Chapter 102

Host the Drusi?  Suruchi didn’t volunteer our ship immediately and waited on me to make a decision.  I asked the Tirani why first.  The idea of a neutral site was appealing to the Tirani, and they thought the Drusi would be impressed with the accommodations.  I didn’t understand as this my ship was not Tirani. Were they planning to pass off my ship as theirs?

The envoys professed no.  Just the ambiance of my ship was the main reason.  I told them I would think about it.  After the meal, I discussed it with my staff.  Suruchi jokingly said the Tirani just wanted to continue eating food prepared by our chef.  Dora said they just wanted to continue playing in the purple grass.

Joking aside. Abby was focused on the security concerns and said it wouldn’t be a problem with the number of marines she had on board.  Julie said she wasn’t at all concerned about either alien’s possible infiltration into her systems.

I commed the envoys and agreed to host after negotiating a sizable credit bonus which they transferred to me without hesitation.  We were six days away from the Drusi system, and we began preparations.  The Drusi were human-like in form.  They were similar in height and limb structure.  Their fingers were a bit longer and more dexterous.  Their skin ranged from deep green to light blue.  It was their head that made them appear alien, though.  No hair and no ears, just an auditory canal.  Slightly larger eyes that were a milky blue with no visible iris.  Their noses were flat with small nostril slits.  Their lips and teeth mirrored humans, except they had larger and sharper incisors for tearing flesh.  I had only seen a few at a distance on stations, so it would be interesting to get an up-close look.

Cori was researching and practicing her preparation of Drusi food.  My crew did not like her samples.  The food was heavy on salt and consisted mostly of dried and over-seasoned meat.  The drinks were gross, tasting like sour milk or lemon juice.  I had to talk to the chef before the crew revolted after just one day.

Suruchi and Dora were serving as the ship liaison for the hosting of the event.  The challenge of hosting an alien summit had them excited and working long hours.  I was a little unhappy that they were building a negotiation table in the center of the promenade.  Suruchi said it was to symbolize the openness of the efforts to create a new diplomatic common ground.  I just told her to remove it immediately after the conference was done.

Edmund, Franis, and Nero were leading the plundering of the Brotherhood stealth vessel. Nero was refitting the ship to produce the pellet fuel for our new generators. Edmund and Francis were trying to strip every useful and valuable piece of technology. The empty space between our faux layer was quickly being filled up again. Abby had already gotten enough weapons to fill three armories, and her marines were figuring out the Brotherhood’s exotic weapons and having Julie create VR programs to practice with them safely. It was clear from the haul that this ship was meant for strike missions from their extensive arsenal. We had been extremely fortunate that Julie took control of the ship. We identified seven fail safes in its programs to destroy data archives and weapons caches that never were activated due to her intervention.

Edmund had months worth of secret Brotherhood data to decipher. He still didn’t have the operative keys for some of the more sensitive material, but we had intact data modules. He didn’t have time to sift through it yet, and if an AI attempted to decipher it, he said it would be erased by the failsafe.

Edmund suggested I question the crew and captain we had captured. They were in holding cells in mild pain from having their cybernetic enhancements removed. I told Edmund to interrogate them when he finished with the ship. I had planned to abandon the captured crew deep in alien space, but I knew the risk of them returning to human space was too great. I secretly hoped Edmund would volunteer to eliminate our unwanted guests. If he didn’t suggest it, then I would.

Understanding the stealth system on the Brotherhood ship had fallen to Danielle, Yannis, and Garrison. We were looking to reverse engineer and figure out if we could add something similar to the *Void Phoenix*. If we could, then I would plan to drop my fake hull. Our sensor signature was already extremely faint. Just our engine exhaust betrayed us at long range.

Other than the excitement of meeting the Drusi, I was focused on my robotics lab.  I could build my heavy infantry suits now that I had a power source. The problem was I needed a complete redesign.  I was finding dozens of ways to harden the suits in combat by examining the Armageddon bot’s internals.  Gabby was working right next to me the entire time, taking the same military engineering revelations to add to her trio of projects, the updated wolf bots, the Black Widows, and the six steward spy bots. Unsurprisingly, she was focused on her steward bots first, especially after I told her she would not get any micro fission cores until the marines were outfitted with heavy combat armor.

The good news about the Gorilla heavy suits was I no longer had to think about the weapons systems. Abby and her marines sifted through their looted weapons and gave me various load-outs they would prefer after testing them in VR. We had three load-outs, shipboard combat, space combat, and planetary combat. Making the changes modular would allow quick switching between them.

I was even thinking of scrapping all my original stealth suits and just rebuilding them with all the knowledge we had gained. Performance-wise, the gains would be marginal, but functionality after taking damage in combat would be increased significantly.  But for now, we just planned to add the small deflector shield for defense against the micro concussion grenades.

When I spent time in my cabin playing with the children, I also worked on the subspace data. Danielle tried to tear me away from it, but it was too fascinating to ignore. It was Celeste crying when I ignored her that had me put down the data slates. So I ended up just spending an hour every night in VR combining my data and postulating things. Speculating on this abstract field was not my strong suit. I just didn’t have all the rules yet for the mathematical equations to work out. It was frustrating as I felt I was just slightly short of enough data points to figure some things out.

