



## Chapter 1

With a quick jerk he pulled Neema around a rack of outside suits and into a crouch. Seconds later they heard the sound of trotting footsteps pass through the room. Then the warning siren started. Ardham wasn't worried about that. The warning was for an event that didn't really involve them, not directly at any rate, it was merely a diversion.

He moved around the rack and started once again towards the extended docking section. The tall dark-skinned girl with the fiery red hair was slightly behind him, looking guiltily over her shoulder in the direction of station central.

"You heard them coming?" she asked.

“Nah, I was just keeping track of the time. We figured that the ship wranglers would respond before the general warning. They probably saw it before any of the others.”

The tall muscular girl nodded. “Exactly what is that they think they’re responding too?”

He gave her a glance and kept moving, going from one long corridor section to another. Sometimes the sections contained suit racks. “They are under the impression, that a reserve water bladder is in danger of being pumped into the stations plumbing system without space being made for it.”

“You’re going to flood the station, and waste water.” The shock in her voice was evident. There were only a couple of things that could really affect a stations life support system. The main three being air, water or fire. Any change in the location, use of, or containment of any one of those three was something that had to be attended too. That kept anyone from noticing what a few individuals among Ebraum’s current 23,000 odd people were doing – or at least it was hoped.

“Don’t worry, it’s just a phantom problem. Cwen Livingston, one of Engineers used to work for the company that designed the original system.”

“She must be fairly old then.” Said Neema, her breathing becoming a little labored despite the fact that she was in better shape than him. She was used to planet based air, and just one planet at that. Human lungs tended to get adjusted to one flavor of air unless they moved around from world to world. The body gradually got used to the changes.

He slowed to stop in the center of a corridor, checked the time and the number stenciled along the upper walls. “Okay, we’re a little early. If anyone drift’s by act surprised by the alarm and ask what it means. That’ll irritate them but they’ll just shout directions and keep going. And yes, Cwen is old but she’s a they, I have no idea what parts they carry.”

The girl nodded, Ardham was glad to see that she had the sense to not keep chattering. He hated people who did that when they were nervous. Glancing at his watch again he decided that it was time.

With a motion of his head he entered the next corridor and moved to the outer wall. After a quick glance in both directions, he keyed the controls of an air-tight door to the outer station buffer space. As soon as the door swiveled outward he was through with the girl close on his heels. He immediately reversed the direction of the heavy metal door and waited for it to shut.

Without being told Neema moved to the far wall by the circular hatch and waited.

He didn’t waste any time moving to join her. Trying to remain calm he checked the pressure readings to make sure that the tube and room were equalized.

Beyond stretched the two-meter diameter of the docking tube. It looked like the inside of a snake with support ribs every 5 meters. It was translucent and lit by the station’s external lights - no internal illumination was needed. A plastic rope was stretched into the distance along one side of the tube. The end was tied to the left side of the hatchway. Ardham grabbed hold of it and pulled himself free from the station’s artificial gravity. A few slow pulls and he found himself floating in the center of the tube.

“Can you get around me?”

She nodded, “you want me to go first?”

“If you wouldn’t mind. I want to set this thing up to auto-retract when we release the other end.”

She smiled, “and I thought you just wanted to admire my backside.”

“Yea, well,” he said. He was startled by her remark and clarified his. “A retracted tube doesn’t catch anyone’s attention. If we just leaving it floating out there traffic control will notice.”

She nodded, a wry grin on her face after her forward remark, and quickly grabbed the rope and swarmed past him. Giving her a chance to put some distance between them he toggled the hatch closed and toggled the auto-retract settings on. Usually, the station just left them floating to save time on the next ship, but they would notice if it was one they didn’t expect to be there. He didn’t want them to notice. He knew that they would notice quickly but not too quickly. Security on a space station was somewhat lax in regards to things that didn’t affect the integrity of the living space.

The tube wasn’t a long one for a station as big as Ebraum, only a short couple of kilometers. The nice thing about a deep space station was that tubes could be long and thin, no worry about solar radiation.

Ardam kept his pace even and yet still almost bumped into Neema. The girl knew how to handle the lack of gravity okay but didn’t have the experience to really cut loose and fly. Well, he told himself, even with the sixty plus years she had on him age wise he had far more time in space. He was impressed however, she did okay for someone who was primarily a ground pounder.

It didn't take long for them to make the two-kilometer journey. Soon he could see the light of the Warden's airlock. She was a Ranger class exploration vehicle. He had crewed on many in his years with the survey service and knew the design well. It was a good ship for this type of mission and better yet, there were a lot of them in use, mostly in private hands. She wouldn't draw undue attention if they had to link up somewhere. He hoped that Cwen was right about being able to full station computers. The fact that communication between worlds and stations was all done by transport ships or drones made it unlikely they would be caught in the short term.

Ahead of him Neema had already transitioned from the zero gee of the tube to her feet in the inner airlock of the ship. Ardham slowed himself with against the rope at the last possible instance and came to stand beside her.

"You right?" he asked.

"Yea, that was the longest tube ride I've had to make in a long time."

"You did fine. Now lets close this thing up and release the tube." It took only a few seconds to swing the heavy outer door into a closed and dogged position. As soon as the safety tattles all turned green, he flipped the switch to release the umbilical tube. Another green light lite on the control plate and he watched the tube slowly start its return to the station proper on the embedded monitor.

"Okay, let's go meet the rest of the crew - all two of them." He touched another panel on the opposite wall and another heavy circular hatch opened into the ship. He moved through before it finished opening followed by Neema.

She seemed puzzled. "I thought you had four crew members."

“I do, they’re waiting for us on Tabatha. In fact, I told them to try and pick up a couple more people. We’re a little light for this mission.”

They moved through the ships empty corridor as they talked. Apparently, the girl had made herself familiar with the layout of a Ranger class boat. He was certain she had never served on one but then again, with the ever-increasing life spans of human beings one could never tell.

The ship wasn’t large, and it took only a few minutes of walking to reach the bridge. The internal layout was one of the few with a continuous internal spiral corridor that went from Engineering to the bridge, cabin doors and secondary corridors opened off it. The airlocks were located at about the halfway point. There were of course numerous safety interlocks that would normally be closed during flight or in an anticipated danger area. Sitting in a parking orbit around a deep space station was not considered a danger area. Space, while being a dangerous place, had become a second home to humans and equipment failures were rare. Humans had gotten used to the ever present dangers of their new home.

Entering the bridge Ardam found his crew busy preflighting, it was an ancient label but still in use. Occupying two of the three seats at the semicircle console that occupied most of the bridge was a large, tall man with the trademark short hair of an Engineer – blond in this case, and a somewhat squat female figure of indeterminate age, height, weight and everything else. The two turned as Ardam and Neema entered the bridge.

Ardam nodded at the two and made introductions. “Neema, the guy taller than you is our Engineer and second in command, Jonteel Cutler, and the other one is

PronDissy, she's our Navigator and general specialist. If she has any other names, she's never told anyone."

Neema nodded acknowledgement to both of them. "I'm Neema. I represent the colony group." Glancing at Ardam she continued, "I too, am known by only one name. I never felt the need for more than that."

