

Chapter 5

Location: Promise, Promise Subsector, Diaspora Sector
0830 UST, Day 356, NE 5

Captain Nile had not gotten very much sleep during the night. He took the data card to the bridge and went over the information and a probable course with his astrogator. Then, he sat at the terminal in his stateroom and generated transfer orders for Petty Officer Daniels.

Since he had to include a fitness report, Captain Niles had to take time to think about that. Except for his choice to leave the Blue Goose, Petty Officer Daniels had served well aboard his ship. Finally, he decided to give the man a fitness report based on his service and let the circumstances speak for themselves.

Then the Aubaine was slow to get the fuel transfer started, so he was woken up during the mid watch to approve the process and get it going. He took the duty so his officers and crew could have some time off the ship, even if it was to go over to the mess decks or wardroom of the Aubaine and share some camaraderie with some different faces.

Now morning had arrived. He had Lieutenant Inshali and Petty Officer Jenkins go over to supply and requisition some additional meals for the ship. They would be at least eight weeks away from the Coalition's area of operations. There might be a world where they could pick up supplies, but he would rather not have to count on it.

Lieutenant Buchannon went to the supply clerk as well and tried to requisition the part that she had manufactured, but the Aubaine did not have any, so she settled for getting some extra materials to keep the life support systems running in top shape.

While they were over there, they also obtained their civilian clothing. They would later comment on how ratty the clothing looked, but Doc reminded them they should be thankful the clothes didn't come issued with fleas.

In the meantime, Petty Officer Sommers was acting as loadmaster and helping the Aubaine crew off-load the last of the cargo from their cargo bay.

Petty Officer Daniels came to see him early. He had dressed in his dress uniform and had his gear all packed in his space bag. Captain Nile had him sign his fitness report and then gave him a copy of the report along with his orders. The captain shook his hand and wished him luck, but other than that, not much was said between the two.

Now it was time for him to go to the Aubaine. His first task was to track down the operations officer. He learned that the Aubaine's current operations officer was Lieutenant Commander Brian Strong, the man he better knew by his call sign, Two Fer. He had first met Two Fer back at the Hiver Technical Academy on Aubaine. Strong was just a Lieutenant then and Nile was just a fresh faced Ensign. Strong was one of the human instructors at the academy and the two had developed a friendship during his time

there. Their paths crossed several times over the next few years and they served together briefly on one of the Victrix class vessels. Now they were the same rank, the “captain” that Terrel Nile wore in front of his name was the honorific due to his position. He actually wore the rank of Lieutenant Commander on his uniform.

He felt that Brian Strong should have been commanding his own ship as well, but Strong preferred the staff role. He had been serving well in that roll, but knew it was holding back his promotions.

Captain Nile tracked Lieutenant Commander Strong down on the bridge where he reviewing some radio traffic the Aubaine had intercepted.

“Good morning, Two Fer,” Captain Nile said as he entered.

The other officer looked up and said, “Good to see you T-Man, how’ve you been lately?”

“Getting by,” Terrel replied with a shrug. “We need to talk about some data I need.”

“The skipper said you’d be by,” Strong said and looked to see who else was on the bridge. Seeing that the Officer of the Deck was there, he said, “Let’s step into my office.” He locked the console where he was working and headed to the briefing room just off of the bridge.

Captain Nile followed him, closing the door after they had both entered the room. He said, “I suppose this mission is still pretty secret then.”

“The admiral and skipper both emphasized to me that it should be kept secret,” Commander Strong replied.

Captain Nile nodded and said, “What I need is the frequency the spec op team will be listening on and the key code for the cryptography unit.”

Commander Strong produced a data card from his pocket and handed it to Captain Nile. He said, “The information your com set needs is on this data card. The rest I will pass on to you personally.”

The captain took the card with a confused look on his face. He said, “What else is there? As far as I know, this is the only data I lacked.”

Commander Strong lowered his voice and said, “I don’t think you are being told everything and I’m not sure why.”

“What do you mean,” Captain Nile asked, looking at his old instructor questioningly.

“The 247 misjumped because it executed a jump from within a gravity well, it wasn’t even heading for Promise,” the older man said, continuing to speak quietly.

“What?” Captain Nile exclaimed, “Captain Adams is a seasoned captain, he wouldn’t do something like that...unless he had to.”

“That’s what I am saying,” Commander Strong said, “There was something in the Baraduusa system. Something big with a Virus code in its transponder signal.”

“Do you think it is still there?” Captain Nile asked, contemplating the significance of this revelation.

“We can’t be sure,” he replied, “Captain Adams reported that the ship was not there on their outbound leg. It has had about 2 weeks now to decide to move on or stay.”

Captain Nile shook his head slightly and said, “The crew of the Sublime Lemon is indeed lucky then to have arrived here instead of many parsecs away.”

“The brass has wrapped that information in a cloak of secrecy,” Strong said looking intently at his former student, “The crew that was brought back from 247 were sent dirtside and given a long leave. I am somewhat surprised that it was not included in your briefing. Still, I felt you should know.”

“That does give me a lot to think about, Two Fer,” the captain said, nodding his head.

“I wish you luck,” Commander Strong said, “You can’t really second guess it. If you detour way to the coreward end of the subsector, you might avoid that thing, but then again you might ruin smack into a nest of them. In any case, you would add weeks to your run which could be bad for the team waiting on Eberly.”

“Sort of a damned if you do, damned if you don’t situation,” the captain said. “If we get destroyed on the way there, they won’t get picked up for many weeks. It would be probably eight weeks from now or more before anyone decides we are overdue.”

“Someone is reaching too far,” Strong said gravely, “and I hope you don’t end up with the butcher’s bill.”

