*Hanson Gammon wasn’t shocked when he was notified that another agent was coming out to the rim to work in parallel with him. He was shocked that the Diamond agent was Desdemona Rouse. The prodigal daughter of one of the de facto leaders of the Brotherhood. She was young, mid-30s, and excellent at intel gathering. The fact that she was traveling to the Rim indicated how important this mission was to the Council.*

*Desdemona was in command of a stealth cruiser, the Misty Palisade. Hanson would be jealous of her for just this fact. To make him even more envious she had a crew of 200 of the Brotherhood’s top agents on board. He was glad that he had lost the woman, Vanessa. Desdemona would have gotten all the details from her. She had already requested the interrogation vid which had been conventionally edited.*

*While his own mission record was marred with partial successes and brutal interpretation of orders…Desdemona’s record was spotless with success after success. Hanson guessed maybe her father edited to show such a sterling record. Then again Jane Doe had a similar record but Jane Doe was known for reckless spending to achieve her successes.*

*The Misty Palisade dropped from subspace 19,000 km from Hanson’s own ship. Even cloaked the Palisade moved right at him. A heavy shuttle was soon dispatched and fifteen minutes later Desdemona was on his bridge. She ordered his command to be turned over to her and he was confined to quarters. If she needed a club to hit something then she would call on him. He reviewed her orders while seething. She was being handed complete control of ALL operations in the sector of the rim. Hanson went to his captain's quarters and began planning. If things went bad then it was time to disassociate himself from the Brotherhood.*

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I looked at the motley group of seventeen marines. Some seemed exceptionally fit and alert and some were acting like they were on holiday. I noted every one of them was wearing a skinsuit under their clothes. Kara, Abby, Buckie, Francis, and Edmund were going to be handling the interviews. I was going to be present but in the background. The physicals were going to be conducted by my two doctors, Doc, and Scrubs. Then Julie was going to run them through some VR simulations. Finally, Abby and Buckie were going to do some testing in our gym. Julie had already delved deep into security systems to confirm everyone’s identity. At least on this first shuttle, we were fine on that end.

Nine of the current group were recon marines. These marines were dropped or inserted into a planet and expected to return intel to ships in orbit. They usually had nicknames to call each other on their comms. Recon marines had a high mortality rate in the Union and Abby said that gave them quirky personalities.

Of the nine recon marines only five passed through all the checks and I personally offered them a contract. They were assigned quarters next to engineering and would be responsible for defending engineering from threats. They seemed to get along and knew each other from their time served. I added their names to the ship roll call: Rob 'Ace' Tungsten, Jimmy 'Nickel' Nicholson, Bob 'Tech' Dragon, Jules 'Pinky' Flat, and Ronald 'Coke Can' Jerome.

Of the remaining eight recruits two were shuttle pilots and six were ship’s compliment marines. Ship compliment marines manned armories, repelled borders, and kept the peace among navy personnel. The shuttle pilots were a lock after testing, Kathy ‘Zipper’ Purtain, and Penelope ‘Haven’ Guerra. The two women had run resupply shuttle cargo shipments from stations to ships for 15 years. Even though they had worked on the same station and knew each other they had never worked together before. Their scores from the VR were impressive even though they had never actually seen combat before.

They had the same background as me. They were forced into service by the Union corporations for exceeding their family's limit on children. They were in their early 30s and at first, Finn was happy to get some help but soured when he learned their certs exceeded his. He was now regulated to the role of co-pilot.

Five of the six shipboard marines passed the gauntlet of testing. All these candidates had been trained by Abby and Buckie at some point. They were young, broke, smart, and eager. Kara had some doubts about two of them but I trusted Abby’s judgment. Melanie Zahora, Emilio Yang, Ansid Turov, Harry Roman, and Vilma Roman were added to our roles. Harry and Vilma were a married couple. Even before we finished the first batch intake the next shuttle had landed.

From the second shuttle, we added two more recon marines, Lucia ‘Hazard’ Torres and Mikhal ‘Jungle’ Ortov. The second shuttle also gave us six planetary specialists; ground vehicle drivers, logistics, and heavy weapons operators. This group was all from the 14th Brigade. I doubted I would be fielding any artillery but Abby and Buckie assured me they could be cross-trained. Their criteria in the recruiting call were that the marines be smart, capable, and of good character. I deferred to their judgment and added the following to the roster; Eldon Dunning, Melodi Burroughs, Jack Escalante, Clifford Barnett, Leon Castro, and Alonzo Guzman.

Those that did not make the cut in the first two shuttles were given 400 sol credits and a ticket back to a larger station in the system. It was essentially five months' pay if they had been hired. A lot of the candidates had paid their way to rendezvous with us in the Hofstra system and I wanted to help them get home and reward their willingness to answer the call.

