Chapter 44

Abby was alive! This was fantastic news. I searched twice more for my brother just to make sure. I didn't know what I would do with news that my tormentor, Asher, was a POW. Haily...well 2 years was a relatively short amount of time, right? All this news would mean a change in my plans. I had to dive into what '4 years 5 months' and '100 credits a day' meant for Abby. Apparently that was her 'buyout' in length and rate. 158,400 Sapphire Empire credits was the current total for Abby's freedom. The daily credit rate was a direct reflection to how much damage the individual did in the war...all subjective in my mind. It ranged from 50 to 200 credits a day for non-command staff. For 'war criminals' there was a minimum of 25,000 credits per day and up to 1,000,000! Even then there were one hundred and thirty six listed as 'scheduled for trial' which meant a death sentence most likely.

It was an ingenious way for the conquering empire to recoup some of their expenses from the war, weaken the old regimen financially and appear to do it all in a semi-respectable manner from an outsiders perspective. At least that is what the brief article I read indicated.

I returned my focus to the ship operations. I had Henry run profiles on the small Sapphire fleet in system. They were apparently doing a tight patrol route using the gas giant's gravity. As the plot filled out there were another dozen small navy craft in system and 32 mining ships and freighters with Sapphire Empire IFFs. Outside of those there were 29 private owned ships based on their IFFs. I didn’t get any sense of danger as we approached the space station. Our docking ring assignment was a small spoked ring that was separate from the station and was 80 km distant.

We had fabricated large sensor obfuscation tarps to cover sensitive alien technology and the Sapphire military equipment we currently carried. The combat suits had been striped and looked generic but the two heavy fighters were extremely difficult to hide. They were produced directly by the Empire and didn't mimic any other fighter on the market that I noticed in my search. I was confident in evading scans but if they boarded my ship the fighters would be revealed easily.

On our approach I arranged for the sale of a few crates of rare metals, restricting the sale to a specific metal to simulate that I was an amateur trader. I learned they only dealt in two credit types here, Sapphire Empire and Sol Bank credits. I had to look up the Sol Bank. It was based on Earth and acted as an intermediary credit exchange. It hadn’t been allowed in the Union because it might encroach of the corporate profits. Silverstream station didn't have a branch of the bank either. Doing some research on the Sol Bank I found you were given a data hard drive to hold your balance and the device was biometrically linked to you. You then needed to bring this device to a Sol Bank terminal on a planet or station and physically plug it in to access your balance. The device was supposedly unhackable. The Sol Bank had regional offices in most human star faring nations so that might be my best route. I would lose 3.5% when I exchanged from Sol credits to Sapphire credits so planned to get as many Sapphire credits as needed and the remainder in Sol credits.

Tallying the crates I planned to sell I initially decided to get 20% Sapphire Empire credits and 80% Sol credits. That would give me 2,300,000 Sapphire credits and 91,080 Sol credits after import taxes. The current exchange rate was around 100 Sapphire credit to 1 Sol credit. I sent a steward bot with two stevedore bots to prepare the crates. I checked other fees quickly and didn't see anything outrageous. There was a 4% system tax on imported goods, 200 credits a day for the docking berth, and 25 credits for transport to and from the station.

I sent the crew an announcement that there would be no station leave at this port. Vanessa would still be leaving in her shuttle as we departed but I just didn't want to risk it the crew's loose lips. I would eventually have to trust them...maybe our next port. Eve was going to be working full time managing surveillance of the crew and station while we were here. I then announced after I traded some cargo their crew accounts would be updated and they would be free to make personal purchases from the station. I sorted the ship needs on my own terminal.

Nero had quite a few requests for parts and filling the stocks of the repair lockers. I checked the station markets and it looked pretty decent for medium sized station. It didn't take long to figure out the station had been expanded during the war effort to serve as a minor navy resupply and repair base. They had a range of fabricators on the station and with the war coming to an end most were idle which was great news for me. I brought up Vanessa's designs for refurnishing the ship. She had gone with four primary colors in her design. A porcelain white was dominant in her designs, a soft sky frost blue complimented the white in the cabins, a soft mint green in public areas and harder burnt graphite color for highlights throughout. She had spent a lot of time of choosing everything and had asked me for opinions a number of times. I had just brushed her off and said whatever she choose was fine. It was definitely far superior to Henry's selections.

She had created a massive list of purchases required for the common areas and cabins on decks 6, 7, 8 and 9. I didn't want to stay at the station more than three days so I would see how much we could get fabricated in that time. I sent off some inquiries to the commercial part of the station. For my own part I had a number of things I wanted to purchase.

