Chapter 116 Disappearing Act

The Squirrel scientists made steady progress on the alien sensor system over the next two weeks, building more and more parts of the sensor. Their understanding of the device was increasing at a phenomenal rate, and at the pace they were going, they should be able to have a functional replica in less than two years.  I did get their promise that any ship, colony, or space station would destroy the research and sensor devices if it looked like they might fall to an enemy.

Giving the Squirrel access to the device had been a trade-off. I lost my exclusive advantage, but they were doing all the leg work and research on the device. Already Haily had been able to move past just utilizing the device. She now understood some aspects and could even do some maintenance. Once the Squirrel built a functional replica, I would be given all the files.

After the success of my Gorilla suits being able to transition into shadow subspace, the Squirrel came up with an idea to hide their asteroid colonies. They were in the process of installing the special emitters and would phase the entire asteroid out of normal space. If they could pair their phasing system with functional alien sensors, then they would have enough warning to disappear if a threat arrived in the Bradbury system. They would be safe if the enemy did not have a device to scan subspace.

The largest mystery in the system was the shadow planet that showed signs of habitation. We did make numerous observations of the habitable planet that showed life in shadow subspace. The Squirrel determined the population had no access to space, so if they kept their distance, they should be safe. The Squirrel Council decided that they would not interact with the population trapped in subspace until they had complete control and understanding of subspace band phasing. That didn’t prevent them from studying the planet from afar. It appeared there were about a dozen small cities with small populations estimated at around one hundred thousand each. The images were incomplete since it was the *Void Phoenix* using the alien sensor at an extreme range while making short jumps on the periphery of the system.

The Squirrel xeno scientists believed there were at least five species based on the various city architectures from the images. That made some sense as the documented ruins in the Brotherhood database said at least nine different species tried to colonize the system before humanity had three failed attempts of its own. I did wonder if one of those cities might not have a population of humans.

Moving their colony asteroids to subspace would be an extremely effective system, with the only drawback being the power requirements to remain in subspace. The Squirrel needed solid-state fuel, as solar and hydrogen fusion generators were barely sufficient. They needed to risk traveling for both food and refined fuel. My crew had no idea how they had been able to stomach a constant diet of nutrition bars made from the algae. Our own lack of food was forcing us to leave as well. I would have to decide whether we would return here or continue pursuing the Union fleet.

We had remained for so long as I had hoped they would start figuring out a way for our subspace shadows to be merged again, but the research seemed at a dead end. I felt there was nothing more we could do by remaining in the Bradbury system. We were going to escort the Squirrel transports to the fungi planet.  The Squirrel had seeded their populations from their ships on the asteroids and were sending two massive transports with us.

I had left the hover tanks and a stockpile of other material goods behind so we could dock the *Caladrius* again in the belly of the *Void Phoneix*.  I even offloaded the entire crystalline data library and the device for reading the archival discs. The Squirrel were going to make much better use of them, and when I returned, I would have access to their findings. Getting the 30 million discs off the ship created a lot of space. That was not all I left behind. Most of the alien devices I scavenged from the planetoid were left behind for the Squirrel to study. It had been a hard decision, but I lacked time truly delve into their secrets. Lightening the mass of the *Void Phoenix* would make her faster. As we continued our voyage, I still had a fortune in precious metals and alien jewelry to barter with.

We had added seven Squirrel scientists and engineers, eleven Squirrel children, and six Squirrel marines to our crew roster. They all joined without expecting any compensation. The new crew was repaying the debt their entire race had accrued from our help. I still planned to pay them, not that we had many future destinations with places to spend funds.

I think Gabby was the happiest person on board to be leaving the Bradbury system. She had been locked in the robotics lab for much of our stay, spending an average of twenty hours every day cycle. She had even set up a cot for her and Zed. She had been using the fabricators and assembly equipment to build a steady supply of bots for the Squirrel. It was good practice for her, and she had been mostly overseeing the assembly and doing testing on finished bots. She had been sending out three of four bots daily on shuttle transports. I know the Squirrel appreciated her efforts and constantly gave her small gifts. My entire crew received similar treatment from the gracious and thankful Squirrel.

As we were leaving the system flanked by the two transports, I had to admire the Squirrel.  They had focused their energy on rebuilding their civilization with minimal resources in what amounted to a hostile system.  The asteroid colonies looked stable, and they had plans for controlled growth. The Squirrel had dismantled over half of their ships to build their colonies on the asteroids. The remaining ships were slowly installing the same emitters, but most of the ships would be scraped for material at their future shipyard. They did not have enough military strength to defend the colonies, so I hoped their phasing technology worked.

