

Voyage 24

GALACTIC COMMAND:

29 JUNE, 2155 GALACTIC TIME

JOHN B. ROSS, COMMANDER

PELONIS 756A, EXPLORER SPACE SHIP 14

MAIN LINK GC PELONIS, EARTH

ADDITIONAL LINK, MOTHER SHIP 11, PELONIS 143

ON 15 JUNE, 2155 GT, ARTICLES OF PEACE WERE CONSUMMATED BETWEEN GALACTIC COMMAND AND THE ANTARIAN SANCTUM. THE ARTICLES, KNOWN AS THE BILATERAL WITHDRAWAL TREATY, WERE SIGNED ON ANTARES VI BY COMMAND COUNCIL ADMIRAL GATES AND ALL SITTING COUNCIL MEMBERS. THE TREATY MOVES THE BOUNDARIES OF THE ANTARIAN SANCTUM TO HALF THE PREWAR AREA AND CREATES A FULL WAR ZONE KNOWN AS ANTARIAN OCCUPIED TERRITORY. NO ANTARIAN VESSELS WILL NAVIGATE WITHIN THE OCCUPIED TERRITORY WITHOUT PRIOR PERMISSION, ESCORT, AND FULL REPRESENTATION OF SHIP'S ORDERS AND DESTINATION. ALL PRIOR ANTARIAN PLANETS AND OUTPOSTS EXISTING BEFORE THE HOSTILITIES WILL BE RETAINED BY GALACTIC COMMAND. MONITORING OF ALL ANTARIAN WEAPONS TESTING WILL BE REQUIRED, A LISTING OF ALL COMMERCE PROVIDED TO EARTH PELONIS LINK. VIOLATIONS OF THE BATTLEFIELD OR MONITORING REQUIREMENTS WILL BE CONSIDERED A FULL ACT OF WAR AND TREATED ACCORDINGLY. THE ENSUING PERIOD OF PEACE WAS PROCLAIMED BY COMMAND GROUP ADMIRAL GATES.

IN ATTENDANCE FROM ESS-14 WERE COMMANDER ROSS, COMMANDER HUGH LINDSAY AND LT. COMMANDER WALTER KUCHINSKI. COMMANDER ROSS WAS PRESENTED BY ADMIRAL EBERT WITH THE SOLEMN ORDER OF BATTLE FOR THE VICTORY AT THE MAREGAULT STAR SYSTEM, FORCING THE ANTARIAN FLEET

SURRENDER. COMMANDER LINDSAY RECEIVED CITATION BY ADMIRAL EBERT FOR THE MERITORIOUS BATTLE STAR, THE VALOR COMMENDATION WAS BESTOWED UPON LT. COMMANDER KUCHINSKI.

A FIVE DAY LEAVE ABOARD THE MOTHER SHIP WAS GRANTED BY ADMIRAL EBERT TO SENIOR CREW MEMBERS. COMMANDER LINDSAY AND MYSELF HAVE LEFT ESS-14 FOR THE MOTHER SHIP AND DOWN TIME.

ROSS, COMMANDING ESS-14

1

He was on a continuous binge for three days and did not care who knew about it. After four and one half years of battle, confined within his ship, fighting occasional battles on twenty-three planets, and under the constant threat of Antarian attack, John Ross, Commander of Explorer Ship 14, wanted to push the limits of his physical and emotional stamina.

In the murky blue light he rapidly lost his concentration after the second brewmac. Months had passed since he had drunk so heavily and chased women like this. Still he drifted back to last week's peace treaty ceremonies on the Antarians home planet. The sole surviving city building's clear green windows reflected

Antares VI's rugged mountain peaks and the looming crimson sun. Command engineers had constructed a long pavilion, amidst the rubble. The long surrender tables were positioned in a parallel fashion, under the blue glow of a newly constructed Command Sphere, designating the five hundred and six aligned planets.

Ross visualized the wispy, white haired Antarian cerbacs, in full dull silver uniform, as they marched in under heavy guard along the formcrete. Missing was Cerbuin Rafec, killed in Ross' final attack at the Maregault Star System. Every surviving cerbac must have felt the humiliation of surrendering on their home planet. Seated at the glossy, black slab tables, their pale faces wrinkled as the treaty was read. Further compounding the humiliation was Command's decision not only to send the treaty signing across Galactic Command on frequency channels, but throughout Sanctum. Antarian feelings mattered very little with the war over. Ross realized he was now not trapped behind ESS-14's command consoles, but tucked away little bar pit in the mother ship's belly.

He had remembered this low-lit dungeon pit from a few years ago, when he and Chris Keller, commander of ESS-19, stumbled in here after one of the Antarian battles. It was as if the same blue haze still hung over the tightly packed bar. Lindy, holding the mugs high in the air, moved his large two hundred and forty pound frame through the crowd. Ross stood as his second in command finally made his way back to the small round table.

" John, I swear you need a level one security clearance to pass through those idiots out there! I had my pocket picked three times, my ass pinched twice, and some barge freighter from Zosma tried to explain how she had some cosmic prevail dust for only fifteen marquees."

" So, what's the complaint, Lindy?" Ross took the bright blue brewmac to his lips. Not bad for a mother ship beer, but not as rich as the stuff found on the open space trade routes before the war. " I told you this place would be a good diversion for us."

" I can't believe it's actually over. No more fighting." Lindy smacked his lips. " They've shipped in this brewmac."

" I was just thinking that," said Ross, looking around the loud, darkened pit. " There are more women here than you want to know about. Half of them are loaded with transmuted eloviruses."

" Just what I need." Lindy took in more brewmac. " Spend a month in some medifac having my innards snipped by some genetic strand slicer."

Ross nodded as he continued to scan the pit. He remembered the tall blonde he had met here with Keller and how he had never seen her again. He was away from ESS-14 for three days back then, until his propulsion engineer, Frank Muldoon and some third rank personnel dragged him and Keller out of a docked pleasure ship before the ship left port. He smiled as he thought about the pleasure ship.

"What are you grinning about?" Lindy also looked around the pit.

"I was just thinking back to the last time I was on the mother ship," said Ross. He stroked his chin beard stubble.

"I bet," said Lindy and they both men surveyed the bar. "Where do you think they'll send us next, John?"

Ross raised his finger. He was looking at two young women with looped ringed ears and reized hair, neatly woven like a fabric.

"What do you think of reized hair, Lindy?"

Lindy turned around. "I'm not looking at the hair."

"Neither am I." The women were dressed in silver metallic shorts and were alone. Ross stood and started across the pit.

