Chapter 23

I woke having failed in the emergency drill I programmed into the SULMBER unit. It was a survival scenario focused on repairing a damaged escape pod and getting it to a habitable planet or moon. I had gotten lax in my preparedness training. I hadn’t been doing physical training as well. I needed to bring it back into my routine. I couldn’t get soft. My excuse was I just had too much to do and the list had never shortened. Even now my PerCom showed I had 27 days to get back to Shinade and Vanessa before they activated the backup plan for getting rescued.

I got some good news on my PerCom when I was reviewing messages. All the jewelry had already been sold. I opened the receipts for the sales and was shocked to find each one had sold for 1.111 million system credits! I was expecting at most 200,000 for each one. That was 20 million credits after the 10% handling fee! I read through the notes and found they had all been purchased by the same Sylvan and he wanted to meet. He would be here in 15 days. I had a bad feeling so planned to be long gone before then. I slid into the pilot seat and tied the monitors into the system stores and told Eve to do the same.

The fist thing I did was make payment in full for all the bots and sent the list over to Eve to review. Next I spent a little time to bring up the financial bank that I could use to pay off my Union debt. Right now the exchange rate was 13.6 Union credits to one station credit. I was trying to pay my debt anonymously and with Eve’s help was working on it when the exchange rate suddenly changed to 15.2 to 1. I went to the news feed and found the Union had lost another large space fleet battle in the Perrault System. That should be the last straw in my opinion. I couldn't imagine the Union had too many ships left. I hoped Gwen, Nila, Haily, Adam and Buckie survived the stupid war.

We finished the blind payment of my debt and set up delayed payment for everyone else in my family in intervals over the next two months. My brothers account appeared active so I hoped that meant he was still alive.

Eve had some additions to my bot list. She added two more large exterior bots with her reasoning being that four of the large exterior bots would be needed for quick exterior upgrades and hull work. They should earn back their cost in ten years by saving time and limiting need to use shipyards. She also doubled the number of engineering humanoid bots and updated their programming at a cost of 2,000 per bot. Most bots needed human supervision and direction. This way they could take some initiative and having 24 engineering modern engineering bots should make my life much easier.

She added six steward bots. When I asked why she said I was looking at the passenger liner in 16 hours. I hadn’t planned to actually start a passenger business but maybe… I looked at the bots she selected. They were essentially sex bots with a whole array of programmed skills to take care of high end passengers. Child care programs, dancing, cooking, massage, tantric arts, and dozens of others. At 80,000 each I was a little hesitant to but eventually decided on two male and two female. Six was overkill. Eve said some races would prefer stewards to be modeled after their own race. What did she suggest? Eve spent an hour going through the 8 dominant races in the 1000 light year radius. I shot them all down as I probably would never transport any of them. She seemed insistent so I eventually caved and let her select a Sylvan male and female model bringing the total to six. I think she smirked as she designed the two additional bots.

Eve changed the models on the stevedore bots and cleaning bots to a more ‘efficient’ and aesthetic pleasing model but I told her firmly they had to be from Venuvian Robotics. Unfortunately the steward bots were not as Venuvian did't make sex bots or steward bots. There was a modest increase in cost for these changes. She also wanted a full suite of four construction bots used in refurbishing the interior of space ships. The cost of 190,000 made it easy to say no. I told her it was time to move on. She seemed about to argue but dropped it. She didn’t mention the bot dogs I had on the list.

I sent her the specs for the robotics fabricators I planned to purchase to create her upgrades. Eve became engrossed and started to look at all available options. I had been pretty thorough in my research but I saw Eve making changes immediately and let her be. I turned my attention to the ship I was going to be touring.

I had been sent an information packet and found my tour guide for the extensive tour would be Sha’lua. She included a note with the packet saying she volunteered to give the tour after she found out I had requested it.

Opening the packet I reviewed the ships history. It was commissioned by the Corbyn family as a passenger liner to travel between their interests in various star systems and was christened the Gilded Coach. It was later used as a commercial passenger liner between Earth and the New London star systems, a 34 light year trip. It was refurbished and overhauled 68 years ago and bought by the Dresden Conglomerate. After twenty years of service it took a new role as a small goods transporter. It was commandeered by the Fresno government in a raid. A few years later the ship left the Fresno home system carrying a group of Wren fleeing the core worlds. It took them 24 years to reach the Silverstream station. The ship was purchased by Silverstream station and the Wren used the funds to settle here. It has been here for 9 years and this would be the third time they had tried to auction it off. Minimum bid for the ship was 40 million.

A few points from this history. It had been a heavily used ship in its life. There had to be issues with the ship if they couldn’t sell it for 40…no the first auction was 50 million and the second auction had a minimum bid of 46. It probably needed a lot of work. I was getting turned off to the ship the deeper I read into its history.

Three space battles in its life…two on the way to Silverstream but no listing of the battle damage in my report. I put together a suitcase sized scanner. This might be a waste of time but it would be good to see a ship not of Union manufacture. I made a meal on the shuttle and Eve was ready for me to process the purchase request for the fabricators.