"Ouch," said Ardam. "I meant no disrespect. Sides, she would think I didn't love her anymore if I didn't make a fuss about her name on occasion."

PronDissy laughed, "I like this girl boss."

Cutler, glancing back at his console and said, "We're pretty much ready to go. I think they've just about figured out that it was a sensor cascade failure so we might want to get a move on."

Ardam slid into one of the three chairs at the back of the bridge, by habit he took the center. "Right, is that big cargo you were going to shadow on schedule?"

"Pulling out now, I've already started to match them," said Jonteel.

"Then why did you tell me we should start?" asked Ardam.

The tall man shrugged. "Just being polite I guess."

Neema, who had seated herself to Aram's left asked, "shadowed."

Ardam answered, "just means he's hoping that we'll just look like one ship if anyone's paying attention. Jon, any chance anyone's got a visual on us."

Jonteel shrugged again, "anything's possible but I doubt it. These people are bored, and they've just had the excitement of a station alarm. Sides, there isn't a lot they could do anyway. The only chance they had of stopping us from stealing this boat was



before we got on board. Now they can watch us fade away and that's it." It was a long speech for the Engineer.

"Right," said Ardam. Turning to Neema he motioned her to the door. "Come on. I'll show you where to bunk."

She came to feet. "Okay, guys it was great to meet you and I hope we'll be friends."

PronDissy answered. "Sure, and hope we'll stay off a prison world too."

In the corridor he led her to the third hatchway. "This boat has three cabins and a dorm. Since you represent the bank for this little excursion, I'm giving you one of the private cabins. I've got the first one – it's closest to the bridge. Everyone else is bunked in the dorm.

She inspected the little cabin quickly with her eyes. She had closets at home that were bigger, but she didn't say anything about the size. "This will do. Beds that aren't part of the wall, nice." She was referring to the pair of bunks centered in the room. "Who gets the third cabin?" she asked.

"That one we leave open in case anyone wants some privacy. It's called the Sock door, I don't think anyone knows why – just tradition. Normally it might go to Jonteel, but he prefers the dorm, closer to the engines. I don't really think where he sleeps matters to him. He's either working, exercising, or eating. The gym, rec area, and galley are between the private cabins and the dorm. Life support, data systems and everything else is in engineering. This is one compact little boat."

"How long to Tabatha?"

His eyes rolled up while he gave it thought. “I’m sure Jon’s going to make a short jump first. See if anyone is following us. Then he’ll jump there. Probably about a week.”

She nodded. “Any chance of that happening, someone following us?”

He shook his head. “Unless there was a cruiser sitting off Ebraum waiting for us to move, the answer would be no. The survey’s got too few ships for that kind of thing. Besides, stealing a starship is not something that happens very often. It’s a low profit game, you will eventually get caught.”

“Will we?”

“Not a chance. We aren’t going to hang on to this boat long enough for the word to get around. Ebraum doesn’t have an FTL comm. Almost no one does. Not enough AlienRock. We fall into the slim category of needing a ship for one brief mission and that gives us an edge. As long as we stay away from places like Ebraum and Tabatha where they have our faces and genetic profiles we’re okay.”

She asked, “Don’t they send along that kind of information on routine data transfers?”

“No,” he answered. To many planets and stations. They might send that info along but unless you show up on a vessel that is worth a lot and reported stolen no one’s going to care. To many people, things and such to look for. Plus, you can’t keep people locked up for years waiting for a chance to send them someplace else or waiting for additional information. Unless there’s a stop order for murder of course, but even then they’re just going to keep you on planet or station until they get further info.”

“Yea okay. That makes me feel a little better.” She tilted her head towards him.

“By the way, what exactly do the others think we’re doing?”

“Stealing a starship. That’s all I’ve told them so far,” he said.

“And they’re okay with just that. They really trust you. I take it you’ve been together for a long time.”

“Together – we’ve known each other a long time, but this is the first time that I know of that we’re breaking the law. We each have our own reasons.”

“It’s strangely comforting to know that I not associating with hardened criminals,” she said. “Can you tell me where to find my gear?”

“Probably in the rec cabin. That’s usually where everything gets dumped. If you’ll excuse me, I’ve been awake for thirty plus and I’m going to introduce myself to my mattress. If you’re hungry the galley is stocked. We don’t stand on ceremony so just eat when you’re hungry.”

“We’re fully stocked as far as food, fuel and whatnots?”

“He laughed. “Well, I don’t know about whatnot’s but anything we’re short on we’ll pick up on Tabatha. Good night.”

Turning he headed back up the corridor to his own cabin. With any luck he would sleep most of the way.



## Chapter 2

Ardam was seated in the center control seat with Jonteel to his left when they slid into Tabatha stations control sphere. The others were watching from the entertainment screen in the rec area. The station might find it curious if the bridge of a ship on a supply stop was fully manned, they might find it curious if a ships bridge was ever fully manned outside of an approach to a new planet. Besides, he didn't want to leave everyone's face on the station communication logs.

He glanced at his Engineer. "Anything out of the ordinary?"

"If you mean, are they curious – the answer is a resounding no. I don't think anyone was even looking up when we had visual. It'll be recorded in their logs of course. But we'll be long gone before someone has a reason to see what we look like."

"Yea I know, and we've never shown up anywhere in a stolen ship before, so we don't know if anything is going wrong," said Ardam.

“Good,” said the Engineer, “I think I prefer not knowing. Keeps me from acting nervous.”

“On the other hand,” added Ardam. “If you were used to showing up in stolen ships you probably wouldn’t be nervous.”

“So, I’m okay because we’re not professional thieves?”

Ardam nodded, “makes as much sense as anything else. How long till they run an umbilical?”

The big man shook his head. “I doubt if they will. Since we’re picking up cargo and not staying long, I venture that they’ll just grab us with an arm and pull us to an extended airlock. If they’ve got the space, they might just pull us inside a hanger. We’re not that big and it makes loading a lot easier.”

“We don’t have anything big to load.”

“Well, they might do it anyway if they’re not busy. This is not exactly a hot spot for travel.”

At that moment an indicator light flipped on with an accompanying beep. “I think we’re about to find out,” said Ardam.

Ardam watched with interest as the three manipulator arms slowly moved them into the interior of one of the station’s many work bays. It was always fascinating to watch the thin snake like arms that were as flexible as anything yet strong enough to wrangle a hundred-kilogram starship with ease. As the edge of the station slowly slid by the forward camera image he turned to his Engineer.

“Tell me again why they actually have to close physical doors around us.”

Jonteel didn't take his eyes off of the various monitors lining the wall before him.

"Because this station is old, small and too cheap to have force field hanger doors."

Ardam responded, "this place isn't that old. I'm sure they had field door tech when it was built."

"Oh, they had it. Used it for a lot of stuff. But people didn't like working with one side of the room open to space and seemingly nothing there. Remember, we're on the direct route of the migration from Earth. Perversely, even though Earth is still where most of the new tech comes from, the tech leading outward from Earth is the oldest."

Ardam agreed, "I know, everything that got built still works, energy is cheap, no reason to go upgrading things. I just don't like the fact that there's a door that has to open if we need to get out in a hurry or if someone wants to keep us here."

