

## Chapter 4

Location: Promise, Promise Subsector, Diaspora Sector

1830 UST, Day 355, NE 5

Captain Nile entered the Aubaine's wardroom at the designated time. He wondered briefly about the marine standing guard outside the wardroom, but was permitted to enter after identifying himself.

The evening meal was finished and the mess attendant had cleared away all traces of the meal and tableware. Captain Nile had taken his meal on the Blue Goose. He had not been invited to mess with the officers of the Aubaine. That might bother some other captains, but he wasn't looking to go to a larger vessel.

There were four beings in the room. Three were human, but the fourth was a Hiver. Captain Nile thought to himself that this was the furthest spinward that he had seen a Hiver.

There was an older man in the room, whom Captain Nile recognized as Admiral Langston, the RCES Chief of Operations for the Promise Subsector. Captain Nile presumed that he was using the Aubaine as his flagship.

Seated to the admiral's right was Captain Farmer, who was the captain of the Aubaine. To the admiral's left was a lieutenant whom Captain Nile did not recognize, but whose name tape read, "Billson." They had moved a seat away from the table so the Hiver could be at the table next to the lieutenant.

Captain Farmer spoke first. "Come in and sit down, Captain Nile. I believe you already know the admiral."

The admiral nodded when he was mentioned.

Captain Farmer continued, "Next to him is Lieutenant Billson, our intelligence officer."

Lieutenant Billson said, "Pleased to meet you Captain." The two shook hands.

"Next to him, of course, is our Hiver liaison, Isaac.

The Hiver, typed a message on his voder and the machine said, "Greetings, Captain, we are glad to have you."

Captain Nile purposely did not shake hands with the Hiver. It was not expected and few people actually did.

Captain Nile nodded to each and then took a seat next to Captain Farmer. He said, "You said you had a job for my ship?"

Captain Farmer said, “Yes, captain, but let me say up front that what is discussed in this room carries the highest classification of secret.”

“That’s the reason for the marine outside?” Captain Nile asked.

“Yes, Captain,” the admiral spoke. Then he called up a holodisplay, which showed the nearby region of space. He pointed to a world highlighted in red and said, “We need your vessel to travel to Eberly and recover a special forces team that was deposited there several weeks ago.”

“Eberly? Isn’t that a bit outside of the area of operations?” Captain Nile said as he looked intently at the Admiral. The holodisplay had the AO clearly marked as a yellow region on the map. The planet in red was clearly outside of this.

Captain Farmer said, “Yes, it is outside of the Primary Area of Operation. The Exploratory Service routinely operates missions beyond the AO, especially when the Admiralty is preparing to expand the area.”

“I figured that was coming soon with operations at Promise and other worlds in this area going well,” Captain Nile observed.

“Yes and early missions to Promise are a case in point,” the Admiral said.

“How was the team infiltrated,” Captain Nile asked, hoping that he could get some information rather than go in cold.

Lieutenant Billson took over the conversation and said, “A vessel similar to yours,” he paused to look at a data pad, “The ACL 20247, a sister ship of your ship, I believe, transported them to the world.”

“I get the feeling that sending my ship is a contingency plan,” Captain Nile said, looking at the Lieutenant. “I don’t believe that the plan for exfiltration was to wait for a ship to come along and send them after the team.”

“You are quite correct, captain,” the admiral said. “No team would reasonably go on a mission without a reasonable plan for extraction. We are not the type to send teams on suicide missions.”

Captain Farmer said, “The ACL 20247 was scheduled to return to the Aubaine and then return after several weeks to recover the team.”

“I gather that waiting in system for the team to finish its task was not an option,” Captain Nile said continuing to watch the intelligence officer.

Lieutenant Billson said, “We felt that it would be best to keep the mission as covert as possible. Since Eberly does have some space faring capability, a free trader staying in the system for more than a week would draw suspicion. The team needed more time than that to achieve its objective.”

“I don’t suppose you intent to inform me what their mission was,” Captain Nile said looking squarely at the intelligence officer.

“You do not need to know the specifics of the mission,” Lieutenant Billson said, “Suffice it to say that reconnaissance was involved.”

Captain Nile thought that if he was taking his ship and crew into danger he damn well had a need to know the specifics of the special forces team’s mission, but the looks on the faces of the others in the room told him he would not get far with that.

Instead, he chose to pursue the line about the team’s recovery. He asked, “What happened to the Sublime Lemon?” He used the common name for the ACL 20247.

The Hiver spoke up by means of his voder. “On the last portion of its return trip, the ACL 20247 suffered a misjump. Fortunately for the crew, it was not a severe misjump.”

“Where did they arrive?” Captain Nile asked, watching as the Hiver’s tentacled hand worked the keys on its voder.

