

Chapter 1

Commander Donald Jenkins was impatient. "Mister Moore, how far to Charlie station?"

Ensign Benjamin Moore III, the Junior Officer of the Deck, glanced nervously at Chief Warrant Officer Raymond G. Raymond, 'Raygun' to his friends. Raygun shrugged a go-ahead-and-tell-him look and the JOD reported, "Seventeen minutes to station, Captain."

"Ensign." Jenkins emphasized the word derisively. "Are they teaching the ninety-day wonders at Officer Candidate School to get the Officer of the Deck's permission to answer a simple goddamned question from the Commanding Officer?"

"Uh, no sir." Ben Moore involuntarily came to attention.

Jenkins turned to stand directly in front of the trembling junior officer and growled. "In the future, Mister Moore, when I speak to you, respond immediately. And you better have the right answer, or you will be permanently on my shit list. Do you understand?"

Moore stared past his Captain's eyes. He barked, "Yes, sir!"

Jenkins now turned his wrath on the Officer of the Deck. "And Mister Raymond, as OOD I expect you not only to train watch standers, but also provide a good example for the junior officers to follow. Your duty section is the slackest on this ship. When you get off watch I want you to report to me in my docking cabin, because we must decide what we are going to do about your misfits." Not waiting for a reply, Jenkins turned and stalked off the bridge.

"Aye aye, Cap'n," Raymond flung off an insolent salute in Jenkins' direction and turned back to the Status Board. "How're we doing, Benney?"

"We'll be on station in four minutes. I began deceleration right before the Captain came on the bridge, about twelve minutes ago, and our ESM Stations are on standby. We'll begin powering

up to start sensor sweeps within thirty seconds after we achieve station speed." Ensign Moore relaxed.

"Good job, Ben. Don't pay any attention to what the Captain said. You're doing fine. But go ahead and give him the answers he wants when he asks." Raymond moved over to the Engineering panel and studied its gauges. Gauges. Christ, but this was an old ship. Ray hadn't seen gauges in fifteen years.

Moore trailed behind Raymond, keeping his voice low so the rest of the bridge watch team couldn't hear him. "This is my first ship, but isn't the Officer of the Deck supposed to give the reports to the Captain? I wasn't trying to slight him."

"Yeah, he was just putting me in my place. Our CO doesn't like having a Chief Warrant Officer as a Department Head, not to mention Senior Watch Officer. Hell, he doesn't even want a noncommissioned officer standing OOD watches." Ray scanned the area behind him. "Boats, any more coffee?"

"Yes, sir. Someone spilled the pot about a half hour ago, but it hasn't oozed over the side of the table yet, so I can scrape some off for you." The graying and tired looking man grinned as he grabbed a cup off the rack.

"So anyway," Ray continued, "don't worry about it. This hasn't been the first time we've been chewed out and it won't be the last." Ray accepted the cup offered by the senior enlisted watch stander, took a long gulp, and grimaced. "Geez, this will either put hair on your chest or take it off." He then plopped down into the captain's chair, propped his feet onto the status console, stuck a large cigar in his mouth (all actions that Jenkins had forbidden), and settled in for another long and uneventful watch in deep space.

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Commander Donald R. Jenkins, Commanding Officer of the North American Service (NAS) Ship Charles Higbee (XDE-19) did not go directly back to his cabin, since he knew that CWO Raymond would not be off watch for another two hours. Instead, he made another of his frequent surprise inspections. These inspections, he often told himself, were necessary, even critical, given the sorry state this ship had been in when he assumed command. The slack crew he inherited made his tasks even more difficult. If he didn't stay on these people constantly, they would let the entire ship fall apart. But this was the type of crew he had to expect with a ship like the Higbee.

As Jenkins walked the passageways, he bitterly reflected on the bad luck of being on this ship, on this assignment, at this time. At twenty-nine years old, he was the youngest officer ever to hold command of a combatant vessel: a feat helped along by the political skills of his father and a bribed technician at Command School who gave him the key to the final simulator battle problem. Jenkins shook his head at the memory. He had badly flunked the first two tests and only had one more chance. Thank God he had found a simulator technician in severe financial trouble or his career would have been down the toilet. But the ends justify the means, he got his command, although the Higbee just barely fit that description and only because of its deep space capability. This ship had no speed, no weapons to speak of, and worst of all, no up-to-date detection or evasion equipment. In fact, an ungodly amount of the ship's design capacity was taken up by some antiquated interference system that was never really used in space operations and was no longer even on the Ship's Systems List.