When we slipped into subspace with the transports, the bridge seemed extremely optimistic, even our new comms officer, Hyrena. Hyrena was a language savant and rotated shifts with Haily. Hyrena was the wife of one of the Squirrel marines and extremely competent, and it allowed Haily to spend more time working as an engineer on the sensors. Our aimless traveling had done some good. We had made a potentially powerful ally. And we made some substantial gains in deciphering the alien technology.

Nero and the engineering team had returned the ship to its prior state before we had become a refugee transport. Two of the Squirrel engineers were weapons engineers, and all eight of our grazers were now functional at 77% capacity. The bridge targeting system was installed and implemented. The six port and starboard grazers were intended for missile and fighter defense, and they had increased the tracking speed and data exchange with the bridge fire control. We now had a decent chance to hit fighters and destroy missiles.

The two medium grazers only had a forward arc. The Squirrel said they were functional but our best offense was still running away. We just would not be able to do enough damage if we were attacked by multiple large ships—or anything larger than a frigate.

Our mix of alien and standard shielding actually made a stalwart line of defense. The Squirrel engineers in conjunction with Hans Anders, my shield engineer, had been able to layer the shields. It drew a lot of power but resulted in a three-fold increase in shield strength. It was the alien hull plating and stealth coating that would hopefully keep us out of trouble, though.

The first staff meeting after leaving Bradbury had me reveal my plans. After our resupply, we would be taking a long subspace jump to Juniper-44Z. It was the furthest human colony outside of human-controlled space. The Brotherhood database said it was still viable as of 15 months ago. The colony had fuel refineries, orbital farms, and a significant presence on the jungle planet. The entire colony had less than 200,000 humans, and its growth had been stagnant for two decades.

They had a fairly weak space navy, composed of mainly heavy gunships. The colony had gone unmolested for so long since the only valuable thing in the system was the planet with a breathable atmosphere. There were very few heavy metals to mine in Juniper-44Z and only two gas giants for siphoning hydrogen. The good news was our metals should sell extremely well. We confirmed our plans for our next two ports of call.

Edmund, Vicky, Doc, and Damian were to work on preparing for our next stop at the fungal race. We needed to confirm the food’s safety and the fuel’s viability. The Brotherhood had no records of the race, but the Tirani had successfully traded with them in the past. If this transaction fell through, then we would be stretched to reach Juniper-44Z.

During the voyage, I focused on mentoring Gabby and Luna and spending time with Celeste and Amos. Outside of the bridge, I was working mostly on troubleshooting the three types of power armor. We had 40 Badger suits, 12 Gorilla suits, and 12 Gekos. The Gekos had six Squirrel and six human variants. Abby wanted them for bridge guard duty since they were much lighter than the Badger variant. Abby classified the Gekos as light infantry, Badger as infantry, and the Gorillas as heavy infantry.

When I asked her if we were building and space marine battalion, she looked at me and said, ‘Of course.’ I paused and then shrugged and said, ‘Then we are going to need a bigger ship.’ I had a lot of time invested in the *Void Phoenix*, and it had quite a bit of sentimentality to it. Being pragmatic if we were no longer serving passengers, then it would make sense to get a new starship.

I opened the files the Squirrel had sent me on their new cruisers. It was probably going to take five years before they even started construction on their first cruiser, but they were nice ships and the Squirrel engineers were motivated to incorporate as much of the technology I had given them as they could. The Squirrel Council had even offered to give me the first one they built. The problem was the cruisers were warships, not passenger liners. It would be hard to travel in human-controlled space. And the maintenance costs would be a nightmare. The crew requirements were steep as well. At least 200, just to run the ship. It only had six oversized shuttle bays as well.

The shuttle bays were supposed to hold stealth shuttles and marines. That was a nod to our efforts in helping the Squirrel. The engineers had figured their population was too thin for direct space combat, so boarding enemy ships with the powerful Gekos suits was preferable. I only had the initial schematics of the large shuttles.

The shuttle was designed similar to my Brotherhood shuttles but was large enough to hold thirty-six marines and twelve spider bots. We had also given the Squirrel the Black Widow plans, but they couldn’t manufacture the fuel rods for the power core. Maybe their scientists would come up with something. The shuttles were slated to have shields, alien sensors, micro-jump drives, anti-fighter missiles, anti-infantry turrets, and the new shadow space emitters.

All of this was still a work in process, but if the shuttles did have all this, then they could slip into subspace, sneak up on their target, deploy their marines, and escape untouched. I was actually scared just thinking about the versatility. The quadrupeds wouldn’t see it coming when the Squirrel sought their revenge.

I weighed the advantages and negatives while we made our way through subspace.