Chapter 112

Although our sensors gave us visual data in three dimensions, the distance was too far for rapid communication.  We would have to come up with some type of visual communication in the future.  It would be one way to the *Void Phoenix,* but at least we would be better informed.  Since I was anxious, I tasked Elvis with coming up with something to add to the marine suits that we could read with the sensors in the future.  It was the first time I heard the sarcastic AI sound mildly excited at being given a task.

We watched as the two shuttles docked within sixty seconds of each other.  The Squirrel marines flowed out and moved into the ship in three teams of six, with their commander coordinating from each shuttle.  They were a distraction.  They were to secure the hangers, attack armories, and the bridge, drawing off the defenders.  My marines were to get Julie’s hacking device to infiltrate the ship’s computer systems and make sure the spider bots had a clear path to engineering for the eventual destruction of the ship.

The first engagement was the Squirrel in one of the quadruped’s hanger bays.  It was a bloodbath as the mechanics and fighter pilots did not have any armor.  This vessel only had two large hangers for small craft, one port, and one starboard.  If the Squirrel could hold both or destroy the small craft, then we wouldn’t have to worry about a fighter screen when we approached.  As the Squirrel were disabling the ships, the anti-boarding marines finally arrived.  The firefight started ensuing, and the other Squirrel team had just reached the other bay.

Two fighters tried to launch but were quickly damaged and failed to leave the hanger.  The first Squirrel went down wounded, and then another.  It was frustrating to watch as the Squirrel were being reckless.  We didn’t want any fighters launched in case they discovered our cloaked shuttles on the exterior of the ship.  My marines were in lower engineering and had just run into their first resistance themselves.  Squad A had Julie’s bot with her fragment and the hacking device with them and secured one of the main control stations.  Squad B was in control of the aft weapons power generators and was clearing the crew.

A scan by Elvis showed the crew on the enemy battleship in complete disarray.  Elvis gave me estimates of marine defenders based on who was gathering weapons and armor in the various armories across the ship, about 1,700 defenders.  That was a lot for our small group who already had four Squirrel down with injuries.  And one of those four wasn’t moving, so Elvis applied the KIA tag overlay on him.

The Squirrel commandos disabled all the craft in the hangers and moved out but soon encountered heavy fighting in corridors.  All of our momentum was lost.  I wished we had tasked a pair of our Badgers to go with them.  We could have broken the resistant choke points.  But we were helpless on the *Void Phoenix’s* bridge, just spectators waiting for our exodus with the Squirrel fleet.

Finally, the enemy fleet responded.  Elias alerted me they had slowed their burn to the planet, and two cruisers and eight frigates were vectoring toward the battleship.  This was huge for the Squirrel.  This delay in the planetary assault would hopefully get drawn out.  Every hour was precious time to repair defenses and dig in on the planet.  I was wondering if Julie’s fragment was going to be successful, and my question was answered when the battleship flipped over and started to decelerate, and it would eventually move out of the system.  My bridge cheered, and Julie’s hologram at the right of my captain’s chair muttered, ‘as if there was any doubt.’

With Julie’s hack successful, my marines moved to reinforce the Squirrel, who had been having a miserable time of it.  Five KIA and six were seriously wounded.  My Badgers were less hampered and tore through defenses and quadruped marines as they moved forward in fire teams of four.  One marine fire team swept over the Squirrel emplacement at a corridor juncture and moved into heavy fire unimpeded.  My marines had control of engineering which hopefully meant no self-destruct.  All Julie needed to do was jump the ship when it got a safe distance out of the system’s gravitational field.

Elias informed me the fleet was merging to intercept the battleship…and it was growing.  The two cruisers were now four, and the eight frigates now had a screen of 35 fighters.  Elias ran the ETA, and they would get there at the same time we would.  I switched my view to our countdown, 98 seconds.  I watched it hit zero a short while later, and our fleet of civilian and military ships ignited their engines.  The quadrupeds had trouble responding.  The assault on the planet had been put on hold to deal with the battleship, and now hundreds of Squirrel were attempting to break containment.

If they put all their assets into stopping us, then the planetary assault would be so blunted it would be repelled.  I watched out own plot….six civilian ships had engine trouble and were left behind.  The rest of the fleet matched the speed of the slowest ship.

A massive explosion on the battleship drew my attention back to the battle.  Elvis and Elias sorted it out quickly; a missile magazine had exploded.  It had vented a large section of the ship, and five of our marines had been sucked into space.  Damn it!  I made the call for shuttle B to detach and collect our marines.  I had the old Union marine shuttle on the *Void Phoenix* to get up to standby status.  We might need it to collect troops after the short jump now.  A few minutes later, the quadrupeds tried the same thing, blowing a section of their ship up in order to suck out the marines, but we had been prepared this time. The marines had attached anchor cables to their suit as they were advancing.