Jenkins grimaced. The Higbee and Fox, the other rust bucket of this class, had been assigned to guard the Back Door – the E-R bridge that opened inside Earth's solar system. Their mission was Sensory Picket, meaning they were to patrol their far-side sectors and inform Service Command if they came across space vehicles of any sort. Service could recall a warship from the frontier if any alien ships were detected, although no one expected that to happen. So here they

were, flying around in empty space. Meanwhile, the rest of the Fleet was off dealing with the Confederation, which was making noise about attacking Earth's settlements on the frontier: where the action was and where unit citations, so important to a commanding officer's career, were handed out.

Jenkins stepped through a hatchway into Main Control, the area where most engineering personnel worked and stood their watches. Immediately, everyone turned from their tasks and shifted nervously.

"Attention on deck. Captain's in Main Control." The Chief Engineer's obligatory announcement was stiff and sounded artificial.

The on-board computers sounded more lifelike, Jenkins thought. He stopped and noticed that two engineers had only risen half way and then sat down, before he had told them to carry on.

Damn snipes were the most insolent group around. "Lieutenant Morris." Jenkins sullenly stared at the two offending engineers, who were now resentfully rising to their feet. "How are repairs coming on the number two auxiliary power system?"

"Captain." Morris drew out his words carefully. "I reported the situation to you at Officer's Call this morning. If there was any change, I would have informed you immediately."

Jenkins exploded. "Officer's Call was over four hours ago. You mean to say you haven't made any progress in all that time? What the hell are you guys doing down here, jerking off? I want this goddamned system up and running soon, or I'll have your ass."

Morris wearily stroked his fingers through his thinning, sandy-blond hair. He was a reservist called up to active duty for this latest crisis and was not used to this kind of treatment Earthside. "Captain, the Yards had to get these ships back in commission in a hurry and, unfortunately, the yard birds didn't do a good job in updating the as-built drawings. I've had every off-duty man in my

department troubleshooting the problem. We have some leads and are checking them out. We'll keep on it until this system is back up, but there is nothing to report right now."

"Mister Morris." Jenkins's voice was low and menacing. "You get this system up by the end of this watch period or I'll write a special evaluation on you." He looked around the space to see if anyone else wanted to take him on. Dead silence. "Sixteen hundred hours. Now carry on!" He turned and stalked out of the space.

Jenkins's mind reeled with anger. No one on board is at all competent. If it weren't for his pushing them, the ship wouldn't even be spaceworthy. It was barely space worthy under the best of circumstances. He couldn't let this bunch of lazy slackers ruin his chance for promotion to Captain and a cruiser command. If only he could straighten out these people and get this piece of junk through the tour.

Jenkins stormed through the hatch of his space cabin and flopped onto the couch, exhaling a long breath. He could feel the resentment of the entire crew beginning to weigh upon him. His efforts to square them away were not proceeding as well or as quickly as he would have liked. How he wished that he had an executive officer. But these ships did not rate that billet, and even if they did, Service Command had said time and again that there was an acute shortage of experienced officers. All command-qualified lieutenant commanders, who would normally serve executive officer tours of duty, were assigned to front-line capital ships or had gotten fleeted up to early command. In fact, the Fox's Captain was a passed-over lieutenant commander who was on the verge of being cashiered out of the Service before this latest crisis erupted.

Jenkins shook his head and stared at the overhead as if asking for divine guidance. What a sorry group he had the misfortune to be stuck with. Both ships were manned almost entirely with reserve officers and enlisted. With all the problems he had keeping the Higbee together, he couldn't even imagine how slovenly the Fox must be. And they were both here in the middle of nowhere,

with all the action taking place light years away. The best he could hope for was to get this ship cleaned up and the crew adequate to the point Service Command would take note and give him a front-line warship. He hoped the action on the frontier wouldn't be over soon.

Jenkins's thoughts were interrupted by the squawk from the bridge phone above his head. Christ, what now? "Captain here." He listened for a minute, a frown deepening on his face. "Goddamn it, didn't I say not to bother me down here for the next hour unless it was an emergency?...Well, that's not an emergency is it?....I don't care what the standing watch orders say....Now listen, Morris, first you can't keep your engineering systems going or even find out what is wrong with them, and now you're bugging me with every little piddling thing on the bridge. Can't you even stand an OOD watch without someone holding your hand?....Then do it or I'll find someone who will." He slammed down the phone.

