

Chapter 1

Location: Trybec, Aubaine Subsector, Old Expanses Sector
2215 UST, Day 321, NE 5

Captain Nile walked across the tarmac to his ship. It was an old ship, but then it was old when his grandfather was a boy, back when this whole region of space belonged to the Third Imperium. Now, most of that region was wilds.

The Reformation Coalition was working to rebuild an interstellar civilization and Captain Nile had a commission in the service that was on the cutting edge of that effort, the Reformation Coalition Exploratory Service, or RCES for short.

Of course the Blue Goose had not belonged to his grandfather. No. His grandfather was not a spacer. He never left the world he was born on. His grandfather always said, “If you live on a habitable world, why would you want to leave?” Captain Nile thought he might have had a point there. When Virus was unleashed and destroyed civilizations hundreds of worlds that depended on artificial means to support its populations became tombs for those who could not escape.

Officially, the Blue Goose was just tail number 10253, but Captain Nile decided to give it a name. When it had been salvaged from the starport on Dijon, the ship was surprisingly intact. The salvagers theorized that it was on ground power when it got infected with the virus. The computer managed to kill the crew, but couldn't do much more damage than that. A tech crew replaced the computer and got it ready to fly again. The 10253 had been built as an Empress Mavara class far trader, which made her perfect as a small transport.

At the base on Aurora, the ship was cleaned up some more and given a new paint job. It seemed to Captain Nile that was ever the way of the military – salute it or paint it. In doing so, they removed the ship's original name, Mystic Venture, and gave it an official tail number.

While the tech crews were cleaning the old Mystic Venture up, they made some modifications to the old far trader. They enclosed the front loading ramp, making it a cargo lock and docking collar that was designed to fit the Coalition standard docking collar. They built a transverse passageway on the lower level, between the crew's quarters and the bridge.

Life support was moved closer to the engineering section. A significant modification was to add a rear cargo door by moving part of the engineering section. Overall, the ship lost a bit of maneuvering fuel, which could be replaced using drop tanks if needed, and gained a bit of cargo space. Perhaps more importantly, the ship gained the ability to perform roll-on roll-off cargo moves similar to what the larger subsidized merchants could manage. Another benefit was the ability to perform air drops while still moving.

As Captain Nile approached his ship, he saw Lieutenant Kalin Buchannon walking around doing her pre-flight checks. The sun was still low on the horizon and was casting long shadows under and behind the ship, but it glinted off her jet black hair. Captain Nile noted that a pallet of cargo was being loaded at the rear cargo door and shore power was still connected. The fuel tanker that had been there last night was not present. He hoped that its absence meant that they were topped off, but he would check levels once he reached the bridge.

Approaching Kalin, he looked up at the ship and said, "Good morning, Kalin, how are your pre-flight's going?"

With a data pad in one hand and a stylus in the other, she did not salute but replied, "It's going fairly well, sir. It should be ready to lift in about an hour." She transferred the stylus to the data pad and pulled another streamer free. She dropped the streamer in the bag she wore and marked off another step on her data pad.

"Is the power plant up yet?" He asked, believing she already had it running.

"Got it up first thing this morning." She replied while moving to the next position. "I only have it running at 10 percent right now. The ground crew should be arriving momentarily to remove shore power."

"Very well." He said as he walked along with her, "Notify me if there is a delay getting shore power disconnected. There is a storm moving in from the south and I would rather not lift through it if we can avoid it."

"Yes, sir." She said while examining one of the massive landing legs, "I'll give maintenance a call if they are not here in the next 15 minutes."

Captain Nile nodded and headed to the rear of the ship. The grav truck was pulling away, having been unloaded. He saw the loadmaster near the aft end of the cargo bay and called up, "Is that the last of the cargo, Petty Officer Daniels?"

The petty officer replied, "Yes, captain, but the postal clerk called over and said they have a few bags of mail for the Aubaine."

Captain Nile asked, "I see. Well, take the air raft and run over to the post office. I don't want to wait for them to get around to delivering it and I don't want to show up at the Aubaine without their mail. While you are out, swing by supply and requisition some extra meal packs. We are going to have some passengers on the way out." He didn't add that they might have some passengers on the way back as well. He only hoped that he had more live passengers than body bags this time.

"Marines?" Daniels asked hopefully. They were generally self sufficient. Officers, on the other hand, required more attention. Cargo handling was only one of his duties. He

also served as steward whenever there were important passengers. Officers qualified as important.

“A few marines and a few ratings. You won’t need to do anything fancy or get into a dress uniform. Get the cargo secured and pick up that mail as soon as you can.” The captain replied making a sweeping motion with his hand.

“I’m just about done here, captain.” Daniels said waving at the pallet that he had just loaded into the cargo hold. “I just need to finish strapping it down. Then I’ll head out.”

The captain nodded and continued around to the starboard airlock. Captain Nile preferred to use that airlock as the main access to the ship in most circumstances. Just inside the airlock was a sizable area that could serve as a reception area. The lift to the upper deck, where the passenger staterooms were was just off of that area.

