Chapter 110

The Squirrel Fleet Admiral for the system came on screen. It was odd talking to a squirrel head on my screen. The admiral offered his profuse thanks for destroying the two platforms. If the invading ships had been able to utilize it, then they would have been able to turn around quickly and attack in full force. Now the ships were forced to group and get assistance from the myriad of supply ships. He thought our actions bought them two, maybe three days before another assault.

He then asked if there was anything I could do for the eight mining colonies I would be passing on my way into the system. Elias offered from his station that the quadrapeds were sweeping the system indiscriminately. Any Squirrel mining, colony, ships, and stations were being destroyed. I brought up the data and had Elvis focus our sensors on the indicated mining colonies.

The data took some time to populate my captain’s screen, but each colony was based on a massive asteroid and had 12 to 28 Squirrel. I asked Elias to help plot our shuttles to drop in and make rescues, and the asked Zoe to take the *Caladrius* as well. She would hit the furthest mining station and rendezvous with us at the Squirrel planet. She was gone before I finished my sentence, so I opened my comms and said two marines in each shuttle and on the Caladrius as well in Badger suits and all pilots were to be wearing full EVA suits.

The LUX shuttle launched first, just five minutes after I gave my order. Zoe commed asking where the hell her marines where and they responded with an 80 second ETA. My old trust Union Marine drop shuttle launched second. I got a comm from my shuttle tech, Evira. The two Brotherhood shuttles would be ready to launch in 30 minutes. Elias took that info and updated the rescue profile.

I didn’t want to decelerate the Void Phoenix to do any of the pickups ourselves, so I relied on the shuttles. I looked at the plot and our slowest shuttle, the old cargo shuttle, launched to the closest rescue site. Elias in the pilot’s chair now killed our acceleration. We were gliding. The old shuttle did not have great thrust, so it would not be able to catch back up with us.

I hoped the attacking forces would not be able to see our rescue ships. We were traveling through a dead zone, and our sensors prevented the enemy from launching any surprises. The LUX shuttle would have to make two trips and was on schedule to do so. The second shuttle that needed to make two trips was one of the Brotherhood shuttles. Elias turned to me and said he was going to flip his orders and has the Brotehrhood shuttle go straight to the second site. It would now have 32 Squirrel on board as it made its way in system on its own.

Gwen jumped up and said she was going on board with additional life support to help. That many bodies would definitely tax the shuttle, especially on such a heavy and long burn. I granted her permission even though she had already left the bridge.

The *Caladrius* launched next. It was followed fifteen minutes later by both Brotherhood shuttles. The *Caladrius* was going to beat us in system with their speed enough though Zoe was muttering about slow-ass marines. With all our birds in the air, I watched the holo tank intently. It was an hour before our first shuttle landed on the large asteroid to retrieve the civilians. It was like watching a vid as we saw the rescue in real-time with our incredible sensors.

As the shuttle lifted off 15 minutes later, the enemy fleet finally responded. Four small fighters were being launched to intercept the shuttle. I guessed the stealth coating had not been effective when it got close to the asteroid. These attackers must be bloodthirsty to not want this simple rescue operation to go off.

I only had one marine pilot and Elias left on board to man the two Saphire fighters. The plot that Elias calculated showed the enemy fighters reaching the shuttle before it docked with us. Elias asked if we should vector toward the shuttle in order to cut down our time. I nodded and ordered Elias and the last marine pilot to man the heavy fighters.

He looked at me, and I explained that I was worried about long-range missiles. They would sit in the fighters and launch to intercept if necessary. The enemy cruiser that had launched the fighters had decelerated from its rendezvous with the main enemy fleet. I was certain it had missiles ranged enough to gum up our rescue. Haily moved into the pilot/co-pilot position. Kara moved into the sensors station and took over comms. Damn, I really needed more bridge officers. Arthur had left to be Zoe’s co-pilot since the *Caladrius* really needed two people. Now the only people on my bridge were Haily, Edmund, Kara, and myself.

Nero reentered the bridge with two marines in tow. Nero had gone to help get the Brotherhood shuttles refueled and off again. The marines were from the mission to the platforms and had plenty of burn marks on their suits from the operation.

Finally, the missiles launched from the cruiser, and I guessed why. Our stealth coating was good enough that they couldn’t get a lock until the fighters’ sensor data got back to them. I had Elvis relay sensor data to our fighters, and Elias and Finn launched to intercept the missiles. It was a three-minute delay before the cruiser launched eight more fighters.