“As it happened, the ship arrived at the outer edge of this system.” The Hiver replied, “The ship is inbound now.”

“Are they conducting a microjump?” Captain Nile asked, knowing that was a common way of travelling long distances within a system.

“No. When the ACL 20247 arrived in system, their astrogator determined where they were.” The Hiver replied. “They were able to contact the Aubaine by radio and explained their plight.”

Admiral Langston said, “We sent one of our newer ships, the Norfolk Victrix out to her position with fuel and supplies so that they could bring the ship in for repairs. Isaac and some of the Aubaine’s engineering staff accompanied them to examine the jump drive and see if a microjump was viable. They determined that the jump drive needed more extensive repairs than what could be accomplished in flight. The Victrix returned with most of the crew, leaving only a minimum crew to bring the ACL 20247 in the long way using her HePlaRs.”

Captain Farmer added, “You can see where that will take time, and we don’t know how long repairs will take. We need to get a ship heading to pick up the team now. Your ship happens to fill the bill.”

Lieutenant Billson chimed in, "Of course, your ship will be modified to pass for a ship of the Free Trader Network, primarily by removing your ship's hull number and adding rust lines, and so forth. We will also have the ship's name painted on the hull. You call it the Blue Goose, I believe?"

"Yes, but we already have it on the hull," Captain Nile replied.

"All the better," the lieutenant replied. You will also be provided with some clothing similar to that worn by the free traders. Have your personnel report to the supply clerks so we can get the right sizes."

"What about our transponder?" Captain Nile asked. "It identifies us as a Coalition ship and operating without one generally marks a ship as a pirate."

Lieutenant Billson made a motion with his hand and said, "Among other things, you will be provided with a new transponder code." He checked his data pad and said, "Actually, I believe we are providing you with the ship's original code, well a duplication of it actually. It will be close enough to pass all but the most detailed examination."

Captain Nile wasn't too happy with that answer, but he decided that running with a false code was better than running without any transponder code at all. That was just asking for trouble.

He turned to the next question in his mind, "How will we contact the team once we arrive in the Eberly system?"

Lieutenant Billson provided the answer, "Every day at 1200 UST, they will set up an antenna and listen for a coded signal. I believe your vessel is already equipped with the standard signal encryption equipment. The team's call sign is Red Fox. Your call sign will be Blood Hound. That call sign, by the way, will signal them to expect a different vessel for exfiltration than the one that took them there. They will listen for the signal for 15 minutes each day."

"With the problem with the Sublime Lemon, won't they already be expecting a pick-up?" Captain Nile asked turning to look at the map and mentally calculating how long it might take to get there.

"They are not expecting exfiltration until day 11 of next year, about 3 weeks from now," the intelligence officer said. "If you work to minimize your time in each system, you should be there not long after that. Special forces teams are trained for contingencies."

"I hope they won't have difficulties because of the wait," Captain Nile observed.

The admiral spoke, "One way or the other, this is the best we can do. Your ship represents the best opportunity to get the team off that world."

The Hiver spoke up through its voder, "If I may interject, admiral, the Norfolk Victrix is still in system. Perhaps it would be better to send that ship rather than a cargo vessel. The Norfolk does have a greater jump capability."

The admiral said, "You have a point, however, we do wish to keep this low profile. Sending a warship is not the way to do it, nor do we engender friendly relations by landing a warship on a planet. We are not conducting an invasion here."

"Still," the Hiver continued keying its voder, "We have already sent one of these ancient ships out and it very nearly ended in tragedy."

"If I may interject," Captain Nile said looking at the Hiver, "the Coalition technical crew did an excellent job restoring the ACL 20253 to an operational condition. Also, I have a top notch engineer in Lieutenant Buchannon."

"Is that Kalin Buchannon?" The Hiver asked through its voder.

"Yes," Captain Nile replied, curious now at the Hiver's interest. "There are a few other Buchannons in the fleet, but she is the only Kalin Buchannon that I am aware of."

"I will allow that you have an excellent engineer, then," The Hiver said through its voder. "However, my objection about the age and condition of the ship still stands. Within the Area of Operation, a disable ship has a fair chance of being found and recovered. Beyond that region, it might be years before another ship passes through a system the might find themselves in, especially a boneyard world."

"Your objection is duly noted, Isaac," the admiral said, "However we feel it is an acceptable level of risk. Captain Nile, are you willing to accept this mission?"

"What are my options?" He asked, thinking about his crew for a moment.

"Well," the admiral admitted motioning with a hand, "Your options come down to accepting the mission, accepting a transfer to the Aubaine, or resigning your commission. You're damn fine officer and I would like to think that you would continue your career. However, I am sending the ACL 20253 to pick up that team whether you are its captain or not."

Captain Nile nodded and said, "Not much in the way of options there. I'm not ready to fly a desk yet, so it looks like I'll be taking your mission. However, I will want a few things."