"On the prowl. There he goes. Full Battle Alert," shouted Lindy, raising the mug to his lips again. "Full Battle Alert."

But as Ross began his move across the bar, two younger third ranks appeared and the reized haired ladies were escorted away. He turned and looked back at his dark eyed friend.

"Que sera, sera," said Lindy, laughing.

Ross returned to the table. "I knew it was too good to be true." He held his brewmac. "Where *are* we going? Where is Admiral Ebert sending ESS-14?"

"Yeah, that was the question."

"Lindy, Galactic Command has five hundred and six planets, in four space sectors. There are seventy-two mother ships, not to

mention the outposts, the colony vessels, and non-aligned planets. As well as the Antarian Occupied Territory. And you want me to tell you where Ebert is sending us?"

" Yeah."

" After four years of war, we will be sent on a vacation. Map space. Visit the non-aligned planets we know little about."

" We deserve an assignment like that. Those Antarian bastards cost us too many lives."

Ross lifted his brewmac into the air. " May the Antarians never rise from the ashes."

" Nor even try."

" All comes down to marquees, Lindy," said Ross, still searching the bar. " The Antarians were broke."

" Everybody needs a benefactor."

" They'll be back as soon as the coffers are full. No matter what they might have said in all the surrender ceremonies. I don't trust them."

" Oh, John, they were beaten and beaten badly. Even if they were funded, how could they ever bother us again? Their home planet in ruins, fleet in shambles and settlements occupied."

" I have it on good authority that Gates wanted to put all their upper command on prison planets, but the Group turned up the heat. Thought it might look bad with the non-aligned planets."

" Gates is the top dog," said Lindy. " He heads the Command Group."

" He's been renominated and elected by The Group, but do you think, if he sent all the Antarians away for good he would still be where he is?"

" I hear you. Then he's just a puppet, John. If that's what you're saying."

" Yeah. He saved his own hide instead of doing the right thing. Now, we may have to face it all over again. How many lives will be lost because of that decision? He has left them free to plot and start the conflict all over again."

Ross looked over his shoulder and in the blue light saw a short woman with trimmed silver hair walk into the bar. She was dressed formally in a green, two-piece day suit and she waved at Ross.

" That's Nancy Burke!" Lindy turned. " I knew I'd catch her here. She looks like hell..."

They stood as she approached the table, computer clipboard for writing in her hand. She had lost weight and her skin had a pale, matted appearance. " Well, well, well. I see the sooner sweepers have brought in the space junk."

Ross gently pecked his old friend on the cheek.

" Can't keep that viewer bender's clipboard away from you, can you?" asked Lindy as he shook her hand.

" Have I got a surprise for you space rogues."

Ross pulled up a chair for her, but remained concerned about her frail appearance. " How long has it been, Nancy?" Ross leaned

back and crossed his legs. " Can I get you a brewmac? How are you feeling? Are you all right?"

" One question at a time, Commander. First answer: Fifteen months, right before you went out to encounter that Antarian who was starting his own little empire."

" Commander Zariac and his defiance of the Antarian Command. I thought we had him over on our side, but he headed for deep space."

" Deep is not deep enough," Lindy produced a low, contagious belly laugh.

" That is a story I would like to bend. It's all wrapped up in a Command Intelligence file," said Nancy.

Ross uncrossed his legs and leaned toward her. " How did you find out about Zariac? That was classified."

" No comment," she said. " And the answer to your second question is no. And I'm on a damned required diet from my doctor."

" Anything serious?" asked Lindy.

" Oh, no. Just the usual maladies of pushing fifty," she said.

" Our dealings with Zariac." Ross moved even closer to her.

" The Zariac affair *is* classified."

" Word leaks out, Commander. Now that your this big battle hero."

Ross smiled. " That's old news, Nancy. I know you have political connections. Big political connections."

" Probably why I've been chosen to be on your next voyage."

" What? A viewer bender on an Explorer Space Ship? Something if off frequency with that image. No offense."

Lindy laughed and lifted the brewmac mug to his lips. " We don't even know where the hell we're going."

" Something big is up," said Nancy.

" Big?" Ross laughed and looked at Lindy. She might be revealing Command Voyage orders. " The war is finished, the battles over... there is nothing big left, Nancy."

" It is important enough for Admiral Gates to personally push me on this voyage."

" Really? Now you've piqued my curiosity. We were just saying how easy things were going to be for us now. You sure you want to be on something big?" Ross pointed at her, thinking someone had fed her a line about this being a big voyage.

" I've hardly ever been off the mother ship, John." She thought for a moment and her blue eyes brightened. " This is just what I need right now. To get away."

" Nancy, if you have any knowledge of Voyage 19, and our dealings with Commander Zariac, you should know that an Explorer Space Ship can be a hazardous assignment."

" I am aware of that, but I figure any man who could survive the Antarian War, in as many battles as you both were in, will survive whatever mission Gates orders you on."

" Orders are orders, John," said Lindy with a big smile. He finished the brewmac and rapped the mug on the wooden table.

" Yes, Commander, they are. And I have yet to receive any orders."

" You should begin cataloguing your career, John. People would be interested. All the planets you've seen before and during the war."

" That's why we have frequency reports back to Command," Ross was still not happy about a civilian on ESS-14.

Nancy smiled and held his hand briefly. " Maybe they'll send you in search of non-human intelligent life. With all the planets, settlements recorded, no contact with the Anchaus."

Ross studied her blue eyes as she spoke and was convinced she was hinting ESS-14's new orders involved checking for the Anchaus. Any member of Galactic Command would have kept such information to himself. Even more than before, he doubted whether bringing a viewer bender on a voyage was a good idea.

Lindy spoke in an official voice, the brewmac kicking in. " Are you referring to intelligent life independently evolved?"

" Exactly, all the planets," said Nancy. " So much independently evolved life abounding, but no Anchaus."

" True... Now, " said Lindy, " Humanity spread out over this portion of the galaxy and we diverged into such radically different societies. Even the Antarians are an evolved race within the human umbrella."

" The human umbrella," said Ross, grinning. " You ought to use that in your bend, Nancy."

" Why is there just one independently evolved intelligent race?"

Ross' face tightened and he kept his distance. " If you have Command voyage information."

She smiled and both men stood with her. " Things will be changing sooner than you think, Ross from Markab IV. I'll see you both onboard ship."

Ross gently squeezed her icy hand and studied her tired eyes. " As a friend, I would love you onboard. As a Commander, I have to protest it."

" This is a fait accompli," she said. " Sorry."

Ross faced Lindy as she turned and moved slowly through the bar pit.