This second wave might be able to launch missiles. I commed the Fleet Admiral and asked if his two nearest assets could move to help. He said both ships were damaged and limping toward the planet, but the frigate *Cloud Predator* could halt its retreat to assist. I looked at the plot and just told him to do a feint. They really couldn’t help when I looked at the damage. The ship was hulled in four locations, and I was surprised it even had any power. We were on our own.

Twelve fighters vs. our two. I made a call. We were going to start launching our decoy drones…all eight of them in our launch tubes. They would be broadcasting as heavy fighters on an intercept in support of our fighters. We should be at such a distant range that they shouldn’t be able to tell the difference. I worked with Haily to program the drones to form into formations to look like two fighter wings as we launched them.

I hated losing the eight drones, but my plan worked, and the fighters just launched their own missiles and retreated. It took a little work, but we moved the drone controls over to Elias’ fighter. He moved the drones to intercept the missiles, and then Finn, and he would just have to deal with the seven remaining missiles.

We watched anxiously on the screen at the engagement. One drone missed its target, but the fighters got all eight missiles before they got close to our fleeing shuttle. Even if the enemy fighters turned around, they could not catch up before the shuttle docked.

Elvis suddenly interrupted our focus. Two more fleets had entered the system. I looked at the plot and groaned. Each fleet had dozens of frigates and destroyers surrounding a core of cruisers. Edmund was working on sorting it out, but it was clear these were the victorious fleets from nearby systems.

They started to spread out in groups of ten across the system. They were planning to be able to intercept any ships trying to flee. They didn’t need to encompass the entire sphere, just be able to react to ships and intercept them in the few hours it took to leave. I might have trapped us here.

I sent Nero my plan to escape. We were going to shed our disguise and get the stealth coating finished. With it, we should be able to travel far enough without being noticed and escape to subspace.

The rescue mission at least went on uninterrupted, and we had two hundred and three Squirrel on deck seven as we approached the planet. We scanned all the ships the Squirrel had around the planet. Very few were undamaged. Some looked damaged beyond functionality, and I guessed they were just towed to be decoys when we didn’t detect any crew on board and minimal power activity.

The Caladrius was docked at a station, and all the shuttles were back on board. Our two fighters had also docked at the station. As we orbited over the planet, the civilians were being offloaded, and I was put in contact with a regional governor. The information that was relayed was not pleasant.

The race of quadrupeds was called the Yandree by the Squirrel. They had fought them many times in the past and had no idea how they had built up such massive fleets in the last twenty years. The Yandree were a very militaristic and expansionist race. They found habitable planets and eradicated all sapient life, and then established their own colonies. The governor didn’t think anyone would be coming to help. They expected their home system would have held out well against the assault, but their other colonized system most likely fell. One of the late-arriving fleets arrived from that vector.

He thanked me profusely for the effort we put into destroying the platforms and was curious how we did it, but I didn’t reveal my secrets. I told him we wanted to dock and service our ship and planned to leave the system when we were ready. He nodded and said he would do everything he could to help. All the docking rings were booked with military ships, but he would find us space.

All our marines were suited in case of any deception. We docked when a resupplying frigate was bumped and were offered fuel and supplies while the *Caladrius* was moored in space with a pair of our marine pilots left on board. The planetary governor commed us next to thank us and ask if there was anything we could do.

The governor was in charge of the system, and she seemed extremely haggard. I told her why we had come here. The informaiton exchange. She told one of her aides to look into what I wanted, and they would send me all the subspace research they had. She didn’t think they were going to be able to hold out once all the enemy ships got their deepspace repairs completed. They were planning an exodus fleet to head toward their home system. She offered to include us in that fleet. It would consist of all their functional military ships still capable of subspace and civilian ships loaded with as many people as they could save.

I thanked them for the offer and accepted. I even offered to take 327 civilians with us, the max our life support could handle for an extended time. The *Caladrius* would allow another 10 civilians. The selection of who would be allowed into the exodus fleet weighed heavy on her, but she offered to send the top scientists on the planet into the subspace field with us. She promised they would help us. Eight hours later and I had seven Squirrel being transferred to my ship early. Two married couples were the top scientists, and the other three were their children. I greeted them when they boarded, and they were somber. The Squirrel were an extremely social species, and they left behind a lot of family members.

I brought them to my special lab for the researching subspace, and they got their translation programs going on my data. I told them I was too busy to help them beyond that and let them work. I guessed the work might help distract them from the impending doom. I planned to escape, but I could tell they didn’t think it was going to be possible.

We had a lot of work to do before the next phase of this invasion commenced.