Petty Officer Jenkins was standing watch at the bottom of the accommodations ladder. When docked with another vessel or parked in a starport, the ship’s gunners had fewer duties than the other crew members so they served as security watches when the situation warranted it. Captain Nile usually set a watch at times when traffic to and from the ship was high and included personnel other than the crew. With only one gunner and the loadmaster, it would be impractical to have a watch there constantly. Otherwise, there was always a duty officer on board, which didn’t really have to be an officer. The captain was the only crew member exempt from that duty.

The blonde haired gunner snapped to attention and saluted as the captain approached. The captain saluted the Coalition flag painted on the ship’s tail fin and then returned the petty officer’s salute. He dropped the salute and Jenkins followed suit.

“We will be taking on some passengers,” the captain said. “Hold up your data pad so I can beam the manifest over to you.” He took his hand computer out of its holster while the petty officer prepared the data pad.

When Jenkins had the data pad activated, he said, “Ready to receive, captain.”

Captain Nile selected a file with the stylus and then touched the SEND soft key, which transferred the file to Jenkins’ data pad. When the captain noted the “File Received” display on his screen, he turned the computer off and restored it to its holster. He said, “They should arrive here at 0800 local time. If they bring more than their space bag with them, get a hold of Petty Officer Daniels so he can get their gear stowed.”

“Aye, captain,” the petty officer replied.

The captain nodded and climbed the boarding ladder into the ship. He cycled through the outer air lock door. Although the starport’s atmospheric pressure was a bit lower than the standard one atmosphere normally maintained on ships, Captain Nile had the interior

pressure reduced to match local atmospheric conditions. That allowed the crew to override the inner air lock door open.

As the outer door closed, the captain could hear, “Captain arriving!” announced by Petty Officer Jenkins over the public address system. Some captains preferred to be identified by the ship’s name, as was their right by custom and tradition, but Captain Nile preferred the simpler announcement.

As he stepped into the reception area and started to head for the bridge, he spotted the ship’s medic checking the seal on the first aid kit located in that space.

She looked up and said, “Good morning, skip.”

Captain Nile nodded and said, “Good morning, Doc.”

In the Exploratory Service, only the larger vessels had a regular doctor. Smaller vessels carried a medic that was qualified for independent duty. As part of their qualification, these medics were required to serve a tour as a medic with the marines. Most were as competent as doctors that had taken the medical school route. Traditionally, medics who served on the smaller ships were called “Doc” as a measure of respect for their training and abilities. Captain Nile noticed that she was already dressed in her body sleeve, the combination armor and emergency vac suit that the service issued. He figured it was her time with the marines that got her in that habit.

Knowing that he would get her report later, Captain Nile continued on to the bridge. Because they were expecting passengers, the bridge was locked. He quickly entered his access code on the keypad and the airtight door cycled open.

Captain Nile entered the bridge, took a public address microphone and announced, “All personnel conduct pre-flight checks. Make reports to the executive officer.” As he placed the microphone back into its bracket, he saw Petty Officer Daniels depart the ship in the air raft.

He left the bridge and locked it behind him. Doc had already moved to another space, going up to the passenger deck to check the medical equipment there.

Captain Nile turned right and headed for the port side of the ship. He opened the iris valve on the starboard side of the cross ship passageway and moved into the passageway itself. He let the iris valve cycle closed automatically as he passed between the doors of the aft cargo bay, which could hold about 52 tons, and the forward cargo lock, which was often used to hold up to about 15 tons of cargo.

The port iris valve of the cross ship passageway was locked in the open position so he entered the lower stateroom area, moving quickly to his stateroom in the bow of the ship.

He unlocked and entered his stateroom, which was in the port extension of the ship. The starboard extension, which he could see through the curved window of his stateroom held the bridge he had recently vacated.

He touched a panel on the wall and commanded the window to darken. It occurred to him that if he had commanded the ship in the days of the Third Imperium, when it came out of the shipyard, he could have commanded the computer to darken the window. However, after Virus, people gave the computers far less control over the devices they operated. There were also devices in place to disable it quickly should it become infected.

Captain Nile changed out of his working uniform and put his own body sleeve on. He slipped a pair of ship's coveralls over that and felt ready to start with his pre-underway checks.

Outside, Lieutenant Buchannon noted the arrival of the ground crew. They asked her, "Are you ready to have shore power removed, lieutenant?"

Placing the stylus into its holder, she replied, "As soon as I transfer the ship to internal power, you can remove your cables. I'll go inside and get on the phones."

The petty officer in charge got out of the maintenance vehicle and said, "We'll be waiting, ma'am."

Lieutenant Buchannon walked around to the boarding ladder and set her bag of streamers off to the side. She said, "I'll be back for this momentarily," to the watch.

She saluted the flag and the petty officer and said, "Permission to go aboard."

The petty officer returned her salute and said, "Permission granted, ma'am."