" I don't like this."

" She'll never get onboard, John. That's the viewer bender in her talking. When does Command routinely allow civilians on board an ESS vessel? Unless their scientists or assigned personnel like Sebastian."

" But Sebastian is an excellent cook." Ross watched Nancy disappear through the crowd and into the foggy shadows. He shook his head. " I'm going to fight this."

The Fitton Chronicles

The Nebula Planet

" You should be able to squelch it." A couple of blondes caught Ross' eye. Lindy looked in the same direction and smiled. " Back on course to our primary mission here tonight.

" Full speed ahead, Lindy."

2

As the hours passed Ross could not figure why he had hardly touched his brewmac, but the animated Lindy entertained two good looking, but very boring woman for the mother ship administrative offices. Ross listened to Lindy's yarns of distant voyages. He had heard the same stories a dozen times and rolled his eyes as Lindy embellished every incident, raising his brewmac mug as he spoke. The women sat like two schoolgirls and Ross wondered if they had ever been off the mother ship.

" Another brewmac!" shouted Lindy.

Ross counted six mugs on the table. He smiled. At least Lindy was relaxing at war's end. " I'll get it, Lindy."

Ross checked his counter. Three in the morning and the darkened, packed pit shook with loud Topaz bass music and a grind of uninterrupted, useless conversation. He maneuvered his way to the long polished black bar and looked down the pink and green neon moldings, at the wide diversity of space travelers in the mirror maze. " Four brewmacs."

" Four?" asked the brewmaster.

" Four."

His tab appeared in bright green digits on his debit sheet screen. The brewmaster took the order from spherical chrome formulator and set the tall frosted blue mugs on a clear tray. Ross nodded, added a tip to the debit sheet. But he stayed at the bar, worried about Nancy Burke's appearance and her vague references to the Anchaus. As was about to pick up the brewmac tray, he saw two space rogues giving Lindy a hard time back at the table. He spun from the bar like ship leaving space dock at breakaway speed. One of the rogues took a swing at Lindy, but his second in command slammed his fist into the man's jaw. Both rogues were on him now as the women scattered.

Ross vaulted one table and then another. He took a leaping dive into the air, clutching the first rogue at the collar and disabled him at the knee with a vicious kick. As Lindy pummeled the second one, Ross displayed his proficiency fourteen defense skills and outmaneuvered the rogue, beating him to the ground.

As he turned toward Lindy's attacker, Command security, in their black and silver uniforms, holding drac beamers upward, appeared in the crowd. Ross knew he had only about fifteen or twenty seconds before security arrived. He pulled the rogue back and with a series of thrust kicks, spun around, landing two well placed jabs into the man's midsection. The rogue collapsed as security pointed snub nosed silver dracs into their faces.

Ross, about to identify himself, turned as the three security men next produced restraining harnesses. Glowing red energy fields surrounded him and they were led through the pit.

" These rogues attacked my second in command!"

" Tell that to the Administrator. He gets these cases by the hour," said the first rank.

" I demand to talk to Admiral Ebert," said Ross.

" We are Command Off.. offi... offithers!" shouted Lindy.

" Sure..." The first rank pushed them out of the pit. Ross struggled within the belt and looked down at his blue fatigue suit.

" I am Commander John B. Ross, Explorer Ship Fourteen."

" Yeah, and I'm the Command Group Admiral," said the first rank.

" Where's your uniform, Commander?"

" We're on extended off vessel time," said Lindy. " If you weren't such a thick head, you would have checked our scans."

" Shut up," said the second rank.

They were marched into the village courtyard and over to a nearby conveyer tube. Ross kept arguing with them, drawing the attention of the passersby in the square as they were shoved into the tube.

" Level twenty-eight. Section 5," said the first rank.

Ross, pushed to the seat, quickly stood. " I'll have your ass for this. What's your name?"

The man nodded to his subordinates and they expanded the restraining belts over his and Lindy's mouth. He breathed through his nose as the bright red glow around the belt matched his seething anger. This guy did not know Ross could have him demoted ten times and working on a barge vessel outside the Andromedan Waste Sector.

* * *

For three hours they sat in a containment tub somewhere in Section 5 of the mother ship. At least the restraints were off Ross paced the stark green booth and continually complained about the security men. Morning had come and Lindy slept against the security wall as Ross shouted. " I would request my right to be scanned. I would request my right to representation!"

A sparkling gold opening slowly formed within the green field. He closed his mouth when the entire security barrier collapsed into a standard eight by ten room with white security field tubes. More baffling was the presence in the hallway of Admiral Ebert and three Group Admirals in their gold uniforms. He nudged Lindy. His second in command opened his eyes and held his temples.

" Oh, my head is spinning."

" I'll get you to a medifac later. Lindy... *Ebert.*"

" The same to you. What? Ebert?" asked Lindy, squinting. He sat up when he saw Ebert. Ross helped him to his feet.

Ross spoke out of the corner of his mouth " I think we're sunk, Lindy."

Lindy and Ross stood to attention as the corridor field dropped and the four men entered the room. Then the entire security wall went up again.

Ross moved up to Ebert and the other Admirals, saluting quickly. " Sir, I can explain."

" Problems off vessel, John?" asked Ebert.

The other Group Admirals were smiling. He knew them all: Admirals Glover, Mackenzie, and Anderson. Mackenzie, his old friend from the Altair Command Institute, winked at him. This seemed to have nothing to do with the bar arrest. Lindy, his large body rigid, raised his brows at Ross.

" By now, of course," said the white haired little Admiral Glover.

" You have surmised we are here on a mission."

" Yes, sir."

" You're going on a long voyage, John," said Ebert.

" Sir?"

Admiral Anderson, a man Ross' did not know well, stepped forward and looked at the other men. They all seemed to nod one by one.

" Commander, I don't think we've been formally introduced. I'm David Anderson." He had a strong grip and also shook hands with Lindy.

" Hugh Lindsay," replied Lindy. " Sir."

" Gentlemen, we have a multi-faceted problem that must be addressed in this rather unorthodox way. Security must be maintained. What we are about to tell you has galactic implications."

" Are you aware of the Nebula Planet?" asked Ebert.

" No, sir," said Ross, looking at Lindy shaking his head.

" The Nebula Planet," said Anderson, his blue eyes tightening, " is at the farthest distance of the explored galaxy, technically part of the third sector. The nearest outpost is on planet Axian Boroma VII."

" I've heard of transport ships making the swing by there. By Boroma, that is," said Ross. " A desert planet."

" That is correct," said Anderson.

