Chapter 144

Desdemona ran the engineering spine of her cruiser.  It was four hundred meters of straight corridor when all the bulkheads were open.  She sprinted the distance ten times to start her day.  Sweating and now awake, she could focus on her duties. A short while later, she cursed and pulled the screens up on her bridge. Larazus still couldn’t find the parts she needed for the upgrades. He was a resourceful and somewhat useful man, but he was always scheming.

She was not sure when she had been able to read surface thoughts, but she could.  Would she eventually be able to dominate and take over someone’s mind as Rae’Ver did to her? Whatever mind ability she had, she knew it was still growing and getting stronger.

She reviewed the progress reports. The cruiser was almost complete, seven months of work and most of her wealth invested in the ship.  She had incorporated as much Brotherhood tech as she had salvaged from the caches they raided in the sector.

Her secondary problem was finding a qualified crew for her cruiser. She needed seventy at a minimum, and so far, she had twenty-nine. It was frustrating that there were so few humans on Silver Stream station.  At least her new power of reading surface thoughts had filtered out the undesirables.  She again thought about recruiting an alien crew.  She could read their minds as well, but if they were thinking in an alien language, it didn’t give her any advantage.

Tasks completed on the bridge, she found Broddick working with bots installing the new relays for reactive shielding.  She stopped and watched him work. He was a people pleaser.  He worked hard to give you exactly what you wanted.  When she read his surface thoughts the first time, she couldn’t make sense of them.  His mind was divided in three different directions, focusing three different ways.  He did not even realize he was doing it.  One was on his current task, one was observing the world around him, and the other was his hidden desires.  At the time, she focused on his desires and found her image there—wearing almost nothing.

She took him to her cabin because she wanted to and needed to vent physically as well. Sometimes running was not enough.  And yes, Broddick was a real people pleaser, and his name was apropos.  She interrupted his work momentarily and told him to prepare her dinner in her cabin for the evening.  She could have punched the button for the chef bot, but this way Broddrick would join her.  She also liked how envious Lazarus got from her dalliances with the engineer.

She toured the cruiser and eventually sighed in defeat. The ship was not going to launch without a crew.  She decided to break her engrained thoughts of not hiring aliens. She got on a shuttle to Silver Stream station.  She would interview some Wren first as they were from human stock.  Then, she would have to venture into unknown terrain for her.

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It took nine days to complete her crew roster. She hired nineteen Tirani marines whose transport had broken down. The Brotherhood had used the Tirani before and were known for their being excellent mercenaries throughout the sector. From there, it was a hodgepodge. She hired twenty-seven engineers and thirty-four technicians from an assortment of Wren, Nyriad, Mourau, and Drusi. She had used her gut when she could not effectively read their minds. She did not want to wait any longer and gave the crew three days to familiarize themselves with the advanced tech under the direction of her human crew. Cross-training on weapons systems would have to be accomplished in VR in subspace transit.

In the last eight months, the transports that had left with the Caldriud had returned twice more to trade. They were selling cheap raw mined metals and exchanging it for fuel. The curious thing was the return vector remained the same. They were apparently headed to the Bradbury system. Did Rae’Ver leave with his Brotherhood fleet then? She planned to stay ten light hours away from the system’s sun on arrival and let her scanners give her a clearer picture.

The subspace trip had a lot of issues as her crew was fairly subpar compared to what she was accustomed to with Brotherhood-trained crew. Aliens were fiddling with life support to make it more comfortable for their species, the ship stores lacked favorable food for the Tirani and Nyriad, the Tirani complaining about not being able to use the flight deck for training, and many headaches. As captain, she handled each incident. Her thought-reading ability proved useful, and soon the aliens on board held her ability to get quickly to the matter with some awe.

She even ferreted out a Mourau spy for the Brotherhood. That had irked her some. The fact that she had missed it during the interview process. She took the opportunity to experiment on Mourau female. She found she could penetrate her mind and almost dig around for the information she wanted. The problem was her attempts were a little too aggressive, and the female had gone catatonic after a few hours of practicing on her. She needed to be more delicate—she needed to practice.

She was also ready to space Lazarus. The man never ended with his scheming. Her tried his best to usurp the loyalty of the crew to her. He would personally deliver their wages and talk to them endlessly about his days as the famous Dread Pirate Axle. He was preparing the crew to make him their leader if the opportunity arose.