She entered the ship and inside the airlock took a left turn. Opening and closing iris valves as she walked along, she passed by the starboard cargo lock, which could also hold a ton and a half of cargo, and the ship's life support equipment before she entered the engineering section.

Lieutenant Buchannon went to the engineering control panel and pressed an actuator. This sent an electronic command to a buss transfer switch that switched the supply of power from the shore power cables to the fusion power plant. When the corresponding indicator displayed that the ship was operating on internal power, she put on a headset and contacted the working party. "The ship is on internal power. You may remove the shore power cables. Thank you for your help and we'll see you next time."

The petty officer in charge reported, "Yes, ma'am. We'll have them off in about 15 minutes."

She replied, "I'll be outside finishing my pre-flight checks out there. Report to me when you are done."

"Yes, ma'am." The petty officer in charge of the ground crew replied and motioned to his team to get started.

She removed the headset and headed back to the forward end of the ship. Lieutenant Buchannon exited the ship, closing the hatch behind her, and walked down the accommodations ladder. At the bottom step, she saluted the flag and the watch and then said, "Permission to go ashore."

Petty Officer Jenkins returned her salute and said, "Permission granted." She stepped of the accommodations ladder and recovered the bag she had left next to it. Then she headed back aft to continue her pre-flight checks.

Captain Nile returned to the bridge to commence his pre-flight checks, leaving the iris valve open so he could hear if anyone entered the ship. He sat in the left hand seat and energized his console, checking to see that it was still set for his preferred configuration. Satisfied that it was, he checked off the appropriate step on his data pad and continued with his checks.

As he worked, he heard the whisper of an iris valve opening. Moments later, a female officer entered the bridge. She was wearing ship coveralls as well.

Upon entering the bridge, she said, "Good morning Captain."

Captain Nile nodded to his executive officer and said, "Good morning Riga, how was duty?"

She shrugged and said, "Quiet as expected. The last minute cargo drop was unexpected, but fortunately, Petty Officer had decided to spend the night on board. He wasn't too happy to get up, but he did. He should have it all on and secured by now."

"He was securing it as I came in," the captain said looking out the window. The outer doors of the air raft bay were still open. "I sent him off to pick up some mail for the Aubaine and maybe get some extra supplies for our passengers."

"I haven't seen any come aboard yet." She said as she sat in the co-pilot's seat.

"I am not expecting them for about another hour. However, I hope to lift shortly after they get on board." He said and sat in his own seat once again. "You should start getting pre-underway reports here shortly. I'll be finished with mine shortly after Kalin finishes her pre-flights."

She looked over at the captain and asked, "Did you get any intel about our projected route?"

He patted his hand computer in its case and said, "I got some from Flight Ops and I had a chance to talk to Captain Wilkins of the War Sprite last night. They just came from that way. I'll fill you in once we have pre-underway checks done."

A motion at the edge of his vision caught his attention and he turned to see Lieutenant Buchannon entering the bridge.

She said, "Good morning Riga, I hope duty was quiet last night."

Riga turned and said, "It was quiet Kalin; just the way I like it." She smiled at the engineer.

Lieutenant Buchannon said, "My pre-flights checks are done with no discrepancies." Turning to the captain she asked, "Permission to increase power output on the main plant, sir."

Captain Nile nodded and said, "Bring it up to 50 percent. We'll bring it up to full operational status just before we lift."

She smiled and said, "I'll get right on that sir. The plant will be ready to go fully operational on your signal."

Captain Nile stood and said, "Good. We should be able to lift as soon as our passengers get on board." Turning to the executive officer, he said, "Bring the passive sensors up and keep an eye on that storm that's developing. I would rather not have to fly through that."

"Since I'll be waiting for the rest of the pre-underway checks, I'll have time." She replied turning to her console and energizing it.

"I know you might not be able to see much with just the passive sensor array, but learn what you can." He said.

Captain Nile walked out with Lieutenant Buchannon. She continued on aft to the engineering section while he exited the ship through the starboard airlock.

Once outside, he walked around the starship checking various places as he walked. Part of his task was to make sure that all the shore streamers had been removed. He knew that Kalin would do a thorough job as always, but he was the captain and it was his responsibility to check.

He saw that the ground maintenance crew had departed. Shore power was the last shore service to come off, so he knew that the Blue Goose was self sufficient and ready to lift in that aspect. At the rear of the ship, he took note that the cargo doors had been closed as well.

While he was completing his checks, he saw Petty Officer Daniels return with the air raft. He mentally checked that off as one more thing accomplished.

On the bridge Lieutenant Riga Inshali watched the storm in the distance. More correctly, she tuned the passive sensor array to intercept a local weather broadcast and was watching their weather radar on one of her multi-function displays.

While she was watching, Petty Officer Sommers came into the bridge and said, "Weapon's Department reporting pre-flight checks are complete with no discrepancies."

"Very well, Petty Officer Sommers," she said and checked off Weapon's Department on her data pad. She looked up and said, "That's all for now."

"Yes, ma'am," He replied and left the bridge. As he left Chief Gaamlish came into the bridge.