" Command, if I'm not mistaken, does not have an official position out there."

" Well, we have governor of sorts, if he's still out there. It's so far removed, nobody really follows it. Boroma is listed as one of the aligned planets, but in reality you could call it unaligned. The nearest base is approximately six days travel time at voyage speed from Axian Boroma. The Nebula Planet is three weeks beyond

Boroma, Commander in the opposite direction. It *is* at the outermost edge of the explored galaxy."

" Three weeks out?" Ross pictured ESS-14 cruising through deep space, away from the civilized galaxy. " From Boroma, you're saying?"

" Yes, you will be getting underway in four hours," said Anderson.

" Sir, my vessel is in spaceport, systems being updated after the war."

Ebert shook his head. " Was, Commander. We have had specialized teams working on ESS-14 for the last sixteen hours. Vessel is in breakaway port 11."

Ross smiled.

" Something amusing, Commander?" asked taller Ebert.

" No, I am amazed at your proficiency, Admiral. May I ask the nature of my orders, sir?"

Admiral Mackenzie stepped forward. Anderson motioned him by. Mackenzie was a Fleet Commander during the war, only a couple of years older than Ross and had taught a course on military tactics. Ross knew him well and had spoken with him back at the war ceremonies on Antares VI. Mackenzie pushed his fingers through his wavy rusted hair before he smiled. " Admiral." Ross wanted to call him Mac.

Mackenzie shook hands with Lindy and then faced Ross. " John, you guys don't waste any time relaxing. Another off vessel, another bar pit hidden away."

" Apparently not far enough... sir."

Ross pictured Mackenzie drinking with him at an outpost bar pit before one of the Antarian battles. He remembered how Mackenzie got involved with a woman who ended up dying on ESS-45 in the ensuing battle.

" John, we are not going to share everything with you now."

" I figured."

" When you get underway you will have classified rendezvous orders from your ship's Pelonis. At rendezvous, you will receive your final orders sealed. Custody orders are in the hands of ESS-27 Commander Donaldson. You will input those orders into your Pelonis. Please remember even at the distance of Axian Boroma, messages to the council will take forty-six hours. By the time you arrive on the Nebula Planet, you will be totally on your own. A message from that distance takes eight days to reach us. So, double that time for your return message."

Admiral Glover, senior in command, moved forward. " Your record stands unmatched, Commander. When the history of the Antarian conflict is fully written, your name will be prominent."

" Sir, I was one of many people who fought."

Glover paused and nodded. " I appreciate your modesty, John. But there is no other choice for the man to lead this voyage."

This mission could be of *historical* proportions and I don't say that lightly. Admiral Gates is personally involved in the logistics and has been for some time. You'll see what I mean when you get your orders."

" Does this mean, we're officially out of the tub?"

Glover and the rest of the Admirals grinned. " You are out of the tub. Even the arresting personnel are unaware of our presence here. I do have to state the risk. Things could get-"

" I thrive on risk, Admiral." He winked at Lindy, who rolled his eyes.

" That's why you're commanding this mission. Good luck."

Each of the Admirals shook hands with Ross and Lindy. Ross felt as if he this was a battlefield suicide mission. The Admirals saluted, the security field went down and they were gone. Lindy looked into the hallway and turned to Ross, rubbing his wrists from the removed restraining belts.

" Why do I think we just got hoodwinked?"

" Because we probably just did... Those restraints were tight. If I see that little first rank again. I'll pop him."

" The farthest edge of the known galaxy? Come on, John. Showering us with compliments and then booting us to the edge of the galaxy. For what? We don't even know. For that matter, we don't even know what's in Donaldson's sealed orders when we rendezvous at Boroma."

" We'll get our preliminary orders on the ship," he said, looking into the corridor.

In the hall his own vessel's husky, nubby haired, security chief led a contingent of his own men. He wondered if Kuchinski was still drunk.

" Krutch," said Lindy. " Come to bail us out?"

" Lindy, I won't even tell you where they dragged me from." The lines on his unshaven face tightened as he turned to Ross. " I thought we were off vessel for two more days, John."

" What have you been told?" asked Ross.

" My orders from Admiral Ebert are to escort you to ESS-14 in silence."

" Oh?"

" We will be taking a freight tube and enter port station 11 via a construction barge. My orders," he said, taking out a drac beamer, " are to get you to ESS-14. Anything or anyone getting in the way of that mission will be killed."

" What?" asked Lindy. " Have they lost their collective minds?"

" So, you know nothing of the voyage mission?"

" John," said Kuchinski. " You're going to have to shut up... Sir."

Ross grinned at Kuchinski, shrugged his shoulders and followed the men out of the containment cell. Before they reached the village courtyard, Kuchinski veered into a side alley. Ahead

were freight movers and logistical personnel. As they moved in silence, the growing magnitude of this mission was apparent, not just the distance of the Nebula Planet, but Ross had never seen a security ploy like this employed on a Command Officer and his second in command.

They stepped into Freight Elevator 16 and rose upward inside the mother ship. Ross wondered if the Antarians were already violating the peace treaty or maybe Nancy's alluding to the Anchaus had special meaning to his trip. Being out at the edge of galactic civilization, without fleet backup, would make Ross and his crew vulnerable to whatever awaited them.

3

The long orange hull of the barge freighter moved a hundred meters above the gray brown hull's observation areas and lighted compartments. Ross, understanding his eventual destination, pondered the nebula, a remnant of an exploded star, covering the skies above the distant planet. Ventures to the edge the Third Sector, away from the civilized galaxy were reserved for recognizance missions and scientific survey parties. Something must have gone wrong out there. A survey party might be in need of evacuation or supplies. Ross had never heard of the Nebula Planet and did not fully understand the connotation. Because of security, the orders, according to the Admirals, would come in two stages. The anticipation, combined with this insane silence order frazzled his nerves. " Krutch, I need to speak with Ebert."

" We're supposed to remain silent."

Ross leaned against the cold window, talking with his security chief's reflection. " Bullshit." He turned to Lindy. " Lindy, what the hell is a nebula planet?"

Lindy grinned. " A planet with a nebula."

" Funny... Why would there be a nebula, gas... Where is the star? Why wasn't the planet destroyed in the explosion?"

" I'd have to look at the reports, John. Planets don't orbit nebulas."

" My point exactly." Ross' clenched fist moved down the glass.

" Listen, I don't like not being told and getting sealed orders when we're out in the middle of nowhere isn't my idea of useful information."

