

Chapter 7

Location: Baraduusa, Promise Subsector, Diaspora Sector
0900 UST, Day 5, NE 6

The first day dirtside was primarily spent on the task of refueling. Doc Tina briefed everyone that the local temperature would get in the hundreds during the mid day and the gravity was lower than they were used to.

Before the day got too hot, the crew strung hoses from a connection in the fuel scoops to the sea below. Captain Nile reflected that refueling would probably have been easier if he had set the ship down in the shallows.

As it was, they had to use water from the life support tanks to prime the pump before it could get enough of a suction to draw in the water. That in itself was the result of some creative plumbing by Kalin. While the fuel purification plant broke the water into its component elements, the engineer was determining how she would be able to replenish the ship's water supply. She did take the oxygen that the purification process produced and filled up the emergency oxygen supply.

Captain Nile had chosen to park the ship on land because that would allow the inhabitants to approach the ship. He felt it was time to play the role of free trader. The Baradusans, however, were not interested in the gold coins that Terrell had to offer. There were more interested in foodstuff and cloth. He did manage to exchange some of their surplus rations for several boxes of salvaged parts. It wasn't much, it barely filled a corner of the cargo bay, but it was a start.

Carol Lahani came out to see what all the excitement was about and, after they got introduced, Terrell revealed to her that they were from the Coalition.

"Has the Coalition expanded its Area of Operations, then?" she asked when there were no Baradusans nearby.

"No, not as yet, but I expect it will be soon," Terrell said with a wave of his hand. "Do you think this world is ready for integration?"

"Probably not," she replied. "The population is not sustainable. This world does not have much to offer at the moment."

Terrell asked, "As far as you know, does all the population live here?"

She nodded and said, "There was a copper mine, but it was destroyed during the collapse. Those that survived the attack on the starport and the mine banded together and formed a settlement here."

"I didn't see any youths among the visitors today," Terrell said with a puzzled look.

Carol said, “Not many children are born and the young people that can, try to find a way off this world.”

“It must be a pretty rugged life here,” he said, looking in the direction of the village, but not really seeing much over there.

“After years of adaptation, they have developed a comfortable lifestyle,” she said. “Their sustainable tech level is pre-industrial at best.”

“Do they even have electricity,” he asked?

“No, but with a little help, they could,” she replied. “They have a form of water power to drive mills and I think it could be adapted to provide some electricity to the settlement.”

“Have you seen any Vampire activity in the area?” He asked.

“I think this settlement is too low tech to attract any Vampire interest,” she replied.

“We think there might have been a Vampire in system a few weeks ago,” he said looking at her. “It attacked the Sublime Lemon and caused them to mishap.”

“Did they survive?” She asked, remembering the crew’s visit.

“Yes, they got very lucky and ended up in the Promise system,” he said with a nod.

“It could have been a Guild ship,” Carol said, glancing back at the settlement. “There is a Guild representative here.”

A scowl crossed Terrell’s face. He said, “I’m sure they are doing their best to smear the Coalition.”

“The younger people are interested in rejoining a stellar society so they can get off this rock,” Carol said, “The older ones seem to be too used to living this way and remember the horror stories their elders told them about the civil war and all that followed.”

“I suppose there are plenty of valid arguments on both sides of that discussion,” Terrell said, still frowning. “In any case, it’s good to see that you are well.”

“Will you be spending another day dirtside,” Carol asked looking over the ship.

“It is going to take awhile for us to refine all this water into fuel,” he said, motioning to the hose, “so I think we will enjoy a bit of liberty tonight and leave sometime late tomorrow.”

“Stop by my place tomorrow afternoon,” she said motioning to the settlement, “and I can give you some information I have gleaned from the free traders that come through here –

at least the ones that aren't in the Guild. They won't talk to me once they learn I support the Coalition and they always seem to get that word pretty fast."

"That sounds reasonable, Carol," he said with a smile. "Should I bring anything?"

"If you have a spare bottle of wine, that would be wonderful," Carol said with a smirk. "Grapes don't grow here."

"We don't carry much alcohol on the Blue Goose," he said with a defensive gesture, "but I will see if we have some."

She started to walk back towards the settlement, but half turned and said, "I look forward to it."

He waved as she headed away and then went to check the beverage locker.

That evening, several of the crew went into the settlement. The buildings of the settlement seemed to fall into two categories. The first were those buildings that used salvaged duracrete blocks that were mortared together with what seemed to be mud. The other type of building seemed to be primarily structures that had been disassembled in whole or in part at the old city and brought to the settlement.

Since there was no electricity in the settlement to operate sliding doors, those doors were replaced with simple wooden doors. Apparently one of the Baraduusans had relearned the art of machining and made hinges from scrap metal, of course they had to develop muscle or water powered tools first.

Most of the land around the settlement was cultivated. Terrell reckoned that it was mostly done by hand since there did not appear to be any draft animals evident. All the plants growing here were imports, Baraduusa never developed any native life.

The pre-collapse inhabitants of Baraduusa did not have any significant form of agriculture. The plants that existed here were descendent of plants that were in gardens or private orchards. The hardier ones had thrived and continued to spread outward from the settlement. These were supplemented with plants obtained from free traders over the years.