Before we reached the Drusi system, I fabricated Eve’s new suit. It had the majority of the enhancements from our reverse engineering of the Armageddon bots. Eve’s combat effectiveness was beyond scary. In VR, she was able to eliminate every marine on the *Void Phoenix* 3 out of 4 times in ship seizure attempts. The two times she lost, extraordinary measures were taken to destroy large sections of the ship to blow her into space. I was surprised that Abby didn’t object to me outfitting Eve with the combat armor. My suit was left half-finished as I wanted to cram all the advancements I could into it.

The bridge was packed when we dropped out of subspace in the Drusi system. The Drusi had two large habitable worlds that were mostly water. The Drusi had a subspecies that still lived in the vast oceans of its planets but used mostly primitive tools. I was told they were similar to the neanderthals and home sapiens from our own human lineage. The Drusi species could interbreed, but it was frowned upon.

My bridge crew got to work using our advanced scanners and sending out identifiers over the comms. Elias was scanning Drusi mining ships in extreme detail one by one, as they were the closest ships to our position. Our Drusi hosts accepted us as friendly and connected us with the civilian sensor buoy system. Elias immediately overlayed the data and found four anomalies. Elvis, the AI running the sensors was working faster and faster as Elias programmed priorities for him. Of the stealthed ships, two were Drusi cruisers that were powered down and in stealth, and the other two were stealthed ships that belonged to alien species I was not familiar with.

We focused our scans on these ships. One race was quadrupedal, and the other seemed aquatic in nature. The strange thing was the two ships seemed aware of each other, maybe working in concert. Their stealth seemed limited to minimal power emissions and drifting through the system while collecting data. Elvis, the sensor AI, was tasked with keeping track of them. He groaned at being given such a menial task.

The Drusi response to our request for a delegation to come aboard and negotiate a peace with the Tirani was met with silence. A tense hour later, we were connected directly to the Supreme, their leader. The Supreme started asking me questions I had no answers to. I called for Suruchi and the Tirani to get up here and answer the leader’s questions.

Suruchi thankfully arrived and took over. I was way out of my depth at being both diplomatic and courteous. I watched the master work her magic, and the Tirani envoys never made it to the bridge before Suruchi convinced the Supreme to send a delegation to our ship. I learned a few things from Suruchi’s methods, and maybe by observing her more in the future, I might be able to hold my own when talking with the ruler of 40 billion people.

The Supreme gave us a prestigious orbit over one of the worlds. Surucuchi switched to working on trading what little cargo we deemed trash to the local merchants. With our recent arms upgrade, we had stockpiles of old weapons and outdated ship parts that just took up mass.

We did get some inquiries about the ship attached to our hull. We had already removed its weapons and all its stealth coating. It looked more like a wreck than a functional ship. Our explanation was the ship was salvaged, which was the truth. Nero was close to starting our pellet fuel creation. Once we converted the ship’s fuel to pellets for our micro power generators we could scuttle the vessel. We had seven micro fission generators built and ready to be utilized.

It took four days before the Drusi boarded our ship. Four dignitaries. I watched the ceremonies before returning to my own work in robotics. Gabby was ready for her first steward spy bot, and I was getting close to finalizing my heavy combat armor. In normal gravity, the armor was going to be too heavy to use on normal ships. The deck plating was too thin. Maybe my new suits would be better used for space marines focused on ship boarding actions. They would do too much damage to the *Void Pheonix* as defensive suits.

I got brief updates from Suruchi on the progress of the negotiations. Suruchi was sitting at the table as a moderator. I wondered if she ever thought she would be in this position. The Tirani had already transferred their gifts, and they were well received. The hangups for both parties were that the Tirani wouldn’t commit to their mercenaries, never attacking a Drusi encampment or ship.

I told Suruchi to nudge it along and even gave her the plots of the two stealthed enemy ships as a goodwill gesture. I only did this because I learned both alien races on those ships were expansionist species. This allowed us to watch a quick little firefight with one spy ship being destroyed and the other captured.

The Tirani were given credit for uncovering the stealthed ships, and it gave them the upper hand. The final stipulation for Tirani to be allowed travel through Drusi space was any established colony within Drusi space wouldn’t be attacked by the Tirani. There was a good deal of legal jargon about what constituted Drusi space, but the Tirani seemed happy with the final contract.

We needed some type of ship’s motto like ‘solving the galaxies problems one issue at a time.’ We had a lot of liquid credits in terms of precious materials, and Suruchi wanted to get her hands dirty before we moved on.

Our next stop in pursuit of the Union fleet, was an independent system. It was a large asteroid belt mining colony, with hundreds of operations in the outer system. In some way, the five different races mining in the system got along and shipped their refined metals to a central hub.

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*Captain Hassim Morain sat on the bridge of his ship nervously as he waited for the agent to arrive. How was he going to explain Hanson’s failure to take the old hauler? Would she blame him for not giving Hassim enough intel on the ship? He did know where the ship was headed and that Deven Wellspring was on board. He had been planted here by the Brotherhood two years ago to watch the Tirani. The Tirani had the most potent ground infantry and shipboard marines in this sector of space. The thing they lacked was technology. He was to report any technology advancements back to Earth. But the only excitement in the last two weeks was for a new purple grass drug. Maybe the Brotherhood would find the information useful in controlling the Tirani. He was reaching for straws. Diamond agents were usually unforgiving.*

*The blips on his screen indicated she had arrived in the company of two other ships. He just hoped they didn’t attack the station. Humans have consistently underestimated alien species.*