It was actually Broddrick who had told her about him and how he operated. She knew what he was doing before, but Broddrick showing her loyalty by shedding light on Lazarus made her—feel good. She needed to be careful as she might actually develop feelings for the eager-to-please engineer.

When they transitioned out of subspace, they immediately went silent and worked to resetting the FTL drive. If Rae’Ver was still here, then he could easily overwhelm her cruiser. It took over a day to get a clearer picture of the system, and nothing made much sense.

The intersystem traffic was light but unhindered. A few Brotherhood ships were still in the system and seemed to be assisting with asteroid mining operations. She sent in some probes to start intercepting the transmissions and slowly edged her ship closer. The info delay was frustrating, and she was not used to having to be this cautious. Usually, she was confident in the ship’s superiority.

Now, her ship was not even up to par with a standard Brotherhood cruiser. Her modified cruiser was close to a Borhterhood cruiser but lacked supporting fighters and a complement of advanced missiles, but the lack of an experienced and disciplined crew would put her at such a major disadvantage.

She did not like what she was deciphering over the intercepted communications. The Brotherhood fleet had been defeated. That seemed too outlandish with the resources she tallied in the system. Did they have an entire cloaked fleet hiding? Where was the Void Phoenix? It was mentioned in numerous communications. She tried to coopt some of the Brotherhood communications to gain access to the archives on the remaining Brotherhood ships.

Her first attempt succeeded, but it abruptly stopped three minutes into the download. Her instincts warned that something was amiss. She ordered the cruiser stopped and the FTL engines prepped. Seventeen minutes was the reply from engineering. Damn, she would have to drill engineering more. The engines should have already been on standby, anything longer than five minutes was just unacceptable.

Something was definitely wrong, she ordered FTL immediately when ready. She felt their minds even before the sensors told her assault shuttles had latched onto her hull. How did they get so close? And they were already boarding. This was impossible. Her only solace was at least she knew that Rae’Ver was probably dead by whoever was going to take her ship.

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Edmund was reviewing the video of the prisoners. For some reason, Deven was still talking to the Sylvan. He had listened to the audio briefly, and it sounded like an information exchange. He would have the AI transcribe it and read it later. He did not have time right now to listen. He was doing a million different things. Trying to establish an anti-spy network in system with the help of the Squirrel. And then training agents to send out into the sector to gather intel.

If Suruchi ever got all the races on the planet to sign on, he would have a varied pool of different species to train. It was odd how he was a minor agent in the Brotherhood and was now responsible for establishing his own network. He didn’t think Deven knew just how big a project this was.

He was reviewing his twenty trainees VR sims when Julie alerted him someone was trying to hack one of the Brotherhood ship archives. They had codes and were in the system. Edmund said to let it continue but limit the info and trace the signal.

The new alien sensors hidden the asteroid turned their focus in the direction of the signal. The replicas sensors still did not have the fidelity of the original from the Vod Phoenix, but they were getting better. He located a cruiser far outside the system. He could only tell that it was not a normal Brotherhood design. Destroy or capture?

He ordered the five Marine shuttles to try and take the cruiser. They could approach in shadow subspace and lock on before they were aware they were there. Each shuttle had twelve Marines in Badger armor, two in Geko armor, and one in a Gorllia set.

The operation went quickly, and soon the cruiser was secured. They had already been spinning up the FTL reactor when they boarded. The fast reaction time told him this was a spy ship. The Marines killed seventeen and had a host of prisoners. He was getting the photos now and paused. No fucking way! Desdemona Rouse?

He idolized her when he was a Brotherhood agent. She was their propaganda machine for recruiting and showing what the perfect Diamond agent should be like. And now she was his prisoner. He sent orders to disable all her devices and isolate her. He wanted her brought to him immediately on one of the shuttles.

Two hours later, she was standing before him, her PerCom removed and holding her chin high. He didn’t gloat but used her name when addressing him. Desdemona asked if Deven Wellspring was in charge of this, indicating everything with her hands. Edmund conceded that point and said he would meet her soon. He ws currently interrogating the Sylvan, Rae’Ver.

As if he had said something funny, Desdemona could not stop laughing….