Chapter 97

Chapter 96 Where is Jane Doe?

Admiral LaRoche quickly grew frustrated.  The space elf’s ships were much faster than they had been in the sims.  He was forced to commit seven wings, 35 medium fighters, to hinder the two War Chariots that he hoped to destroy before they could rejoin the city ship.  He watched as the fighters were destroyed in succession.  When 11 young pilots had been killed, he ordered the withdrawal.  He had no time to think of the lives he had just handed the enemy in hopes of delaying them.

He started adjusting orders to his capital ships, then pulled his trap, accelerating heavy cruisers forward from above the ecliptic.  Sprite fighters were swarming near the city ship.  If these 200 elven fighters moved to his fleet things could go bad very fast.  He started rotating his front-line ships as elven long-range missiles from the city ship reached his position.  The two War Chariots he pursued starting doing the same, rotating their positions and hulls to spread incoming fire.  Reports from his bridge staff kept him updated.  So far no good news.

His second fleet came out of subspace on the far side of the elven city ship and he swore loudly. They were 500,000 kilometers from their expected transition.  His sensor officer told him the city ship had deployed subspace disrupters.  He ran out scenarios in his head with the aide of his *computer.  The last portion of his fleet would be entering too far out but maybe he could trick the War Chariots to move closer to their new subspace transition location.  He started moving his fleet and gave the War Chariots the opening to reach their city ship and they took it!  Seven minutes later the 3rd detachment emerged right in the path of the War Chariots.  These were his best light cruisers with some of the best modern weapons he had in his fleet.*

*It was 22 minutes later when the tide turned as the third detachment started pounding the two War Chariots.  The city ship had an immediate response from the unexpected effectiveness of the weapons.  The swarm of sprite fighters flew to help the War Chariots.  It was too late.  The first chariot shields fell and then it erupted in a series of explosions.  When the ship was disabled he ordered focus fire on the second chariot.  It too soon succumbed.  His victory was short-lived as the sprite fighters started to get vengeance for the loss of the two ships.  The city ship was also pulling in all its supporting ships.  It was obviously planning to flee.*

*He couldn’t stop them, but he could make them bleed.  He positioned his ships and ordered 86 gunships, and 388 light fighters launched. He was going to cut off the sprite fighters’ retreat.  The city ship would get away but if he could thin the fighter screen before the next engagement, it would give him more options.  The swarms of fighters engaged and he kept an eye on the numbers but his main focus was on the capital ships as he directed them.  One War Chariot was moving off…it was getting ready to go to subspace he surmised.  The elven ships with no subspace drives were frantically docking with the city ship.*

*Admiral LaRoche was surprised.  He was sure he was outgunned but he had numbers.  The sprites retreated and he looked at the numbers.  Fifty eight sprite fighters had been destroyed or disabled.  He had lost twenty five gunships and seventy-two light fighters.  About a 2-1 ratio.  Not great since he had vastly superior numbers but he would take it.  As the Sylvan fighters docked and the city ship powered up and entered subspace he ordered the SAR shuttles launched and ordered the fleet to the remains of Anderson Station.  They would pull what fragments they could to a higher orbit for salvage to rebuild per his orders.  He sent orders to reposition his fleet and set a 80 hour window till he pursued the elven city ship.*

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*Hanson was in his quarters when he received orders.  He was being directed out into the frontier beyond the rim to an alien-controlled system.  The Tirani.  The bear-like men who loved to fight.  But he wouldn’t get a chance to play with the Tirani warriors.  He was to remain in stealth and observe the arrival and departure of human ships.  Being relegated to being a watcher.  He had a resupply order….6 months of supplies.  That bitch was probably 0annong on leaving him and his crew out there to rot.  It was time to remove himself from the Brotherhood.*

*He would follow orders but when his resupply ship came in 6 months he would commender it and move to outlaw space.  The Brotherhood had very little influence there.   He would have to remove a few Brotherhood loyalists in his crew when it was time.*

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*Rae’Ver watched, amused as Ponfirr struggled with the human fleet.  He was well away from the action and stealthed.  The Ponfirr was caught unprepared as they were in harvest mode, cutting up sections of the station for the furnaces.  Over half the War Chariots were out searching for signs of the Void Phoenix as there were just not enough scouts.*

*The human fleet was impressive and the admiral directing it was clever.  Rae’Ver watched as two more units of the human fleet emerged and craftily cut off two War Chariots from reinforcements.  When the two assault ships were destroyed by the humans, Rae’Ver moved away and had his navigator input coordinates for Silverstream station.  He had enough operatives there that he could get some much-needed support. He might even be able to expand his fleet with a few functional junkers.*

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I missed my appointment with Gwen and Danielle in the game.  I was too absorbed in the subspace data.  Over the next few days I spent a lot of time working on the sensors.  The sensors worked in a sphere, they were not directed in an arc like all conventional sensors.  The amount of data coming in was giving Julie some fits.  I would need to upgrade her memory and processing to handle the load.  My other option would be to get another AI only to process data input from the sensors.

