Chapter 111 Ridiculous Escape Plan

The conversion of the *Void Phoenix* had the entire crew involved and extremely busy.  Taking off the shell took less than an hour, and then the real work began.  Without the shell, it gave easy access to all the stored material we had secreted away. I had most of the exterior bots working on applying the stealth coating.  I had one of the large bots cutting and installing the launch tubes for the fighters.  I included plans to install the bubble housing for the weapons. The weapons would be a rough install and not be connected. I didn’t want to use precious hours troubleshooting the weapons. We were going to be surrounded by Squirrel military ships anyway.

The Squirrel were very generous in giving us whatever we wanted. Unfortunately, we didn’t have the need for much. I took on a few tons of precious metals to top off our fabricator stock, but other than that, we were pretty saturated. I gave the Squirrel 120 cubic meters of cargo space for the 337 civilians we would be taking on board. It wasn’t a lot, but it was something. The civilians were going to be crammed into the passenger quarters but would have some personal cargo space there, so the cargo space was just for cultural artifacts, according to the governor.

The *Void Phoenix* was actually shedding quite a bit of mass. I was constantly fretting over what I wanted to part with. I ended up stuffing the shuttles and shuttle bays with the material. The biggest loss was going to be all the spare fuel we had been carrying. Since the *Caladruis* was making its own jump to subspace, it gave us the opportunity to stuff our belly dock with some of the material. The two Brotherhood hover APCs made the cut and were secured in the small hanger along with our stockpile of subspace disrupter missiles and an array of crated weapons Abby didn’t want to part with but wouldn’t fit in her already stuffed armories.

I released permission for Doc to release stims to the crew and initiate two-hour forced REM cycles. This would keep everyone functional. The hospitality staff was extremely busy as the Squirrel refugees arrived in bunches of 20-22 every hour on the hour to get settled into the passenger cabins. I ignored the background noise of the distressed residents on the planet. Of the population of 300 million, only about 150,000 were getting crammed into the civilian and military ships. My conscientious mind would not have been able to handle listening to the chaos on the planet below.

I raced around the ship, helping Gabby get the spider bots ready, making decisions about what to keep and abandon, spot-checking engineering work by bots that the small engineering team didn’t have time to do themselves, reviewing the stealth coating being installed and troubleshooting issues, manufacturing Gorilla suits in case they were needed and answering question after question.

Nero did get some temporary life support set up to safely take on another 68 Squirrel passengers. I didn’t want to tax our ship too much or gut it. We didn’t even know how long we had before we had to flee.

About two days into the chaotic mess the Squirrel scientists who had been locked in the lab with my subspace data found me on the bridge assigning engineering bots along the exterior hull, checking and installing the stealth panels. They were excited by the Milo Desjardin research and the readings I had from when the planetoid was destroyed.

The data meshed well with what they had in terms of layered subspace. I only understood about half of what they were telling me and didn’t have time to become involved. I realized I hadn’t given them the data from our scanners. When I sent them the data, the fact that there were actual objects in subspace blew their minds. I had to threaten the excited scientists with locking them in their quarters under guard if they didn’t stop harassing me. They wanted to use the alien sensor right now to explore some of their hypothesis.

We needed the alien sensor to be constantly scanning the enemy. Elias and Elvis had spent their time focusing the sensors in a narrow beam, scanning the enemy ships, looking for the best escape route. The best option he found was a battleship that was by itself in the envelope sector. This battleship had flights of fighters constantly on patrol. However, Elias was certain that our two Brotherhood shuttlecraft had good enough stealth capability to reach this ship and repeat what we did to the platforms.

His plan was absolutely crazy. He wanted to have Julie jam all transmissions from the battleship while our marines boarded it. That meant pimping out a bot with a fragment of her consciousness and getting the 3rd hacking device on board and installed. Once they began the assault on the communications dead battleship, we would begin our escape vector run. The marines’ goal was to get the battleship to commit a short subspace jump of half a light year. We would meet them at that point and pick them up while Gabby’s spider bots destroyed the vessel’s core.

