Chapter 98 Catnip for Bears

Eve joined me after getting a few bots to the station and watching the children with Claire.  She was very protective and rarely left the children for more than an hour during the day.  I think she only came with me to the station because her directives still had to procreate me as a priority.  We had no problems getting through security, and my two marine shadows were allowed side arms.

The station smelled like antiseptic soap.  It was also blue.  And by blue, I mean every shade of blue you could think of.  Eve informed me the color blue was considered royalty since the Tirani had copper blood which made them bleed blue.  The smell was due to the bots constantly cleaning the station.  The station administrator feared alien diseases, apparently.  There was definitely a variety of aliens on the station.  The central market area had at least a dozen different aliens, two I didn’t even recognize.

The Tirani were the opposite of humans.  Humans were xenophobic as a species, while Tirani embraced other cultures and frequently blended foreign technology into their own.  Their scientists were average on the galactic scale, but their engineers were creative.  We had six hours before meeting the Tirani group that wanted passage.  We were going to do some window shopping.  The station catered to many races and had a lot of variety.  I spotted our chef in a frozen food shop and wondered what culinarily masterpieces she would come up with.

I entered a stylist shop.  It had an automated robot that gave haircuts and did makeup.  We had a small spa on the luxury deck that did the same thing, but I sat down for a quick hair and beard trim.  Eve asked me a few questions regarding her own style and if she should make changes.  I told her she could choose anything she wanted, and she moved into the seat.  The bot had trouble cutting Eve’s hair, and I lamented the loss as they were expensive acoustic sensors.  Eve chose to go with a French braid.  What really added to her appearance was the makeup. The bot applied some incredible shadowing and highlights of color on her cheeks.

When I told her how amazing she looked, she immediately spent the equivalent of 103 Sol credits on makeup. That is a lot of money.  She said she planned to share with Julie....well, the Claire bot.  A Tirani male who spoke our language commented that my woman had just purchased a decade’s worth of makeup, and he hoped I got paid in services from my voluptuous mate.  I guess Eve’s beauty transcended races.

We entered a weapons shop, and my two marine shadows looked more interested than I was.  I had money, so I decided to purchase a few handguns.  Three simple laser pistols, a heavy plasma pistol, a focused sonic pistol, and three ballistic slug pistols.  All were from various races across this region of space.  I tested the grip on all of them, and my human hands could use them after some adjustments by the gunsmith.  I got ammo for each one and sent Julie a message to create a lockable wall display case for my quarters.

We moved to a ship parts vendor. The inventory was all done by a terminal, and I could look at three-dimensional images and specs. I searched for power systems first. There was never enough power on a ship.  Sometimes you could get the power, but the mass of the fuel made it unfeasible. I didn’t find my answer but I did purchase an emergency solar array.  It was 2.2 m cube and expanded to 18,000 square meter array.  It was a single-use array after being deployed.  I figured it was something a trader might purchase and it had good utility in an emergency.

We looked at the ship-for-sale registry next. The most interesting was an ancient human battleship.  It had been stripped of weapons and shields but had a functional subspace drive.  It was listed as a mobile mining platform.  While I had the holo display of the battleship up a middle-aged man sat next to me.

He was human and asked me about my about business in Tirani space.  I said we were skirting human space and making trades.  He offered me a contract to pick up a shipment of weapons and bring them back to this station.  His ship had sustained too much damage and couldn’t make the trip.  I asked how did he know I was a captain.  He just thumbed in the direction of my two armed shadows.  We talked further, captain to captain.  He had a terrible engineer who fell behind on the maintenance of his subspace drive, resulting in a cascading failure. I just nodded.  I didn’t want to reveal that I was an engineer.  Maybe this man was looking for me.  The conversation did seem innocent, and I got his name as he left, Captain Hassim Morain.

I walked with Eve through some clothing stores, and she insisted I update my wardrobe.  So I spent my remaining time studying the clothing fabricators on the station.  Maybe I could get some understanding of the alien fabricator I had liberated from the planetoid.  Julie sent me a comm message.  My meeting with the governor and his attendants was in the lower viewing room.  We headed all the way down through the station under the guard of four Tirani warriors in armor. We entered a room with a floor that was a viewing port to the planet below.

I got vertigo for just a second before catching myself.  Eve whispered that the floor was a vid screen and not actually made from transparent material.  I was impressed as the detail looked perfect.  I paused, studying it for a second before heading to a large conference table that had seven Tirani in robes.  Guards in heavy non-powered armor stood around the room.  I sat and was confused.  These high-level officials wanted my crappy-looking ship to transport them to the Drusi homeworld?  Was I transporting a bomb?

They opened the meeting with the choreographed Tirani formalities.  I had glanced the protocols and responded correctly.  Then they explained that Tirani mercenaries had opposed the Drusi at one of their colonies.  The mercenaries were hired by another race to clear the Drusi off the planet.  The mercenaries killed and captured the Drusi and then shipped the survivors back to the Drusi system. The Drusi still held a grudge, and now Tirani ships were allowed in Drusi space.

Now a new Supreme was taking control of the Drusi empire.  The Tirani governor thought that a sizable gift may convince the Drusi to open their space again to Tirani mercenaries and trade ships.  This would give them easier access to that region of space.  Since my ship had posted luxury cabins and had enough cargo capacity for their gift I was being considered.  So this was my interview.

The pay was ludicrous, with 5000 Sol credit equivalents in rare metals up front and another 5000 on the successful delivery of their envoys.  It seemed to true to be good.  The cargo was natural osmium crystals. Three tons...worth about 50,000 Sol credits due to their rarity. As they said, this was an interview, and the expedition wasn’t leaving for 11 days. If I was interested, then I could note my interest now.