A multitude of antennas and red flashing lights were silhouetted against the spaceport's upper grid fence. The port cast an azure-green glow across the blackened sky as the barge freighter crossed over dozens of various class vessels of many shapes and sizes, cruising above the runways. Ross was drawn toward the far end of the mother ship, past the complex girder network to his own ship.

As majestic as Rondorian wafting bird, with wide, blue sculptured rear wings and a sphere head down the end of a long, tapering thin body, ESS-14 was anchored securely in the docking bay, but dozens of extra ships worked around the brightened hull. At least fifty external technicians, tiny repair scooters and maintenance shuttles to ready the ship. The vessel was his for almost five years, before the Antarian War, and although he had commanded other vessels, he had an odd attraction to this ship.

Kuchinski brought the barge alongside the starboard sky pilot bays, under the wingspan. Out of the portalights glare, the ship returned to its usual light blue color. Only a few people gazed out the linear observation platforms above the bay doors. Ross thought he saw Jim Morris standing next to the sky pilot ships inside. As the barge nudged into the air lock barrier, Ross turned to Kuchinski. " Am I in charge yet?"

" When we step onboard, sir."

Ross nodded and peered upward to the ship's wings; the underbelly extending back to the bay girders. Steam almost instantly evaporated from transport shuttles bringing in the final fuel canister shipments into the storage bins behind the wingspan. Once they were safely in the thick, fingered metal air locks, and inside pressure was equalized to the main ship, the barge doors opened. Ross followed Kuchinski quickly, their steps echoing, across the metal floor. Kuchinski spoke to Pelonis, and the ship's computer performed a quick scan on everyone before they officially entered ESS-14.

Kuchinski folded his arms as he stood before the viewer. " What's the matter, Pelonis, you in a bad mood today?"

" No, sir," said Pelonis. " Scans complete. Feel free to come onboard, gentlemen."

The internal sky bay doors rumbled and the brighter light hit Ross' eyes. Crewmembers saluted as he stepped inside the ship. Then he turned to Kuchinski. " Now, I am officially on board."

" Just following Admiral Ebert's orders," said Kuchinski.

Ross looked around the spacious sky pilot bays. Fifteen sky pilot ships, still singed from battle, were lined in a long row across this area of so much activity during the war. No one seemed overly concerned about the mission. Even Jim Morris, who had a Level One Clearance, casually talked with some of his sky pilot sector maintenance men about twelve meters away.

" John," said Pelonis. Ross turned toward the speaker. " I have been told by Admiral Ebert to convene an immediate meeting of all personnel with a Level One Clearance."

" One hour in the locus."

Norm Gannon, one of Ross' personal aides, moved out of the propulsion room corridor. " Commander, I was just informed by Pelonis that you were returning to the ship and that we are getting underway?"

" Correct, Norm."

" What do you need, sir?"

" Uniform in my cabin. I'm going to shower and be at a locus meeting in an hour."

" Yes, sir. I'll get on it right away." Gannon headed back toward the propulsion room.

" Pelonis, inform all other Level One people. "

" Should we restrict knowledge of the meeting?" asked the computer.

" For what?" asked Lindy from the side. " Nobody's going anywhere."

" I didn't know you were commanding this vessel, Mr. Lindsay," replied the computer.

" I think we need some reconstructive surgery on the Pelonis links in this vessel," said Lindy, moving behind Gannon. " I'm going to my cabin, John."

" Commander?" asked Pelonis. " The restriction problem..."

" Don't worry about it, Pelonis. When will all personnel be aboard?"

" Within the hour. People have been ordered back all day," said Pelonis. " We leave port in three hours and ten minutes."

Ross nodded his head. Lindy moved into the sloping propulsion corridor's tan walls and walked toward the clear conveyer tubes beyond. Jim Morris followed. Ross knew what the next question would be.

" Level One meeting?" Morris whispered, squinting his dark eyes.

" We are getting underway in approximately three hours, Jim. I want your people on standby."

" What's going on, Commander?"

" You'll find out as much as they want to tell us at the locus meeting. I'll see you."

Nancy Burke, looking winded and fatigued, rounded a small shuttle inside the bay doors. She managed a half smile. " Aren't you going to welcome me aboard, Commander?"

" Nancy," he said, shaking his head. " You did get clearance."

" Right here." She lifted two silver security disks out of her pack. Then she held her hand over her droopy eyes.

Ross tried to steady her. " Are you all right, Nancy?" She straightened and nodded her head. " I'm all right and I do have clearance. I *am* officially assigned to ESS-14 for the duration of this mission. You can push the disks into an activation slot."

" Not necessary."

" Miss Burke does have access, John," said Pelonis.

" I have to wonder why they sent a viewer bender on a..."

" Mission like this?" she asked, grinning. " Listen, Commander. Believe me, this mission is going to require someone here to bend it."

" Then you best brief me. " Ross liked her and having her onboard would make an otherwise long and dull voyage interesting.

" I know what you know. "

" You have connections, my friend," said Ross.

" I do." Her eyelids still hung heavy.

" Nancy, you're all right in a pig's ass." Ross steadied her again.

" I just need to rest for a second. Go to my cabin."

" Sure." Ross walked over and hit the button near an adjacent speaker. " Pelonis."

" Yes, sir."

" Pelonis, I want S.R. Schaefer down here to escort Miss Nancy Burke to her cabin."

" Instituting command." Schaffer's name echoed throughout the bay and into the corridor.

" Thank you, Pelonis," said Ross, looking back to Nancy. " I'm having one of my aides, Melissa Schaefer, come down here. She will bring you to your cabin."

" Cabin A-16."

" You're right across the wing span in the corner. Sixteen is more like a suite, Nancy." He did not know whether to steady her again. " Most of the wing cabins are more like group barracks for the crew."

" I will need to talk to ship's physician... Pfeiffer."

" When we were in the bar pit, you mentioned you couldn't have a brewmac because..."

" I will speak to the ship's doctor about that."

" Dr. Mike Pfeiffer..." Ross saw the young Melissa Schaefer, in her magenta uniform, moving in from the propulsion corridor.

" Yes, Commander," she said as she approached.

" Melissa, I am assigning you as aide to Miss Burke on this voyage."

Melissa smiled and looked at Nancy. " Yes, sir."

" She is in cabin A-16. Nancy, I have a Level One meeting in less than an hour. If you wish a tour of the vessel after-

" It's very late, John. Perhaps tomorrow or the next day. We have plenty of time, I think, from what I sense."

" You sense correctly. Time is the one thing we do have plenty of on this voyage. If you need me, contact my ship's Pelonis."

" Thank you, John." Ross held her for a moment and started across the bay. " And enjoy your meeting."

