Chapter 139 Rae’Ver vs. Wellspring

We had been noticed by the Brotherhood ships shortly after our exit from subspace.  Most of our stealth coating was Brotherhood technology, so I should not have been surprised.  I looked hard at the display and holo tank.  The Brotherhood fleet was swarming one of the asteroid colonies of the Squirrel.  Elias turned from his station and said the other three Squirrel colony asteroid were showing their gravity shadow and looked untouched.  They were not in real space and were hidden from the Brotherhood.

The Brotherhood had only recently broken down the defenses of this Squirrel base.  One light carrier was on an intercept for us.  Elias said seven hours until they reached us.  Even if we fled, we were not going to get away as the fast attack carrier was burning hard and had better acceleration than the Void Phoenix.  The deep scans of the ship showed sixteen Warpath Intercepters on board and prepped for launch—the worst possible match-up for the Void Phoenix.  The heavy Warpath Intercepter had one heavy energy cannon and an array of fast attack missiles, and a powerful engine.

I did the mental calculation and had Elias take us into the system.  If we could pull the ships away from our fleet entering in six hours and give them enough distance to get their FTL drives turned over to escape.  My terminal pinged—the Caladrius was prepped.

I made a decision I may regret later.  I ordered Zoe to pilot the Caladrius.  She was not happy, but I wanted Celeste safe.  The Caladirius was originally designed as a luxury fast in-system craft. Two pilots, one engineer, and five passengers were the specs.  Once, we added more life support to take more of the Squirrel, but we had stripped it out, and eight was the safe limit again.

We had also added the Brotherhood’s micro FTL system to the ship.  I assigned Zoe, Luna, and Abby to the crew.  All of them objected, and I pretended to get angry as I did not have time to argue.  The passengers were Celeste, Amos, Zed, Doc, Neon-Doc’s child, Danielle, and Mozzie.  I was also sending six bots: Eve, Chloe, the play bot, and the best three engineering bots.  Danielle was pregnant with our son, and Mozzie was going as protection, taking his Badger suit with him. Eve’s Badger suit was also going to be loaded.

The assignments caused some dissension.  The more resistance to orders I had, the louder and more affirmative I got.  I was sending them to Silver Stream station.  I was transferring a small fortune in precious metals into the cargo hold.  If we did not reunite, they should be set for life. Elias slid into the pilot’s seat as Zoe left.  He was running both navigation and pilot controls as we went.  Elias put up an estimated plot for the Warpath Intercepters once they were launched.  They were powerful ships, but their operation life was relatively short since they could not carry much fuel.  We had three hours before they could launch and reach us…make that three hours, twenty minutes.  Our acceleration would improve once the mass of the Caladrius launched and lightened our ship.

I brought up screens and started doing the math.  I ordered the fighters and one remaining Brotherhood shuttle to launch and to make their way to the largest Squirrel asteroid after being loaded with materials.  It would only drop our mass by 1.1%, but it was something. It would also get more Marines off the ship.  I hit fast release for the Caladrius bay doors.  The entire belly of the Void Phoenix shot away as the explosive bolts fired.  I did it to shed a small amount of mass and maybe distract the pursuers.  We were losing some protective hull plating, but duplicate shield emitters were in the cradle. Some yellow flashing engineering indicators were handled by Nero. He was doing his best to cycle the FTL systems. I knew it was impossible to do it in less than a day. They needed to cool completely, get maintenance, and then power up slowly.

We had three decoy drones left on the ship.  I doubted they would fool the Brotherhood’s advanced sensors, but I would try anyway. Ten minutes later, we had the Caladrius launch, and I also sent the three decoy drones shortly after.  Elias turned and said the Brotherhood fleet around the asteroid was moving.  We were receiving delayed hails from the Brothership battleship as well.  Well, this should be interesting.  I had them open the comm.  It was on a two-minute delay.  I was stunned when a familiar space elf greeted me on the screen.  He had introduced himself as Rae’Ver and bowed mockingly.  He asked me to surrender so he did not have to sift through the wreckage of our ship.

With the delay in comms, things were happening fast.  The Brotherhood was firing a large spread of FTL disrupters.  They were intended to get ahead of a ship by skipping through subspace and then detonating when emerging.  I knew they existed from the records I reviewed with Edmund.  I asked Elias for thoughts on our predicament.

He turned and said they probably did not have a large stockpile of the subspace disrupters.  We should do what we can to draw them away from the Caladrius so it could escape.  My brother and Ransom Krueger appeared on the bridge and took to empty stations.  They probably wanted to be useful but would just be monitoring screens as neither was bridge trained.  I sent a comm message to Rae’Ver telling him he would never catch us.  That was a blatant lie.  We had transitioned too far into the system.  Too close to their fleet.