"Good morning, XO. I've finished my pre-flight checks." She reported, sitting in the rear seat. "Did the skipper say whether we were going to have passengers?"

Lieutenant Inshali nodded and said, "Yes, not sure how many, but they should be here before long, Doc."

The medic sighed and eased out of the seat. "I better go break out some medication. It seems like we always get one or two that get jump sick."

Riga laughed and said, "Better to try to prevent it than clean up afterwards."

Chief Gaamlish said, "I've done that more times than I care to remember. You'd be amazed at how many of those tough marines just can't handle a jump."

Riga laughed again and said, "Well, you know the old adage, choose your rate, choose your fate."

The chief chuckled and said, "Right XO. I'll be in sickbay if you need me." She headed out the door, leaving Lieutenant Inshali alone on the bridge once again. She wanted to start plotting their course to the next destination, but the captain had not given her the intel report yet.

Captain Nile re-entered the bridge and asked, "How are the pre-flight checks coming, Riga? I'm done with my checks, I found no discrepancies."

The lieutenant said, "Then I have everyone except Deck Department, but that might be a few minutes yet. I just saw Petty Officer Daniels return."

“Hmm. Since he’s still working on that, I suppose we can use Petty Officer Sommers to standby at the quarterdeck and show our passengers to their staterooms when they arrive. At least until Daniels is finished.”

Riga nodded and picked up the public address microphone. She said, “Petty Officer Sommers, report to the bridge.” When she set the microphone back into its bracket, she noticed that the captain was looking at the radar display.

“I don’t like the looks of that, captain.” She said motioning to the display. “That front is moving in pretty fast.” She looked up at the time display on the bridge and said, “I estimate that it will be here at 2300.” The time display showed the time in the 24 hour format and was in Universal Ship Time, the time to which all ships of the coalition were synchronized.

The captain looked at the time and said, “That’s barely more than a half hour. I think we’re going to get a bit wet.”

Petty Officer Sommers came back on to the bridge and said, “Reporting as ordered.”

Lieutenant Inshali said, “Take some foul weather gear out to the watch and then post yourself at the quarterdeck so you can escort the passengers to their staterooms.” He asked, “Do we have them assigned?”

She looked at the captain for an answer and he said, “No, Sommers, just get them up to the stateroom area, show them which ones are available, and let them sort it out. Petty Officer Daniels should be done in time enough to issue them bedding.”

“Aye, sir,” the young petty officer said and asked, “Is there anything else sir?”

“That will be all for now, Sommers,” the captain replied and turned back to the radar display. The front looked like it had already reached the edge of the city, which was south of the starport.

“Aye, sir,” Petty Officer Sommers replied again and left the bridge.

Captain Nile went to his seat and, on the intercom panel, selected engineering. He keyed a microphone and called, “Engineering, are you back there, Engineer?”

“Bridge,” she replied, “I’m here, what can I do for you, Captain?”

“Bring the power plant up to 75 percent and start the warm up cycle on the HePlaRs,” the captain said looking out the viewport to the clouds in the south.

“I’ll have them ready in a few minutes, captain,” Lieutenant Buchannon said.

Captain Nile noticed some flashes of lightning in the clouds to the south and shook his head. Turning to his executive officer, who also served as the ship's navigator, he said, "Let's go over the intel report."

Lieutenant Inshali said, "All right sir."

Captain Nile reviewed the report with his executive officer. Of particular interest was the lack of Vampire, a ship controlled by Virus, activity immediately outside the borders of the Reformation Coalition. Since their first stop would have to be one of two boneyard systems, either Savjanni or Buhle, the absence of Vampire activity was important.

When he finished the briefing, Captain Nile looked up and saw a grav bus approaching the ship from the direction of the terminal building. He said, "Looks like our passengers have arrived."

Riga did an upward nod with her head and said, "So have the clouds. It will probably start raining any minute now."

"Contact ground maintenance and have them send a crew over here to remove the accommodation ladder. Secure the watch as soon as our guests are on board." He got up and slipped his hand computer back into its case.

"I'll call them right away, sir," she said as she reached for her headset.

"If they can't send anyone right away, get Jenkins and Sommers to move it clear. Ground maintenance can come collect it later," he said as he headed for the door. When he left the bridge, he closed and locked the door behind him and then headed back to the port side of the ship. He saw Petty Officer Sommers waiting on the quarterdeck and said, "The passengers should be arriving momentarily."

Petty Officer Sommers said, "Aye, captain. I saw Petty Officer Daniels heading up to the stateroom area."

"Thank you, Sommers," the captain said and continued on to his way.

Captain Nile proceeded to the port cargo lock and passed through it to the area where the low passage berths were. He made sure they were kept well maintained although he preferred not to use them for passengers. Aft of the low berth bay, was port lower engineering. He entered that and walked through to where he could enter the cargo bay.

In the cargo bay, he did a quick walk-through and exited into the starboard lower engineering section. Lieutenant Buchannon was at the engineering station there.