Damn she had added quite a few things and included a large supply of material feedstock for all of them. Lots of software updates and a full design suite terminal. She had added another 490,000 to the cost overall but I sent out the funds to cover everything. Eve had planned to sell me on it as she had the metal sales projections were now 67 million. I looked it over, still hours remaining, but it looked to be a three way bidding war. The three parties were the station’s manufacturing arm, a Union corporation and a Sylvan city ship. I checked and it was a different city ship than the one who had bought the jewelry which made me feel better.

I decided to leave an hour early for my tour. The shuttle bay was C-3. It took ten minutes to get there and after showing my ID to the two security guards I was let inside. I found my guide inside and she smiled which I found a little creepy. Sylvan teeth were slightly blue apparently. We immediately entered a modern luxury shuttle. Curious, I asked how much for one of these shuttles and she checked her PerCom and said a new one could be fabricated in a week and cost 700,000 credits. I grounded myself as it had a small cargo capacity and just 12 passenger seats. The shuttle lifted off.

It was just me and the guide in the cabin. When I asked about that she smiled again and said just one other party was on the long tour with their own guide. The shuttle was extremely fast and ran quiet which got me to reconsider getting one. Soon we were circling the hull.

Sha’lua said the ship had 45 minutes before its atmosphere and pressure were restored. The ship did look sleek in its silhouette, like an aquatic racer. However as we approached the scars of age were clearly shown. Dozens of poor hull patches, obviously missing modules and emitters. The stern still showed some heavy burns. Sha’lua was talking as I examined the hull. The ship had shields. Actual shields and not just deflector shields. The power consumption of shields was too ridiculous to put on anything other than warships. Unfortunately only 38% of the shield emitters were left and only one shield generator still functioned, the other 3 had been removed for scrap. Sensors on the hull were at 30% as well and it looked like they had moved them all to the fore.

We circled twice more as I asked questions. I wanted to know why it hadn’t been scrapped. The value of the ship was the FTL drive and it was intact…needed a massive overhaul though. Sha’lua looked at her pad and said if they couldn’t sell it for 28 million then they would send it to the furnaces.

We landed in a port dorsal shuttle bay. It was large and you could squeeze two large shuttles in here. It was also filthy. Even with the fresh cycled air didn’t hide the smell…acidic with ammonia. She said the smell lingered as the Wren were essentially refugees and only had a handful of people who could handle the maintenance during their long voyage. The shuttle bay had two cargo lifts and a mangled docking station for a stevedore bot.

My tour only had 5 hours left so I asked to see engineering first. I might spend the entire time there. The lifts were at least working but that persistent urine smell lingered. Engineering was a mess. Panels were removed exposing components. Trash was everywhere. Two disassembled bots were on a work table. Monitoring terminals were powered to standby and I went to the primary FTL one. The language was English which I was familiar with. Well the FTL was intact but had dozens of red indicators. I paged through them. Most were maintenance related but a few were leaks and part replacement required indicators. The last engineer had gotten quite creative in rerouting things to keep the ship moving. I noted the parts on my PerCom that I could see, compiling a list. Next I went to life support and it was not any better. Air filtration was barely operational and water recycling was just a red listed mess. I noted it as best I could on my PerCom.

Seeing my distress Sha’lua said the ship came with full licenses for replicating original parts and any parts I ordered from the station for 90 days after purchase would be at a 25% discount. They probably marked them up by 200% cost so I didn’t think it overall generous. I asked why they hadn’t at least got some cleaning bots on board to clean trash and remove the smell. She said it was a legal technicality. The ship needed to be sold as is or they would have to pay the Wren 20% of the sale value in addition to what was paid for the ship.

Next I checked maneuvering and sub light engines. I could see why they had trouble selling this ship. The ship was barely able to accelerate. The maneuvering thrusters were ok but the fuel feeds had red engineering alerts on all of them. Basically they had run them on substandard fuel for too long. I checked the grav plates…they looked to be intact and could generate up to 1.9g…well off from the new ship specs of 5.0g. Inertia compensators were listed at 62% functional…the ship was missing a third of them. I started sending over the information to Eve so she could start a parts list estimate.

I had spent three hours in engineering and wanted to see the other decks before the auction started. The back third of the ship was all engineering. The front two thirds of the ship had 10 decks. The top deck had the six shuttle bays, a large shuttle maintenance room, a fuel depot for the shuttles and EVA engineering room. The bottom two decks were cargo decks. I didn’t like the fact the cargo access for the two large bays were through the front of the ship. The smaller cargo bays had access elevators to the larger bays and up to the shuttle bays. In addition to the small cargo bays there were other cargo bays for all the various ship stores on this deck as well. Above the two cargo decks was deck 3. It had most of the life support functionality of the ship and tied directly into engineering. We started walking quickly through deck 3 and it was as bad as I had thought. I sent a video feed to Eve and audio of what needed to be done and replaced. My guide seemed overly impressed with my knowledge.

