

Chapter 6

Location: Baraduusa, Promise Subsector, Diaspora Sector
1450 UST, Day 3, NE 6

The ship was several days out of Promise, having passed through the Eloji system before arriving in the Baraduura system.

The new year arrived while the Blue Goose was between Eloji and Baraduura. The crew celebrated Holiday in the common room with a movie marathon. Tina and Hideki cooked prepared a meal from fresh ingredients they purchased on Eloji and Holiday was celebrated with a toasts. Most of the toasting was done with sparkling juices, but each crewmember was allowed a glass of wine for the occasion.

Now several days past the celebration, the Blue Goose was out of hyperspace and in the Baraduusa system. Everyone remained at their station after breakout and hoping against hope that the Vampire had moved on.

On the bridge, Terrell had the sensor screen called up on one of his multi-function displays. Riga was the primary sensor operator, but he felt a second pair of eyes would not hurt and he didn't have to do any real flying until they were ready to enter the atmosphere. Although it was equipped with an active EMS array, Terrell elected to only use the passive array. He also had the transponder de-energized before breakout, thereby significantly lowering their electronic signature.

He hoped that if there was anything out there that it did not have a densitometer that could detect the gravity ripple that was caused by a ship entering or exiting hyperspace.

Riga had plotted their outbound trajectory well enough from Eloji that they required only a short burn of the HePlaRs to send them towards the main world. At the moment the primary tell tales that they were in system were the heat and neutrinos generated by their power plant.

Riga suggested, "We could cut our power output to reduce our IR signature."

Terrell shook his head and said, "I know, Riga. I am balancing the need to be stealthy with the need to have power quickly. I want you to plot a jump vector to the Elusive system."

"I can plot it, but it won't do us much good," Riga replied, switching one of her multi-function displays to the astrogation screen. "We jumped 2 parsecs from Eloji to here, by my reckoning that used up all of our jump fuel."

"Our jump fuel yes," Terrell replied, "but we haven't had to do very many burns, so we have most of our maneuvering fuel left. In an emergency, we could use enough to get us one parsec, which is enough to get us to Elusive."

“That would be a very dangerous thing to do, Terrell,” Riga said, looking over at him.

He glanced her way for a moment and said, “I know. I know. We would arrive in the Elusive system with very little fuel for the HePlaRs. We might not be able to maneuver enough to land on the world or refuel at a gas giant. What’s more, if a hostile vessel were there in system, we would perhaps be worse off than if we had remained here.”

She shivered at the thought and said, “I will do as you ask, captain, but I really, really hope we don’t have to use this.” She started to feed information into the astrogation program.

“I hope so, too, Riga,” he said with a nod of his head. “I would prefer to continue on to Daariida as planned.” He paused for a moment then continued, “But still, having a course plotted would valuable time in an emergency.”

“Any emergency we would have now would find us within the gravity well,” Riga said calmly. “It would have to be a life or death situation before I would even consider making that call.”

“Others have made that call,” Terrell said, thinking about the Sublime Lemon, “and some have even survived.”

“We won’t talk about the rest,” Riga said firmly.

The Blue Goose was still 240,000 kilometers out from the planet. Its present, low velocity approach would get it to the world in approximately another 12 hours. Terrell knew he could have executed a longer burn while still reserving an adequate amount of fuel for maneuvering and landing. However, he felt a slower approach would allow them time to take a good look at the planet’s vicinity and leave them maneuvering room if they needed to evade a threat.

“I have a contact,” Riga announced, staring intently at her multi-function display. “Do you see it? It’s just off of the dark side of the planet.”

Terrell examined his display looking at the area the sensor processor had marked. He said, “I see it, designate it Poppa 1 and start a track on it.”

“Yes, captain,” Riga replied and touched a series of keys on her panel. The circle around the contact changed to a red triangle with the designation of P1 underneath it.

Terrell called over the intercom, “All stations, this is the captain. We have detected a heat source in the vicinity of the planet and are beginning to track it. At the moment, we have no indication if it is hostile or not. We will keep you posted as the situation develops.”

Tense minutes passed as the Blue Goose continued its course towards the planet. Then, quite suddenly, the intensity of the infrared signature increased by an order of magnitude.

Riga said, "It looks like Poppa 1 has executed a burn."

"I concur," Terrell said, "Now to see which way it is headed. I think we can confirm that the bogie is a vessel."

"I have a good lock on it now, captain," Riga said, "and should be able to get a good track for Poppa 1 shortly."

"Very well," Terrell said, watching the red triangle. He had decreased the scale so that the bogie was visibly moving across the face of the screen. I meant frequently centering the screen to keep track of it, but he wanted to see more motion than the larger scale would show.