She looked up and said, "Oh, captain, the power plant is at 75 percent output and all of the HePlaRs are warmed up. Engineering is ready to support lift."

Captain Nile said, "Good. Our passengers are arriving now, so we should be stationing the maneuvering watch soon."

"Do I have time to get some coffee?" She asked standing up.

"You should have time," he replied starting to head forward.

She started to walk along with him and said, "Thanks, captain."

They passed through the life support bay and back into the quarterdeck.

The captain noticed there were six packing crates sitting on one side of the space. Figuring that they were combat armor for the marines, he said, "It looks like our passengers are on board. If you see Petty Officer Daniels up there, have him get these stowed for space ASAP."

"I'll be sure to, captain," she said heading to the lift shaft.

As she arrived, Petty Officer Sommers stepped out and headed for the starboard airlock. When he saw the captain, he said, "The XO said to move the accommodations ladder."

Captain Nile nodded and said, "Ground support must not have been able to send anyone to move it. As soon as you get it moved, secure the watch and lock the outer airlock door."

"Yes, sir," Petty Officer Sommers said as he headed into the airlock and cycled the outer iris valve open.

By time he and Petty Officer Jenkins got the accommodation ladder clear of the ship and climbed into the airlock with the ship's built in ladder, fat raindrops were starting to make spots on the tarmac. The closed and locked the outer airlock door and then closed the inner airlock door.

On the bridge, Captain Nile noticed that the hull opening board went from red to green for the inner airlock door. That was the last opening that was not in a green condition. Now that it was closed, the display showed a "strait board" meaning the ship was air tight and ready for space.

Captain Nile picked up the public address microphone and announced, "Station the Maneuvering Watch, make reports to the bridge." Turning to his executive officer he said, "Contact Dawn Base traffic control for permission to lift."

Lieutenant Inshali said, "Yes, captain," and proceeded to contact traffic control. Elsewhere in the ship, the crew members were quickly moving to their assigned maneuvering watch stations. As each individual reached his or her station and got it prepared for ship's maneuvers, he or she reported readiness to the bridge.

The captain keyed the mike again and said, "This is the captain. The ship will be getting underway in a few minutes. It looks like we will be flying for a brief time through some heavy weather. In case the turbulence is greater than our inertial compensators can adjust for, all passengers will report to their staterooms and strap into your bunks. It is recommended that you not move around until the otherwise instructed."

The executive officer strapped herself into her seat and said, "Dawn Base traffic control has cleared us to lift at 2310. The ship is manned for the maneuvering watch."

"Very well," the captain said as he also strapped into his seat. Placing the public address microphone back on its bracket, Captain Nile then put a communications headset on. He wrapped a hand around the control joystick and tested the few atmospheric maneuvering surfaces the Blue Goose had. Satisfied with the results, he felt that the ship was almost ready to lift.

"Engineering," he called, "bring the power plant up to full operational capability."

Lieutenant Buchannon replied, "Bridge, power plant is coming up now. HePlARs are warmed and ready."

"Very well, engineering." He replied and watched the power indication rise on his engineering multi-function display. "Once we are at full power, engage life support and bring the internal pressure up to 1 atmo."

"Yes, captain," the engineer replied. "Power plant is at full operational capability, commencing life support start-up."

Captain Nile looked at the time display on his console. He had 5 minutes remaining before he could lift. He checked that the ship's artificial gravity was still set for local gravity and then engaged it. Once they were off planet, he would gradually adjust it up to 1 G.

Then he energized the ship's contragrav system and adjusted it so that it negated 90% of the ship's mass.

Outside the rain was starting to increase in intensity and lightning was plainly evident among the clouds.

The time display changed to 2310 and Lieutenant Inshali reported, "Traffic control says we are cleared for lift-off."

Captain Nile switched his headset to the radio and said, "Dawn Base traffic control, this is the Blue Goose, we are lifting now."

Traffic control replied, "Understood, Blue Goose, have a safe journey and come back to see us."

Captain Nile acknowledged traffic control. In the right seat, Lieutenant Inshali served as the ship's astrogator, but also handled sensor operations, communications, and functioned as a co-pilot if the occasion arose.

"Energize navigation lights," the captain said.

Lieutenant Inshali complied and reported, "Navigation lights are energized."

The captain increased the contragrav output to 110 percent, which not only neutralized the ship's mass, but started pushing her away from the surface of Trybec. When the ship reached an altitude of 100 meters, he raised the landing legs and engaged the HePlaR engines to give the ship forward thrust.

Angling the nose up slightly, the captain used the ship's aerodynamic shape to provide some additional lift. Within a minute, the Blue Goose entered the clouds.

As expected the weather was a bit rough. The crew felt the turbulence some when it caused the ship to move more violently than the inertial compensators could handle. Off of the port side, a flash of lightning lit up the interior of the bridge and the associated thunderclap was plainly audible through the ship's hull. Then the ship broke through the clouds into the light of Tyrbec's orange sun. As the ship banked some, Captain Nile could see lightning strikes light up the clouds that were further away by the second.