Deck 4 was a crew and recreation deck. Well that what it was supposed to be. Walls were torn down exposing the ship skeleton and trash was everywhere. There were supposed to be individual crew quarters here for 69 people. As well as common areas for the crew and it’s dining. The ships main kitchen and food storage was on this deck as well…in the kitchen they had a rather expensive food replicator checking the model but it looked like it there had been an attempt to repair it as it was half disassembled. Deck 5 and 6 where standard passenger quarters. The schematics said 39 cabins on each deck with large common areas. It looked a mess and I didn’t walk the corridors.

Deck 7 was the luxury cabins. Not much luxury these days. The center of the deck was a 120 meter long walkway that was 23 meters wide. There were 12 cabins on each side. Each cabin had two levels and a balcony of per the long courtyard. In the bow of the ship there was supposed to be 8 shops and a large restaurant. I put down the pad I was holding and looked at the real image before me. It looked more like a homeless alley from a detective vid. I commed Eve and said to add in the construction bots I had discounted. Deck 8 was another life support focused deck. It had 11 crew quarters...no the quarters were for the ship's constables. There was also an armory, detention center, and a fitness center on this deck...at least when the ship was originally built but god knows what was there now. Deck 9 was the command deck. It had the bridge, nav computer, bot docking station and bot maintenance, 9 officer quarters, officers lounge, the small armory, a very large captains quarters and a ten bed medical bay. Although it was filthy it seemed this deck seemed mostly intact. I walked through the officers lounge and old leather chairs were peeling. The bar was empty of course but the room was clean. It was time to head to the bridge. The auction would start in twenty minutes I was informed.

The bridge had panels removed but still seemed orderly. I was a little shocked to see a Union admiral here with someone wearing a Union corporate logo. They were one of the parties interested in bidding apparently. There were two other parties interested, a pair of Sylvan were together and three humans talking off to the side. So a total of four. Sha’lua handed me a pad. I was extended credit up to 68 million. My precious metal sale would close soon and would close around 72 million. After the station commission that amounted to just over 68 million. She said it would be about a 30 minute presentation before bidding opened. Bidding would last one hour during which time we could socialize. I asked about the admiral but before she could tell me anything a well dressed middle aged human arrived.

He went into a speech with video behind him supporting how great this ship was. Sha’lua whispered to me the Union admiral was representing the Polynomial Corporation as an advisor. She said a lot of Union corps were transferring their wealth to precious metals as their Union credits were becoming worthless. That explained the strong metals market but why were they interested in this ship? Sha’lua guessed maybe as an asset? Or escape vehicle? Well it needed a lot of work so I doubted it would escape anything.

The salesman finished and opened bidding. I just went to the food spread on the far side of the bridge and got a fragrant drink and some cheese balls. The drink was a white wine and quite good, it was Sylvan apparently according to Sha'Lua. I looked at the cost on my PerCom, 200 station credits per bottle!

The first bid finally came at 30 million from the two Sylvan. I asked Sha’lua and she said since it was below the minimum it could be turned down. The Union rep put a bid in for 32 and a the third party went to 33. The Sylvan pair took their glasses of wine and left. I actually agreed with them. Thirty million was already pushing the ships upper value in my mind. A timer was on the ships main screen, 45:34. The hour was ticking down. I went to my PerCom and Eve had the parts list calculated, 27 million. And that didn’t include fuel or labor.

The bidding was ticking up in 0.5 increments between the other two parties and was at 36.5. This ship was a big fixer upper and did I need something this big? 37.5 and it seemed the Union party had the top bid. The Sylvan party was packing up. I bid 39 million just as they were leaving which made them look at me and pause. I didn’t look like much. I didn’t have their fancy clothes or snobbish attitude. They paused waiting to see if the Union pair would bid and they did, 40. So the minimum had been reached. I waited till 5 minutes remained and bid 41. The admiral looked peeved and whispered to the corporate man who bid 45. The jump bid was probably to take me out of the bidding. It was much more than the ship was worth. I calmly bid 46. I could see the indecisiveness on the pair and the three humans who had paused had smirks on their faces. The clock slowly ticked to 0 and everyone clapped except the two perturbed Union members.

Sha’lua congratulated me and said my funds would clear in three hours. Then the deed and sale would be finalized. The docking fee for my new ship would be waived for 30 days and then accumulate at 1,000 credits a day.

Even though I had a ship that had seen better days it was my ship. I would need to get my shuttle over here. Everyone left me after they got my biometrics and signatures for the sale. I had a space to change the ship’s name. Eve suggested the Void Phoenix, which approximated at being reborn from nothing. I liked it and added it to the paperwork. I started with a parts budget of 14 million. That would give us over 8 million for fuel, resupply and anything important that came up. To fully refit I needed 27 million…or roughly 20 million with my generous ‘discount’. So the budget so I raised the budget to 18.6 million. And I added .4 million for cosmetic improvements. With Eve I went through the list removing items to bring it down to our budget.

The time finally closed on the metals auction and I was briefly a wealthy man. Then we started putting in our parts orders. I found I needed to pay a 10% premium to get parts in under a week and we put the FTL parts first on our list. I planned to be long gone before that elf arrived. I had lots of work ahead of me and on a tight timeline.