I wanted a medical bot, a top of the line model. I really wanted to hire a medical officer but didn't think it was wise to get one here. I also wanted to update the ships old and limited infirmary's equipment. The station had full medical suites in stock for purchase, military grade. The cost was steep but Shinade and Samantha were giving birth soon. So I put in an order and set up a credit transfer for once my trade was completed.

I was interrupted by Henry. He said the station commodore had been trying to reach me. There were actually fourteen separate communication attempts I noticed. Damn, I needed a comm officer to sort this crap out. The commodore didn't seem happy to have been kept waiting...nearly 30 minutes according to the screen I was looking at. I profusely apologized and said we only had one comm officer and he was off rotation. I don't think it appeased him much. He wanted to know the extent of my business on his station and offer what aide he could.

My guess was he didn't get too many foreign ships here. It was probably the most interesting part of his job, talking to foreigners. And he did like to talk so I suffered through the social interaction to make up for ignoring his comm requests. He did manage to get quite a bit of information out of me. My replies were mostly truthful. I told him I had recently purchased the Void Phoenix and was out on a shakedown cruise. I was trading most of my stock of precious metals to finish the refit at his station and refurbish the passenger cabins. I told him the old Union was currently not a profitable region of space so I was going to try my luck in the Empire as a passenger ship with some small cargo on the side. Somehow the commodore managed to talk me into a corner and I never realized where he was leading me before I was trapped. He had promised to get the station's full force of available replicators on my requests to meet my 72 hour deadline at standard costs. The trap was he now expected me to post a passenger flight booking with the station's departure terminal. I didn't even know where the hell I was going next!

Thankfully he let me go after nearly an hour. So now I had to make an effort to prepare the ship for passengers. No, I could always say we were not 'quite' ready for passengers and just leave. Would that be too suspicious though since we were a passenger liner?

Almost immediately after I hung up with the commodore the manufacturing engineers were requesting fabrication lists. I sighed. Well at least they were motivated for my business. I set up a spreadsheet with costs in Sapphire credits and began sending them my lists for ship parts, furnishings, the medical bot, medical suite, ship's larder restocking, complete refueling, a complete set of new bridge station terminals, a complete set of engineering station terminals and completely outfitting the crew and passenger recreation areas. I did my best to make sure all the new engineering stations would be superior in comfort and utility to Henry's station.

What a fucking headache this had been! Ok, I needed a ship's logistics officer and a chief steward if we were taking on passengers. I wasn't going to deal this constant and endless series of headaches. I was an engineer not a cruise director! I wasted my entire voyage to the docking ring updating the purchase lists and communicating with various lead fabricators as questions came up and things changed. I was being a bit of control freak. Eventually I had turned over some of the duties to Nero, Henry and Vanessa. I had to trust other people at some point. The only thing I was left with finalizing was the precious metal trade, selecting the medical bot programs and the medical suite purchase.

For the medical bot I selected a male steward bot base architecture and all of the medical programs they had permissions to install. There were six alien physiology program suites in the package. I also obtained a hard copy clone of the med bot's programming for additional cost. That way I could insert it into another bot if this one was destroyed. The medical suite was a full diagnostic, surgery and 20 bed recovery suite for a military destroyer. I did some quick overlaying of the equipment and reduced the recovery section down to eight beds. Even with that reduction I had to double the current space I had planned to allocate for the medical suite. Just more work for the construction bots.

Henry had the Void Phoenix docked on the ring and twenty minutes later a shuttle came to take away our metal cargo crates. I sent Eve to handle the transfer. I was shocked to see the credit transfer to my account took place almost immediately after they scanned each crate. I had a notification on my PerCom that I would need to visit the Sol Bank on the inhabited moon orbiting the gas giant to get my device and get it linked to my person.

I watched as the credits were transferred in and they were just as quickly transferred out to cover our laundry list of needs. With the last crate scanned and everything paid in advance I had just 85,312 Sol Bank credits remaining. Our purchases exceeded the 2.3 million Sapphire credits by a fair amount apparently. The good news was the ship we would have all the parts needed to finish the ship and get it ready for...transporting people?

I did some research and found there were two POW planets in the Empire. One was in the Vinita system and the other was in the Arana system. Abby, Asher and Haily were all in the Arana system. It was about nine days travel from Gunther. It would be toward the center of the Sapphire Empire though. If everything went smoothly at this station that would be my next destination. I was exhausted...how could a few hours of dealing with people and logistics be more tiring than working for days on end on the ship? No matter.

I put Eve on over watch with her assortment of bots to watch and monitor the crews communications and the stations actions. I needed to get some sleep and then I needed to head down to the planet. After a long shower I crawled into my bed and paged through the SLUMBER units prepped programs. I needed something relaxing...I choose a combat scenario based on the pirate comedy vid. Maybe tomorrow Eve would want to watch an episode or two.