Chapter 153

We managed only to take on seven Tirani passengers when we left Galadium. They were to help lay the groundwork for the arrival of the five thousand members of their clan. I was going to have to meet with them repeatedly during the six-day subspace trip to the Bradbury system.

The first meeting did not go well as they made numerous requests that sounded closer to demands of me. They wanted their own orbital trading station, for starters. I was open to building a Tirani station, but they wanted ownership of it, which was a non-starter. They kept circling back to the point because they knew how many credits I had. Eventually, I had to end the meeting, feigning anger.

Even though they were relocating to the Bradbury system and I had exclusive contract rights to their trading operations, they wanted assurances they would stand to make a profit. It was not going to be an issue as I had more Tirani credits than I would ever know what to do with, but still they were traders, and they were pressing for every advantage. I was an engineer, not a merchant.

When they returned to negotiations, they accepted the station would be built by me and owned by me. Their second ‘request’ was more reasonable. They wanted one of the agricultural domes surrounding the City of Arcadian to produce the purple grass. In Tirani space, my business partner was the only one licensed to produce, refine, and sell it.

Thankfully, Shara, my young bridge sensor officer, came to my rescue on this point as she had studied up on the purple grass, having never tried it before this voyage. The compound in the grass was refined into extremely popular consumables to the Tirani. She suggested that we refine the purple grass and focus on manufacturing just one or two products, aiming for quality. It would minimize manufacturing infrastructure and offer two products our partner did not offer.

The two products we decided on by the end of the voyage were an alcoholic beverage and an infused chocolate. Dark chocolate was a noval sweet to Tirani, and adding the extract made it a luxury item. The alcohol was a wine we were already producing from berry bushes we cultivated from another assortment of seeds we found with the Tirani seeds.

That was not the end of the ‘requests.’ Preferred housing, priority repairs, upgraded sensors, new subspace drives…they were trying to ring this cooperative agreement for all it was worth. I definitely preferred dealing with the Tirani mercenaries over the Tirani traders. They were much more straightforward, but without the merchant trader faction, the Tirani would have probably been swallowed by alien expansionists—like the Brotherhood. The Merchant-Merc was a good balance to have.

Abby visited me in the conference room the day before we were to reach Bradbury.  I had been busy with our Tirani ‘guests’, so she had not talked to me. She just wanted to give me some advice. She thought the Tirani Marines would bring a lot to our forces in the future, but it would take time to train them.  She was more focused on my handing over my accounts to Mozzie and Luna before we left Gladium.  Abby thought I should put some constraints on the spending as neither of them was known to be thrifty when it came to credits.

She apologized that she did not mention it sooner. I doubted the two could even put a dent in my accounts anyway—unless their new clan was composed of thousands of Tirani—that wouldn’t happen, though.

When we transitioned to the Bradbury system, I was shocked to find Samantha’s battleship holding at the edge of the system. The two Fateweaver-class cruisers were holding position nearby. Elias’ projections on the battleship’s arrival were for two more days. He guiltily said they must have cut corners on maintenance to get here so quickly.

Communications started rolling in, and they had only arrived nine hours ago. We moved to their position, and I sent my own communications out. The Squirrel were going to be ecstatic about the upcoming assault on the quadruped systems. Suruchi was probably not going to be thrilled with the incoming Tirani.

Arcadian City was only about half built and already close to capacity. The five hundred agricultural domes were being built as needed, and I had just committed three of them to my new Tirani enterprise. I hoped that Mozzie was correct and that we would start to yield Marines from the Fossores Clan.

The Bravados Clan was going to be easier to accommodate, with four hundred family members and less than a hundred warriors. They would enroll in the Naval Academy to undergo Marine training before joining our ships.

We approached the battleship, and Samantha was on a rendezvous shuttle with the Fateweaver. I would take her in system, and we would get the bots to transfer Lazarous to her custody. I also sent out a call for Amos to come to the Fateweaver. Might as well get the entire family reunion done quickly so we can focus on the five-month preparation for joint assault.

I held off meeting Samantha as I reviewed the Fateweaver construction. We had four dry docks on the asteroid for the construction of the ships, and only one additional cruiser would be completed in that time. I set up a call with Admiral Rouse. Desdemona was reviewing the data packets and looked up from her screen.

We quickly hashed out a plan. I would take the Fateweaver and Cloud Jumper to the quadruped shipyards. She would take command of the Excalibur when it was completed, and the New Horizon. Desdemona would be attacking the mining system where the quadrupeds were using prisoners to help mine. We each would have two support transports, equipped with the improved drive coming with us.

Part of Desdemona’s parol was never leaving the Bradbury system. I was taking a leap of faith in trusting her with the command of two of our powerful assets. Desdemona was already making requests of the shipyard to complete the Excaliber. She wanted to squeeze in an additional two Slipstream fighters. She was also submitting transfer requests for her current crew.

The problem was we were still extremely thin on the qualified crew. With these four new cruisers and the current defense fleet, it was going to be a difficult fight if we sustained damage.

My PerCom beeped. Amos and Celeste had come aboard. I was not surprised Celeste had come with Amos to meet his mother and father. They were close, like brother and sister. I would have liked to be there, but my PerCom and screens were rapidly filling with responses to my data dump. I would love to only be responsible for a single ship’s maintenance…

<<<<<<<<<<<<>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>

The shuttle landed, and Amos stepped off first. He was nervous, and his sister put her hand on his shoulder to steady his emotions. He rarely showed emotions, but now he fidgeted. He had wanted to come alone, but Celeste wouldn’t let him. Now, he was glad for her support.

To surprise Deven, they had been working frantically in the civilian shipyards to complete the Void Phoenix. The ship was almost ready, and then this. It was like his entire world had been flipped upside down. His mother was alive. Not his true mother. Eve was the closest thing he had to a mother.

Growing up, she was the only one who listened to him. Celeste has always thought the universe revolved around her—taking him along for the ride. He entered the lift and tapped the forward viewing room. That was where his PerCom said she waited.

The lift ride was seconds, but he wished it would never end. Why did he even have to do this? He needed to get his emotions under control. He was not going to cry. He found what he was searching for: anger. That was a good emotion for the encounter. He was not the one who should be worried, it was here.

The lift doors opened, and the forward viewing room was before him. A woman in a uniform with short blonde hair stood with her back to him. He moved forward and told Celeste to wait by the lift. He walked up behind the woman, who slowly turned around. She was old. Well, not old, just graying. She obviously did not have access to SNAIL treatments. Her expression was blank.

He studied her and saw the familiar features of his own face. She was waiting for him to speak first. She had a command authority to her, straight back, impassive stare, eyes that told you nothing. His face suddenly wiped up, and he slapped her hard, sending her stumbling. He spun before seeing her reaction. He had expected something from her. Some emotion—guilt, regret, happiness to see him. There was nothing. He had no mother birth mother. Eve had raised him; if anyone deserved that title, it was her.

Celeste was at the lift and entered with him. She asked if he was alright. He just nodded, a single tear falling from his left eye. That was all the grieving he would do for his lost mother, a single tear.