"You know better than that. Safety protocols would force the doors open to protect the station. It's an automated response," said Jonteel.

"You and I both know protocols can be turned off if they want to."

"Yea, but it has to be done manually and I don't think they'd risk the station for this hull, not without some serious backup."

"Let's hope," murmured Ardam.

Ardam and Neema met the rest of the crew in the station's large cafeteria. The others stayed behind to load the supplies waiting for them. Stuff picked out by the stout bald, blue eyed man seated across the table.

"Neema, this is my best friend and right-hand man, Trent Evans. He and I have been kicking around since we were kids, and I mean actual kids – not just young."

Trent was quick to put out his hand. Ardham grinned. “He’s also one of the few people around who still believe in handshakes.”

“And why not,” said Trent.

“Fair warning Neema, he also is partial to tall women,” threw in Ardham.

“Well, on behalf of tall women everywhere, it’s nice to meet you,” said Neema.

Of the other three at the table Ardham knew only Cwen Livingston, a short stout engineer with no discernable sexual characteristics and a voice that was soundly androgynous. For his part Ardham knew she was a she, but he solved the problem of pronouns by always using her name.

The other two were new to him. Trent had hired them. Susan Dietrem, a short pretty young woman with blond hair, dark eyes, and an attitude of aloofness. Trent had forewarned him that the new Doctor was a bit of recluse socially. That he didn’t really care about. Even though medicine was mostly about being able to handle the instruments and follow computer directions, he still felt more comfortable with an actually human doctor when exploring unknown planets.

The last member of the crew was a man not yet into his eighth decade in standard years. He was an apprentice engineer needing time under a qualified master to finish his training. In his mind he could hear Jonteel saying that no engineer’s training was ever finished. The new man’s name was Timothy First Johanson and he was new to space work having been a farmer, musician and writer in his previous life. On the Warden he would fill the role of general crew.

Ardham got through the introductions quickly. He didn’t want anyone to have time to think much. The two newcomers knew that what they were doing wasn’t strictly



kosher, but they had the excuse of youth. In the case of Susan, very young youth, she hadn't reached forty yet.

He sent the newcomers to get their gear and arranged for everyone to meet at the ship by 18 hours station time. Fortunately, since the station was one of the oldest and first built on the migration from Earth, they used a 24-hour clock.

### Chapter 3

The entry into the system was without event, as was normally the case. Ardam filled the center back seat and for once the entire bridge was full. Trent Evans was in the center front seat, piloting the ship, although this took little effort during the deceleration from out system. The real work had been done by PronDissy doing the work of navigator from right hand seat. Jonteel was monitoring systems from the left hand. On either side of Ardam in the back was Neema on his left once again and Tim Johanson to his right. Johanson was the only one doing any real observing. This was his first time in the control area during a system approach as a member of the crew, and he was intensely watching the curved console to his right. The rear seats of the bridge were a mirror of the front three with the exception that the backup control stations were in a semicircle behind them. If they had to swing around to use those controls the large screens were also duplicated on the wall behind them. The bridge was one side mirrored to the other. Susan, the doctor, was standing just inside the entrance way. She seldom involved

herself with ships functions but since she, like Mr. Johanson, was new. She felt the need to experience the entry into the system with her shipmates. Cwen was in Engineering as a backup to Cutler.

Ardam spoke up, “Well, anything amiss?”

PronDissy glanced in his direction. “You know. I have to keep an old dictionary around just to look up some of the words you use. I used to think you made some of them up.”

“Nah,” said Trent Evans. “He just likes to make believe that he’s an old soul from another time. Been that way since he was a kid. Always reading books, actual books.”

Neema broke in, “what’s the matter with that. Some of like the feel of paper.”

“Oh good,” said Jonteel, “we’ve got another one.”

Tim Johanson hesitantly said, “I like old books too.”

Jonteel glanced over shoulder to reply but an alert light and tone interrupted. He turned his attention to the console.

Ardam waited patiently. It hadn’t been an emergency tone and the tattle led had been green, just an indicator.

After a few seconds Jonteel spoke quietly. “That is odd.” Then he fell silent while taking a closer look at one of the consoles built in screens. His face, from what Ardam was able to see of it, changed from its normal taciturn expression to a slight frown. That frown deepened until Ardam grew impatient.

“Jon, would you care to elaborate on what it is that’s got you in a bother?”

The figure, slumped over his console, went still for a second, Ardham could guess that the man's narrow did the same.

Jonteel leaned back in his seat. "Bother, in a bother, I'll tell you Captain. This here too unexplored system is radiating a transponder signal."

Now Ardham was bothered. "Transponder, what kind of transponder?"

"Don't know, it's muffled," said Jonteel.

Trent, with a confused expression asked. "What exactly does muffled mean. Is it wearing a mask?"

Jonteel shook his head. "It's like the antenna isn't right somehow. I can get the signal in system, but I doubt if it reaches much farther than that. I don't think the transmitter is weak, it's just not clear like it should be."

"Are you sure it's a transponder, not a natural or a lost exploration bot?"

PronDissy broke in, "it's definitely a transponder, a survey ident and a claim one, both from the Jameston Group I think, but it's an old one."

Ardham, with a wry smile on his face turned to Neema. Her dark face now closed in a don't ask me expression. "You're a member of the Group, anything you might have forgotten to mention."

She shook her head, pursed her lips for a second before responding. It's just what I've told you. Four hundred years ago the Group kept a new world off the books for company use, more specifically for family use, the James family. But the man who told me about it never said anything about a survey mission. Just that long range surveillance showed a planet that might be suitable for settling. I swear, I didn't know that anyone

had ever come here.” She paused for a second and then said quietly. “They never told me that.”

Ardam sensed that they weren’t getting the full story, even now, and worse yet, he didn’t think that she knew the whole story. The little part of his brain that had told him something was not quite kosher got a little bigger and louder. A part of his brain that had served him well when evaluating planets was apparently able to discern when human situations were not what they seemed also. He put a pin in it for further thought.

“Well, this is interesting. I take it that it that you suspect a planet based unit?”

“Yes,” said Jonteel. “And I would say from the fourth planet. The one we came to visit.”

Susan Dietrem broke in. “I don’t understand. Does this mean that someone has beaten us here?”

“No,” said Ardam, “it means that someone was here a while ago, and no, I don’t know what that means for us.”

PronDissy looked up from her display. “A while ago is putting it mildly. The data is a little garbled, but the date is about, two hundred and seventeen years, ago – plus or minus a hundred days or so.”

## Chapter 4

“Okay,” Ardam looked around the ensembled group. “If we’re going to do this, we need to figure out why we’re doing it, what we hope to accomplish, and how we’re going to do it without spending a lot of years on a prison planet.” His eyes came to rest on PronDissy.

She nodded and stood up. “Believe me, you don’t want that.” She paused to let her eyes roam around the rec room, stopping at each one of them. Her gaze lingered for longer on the younger members, especially Dietrem and Johanson. “You may think that fifty or a hundred years on some sub-grade planet is an adventure of some sort, or maybe you’ve decided that you’re tough enough to do the time. Well, from what I’ve seen so far – you’re not. You live in primitive conditions. You work for food and shelter. Nothing is given to you except some basic tools and they aren’t power tools – you supply the muscle. It gets old real fast and even though you know that you’ll live until something happens to you. You learn fast that even with all those years to look forward too, you do

not want to waste them just surviving. Because you're surviving just to get to the other side of your sentence and that is no way to spend decades of life."

