapter 163

I anxiously awaited word from Leopard I.  I thought my daughter, Celeste, and her companions were competent.  The Void Phoneix had numerous upgrades and was a dangerous ship on its own.  I was dealing with daily calls from Danielle, asking why I was not running off to drag our two sons and three daughters home.  Celeste was technically not her daughter, but Danielle had helped raise her.

I also knew that Eve was with them and was slightly concerned that she had essentially abducted my children from the planet.  That made little sense to me.  I might have to reevaluate Eve’s programming matrix.  I was assuming her directive to protect Celeste might have facilitated her absconding with her. She had been a great nanny for all the children, and Danielle even considered her a friend, so she took Eve to the planet.  After this, I doubted Danielle would let Celeste near the children again.

While I waited on news of the fate of the Void Phoenix, I worked with Suruchi, settling the enormous amount of refugees in the current wave.  The Squirrel scientists and doctors worked to get them all PerCom units.  This allowed them to have a translator on hand as computers were embedded in their bones.  From there, we isolated their language and had them go through questionnaires for their skill set.  Many of the formerly enslaved people were from ship crews captured on the Quadrupeds during system assaults or were intercepted when they entered a system under occupation by the Quadrupeds.

These were ideal candidates for employment in our shipyards and asteroid factories.  This meant Suruchi needed to create an economy overnight.  The freed aliens needed to be paid to convince them to stay, and we could not afford to pay hundreds of thousands of people.  I had been fortunate that my largest workforce, the Squirrel, essentially worked for just housing and food. Suruchi’s answer was a self-contained circular economy.  We produced the consumables and housing and paid the workers.  If she ran her numbers correctly, then about 85% of what we paid them would return to our accounts.  It meant everyone would rent one of my many habitation modules. The system tax was only ten percent, and I was hoping never to raise it.

There was very little awareness or resistance to what we were slowly doing.  The whole system could collapse if outside merchants entered the system and drained our economy.  Julie said it would work in the short term, but eventually, without product competition, the quality would degrade, and the morale of the citizens would decline.  I forced this onto Suruchi to figure out the balancing act.  It was going to become more precarious the more people we nationalized.

In addition, I had a number of large construction projects of my own to worry about.  The massive space station for the Chaotica Clan was being framed out.  We were recycling most of the ships Mozzie and Luna used to get their clan to the Bradberry system.  The process was efficient with the one large orbiting furnace.  A ship was stripped in two days by bots and then dismantled inside the furnace, creating blocks for the replicators.

We were building an all-new shipyard on a lassoed asteroid.  The asteroid was being equipped with its own subspace drives and was going to be moved seven light years away from the Bradbury system into deep space. This shipyard was going to build the Leopard spy corvette and the box modules for their deep space resupply stations.  Rather than let Edmund oversee this project, I took complete responsibility.  It was at the suggestion of Julie.

If Edmund had been in charge, then he could possibly have built and deployed deep space stations or Leopards not on record.  I trusted Edmund, so whether I was being paranoid or not remained to be seen.

I planned to do that exact thing. Make stations not on file and deploy them in deep space. I controlled much of the raw materials coming into Bradbury so I could divert them to a transport to warehouse at the asteroid shipyard. They would be in low-power mode and crewed by a handful of bots. I was not stupid and understood that everything could quickly fall apart and the Bradbury system overrun. I staffed the entire asteroid shipyard with the fiercely loyal Squirrel.  I diverted enough resources to get the shipyard functional in six months.  We still had three Leopard corvettes in the regular queue for Edmund.

The shipyard asteroid for the stations and the Leopards was named Stygian Station. It was a reference to a mythological river Styk that the recently dead needed to pass before entering the afterlife. It was an asset I would keep complete control of. Stygian Station would also relocate every six months based on a mathematical formula. I planned to time it such that the station would be resupplied with material just before relocating. My only issue was when it was completed in six months, and I was reluctant to pull one hundred and seventy Squirrel to man the shipyard. Also, what would the shipyards produce after I completed the Leopard quota for Edmund?

For defenses for Stygian Station I added three flight bays with two assault shuttles and six Slipstream fighters in each bay. That meant I needed eighteen fighter pilots and forty-five Marines as well. I was going with a Squirrel population on the 19-kilometer-long asteroid base. In time, it could house upwards of twenty thousand Squirrel.

I also had the newest Fateweaver-class cruiser completed, the Indomitable. The captain that Desdemona had slated to take command had been sent off on the Leopard I. So, I was reviewing possible captains from Desdemona’s list of candidates.