I didn’t need the money.  I was going to be headed in that direction, though.  Being on good terms with an alien race seemed like a good idea, too, since I was alienating human nations in my wake.  I told them I was interested, but I would need to be able to scan any cargo brought on board.  They agreed but my bid would require a tour of my ship.  I negotiated this down to just deck 7, the luxury cabin deck where they would reside on the trip. I commed Suruchi and Dora.  They would be responsible for the tour.

The majority of the Tirani race were between 1.9 and 2.2 meters.  They were considered bear-like due to their heads resembling bears from old Earth.  They were well-muscled and had four fingers in each hand.  Their bodies were covered in thick hair that was either white or black.  Very few deviated from these colors, but those who did were celebrated for their uniqueness.  The group of four that would make up the envoys were gray, black, white and maroon furry beasts.  I left with Eve and my escort.

Since we were headed out of human space, I wanted to look for an AI core to manage the alien sensor data.  The vendors didn’t have any human AI cores. The Tirani primarily used AIs but by a race called the Wraiths.  The Wraiths were humanoid with pale almost translucent skin.  Their society was very similar to humanity but they evolved in large underground and maze-like cities.  This subterranean race only recently ventured into the galaxy with the aide of the Tirani.

I was currently standing in front of a Wraith.  He was hairless, and seeing his veins clearly beneath his skin was a little off-putting. He was currently pitching his blank AI cores to me.  It was compatible with my interface and was 11% percent faster than an equivalent human AI.  That really didn’t mean anything since there was so much variety across human space.  I started to review the specs and Eve interrupted.

She had already made the comparison for me and relayed her findings.  Huh, the Wraith AI was as advertised. It was slightly better than what I had planned to install.  The issue was cooling.  The Wraith AI ran fairly hot so Nero would have to set up some cooling systems in the housing room.  I spent four hours with the Wraith and commed Danielle who was growing more and more excited about installing the alien tech.  She decided we needed two AI cores at the two planned install sites but both cores would be controlled by a single seeded personality.  That is what software engineers called AIs, seeded personalities.  Even if they had no capacity for growth like the one I was in the process of purchasing.

I ordered the two ‘clean’ cores and they were set to be delivered.  The clean cores were new and never utilized to host an AI.  The seeded personality was selected by Eve.  It was a male and she named him Elvis.  I wasn’t surprised as this was the name of the AI from the pirate vid comedy we used to watch.  That AI had a sarcastic sense of humor and got the crew into trouble just as much as he got the crew out of trouble.  I hoped this was not a bad omen.  I wanted to explore further but Even insisted we head back to the ship and check on Celeste and Amos.

I worked with Nero over the next two days to create the space and coolant infrastructure for the two cores. Danielle was so happy I got a wonderful reward in my cabin.  As we were finishing up with the installation and initialization of the AI the envoys came for their tour.

The crew were having a lot of fun on the Tirani station.  It was the first time in an alien port for just about everyone.  The Tirani tour on our ship was a huge event.  Suruchi and Dora had done a lot of research to make changes that would be attractive to the bear people.  But what drew them was the red alien grass on the promenade.  They said it smelled intoxicating to them.  That caused Doc and Scrubs to spend two hours to confirm it was not harmful to them.  What they found out was slightly amusing.  The grass stimulated Tirani like catnip did for felines.  I had to look up catnip and felines as I was unfamiliar with the pet species from Earth.

One of the envoys unabashedly rolled around in the soft purple grass.  The other three were clearly restraining themselves.  I think we had just won the bid to host and transport the envoys.  This was confirmed two days later.

One of the brothers of an envoy contacted me shortly after the visit.  He wanted to start a business with my purple grass.  I listened to him and he would either give me 1200 Sol credits and a 10% stake in the business or a straight-up 50% stake in the business in exchange for seeds and growing information.  I didn’t need the money so I chose the second option. I had my two botanists send the data and seeds down to the planet.  Maybe it would yield a return but I wasn’t holding out hope for bearnip....bearclaw....beargrass.... Well, he could assign whatever name he wanted to it.  It had just been an interesting science project for me to get the ancient seeds to grow.

The berries from the bushes my botantists had fermented was also a possible cash crop and Abraham thought I should rent an orbital farm to grow the bushes and process the berries.  Such a long-term investment seemed unnecessary at this point so I passed.

In the days waiting for our departure my crew dumped a lot of their credits into the station.  I visited twice more myself on dates with Danielle. She was more successful than Eve in getting me to purchase an entire new wardrobe.

As the day approached the hull cavities were finally clean of loot and the ship was in fantastic shape.  The new AI came online and did a sweeping scan at maximum range. Elvis dropped interesting data to the sensor station on the bridge in an order of priority. I was on the bridge when Elias told me a stealthed ship was watching us.  I asked how he was certain it was watching us.  He showed me the orientation of the ship and how it had shadowed us when we had changed docking ports.  We had moved from the trader ring to the diplomatic ring to await our passengers.

I started to get really concerned and asked Edmund to come to the bridge.  He confirmed that was a Brotherhood ship.  He had only picked up small chatter on the Brotherhood frequencies, nothing concerning.  But he reminded me that he was a low-ranking agent.  If higher-ranked agents were communicating, he couldn’t listen in with his PerCom.  The best guess Edmund gave me was the ship would try to board us when we made our way out of the system to transition to subspace.  What Edmund did have good knowledge of was the Brotherhood's tactics in such engagements.

I started having Elias do detailed scans of the stealthed ship and then called in Abby and her marine sergeants.  I planned to completely flip their attempt to take my ship on them.  We would take theirs instead.