Chapter 130 Plans Within Plans

The bridge quickly transformed into an operations center.  As we moved closer and carefully scanned each ship, we identified seventeen ships with the personnel we were seeking.  Julie wormed her way into systems and pulled out relevant data.

The third fleet, composed of the mothballed ships, contained the most important ships for a new colony.  They were stuffed with colony pre-fab buildings.  The ships were going to be hollowed out and converted to orbital farms on arrival.  These ships also had a large number of civilians.  Julie figured out the Union Premier University of Technology had been raided under false pretenses.  The Union told the students that the Sapphireans were going to bomb the planet, so they evacuated most of the students and professors.  They obviously just wanted to seed the new colony with strong genetics.

These civilians were restless as they were on an extended voyage and had limited access to information.  The Navy staff operating the 3rd fleet were more like prison guards, and Julie noted most abuses reported were ignored.  Initially, we didn’t have any targets within this fleet.  Once we reviewed the academics, I thought a large number could be helpful in unraveling our technology needs.  Julie was working with Doc to get long-distance psych evaluations completed. At least preliminary evaluations.

One sore point I learned was Nila was married.  It shouldn’t have bothered me much, except her husband was her superior officer, and she was seven months pregnant.  Obviously, regulations had been thrown out the window when the fleet had abandoned its duties and fled.  If she was happy, then maybe I shouldn’t try to abduct her.  Julie delved into the systems on the battleship but didn’t find any records or personal logs that revealed Nila’s state of mind.  I thought about sending her a comm but didn’t want to risk revealing my presence.  According to the Union database records, I was KIA.

My brother had been reassigned to a cruiser and had risen in rank.  He was in charge of the 1st armored unit.  The fleet had only two armored detachments with heavy vehicles and battle suits.  He was still in logistics and had to make sure all the vehicles were ready for operation at a moment’s notice.  Not an easy job since they had been traveling in space for years.  Once they landed on the colony planet, though, these two units would be responsible for protecting the civilians planetside or maybe keeping the populace in line.

Would the people we came this far even want to leave?  That was the biggest question in our strategy meetings as we mulled over the data.  How to extract them was the second.  The best plan offered was from Gabby.  She said we should get everyone we wanted on one ship.  Then when the fleet went to subspace have our targeted ship break down.  Then we could take on the single ship ourselves instead of dealing with all these ships.  It sounded far-fetched as ideas go.

However, Julie thought it might be possible as transfers among the ships during these long layovers were widespread.  Fabricating the orders wouldn’t be difficult, but if the wrong people started looking into it, it could fall apart extremely quickly.  Nero stated we should create the reason for the transfer then.  Whatever our target ship was, we board it, sabotage it, and then push through the transfers to deal with the issues we created. Thereby bringing all the personnel we wanted to one location.

We began to search for the ideal ship.  It had to be large to account for all the personnel transfers, and I did not want it to have a lot of weapons.  Massive transports were off the table as they would not need the number of Marines we were seeking to transfer.  Abby came up with the plan to focus on one of the battleships loaded with civilians from the university.  She thought we could fabricate a revolt amount them and damage the ship enough to bring in the people we wanted to subdue the discontent.

There were a ton of risks with this plan.  Innocents could be injured or killed.  The revolt could take off and be successful.  There could be an overwhelming force in response to the revolt.  Julie’s records indicated that last option was extremely likely.

Edmund offered his own take.  First, the Brotherhood communications were coming mainly from the 2nd fleet composed of the illegally built battleships by the corporations.  They appeared to be puppeting a number of officers in the fleet.  He guessed they were trying to hold the fleet together to get to the desired destination.  This supported my theory that the Brotherhood wanted this fleet to succeed in spreading humanity further from the core worlds and past the Alien Alliance.

Suruchi offered the idea that we reveal ourselves as a trader.  Unfortunately, Julie killed that idea.  The records she obtained from the Union showed they had encountered forty-seven traders in empty systems like this on their trek to this point.  The policy was to open trade, disable the trader, and take everything.  If they were human traders, the crew was incorporated into ships in the fleet. If they were aliens, there were no records of their fate, but clear records of scrapping the alien traders for parts showed their true fate.

Nearly a week passed as we spied and discussed our options.  I eventually decided to make a move, as we only had eight days before the fleet was scheduled to depart.  I had Julie open access to all databases to everyone, creating a wave of free information throughout the fleet.  I thought this was a subtle way to create unrest without drawing attention to our presence.  Julie stood poised to take action if needed.  Seven hours after the information release, the commanders started to secure the leaks by locking down terminal access.  It was too late, as many copies of the data were already made and circulating.

