Chapter 85 What the Hell is a Phylactery?

Francis joined the sword and sorcery game for the first time.  Starting at level 1 he decided to be a bard, acting in support.  His bard character was definitely modeled after Sherlock Holmes as he was an Inquisitor sub-class.  As we moved through the undead hordes Francis died a half dozen times but did reach level 5.  Our party did reach the lair of the lich high in a ruined castle in the snow-covered mountains.  It took quite some time before the final confrontation with the lich king as we made our way through the castle.  Gwen was the last one standing among us but she won.  It helped that her level was superior to all of us.  Triumphantly we returned for our reward only to find the town raised and a gloating lich king in charge.  Apparently, liches had a way to save their soul by making something called a phylactery. This allowed them to resume their life in another body.  We chased the lich away but didn’t get to kill him again.  Julie chuckled.  She said the second game story arc would need to be completed to comfort the lich king again.  I reminded Julie that she was only in here because I had given her a free pass on her time out…which I seemed to do a lot. I was definitely too soft with the AIs.

Francis said he might join again but wasn’t sure. Julie and Luna had behaved themselves during the long game session so I hoped he would join us again.  Everyone else was excited to track down the lich in the neighboring kingdom.  I left the game somewhat upset, the long build-up didn’t meet my expectations.  The fight had been epic but the lich had escaped.

Exiting the VR I went down to the robotics lab to work on my spider bots.  I was just doing something fun after the frustrating lich battle.   I had the alien power generators and could build a very dangerous and useful bot around them.  I still didn’t have fuel for the generators but hoped I would figure out how to manufacture the solid-state fuel rods soon.  Truthfully I was hoping to find a scientist or two at the Anderson Research Station.  Although the main focus for the bevy of scientists was on the organic life on the super planet it orbited there were many brilliant minds on board the station from all across human space.

With Julie’s help, I designed the most terrifying spider bot I could.  It was going to be black and the size of a person when its legs were folded around its body. This storage configuration would allow us to stash them across the ships.  When the legs sprung out it would be 1.5 meters wide and 1.5 meters high.  Its movement speed was up to 70 kph and it could climb walls easily.  Its eight eyes would be glowing red and each pair of eyes would see in a different spectrum, ultraviolet, radiation, thermal and visual.  There would be some long hair on the bot that could sense vibrations and act as sonar if the eyes were disabled.  Its 0.3 meter mandibles would have a decent crushing strength but would not be its primary weapon.  Its two forward legs could produce spikes at the feet and act like spears to puncture targets.  The other six legs would have stores of solvent to dissolve the foam if needed. Between its mandible maw was the foam projector.  The reservoir of the foam compound was four times that of the original bot.  I know it should have extruded the foam from the abdomen to be more anatomically correct but in Julie’s sims, the forward mount location on the head was far superior for combat applications.

The shell and legs were going to consist of alien hull material making a very resistant to damage and difficult for scanners to pick up. If our numbers were correct the bot would be completely invisible to energy sensors when operating at minimal power.  We also incorporated a poor form of stealth camouflage into the bot.  It could blend very effectively into the background as long as it didn’t move.  With Julie’s help, we made the bots able to function in the cold of space…so they could swarm on the hulls of an enemy ship if necessary.  The final piece of functionality was a plasma cutter in the abdomen where the spinnerets would be.  It was a very short-range plasma cutter but it was powerful.  The spider bot could use it to cut access into hulls or power armor.  I set Julie to programming the spider bots.  But before these nightmares were ever completed that programming would have to be perfect.

I had spent the entire day on this mock-up of the *venom bots*. Julie used her hologram projectors to project a life-size model of the bot when we were done and I was sufficiently horrified.  Although its primary purpose was defensive this bot was a serious nightmare in appearance.

Finished in the robotics lab, I joined the marines for some late evening training and then spent a few hours on the bridge.  I sat on the bridge reviewing crew progress on certs.  I sent off some congratulations here and there and encouragement elsewhere.  It was boring work but it was also part of my merchant marine captain training.  The final thing I did on the bridge was to prep for the command staff meeting tomorrow.  With no passengers, these meetings had been moved to every other day.  I was slightly nervous as this meeting would have a lot of the crew's answers for if they planned to stay or not.  My evening was spent playing with Celeste and Amos.  They were growing so fast and already making some sounds.  I hadn’t realized it but  Celeste had said ‘Eve’…I spent the next two hours trying to get her to say ‘Dad’ while Eve watched, clearly amused.