She paused for a few seconds. "In case you're wondering why I'm so intense on the matter. Well, you've all wondered about my age and you're curious that I don't mention my past. The reason is none of your business, but the truth is I spent over a hundred years on Drago, a prison world. So, I have better reasons than any of you to say turn around, go back. I'm not, we owe some people we've never met, a debt. We need to know what happened to them, and we need to let others know. Preferably, as Ardam said, without getting into too much trouble ourselves. But we cannot let the fear of what might happen to us influence our decisions." She sat back down before adding, "and in case you're wondering. I said all that about prison planets so you'd make the hard decision, not the soft one you thought it might be."

Ardam let the silence be for a moment and then said, "okay, I think she just took care of the why we're doing it part.

Trent added, "and the accomplish part. We can't answer the stay of trouble part until we go down."

"Agreed," said Ardam. "The question becomes who and in what."

"Suttle one, with a limited crew," said Jonteel.

"Can't we all go?" asked the doctor. "We have the big shuttle."

Ardam shook his head. "No, we're not going to leave the Warden a ghost ship.

"I know that," snapped the Doctor. "I mean we have to leave an engineer and a pilot on board, but the rest of us could go."

Ardam gave her a brief but hard look, “tone Doctor, but you’re right, we could do that. I don’t like the idea of taking the big shuttle, the others are built for the role, heavier hulls and better handling if things are rough. We’ll take shuttle one. As for who goes, that’s simple – me, because I’m in charge, Neema because it’s her mission, and the two youngest members, Susan And Tim.”

He raised a hand to stave off the coming dissent. “The reasons are simple, Susan because we might need a doctor and Tim because we might need some muscle.”

“And,” offered Trent, “the doctor and Tim have the least chance of getting trouble. You and Neema are already screwed if we get caught.”

“I’m going,” said PronDissy. “You might need my wisdom.”

Trent gave a short laugh, “what wisdom?”

“I’ve already been imprisoned once. I can try to keep us from doing anything that’ll offend worse.”

“I don’t know,” said the now laughing harder man, “you’ve proven that you’re not a very good miscreant.”

----- Move to launch scene.

“Who, the hell named that ship? Asked Trent’s voice over the shuttles comm system.

“Someone with either a wry sense of humor or no sense of humor. I don’t know which,” said Ardam.

“I think it makes perfect sense,” said PronDissy.

The five of them were struggling through the shuttles lone entrance, located to the left side of the cabin. It was of adequate size, even for humans much larger than



themselves, but still awkward in placement as necessity demanded that it not interfere with any of the ships many control panels and displays. Their gear had been stored in storage lockers only available from the outside. That something Ardam didn't like about this model. The equipment storage was a first line of defense against attack or crashing but left no avenue for those inside to reach stored items in the case of such an emergency. The small size of the shuttle necessitated such an arraignment, making the immediate survival of the crew a first priority. It made up for this draw back with superior flight characteristics that made being attacked or crashing much less of a threat.

“You would,” he told her. “How are the engines?”

She was seated to Ardam's right in the five-seat cabin of the shuttle 'FIRST'. It was a small ship of the 'FIRST IN' class apply named for her primary job, being the first ship into a new planet's atmosphere. The Warden's three shuttles had been named FIRST, SECOND, and THIRD. Ardam decided that the shuttle names were practical if nothing else, no chance of getting confused.

“Fine, give them a minute to warm up. They probably haven't been used in a long time,” PronDissy responded to his query. And give this thing a chance to air out. It smells in here.”

He nodded but said nothing, PronDissy had an overly sensitive sense of smell for someone planet born. He looked over his shoulder at the two youngest members of the crew and Neema seated behind him. The cockpit was arranged in a two-by-three configuration with the three in the rear seats facing backwards. That way everyone had access to a control panel and view screens. There were of course no windows, something Ardam sorely missed in a craft designed for skies.

“Everyone belted in?” he asked.

After receiving three affirmatives he warned them anyway. “Make sure those harnesses are secure. The internal gravity will switch off right after we hit air, and if your loose when that air gets dense you might find yourself bouncing, and not the kind of bouncing that’s fun.”

“And what kind of bouncing is that boss?” Asked PronDissy.

“Not in front of the kids.”

Susan said, “we’re not exactly children you know.”

Trent’s voice broke in, “coming up on where you wanted to drop. You want to go now or keep up the banter.”

“I don’t banter,” said PronDissy.

Ardam glanced at his console. “I’m ready and the ship says it is. I’m going to exit under power so I can get a feel for the controls.”

“Fine, I’ll make sure I’ve got hold of the stick.”

“The stick, is he making a joke,” asked Susan.

“No,” answered PronDissy, “in the old days you used to fly with a control stick. It would feedback when something happened, like our leaving the hanger bay under power.”

“Technically,” said Ardam, “he was still making a joke. The ships not going to let him feel anything. Even if I jumped out of here under full power I doubt if the control system would even allow vibrations to reach the bridge.”

Trent’s voice came back. “How about you don’t do it and we don’t find out.”

“Fine,” answered Ardam, “but you’re taking the fun out of it.”

“We’re not here to have fun,” Neema said.

“Right,” said Ardam dryly. He still hadn’t figured out her sense of humor. He wasn’t sure she had one.

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He pressed with three fingers of both hands - a difficult sequence to accomplish by accident – unlocking the shuttles safety interlocks. The shuttle gave a slight bump downwards to let him know that it was free of restraints and with a grin he gently maneuvered the small craft away from the Warden. Glancing in his rear-view monitor to check that he was clear he gradually begin to angle into the outer atmosphere of the planet. After a few minutes of carefully lining up the trajectory he toggled the control to let the computer take over the flight. They were about halfway around the planet from their target. He intended to make a leisurely descent and allow the shuttles sensors to make a detailed analysis of Nix’s surface. The sensors on the Warden had shown a picture of a slightly bigger than Earth normal world (All standards were still based on man kinds planet of origin.), complete with blue oceans, large areas of green on the two large continents and a myriad of rivers and islands. Those were not visible now because they were starting their descent to the planet in darkness, flying through the nightside of the planet to arrive shortly after dawn. It would give them maximum daylight for exploration.

“How long till we’re on glide path?” asked PronDissy.

Ardam studied his console for a second. “We dropped about thirty seconds shy of optimum. I think I’ll just let the computer fly us until we get into some heavy air.

Maybe an hour or so before target I'll take over and get some more hands on with the controls."

"Sounds good. You might want to give me a few minutes on them too before we land."

Ardam nodded at her, "not a problem, we are not in a hurry at the moment." He glanced at the back of the three in the rear seats. "Anyone back there want to try this boat out when we get lower. I know two of you have had to have passed emergency certification."

"Not me," said Neema. "It's not part of any training I've ever had."

"I know," said Ardam. "I was referring to the Doctor and our Engineer trainee. They both had to pass a emergency cert test when they got their crew license. How about it guys?"