The first domino was the lone smelter the fleet had.  It was operating in the asteroids alone.  The smelter had four breakaway harvester ships that mined the resources and brought back material to the smelter.  The harvesters did not have subspace capability and needed to dock with the smelter to travel FTL.  Three of the four harvesters docked, and then the smelter started a hard burn out of the system.  They were far enough out of range to make the transition without a fighter-interceptor reaching them.

After the smelter fled, things quickly went downhill.  I could not fathom the series of events that would happen next.  A cruiser’s power core went critical and ejected its core straight at one of the battleships.  The resulting explosion did considerable damage to one of the corporate battleships.  In the confusion, scattered mutinies started to happen throughout the smaller ships as they tried to break away.  It was absolute chaos.

Edmund was monitoring the Brotherhood comms, and they were frantic as well.  The fleet must have been held together by bubblegum and duct tape.  Things started to get worse when a battleship fired missiles at two fleeing transports, destroying both.  The comms were awash with threats.  I had Julie tap in and ordered our plan into action.  She started altering transfer orders and getting the people we wanted onto one of the colony battleships.

Both Brotherhood shuttles were being prepped.  They would dock with the ship and remain cloaked until they entered subspace. Then they would board it, force it out of subspace, and then pacify the Marines.  It was clear there was no unifying command in the fleet.  Three separate admirals, two corporate CEOs, and one Union Planetary governor all thought they were in charge.  It was making our plan progress as envisioned.

In the end, a few ships did manage to break away but nothing larger than a frigate.  Eighteen ships had been destroyed or damaged.  Now Marines were sent to stand watch on the bridge of all ships, no matter how small.  It might have been humorous, except 320 men, women, and children had been killed by the rouse I ordered.  It weighed on me as there had probably been a better way.   As things settled over the next few days, our plan mostly worked.  Only two of our targets were not on the chosen battleship.

One was Nila.  Her husband had canceled her orders, and she was confined to quarters.  The other was a Marine who was diverted to a medium transport to stand watch on their bridge.  The two Brotherhood shuttles were pepped and on standby, and I needed to decide what to do.  I could just be happy getting the plan to work to this point.  Or I could send shuttles and try to extract Nila and capture the medium transport.  The medium transport was a built for refueling larger ships.  It was vital to the operation of the entire fleet.  I was thinking big.  Completely capture the battleship and use the transport to top off its fuel tanks.  Then we could take the battleship as a prize.

Maybe the conscripted humans from the university would want to return to human space or even join the Squirrel in the Bradbury system.  The battleship they were on had numerous pre-fab colony structures.  There was even a habitable planet in the Bradbury system they could colonize.  Well, habitable except for numerous other races hiding in subspace shadows haunting it.

I approved the orders to send another shuttle to the refueling transport. My last important decision was whether to try and get Nila. She was confined to quarters, Abby reminded me. That meant her husband did not trust her. She was probably being held against her will.

Thirty-six hours before the fleet was supposed to depart, three shuttles left the Void Phoneix. The two Brotherhood shuttles made for the battleship Fortuna. The third shuttle made for the Hydro Therapy, the refueling transport. I made my way in my optimized Badger combat armor to the fourth prepared shuttle. The Alpha Team was also waiting for me with Eve in her own suit of personalized power armor. I had not planned on taking Eve, but she insisted. Julie’s bot, Chloe, was suited in of light Geko armor. She was going to hack the ship systems for us when we boarded.

Abby showed up at the shuttle and tried to convince me for the tenth time not to go. It was a personal epiphany that the reason that I came out here was not for my brother but, in fact, to rescue Nila. I wasn’t sure why I had to do this as my rational mind told me I probably would not make much of a difference on this mission.

I boarded the shuttle and was surprised to find Zoe and Elias in the cockpit. I probably should have ordered the assigned pilots back and sent Zoe and Elias to the bridge. But having them here was reassuring. My old Union Marine shuttle went through flight pre-checks, and then we exited the flight bay into space.

Mozzie, one of my heavies, made jokes the entire time we were in flight. I flicked my HUD to the shuttle to watch our approach. Zoe moved cautiously among the fleet of behemoth battleships. It was the first time that I could remember the ace pilot using caution. She placed out suttle port side, just aft of a heavy grazer emplacement on the Bastian’s Shield. As we settled in, the shuttle hull used its photonic cells to activate a chameleon effect, blending us visually into the hull.

Now all we had to do was wait until the battleship entered subspace. Nila’s crew quarters were 32 meters from where we had locked onto the hull. Zoe and Elias remained in the cabin, watching sensors and listening to our secured comms from the Void Phoenix. If anything started to go wrong, they would react instantly.

Mozzie made a fart joke and everyone laughed…