As the two babies were becoming mobile Julie had numerous toys being fabricated that would help with mental development.  According to Julie development was 75% genetic and 25% environmental.  The Claire bot was constantly present with Eve, helping the children remain stimulated. I really hoped Celeste would grow up to be more socially flexible than I was. I still found interactions with others very tedious but was doing a much better job of picking up body language according to Abby.

For my evening VR session I joined Francis for a murder mystery dinner game. It was based on an old board game called Clue. It ended up being quite fun and I even guessed the correct murderer but had the weapon incorrect. I thought it was the pipe due to the nature of the injury but it was the wrench!

In the morning, I showered and helped feed the babies before dressing and attending the staff meeting. I was expecting a little bit of bad news. We first reviewed the ship engineering reports from Nero. I noted a few issues I planned to check on myself. Then we discussed our current provisions and supplies. That was quick. Abby then started on the crew reports. Who was staying?

The marines were 100% on board. They were getting to play with more toys and getting paid better than any job they could find in civilian life. And Abby let slip the adrenaline rush of being chased across the galaxy was high for the marines. Engineering was also 100% on board. But Nero had a list of staff positions he wanted filled. Computer/Software Engineer, Navigation Engineer, Shield Engineer and Power Sub Systems Engineer. The last was a new addition and basically worked hand in hand with all the other engineers on the ship. I agreed to all the hiring when we found suitable and vetted candidates.

The flight deck also had good news. Luna had convinced her parents to remain on board. I was a little bit shocked on this one. Luna had turned 13 and being forced to grow up in an environment without kids her own age. VR could only do so much. And now with a probable threat of the Sylvan I had been certain that Stavros and Evira Martis would leave with their daughter. I was happy they were all staying.

The command deck was also remaining intact. That was not unexpected. Then it was Suruchi’s turn. Our comedian and assistant steward and Suruchi’s assistant were leaving at Anderson Research Station. That was half of our hospitality staff. Maybe this was a good thing. I might reduce our passengers capacity in the future when I added weapons. It would also give us a chance to hire new staff at a more reasonable pay scale.

We quickly set priorities for when we docked at Anderson Research Station in 10 days.

*Lazarus sat in the conference room while Sha’Lua debriefed him.  He was extremely irritated that the elves had quarantined his new crew and ship.  Broderick sat next to him and over-answered every question asked while Lazarus smartly moderated his responses.  Sha’Lua was trying to figure out the engineer’s motivations in order to figure out what his next destination would be.  They had just missed the engineer in the Vinita system.  It was obvious the engineer had known he was being followed as he spent less and less time in systems refueling and resupplying.*

*The Vinita system had also been a massive standoff.  The system had a large number of human defensive fleets, enough to challenge the Sylvan city ship.  The elves watched helplessly as the Void Phoenix escaped on the far side of the system.  Lazarus had been on his own ship and been ordered to dock with the city ship after the escape.  His crew had been detained and his ship seized.  He considered it his ship even though the elves had paid for it.  They didn’t want to recall the War Chariot ships to the city-ship for fear of minimizing the defensive screen of city ship in the Vinita system.  So it had taken two days for the elves to withdraw and follow the rough vector of the Void Phoenix.*

*Sha’lua had the plot up in front of them as she questioned them over and over. Lazarus wanted to help he needed his thirst for revenge satiated. But even he couldn’t figure out what the hell the engineer was doing. There were only three systems on this vector, two in Sapphirian space. Both were minimally populated and the third had almost no population. Unless he was planning a longer voyage…over ten days. That would vastly open his possibilities.*

*If he wasn’t taking on passengers then what was he doing? Was he looking to sell his alien loot from the planetoid? Where would he…!!! He zoomed in on the stellar map. Anderson Research Station. It had dozens of scientists from across human space and even a few alien species. They were mostly planetary biologists but it would give him a massive market of potential customers. It was brilliant. He would need to stop and fix his subspace vector and it was a long 12 to 14 day trip in his fast ship but it made sense.*

*Lazarus smugly told Sha’lua of his deductions. He could be wrong as the Void Phoenix could stop and completely alter its destination but then the engineer would be staying in Sapphire space. After the mess in the Vinita system he would be persona non grata in the Sapphire Empire so his deductions made too much sense. If he was correct then the elves would trust him…maybe enough to let him return to his ship and crew.*