She had a list of twenty-seven captains and notes on everyone. She viewed a few as capable captains but noted they should also not be responsible for fighters. I needed someone capable on all fronts. The highest score on the VR examination, as far as tactics went, was a Drusi.

How did a Drusi end up in the Bradberry system? The Drusi were an amphibian race that I had taken a Tirani delegation to negotiate with long ago. They were closer to pacifists than warriors as well. I reviewed his file and he had been an engineer for nearly a decade on a transport so that was a plus in my book. When the quadrupeds started invading this region of space he served as a first officer for Drusi captain on a cruiser. He performed well and took command in a battle when the captain was incapacitated.

He had made his way to Bradbury about a year ago in hopes of fighting the Quadrupeds. After six months in our program, he had risen through the Naval Academy. Desdemona noted three negatives. Questionable/Unkown loyalty. Lack of large-scale combat experience. Unwilling to sacrifice men and women to achieve victory. I called him to the Fateweaver for an interview.

Captain Taariq was short and had a slurred speech. We talked mostly about his time as an engineer; he had a sharp mind and excellent attention to detail. When he asked why he was meeting with me, I told him I was interviewing him for captaining the Indomitable. He immediately said he was not worthy. He was happy captaining one of the Brotherhood support ships until he spent enough time earning the right to one of the Fateweavers.

I checked, and he was Desdemona’s most recent addition to the captain’s list. I told him I wanted him to captain the Indomitable, which would be the sister ship to the Fateweaver. I would have preferred Kenji on the Cloud Jumper, but he was attached to Desdemona for now. Taariq and Kenji had close to the same scores for tactics. Taariq was slightly superior when it came to using the Slipstream fighters, while Kenji was better when it came to utilizing the cruiser in attacks. Due to this, I converted the Indomitable flight bays to hold six more fighters and reduced the assault shuttles from four to two.

It took two weeks for Taariq to get his new command situated. We only had seven fighter pilots for his Slipstream fighters and only two of three shifts of crew for his ship to start. We had a number of graduates coming in the next six months, but for now, he would have to work with a shortened crew.

The long days of fleet and planetary logistics bled together. The next Fateweaver-class cruiser, the Valkyrie, was due three months after the Indomitable. I diverted manpower to the other three cruisers in the shipyards as we did not have any crew to spare at the moment. The three other ships under construction were the Aurora Borelais, Nero, and the Sunheart.

We were building ships faster than we could crew them. The good news was enrollment was up at the Naval Academy and Marine Academy. The refugees who had committed to staying in the Bradbury system were finding employment by entering the fleet training. Marines were not going to be an issue for us as Mozzie’s clan had a backlog of enrollment at the Marine Academy. Even though fleet officer and engineering training was packed, we still held to high standards and expected only about thirty percent to pass. Failures would still be offered employment on non-military transports.

Somehow, we had managed to absorb nearly three hundred thousand new people into the Arcadian Collective. Mostly due to Suruchi’s political and managerial skills. The city of Arcadian also had accepted nearly twenty city-states of alien territory on the planet. That accounted for about one-third of the planetary land mass. The two aquatic races on the planet had remained in seclusion so far. My brother’s Marines were busy servicing as the police force now.

Raw materials were being imported just below our required demand, even with our extensive construction and shipbuilding efforts. In a captain’s meeting, Taariq suggested we plunder the mining system we liberated from the Quarupeds. I approved the mission and sent the Indomitable and seven transports to gather what material he could. Only two more waves of refugees were coming from the system, and one was in route already. Taariq was going to go undercrewed, but we did find him enough pilots for his Slipstream fighters. He should only be gone one month.

Two days after he departed, I finally received word from Leopard I. There data had been relayed back through Edmund’s network and was two weeks old. The spy ship had tracked the Void Phoenix to Silverstream station. From there, they picked up passengers and cargo and were headed New Seattle in human space. It was a small Empire on the edge of Brotherhood-influenced space. According to the message, the Void Phoneix docked but never departed the station five weeks ago, according to the time stamp on my intel.

The Leopard I had gotten close enough to scan the hull of the Void Phoenix and intercept communication. It appeared Ezra and Emil, the Wren twins, had gotten into a fight on the planet and were being held prisoner. They contacted Celeste, and she was not leaving without the twins. I had a bad feeling about this. I needed to decide if I should leave the Bradbury system without a Fateweaver-class cruiser to defend it or send someone else.

It took me less than an hour to decide. The Fateweaver was going to go after my children.