We only waited seven days in system for candidates to reach our ship for the interview process. Seven days was the average length of stay a small-time freighter would remain before heading out. Since we were not purchasing cargo I didn’t want to look too suspicious either.

The tickle of candidates yielded four more recon marines; Earnest ‘Pudge’ Bates, Aubrey ‘Thong’ Guerrero, Julian ‘Wolf’ Collier, and Omar ‘Camel’ Adkins. Three marine fighter pilots; Tina ‘Fluff’ Roy, Jana ‘Lightning’ Underwood, and Jim ‘Jimbo’ James. And finally the more shipboard marines; Gayle Rivera, Clinton Estrada and Ray ‘Raygun’ Holmes.

In all, we fell short of our goal by seven marines. We had added five unplanned pilots so that balanced our expectations a bit. The ship was a mess as Kara and Abby worked together to assign the new crew members quarters around the ship. Deck 8 now had 15 marines living on it and aft engineering had 16 marines in double occupancy rooms. The ship seemed packed all of a sudden.

The fitness room was always occupied with multiple marines doing the required training. The bridge now always had two marines on duty in power armor. Abby had a long ways to go with training and assignments but I suddenly felt a lot safer.

The tricky part was getting the passengers off the ship with Kara’s departing crew. I hired a lux shuttle to come from the planet and transport them just as we were headed out of the system. Even if they informed the authorities it was going to be much too late to stop us. The transfer seemed to go smoothly and no one commed us as we headed out system. When we entered subspace I relaxed. We had a long trip, 17 days, to the Tirani station. During that time I hoped our crew would mesh with its new members.

The first few days of competition was intense in Abby’s unarmed combat. She had a point system now for everyone. The higher ranked you were the more points you were worth if you were defeated. That made all the new grunts aim for me. I quickly fell from my perch but settled in 7th among the crew of 38 marines. I was motivated to move up in the rankings and the point system did make the training more fun.

A lot of our effort on the 17-day voyage was focused on the sensors. I had everyone working on helping increase the power input and tighten the calibration. We even tried the sensors in subspace for the first time and as expected they showed nothing within the sensor's range. When we diverted all the power we could from the power core we could get readings out to 250 million kilometers. Very fuzzy readings but they were still readings in real-time which was extremely perplexing to me. I just didn’t understand subspace or the effects of gravity in subspace enough. This caused me to break into the research we had stolen from the Brotherhood.

I had a small lab setup with this research and I quickly became engrossed. I brought in the data from the sensors and from when the alien planetoid imploded. All three sets of data intersected! When the device on the planetoid had collapsed and exploded it released waves through regular and subspace…all layers of subspace. The data clearly indicated there were more layers of subspace and to reach them you needed fuel in your subspace power core to resonate with it. That meant the fuel on board when the wave hit had in fact been altered! Even with Julie's help and some of the tangents being laid out before me, I felt a little overwhelmed. I needed to bring in an expert to help decipher and utilize this profound discovery.

I was hypothesizing that it might be possible to travel 5 or maybe even up to 10 times faster in subspace than previously thought. Generally, a ship traveled around 400 times the speed of light in subspace, give or take 15%depending on navigation and subspace engine efficiency. If I could figure out a way to travel 4000 times the speed of light? We would be able to travel 11 light years in a single day! That just seemed too fantastical to me.

All the greatest minds researching subspace lived in the core worlds. And I had no plans to head there anytime soon. A version of my hull technology was already being used in the core worlds as well. So maybe I should try to profit from it. A lot of fringe civilizations were well behind the core world technology curve. Maybe I could sell it? What kind of attention would that drag to me? I had time to decide on our voyage. The important aspect of this voyage was getting the crew synched and functioning at a high level.

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*Desdemona was working with her AI, Carlo, filtering mounds of data coming in from across the rim systems. That idiot Hanson had been ineffectual in finding the Void Phoenix and she doubted the ship had been destroyed. The psych profile on Deven Wellspring indicated he would never let that happen on his watch.*

*She had traced 91 leads in the first month she had been out here. All dead ends to find the Void Phoenix but they did unearth some interesting players out here in the rim. Unknown alien infiltrators, known alien infiltrators and a splinter group of the Brotherhood called the Godfather, were all operating out here. It was a dangerous region of space. That was why she had requested and received two frigates to support her cruiser. They would arrive in two weeks.*

*Carlo announced he had found something and data started scrolling. Desdemona cackled in glee. Deven Wellspring had made a mistake finally! The passengers that he picked at Anderson Research Station had just surfaced in the Hofstra system! She finally had somewhere to go. She furiously sent messages to detain to agents in the system to detain as many of those people as possible. She was just 16 days away from the system. And the Hofstra system was in the old Union…she had assumed correctly. Deven was from the Union…but just who was he before he commanded the Void Phoenix?*