Chapter 113

The subspace trip started with combat reports. I learned the marine was Julian ‘Wolf’ Collier. The funeral was going to be in a day. His death was due to damage to his suit. His suit vacuum was compromised in multiple areas as he was the closest to the missile storage explosion. Doc said he was knocked unconscious, so he didn’t feel anything when he froze to death. I checked on the suit’s self-repair capability. It had worked, but there had been too many breaches.

Feeling I had let down my marines, I spent all my improving the auto-safety features up to when I was called to the funeral. I attended the funeral and listened to half a dozen marines give stories of Julian. He had gotten his name because he was a lone wolf in combat. He preferred to operate alone as he was recon sniper. Abby listed his accolades in combat, and then his body was ejected into subspace. Once it cleared the protective envelope, his body’s atoms were scattered across the cosmos.

I skipped the wake for Julian and finalized some of the Badger suit upgrades. I doubled the number of micro repair packets and added two external quick foam patches. It still would not have saved Julian, but it was all I could do.

I spent the next two days with Celeste and Amos. I had neglected the children because of the massive rush to get the ship ready in the Squirrel system and finally had time. Celeste was using near-complete sentences and was constantly getting in trouble. Amos seemed to be the quiet partner in crime. He was still working on his vocabulary and just went along with whatever mischief Celeste dragged him into. Thankfully Eve was on near-constant vigil with the new playmate bot.

As we passed through subspace, the bridge crew had multiple meetings to discuss possibilities when we exited subspace. We were headed for the Squirrel homeworld. It was the center of their civilization; over 12 billion Squirrel and the majority of their space combat power were situated here. We strongly doubted the Squirrell system had survived, as no messenger or support fleets had come to support the colony system we had just come from.

The exodus fleet already had a plan. If the home system was compromised, the ships in our armada would reenter subspace and go to the Bradbury system. This was a 16-day trip, and many of the civilian ships would not have enough fuel to make the trip. Abby was the one who voiced what we were all thinking. The Squirrel were going to become extinct. They did have thousands of merchants throughout space, but if the quadrupeds killed all the Squirrel in their three settled systems, they wouldn’t recover.

The Bradbury system was a long shot. Not only had humans failed to colonize it, but many other races had tried and failed as well. The planet was cursed and haunted. It had a breathable atmosphere and lust vegetation growing throw the ruins. But other than a variety of insects, there were no other life forms. Looking at the reports from the past attempts by humanity to colonize the planet, it was littered with the fantastical; colonists disappeared, died in their sleep, were unable to conceive children, and went crazy.

Edmund had access to some Brotherhood archives on the planet, which sent chills to my core. The Brotherhood had hundreds of studies and had come up empty. No environmental factors were discovered, no anomalies in the system, nothing in past ruins by other races that failed to colonize the planet, and the oldest ruins on the planet were dated to around a hundred thousand years old, and the best estimates had billions of people. The cataclysm that ended that race’s dominance of the planet was also missing. The Brotherhood found no evidence of war, disease, or environment contributing to the extinction. The race just vanished.

It appeared the Squirrel were going to have to become space nomads like the Sylvan if they wanted to survive long enough to get revenge on their enemies. Abby had sent me a request by two of the Squirrel commandos. They were petitioning to join my crew with the caveat their family could remain on board. That meant we would be taking their spouses and five children as well. They must have come to the same conclusion about the fate of their races fate.

I looked over Abby’s report on the two commandos. She had reviewed their suit footage during the assault on the battleship and thought they were quality marines. That made sense as the original 38 marines we transported to the battleship were the best soldiers the Squirrel had in the system. I just didn’t like their willingness to throw their lives away to save their comrades. There was also the headache of making a new iteration of the Badger suits.

The Squirrel anatomy was completely different from humans and Tirani. I tapped on my datapad, trying to make a decision. Eventually, I sent Abby a reply. No, unless she could add at least four Squirrel marines. At least that way, my efforts would be somewhat worth it. A number of the heavily injured Squirrel marines were being treated in medical, so if Abby really wanted them, then she had to convince a few of them to also join the crew.

The Squirrel scientists had finally gotten access to the sensors while we were in subspace, and after a few days, they excitedly came to me to explain their findings. Much of their theories revolved around the explosion of the planetoid. The massive amount of energy released in that event highlighted the different bands of subspace briefly. This was the key piece of data that helped connect everything. The alien sensors confirmed everything in subspace. They had adjusted the sensors and were able to cycle through see the different bands.

