Chapter 140 Not a Storybook Ending

We had just lost three Marine pilots, Finn and one engineer, in training.  Had I made a mistake in launching them?  Their deaths were definitely on me and a miscalculation.  With our own situation so grim, I could not dwell on it.

The boarding shuttles had a bad vector on the Void Phoenix, but the pursuing light carrier had launched all twelve of its Warpath Interceptors.  Rae’Ver was either desperate or confident in ending this.  I gave the signal to Elias, and the decoys swung around wide and began to accelerate toward the light carrier.  They acted like fighters in their evasive maneuvers, making an attack run as they accelerated.

The heavy guns of the carrier ignored the drones as they sped toward the cruiser, and the anti-missile and anti-fighter defenses fired to destroy them.  The three drones took incoming flak fire and tried to evade it.  One drone spun away, its thrusters too damaged to continue functioning.  The other two drones penetrated the defenses after taking numerous hits.  We had layered the drones with thin layers of the alien hull and hardened the internals like the Armageddon bots.

They had a minor self-destruct explosive payload but that was to destroy the technology and not do damage. We were relying on their kinetic energy from their high-speed collision with the shield.  The shields on the port side overloaded with the first drone slamming in, emitters blowing in series.  Elias timed the drone strikes perfectly. The second drone impacted on the hull before the backup shield emitters could initiate, causing a modest explosion.  The light carrier lost power, and the backup systems powered up seconds later.

Elias mumbled his disappointment at not destroying the ship.  Elvis sent a scanner report from the damage.  It appeared we had done enough destruction to the fighter bays to prevent the fighters from refueling and rearming.  A small reward as the twelve fighters started their ranged assault on the Void Phoenix.  The ship thrummed as the high-energy weapons from the fighters hit our shields.  These heavy fighters were specialized in draining shields, and twelve of them would make quick work of our shields.  The shields were quickly drained in minutes, and the shots switched to targeting our engines.  I was confused.  Did Rae’Ver not just want to blow me out of the sky for revenge?  Maybe he wanted to capture me and torture me for destroying his city ship.  Well, I  was not going to make it easy.

I had Elias flip over the Void Phoenix, reversing our course, and burn into the swarm of fighters.  Elias switched his terminal over to weapons.  After the fighters passed us, Elias launched all our defensive missiles.  They were anti-missile and anti-fighter missiles.  Too small to damage a larger ship.  The fighters went evasive as they launched their countermeasures.  The Squirrel engineers had upgraded the missiles, and they forced the fighters to expend a lot of fuel to evade them.  Only one fighter took two hits and spun hard, most likely killing the pilot as the power to the inertia compensators had failed.  That was all we got and I was surprised to get even one. The missile attack was mostly a distraction to get them to burn fuel in evasive maneuvers.  Eleven fighters remained.  At least we were now going the opposite direction of the assault boarding shuttles, right toward the damaged light cruiser.

I looked at my timer. In one hour, my four ships would be arriving in the system.  I checked the overall plot.  We were still pulling the enemy fleet away from their intended arrival.  I sent an alert to the lower decks.  Power was going to be shut down to everything below the command deck with the exception of engineering, where Nero was working.  All power was being siphoned to the capacitors for our two medium grazers.

Elvis announced some bad news.  The disrupter was a segmented chain design.  Each disrupter was actually a series of individual disrupters, setting off a new gravity sink before the last one expired.  The chain would last for days in a 90-million-kilometer envelope.  Elvis showed the bubble of effect, and our arriving ships would thankfully be outside of it and could escape.  The massive disruptor missile had come from the battleship. If it had another, then there was no way my ships could escape when they arrived. Everything we were doing could be for naught.