Minutes later, Riga reported, "Captain, I have a track for Poppa 1. The bogie seems to be out bound and not on an intercept course."

"It might be that it's not aware that we are here," Terrell said. He passed the news on to the rest of the crew listening at their stations.

He continued to watch the sensor display. He noticed that the sensors were picking up another signal from Poppa 1. He said, "I think we are getting something in the radio frequency band."

"I see it," Riga replied, switching her headset to listen to the radio reception. She said, "It sounds like a digital signal," giving the captain a worried look.

"It could be a transponder code," he replied, feeling his heart begin to race. "Check it for Virus."

"Aye, sir," she said and routed the signal to the ship's transponder processor which was specifically designed to catch and isolate any Viral signals. After a few minutes, the processor screen showed a green indication, signifying the signal was clean.

"The signal is clean, captain," she said and then read from the display, "The transponder identifies the ship as the Cosmic Fire." Looking up she said, "It's a far trader, like us."

Terrell said, "Good. Let's return the favor." He pressed the ENERGIZE soft key that allowed their transponder to transmit their identification signal. "No need to let them think we're raiders or worse."

Riga changed the designation below the triangle from P1 to CF, representative of the ship's name.

Their signal crossed the void between the two ships.

Terrell said, "I hope they recognize it as a friendly signal. Do you know if the free traders have the means to detect a Virus?"

Riga nodded and said, "They must have to be able to survive out here, Terrell."

After a space of several minutes, they started to receive a signal, "Blue Goose, this is the Cosmic Fire, do you copy?"

Captain Nile switched to the radio and replied, "Cosmic Fire, this is Captain Nile of the Blue Goose, we copy loud and clear, we are currently inbound to the planet ahead. What sort of information can you provide on it?"

Riga smiled knowing that Terrell was playing the role of a free trader captain new to the area.

"Blue Goose, this is Captain Tilson of the Cosmic Fire. Haven't seen you around before."

"Cosmic Fire, roger that," Captain Nile replied, "We have been working our way spinward from the Old Expanses sector."

"Understood, Blue Goose," Captain Tilson replied, "The planet is called Baraduusa. It has a small population that is centered not far from the old starport."

"Roger, Cosmic Fire," Terrell said, "Is the starport in use?"

"Negative, Blue Goose," Captain Tilson replied, "There is an exposed escarpment to the east of the village, but close enough to a lake to refuel from. That's the best place to set down."

"Roger, Cosmic Fire. Thanks for the information," Captain Nile replied, "Safe journeys."

"To you as well, Blue Goose," Captain Tilson replied, "Cosmic Fire out."

Captain Nile switched to intercom, saying, "This is the captain. The contact that we were tracking has proven to be an independent free trader. It is outbound at the moment and does not appear to be a threat. However, we will remain at our stations until we have landed on Baraduusa."

"Do you think that there might be another ship out here, Terrell?" Riga asked, glancing at him briefly.

“No,” he replied with a smile, “but we are in unfamiliar territory, so we can’t get too relaxed. Are you receiving any EMS signals from the planet?”

“Not yet,” Riga said, looking at the sensor screen. “However, there is only the one settlement as I understand it, and it may be on the far side of the planet from us at the moment. I am definitely not receiving any orbital signals, though.”

“I’m not expecting much,” he said, looking out the viewport to the crescent of the world ahead of them. “Intel reports hold them at a pretty low tech level. I am surprised anyone is left on the world at all.”

“They might be holding out waiting for interstellar civilization to reach them again,” she suggested, “It could make them all landowners of a significant portion of the world.”

“If whoever reaches here is generous enough to grant them that,” Terrell said, looking at her briefly, “The Coalition should treat them fairly, but probably won’t go as far as to make them all land barons. Someone else might just take what they want and leave them empty handed.”

“The Coalition has done quite a few smash and grab raids,” Riga said quietly. “I’m not sure how history will view us.”

“History is written by the winners, remember,” Terrell said, nodding. “If the Coalition succeeds in its purpose, then the historians will write it as a necessary expedient for the re-establishment of interstellar society. If we get swept away by a greater power, we may be looked upon as no better than the raiders that ravaged worlds just before the collapse.”

“I’m all for re-establishing an interstellar society,” she said, turning back to her screens, “but there are times I think we could have gained through negotiation what we took by force. Many of those planets were just trying to survive.”

“Most of those planets were under the heel of a TED, too,” he said frowning his brows. “I can’t say that every raid was justified. It’s not my place to make such decisions. I do know that many worlds have been liberated from a dictator and are now productive members of a growing and thriving interstellar society.”

“I’m glad that I have not had to make that decision,” she said quietly, “or have had to participate in such a mission.”