Now that they knew the bands existed, they were trying to figure out how to get ships into the different subspace bands. The theory of Milo Dejardin was that the bands existed. He theorized that bands were like different rivers flowing at different speeds. If you could move up to a faster band of subspace, you could travel significantly faster in subspace.

My quartet of Squirrel subspace physicists had absolutely no idea how to reach the high bands. The emitters that all races currently used created the field to bring a ship into subspace. The efficiency of these emitters was within a predefined range, there was an upper limit and a lower limit. The Squirrel analogy was the emitters were like sails. The better your sails, the faster your speed. I didn’t get the analogy as I had never sailed, and I looked at subspace mostly in terms of equations. I told them to keep working on it but not to endanger the ship or crew.

In our final staff meeting before exiting subspace, a smug Abby said she had three Squirrel commandos willing to sign onto the crew. I waved to Edmund and Doc at the table to handle the background checks and physicals. The Squirrel were no imposing figures, but once you put anyone into a Badger power armor, they were going to be deadly. I told them it might be a long time before I had the opportunity to design them Badger suits, though.

Nero gave us a lot of bad news on the life support systems front. We had stressed our systems and were falling behind on maintenance. I definitely hoped we could offload our passengers. We also discussed our fuel profile. If we had to go to the Bradbury system to unload the Squirrel we had very few options for our next possible safe port of call. It was either the Herculian system or the Augustine system. The Herculian system had a small human colony living in domes on a barren planet, and fuel would be extremely expensive. The Augustine system had a race of sapient fungi. They barely had space capability, but the Tirani had noted they traded for fuel with the species in the past.

We had a backup plan. I knew there was a gas giant in the Bradbury system, and we did have a small emergency harvester in storage we could deploy. But that was a last resort as it would take weeks to harvest the gases to power low-yield reactors up to an acceptable level to extend our subspace range.

When we entered the home system of the Squirrel, the Tachi system, the plot showed dire news. The quadrupeds were here with the amphibian race in mass. They had set up blockades with hundreds of starships around the planet with two moons where most of the Squirrel were located. The fleet we had arrived just after was under attack by swarms of fighters, and the civilian ships were taking a beating. We transitioned a little far from the fleet and the battle would be over before we could join the fray. It took an hour before the fighters and the small carrier ships were dealt with. We lost a number of civilian ships in the exchange, and now we had a standoff.

The Squirrel were in communication with their home planet, and I had to wait as the transmission time was over fifteen minutes. In the meantime, Elvis was doing narrow beam scans to give us an idea of just how badly the Squirrel homeworld was screwed. It looked like the enemy ships had two of those large platforms here servicing the fleet. The enemy fleet looked to be of similar size to the one we had just left. Granted, we had shaved off about a quarter of that fleet’s combat strength with the destruction of the cruisers and the battleship.

Three hours later and the planetary governor sent me a personal communication. He thanked me for the help to date and asked me to continue on the Bradbury system and leave my refugees there with as many supplies as I could spare. At least I wouldn’t feel guilty about leaving them on the cursed planet.

Damian said he needed at least forty-eight hours to do maintenance before we entered subspace. It was fine as I didn’t see any threats. Elvis had highlighted the seven small carriers circling the likely subspace transition points, and the Squirrel were looking forward to surprising the ships under silent running. It would be a small amount of payback for this attack.

We watched the Squirrel make good on the information, destroying four of the carriers before the remaining three fled behind the skirts of the larger fleet in-system.

I worked with both Nero and Damian on a myriad of engineering problems. Our ship was not meant for this many passengers, and the old engines needed a lot of maintenance between long sub-space journeys. I actually looked at the star maps a few times and considered abandoning the pursuit of my brother. The truth was I had nowhere to return to. The Sylvan and Brotherhood were dangers behind us and were pushing us forward now.

The fleet was trying to consolidate it resources over the two days. The military ships were siphoning their fuel to all the civilian ships for the trip to Bradbury. Then the military ships would make an attempt to break the blockade and join the defense of their home planet. I felt completely helpless but admired the Squirrel’s resolve.

The Squirrel ships started leaving as soon as they were able. I had the *Void Phoenix* remain to give the military ships our sensor data as they moved to rejoin their home planet. It was tear-jerking as barely over half the ships made it to join their compatriots at the planet, and all were damaged. I ordered the bridge crew to enter subspace.

The next leg of the trip for us was the Bradbury system. A voyage none of us wanted to make.