Chapter 109

Space combat was not rare. Humans and aliens frequently fought amongst the stars, and my goal was not to be present when it happened. We had seven days in transit to the Squirrel system, where I hoped to exchange information.

My focus was divided in the robotics lab between Celeste and Amos’ bot playmate and finalizing the Gorilla suits. I was on my third iteration of the playmate bot for Celeste and thought it was acceptable. The first two child bots had been given an engineering AI and handed off to Nero to help in the lower decks. For the first two bots, I had trouble with the synthetic muscle attachments; the simulation didn’t show the muscles bunching and interfering with each other in certain ranges of motion. This was due to me making so many changes in the process to try to get the bot as life-like as possible.

With the child bot finished, I let Eve choose her cosmetic appearance and personality base. I was a little curious to see her choices and the bot’s appearance. Eve showed me the final product in a hologram projection. Long black hair, large azure blue eyes, small nose, ears, and lips. I fabricated the covering and added Eve’s selected base personality program.

The bot was introduced to Celeste and Amos, and the first interaction went well. Celeste called her new bot Emma. Eve treated Emma with the same care and oversight that she treated Celeste and Amos. Did Eve see Emma as her own progeny? I had the impression that may be the fact when watching the interactions in the evening between Emma and Eve. I didn’t want to voice my suspicion but I planned to keep an eye on it.

The other project was finally going into fabrication—the Gorilla suits. The mass of the suits made them next to useless in anything over 0.6g. Since I had fourteen of the advanced generators on board and the quirks were worked out, we scrapped the test suit and began the manufacturing of the Gorilla suits. The other eight generators went to a giddy Gabby for her Black Widows. She had already made the parts, so she just had to finish the assembly.

Gabby was actually becoming good friends with the Tirani females. After she completed the male Tirani steward bot, she started hanging out with them in the evenings, according to Gwen and Danielle. I was happy she was making friends.

When we were ready to exit subspace, we had four Gorilla suits finished, and the last two were being assembled.

The entire bridge crew was present as we prepared to exit subspace. We were not sure of the reception from the Squirrel, but I planned to have Mozzie make first contact. Immediately after we broke out of subspace in the Squirrel system, Elias was already informing me of hostiles in proximity. The ship’s alarm sounded a heartbeat later. The plot populated, and a battle was going on. The Squirrel were being attacked. I asked Elvis to compare the ships to the ones we had seen starting combat in the Macabre system when we were making our way to the transition.

After four minutes, the sarcastic AI added that the hulls were a 97% match. Elias started giving me updates as Elvis populated his screen. Four missiles inbound. Six light screening frigates were three hours out. Nero called from his station seven hours till engineering could spin up the subspace drives. Zoe was plotting vectors, and we could escape with a full burn away from the screening frigates. In that case, we would just have to deal with waves of missiles from the screening frigates, which had fired on us immediately after we left subspace. So they were not friendly.

Zoe suggested we cut our burn and go to a coast and fire one drone off. I agreed and watched as the drone burned hard and all four missiles veered toward it. The *Void Phoenix* was extremely difficult to spot at this distance with traditional sensors. Zoe asked to go ready the fighters, and I sighed. We hadn’t installed the tubes, so the *Caladrius* would have to launch to get them out. I commed down to get the fighters prepped and the marine pilots into them. Zoe winced, realizing she wouldn’t be flying a fighter. Zoe was the best pilot in VR but she was needed on the bridge.

We started to get details and three-dimensional renderings of the attacking ships. They were the quadruped beings that had been in the spy ship in the Drusi system. So this was a multi-system attack. They had been working with another spy ship. That other spy ship had an aquatic race. I asked Elvis to differentiate our plots between stealthed and unstealthed ships. That meant we had to wait for our traditional scanners to assist. It was an hour later when we identified four cruisers lying in wait for a squadron of corvettes the Squirrel were using to flank a formation. Most of the fighting in the system was at the fourth planet from the sun. It looked like a pretty even fight—at least until the quadrupeds added reinforcements.

I ordered our sensor data to be transmitted to the Squirrel. Not the layered three-dimensional models, just ship locations and vectors. Elias informed me the screening frigates on our tail had fired a new salvo of six missiles at us. I asked the air how long this conflict had been going on. Haily responded that the Squirrel indicated it had been six days over comms. So definitely a multi-system coordinated attack in this region of space.

It was two hours later when the Squirrel finally contacted us. They hadn’t believed the sensor data we had been feeding them, but since it was now confirmed, they were asking who we were and if we could help. I didn’t plan to get involved but told them we would remain in the system as long as we could to send them our sensor data.

An hour later and my plans changed. Two more quadruped ships came out of subspace in front of us. They were both behemoths. Edmund was currently on the bridge assisting and said they were mobile space docks for the Straaik. That was the amphibian race on the other spy ship. The two massive platforms were on our escape vector. We were now vectoring up on the ecliptic to avoid them.