Elvis was cycling the scanners now to track ship movements as our large fleet started to encounter resistance in our attempt to flee.  Long-range missiles, small fighter wings, and mine layers trying to get ahead of our vector.  Julie was filtering and compiling the data to send to the Squirrel.  The quadrupeds could not stop us.  If the battleship had been functional with its subspace disrupters, they would have had a chance.  I gave myself some self-praise at making the right call to join forces with the Squirrel.

The battleship was also now starting to thrust on a vector out of the system having reversed its inertia.  My internal processing of the information was interrupted by Haily.  She just wanted me to know the quadrupeds were swearing up a storm and cursing our descendants for 100 generations over comms.  Apparently, the battleship we had targeted was commanded by someone important.

The combat ships in our escape fleet were cycling to meet the four cruisers, eight frigates, and the fighter screen.  They were planning to reach the battleship and retake it, but it would also be in our engagement envelope.  The delayed communication from our shuttle had bad news.  Our five marines had been picked up, but two were severally injured, and one had been killed.  The bridge was silent for a moment before I told everyone to stay on task.  We would be picking up that shuttle on our way out of the system and find out then who we had lost and mourn them when we were safe.

A shock suddenly occurred when the battleship launched all of its missiles.  My heart thudded until Elvis got the initial tracking data.  They were headed at the four enemy cruisers.  Julie must have assumed control over their fire controls!  Twenty minutes later and a second spread was fired.  A comm reached Julie from her fragment, and she gave us bad news.  The subspace drive was on a separate network, and the marines were working furiously to get close enough for Julie’s bot to compromise it.

With minutes between communications, I needed to decide now on a course of action.  It would take a long time for the remaining marines to make it back to the shuttle.  We had four spider bots on board, and Gabby was waiting to take control when we got in range.  I decided on my message.  If the likelihood of succeeding was less than 66%, then they were to retreat to the remaining shuttle.

Abby quipped from her station on the bridge that expecting a marine to be able to do math beyond counting their ammo was setting the bar too high.  It turned into a moot point as the quadrupeds blew up the entire AI CPU, cutting off Julie’s access to controlling any part of the battleship.  The marines commed and said they were making their way to the shuttle.  The Squirrel commandos were down to 18 combat effective and 7 seriously injured.  The only good news from Elvis was the quadrupeds were down to just over five hundred marines.

I told Gabby to get her spider bots in a position to destroy the ship.  The first part of the plan had failed, but we had secured our escape vector. Of course, my thoughts of success were crushed.  A large number of enemy ships had moved out of the gravity field, and completed micro subspace jumps on the perimeter of the system to get in front of our fleeing armada.  One was a cruiser that immediately fired a subspace disrupter.  Our escape vector now had about two dozen ships.  It seemed like a waste of resources as we would easily be able to chew through them.

Elias announced mines were being deployed.  I switched Elvis to focus on the mines and send all tracking data to our escape fleet.  They were casting a large net with hundreds of mines being flung into space.  Haily let me know our shuttle was matching our speed and currently docking.  Doc and Scrubs were already in the shuttle bay waiting for the injured marines.

The news from the battleship was not good.  The Squirrel had destroyed all the shuttles, and now they had 19 Badgers and 22 Squirrel commandos trying to squeeze on board our one remaining shuttle.  The solution was eight Badgers were going to anchor on the exterior of the shuttle.  Crazy freaking marines.

We were spectators as the fleets started engaging.  We were secure in the center of the formation and transmitting sensor data.  I would have liked to watch the disbelief of the quadrupeds as our fleet shifted and avoided every mine in our path.  Two civilian ships were still lost to the mines, and we never found out why they didn’t maneuver out of the path.  The cruiser that had fired the subspace disrupter tried to turn and run but was quickly swarmed by the Squirrel combat ships.

The intercept fleet of the cruisers and frigates moved to the battleship, which promptly exploded when two cruisers got close enough.  I made the decision we were not going to get any better chance to do some damage.  The explosion took 17 troop transports in its bloom as well that had docked or were in the process of docking.  The battleship explosion seemed to break the attacking fleet.  They moved to resume their safe distance and lick their wounds.  We bought the Squirrel planet some time.

As our fleet reached a safe distance, ships started to transition to subspace.  No enemies approached us as we waited, keeping our sensors active.  We were going to serve as the rear screen.  The four cruisers without functional subspace drives had taken some damage but still grouped up and made their way back toward the planet to aid in the probably futile defense.  Sixteen of the Squirrel commandos transferred to these cruisers.  They wanted to spend their lives defending the planet they were born on.

While we waited, I learned we had six Squirrel commandos remaining on board.  Four were in critical condition, and two were spouses of two of our passengers.  Our marines talked highly of the Squirrel commandos.  They were brave to the point of idiocy, willing to give their lives to save their comrades without hesitation.

We were the last ship to leave the system. We lingered, watching the enemy fleet trying to sort itself out. I guessed the admiral, or at least one of them, had been on the battleship we had destroyed. With the quadrupeds in disarray, the Squirrel might have a chance to hold out. We slid onto subspace to catch up with the fleet. I needed to offload my passengers.