Terrell just nodded, understanding that she volunteered for duty on the supply ships rather than taking a more prestigious position on a combatant vessel.

The two bridge crew lapsed into silence for awhile each absorbed in their own thoughts. After they had received no new contacts for a half hour, Captain Nile let each of the crew in turn take a few minutes break from their station. When everyone had cycled through their breaks, he turned the Conn over to Riga and went to his stateroom for a brief break.

When he returned to the bridge and resumed the Conn, the Blue Goose was still several hours from the world ahead of them.

The hours passed quietly. No other contacts appeared on their sensor screens and the Cosmic Fire, which was moving away from the planet faster than they were approaching it, vanished from their sensors. Terrell and Riga concluded that it had jumped, although the Blue Goose did not have a densitometer with which to verify that and they were too far away to make a visual observation. Terrell had Riga scrub the contact and the red triangle disappeared from the screens.

After the Cosmic Fire left system and the sensor screens were clear of other contacts, Captain Nile executed a short burn to decrease the travel time to Baraduusa. Two hours later they executed a series of burns to slow the ship and place it in orbit around the world.

“Now to find a spot to land,” Terrell said.

Riga called up a visual display of the world below and observed, “Most of the seas seem to be clustered around the equator. I suppose any of them would do.”

“Ordinarily,” he said with a smirk, “I would agree with you. However, we want to land near the settlement for two reasons. First, it is what free traders do and second, I was asked to check on someone here.”

“One of our people?” Riga asked looking at Terrell for a moment.

“Carol Lahani,” he said with a nod. “She was an instructor at the Hiver Technical Academy on Aubaine for awhile. I don’t know if you ever met her.”

“The name’s not familiar,” Riga said shaking her head. “What is she doing out this far?”

“Trying the diplomatic route,” Terrell said with a grin. “She’s sort of an advanced scout and diplomat as the Coalition is getting ready to expand its AO again.”

“Sounds like someone I’d like to meet,” Riga said with a smile.

“Pull up the pre-collapse map data and see if we can correlate the old starport’s position with the terrain below,” Terrell said switching his sensor multi-function display to show the view of the planet below.

Riga did so and had the sensor processor start to match up terrain features with the image that they were receiving of the planet. Baraduusa didn’t have much free standing water, so there was very little cloud cover to obstruct the outlines of mountains and shorelines.

After a few minutes of work, the processor reported a match with a 90 percent probability. Riga relayed that information to the captain.

“Good, now where is the starport in relation to our position?” He asked looking at the map superimposed over the landscape below.

“It is ahead of us,” she said, “They are experiencing night right now. That will help us verify the position of the settlement, either from the light sources or heat sources they are using. The heat should stand out fairly well on the infrared display.”

“Do we need to adjust our orbit to pass overhead,” Terrell asked, continuing to look at the map. There were craters where several cities had once stood. A silvery thread of a maglev line glittered in the sun.

“It is near the equator,” she said shaking her head in response to his question. “We should pass close enough to its position to detect them without adjusting our orbit.”

“Good, let’s maintain our present orbit then, Riga,” he replied. “How long do you project before we are over the horizon with respect to it?”

She made some quick calculations and replied, “We should clear the horizon in 27 minutes and be overhead in 35 minutes.”

Captain Nile unstrapped from his seat and stood up. He said, “You’ve got the Conn. I’m going to stretch my legs for a few minutes. I’ll be back before we reach their horizon.”

“I’ve got it, Terrell,” Riga said, glancing at the captain, “If you get back soon enough, I could use a break myself.”

He nodded and after stretching his arms and back, headed off the bridge. He took the lift up to the common area. Tina was there. She had her headphones off and was listening to the interior communications through a “white rat,” an amplifier that played the communications over a speaker.

She asked Terrell, “Any idea when we are going to land?”

“It will be a couple of hours at the very least,” he replied. “We are about to make a pass over the site we believe has the settlement. Once we are certain where it is located, then I will decide whether to land at night, which would be about an hour and a half from now, or during their morning, which would be about 9 hours from now.”

“Morning might be better, unless they are used to seeing ships come and go,” Tina said, pausing the movie she had been playing.

“They probably are, but I am leaning towards the morning anyway as we will need to look where we are landing. There are no landing beacons or anything like that.”

Tina nodded and said, "Well, I'm glad there are no emergencies for me to tend to."

"You are one person I would rather not have busy," Terrell said as he selected a mug and drew some hot water.

"Sometimes I miss being with the marines," she said. "Sure there were those terrifying times, but there were always people around." She waved at the empty common room. "Without passengers, there is very little for me to do be. The crew tends to stay healthy."