As we were getting close to our attack run on the light carrier, I asked for an update on all the ships in the system.  The fighters had turned, formed, and would be attacking our aft again in about three minutes.  Of the three cruisers that had cut us off…one was disabled.  The entire crew has been killed.  Elvis guessed their interia dampers failed on the short jump too close to the gravity well of the star and turned the crew to paste.  Another cruiser had lost maneuvering from the jump.  That was why they had not launched fighters or assault shuttles.  Only one cruiser had been intact enough to launch ships.

I had the sensors swing to the large fleet still a distance away.  One battleship, two more cruisers, three support frigates and three corvettes.  All had external weapon mounts.  In the high orbit of the planet were four large transports and one corvette.  Those must be the support ships for the fleet.  I returned my focus as the light cruiser opened fire on our ship.  They only used two turrets, each with duel grazers.  The heavy weapons had trouble keeping a lock on the Void Phoenix from their damaged systems. I guessed enough sensors had been destroyed that they were having trouble triangulating out position.  Only one in seven shots hit, but when it did, the entire ship shuddered.  The shields started to fail again as the capacitors were emptied, and the first attack hit the hull, blowing off a subspace emitter.

It was not like Elias was not trying to evade the incoming fire.  The Void Phoenix was cork-screwing on its path.  I finally allowed Elias to open fire.  Flying, running sensors, and weapons were a lot to expect of one person.  After all the crew I had hired and trained—they were spread across the rest of my absent fleet.

Elias took three shots to find the carrier in his weapon lock.  Then a miracle happened.  The carrier had no shields, not even basic deflector shields.  They must have shut down generators for repairs.  Each shot dug into the hull, blowing debris into space.  He quickly focused both weapons on engineering.  Exactly where the primary reactor would be.  The enemy ship stopped firing and then exploded. The ship nust have been more damaged than previously thought.  Elias gave a short phrase sending his enemies into the afterlife before starting to weave as the pursuing fighters opened fire again.  They seemed angry because they added missiles to the barrage.

I ran the possibilities in my mind and ordered everyone to get their suits up.  I raced to my quarters to put on my Badger suit.   I had five Marines left on board, and they were already suited.  The pursuing fighters were going to disable our engines, and the boarding shuttles were going to reach us.  I almost regretted not going with Celeste as I knew this was the likely result of engaging the Brotherhood.  I had hoped to find a way to get into open space while drawing the ships away from my fleet’s expected arrival.

I returned to the bridge in my suit and ordered my brother to suit up.  He had minimal experience in the suit, but it would protect him.  I told him to release JJ and get him suited as well.  He could earn his freedom and fight his enemies, the Brotherhood.  I took stock of my crew.

I had five Marines, Silas, JJ, and myself in power armor.  I had Nero, Yannis, and Kristina as my engineers on board.  Then there was Elias and two Squirrel engineers.  I commed my brother as the ship started jerking from missiles on the shields.  I told him to grab some Geko suits for everyone else on the bridge.  Hopefully, Nero in engineering had already suited up.

Not three minutes later, the shields gave way, and the first missile struck our aft thrusters, throwing everyone around as inertia compensators had not been prepared.  Elias was spinning the ship and said we had a comm message coming from the Squirrel in system.  The had brought their other three asteroid colonies out of shadow space.  Small craft were being launched from the asteroids and headed toward the main Brotherhood fleet and Rae’Ver.  Help was not going to reach the Void Phoenix, but they might delay the main fleet and give my arriving fleet a chance to turn over their subspace engines and get away.

The Void Phoenix suddenly lurched hard and reverberated in an explosion.  We turned the sensors on ourselves.  The calibration had been thrown off.  But not enough to still see that a good quarter of engineering was gone.  Nero was gone as well as the two Squirrel engineers.  Evis found them in space seconds later.  Nero was missing his leg, his suit was compromised, and he was dead.  One of the Squirrel had life signs so we logged his vector and speed and sent out a mayday for him.

I mourned for seconds.  My friend was dead, and it was my fault.  I turned my sadness to rage.  What could I do to avenge him?

