Chapter 114

As the *Void Phoenix* cleared the gravitational influence of the Squirrel system and slipped into subspace, I reflected on what I had observed over the last few days. We had remained behind as long as we could in order to feed sensor data to the Squirrel remaining in the system. We were helpless as we watched the quadrupeds continually probe the defenses surrounding the green home world. I could tell the bridge crew wanted to do more, but our little ship had risked a lot and done quite a large amount of damage to the enemy. I felt some guilt in leaving them to their fate, but my crew came first.

It was going to be a long journey, and I knew a number of the civilian ships ahead of us would not make it. There just hadn’t been enough time to service the engines completely. Even Damian had complained about another short turnaround. Julie’s prognosis was about 15% of the Squirrel ships would fail to reach Bradbury. Another huge loss of life. The family-oriented Squirrel species had grown on me, and I added the quadrupeds to the enemies list.

I thought about what I could do to help the Squirrel. Of the 150,000 Squirrel evacuees, maybe 100,000 would reach Bradbury with minimal supplies. Looking at the star maps, there was just no choice for the Squirrel. Even reaching Bradbury was going to be difficult. At least it was a good distance from the quadrupeds and a system where they should be safe for a time.

The eleven-day voyage started with my Squirrel subspace experts coming to me and saying they had figured out a way to communicate with other ships in subspace. This would be a monumental breakthrough, and I listened to them explain their research for over three hours. The research was sound and sounded plausible, except that each ship needed to be equipped with similar sensors to the *Void Phoenix*. We hadn’t even scratched the surface of reverse engineering the sensors.

I ended up calling Eve down to work with the Squirrel scientists. Eve would sift through the archived alien crystals to hopefully get some schematics translated for the Squirrel scientists. Since they were so enthusiastic, maybe they could reverse engineer the sensors on their own.

My goal for the trip was to design and build Badger suits for the Squirrel marines we added to our crew complement. I would transit the design to the other Squirrel ships when we exited subspace. I quickly found that within our Squirrel passenger refuges, we had a number of scientists and engineers. The Squirrel had tried to save the best and brightest among themselves. Each mind deemed too valuable to lose was allowed to bring one loved one with them. That meant many had to choose between a spouse or child. Gwen did me no favors when she told me this.

I was able to pull seven engineers from the passenger decks to help with the Badger suit redesign. Rather than let them into my primary robotics lab, I built a temporary lab and simulation suite. The room was tiny and barely fit five people, but the Squirrel, desperate to help their species, worked long shifts to engineer the new suits. I acted more in a managerial capacity. Throughout the trip, the Squirrel engineers showed their abstract genius in their design and made a number of upgrades to the design that improved functionality and safety.

Some of their idea were completely and utterly terrible, but when they went to the simulators, Julie could usually quash them. The Squirrel Badger suits ended up being much lighter and closer to body armor than true battle suits. It gave the suits a longer run time, took fewer materials to build, and incorporated micro-shielding emitters to deal with heavy combat.

They couldn’t handle as much damage as the Badger’s, but the stealth capability nearly doubled when the Squirrel finished. We called the new suits Gekos. By the time we reached Bradbury, we expected to have half a dozen completed.

Since my time was free from working on the Squirrel light infantry suits, I focused my efforts on improving the offensive and defensive capabilities of the *Void Phoneix*. I definitely didn’t want to get dragged into combat, but if I did, I wanted to have some teeth and a tough hide. Once again, it was the Squirrel passengers that had found purpose on the voyage. They quickly assimilated the shielding technology and worked to get our two heavy weapon emplacements installed and powered.

The two bubble-like protrusions looked like the eyes on a fish. They would fold back to reveal the two tight arc turrets underneath. The two medium grazers were from a Union destroyer. We had to tie in the power to our main power core to fire them, but at least it gave us some level of threat. A typical Union destroyer would have eight to twelve of these grazers, so I would say we were not at all a serious threat in a pitched space battle. They would compliment our six light grazers on port and starboard that were geared toward missile defense.

I actually got quite a bit on time on the voyage to spend with the children. Gwen told me outright that Celeste was growing up to be a spoiled brat, and I needed to take a firmer hand with her. I agreed Celeste had a lot of leeway, but she wasn’t the terror Gwen was insinuating. Well, she did purge the air recyclers on deck 9 once. And she had convinced Eve to have two engineering bots fight each other. And Zed seemed petrified to come near her for some reason. And Amos seemed to defer to her all the time. Ok, maybe Celeste needed some tough love.

I was no father figure. I asked Danellie and Gwen to spend more time with Celeste and discipline her. That was the heart of the issue; according to Julie, Celeste had no discipline and no fear of punishment for anything she did. So Danielle adjusted Claire’s programming, and I had to deal with a screaming Celeste for the entire voyage. It was heartbreaking for me as I couldn’t swoop in and save her.

I had extra time to train with the marines as well, and at least that gave me an excuse to flee my own quarters. I was getting extremely proficient in the Badger suits, and Abby had me ranked 9th in the crew. I especially loved when I got a chance to be pitted against Mozzie as I won 3 out of 4 times. Besides the Celeste discipline and knowing I was dropping off Squirrel refugees to their likely deaths the voyage was actually enjoyable.

