Chapter 176

With the Brotherhood fleet moving, our brief reprieve of time to prepare was up.  The subspace vector confirmed that they were on a path for the Bradbury system.  We had sixty-five hours till they arrived using normal subspace drives.  They had not shown any evidence of having anything faster or being able to travel in the higher bands.

While everyone was scrambling, I was making different decisions.  I wanted Jackson Jones to leave before they arrived.  I was not going to have a new Leopard-class ready, and the ships already in service were too valuable to send away before this confrontation.  I had only one viable option, the Void Phoenix.  I needed to select a captain for the Void Phoenix.  It had to be someone I trusted, and I did not have many options.

My list was short, with just three options: Abby Surgorov, Edmund Asir, and Zoe Quintos.

Abby was a long-time friend from my Union Academy days, and I trusted her with my life. She was a competent leader of small groups but was always trying to do everything herself when she commanded larger groups in VR and failed scenarios.

I trusted Edmund enough to send him, and he would be the best person to contact the Godfather organization since he knew so much about the Brotherhood. He was just too important to send along to negotiate. Even with our drives, the trip to the other side of human space would take almost three months. I could not have him gone for half of a year.

Zoe Quintos was my third option. She was married to Jackson Jones and an amazing pilot. She ran our Navy’s fighter pilot training program and was gifted with a pilot’s intuition. It was kind of an echo of foresight that boarded on the supernatural. Of course, none of the tests showed anything other than her instincts taking her on the best course of action all the time.

I did not have a lot of time to think about it. Sending any of them away was going to hurt my ability as I leaned on all three heavily. I finally decided on Abby Surgorov, the Marine and commandant of our Marine training.  She typically found her way to command my Marines on the Fateweaver when I also left for a mission.

I called her in, and she was not happy.  It was the first time in a long time she called me a few obscenities.  I then explained my logic.  The expedition was for us to connect Jackson Jones with Godfather’s leadership.  I needed someone capable of negotiating with them on my behalf.  She was that person.  I also agreed to send Zoe with her to be her first officer and pilot. Losing two people I trusted was going to be hard.

I also had a more selfish reason.  I was sending all five of my children with her.  At first, she didn’t understand, but I had already done the math.  We were not likely to win this engagement when the Brotherhood arrived.  If they had a way to neutralize our armageddon missiles, then it was over before it began. The Cloud Jumper would return to help in the defense, but it was two Fateweaver cruisers against an armada of advanced Brotherhood ships, and we had lost the element of surprise.

She eventually agreed, and I gave her twelve hours to have the Void Phoenix loaded and heading out of the system.  Zoe and Jackson were taking their three children as well. Edmund warned me that it would mean that Jackson would have nothing to lose in betraying us since we were sending his wife and children. It was a risk I was willing to take.

Danielle, my wife, and mother of my children, except for Celeste, took a little convincing to let the children leave on the Void Phoenix. The fact that Abby and Zoe would be on board had made it easy.

It was not long before I found resistance from my children, well, two of them. Celeste would not leave without Amos, Neon, Ezra, and Emil. That was fine, and I pulled them from classes. Then, she wanted to be in command as well. That was not going to happen, but I told her Abby could teach her leadership skills and Zoe could help her learn starship combat in VR.

My second problem was Dartantion, who was enrolled in the Naval Academy’s heavy space fighter problem—Slipstream. His scores were good as well, and he was 3rd in his class of 48 cadets. I moved two fully quipped Slipstream fighters to the Void Phoenix with a maintenance crew and additional ordinance. When I showed him that he was more willing to go, I did not tell him that it had been a request from Zoe—not a means to trick him into going.

I said goodbye to my daughters Nova and Venus who had been living with me. We had gotten closer and enjoyed the few months together. They had remained on the Squirrel asteroid when I had left to fight the Brotherhood, and they boarded the Void Phoenix with Abby and eighteen Marines she personally selected. I transferred nine engineers to the Void Phoenix, all from the Sunheart.

The Phoenix zipped to Bradbury to pick up everyone else in the city of Arcadia. Nine hours later, I watched them transition into subspace. I truly thought that I might never see them again.

I still had time to prepare for the Brotherhood fleet. The Cloud Jumper was a day out and was already in communication range using our binary code with the gravimetric sensors. Kenji’s first thought was to evacuate the important personnel before the Brotherhood arrived. Get them to safety.