I focused my rage into clear thought.  Rational thought. My goal was still to live through this.  I quickly sat in the engineering station on the bridge and moved all the remaining engineering bots to deal with engineering issues.  Elias said the shuttles were latching onto the hull and boarding.  Elias then moved to Gabby’s station to control the spider bots.

There was not much point in defending engineering. I pulled the five marines back so they boarders would have to deal with Gabby’s defenses first. At my engineering station I quickly began moving all power to the alien sensors. That was the biggest advantage we had, knowing exactly where they were. The first boarders did as expected, taking engineering and shutting off the primary reactors.

Each of the five shuttles unloaded nine Marines in combat armor. I heard one of my Marines mumble forty-five versus six created a target-rich environment for us. This was the squad that Mozzie led so I needed to step into the role. I left the bridge to join them. I ordered everyone else to remain on the bridge to defend Elias as he fought with the spider, wolf, and steward bots. I overrode Julie’s programming and let her assist Elias in the defense, controlling some of the bots.

I watched as the spider bots and wolf bots worked in concert in the lower decks. It was a bloody and violent battle. The Brotherhood Marines were well trained and made steady progress and minimized losses. By the time they reached deck seven only six of their men were dead and a handful wounded. We drew them into the large promenade area as my Marines fought the with the last two Black Widow Spider Bots. We quickly reached a stalemate after they lost seven men to our one. Gale Rivera had taken repeated helmet strikes, breaking her seals. Since we were in a vacuum, she was too isolated in her firing position to get to the emergency air.

My suit was scorched and burned from heavy plasma fire but held together. Some internals had melted and burned my skin, but I was fine. Many of the Marines with men had the same issues. I needed to add some heat dissipators in the future. Five successive plasma strikes heated the suit too fast. Elias radioed and said the borders were down to twenty-nine combat effective. They planned to walk the hull to the command deck with half their men.

I needed to split my team to defend two areas. I sent everyone except Aribara, a female Tirana, to defend the upper decks. Elias said the Squirrel shuttles had engaged the enemy fleet. I was confused for a moment before realizing they were approaching in shadow space and depositing their Marines before their shuttle was destroyed. They were sacrificing themselves to slow down the fleet.

The Marines on the upper decks started to engage, and JJ was leading the combat. For being a spy he was an exceptional fighter. My attention was drawn to my fight. Aribara and I were under heavy fire from a dozen men as we retreated. My flesh was cooking in my suit from the heat, and my suit warnings were flashing in my HUD. I hit another dose of nerve-deadening agent as I retreated with Aribara.

She was in much worse shape than me. I told her to retreat to deck nine and change her suit to her gorilla suit. I had made each Tirani both a Badger and Gorilla suit. She reluctantly left me alone in the corridor. I checked my HUD, and it was pretty much over. The enemy controlled 80% of the Void Phoenix.

My HUD beeped. The message indicated my fleet was arriving. Elias still had power to communications. The orders I had prepared to be sent were for them to retreat to the Silver Stream Station and then travel with the Caladrius to the alien Alliance. Elias said Abby was declining to follow that order and was launching the three shuttles with Marines. Stupid. Our stealth systems would not work against the Brotherhood. The shuttles would not survive to reach us.

Elias said the Squirrel assault of the battleship had resulted in an explosion. All Squirrel Marines were likely dead but the battleship had lost its primary reactors. Then I got news the enemy fleet was retreating. I knew why instantly. They did not realize my battleship was basically a floating junker. In an hour, their scans would tell them that, though. The seventeen fighters around the Void Phoenix were retreating to the trio of cruisers to refuel. The cruisers had not moved much after their subspace skip. I was guessing they had sustained too much damage. One of the crews on a cruiser had been wiped out completely. Still, three more shuttles were in bound with more Marines. Those three shuttles were twenty-nine minutes out, and Abby’s shuttles were seven hours out.

The only hope we had was to regain control of the Void Phoenix and see if we could reach our shuttles.