Abby made a suggestion. We could take the two Brotherhood stealth shuttles and deposit Gabby’s Black Widows on the monstrosities. If the spider bots could reach engineering and destroy the ship, then the Squirrel would have a chance. It was true, as on the plot, I could see dozens of ships from the inner system heading for the platforms for resupply and repairs.

Elias noted missiles were being launched from the platforms, not at us but in front of us. The staggered firing meant one thing, subspace disruptors. Why would they invest so much in keeping an alien trader from getting away?

It was time to make a decision.

I ordered us to pull as many supplies as we could from under the fake hull into the ship. We were going to shed our skin if needed to improve our speed. I ordered the marines to the Brotherhood shuttles with all our spider bots. We needed those platforms to stop firing subspace disruptors. The shuttles were going to lock on and deposit the spider bots to create havoc, while the marines in Badger suits were tasked to destroy the launchers. Elvis’ model showed where all the disrupter missiles were stored in the same hold. After the missiles were destroyed, they were to retreat.

The repair platforms had just over 1,200 personnel. Elvis informed the bridge that there were no armories on board. This had everyone pause. Were the platforms purely civilian ships? We confirmed that when the disrupter missiles did not have a launcher. They were just automated mini-shuttles that went to a point in space and exploded. They were massive, though, and the first disruption wave measured effectiveness out to 3 light hours. I tasked Elvis with compiling the data we were getting.

Our sensors should allow us to ignore the subspace disruptions…except they were coming too fast. Every thirty minutes, another one went off and required Elvis to start his calculations over again.

Elias said two cruisers and four frigates had just come out of subspace in support of the quadrupeds. No threat to the *Void Phoenix*, just more reinforcements for the attacking force. It also looked like the attacking force was withdrawing to regroup at the repair platforms. Haily said the Squirrel were offering to cover us if we retreated toward their planet.

That made sense, as they wanted to utilize our advanced sensors. We had been feeding them the data for hours, and it had an effect on the overall battle. The enemy cruisers in stealth mode had run into a carefully laid minefield. All of the cruisers had been damaged, but none were destroyed. The problem was the Squirrel were outnumbered two to one, and more ships kept arriving. Then the Squirrel gave me information that forced my hand. Every inhabited system within ten days of subspace travel had been attacked. At least, that is what the admiral in the opposing fleet had said.

The insane amount of ships to do that…Elias provided the information. There were twenty-one inhabited systems in that envelope. Nine of them had substantial populations and space forces.

The shuttles were prepped for launch, and the bots had crammed the hulls and corridors with as much as they could salvage. I ordered the shuttles launched and had us move to the entry vector the Squirrel had relayed to Haily. I was going to through our lot in with them. We would be given enough time to resupply, and if we shed our skin we had a chance to escape. We were not forced to protect population centers like the Squirrel.

We all watched anxiously as the two Brotherhood shuttles approached the large platforms completely undetected. When they docked, we all cheered on the bridge. Twelve marines in Badger suits and five Black Widows scrambled on the outer hull and quickly breached from four different locations. The Badger suit comms went dark as they ventured into the vessel. I would need to investigate stronger com units for the suits if we were going to be performing operations like this. We had limited communication for the next three hours, but one of the repair ships suddenly blew apart around where the disruptor missiles had been stored. Zoe asked if we would be changing course to exit the system now.

I shook my head no. If the quadruped race had attacked all these colonies, then I planned to resupply and service our subspace engines here and then make a huge subspace jump to get out of the war zone. She nodded and returned to her work. I was running dozens of scenarios in my head for the best case survival for my crew, and this was it. Destroy the repair platforms, get this portion of the invasion to a stalemate, and retreat.

I asked Edmund again if this was a Brotherhood-orchestrated event, and he couldn’t answer. He didn’t have any information on it, but it seemed like something they would do. Have aliens fight each other to weaken each other, so they are not a threat to humanity. Maybe something bigger was happening in human-controlled space. The first shuttle had all marines on board and was asking for orders.

I looked at Abby, and she nodded at me and ordered them to support the other marines. The other platform was still functional, and it appeared they were still fighting deep inside the ship.

It was five minutes later when Gabby asked what did I want to do with the spider bots. Three were still functional on the partially destroyed platform. I told her to get them to engineering and cut through the main reactor housing if possible. She nodded, and we waited while we tracked the shuttle joining the other one. The damaged platform exploded an hour later with the spider bots’ assistance. This was followed shortly by the disruptor missile munitions of the intact platform. Cheers from the bridge as we waited for the marines.

We finally got comms. They indicated the issue was one of the Badger suits malfunctioned when it was submerged when the corridors were flooded by the aliens to slow them. It had gotten lodged into the mechanicals, and it took nearly two hours to extract the marine and the suit. The other marines didn’t want to kill their comrade by blowing the missiles up.

The two Brotherhood shuttles with our marines and four functioning spider bots made their way in system Rendezvous was seventeen hours on the converging vectors with the *Void Phoenix*. An hour after the shuttles had left the second vessel, it exploded as well. They had planted dozens of explosives at key junctures on their gaunt through the ship to go off at the same time.

As we made our way into the heart of the system, the Squirrel commed us. They wanted to talk.