There was so much wrong with the plan. The battleship, one of three in the system, was massive and had 9,000 quadrupeds on board. Unlike the platform, I was certain a fair number of this crew were their version of marines. My second hang-up was if Julie would be able to hack the alien computer systems with the Brotherhood device. Julie seemed confident based on the intel the Squirrel had given us of their technology, but military ships tended to have lots of safeguards. What if the ship didn’t have a central computer to control communications—then the surrounding vessels would swarm to the ship. It would have to jump before the ships engaged. Also, the Brotherhood shuttles couldn’t make subspace jumps, so the marines would be stranded if everything went to shit. Also, if they failed to neutralize the battleship, then the battleship could launch subspace disrupters.

The loss of one of three battleships would give the Squirrel a much better chance to defend against invaders. I think that was why I told them about the ridiculous plan. They offered all support they could muster. Their marines were going to be virtually useless in the upcoming battle. Once the quadrapeds broke through and obtained space superiority, they would commit genocide. So we were going to be taking on 38 of their marines in their version of battle suits. Each shuttle was going to be standing room only with two pilots, 12 of my marines and 19 of the Squirrel marines. Gabby was hopefully going to have time to fabricate two Black Widow bots to be added as well for the end game. I was only sending 24 marines because I wanted to keep enough marines in reserve to protect my ship.

So even before the plan was finalized, we started getting the Squirrel marines transitioning to our ship. I examined their battle suits, and they were terrible. Even worse than the ones the Union used to use. I didn’t have time to make them suits, but we could add a small shield unit to each suit with a few seconds of charge.

It was three days into our refit/reconfigure when Elias commed me. He was certain the enemy was maneuvering for the final assault. He detected 12 heavy cruisers on a stealth run at the planet and the outer ships were getting ready for a mass attack, with smaller ships grouping together. The Squirrel took the information and planned to send a wave of 700 missiles on a silent coast to the heavy cruisers we had detected. They would light up when they got close and go active. It should overwhelm their defenses and destroy the crusiers. The Squirrel fleet admiral said it was a massive gamble. This was about a quarter of all their capital ship missiles. He hoped it would be successful and the invaders would lose all 12 cruisers and then delay the assault further. Further, if the cruisers and battleship were removed from the equation, then the Squirrel might be able to hold out against the onslaught. It was a slim chance, but still a chance. I doubted it since the quadrupeds were still sending reinforcements, just small frigates and corvettes but still more ships. We hadn’t received any communications with either of the star systems the Squirrel still controlled.

This was a concern since I planned to drop off our Squirrel passengers there. If not, then we would have to continue on to the Bradbury system. The Bradbury system would be a 16-day trip. The Bradbury system was a barely hospitable world and had a failed human colony in the past. There were also ancient alien ruins on the planet and sites for other races that failed to colonize it. The planet was considered haunted and cursed. Not the best option for the Squirrel refugees.

We pulled the Void Phoenix out of the dock and sent our shuttles packed with marines on their stealth run. Their ETA was 19 hours. The cruiser’s intercept with the missiles was 17 hours. Our burn to escape with the remnants of the fleet and civilians would coincide with the missiles intercepting the cruisers. All cards were in play as everyone worked furiously to get as much done as possible before the fireworks started.

Our fleet bunched together. The military vessels surrounded the core fleet of civilian vessels. Six hundred and forty-two subspace civilian vessels, of which we were one. The military vessels were mostly frigates, forty-six in total. We also had eight heavy cruisers and ten light cruisers. I knew from the fleet admiral that three of the heavy cruisers had been damaged so much that they were not going to be able to enter subspace. They were coming with us to serve purely as a shield against the enemy, sacrificing themselves.

The Squirrel were keeping almost eighty ships in defense of the planet. Ships without subspace drives or short-range subspace drives. The defense force was being bolstered by eight orbiting stations, and all were partially damaged already.

The timer on the bridge reached zero, and we watched as the missiles came alive in front of the cruisers. The cruisers being in low-power mode, couldn’t get defenses up in time, and we watched as, one by one they were turned into wrecks. We were sharing the sensor data with the Squirrel and were cheering as the last of the missiles was expended. Only one cruiser escaped complete destruction.

The enemy fleet reacted to the destruction. Not as the Squirrel had hoped. The ships accelerated, forming battle groups and burning toward the planet, closing their envelope for a final confrontation. The target battleship started moving as well. We were all anxious as we watched our shuttles pass the ship and turn into the wake. They then accelerated in the blind spot and locked onto either side of the massive warship. The real party was just beginning.