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Lieutenant Morris shrugged and placed the phone back into its receiver.

"Let me guess." Lieutenant Donna Czieszki, the ship's Navigator, pursed her lips and squinted her eyes in an exaggerated expression of deep thought. Her voice became a mock imitation of Jenkins. "He doesn't want to hear anymore of this bullllllshit." After a few snickers on the bridge, she went back to being serious. "You should have let me give him the position report, Joe. It's my job."

"It's the job of the Navigator and the Officer of the Deck to navigate the ship, and either one can make the standard position reports." Morris retorted. "Besides, you've been enough of a shit screen on this cruise."

"Well, I'm a city-system grad, and I'm sure that doesn't sit well with our enlightened Captain, but hell, I'm used to it" Czieszki smiled sardonically and turned back to her panel.

"You're damned if you do and damned if you don't." Morris said reflectively.

"Contact. Bearing one three five up one-seven. Range..." The JOD paused while he fiddled with some dials on the Aptom Sensor Panel. They didn't have any devices this old in the Earthside training simulators, and they took some getting used to. "Range about 35,000 kilometers."

Morris, unconcerned, turned towards the junior officer. "Solid readings?"

"No sir." The JOD hadn't taken his eyes off the panel and was still fiddling with the dials.

"It comes and goes. Signature is unreadable too."

"OK." Morris was all business now. "Key the helm computer to execute a standard zigzag pattern."

The helmsman immediately tapped in a code on his panel and hit a floor pedal. The Higbee immediately turned to a new course and steadied up.

Cieszki looked up from her navigation console. "Another ghost, Joe?"

Morris frowned. "Yeah, must be. If it doesn't change relative position through our random maneuverings, we'll know for sure. But you'd think with all the mods and upgrades on these sensing systems over the years, they'd have solved this problem by now."

Donna shook her head. "Our techs tell me the systems going into the new-constructions ships have almost completely eliminated ghosting. But this antique we're riding in was built almost twenty years ago and no amount of patching is going to fix all our problems." She wandered over and studied the display. "What do you think is causing it?"

He shrugged. "Could be anything: magnetic space phenomena, mis-calibrated systems, computer mis-interpretation, maintenance errors, who knows? It could be a real contact on the edge of our sensing range."

"I thought our range went out to 60,000 kilometers?"

"That varies based on any number of conditions. And as the systems get upgraded to be more sensitive, the variability also increases. That's one reason why Service Tech went back to hard-

wiring onboard comm systems.” Morris smiled at her sudden consternation. “Don’t worry. It’s not a contact. We’re in deep space far from any galaxy. No alien ship has ever come through the back door.”

"Uh, Lieutenant Morris." The JOD looked up anxiously. "Should I call the Captain?"

Morris pursed his lips. All contacts, real or otherwise, were supposed to be reported to the commanding officer as a matter of course. Most CO's modified these standing orders to include only contacts that had an estimated closest point of approach (CPA) within weapons strike range. But since Jenkins had given no such guidance, the Standard Watch Guide rules technically applied. But all watch standers had suffered the consequences of irritating Commander Jenkins with routine reports, especially during evening hours.

Morris thought for a moment "Well, I don't know. What do you think, Donna? Do you want to call the Captain?"

The Navigator smiled as she shook her head "Not me, Kee-mo-sab-bee."

Morris turned to his JOD. "How about you, Bruce?"

"Uh, I'll do it if you think it's necessary." The JOD blushed. He didn't want to suffer the Captain's harangue.

Morris had once been a JOD himself. "That's OK, Bruce. He's probably busy chewing out Raymond. We don't need to report this contact." As the cruise went on, fewer routine reports were being made to the Captain.

As if on cue, the ship's computer chimed an interim report. The contact had not changed relative position. "See?" Morris gestured at the electronic scrolling. "It's a ghost, nothing to worry about. There isn't anything out in this God-forsaken part of the Universe." With that, the bridge watch went back to their normal duties.

Star Picket/Burgess

Ensign Bruce Wall continued his routine scan of the various system gauges that defined the four hours of his watch. But he kept a more frequent scan of the long-range sensors and the blurry image before him.

Ghost contacts. They still gave him the creeps.