Chapter 103 Clear and Present Threat

I was eating dinner with Danielle and Gwen in my quarters when Abby beeped my PerCom to talk.  She came to my quarters and sat with us while we were eating one of Cori’s fantastic meals.  Cori used her small army of bots to prepare general meals for the entire crew at lunch and dinner.  For me, she always prepared it herself instead of utilizing the bots I purchased for her.

Abby was here on behalf of one of the Tirani.  He wanted to join my crew.  Abby asked me to hear her out before saying no.  He was the son of one of the envoys. He had been practicing with the marines in VR and in hand-to-hand combat in the gym. He was outstanding and planned to enlist enroll to one of the upper-tier mercenary companies when he returned to Tirani space.  Tirani were loyal soldiers and excellent fighters.  This Tirani had earned the respect of all the marines with his ability and demeanor.  His name was Mozzie.

I wasn’t opposed to adding alien species to my crew.  I asked how he would do with no one else from his species around.  Could we get a psych profile done on him?  Abby seemed to think VR could satiate his longing for his own species...or I could make a steward bot in the image of a female Tirani.

I laughed and said should I just make a personal steward bot for every member of the crew!  Gwen started to say something, and I held up my hand to silence her.  What type of pay would this new crew member request, I queried, while thinking about it.  Abby grinned and said the same as the other marines.  I was actually paying slightly more than normal Tirani marines made.  Fine, we still had a few open marine roles to fill anyway.  Abby sent me his body specs for a personalized combat suit.  She also sent me a complete female Tirani medical profile put together by Doc.  At least she was prepared.

I opened the file, and Tirami females were leaner than males but still large.  The anatomy didn’t vary too much from humans.  It looked like a lot of work on the bot frame and the skinning would require fur...  I looked up to find my food now gone and Abby with a guilty face.  I told her she could offer Mozzie a position with his own steward not.  Hopefully, he was worth the effort.  I sent the entire project off to Gabby, delegating the design and build to her.  Abby left happy, and I was still hungry.  Danielle gave me some of hers but said I would have to pay for it later with a wink.

Danielle was a fine girlfriend.  She was focused like me when it came to her work but had enough social awareness to pick up on social cues.  I was getting better, and my bridge crew responded well to me.

I decided to spend more time in the Drusi system.  We were just beginning the process of making our fuel pellets using the converted engine of the Brotherhood ship.  We should be able to get a few year’s worth of fuel pellets for our suits and bots.  I wasn’t worried about being followed by the Brotherhood or elves.  Our long-range sensors would give us enough warning to get away safely.

Suruchi was also having a field day.  It seemed like dealing with alien species was her calling.  She picked up on body language, verbal cues and tone so easily.  She was in the throes of trading with the Drusi.  The Drusi had been an aquatic race until about 250,000 years ago.  That was when they ventured onto land away from their cousins.  Although 250,000 years doesn’t seem like a long evolutionary period, the Drusi developed space flight and opened diplomacy and trading with numerous alien species during that time. They kept ties with their aquatic origins through art. Massive multicolored shells were carved into intricate artwork that was polished to show an amazing colorful finish. It was in this art that Suruchi was seeking to trade. It was extremely beautiful, even to my human perception, but I wasn’t sure when or if we would return to human-controlled space.  I decided not to tell her that, though.

I received my first report on the stealth coating we liberated from the ship.  It acted as a signal sink and visual cloak.  It would be excellent against most conventional passive and active scans.  It wouldn’t mask our thermal signature from our drives, though.  But it wouldn’t add too much to our hull mass if I did decide to incorporate it.  The problem was the ship we were taking it from had propellant thrusters that had no thermal signature...I had nothing like that.  So how useful would it actually be...we could use it during coasting or stationary.  I decided to have Julie and the team start making some mock-ups for the exterior hull.

The two assault shuttlecrafts from the Brotherhood ship were finally deemed safe by Julie.  Unfortunately, these were not the super advanced craft that Jane Doe had gifted us.  These were just planetary drop shuttles with no sub-space ability at all.  Much larger than my standard assault shuttle from the old Union.  Each shuttle was capable of carrying one large vehicle and nine marines in heavy combat armor.  We also had two high-speed assault hover tanks secured in each shuttle that I had no idea what to do with.

So what was I going to do with them?  I had six shuttle bays.  One had my marine drop shuttle, one has my exterior hull bots, one had my lux shuttle, two had Sappirian fighters and the last one had an old cargo shuttle.

All of these were extremely useful.  The old cargo shuttle worked well when we were disguised as a fat old trader.  The Brotherhood shuttles would barely fit in our bays.  They were just too good to scrap, though.  They even had their own stealth coating.  I just didn’t have the space on my ship for everything I wanted to keep.  Danielle called me a hoarder when I showed her all the items I had stashed away, alien jewelry, the data disks, tons of alien bots, and fragments of technology.  It was impressive, for sure, but she thought it was overkill from her perspective.  Maybe I would start selling off some of the artifacts as we moved through alien space.

Finally, I slated my two fighters to be moved into the cradle with the *Caladrius,* my concealed ultra-fast courier.  It was a terrible decision as they would be crammed in there and not accessible unless I launched the *Caladrius* first.  Ok, fine, I was a hoarder.  Zoe and Elias would be upset with losing access to the fighters, but at least I was not ditching them.

Seven days in the Drusi system, and Edmund was ready to interrogate the prisoners.  He wanted me present for the captain’s exit interview.  The rest of the captured crew were low-level skilled laborers, so they wouldn’t offer much value.  That is how I found myself sitting across from a very angry man.  Hanson Gammon was his name, according to Edmund, a famous Diamond agent.  Edmund asked questions, and Hanson just stared malevolently at me.  He finally asked where Jane Doe was.