Baraduusa was officially listed as having a tainted atmosphere, but the taint was a higher than normal oxygen level. The only people who really had a problem breathing it were those who were used to a normal oxygen level in a thin atmosphere. The crew of the Blue Goose found they could breathe easily as long as they didn't overexert themselves.

While the plants provided plenty of vegetable matter, the settlement obtained their protein from fungus. Several of the larger buildings contained carefully maintained fungus beds.

They found that there was a community hall where people would gather. Terrell and his crew soon learned why Carol was so keen to get a bottle of wine. The primary beverage served in the community hall was a form of whiskey brewed from fungus. It was sufficiently alcoholic to give one a buzz or get one completely drunk, but the taste left much to be desired.

It seemed that several of the inhabitants were quite proficient at making and performing with archaic musical instruments. As the evening wore on, the music got quite lively and there was dancing in the light of the oil lamps, the oil being a byproduct of the species of fungus that they harvested.

Terrell mused that a chicken farmer could make a fortune here.

In spite of some invitations to increase the variety of the gene pool, the crew of the Blue Goose all went back to the ship that night.

The next morning they started preparing the ship for dustoff later that day. The last of the water they took on had been converted to fuel. The gunners helped Kalin recover the hoses, dry them out, and store them away.

Kalin bartered for two drums of fresh water from the river that emptied into the sea south of the settlement. After Tina verified that it was safe, Kalin transferred the water to the ship's water supply, but put it on the recovery side so it would go through the ship's water treatment before entering the potable water supply. She let the barrels dry out and secured them in the cargo bay.

Terrell and Riga decided to wait until after he talked with Carol before deciding which of the two systems within their range they would jump to next, although they believed they would go to the populated system.

That afternoon, he took a bottle of wine from the locker and walked over to Carol's place. She had brought some seeds and woodworking tools to the world with her when she came to Baraduusa. Between her garden and handcrafted items, she was able to support herself through the world's barter system. More importantly, she proved that she could contribute to the community and demonstrated some of the benefits of association with the Coalition.

A wooden sign that said, "Carol's Crafts" identified her shop and home to Terrell. He entered the shop, which set the metal chimes on the door to ringing. Carol looked up from the piece she was planing and saw that it was Terrell. She brushed any wood shavings that were on her hands off and walked over to greet him.

"Afternoon, Terrell," she said extending her hand.

He said, "Good afternoon, Carol," and accepted the handshake with his right hand while offering her the bottle of wine with his left. "I hope this is acceptable."

She took the bottle and smirked when she saw the brand name. She said, "Well, it isn't an Aubaini Riesling, but I'm not really in a position to quibble." She let the smirk change into a broad smile. "Thank you, Terrell. It will be a welcome change from mushroom whiskey."

"Maybe we can bring you something better on the return trip," Terrell said.

"I'd like that," she said and motioned to the workshop area. "Grab a stool and we can talk while I work."

He moved over to a stool and asked, "Did you make this?" as he sat on it.

"Yes," she said, "I do have talents that are not taught at the technical academy. My dad loved working with wood, but he always preferred to finish his pieces by hand." She paused, reflecting and then said, "He said it got him closer to the soul of the piece."

"Did he teach you then?" Terrell asked, looking around the shop at the various tools and pieces she had worked.

"He tried, but I wasn't a very good student," she said, thinking back to her youth. "You could say I learned his attitude and that woodwork could be done without computer aided machines. The rest came from experience and a lot of practice." She motioned to the scrap bin on the far side of the shop. "Most of my failures end up in the fireplace. That's one advantage of working with wood that you don't have working with metal."

"But, you didn't come to hear me rant about woodworking," Carol said with a smile.

"No, but I don't mind listening," he said with a chuckle. "Besides, a few minutes isn't going to make a significant difference."

She started pushing the plane across the piece she was working and said, "Well, Elusive is a boneyard world. It is barely more than a rock in the biosphere with the barest trace of atmosphere. Anyone that lived there is either dead or gone."

He nodded and said, "That's about what I was figuring. What about Daariida? You hear anything about that?"

"It seems to be a popular jumping off place for merchants heading this way," she said as she continued to work. "The world is not much bigger than this one, but it has more water. The inhabitants there are living a pretty primitive lifestyle, barely above stone age. There are even some traders who say the inhabitants have resorted to cannibalism."

From what I hear, most of the traders land away from their settlements and refuel. There are plenty of freshwater lakes.”

“Is there any particular spot that the free traders set down?” He asked hoping for something a bit firmer, not liking the idea of cannibals.

“Not that I’ve heard of,” she replied, shaking her head. “There is a large lake on the high plains of the largest continent, that seems to be a popular lake, but I don’t recall the traders mentioning any particular place around that lake that they stop. Since they don’t make contact with the locals, I suppose it is largely up to the individual captains.”

“I could see where that would be practical,” he said nodding. “If there are any ships dirtside, they should be fairly easy to spot.”

As he spoke, his com link started beeping. He switched it on and said, “Nile, here, go ahead.”

“Captain,” it was Riga’s voice calling on the com link, “We have multiple bogies incoming!”

“Any idea what they are?” He called back, hoping that the Vampire had not come back.

“No, captain,” she replied, “I’m not receiving any radio signals, just an IR signature.

Then the sound of a gong started to sound in the settlement.