Captain Farmer said, "We can provide as much as we are able. We are a clipper and, although we have a large number of cargo and repair modules, we are not a tender."

"I don't need a whole lot," Captain Nile said looking at Captain Farmer, "I would like a full load of refined fuel and a few spare parts for engineering."

Captain Farmer smiled and said, "The fuel is easy and we'll be happy to provide the parts if we have them in our inventory."

"You already mentioned the civilian clothing and I suspect that the lieutenant will fill me in on known threats in the area..." Captain Nile motioned to Lieutenant Billson.

The lieutenant nodded in acknowledgement and confirmation.

"I will need the frequency and key code for the secure radio, any intel you have on the planets forces, and would appreciate some more information on the special forces team we are to recover."

Lieutenant Billson picked up a folder and passed it over to Captain Nile. He said, "You will find the last two items in the data chip in this folder."

Captain Nile accepted it and briefly opened the folder to verify that there was a data card inside. He nodded at the lieutenant.

"As for the communications matter," Lieutenant Billson said, "the Operations Officer will provide you that information once we have verified to him that you will be conducting this mission."

Captain Nile said, "Thank you." Turning to the admiral he asked, "How soon do you want us to leave?"

The admiral waved and said, "Obviously, we would like you to leave as soon as possible. However, we recognize that you have cargo to unload and have just arrived in system. Plus, you want to fuel, get your parts, and will need to get the com codes."

Captain Nile nodded and said, "We already have the bulk of the cargo unloaded."

Captain Farmer said, "I'll get the mid watch to fuel your ship."

The Admiral said, "You should be able to finish unloading the cargo in the morning. That will also give your crew some time to rest. If you can get underway by noon tomorrow at the earliest, we would appreciate it. However, if, in your judgment, your crew needs another day, the next morning would suffice."

"I think noon tomorrow would suffice, admiral," Captain Nile said nodding.

"Very well, then, Captain," the admiral said, "I think we will let Lieutenant Billson take over from here with his briefing." Turning to the Aubaine's captain he said, "I recommend that you get the duty section going on meeting Captain Nile's needs."

"Yes, sir," Captain Farmer said.

The admiral stood and the other officers stood with him. They remained standing until the admiral and Captain Farmer exited the wardroom.

When Captain Nile sat back down, he turned to the intelligence officer and said, "Okay, what can you tell me lieutenant?"

"There is not much to tell, really, captain," the officer said, "The available data for the systems you will potentially pass through is included with the data card. The Free Trader network visits several of those systems, but they rarely attack other ships. They might challenge you since your ship will be new in the area, but you should be able to convince them you recently entered the area from a nearby subsector, which would be true."

"Should we get a cargo to be more verifiable?" Captain Nile asked.

"You will be given some operating funds, if you want to pick up a cargo, that is up to you," the lieutenant said with a shrug.

"I'll have to look into it," Captain Nile said with a wave of his hand, "although I haven't had much merchant training beyond the introductory course at the academy."

"Well, the idea would be to have a cargo on board if you get stopped," the lieutenant said. "We wouldn't really expect you to turn a profit."

"Of course not, but I'm sure the Coalition would like some return on its investment," Captain Nile replied. Changing subject he asked, "Now, what about Vampire activity?"

"I would be lying if I said there was none at all," the lieutenant said. "However, it has been greatly reduced since we conquered Promise. The word seems to have gotten back coreward to the Vampires there because they seem to largely be avoiding our area of operations."

"What sorts of vessels have been reported?" Captain Nile asked looking at the holodisplay.

"No major combatants have been sighted recently, not for several years now," the lieutenant replied calling up an intelligence report, "There is mostly a mixture of smaller ships from one hundred to one thousand tons, and very few of the latter."

"Is there anything else I should know, lieutenant?" Captain Nile asked looking once again at the displays and feeling there were things not being said.

"No, captain," the intelligence officer said, "I think that about covers it. I wish you the best of luck and look forward to debriefing your crew when they return. I'm sure we will gain much insight from a second journey into that area."

“Indeed,” Captain Nile said, collecting the folder with the data card, “I do look forward to returning.”

Isaac said through his voder, “The academy’s training will only take you so far captain, you will have to trust your instincts and experience as well.”

Captain Nile looked at the Hiver and said, “We somehow manage to get by.” With that he stood up and nodding to the pair remaining in the wardroom, he departed.

As he exited the wardroom, he nodded to the marine still standing watch there.

The marine snapped to attention and said, “Goodnight, sir.”

Captain Nile said, “Goodnight trooper,” as he walked to the lift down the passageway. He took the lift up to the travelator. That whisked him quickly to the section of the spine where the cargo module and dock were attached. He moved into the cargo module and dock to reach his own ship’s forward cargo lock. Petty Officer Jenkins was standing watch inside the lock.