The doctor shook her head. "They said I would only need to fly if all the pilots were dead and you all look perfectly healthy to me. I'll pass."

"I wouldn't mind giving it a try," said Tim. "I trained on Zbrook for my final crew stuff, no planet around."

"Ah," said PronDissy, "you want to know what flying through the air feels like."

"Yea, something like that."

"Well," said Ardam, "I think that we can accommodate you. Consider it part of you trainee requirements. You can subtract a half an hour. Mind you," he cautioned, "you'll fly that time."

Neema chuckled. "What's he supposed to do, fly in circles. No way it'll take that long after we down low."

“As a matter of fact, he will be flying in circles. After I give him the controls I want to look at the surrounding area, look for a city or base or whatever. So, after I’m sure he’s not going to fly us into the ground he can circle while we get a good look.”

“Oh,” said Neema, “hadn’t thought of that.”

Ardam asked. “Just out of curiosity, what do you expect to find down there?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t think anyone had actually been here. Now that I know they lied to me about that I don’t know what to think.

“You know of course that the person who told you about it may not have had all of the facts.”

“I know that. In fact, I think that’s probably what happened. Where he got the information from didn’t include anything about a previous visit. It could have been a follow up from a different company group – or even just a screw up. Now I’m just curious to find out the truth.”

“You may not like it when you find it. I find that the truth rarely is what you expect it.”

Ardam felt himself pushed a little forward as the small vessel began to slide lower into the atmosphere. He adjusted his fingers on the touchpad that controlled the look ahead view on the center view of the monitor at eye level. The image slid up to give him a better view of the planetary horizon. It was one of his favorite things to look at. The entering into of a new and unexplored world. Unfortunately, he knew that it was a view he would get little chance to experience in the future since his forced change of career.

“Well,” he said, “since the doctor has said she’s not interested in adding pilot to her resume Mr. Johanson, let’s see what you can do. Keep in mind that you’re facing

backwards to the direction we're flying. The monitor will give you the correct view of course but the body is going to complain about the apparent reversal of sensations. I doubt that they bothered to simulate that back on Zbrook. All the directions are still correct for what you're seeing of course it's just uncomfortable at first.

The younger man said, "never thought of that. I don't think I'll have any trouble. I spent a lot of time as the rear man on cargo moving."

Ardam started to object that it wasn't the same thing but kept his mouth shut. They were high enough that there was plenty of time to recover if the man screwed up. He remembered his first flight simulator telling him that you learned by failing. To this day he still thought that was a bad idea in terms of flight instruction. However, it was true enough, in this circumstance. He toggled the controls over to Tim's board. "All yours, but I would let the autopilot keep control until we get lower and into daylight. Flying in darkness is good experience but you need daylight flying time to learn muscle memory. The mind needs visual reference points to learn with."

PronDissy laughed, "which is why you don't ever see blind pilot's."

"Blind," said the doctor, "how could anyone be blind."

Ardam answered. "There used to be blind people Susan. Surely they covered that in Medical school. The ability to grow new organs in a vat isn't that old. My parents told me stories about people without eyesight, even people who couldn't hear.

PronDissy was trying out an old joke, one even older than her."

"I know about blind and deaf people of course. It's just that you don't expect to hear about such things anymore."

Ardam responded first, cutting off PronDissy in the process. “Of course you don’t. We’re only into the second generation of extreme long life and as I said, organ regeneration isn’t that old. As a species we’re still adjusting to the fact that the leading cause of death is now accident. Old age as a disease has become a horror from the past.”

“That,” said PronDissy, “doesn’t mean that we can’t make fun of it. We’re running out of things to make fun of.”

“You think humor is mainly being amused by the discomforts of others?” he asked.

“Of course not, but laughing at ourselves and our difficulties was the birth of humor. It allowed humans to laugh at others through ourselves.”

Ardam frowned. “I’m not even sure that makes sense Pron.”

The craft shuddered, ever so slightly, but enough that Ardam knew that Johanson had taken control from the computer. “Taking the reins Mr. Johanson?”

The younger man, although the age difference wasn’t that great, shrugged his shoulders. “I was going to do what you said and wait for daylight, but you might as well know. Patience is not one of my strong points, at least I don’t think it is.” The last part was quiet, an afterthought.

Neema said dryly. “Maybe he just got tired of the discourse.”

“Oh,” asked Ardam, “you have something against meaningless conversation.”

“I do when something important could be about to happen.”

“That,” said PronDissy, “is a sort of specious argument. Something important could always be about to happen. You can’t moderate your behavior based on it. You would never live a normal moment.”

An alarm tone that Ardam never expected to hear sounded, and the craft shuddered as Johanson's hands on the controls abruptly tried to react before settling down.

Aram checked his instruments as he automatically switched control of the ship back to himself. Frowning he double checked the information scrolling up the monitor to his left. With a sigh he forced himself to relax just a fraction.

"Well, something just happened."

PronDissy, engaged in staring down her own readouts, responded. "Yea, I hate when the universe takes something I said personally. Damm, that looks like a Mark AB7."

"It is, fortunately we're well out range. Either its control system is badly setup or something's wrong with the ground sensors. It may not know where we are."

"What's going on?", asked Neema and the Doctor, the latter more excited than the other.

"Missile," said Ardam. Relax, it can't reach us."

"No," said PronDissy, "it's a lower atmo bird. We can wait it out. The real problem is if it has roomies."

Ardam studied his panel some more before turning to PronDissy. "You didn't get a launch position by any chance?"

"Nah, our sensors are find for planetary stuff, not so good on military stuff. We're still a long way from the beacon site though."

He thought about it, "true, but we're on an approach to the beacon. They might have a missile battery ringed around it.



“What do we do?” asked Neema.

Surprisingly, it was Johanson who answered. “We keep going.”

Ardam glanced over his shoulder. “What makes you say that? Didn’t you used to be a musician or something. What makes you gung-ho?”

The man looked confused. “Musician, writer, farmer and a bunch of other things. I’m not over eager but if they have anything worse to shoot it won’t do a lot of good to try and leave. Besides, we’d just have to go down again, otherwise we risked prison for nothing.”

“You missed the best reason,” said PronDissy. “People don’t set up missile systems for nothing. There’s something down there that someone thought worth protecting.”

“Well let’s hope that was the only protection they had because one of those is a problem if we’re near the ground.” Said Ardam. “Besides,” he glanced at Neema, “we don’t get paid for the rest of the job is we turn back.”

Neema she nodded, although he wasn’t sure that her heart was in it. “That would be correct, and now we have another question to answer.”

“If you mean who left the missile, I’m pretty sure it’s the same people who left the beacon. Although I fail to see the reason to advertise something you don’t want anyone to approach.”

“Maybe the two were setup for different reasons. They may have wanted the beacon to guide someone in,” said Neema.

“Either way, it makes this story more complicated. Whatever is down there now had my curiosity. Pron’s right. Missiles are expensive and frowned on by almost

everyone. You have to have a damm good reason to put an automated shoot first system in place.”

He gave her a hard stare and decided now was not the time to have a long discussion about what she did or didn’t know.