The disrupters started going off, and Elias panicked.  Elias flashed an image on the screen. The disruptors were acting as anchors, not disruptors. Suddenly three cruisers skipped from the fleet to the location of the detonated missiles.  That should not have been possible. They were too close to the gravity of the star—unless—damn it. The disruptors must have mapped the space for them to jump. I had too many questions and no time to answer them.

Warpath Intercepters and assault shuttles were launching from the cruisers. The Caldrius was only a few minutes from transitioning to subspace. This time the missiles fired from the cruiser were subspace disruptors. The Caladrius disappeared twenty seconds before they went off. I relaxed in my captain’s chair. Celeste and Danielle were away safely. The shuttle and the two fighters heading toward the asteroid would be intercepted in seven minutes by six interceptors.

I had my own problems with five boarding shuttles vectoring toward me.

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Rae’Ver watched his humans swarm over the asteroid. Three days ago, the hidden facility had finally run out of power. His fleet had cautiously approached, and the Squirrel fled like rats toward their other hidden asteroids. It did not take much to intercept them, but they chose to try a suicide run instead of surrendering. All they managed to capture was a single shuttle of Squirrel children. Disappointing. The asteroid had dozens of traps, and they had been frustrated in trying to recover anything of value. Killing the fleeing Squirrel was not enough.

He already knew he was not going to get anything of value. They had too much time to prepare for this eventuality. Why were they being so stubborn?

He was looking over the latest scientific reports. They had engineered a few subspace disruptors to make the gravimetric waves instead of creating them. This was a step toward hopefully developing a weapon to attack the gravity shadows of the hidden Squirrel asteroids. His bridge sensor operator called to him. A ship had entered the outer system. This would be the fifth ship in the last year. He stood up abruptly.

The silhouette matched the Void Phoenix. He immediately sent his fastest carrier with heavy fighters to intercept. He prepared a message for the ship and called on his scientist to launch the prototype missiles and use the echoes to send three cruisers ahead of the fleeing ship. The scientist looked like he was going to object. There was more than a good chance all the cruisers would be destroyed. Everything about the missiles was theoretical. The scientist did not dare object. Too many people disappeared when they opposed him.

He sent his message and watched as delayed sensor data filled his display. Two large pieces had come off the ship—and it had launched a courier vessel? This must be the one Deven Wellspring appropriated when his city ship Ponffir had been heavily damaged.

The message was received, and he waited for a response as his skipper missiles dipped into subspace. Four of the six survived to detonate their mapping software and send the data back. It had worked.

Then something dreadful happened. Multiple ships fired drives from the target. Not just the courier but fighters, a shuttle, and three decoys. The decoys were picked up immediately as the software on his battleship quickly differentiated the signal. The shuttles and fighters were headed for one of the asteroids, and the Void Phoenix was moving away at speed.

A message from the Void Phoenix had the elusive Deven Wellspring on the screen. The man who more than he appeared. The man who held the secrets he desperately needed to fight the Malevalents. Deven taunted Rae’Ver by saying he would never be caught and all his efforts in the last two years were for naught. Rae’Ver grip cracked the composite armrests of his chair.

He could not wait any longer and ordered the cruisers into subspace to get ahead of the fleeing mice. He pulled the rest of his fleet to intercept in normal space, but they were too slow to play a factor in the upcoming battle.

The cruisers entered subspace and came out where they were supposed to be! This was amazing until reports came in. One cruiser had minor damage. One cruiser had no life signs, and the third cruiser had damage and a number of injured crew. He ordered the remote operation of the dead in a space cruiser. Maybe he could use it as a decoy to cut off an escape route. Only one cruiser was able to launch ships. Six interceptors and five boarding shuttles. His prize was now within his grasp. The small courier disappeared into subspace, his heart dropped. Then the real subspace disruptors ignited from two of the cruisers. His prey was trapped. He ordered the sixteen interceptors to launch from behind and ordered the two fighters destroyed and the shuttle disabled before they reached the Squirrel asteroid they were burning hard for.

The two fighters desperately tried to defend the shuttle from the swarming Brotherhood heavy interceptors. They were remarkably successful as the dogfight unfolded. The heavy cannons of Rae’Ver’s fighters were scoring hits but not taking the fighters apart. Watching the engagement was fascinating until one of his ships finally unleashed a full spread of all of its heavy missiles at once, eight in total at one fighter.

The fighter dodged two, and countermeasures took care of three more, but the final three landed. The first missile through the fighter into a death spiral, and the other two finally cracked the tough little fighter. It was not long until the other fighter was taken down with multiple missiles. Those small fighters were just as good, if not better, than the Sylvan Sprite fighters. More technology, he would obtain more from his prey.

The shuttle weaved as it raced in desperation from the focused fire of the five interceptors. The hull split, and it vented its fuel, fortunate it had not exploded. Rae’Ver turned his attention to the true prize, the Void Phoenix. This ship he needed in one piece. His people would celebrate him and welcome him back once he obtained the knowledge of the Void Phoenix.