I agreed to send two hundred of our top scientists and engineers to Stygian station. It was our deep space secret manufacturing facility for building additional deep space stations to service Leopard ships. A lot of these deep space stations had been repurposed to create deep space relay stations using gravimetric sensors.

We had not kept the impending attack from the people, and dozens of ships were leaving the system, mostly Tirani traders laden with passengers. It was expected the Brotherhood would perform a scorched Earth policy and then pick over the rubble for useful technology. The Squirrel people, who had resettled their entire population in the Bradbury system, were the most affected. They had nearly five hundred thousand people in the system, almost a quarter of those under age ten, as they attempted to repopulate their race.

The Cloud Jumper arrived with Kenji, and I was grateful for the aid. The New Horizon and Nebula Hunter were on their way but still eleven days away. They were not going to arrive for any meaningful assistance in the coming battle.

The first Brotherhood ship to arrive was a battleship. It was off the expected subspace vectors and immediately activated its subspace distortion field. This was a nice way to get all their ships to exit subspace in their vicinity. They could not transition far into the system’s gravity and were on the edge of space. We didn’t even have time to send a single armageddon missile at them. The effective distance of their distortion was nine hundred thousand kilometers, at least, that was how far away the other ships appeared from the first battleship.

We could do nothing but watch as battleships, carriers, frigates, corvettes, and transports arrived and moved to join the first battleship. They were loosely packed and had learned their lesson from the first engagement. When their sizable fleet was fully assembled, I received a transmission from the lead battleship, the Gaia’s Vengence. A man introduced himself as Leonardo Gallo, a member of the Brotherhood Council.

He went into a short, smug tirade about how we had attacked his fleet unprovoked in deep space. I retorted that I did not think his fleet was out there sightseeing. A thirty-second transmission delay broke the conversation, so the threats and black humor were not as impactful. Still, we went back and forth until he was tired of it.

Leonardo demanded the surrender of the Bradbury system. He made an array of promises not to kill anyone in the system. Between transmissions, Edmund advised me. Edmund said the obvious: do not trust anything Leo Gallo said. We continued the back and forth for some time, at an apparent stalemate.

Kenji sent me messages that said the enemy fleet was setting up a defense formation. It was now clear they were not planning to enter the system. This was the best possible news. The Brotherhood battleships began to spread out, and it was clear what they they were doing. They were quarantining the Bradbury system. They were planning to intercept any ship arriving in the system. Their disruption would allow them to handle any arriving ships one at a time.

The Brotherhood didn’t know we had instant communication using our gravimetric sensors. We could send out warnings and the deployment of the Brotherhood fleet. Our ships could avoid the net they were setting up. Edmund advised that we should not circumvent the Brotherhood net. Instead, we should keep our ships from entering the Bradbury system. We could have our returning Fateweavers wait outside of range and be close enough to summon them when we were attacked.

Of course, not all our ships had gravimetric sensors. A few hours after the blockade was set, a Tirani freighter arrived. It had no chance and was quickly destroyed. Messages had already been sent to halt all ships to Bradbury, but ships already in subspace were still in transit.

We tried to attack one battleship with an armageddon missile. It exited subspace prematurely, two million kilometers early, and was easily avoided by the target ship, which had fifty-seven seconds warning to move. The extended range of the disruption field was due to the harmonization of all the battleships. Their distortion fields did not need to overlap to create a larger zone. It was a frightening technology, but they could only create a blockade on about twenty percent of the system, even with their dozen battleships. Their intelligence was good as they targeted all the major subspace vectors we used for trading.

Over the next week, three more freighters were destroyed before they stopped arriving. Every time a freighter was destroyed, I received a call from Leo Gallo requesting our surrender. It appeared the Brotherhood Council member had a lot of patience. Edmund had a different perspective. He thought their losses had been too high in the initial exchange. They couldn’t afford another exchange with similar losses.

We finally had our two Fateweavers return, the Nebula Hunter and New Horizon. The two Fateweavers were directed to dock with Stygian station. They sent news about the Human Federation’s war with the Brotherhood proxies. After initially being pushed back, Admiral LaRoche had gotten into a stalemate with the enemy. Both fronts of this war with the Brotherhood appeared at a stalemate. The question was what was going to tip the scales.