I looked confused but decided to give him the truth and told him she was dead.  We killed her when she tried to take my ship.  He looked confused, then happy, and then just started laughing uncontrollably.  He asked for confirmation, and Edmund gave him the videos after I nodded it was ok.  He was happy his comrade was dead?  He explained that he thought that bitch had taken my ship and had been the one to thwart him.  He said he could die happy now.

Edmund looked willing to comply with Hanson’s request but I asked him to supply some keys for the data.  He laughed and said they were genetically coded.  Only blood from a diamond agent could open them in concert with a 13-digit code.  I asked Hanson if he would give the codes up for his life.  Edmund’s face soured at the thought of letting the agent live.  Hanson said no, smirked, and added maybe for his life and a ship.  Edmund was shaking his head no, but Hanson tried to convince me.  If he gave away Brotherhood secrets, then he would be hunted by the Brotherhood as well.

I didn’t like Hanson; he had the look and air of a predator.  But if I could get access to all the Brotherhood’s records, that would help us prepare for future encounters with them.  Edmund pulled me aside as I was considering. He said this was a bad idea.  Diamond agents were selected for their loyalty and ability.  I should not trust anything he said.

If I was going down this road though he suggested that I get Hanson to promote himself to a Diamond agent.  It would give him access to the archives and temporarily get him access to feeds of the Brotherhood.  Edmund didn’t think it would last too long.  The first time his PerCom linked with an established Brotherhood network, his updated status would be transmitted back to Earth, and they would figure it out.  It would put a target on Edmund but should give us the most recent intel on the Brotherhood’s pursuit of us.

We started the negotiations with Edmund’s plan.  Hanson Gammon was thorough.  He wanted a ship and two of his crew.  He wanted the ship inspected by the two crew, who were engineers, before doing anything.  I purchased an old human deep space explorer from the Drusi.  We toured the ship, and Hanson agreed it was acceptable after his engineers ordered a few parts.  He wanted it fully fueled and 20,000 worth of Sol credits in precious metals stored in the small hold.  I got this down to just 6,000, which should be enough for him to resupply eight times or so.

The exchange was not what we were expecting.  It was done on board the deep space explorer, and Hanson took his PerCom from Doc.  He pulled out some chips, adjusted the settings on them for over an hour, then handed them to Doc and explained what she needed to do.  He had essentially altered his chips so that when they were inserted into Edmund’s PerCom it would read as Hanson Gammon.  It was a brilliant move on his part.  If he was truly fleeing the Brotherhood, he was transferring their sights to Edmund.  Before the final hand over his engineers went over the ship four times to make sure I had not tampered with anything.  Then, with himself and his engineers on his new ship, he transferred the evolving algorithm for the 13-digit code to Edmund and the final procedure to alter the bio reader to Doc. Edmund was now, in effect, a Diamond agent of the Brotherhood.  At least until they realized Edmund was not, Hanson or Hanson was himself blacklisted.

Edmund still didn’t trust the whole sequence, but Doc and Julie couldn’t find any hidden trap, so I watched on the bridge as the small ship moved out system and entered sub space.  Elias said it was vectoring toward the edges of human space.  Edmund got to work immediately to crack and copy the Brotherhood data from the ship.

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*Deven Wellsping was not what Hanson had expected. Tall, fit, young, somewhat attractive, and had the air of raw leadership. The kind you find in new officers. Deven seemed mostly unemotive and bored with the interrogation. That irked Hanson a bit, and he was one of the humanities swords! It must be a contrived act on his part. Maybe there was more depth and intelligence to this Deven than he showed. He even made the absurd request to betray the Brotherhood so casually. Did he know what he had done to become a Diamond agent?*

*Hanson took the lifeline.  He had accepted the fate that he was going to die after an unpleasant interrogation.  They had let him stew for days, a common interrogation tactic. Instead, Deven Wellspring gave him an out.  A way to not only cut ties with the Brotherhood but also let them think he was dead.  Deven was more devious than he had imagined…*

*He wasn’t too shocked to find one of Deven’s crew was an Obsidian agent.  It made sense; Jane Doe must have been betrayed by this agent.  It didn’t matter. He was somehow going to be free.*

*Unfortunately, of his surviving crew, there were only two engineers.  At least one was his lead FTL engineer.  The ship Deven purchased wasn’t great, but the engineer said it had an excellent range for its old subspace drive.  Hanson was thorough in looking for any loopholes in his agreement with Deven, but the man seemed genuine on the surface.  He even transferred two engineering bots to his ship.  They were checked and were clean, but he had them reset anyway to be safe.*

*He was four days into subspace when an alert went off.  He rushed to the bridge to find his engineer in a panic.  He was locked out of the system, and engineering was flooded with radiation.  A cascade failure was in effect.  He was helpless to pull the ship from subspace.  If they couldn’t exit subspace that meant no escape pod or core ejection.  Hanson thought, ‘well played, Deven Wellspring, well played.’  His ship and everything on board turned into cosmic dust 9 seconds later.*

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*Eve couldn’t understand why Deven kept exposing himself and Celeste to future reprisals.  It made no sense.  She twisted her programming to make the Brotherhood agent, Hanson Gammon, a clear and present threat to Celeste’s well-being.  For the two old engineering bots being sent to the enemy’s ship she coopted the programming with a hard encoded sequence.  It would trigger when they were in subspace and take care of the threat to Celeste and their father.*