“Pron,” he said, “let’s see if we can find a launch site, maybe more than one. Johanson, I assume you know how to plot a course?”

“You want to jump around a little bit?”

“Maybe not jump, but a more indirect approach might be better.”

“Or” said PronDissy, “it might just lead us over one of those launch sites we’re looking for.”

Ardam laughed. “That’s one way of find them.”

PronDissy gave him a look. “Sometimes I think Trent’s right. There is something wrong with you.”

The Doctor, a curious look on her face, asked, “speaking of Trent. Why haven’t they said anything. Surely they picked up the missile launch.”

“Not necessarily,” said Ardam. They’re moving a lot faster than us. They probably were over the horizon. Not to mention it’s a survey ship, not equipped to look for military hardware. However, we should let them know what’s going on. We might not be the only target.”

With that he tapped two fingers of his left hand to page the Warden.

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High above them, but on the other side of the planet an alert tone sounded. Jonteel Cutler glanced up from the tablet he was reading from. “Already, they haven’t had time to get there yet.”

“Maybe they forgot something?” said Cwen Livingston seated to his right. The stout little being was eating its lunch on the bridge. Cwen hated eating alone. It had done that far too often in two hundred plus years. There were certain prejudices that humanity had yet to leave behind.

“Like what?” asked Jonteel. Not bothering to move he just said, “open comm”. “Cwen says that you forgot something. Tell me that’s not true.”

Ardam’s voice came back. “Sort of, we forgot our antimissile shield.”

Jonteel sat up straighter in his seat. Beside him he heard Cwen do the same. “Excuse me. It sounded like you said Missile.”

“A AB7 to be exact. Fortunately, it fired way too soon to be a threat. Thought I would check in. See if anyone else was getting shot at, you know, just to be friendly.

Jonteel thumbed a control on his panel to get Trent’s attention. He turned to Cwen. “He’s probably asleep. Why don’t you go get him, so I don’t have to set off an alarm siren his room?”

Ardam’s voice came again. “Wake his ass up. We’ve got hostiles around as they used to say.”

Cwen had already left the bridge. The crew had discovered too late that the former owners of the ship had not been a polite bunch. The intercom in the shared bunk room was not loud, probably in deference to sleeping crew members. That left the only

way to get a sleeping crew members attention from the bridge was to use a loud warning klaxon. It was a rude way to wake someone.

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She woke Trent by shaking his shoulder. He snapped awake instantly, saw her face, glanced at his watch and asked wearily, “they can’t possibly be in trouble already.”

She shook her head, “I wouldn’t bet on that. Someone fired a missile at them.”

“Somebody did what. Who the hell shoots at landing shuttles?” The events finally registered and he got quickly to his feet. “Anything on sensors?”

“No, but Jonteel said to wake you.”

“And he was too polite to set off an alarm, dammit.” He gave a look of disgust as he slipped on his ship sandals. “Cwen, the next time he needs me on the bridge just use off the damm siren. I’m going to reprogram that quiet intercom out of the comm system.”

She laughed. “That’s a good idea. And believe me. I would have.”

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Ardam sighed. “Well, for what it’s worth, the ship is now actively searching for signs of further hostilities. But I wouldn’t hold my breath. Unless a threat looks like a natural occurrence to the Warden’s finely tuned sensors, she isn’t going to see anything.”

Neema said dryly, “you mean a missile launcher isn’t considered natural?”

“Not unless the planet evolved as a military base. Enough with the small talk, Johanson, if we head straight for the beacon, here long?”

The trainee had his answer ready. “I figure twenty-seven minutes if you want to keep an eye out for, what was it, hostiles.”

“Hostiles, okay,” he replied. Tell you what. I’ll do that and you bring us in nice and slow. The ship will handle the landing once we get there.”

He turned his attention to PronDissy. “You watch the right. I’ll take the left and remember to look ahead and back.”

She snorted. “You’d think this is the first time I ever did this.”

“You’ve been shot at before?” asked Neema.

“Certainly. I thought I mentioned my troubled past.”

Ardam laughed, “you did. She’s a farmer. I’m not entirely sure she believed you. If I didn’t know better. I might have trouble believing you myself.”

“Food Engineer, not farmer. They’re two different things.”

“Sorry,” he glanced at Neema. “My mistake.”

Johanson, his voice eager but lined with doubt, asked. “What do I do if someone does shoot?”

“Just jerk us off course and I’ll take over from there. Mind you, if we’re close to the ground don’t jerk in that direction.”

“Got that,” asked PronDissy. “No hitting the ground.”

“Got it. I’m try my best,” answered the man.

“I’m switching to yoke controls.”

Ardam glanced over his shoulder in time to see a half-wheeled flight yoke slid from under Johanson’s console. “Good man, it’s easier to dodge with one of those.”

The Doctor shook her head. “I knew there was a reason I didn’t volunteer. We never had one of those in flight school.”

PronDissy said, “flight school. What the hell did they teach you with?”\

“Console controls, and the instructor said if we ever needed to do more than trust the autopilot then to get to sickbay because we were going to have customers.”

Ardam looked over at the shocked look on PronDissy’s face. “Sounds like a practical instructor to me.”

“Yea,” snorted PronDissy, “a practical idiot. Bet he never rode with his students.?”

“Oh, we never actually were in a ship. It was a weeklong two hour a day class my final semester. The school didn’t have access to a ship – at least that’s what they said.”

“I know you’ve never said,” said Ardam. “But where is it you come from?”

“There’s a reason I never mention it.” The girl took a deep breath, let it out slowly, and continued. “I come from Lester – and I’m proud of it.”

“Whoa,” said PronDissy. “No reason to take a tone. We’re all from somewhere and where that is cannot be helped. Besides, I’ve been on a prison world, an unlike you, it wasn’t because I was born there.”

“I know. It’s a reflex action. I’m sorry.”

“I hate to disturb you ladies, but we were shot at. Is everybody keeping an eye out?” asked Ardam.

“I am,” snapped PronDissy. “Sorry, just don’t like people apologizing for something that doesn’t need apologizing for.”

“I hate to interrupt,” said Johanson, “but I think we’re coming up on a good landing spot. It’s a couple hours walk but it looks like the only flat spot for kilometers.

Ardam checked his own displays, fanning the range out to a larger circle, to get an idea of the terrain. He had been so intent on watching for an attack of some kind that he

neglected to look for a good landing area. Johanson was right, the beacon was situated on high ground, a large diameter hill with a very high peak. Getting to it would take some uphill hiking. Not something he looked forward to.”

“Any sign of a road or even a path up that hill?”

“Nothing that I can see. The Beacon itself appears to be a small tri dish assembly, three ten-meter dishes I’d say, about 30 meters in the air.”

Ardam gave the green hair man a grin. “That’s a lot more than I paid attention to. Too busy looking outward. You see any up that hill Pron?”

“Like you, I wasn’t really paying attention.”

Johanson interrupted again. “If we’re going to land we need to start now.”

Ardam checked his display again, picked the clear spot ahead, and thumbed the secure auto landing sequence into operation. “Okay, starting landing - now. “He turned to the others, “I hope everyone has been getting their exercise. That hill looks like a bitch.”