He leveled out some and increased the thrust of the HePlaR drives to full. Almost immediately, a warning indicator started flashing on his console. Number 2 engine was showing a failure.

Captain Nile called back, "Engineering report status of Number 2 engine."

"There is a fuel feed malfunction, captain," the engineer replied working with her panel to see if she could remotely correct the problem. "I recommend shutting it down until I can run a diagnostic."

"Concur. Shut down Number 2 Engine. Once we are clear of atmo and on course for the jump point, see what you can see from inside."

As he spoke, she moved her hands across her console and shut down Number 2 HePlaR engine. "Will do, captain, Number 2 engine has been shut down. I am getting no indication of fire or fuel leak from upper level engineering, so I think we are safe."

"Very well, engineering," He replied and then checked his airspeed. The three remaining engines had enough thrust to get them clear of the atmosphere. To his astrogator he said,

“Looks like we will be getting to the jump point later than we thought. Better recalculate and adjust your plot accordingly.”

“Aye, captain,” she replied without looking up from the sensor display. “Once we reach the 10 diameter point, I’ll work on that if we have no contacts of interest.”

Lieutenant Inshali kept an eye on her sensor display as the ship moved away from the planet.

Once the ship was clear of the atmosphere and on a steady course outbound to the jump point, Captain Nile relaxed a bit. He called back, “Engineering, we are clear of the atmosphere, if conditions are stable there, take a look at number 2 engine.”

“I’ll head there now, captain,” Lieutenant Buchannon replied. “Everything else is running hot, strait, and normal.”

“Very well, report when you get back,” the captain said and called up the sensor display on his multi-function display. Turning to Lieutenant Inshali, he said, “I’ll monitor the sensors for awhile, you adjust the astrogation plot.”

“Aye, captain,” she said as she called up the astrogation program on a different multi-function display.

He picked switched the com panel to public address and said, “This is the captain. We have cleared the atmosphere and are outbound to our jump point. Passengers are welcome to move about the passenger deck at this time. We will be increasing the ship’s gravity to 1 G over the next hour. Passengers who prefer a lighter gravity may adjust it individually in your stateroom. Ship’s time is currently 2345. The steward will prepare a light meal and make it available shortly. We expect a transit of several hours to the jump point. We will alert you before we jump.”

He switched the com panel back to the local radio traffic.

Several minutes passed.

Lieutenant Inshali asked, “Captain, do you want to still use the low burn approach to the jump point?”

He nodded and said, “Yes, I want to conserve fuel as much as possible. We’re not in such a hurry that a few hours will make a difference.”

“Very well, sir. The calculations should be done momentarily,” she said as she punched the CONFIRM soft key on the multi-function display. The computer accepted the new inputs and started calculating the course.

“Bridge, engineering, captain I’ve inspected drive number 2 to the extent possible from inside the ship. Do you want me to EVA and take a look?”

“That might be wise. Get Jenkins to suit up and go out with you,” the captain replied looking at the time display.

“Aye, captain,” she said and took off her headset. She headed for the starboard turret to get Petty Officer Jenkins, but as she arrived, he was already out and closing the iris valve to his turret.

Jenkins said, “What do you think happened, Lieutenant?” He walked with her to towards the port air lock.

She replied, “Don’t know. As old as this ship is, it might just have been something giving out. However, it happened during the lightning storm, so maybe there was a lightning strike.”

He looked at her as he opened the ship’s locker, “How bad is it?”

“Well,” she said, “We don’t know for sure. We still have the three engines, thank goodness for redundancy, but that only leaves us with three quarters of our normal thrust.” She kicked off her boots and unzipped her ship’s coveralls. Underneath her coveralls she wore only a sports bra, panties, and socks.

Petty Officer Jenkins handed her vac suit to her and said, “Don’t you wear a body sleeve Lieutenant?”

She shook her head as she stepped into the suit, saying, “I only wear it when we are in potentially hostile territory. I figure if the ship gets hulled in any area I am, the shrapnel would most likely kill me before any explosive decompression could.”

He pulled off his coveralls and hung them on a hook inside the ship’s locker. He was wearing a body sleeve underneath his coveralls. He said, “I like to keep my options open.”

They worked together to get suited up. Once they had their helmets on, they did a radio check with each other and the bridge. As they finished, the medic arrived to do a second check on their suits.

Doc said, “Suits check sat. Be careful out there.”

Lieutenant Buchannon cycled the inner airlock door open and the pair stepped into the space. Once inside they cycled the door closed and started evacuating the air from the airlock. She reported to the bridge, “Captain, we’re in the port airlock and getting ready to head out.”

“Very well, lieutenant. Don’t initiate any extensive repairs,” the captain replied.

Doc took the first aid kit out of the ship’s locker and sat on one of the couches in the area, planning to wait for them there.

Once the air was evacuated, the lieutenant she cycled the outer hatch open and switched on the lights on her helmet. Holding on to a grab bar inside the air lock, she reached out and hooked her umbilical to an eye on the hull outside the airlock. Then she pushed out of the airlock to float outside waiting for Petty Officer Jenkins.