Jenkins greeted the captain and asked, “How was the meeting?”

Captain Nile said, “I’ll tell you about it in a few minutes. Is the rest of the crew on board?”

“Yes, sir, Petty Office Daniels went to deliver the mail after we got the lock here emptied and to arrange for the rest of the cargo to be unloaded. I think he went to requisition some supplies as well, but he’s back on board now. Some of the other crew went up to the ship’s store, but they have all come back.”

“Very well, Jenkins,” the captain said, “Close and lock this cargo lock and stand down the watch. We will be having a meeting in the common area shortly.”

“Did we mess up or something, captain,” the petty officer asked.

“Something,” the captain replied. “I will fill everyone in at the same time.” He didn’t wait for Petty Officer Jenkins to ask more questions, but instead went directly to the bridge.

On the bridge, he took a public address microphone and announced, “This is the captain speaking. All personnel muster in the common room in 15 minutes.”

Lieutenant Buchannon, who had been on the bridge when he entered asked, “Does that include me, captain?”

“Yes,” he replied, glancing over at her, “I would like everyone there at the same time. I think the power plant will be okay for a few minutes.”

“I’ll set my panel up to alert my data pad if there is any trouble,” she said, starting to take the necessary steps. She didn’t feel she needed his approval.

“I’ll see you in the common area in 15 minutes,” he said and headed off the bridge to his stateroom. He was thankful that he didn’t pass anyone else on the way there.

He sat in his stateroom for a few minutes thinking about the implications of the assignment. He pondered for a moment whether he should take that transfer to the Aubaine. He knew that if he did, it would be years before he ever had another command of his own, if he ever got one again. Besides, he couldn’t let the crew down. Even if they were given the same choice, he doubted if any of them would take it.

When about 13 minutes had passed, he left his stateroom and headed up to the common room. His crew, duly curious had gathered there as requested. He saw on their faces a mixture of curiosity, apprehension, and amusement. Lieutenant Inshali had her hair in a towel and was looking just a bit peeved, but remained silent.

He said, without preamble, “Crew, the RCES needs us to leave the area of operations and conduct a mission in the wilds.”

There were looks of shock and some murmuring between crew members who were seated adjacent to each other, but they quieted down when the captain continued.

He said, “We are needed to cover for the Sublime Lemon which was supposed to conduct an exfiltration of a special forces team from Eberly. The Sublime Lemon experienced a severe drive failure that resulted in a misjump. Fortunately, the ship and crew are intact, but they are incapable of finishing the mission.”

“It should be a quick trip to Eberly,” he explained, “contact the special forces team, pick them up, and return them here to Promise. While the mission is potentially more hazardous than our normal operational routine, the admiral does not believe this is a suicide run.”

He continued, “However, since we are operating outside of the AO, we will be operating in secrecy.” He looked over the gathered crew. “Since this is not our normal operations, I will offer you a chance to remain behind.”

Petty Officer Daniels said, “I don’t think you will need a steward for a bunch of spec op types. I would like to remain behind.”

The captain said, “Perhaps not, but we could be taking on cargo as we move towards Eberly. I could use my loadmaster.”

Petty Officer Daniels shook his head and said, “If it is all the same to you, sir, I would like to remain behind.”

“Very well, Daniels, pack up and I will have your transfer orders ready in the morning,” the captain said. “I can’t guarantee that you can get transferred back to us once we get back to Promise. Furthermore, you can’t speak of this to anyone.”

He looked at the rest of the crew there and asked, “Is there anyone else? Don’t feel that we can’t let you go. If necessary, I will ask for some help from the Aubaine, otherwise. Unless everyone else leaves, we will get by.”

The crew shook their heads or said quietly, “I’ll stay.”

The captain said, “Petty Officer Daniels, you may leave while I continue the briefing.”

The loadmaster got up and headed to the lift shaft. He muttered, “See you around to the others as he left.

The captain waited until the lift shaft door closed before he continued. He said, “There is not much to add. We will be taking on fuel tonight. Eng, you can go requisition parts in the morning. Everyone needs to go to the supply clerk and get some civilian clothes that will fit you. Once I get a chance to look over the data card they provided, I may be able to tell you more. Are there any questions?”

Lieutenant Inshali asked, “Did we get any data on the systems out there?”

The captain nodded and said, “We have that on the data card. I will pass it over to you after we are done here so you can start reviewing it.”

“Thank you, captain,” she said nodding, “I will see you after the meeting then.”

No one else had any questions so the captain told them to get some rest when they could and plan to get underway by 1200 UST the next day.

With that the meeting broke up and the captain left. As the lift shaft door closed behind him, Captain Nile could hear his crew starting to discuss the mission.