" Enjoy? A Level One security meeting rarely brings enjoyment. And you can quote me on that." Ross kept walking, but her condition worried him. Dr. Pfeiffer would find answers.

4

The Commander's cabin, only twelve meters under the locus, bordered the walking corridor and conveyer tube. The outer cabin, a working section, was used mostly for convening small meetings while the more comfortable living area had an arched cambient reality chamber next to a larger viewing screen. Sleeping quarters and a shower abutted the rear cambient chamber wall. From his bed, Ross could, if necessary, leap up a spiral metal stairway and emerge center locus, next to his command consoles.

He walked from the cleansing shower, securing his blue fatigues; an acceptable voyage uniform. From the storage bins he pulled out a white compac, containing communications link and a smaller computer directly frequencied to Pelonis. He attached it over his shoulders and upper arms.

" Visual check." A image of the locus appeared on the air screen, less than a meter away.

" Clarity a hundred per cent," said a generic, unlinked voice.

" Frequency check, Lindy."

His second in command, at the busy locus science area, turned and yawned. " John, are you sure you don't want to hold this meeting twelve hours from now?"

Ross smiled. " I'd like to. Who's up there?"

" We're waiting for Muldoon. A problem with the scooner sweepers. He says he'll have his guys replacing part before we hit breakaway speed."

" Make sure there are back-up parts. The schooners have been giving us too much trouble lately. This is going to be a long trip, Lindy, we don't need debris banging into us."

" Agreed."

" I'll be up in a few minutes."

Ross went over to his bedside table and looked at a few family pictures. He pushed the green button and a group picture, taken at his parent's home on Vega XIV last year, came to life. It was a two minute shot on their thirty-fifth anniversary. Ross' smile dropped at the site of his silver haired father, still an intelligence officer. His father appeared vital as did his thinner mother. His smile returned as he looked at his younger brothers, Wayne and Cappy, kidding his sister Deborah. It was a wonderful week back home except for the fact the old man left two days into the visit. And now he was out on what he perceived to be a potentially dangerous voyage. Even though, his initial orders were forthcoming, the Nebula Planet loomed too mysterious and too far away.

He hit the button and the family picture returned to the beginning, frozen as he headed to the outer room. With the end of the war, Ross thought he could have shed the exhausted and charged, war weary feeling; the sense of wanting to sleep, yet being so battle ready he could not sleep. The cabin door opened, revealing the clear conveyer tube extending down the body of the ship. He stepped onto the adjacent lower walking corridor's blue grit surface and headed for the locus.

The tube was dark as he moved up the ramp to the locus level. A small set of stairs led to an amber archway around the green locus doors. He gazed up at Command's sphere of planets in blue and the designation above the archway.

ESS-14 LOCUS AREA AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL

A high-pitched scanning beam cut into his eardrums and the doors opened. The extensive mother ship hull, behind the port bay girders, filled the forward viewer. All personnel stood as Ross walked onto upper deck's black grid rim. " At ease, everyone. " He crossed the rim, briefly looked down the stairs to his circular control station, but stopped at the science section along the upper deck.

" Muldoon is on his way, John." Lindy, also in his blue fatigues, swiveled in his chair. With all the science and communication personnel cleared out of the meeting, the area consoles and monitors looked deserted.

" Did he replace the scooner part?" asked Ross.

" No, it was human error."

" You tell that Muldoon we can't afford human error on this mission.

" Tell me what?" asked the husky voice Muldoon as he entered the locus from the conveyer tube.

Ross' bearded propulsion engineer walked across the grid.

" Tell you that your fired," said Ross.

Lindy smiled as Muldoon checked the monitors. " Good. I want to take this ride into hell about as much as I want a drac beam aimed at my crotch."

Ross chuckled and then fully laughed, joined by Lindy, shaking his head. Lindy pushed a few buttons on the console, but directed his comments at Muldoon. " The beam would probably be dissipated if it were aimed at his crotch."

" Listen, John," said Muldoon. " Do you have any idea where we are going? Pelonis tells me destinations are already to be imputed into navigation on your order."

" Well, I-

" And another thing." Ross smiled at Lindy. " What about the coils? I had a bunch of scooner-scrubbers fiddling with those

coils. We were supposed to have a ten-day shut down. Not this quick fix."

Ross moved down the steps to his own control area. "The fix is in, Frank."

Semi-circular monitors and consoles lined the sunken area, directly in the locus center. Five black leather chairs were anchored into the translucent white tile floor, all facing the monitors. His own chair was up front, flanked by two large flat viewers and a smaller monitor section below the slope leading to the forward viewer about five meters away.

Ross, in front of the viewer, faced his officers. "Okay, is everybody here?"

"Commander Alvarez has not arrived," stated Pelonis. All officers descended the grid metal stairs to the Commander's station.

"Please page her, Pelonis," ordered Ross.

"Again?"

"Again, now let's start the classification anyway."

Kuchinski began. "Lieutenant Commander Walter Kuchinski. ESS number, 6599072. Clearance Level One. Password Alpha Libra Six."

"Cleared," said Pelonis.

As Jim Morris began his check, the right upper walking corridor doors opened and Lieutenant Commander Mariah Alvarez, a small framed, young career officer with neatly trimmed

brown hair, rushed on board. " My apologies, Commander. I was late in coming onboard."

" No, more late than the rest of us, Lieutenant. Put yourself on report."

She stopped on the stairs and her dark eyes reflected confusion. " Sir?"

Ross was in no mood for insubordination and bypassed her question. " Security Clearance Procedure, Commander."

" Commander Mariah Alvarez. Clearance Level One. ESS number, 1698745. Individual Password: Bright Star."

" Cleared," said Pelonis.

Ross waited as everyone was cleared. Then he stepped in front of his inner group as they formed an arc around monitors.

" This mission is not your average survey or planet contact mission. Lord knows why we have been chosen to travel to the edge of the known galaxy so soon after the war's end. But we have. The Nebula Planet seems to be the focus of this mission. We will be rendezvousing with a ESS-27 on Axian Boroma VII. I'm sure we will know more in a few minutes."

The security fields buzzed around the locus and he turned toward the main screen. " Pelonis, engagement vessel mission orders."

" Engaging, Commander," answered the computer.

The forward screen, tinted blue, buzzed with yellow and orange serial numbers crisscrossing the surface. Then the display

flashed red and an override frequency signified a classified AZ transmission.

" Final sequence code, Commander John Boyce Ross."

As Ross turned to his console and typed in the code, Admiral Ebert came on the screen.