He reached out and hooked up his umbilical cord and exited as well. The pair worked their way hand over hand towards the aft end of the ship using handholds set into the side of the ship. In a few minutes, they reached the aft end where Number 2 engine was located.

“Bridge, we are outside the hull of Number 2 engine. There does not seem to be any damage to the hull. I’m going to move a little further aft and look at the exhaust ports.”

“Be careful, lieutenant,” the captain replied, “There is probably a lot of residual heat back there still.”

“Just taking a look, sir,” she replied as she moved to the edge of the hull. “I’m not going any closer than that.” She moved to get her helmet clear of the edge and, looking past it, focused her light on the exhaust port of the engine. There she saw that a fuel pre-heater unit was blackened and blown open.

She called forward, “Captain, I found our problem. The fuel pre-heating unit on the drive is blown out, possibly by a lightning strike. We would need to let the engines cool long enough for me to get in before I could replace it.”

“Do we even have a spare on board?” The captain asked.

“I’ll have to check. We might have to try to fabricate one,” she replied, hoping that the simple machine tools she had was up to the task.

“Very well, then. Come on back in,” Captain Nile called back, “Don’t want you out there any longer than we absolutely need to.”

“Right, sir. We’re on our way back in.” She motioned to Petty Officer Jenkins, and saw that he was already turned around and waiting for her.

They moved quickly back to the airlock and got back into the ship. Once the airlock was closed and filled with air, Lieutenant Buchannon pulled her helmet off. She said, “I’m going to need a good shower after that.”

Remembering how the engineer complained if they used too much water, Jenkins said, “Just make sure you turn off the water while soaping up.”

“Just get that image out of your mind, Jenkins,” she said, cycling the inner airlock door open.

Doc came over to them and checked their life support displays. She said, “You look okay.” Then she handed them each a bottle of water and said, “This will help you re-hydrate.”

“Thanks Doc,” the lieutenant. She set her bottle on a table and got out of the vac suit. A sheen of sweat covered her skin and soaked her underclothes.

Petty Officer Jenkins got out of his vac suit and placed it back into the ship’s locker. He said, “I’m heading back for my turret.” He slipped his boots on, took his coveralls and bottle of water, and headed for the starboard side of the ship.

Doc said, “If you need anything, Eng, I’ll be up on the passenger deck passing out meds.”

Kalin stood there in her underwear and drank the water. When she was almost finished, she said, “Okay, thanks, Doc. I’m going to drink this, dry off and change, and then head back to engineering.”

“Fair enough,” the medic said, “Talk to you later.”

Kalin took her coveralls off the hook, picked up her boots, and closed the ship’s locker. Then she went to her stateroom, which was right nearby.

On the bridge, Lieutenant Inshali said, “I have a solution captain. We will be at the jump point at 0742 UST.”

“Very well, lieutenant,” the captain said, “why don’t you go get some rest before we come up on jump?”

“I’m fine, captain,” she replied, “I got some rest last night, well, last night relative to Trybec, but thanks for offering.”

“Okay, then,” Captain Nile said, taking off his headset and unbuckling. “I’m going to do a walk about the ship and greet our passengers.”

“I’ll see you in awhile,” she said, “If you plan to take a nap before jump, I would appreciate a head call before you do.”

“I’ll keep it in mind,” he said as he got out of his seat and headed for the door. He cycled the door open and closed it behind him, locking it for good measure. He walked through

the ship taking time to talk with each of the crew and finally went up to the passenger deck.

There Captain Nile spoke with the passengers while they had a light meal. Eventually, he worked his way back down to the bridge. Upon entering, Captain Nile asked Lieutenant Inshali, "Everything running normal?"

"Your really need to ask?" She asked giving him a look and a wry smile, "You know if there had been any serious problem, I would have called you to the bridge immediately."

"I'll take it for awhile," he said, sitting down in his seat. "Go ahead and take a break, we're still a couple of hours from the jump point."

Lieutenant Inshali smiled as she unstrapped and got out of her seat. She said, "I'll be glad to get into hyperspace."

"I think we're relatively safe here, lieutenant," he said while strapping into his seat. It was his policy that if there was a lone person on the bridge during normal space maneuvering, he or she had to be strapped in. "A vampire hasn't drifted through this system in years. Or fleet has been doing a good job stopping them before they can get near the Coalition."

"It's not that, it's...I don't know, just more relaxing for some reason. Yeah, I know, hyperspace can be as dangerous as normal space," she said stretching, "but still."

"We'll be there soon enough," Captain Nile said. "I'm in no hurry if you want to take your time getting back."

"I don't want to miss the jump insertion," she said, looking at him.

He didn't notice because he was already watching the multi-function displays. He said without turning, "You know I wouldn't let you do that."

"Right. Do you want the door locked?" She asked as she cycled it open.

"It may seem paranoid when we only have Coalition personnel on board, but yes, I want it locked," he replied, keeping an eye on the multi-function displays.