“I’ll do my best to avoid that, Two Fer,” Captain Nile said, “The rest is beyond my ability to control, so I won’t worry about it.”

“That’s true,” Commander Strong said, “and may we all die in bed of old age.”

Both men laughed, knowing the odds were fairly well against that at the moment.

Finally, Commander Strong said, “There is one other thing that might help you.”

“What’s that?” Captain Nile asked, hoping it wasn’t word of more dangers.

“If you happen to get down on the surface of Baraduusa, look up Carol Lahani. She’s been on that world for a while now, trying to build good will and put the Coalition in a favorable light.”

“Is that the same Carol Lahani that instructed at the academy?” Captain Nile asked.

“Yes, I would like to know that she’s okay,” Strong said. “It’s not likely that the Vampire paid any attention to the planet, their technology isn’t high enough to get them noticed from space, but still, I’d like to know.”

“I’ll do what I can, but can’t promise anything more than that, Two Fer,” the captain said.

“That’s all I can ask of you, T-Man,” Commander Strong said. “Well, I suppose I’ve taken up enough of your time, you’ve got a ship to get underway.”

“We’re just about ready,” Captain Nile said, “but I do need to get going. Thanks for the information.”

The two men stood and shook hands then left the conference room. Commander Strong remained on the bridge while Captain Nile left to go to the supply clerk.

At the supply office, Captain Nile found some civilian clothes his size and picked out some that he felt were suitable for a free trader captain. He had only met a few free trader crews that had drifted into the Coalition’s area of operations and found that, like most civilians, their manner of dress varied widely. However, the captains usually dressed just a bit better than the crew. Some were very ostentatious, some were subtle, but most were somewhere in between the two extremes. Captain Nile hoped that what he had selected fell comfortably in that middle ground.

He stopped by the ship’s store and made a few purchases, mostly toiletries but also some snacks, probably the last he would get for weeks to come. Then, he headed back to the Blue Goose.

When he returned, Riga, the last of the crew that needed to do so, went to the supply clerk to obtain her clothing. She got something comfortable and practical to wear on the ship, but then picked up a skirt and blouse set for wearing dirtside.

Captain Nile began his pre-flight checks and took reports from others performing their pre-flight checks. The two gunners and the medic, who had the least to do on pre-flight, were stowing the supplies that they obtained from the Aubaine.

The ship was ready to get underway with the power plant at 75 percent output by 1130 UST. Since there was nothing to delay their departure, the captain set the maneuvering watch at 1135.

He called the Aubaine and requested permission to undock. With permission granted, the ship pushed away from the Aubaine. The time display read 1143.

When the Blue Goose was a safe distance away, the captain turned the ship to the departure direction and executed a burn of the HePlaRs to get them moving out of system. They had not changed the part on Number 2 engine with the new part, but the machined part seemed to be working well enough.

Captain Nile had his astrogator plot a low burn course out to the jump point. Their first stop would be the system of Eloji. He switched his headset to public address and announced, "This is the captain. From now until we return to Promise, we will drop all formalities of rank. We will continue to treat each other with respect, but we want to appear as though we are a crew of free traders. We expect to be at the jump point in about 10 hours. Secure the maneuvering watch and set the normal underway watch, section one provide."

Riga took off her headset and said, "Captain, I mean Terrel, unless a contact gets in our way, we should not need to change course from here."

"Thanks, Riga," Captain Nile said, "I'll see you in about 6 hours."

Riga left and headed for her stateroom.

The trip to the jump point was relatively uneventful. A pair of fighters from the Aubaine approached the Blue Goose and flew in formation with the far trader for awhile. Then they turned off and returned to the Aubaine.

The watch changed at 15:30 UST. Riga came back to take the bridge watch and Hideki Sommers took over as the roving watch. There was still a stretch of space ahead of them before they reached the jump point. Section 2 would not stand a full watch before they set the maneuvering watch for hyperspace entry.

Captain Nile went to his stateroom and changed out of his regulation ship's coveralls and into a set of the civilian clothes he requisitioned from supply that morning. The others he put into the wash.

He sat at his desk for awhile watching the stars and thinking about what might lie ahead. Finally, he headed up to the common area to get some food. Without Daniels on board, each person would have to prepare his or her own food.

The medic was on the mess decks. There was a movie on the large display, but she didn't seem to be very involved with what was going on in the movie.

"Evening, Tina," Terrell said.

At first she didn't reply, but then turned and said, "Sorry skip, I'm just used to being called Doc, I guess."

"It's okay, Tina," Terrell said, "I am sure it will take us all some time to get used to it. At least we have a few days before we make any stops outside the area of operation."

"You're right, skip," she said, "I think it is still okay to call you skipper."

"I think so, Tina," he replied, "It has been around for thousands of years."

They each finished their meals in relative quiet, giving the movie a brief bit of their attention. Terrell looked at the time display and said, "Well, it's about time to set the maneuvering watch. See you on the other side, Tina."

"I'll be here, skip," the red haired woman replied.

He took the lift down to the lower deck and then went to the bridge.

Riga greeted him and said, "I guess it's that time already."

Terrell nodded and strapped into his seat. He said, "Yes, I think we are all anxious to get going here." He put on his headset and selected the public address system, saying, "Station the maneuvering watch, make reports to the bridge."

Terrell did a quick survey of his instruments and readings. A few moments later, Riga said, "All stations report manned for the maneuvering watch, captain."

"Okay, Riga," he replied, "Let's get this ship ready to jump."

They worked in conjunction with the engineer and had the Blue Goose ready to jump with time to spare before they reached the jump point.

The captain engaged the jump drive. The familiar blue lines races across the hull of the ancient far trader and the Blue Goose ceased to exist in normal space.