" Vessel Explorer Space Ship Fourteen. Your ship has been chosen to travel to the Nebula Planet, so named not because it is actually a nebula but because of its proximity to Nebula EG 1632, also known by astronomers as the Pan Handle Nebula. Nebula EG 1632 is actually farther away from the Nebula Planet's system than a typical binary. Planet GSS 11-891, the Nebula Planet, orbits star, Algorean, a class eight blue star with a year equal to one point nine galactic years and is seventeen hundred light years from mother ship 13. There are eleven other planets in this system. Planet GSA 11-891 has a thin atmosphere, with no sign of sustained life. Terrestrial protective gear is needed on the surface. But the oddest observation, even with an extended position for a potential binary, is the complete lack of gravitational pull between the Algorean system and the nebula. Any compacted or collapsed star or gravity trough should have some effect on the system.

Two galactic years ago Command sent the first survey parties to study the nebula for possible a central gravity trough or compacted star within the nebula, and to understand the nebula's relationship to planet GSA 11-891. Colony engineers from mother ship 11 were ordered to construct a habitable living area and

laboratory for studying the nebula. Six months later a party of thirty-five volunteers from the various space institutes arrived on Axian Boroma VII. They were transported the distance to the Nebula Planet by a supply ship provided by the Sawyer Syndicate. Additional supplies and foodstuffs were also carried on this mission. The Antarian War did not effect their operations.

On 14 Biogres, 2153 G.T., the Sawyer vessel arrived in orbit about the Nebula Planet. Shuttle vessels began delivering personnel and supplies to the surface compartments. All was normal when the freighter left and the scientific party began its work.

Sounds like a rather typical, albeit distant, expedition. Specifically, they were to search for high-energy waves, magnetic fields, or a defined angular momentum of star remnant within the nebula. Additional antennas were constructed to scan for matter being thrown off surrounding stars, due to intense gravitational pull. Other teams were to study pulse and spin rates of possible compacted stars.

Probes sent into the nebula consistently vanished and all data concerning a potential compacted star or gravity trough proved inconclusive. Personnel, in a transmission dated 2 Galacticae, 2153 G.T., did note subtle field changes. Four infinitesimal linear beams, widely separated, moved from the nebula, and stopped several hundred light years in space. These lines could not be seen without accurate scanning devices. However, communication, already

hampered by a two month delay, now was sporadic and subject to breakup because of erratic energy emanating from the nebula and the lines.

Not long after, certain incredible discoveries were made, information that will be given to you when you reach Axian Boroma VII. These discoveries, the entire project, and the data being received prompted a Series A communications shutdown, followed by an AZ frequency use only. After a Command Group meeting, it was decided that Dr. Howard Ellison would be sent on a Sawyer freighter with a complete support team to the Nebula Planet."

Lindy looked at Ross and raised his brows.

" Dr. Ellison and a team of five set out on 10 October 2154 G.T. from the Axian Boroma VII station, and arrived on schedule, twenty-three days later. As you know, Dr. Ellison's reputation is unmatched. A pupil of Ronald Eldridge, his theories on time dilation from non-matter sources have added to Eldridge's discoveries.

Dr. Ellison was anxious to explore the meaning of linear energy moving into the Third Sector, and he was to carry the project further. Additional probes and actual manned expeditions were deemed necessary and began on 26 Columbia, 2154 G.T.

The first sign of actual difficulty began some time later, 13 Planeta, 2154 when Command received notification, on the AZ

frequency, of another probe ship loss and all six occupants missing in the nebula. The report was subcaptioned by Dr. Ellison, himself.

Section order 3215 was issued by this office. Further manned exploration of the nebula was to cease. Unfortunately, no messages were received from the Nebula Planet until 18 Sol, 2155 G.T. Dr. Ellison and three members of his team disappeared into the nebula on 19 March, 2155 G.T.

All remaining personnel were ordered evacuated. The Sawyer Syndicate was ordered to send out a freighter immediately. However, communication became almost nonexistent because of increased interference of additional linear energy sources, having moved into the Third Sector. The freighter is overdue by four weeks at the time of this message, 9 May, 2155 G.T.

And there is an additional complication. Intelligence reveals an Antarian involvement."

" I should have guessed that," said Ross, glancing back at his crew.

" Antarian gunner vessels were chased from the Axian Boroma system by base sky pilot ships. John, what we fear is another Antarian involvement in this situation, which is not needed with a signed peace treaty. When you arrive on Axian Boroma VII, you will receive your rendezvous orders from coded intelligence box, now in the custody of Commander Donaldson. The code for the box has been placed in the retrieval section of Pelonis 756A. The final leg of your journey to the Nebula Planet will be with an

accompanying Command vessel. You will be senior officer, the accompanying vessel's commander, reporting to you.

Finally, Nancy Burke, the viewer bender, is on board your vessel as an historical observer. And I can tell you this is of historical significance. All cooperation and access within reason will be given to Nancy Burke. You will understand why, when you receive your final orders on Axian Boroma. You and your crew were selected on this mission because of your outstanding record in the Antarian Conflict and your postwar survey experience. John, I'm counting on you and your crew. This voyage, the twenty-third of ESS-14, could be significant, not only for your ship, but for all of Galactic Command. Good luck..."

Ross looked first to Lindy.

"Wow..."

"You got that right," he said with a smile.

"Commander," said Muldoon. "How will these nebula fields effect Eldridge Coil performance?"

"I'm sure Dr. Ellison could tell you if he was here, but Pelonis will have to do," said Ross.

"I think I've just been insulted," said the computer.

"You have," replied Muldoon.

"Commander, according to the data transmissions, there could be some fluctuation in coil performance especially from a gravity trough from a collapsed star."

" Sounds like they didn't find either," said Lindy, accessing the data on his screen. Muldoon walked over and leaned toward Lindy's screen. " What about those energy lines, Pelonis?"

" Very possible considering already diverted communications."

" So, you're saying, Pelonis, we could have travel problems as we approach the planet?" asked Ross.

" Possible. It would depend the intensity of these lines. Compensation is possible to a degree. But it could be a rough ride. And it could affect other instruments. We don't know."

" Any ideas on this?" said Ross, stepping back to his chair. He sat down and swiveled around to face them.

" I'm concerned about the Antarian component," said Kuchinski.

" A valid concern," said Ross, crossing his legs.

" What the hell are they doing near Axian Boroma?" asked Jim Morris. "Axian Boroma and the Nebula Planet are even farther away from the Antarians than from the mother ship. Why start anything with the treaty signed?"