I was on the bridge when we were ready to exit subspace in the Bradbury system. It was Elias who noticed it first. The sun in the Bradbury system as well as two planets, were showing up on our alien sensors as being in subspace. Even though my Squirrel subspace physicists would think this was the greatest thing ever, I had a bad feeling about this.

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*Rae’Ver was impressed with the humans. He had never really studied their technology, but this cruiser was quite impressive. He had the human captain, Desdemona, under his complete command. She had ordered more human assets in support of this ship as they continued their pursuit of the elusive Void Phoenix.*

*Rae’Ver now had a battle carrier with 72 heavy fighters, four heavy frigates, and eight transports carrying supplies. He knew this was necessary as Deven Wellspring was fleeing human-controlled space. Jae’Tir had gotten his city-ship entangled with the humans. At least he was serving as a sizable distraction to his own efforts.*

*Even though he was collecting a sizable force of human ships, he was falling behind in his pursuit. He had just left the Makabre system desolated from a battle against a race of quadrupeds the Sylvan called Centerians. The Centerians had built sizable fleets in a region of space nearby and were attempting to eradicate sapient species for their expansionist goals. The ocean planet in the system had been struck was large rail guns causing massive concussive waves and killing billions. It was senseless violence that Rae’Ver couldn’t understand.*

*The Sylvan were a pragmatic race. They had lived on city-ships for centuries, and when their population flared, they just built a new city ship or regulated births to slow the population growth. Some more discerning First Citizens would engage in military conflict to thin the population of troublesome residents. At least he was able to obtain the direction of the Void Phoenix.*

*This next system was controlled by a race the humans called the Squirrel. He looked over his plot as they entered the system. The Centerians were attacking here as well. They were beginning an assault on the populous planet. He felt Desdemona kick against his control again…more of a probe. He had her order the fleet forward and open communications with both species. She was to ask if either had seen the mercurial Void Phoenix.*

*It was the Squirrel who responded after a few hours. Their situation looked fairly dire. Almost no stations guarding the planet and the Centerians were getting their large rail gun strikes through. He waited while the message was interpreted. The Void Phoenix had been carried away in an exodus fleet. He scratched his chin. He had Desdemona ask the Squirrel nicely for a vector and they declined. He groaned. He manipulated Desdemona to order the crew for a combat assessment.*

*The Centerians were not a threat to the human fleet unless they swarmed them, and they were currently otherwise occupied. He played out a few scenarios in his mind and then ordered Desdemoa to load all the heavy Warpath fighters with anti-ship missiles. They were to make attack runs on two of the battleships in the Centerian flight. The woman kicked against the command again, and he smiled at her will, but she was outmatched.*

*The fleet moved in system and 22 fighters were destroyed and 31 damaged but he accomplished his goal. The two battleships were disabled and drifting. The Centerian fleet was folding and grouping on the far side of the planet away from his approaching fleet. He wasn’t here to save the Squirrel. He just needed to know where his prey was headed. The supply ships were already delivering replacement fighters to the battle carrier, and he soured. The report from the carrier was that only 66 fighters would be combat effective. They were a good knife to use at a distance. He turned to the captain and scanned her memories…there. He forced her to generate a command to send two supply ships with a dozen of the heavy fighters to rendezvous with her fleet.*

*One of the transports would have to head back to human space to get the message relayed, but that shouldn’t be an issue. Desdemona was already having the ship move out system, waiting for the coordinates for the rendezvous before they left.*

*The Squirrel planetary governor was already calling. Maybe he wouldn’t have to tear the information from his mind. It took two hours of coaxing, promising they were on friendly terms with the Void Phoenix, even going as far as to say they were assisting the defense of the Squirrel at captain Deven Wellspring’s request. He finally got the information he needed. The Void Phoenix had escaped to the home system of the Squirrel.*

*Well, this was going to be annoying. The Squirrel home system was also under attack. He checked the munitions on all the ships and grimaced. His fleet only had 46% loadout. Hopefully, it would be enough. He had Desdemona order more supplies before the messenger transport left. It looked like he might have to wait after this next engagement for resupply.*

*When he left the system, the Centerians were forming up their fleet again to renew their assault. He had only given the Squirrel a reprieve, but the planet would fall eventually. Not his problem.*

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*Katsu Oshiro was perplexed when Desdemona started diverting assets to build a small fleet. When she took command of the Heavy Carrier Indomitable, he began to panic. It was a Brotherhood carrier and was intended to put out fires in that region of space. To make sure sll his plans proceeded. If one of the interstellar wars turned unfavorable, that carrier was to intercede and correct the imbalance. Now it was dark and missing.*

*If Desdemona was AWAL then this would be his third Diamond asset that he had lost. At least none of the other Council were aware of his growing problems. A report to resupply the Indomitable came across deep space comms and lit his screen. It was just rendezvous coordinates…that was…the Squirrel? The abstract thinkers? Why was Desdemona all the way out there? Well, if he remained here and the other Council found out his failures he would be retired. He looked at the communal Brotherhood assets.*

*The battleship, Judgment Day, was going through its shakedown cruise. He would take command and assign a support fleet. It was time to bring Desdemona in and get his assets back to human space. Taking command of one of six Brotherhood-controlled battleships was definitely going to draw the attention of the Council…especially when it went dark from comms.*