*Hanson Gammon tapped his fingers on the armrest of his bridge. It had been four months since he lost the Void Phoenix. Four fucking months! Where does a ship disappear to? At least that fucking Devon Wellspring could have done him the courtesy of leaving evidence of his ship scattered an asteroid somewhere. But to just disappear?*

*Hanson had to resort to back-tracing the ship's path. He had used a large number of resources to find out the ship had been purchased on Silverstream Station in independent space. It had been used to ferry Wren refuges from human space. The man, Devon, had arrived in an old shuttle loaded with precious metals.*

*Hanson’s best guess was the man had raided a Union planetary vault when the entire Union was dissolving. The man single-handedly refurbished the ship and started hauling passengers. The issue that Hanson was having was the amount of wealth the ship had dropped as it moved from port to port. In one of those ports, a passenger took a shuttle fully loaded with crates of precious metal for herself. An accomplice? A payoff? Well, he would soon find out. An Obsidian agent was delivering Vanessa Holliday on a courier shuttle to his frigate.*

*The abduction had been a little messy, three of the family members had been killed. The local authorities that had been paid to look the other way changed their minds halfway through the extraction. The agents still succeeded and the local police would be disciplined by the Brotherhood later.*

*The shuttle dropped out of subspace on his scanners. His sensors office confirmed the shuttle ID and Hanson ordered his stealth dropped. Well, it was time to get some frustrations out and hopefully have an update to send back to Earth.*

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*Hanson left Vanesa slumped and bleeding in the chair. That had been the most surprising interrogations of his career. If he hadn’t done it himself he would have thought it was some fantastic story from a bad vid story. He was deciding what he should do with his bevy of information.*

*His ship doctor interrupted his thoughts. He was asking if he should treat the woman. Hanson looked at her on the screen in his office. She was broken, six hours of steady and varying pain would do that. She could be leveraged against Devon. He was certain he had gotten everything useful out of the woman though. If she was alive then another agent might take possession of her and he would lose exclusivity to what she had told him. He turned to the doctor and told him to space her.*

*So his new friend Devon Wellspring had raided an alien planet full of wealth and interesting technology. He had even destroyed a Sylvan city ship…something no human civilization had ever done. How much more wealth does the man have left? He probably detoured to his stash to resupply. The thing with a ship his size though was that he couldn’t hide forever.*

*He paused a moment before completing his report to send back to back. He decided to include that Devon Wellspring was a security threat to the interests of the Brotherhood and that he had recovered a vast amount of wealth from a secret Union base. He included that he believed Devon was either conspiring with Jane Doe or that he believed Jane Doe was his prisoner. This report should be enough to keep him on this task. Now he just needed the Void Phoenix to poke its head again.*

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*Jae’Tir sat across from Rae’Ver. The pair’s relationship had gotten tense as the trail had dried up. Jae’Tir’s city ship the Ponffir had remained orbiting the high-gravity world. The human research station was now drifting in pieces in a slowly decaying orbit. Rae’Ver had been furious with Jae’Tir’s heavy-handed assault on the station. Humans needed to be manipulated not controlled. The harder you tried to force or control them the more they resisted. Rae’Ver firmly believed this one action by Jae’Tir was going to rally the humans together.*

*The only smart thing Jae’Tir had done was insert bio-synths into nearly two hundred humans before letting them flee back to their empires.*

*Rae’Ver had been making inroads into Jae’Tir’s crew behind his back. That was why they were now staring at each other. Rae’Ver had been using his gifts to influence Sylvan minds under the Frist Citizen’s nose. Jae’Tir then did the unexpected. He banished Rae’Ver. At first, he thought he was joking…but then he remembered the First Citizen had no humor. Banishment for a First Citizen was the most embarrassing that could be done. Usually, they would be assigned to stasis and awoken when needed to combat the Malevolents.*