PronDissy frowned. She wasn’t fond of physical activity, at least of this kind. “How about I stay and guard the ship. Whoever fired that missile may still be here.”

Ardam laughed. “Yea, and they’re just waiting here to steal the first ship that comes along. That missile, the beacon and all the information we have on this world is old. You just don’t want to climb that hill.”

She stuck her tongue out at him.

He laughed again, “well that’s the kind of response I expected from our most senior crew member.”

She stuck her tongue out again.

Ardam turned his attention from her as the ships automated landing system sounded a warning alert. Giving notice in Galactic Standard that landing was about to take place. Out of reflex he checked his seat harness and those of his companions to ensure that everyone was securely in place – both Neema and the Doctor were not.

“Neema, doc tighten up your harnesses.”

Neema obeyed at once, she had the normal civilian space goers automatic response to authority. The doctor, inexperienced and a nominal member of that authority asked, “why?”

Ardam gave a grimace towards PronDissy that she returned, newbies. “To keep you from breaking you neck and since you’re our only doctor we need you to fix broken necks.”

“But,” she protested, “I’ve never heard of a normal landing causing an injury.”

“What makes you think this going to be a normal landing. This is an unknown planet. We don’t know what to expect and I’m not talking about century old missiles. The ground could be unstable, our landing could start a fire or cause an explosion. Any number of things could happen and if one did our friendly voiced baby sitter is going to kick us out of here on emergency boost. And believe me, if that happens you’ll reconsider the meaning of a normal landing.”

“Oh,” said the girl as she hastily tightened her harness.

Everyone was silent as the ship’s forward motion came to a gentle stop. On his screens Ardam had a good view of the ground below. It was a small grassy spot in the middle of a small meadow surrounded by dense forest. The ground cover was a good



half meter thick and appeared to be unmarked by signs of fauna. Something that struck Ardam as odd.

Slowly the craft lowered itself vertically until the landing gear touch and took up slack. It was barely noticeable if you were not expecting it. The ships computer removed any doubt by announcing the completion of the landing.

Ardam slowly unbuckled and slid out of his seat. Despite a rigorous exercise routine, he was still stiff after an extended period in an acceleration chair. While the others were busy unharnessing themselves and stretching out their own kinks he studied the various sensor displays of the outside world.

Nothing seemed to far out of the ordinary, at least for an alien planet. Atmospheric gases were close to enough to standard normal that they shouldn't have to worry, they could breathe it. Temperature was a little on the short side. What would be considered a crisp fall day on most worlds. Gravity was a little below standard, but that was a good thing, considering the hill they had to climb.

He turned to the others. "Everything looks just like Neema's data said it would. Everything is close enough to standard norms that we really shouldn't notice any major differences from our home worlds. Most of us have experienced worse."

"Pron, anything out there that shouldn't be?"

She answered without looking up from her console displays. "You mean like tanks? Nah, the only thing sensors register is planets, grass and insects."

He asked on a hunch. "How about animals?"

Silence for a second and then she answered, "no a traces of animals. Not mammals at least. There appear to be a lot of reptiles."

“That’s what I thought. The meadow we landed in, usually from above you can see traces of animal movement, paths and bedding areas. Didn’t see any of that as we came down.”

“What does that mean?” asked Neema.

Ardam thought for a second. “Maybe nothing. This just might be an area where there aren’t a lot of animals. There could be a number of reasons for that. We’ll try to figure it out once we get out there.”

PronDissy, with a curious grin on here face to said to the ones in the back seats. “Or, it could mean that there’s something big that eats all the normal sized animals, like people.”

The three in the back, looked surprised for a moment before realizing that she was kidding, probably. With sheepish looks they gathered themselves together to exit.

“Olay,” said Ardam, “we probably don’t need to carry a whole lot. Just what we need to check out this beacon. That means scanners, pocket comps and class B survival gear.” He raised his hand to stave off objections. “I know, the idea of lugging a class B kit up that hill or mountain, whatever you want to call it, doesn’t sound appealing to me either. But we can’t say for sure that we’ll get there and back in one day, and while a class A Pack is okay for an overnight, it’s not okay on an unknown world. We’ll lug the gear just in case. Rule one on new planets. You won’t regret what you did bring. However, if you didn’t bring it and it turns out you need it you will regret that.”

PronDissy snorted as they descended the ships landing ladder. “What training manual did you get that out of?”

“I don’t know. I think it fits under the oldie but goodie category.”

She nodded, “true, that doesn’t make it any less a good idea.”

The planet smelled a little odd, somehow both cleaner dirtier than the normal fresh smell of a new world. At the bottom of the ladder Ardam paused for a second, letting his senses take in everything. This was something he thought was perhaps gone forever from his life. After the screwup on Paxider3, a planet that Ardam had approved, had cost the lives of most of the colonist he never expected to step foot on a new planet again. Granted, some of the thrill was changed by the fact that obviously someone had stepped here before. For Ardam, it was close enough.

Ardam and PronDissy checked around the little seed shaped shuttle while the others retrieved the needed gear from the external storage lockers. Both of them were armed with service pistols. Projectile weapons still basically modeled on an old Earth design, semi-automatic and magazine fed. The shuttles landing area was a small flattened circle caused by the downward force of the engine baffles. There was little burning or scorching from the gravity field landing gear.

The others were busy strapping on the needed equipment. Johanson, used to working outdoors with equipment was done first. Ardam noted that he had donned a firearm of his own along with a long-barreled railgun. It would not have been Ardam’s choice for the heavily forested and steep path ahead but it would do.

“Johanson, you want to keep watch while Pron and I gear up?”

“Sure boss,” with that the lanky man with green hair cradled the railgun with both arms and stepped well away from the front of the shuttle. Ardam noted it with approval, somewhere their trainee had received at least some basic training. His musing was interrupted by PronDissy’s voice.

“Whoa there girls, you forgot you guns.”

Neema looked at the doctor and they both shrugged. Neema said, “I don’t know about the doc, but I don’t carry a weapon.”

Ardam broke in, a little of his command voice showing. “Don’t know the reason for that and I don’t care. This planet is an unknown and that means we don’t know anything about it. It means we don’t know what’s dangerous. It means that since we have to depend on each other to stay alive you carry weapons, three of them, a sidearm, a long weapon, and at least one knife. That rule is inviolate. Either abide with it or pay us and we get back on the shuttle. As for the doctor, no hypocritic oath stuff. I know that you weapons training, hopefully better than you flight lessons. The same rule applies, three weapons. If you neglected, through a misunderstanding of the rules, to bring your own weapons. I brought extras.”

Neema looked at the doctor again, shrugged and said, “Fine, but I’m warning you. I’ll be the most dangerous thing you’ll run into.”

The doctor just said, “I don’t have a problem with weapons, but look at me. How much stuff do you think I can carry?”

Ardam scrunched his eyes and gave the doctor’s short frame a once over. “Okay Susan, I see your point. Not to worry, I brought along a couple of small guns with you in mind.” He handed over a sidearm that looked like the younger brother of the one he wore and a small laser carbine, it was an effective weapon despite it’s short length and light weight. “The laser is a long range keep it on the target weapon, a short burst won’t do much good. The gun is a small caliber but it will hurt, and the thing is noisy as hell. It’ll frighten most things away. As far as a knife I’m afraid you’re stuck with standard service issue.”