" There has to be more to this, John," said Muldoon. " Those energy lines from the nebula are conveniently straight. Would a natural phenomenon do that?"

Ross shrugged his shoulders. " I suppose we'll have to wait until we into that coded box on Axian..."

" I don't think it's just the Antarians," said Mariah. Ross, still upset by her tardiness, half listened. " They could send anyone out to that Nebula Planet to gather information or pick up personnel. There must be more to this."

" You're always reading ulterior motives into things," said the crusty Muldoon. " They've told us two important facts. The Antarians have stuck their noses into this and Dr. Ellison missing. Ellison's reputation is known throughout the known galaxy. What more do you need, Mariah?"

" The coded box."

" Exactly," said Ross. " We'll continue to think about the implications of this," he said, gazing at the clock on his compac's shoulder extension. " We will be getting underway in two hours and fifty-two minutes. Once we reach breakaway, you can hit the pillows. I know everyone is pushed to the limit here."

Unless, there are any overriding concerns, I would ask you to report to your sections and maintain security about this. I'll make a general crew announcement sometime tomorrow. Word will get around from the course settings that we are heading for Axian Boroma System. I'll explain what I need to, tomorrow. Dismissed."

As they dispersed, Lindy stood and walked up to Ross, staring at the forward view of the mother ship's hull and the stars beyond.

" I thought I might be somewhere else at this hour," said Lindy, holding a monitor clipboard. He wrote something onto the readout pad as Ross put his hand on his shoulder.

" Lindy, once we complete this mission, Ebert will give us as much off vessel time as we want. I'll show you some places... The Mirak Outer Planets... that will make the mother ship pit bar look like a nursery school. You can count on it."

" Sometimes I wonder what the ultimate goal is, John. "

" What do you mean? "

" Mission upon mission, battle upon battle. We go about our duties, but what does it all mean? "

" I didn't know you were the philosopher. "

Lindy half smiled and peered out at the hull. " I'm not. But if we are following after the Anchaus. I wonder what they will think of us. "

" That is the ultimate question. "

* * *

Ross usually experienced the wonder of leaving spaceport and obtaining breakaway speed. Now, he only wanted to return to his cabin and sleep. He stood next to the locus's observation dome, adjacent to Lindy's upper level station as a barge scraper towed ESS-14 out of port and along the mother ship.

Inside the fully manned locus, science and communication personnel conferred with Lindy, while across the rim, Muldoon and a few of his people were monitoring coil output levels. Navigation staff checked course patterns with Pelonis directly across from the observation dome.

Ross moved down the metal stairs, back to his locus consoles. The ship's rear image was on the right monitor, a view ESS-14 from the outer mother ship was on the second monitor and the forward screen image matched what he had seen from the observation dome.

" Commencing preparation procedure," said Mariah from behind.

" Thank you, Lieutenant," he answered.

Muldoon's bearded face came on the left monitor. " Commander."

" Yes, Frank."

" I just want to report schooner sweepers at a hundred percent."

" So, I don't have to worry about having space debris sailing onto the locus?"

The tug pulled them away from the mother ship and he felt the lurch.

" Who's operating that tug?" asked Lindy, " A maintenance shuttle pilot?"

Ross smiled and moved to his chair. Norm Gannon, appeared to his right.

" Preparations complete," said Mariah.

" Acknowledged," said Ross.

" You need more coffee, Commander?" asked Norm.

Ross thought about it for a second and shook his head.

" No, as soon as we hit breakaway, I'm going to try and catch a few winks. Thank you, Norm. Norm, leave a message for Nancy Burke. I'd like to give her a tour of the vessel sometime tomorrow evening."

" Time?"

" Let's set it up for seven."

" Anything else, sir?"

" No, I'm okay, Norm. Get some sleep, yourself."

" Thank you, sir. We were all caught off guard on this mission."

" No doubt about that," said Ross as he leaned forward.

All screens showed the same starry image as the tug broke away and the ESS-14 drifted forward on its own momentum.

" Readouts." The forward screen showed Ross data in orange and yellow letters. " Rear screen."

Most of the mother ship appeared on the screen as they slowly floated to a safe distance. When the entire length of the massive ship was revealed, Pelonis came on the speaker. " Ready for posturing."

"Align vessel," answered Ross and he stepped up to his consoles.

Gil Webb, Lindy's Section Chief at the navigation station, double-checked the alignment. "Course implemented."

"Engage," ordered Ross.

The vessel gently glided forward. From their perspective, the mother ship seemed to move away rapidly and the rear screen soon filled with stars. Ross turned to Rip. The crusty, shorted haired member of Lindy's communications section was a valuable utility man around the ship.

"Request Command departure, Rip."

"Request in, John..." He paused and listened in his sliver earpiece.

"Request accepted."

"Pelonis, breakaway speed in two minutes."

"Acknowledged," said the computer.

"Here we go, John," said Lindy, his image in the corner of the left monitor as the coils hummed below.

"Why do I get a feeling about this mission?" asked Ross.

Lindy stood and placed his hands behind his back. "I think it will be unique and stand in the annals of Galactic collective experience as a tribute to human initiative."

"I think I'm going to be ill," said Ross, shaking his head and returned to his seat. He could hear the restraining belts settling into

position around the locus as Pelonis announced the impending change in ship's speed."

" Breakaway speed in forty seconds."

Ross activated his own glowing red restraining belt, thinking briefly about being fully restrained at the bar pit earlier that evening.

" Coils at full." Ross then saw Muldoon's face in the corner of the right monitor. " Propulsion is ready."

" Breakaway in ten seconds," said Pelonis.

Ross set the chair rigid as the rising coils resonated throughout his body. The equations constantly changed on the forward viewer and he sensed the backward sling condensing space around them, distorting the stars into large glowing globs. Then they shot forward.

According to the readouts, the mother ship was now fourteen thousand kilometers away. Then fifty. Then five hundred thousand. In less than a minute, they were at one astronomical unit, the distance of the planet Earth to it's sun. The quickness of the velocity always impressed Ross. Ebert and the others were so far away instantly.

Ross watched the elapsed clock reach three minutes and he released his retaining belt. He stood and looked at Mariah. He figured she sensed he might place her on duty. " You are on watch."

" Yes, sir." She abruptly turned her back to him.

Ross went up the rim stairs to Lindy as Muldoon wandered over.

" I'll be in my cabin." He moved toward the walking corridor.

" Oh, John," said Lindy.

Ross looked around.

" Nightie night!" he said, waving his fingers.

Ross grinned, shook his head as they all laughed and he trudged back to his cabin to get some sleep.