She left, closing and locking the door behind her. She paused at the lift shaft, debating whether she wanted to go up and get a snack, but decided against it and went to the port extension where she shared a stateroom with Lieutenant Buchannon. When there were no passengers on board, the gunners, Petty Officer Jenkins and the other gunner would sometimes take turns occupying one of the empty staterooms, just so they could have a stateroom to themselves.

Lieutenant Inshali was the only girl in her family, so she always had her own room, well, for as long as she could remember anyway. She had always heard that she and her brother had shared a room when they were toddlers, but she had no memory of it. In any case, she got along well with Kalin, so never felt the need to occupy an empty stateroom.

She entered the stateroom and turned on the computer workstation at her desk. Doing some quick math in her head, she decided she had time to take a shower. She had been awake most of the night making sure the ship would be ready to get underway this morning.

Well, by Dawn Station reckoning anyway. It was already the early hours of the following day by ship time. A nap would have to wait to later. A shower would refresh her enough to get her through hyperspace insertion and then one of the others would have the bridge watch.

She stripped out of her working uniform and then the body sleeve that she was wearing under that. After slipping out of her panties, she decided to wash the bodysuit while she took a shower, so turned it inside out. The liner of the body sleeve worked well, wicking away moisture, but it still needed to be washed now and again.

She took a towel from where it was hanging and walked into the fresher. She hung the towel on the bar and stepped into the shower with the body sleeve. Turning on the water, she rinsed the body sleeve off and hung it up. Then she finished getting her body wet. She turned off the faucet to conserve water while she lathered her hair and body.

Lieutenant Inshali kept her hair relatively short for practical reasons. First, it was easier to get into a vac suit helmet. It also made cleaning hair easier. She knew many females in the service would keep their hair cut in a crew cut, much like the marines did. She felt that was a bit extreme.

When she was good and lathered up, she turned on the water again and rinsed off. When all the soap was washed off, she turned off the water and, using a squeegee, wiped down the sides of the shower. Then she reached out and got her towel to start drying off. She left the body sleeve hanging in the stall to dry and stepped out to finish drying off.

She finished toweling off and got dressed quickly into a clean body sleeve. She put her working uniform into her laundry bag and slipped into a clean set of coveralls. Some crewmembers were comfortable just wearing the body sleeve, but she preferred to wear something over it. Besides, pockets were handier to use than the pouches on the optional harness.

She brushed her hair and checked her appearance in the fresher mirror. Satisfied, she secured her computer and then the room lights as she left. Feeling much refreshed, she returned to the bridge.

“Feeling better?” The captain asked when she entered.

“Much,” she replied, taking the seat and strapping in. “I took a shower to wash away the night and it really helped.”

The captain remained on the bridge, knowing he wouldn't get very much rest until the ship made the jump. He and Lieutenant Inshali talked a bit, but mostly they sat quietly watching their screens and the time display.

At 0727, the captain announced on the public address system, “The ship will be making the jump to hyperspace in 15 minutes. All personnel prepare for hyperspace insertion.”

Switching back to the normal circuit, he turned to Inshali and said, “Darken all viewports.”

“Aye sir,” she replied and commanded all viewports to go dark. The bridge control overrode all local controls. Viewing hyperspace had detrimental effects on the mind, so ships didn't take any chances of inadvertent sightings.

Captain Nile looked up and saw the stars fade away as the bridge viewport darkened. He returned his attention to the multi-function displays and started making the last checks before it was time to engage the jump drive.

“Bridge, engineering,” Lieutenant Buchannon reported, “jump drive checks sat and is ready for jump.”

“Very well, engineering,” he replied.

The minutes went by quickly.

“All stations report ready for jump, captain,” Lieutenant Inshali reported.

“De-energize all non-essential lighting,” the captain ordered.

“Aye captain,” she replied. On her operations multi-function display, she pressed a soft key that she had labeled “Jump Dimming.” She had set this key up to perform the function that the captain had just ordered. She smiled to herself. Captain Nile may have been of Solomani stock, but she appreciated the fact that he held to the Vilani custom of Jump Dimming.

Captain Nile noted the dimmed light and said softly, mostly to himself, “Almost ready.”

When the time display reached 0741, he depressed the PREPARE soft key on his control panel. This enabled the COMMIT key and also got the jump drive to start charging the zuchai crystal banks which formed the jump capacitor.

The ship had just used fuel enough to charge up the capacitor, so if they did not commit to this jump, the capacitor charge would be allowed to dissipate and they would need to refuel before making another attempt.

When the capacitor was fully charged, the COMMIT soft key changed from amber to green. At 0742, Captain Nile depressed the COMMIT soft key.

Back in engineering, the jump drive diverted the energy into the lanthanum matrix that was woven into the ship's hull. Blue lines formed along the hull and started to glow brighter. As the intensity of the light increased, they started to form a field around the ship. The field expanded and formed an opening into hyperspace. The ship slipped into this rift and vanished from normal space. Only a rapidly diminishing gravity ripple was left where they had entered.