*Jae’Tir was also taking back the War Chariot. He was going to be given a Dark Star scout ship instead. The Dark Star was small, maybe 100 crew. It did have good stealth against human sensors but not Sylvan sensors. It had almost no weapons. It was a spy ship. The number of attendants around and Jae’Tir… He had no chance. His power was still recovering. He allowed himself to be escorted off the ship to his new home.*

*The two human pirates, Sha’Lua, and his 58 strongest remaining supporters. Exile for all of them from the Sylvan culture and support network. Rae’Ver should be fuming but he was actually relieved. He had been confined under Jae’Tir on the Ponfirr. He had hoped to take over the city ship eventually but that plan was foiled. Now he could search for the Void Phoenix on his own. His only assistance would be from the network of human bio-synths he had personally created.*

*Looking at his two pirate converts he hoped the rest would be more useful. The Dark Star ship was old and poorly maintained. The final slight from Jae’Tir.*

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*Admiral LaRoche sat on his bridge and watched as another ship entered the system. Sensors and comms were announcing the ship and sending him the specs. How he had been placed in charge of this ragtag group of castoffs… Well, anger the liege’s son would do it. He knew he was the best Admiral in the Astral Confederacy…most others knew it. So it was appropriate to place him in command of the alliance of 17 human star nations to confront the Sylvan.*

*Most of these ancient battleships were better off being mothballed, poorly designed heavy cruisers, destroyers that should be utilized as token ships in remote systems and an array of support craft that at least contained some modern hulls. All this to put humanity's foot down on the Sylvan attack on Anderson Research station. The back channel diplomacy indicated the space elves would leave if the ship called the Void Phoenix was turned over to them. Even then the rulers and governments had decided to take a stand.*

*Sixteen battleships and thirty-five cruisers made up the core of his fleet. Admiral LaRoche had been drilling the fleet for engagements with the Sylvan War Chariots, the most versatile weapon in the city ship arsenal. Three months to agree to come together and another three months to assemble and train. Now that window was closing. His United fleet had a few good captains, but not nearly enough. His own nation was supplying the bulk of the fleet and the first six months of operations supplies, a heavy toll but to be expected when the liege’s son's future wife was killed. He should have never said the investment of Confederacy resources was wasted on such an operation. A miscalculation on his part. Well, he miscalculated the young man’s influence and apparent love of his deceased fiance.*

*Now he had to make the best of his situation. If he could pull this off then he might just raise his own stock and return home in a position of influence.*

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The Persia system. My home system and their next destination. I couldn’t believe I was risking it. The ship was going to be disguised as a trader. Even now in subspace the exterior bots were ‘roughing’ up the hull to age it. A suggestion put forth by Gwen and a good one.

In the system, we would be docking with an automated refueling station. Julie was going to utilize the Brotherhood hacking device to infiltrate the sensor network. Hooking up the hacking device to Julie was Danelle’s idea. Since our relationship started her ideas had been getting a lot of weight in my decision process. I had three of the devices and two of the devices were now slaved into Julie’s matrix. Supposedly I had a disconnect command tied into my PerCom to cut Julie off from the devices if things got out of hand.

Julie was going to alter everything about our visit. Julie would make it appear that our ship was in fact a very old Norwegian hauler. The other thing Julie was going to do was sent out our crew role calls. She was going to tie into the FTL comm array on the planet and do it secretly. The members on the lists compiled to fill out our marine compliment would receive old Union codes to gather in the Hofstra System. A heavy traffic system in the old Union with dozens of stations and semi-habitable planets. We would be dropping off Kara’s crew and the passengers in the Hofstra system and picking up as many as 50 marines.

Our trade goods going down to the Persia VI was going to be mostly refurbished bots that Abby had completed. We would be purchasing some premium alcohol from the planet’s distilleries. Just 6 tons as we had limited space on board. The plan was going to be completely unrelated trade goods at the next two stops so we couldn’t be tracked by our trade goods.