"You are a qualified bridge watch," Terrell said while preparing his tea. "You are welcome to join us on the bridge. You will be just as close to an emergency there as you would be sitting up here."

"I might do that, skip," she said. "Thanks."

"Well, I don't want Riga to think I have forgotten her," Terrell said, "so I best be getting back to the bridge."

"If we aren't going to land until sometime in the local morning," Tina said looking at the captain, "it might be a good idea to stand down from the maneuvering watch so the crew can get some rest. It seems to me that if we are in a stable orbit and not using the drives, we should be fairly difficult to spot."

"You have a point, Doc," the captain said, pausing by the lift, "I will take that into consideration when I decide when to land."

"Sounds good, skip," Tina said with a grin.

Terrell returned to the bridge and allowed Riga time to stretch. She returned to the bridge before they came up on the starport's horizon.

As they came up over the horizon, they watched the sensors carefully for any signs of electromagnetic signals. Tina had joined them on the bridge and strapped in the third seat that was left vacant by Kalin Buchannon.

"I'm not getting any EMS," Riga said as the three of them watched the screens.

"We will probably have to watch for IR signatures," Terrell said and made a quick check of the trouble board, even though anything that would appear there would also have sounded an alarm.

Tina said, "I'll watch the EMS bands if you want to switch to the IR screen."

"Thanks, Tina," Riga said. "I don't think you will see anything, but go ahead." She minimized the EMS screen and increased the IR screen.

The Blue Goose continued to rise over the horizon, as they approached the local zenith, Riga said, "I have them. There are about two dozen hot spots approximately 10 kilometers northeast of the old starport."

Terrell changed the scale on his screen and said, "I see them. Okay, we know where they are, so let's plan on landing in the morning."

"I think that would be best," Riga said, marking the location on the map.

Terrell switched to the public address system and said, "This is the captain. We have located the settlement and intend to make dust in the local morning, approximately 9 hours from now. We are going to secure the maneuvering watch and set the normal underway watch, but will rotate the watch every 3 hours so everyone gets a chance to rest. Secure the maneuvering watch, section 3 provide."

Tina got up and said, "Well, I'm off to rove. See you on my rounds, skip."

Riga released her harness and got out of her seat. "I think I'm going to grab a quick shower and get some rest."

"Sounds good to me, you two," Terrell said and waved as they left.

The next 8 hours passed quietly with the sections rotating through the watch.

At 0800 UST on the 4th day of the new year, Captain Nile went to the bridge and set the maneuvering watch. Once all stations reported being ready, he let the ship complete most of an orbit to the settlement then took it down into the atmosphere.

The ride down was smooth given the thin nature of the atmosphere. He took the ship down to a kilometer above the surface and placed it on autopilot in terrain following mode. The approach to the starport had very little variance in altitude.

Riga said, "I don't see very many ruins."

"This world did not have a very high population before the collapse," Terrell said, "I believe most of the population was concentrated near the starport. However, it is listed as having technology higher than the average we have in the Coalition, so there may be some nice finds in those ruins."

"As long as it isn't computer equipment, I'm okay with that," Riga said.

At 0843, they sighted the ruins of the city and Terrell resumed control of the ship. He said, "I'm going to take it over the old starport and get a look at what sort of shape it is in."

As he cleared the city, Terrell dropped down to 100 meters to get a better view of the starport. What they saw was a crater about a hundred meters across. A starship had been tossed away from the blast and was lying in the middle of a building. The sturdier buildings were bent and twisted away from the crater and only a few concrete foundations showed where other buildings once stood.

“Looks like there was a nuclear explosion here,” Riga said shaking her head sadly.

“That or a Virus infected starship crashed full thrust form orbit,” Terrell said. “If we were doing a survey, I would approach it with radiation detection equipment to get a better idea.”

“Perhaps,” Riga said as they were leaving the area, “but I don’t think that starport is worth salvaging. The starship might have some good spares, though.”

“I agree,” Terrell said, “but let’s find a landing spot.” He turned the Blue Goose to the north and started following the coastline.

Riga spotted an escarpment near the sea and said, “There, that looks like a good spot, probably the one the Crimson Fire was talking about.”

“Looks good to me,” Terrell said. “Lower the landing legs.”

Riga did as directed. On the bridge, they could hear the whine of hydraulics as it opened the doors and lowered the landing legs. On Riga’s console, an indicator turned green.

“Landing legs are lowered,” she reported.

Terrell approached the escarpment and then hovered over it. He spun the Blue Goose on her yaw axis until the drives were facing out towards the sea, then he brought the ship down to rest on the rocky outcropping.

“We have made dust,” the captain announced to the crew.

The Blue Goose had set down for the first time on a world not in the Coalition area of operations.