This might be the best choice and after talking with Danielle we set the parameters for the new AI. It was going to have dual housing. One of its units would be in the sensor room taking raw data immediately from scans. The second unit would be housed under the bridge in a shielded room. This portion would be for the interpretation of the data and relaying it to the bridge with suggestions. It would have an emergency shutoff function to kill the subspace drive if it detected imminent danger. I decided to make it a dumb AI. Powerful processing but with all breakers installed so it couldn’t evolve. Julie and Eve were more than enough for me to keep track of.

By a fortunate mistake, we found the sensors had the potential to scan a ship in three dimensions.  The mistake happened when Haily tried to scan our ship to see the sensors’ minimum effective range. Even the upgrade to our armor didn’t prevent the sensors from mapping everything.  This only worked if we focused the sensors on an area around 20 kilometers in size within its range. The most impressive part. Haily hypothesized it didn’t matter how away the object was. It just had to be in the sensor envelope. Of course data from the rest of the scanning sphere was lost but in this instance, we set doctrine to keep our conventional sensors active.

The clarity of the 3D scanner image was phenomenal.   We could even see people in real-time.  It was a little too fantastic, and we would need to confirm this high res scan worked in real space and not just subspace, but all the data indicated it would.

With only four days to the Tirani station, I started making my personalized stealth suit. My custom suit wouldn’t have many upgrades beyond the marines. I would just have slightly better stealth capability and a direct link to Julie. It had an override function as well. If I became incapacitated, then Julie could puppet the suit. I finished my suit before we reached the station.

The trip yielded the main objective of getting the new crew to merge with the existing crew. A lot of this was actually due to our hospitality staff. They had regular crew functions like parties, games, vid nights and cooperative VR sessions. Fiona Agave, the singer of all people, even passed the basic engineering certs life support and was working with Gwen and Gabby regularly. I guessed she really wanted to remain on board. I did hear her sing a few times and she was good. Sometimes walking through the ship you could hear her sing while she worked. It was not annoying at all….not like when Saabir tried to sing.

Doc and Scrubs gave me the updates on the health of the crew and we were in excellent shape. A few more weeks and everyone would have gold status. That was how they ranked health conditions of the crew…red for critical, yellow for injured, green for healthy and gold for peak physical status. Abby said participation in conditioning training was at 100% and combat training was at 87%.

With 70 crew members, that meant 61 were enrolled in combat training. Abby had her own expectations of preparedness and the crew was far from that goal. I suspected she would also keep moving that line to keep everyone focused.

Seventy crew members. I was responsible for seventy-three people when you added in the children….Tora had given birth to an adorable wren child. Gwen didn’t understand why Saabir was not interested in helping care for and raise the child named Ezra. He shared his mother’s pantherkin heritage, not his father’s tigerkin heritage. I just hoped he would be a good playmate for Celeste and Amos.

I was on a packed bridge when we transitioned to normal space in the Tirani system. The Tirani station was an eleven-hour trip in the system. We opened communications and listed our goods for sale. I was dumping quite a lot of unwanted cargo. Quite a lot of infantry weapons, old fabricators, a large number of ship parts….basically everything we had stuffed under the fake hull that I thought had value. The trade network said the Tirani would buy almost anything and pay a premium for infantry and ship weapons since they were mercenaries by trade.

The hard part was getting value in return. They didn’t trade in Sol credits, so it was about getting rare raw materials that had equivalency. Kara, Vicky, and Suruchi were all involved in getting us the best deals as we approached. Two corvettes and four fighters escorted us toward the station. We tried our new scanners and the massive holo tank of the bridge showed each ship in turn. We could zoom in on the rendered model and see everything….even the Tirani. One curious thing caught Julie’s attention and she focused on two humans working in the engineering section of one of the corvettes.

Were these humans prisoners or employed by the Tirani? I was interrupted in my musings by a comm request from the station. The regional Tirani government from the planet was requesting an in person meeting. Did my exploits already reach all the way out here? The Tirani had numerous mining and ship-building operations in this system. There was only one inhabited planet with a population of under a billion. This was one of three star systems that held most of the Tirani race.

I commed back asking about the content of the meeting. The governor wanted a cargo and four diplomats transported to the Drusi homeworld. I learned the Tirani were not welcomed in Drusi space due to a past incident, so they needed and intermediary.

Out of curiosity, I looked at the location, and it was conveniently along the path of the fleeing Union fleet that had my brother. We had gathered a fair amount of intel from our new crew members. We knew the probable destination of the Union fleet. They were targeting a star that deep space probes indicated would have a habitable planet. Two human colony ships had headed there about 200 years ago. Whether those colony ships were able to successfully navigate through alien-controlled regions of space and establish a successful colony was suspect. Most likely, the system had been settled by another species. The question was, did I really want to spend potentially three years of my life tracking down my brother? Was he even alive….was Nila alive? We would have to travel through four alien-controlled regions of space to reach the system. The first of which was the Drusi.

The entire crew was on high alert as we moved to dock. The Tirani were free traders and probably one of the more honorable species in the known galaxy. There was not much threat as long as you didn’t piss them off. The seals connected and I went to find Eve. Maybe she would like to go for a walk on an alien station.

For myself, I had some decisions to make.