The doctor pulled up her left pants leg to reveal such a knife. “Got it covered. This doesn’t weight me down.”

“Then we’re good to go,” said Ardam. Raising his left hand to his right ear he keyed the mic. “Warden, can you hear me.”

After a few seconds wait a voice came back. “We hear you,” said Trent’s voice. Ardam had set the relay from the ship to relay all comm traffic to all their earpieces so everyone heard both ends of the conversation.

“Okay, we hear you too. So far, we’ve seen nothing, done nothing. How do we stand daylight wise?”

“Okay, from up her you’re about 25, maybe 30 percent into the daylight sphere. Like I said before, rotation wise I’d say a normal day trips in at about 26 standard hours. So, you’ve got plenty of time if you want to start climbing today.”

“Got it, thanks,” replied Ardam, keying off the comm unit as he did so.

He took a good look in the direction of the beacon. The hill didn’t even have the good manners to start off easy. The incline started about two kilometers away and then rose sharply. It was not a super steep climb, maybe around 20 to 25 degrees, but that just made the distance to the top a long and tiring prospect. The base of the hill stretched out on both sides as far as the naked eye could see. He knew from the view higher up that it was actually just one hill, an oblong one, and not that big in relationship to the mountains in the distance behind it. But looking at it from ground level was tiring by itself. He didn’t relish the climb after the excitement of the missile attack.”

“Pron, how about this? We march over to the bottom and setup a base camp. That way everyone gets acquainted with the air and smells and we climb first light.”

She looked at the hill with her hand shielding her eyes. “You know, we could just fly the shuttle over there and use it as a base camp.”

Neema and Johanson, both having spent a lot of nights outdoors in their pasts, disagreed.

Neema said, “I’d rather, like he said, get a chance to get the scent of this place in my brain. Besides, the shuttle is awfully cramped.”

Johanson, “Same here.”

Ardam said, “Same here too, but that wasn’t the main reason I like doing it this way. Tim, you picked a good spot. With the shuttle out here we can see if anything happens to it.”

“Like what?” asked PronDissy.

“Like some control computer decides it liked firing that missile and decides it has a better chance to kill the shuttle while it’s standing still. I’d rather not be in it if that happened.”

She snorted, “and what are the chances of that. If the planet had another missile to throw at us it would have done so by now.”

Johanson, rummaging through the lone exterior storage bin still open asked. “Does that mean extra food, water, or whatever?”

“It wouldn’t hurt to bring couple of extra meal packs, one for dinner and one for breakfast. That’ll leave us the standard six meals apiece to get there and back.”

PronDissy threw in, “better add another 3 each. In case we need to spend anytime there.”

Ardam nodded, “make it an even dozen, a couple of extra meals never hurts.”

“How about a field radio?” asked Johanson.

Ardam considered it. A field radio didn’t take up much space and could communicate directly with the Warden without relaying through the shuttle. Of course, he already had one in his pack. “Good thinking Tim, you carry it.”

Tim Johanson, not realizing that he was being gently teased headed into the knee length grass – heading for the hill in the distance.

## Chapter 5

Ardam shrugged and followed Johanson into the grass. Behind him he felt the others start out. A quick glance gave him their marching order, Neema, the doctor and PronDissy. It was a good order he thought, Johanson in front, Neema and the doctor in the middle and Pron bringing up the rear. The air was silent and still, the other inhabitants less so. The various noises of insects and birds made a constant background curtain. The insects were pretty much everywhere, although he wouldn't deem them intrusive. The birds were mainly of the medium variety, nothing large enough to say predator, but that's what they were, constantly dropping down to silence a member of the insect chorus. He still saw no sign of animal life, although a short distance into the field he got the impression of many small reptiles moving through the grass. It wasn't something he was conscience of, like a difference in sound, but more like the voice of experience making observations from off stage. This world was teeming with life, just



apparently minus animals, at least ones large enough to carve out changes in the environment.

It was Johanson who actually stumbled on the first reptile. He was bitten by it.

“Ouch,” yelped Johanson as he jumped backwards, lost his balance and fell into Ardham who raised a quick hand to prevent the man from falling.

“Problem?” asked Ardham.

“Something bit me – or tried too.” Johanson, having regained his balance was stooped, peering into the grass looking for his assailant.

Ardham raised a hand to stop the doctor who was attempting to get to Johanson.

“Whoa doctor. What do you mean tried to bite you?”

“There it is, a snake, not a very big one.” The man moved forward slowly, his hands reaching towards the ground.

“Stop,” said Ardham, his voice slightly raised in volume. “Let’s not give it a second chance just yet.” He moved to the side and closer to get a look. As snakes went it wasn’t a very impressive one in size. It was about a meter in length, dark brown in color and the cross section of a small human forearm. It had the general appearance of snakes he had known on many worlds. It would seem that form followed function in the case of reptiles that moved without the benefit of limbs. It didn’t look dangerous but Ardham knew not to be fooled by that. Snakes of any size could be dangerous, although, that often wasn’t the case. In most cases they avoided humans - unless stepped on of course.

“You said it attempted to bite you. What does that mean?”

Johanson's fingers smoothed the material of his jump suit where it extended over the top of his midcalf boot. "It didn't break the material. Pinched like hell, it gave it a good try."

"So, it didn't break the skin?" asked the doctor, a medical device of some type already in her right hand.

"No, it just startled me."

"Sorry doctor, although I admire your readiness. Johanson, take a picture and find a way around it."

Neema asked, "take a picture. Is that really necessary? This isn't a survey mission."

"As far as I'm concerned it is and we'll treat it as such. Surprise is the fastest way to dead, and the more we learn about this world the less the chance of surprise." Ardam gave her a look that said he was serious. She offered no response.

Now that they knew they were there the group spotted more of the slithering residents of the field. It became evident that they were no threat to humans when they moved out of the way quickly. Evidently the one Johanson had stepped on wasn't as observant as his fellows.

The reptile did accomplish one thing, slow their pace. It increased the time to reach the base of the hills by an hour over Ardam's initial estimate. It was well past midday when the ground began to curve upwards at an ever-increasing angle. Ardam called a halt at a level area just before the first of the very thick and very tall trees.

“Let’s stop here. This is as good a spot as any to make camp, the grounds level and the grass isn’t too tall. We can mash it down pretty easy and form a circle for the tents.”

Neema looked around and the grassy area and compared it to the clear of undergrowth forest ahead. “Why not just us the clear ground?”

It was PronDissy who answered. “Because keeping track of things on the ground is one thing without having to worry about who might drop in.”

Ardam looked around, “I don’t think we have to worry about anything large bothering us on the ground. I still haven’t seen any signs of animal life, large, small or in the middle. A single drop cloth as a base for our tents should be protection from crawlies in the ground. As far as anything else, we’ll put a protector ring around the ground sheet. That should stop the merely curious.”

Johanson nodded and begin pulling gear from his backpack without being told. As a trainee he was the official ships gopher handling all things that no one else wanted to do, and that was alright with him. It gave him a chance to learn and experience things. Plus, he liked to feel useful.

Ardam noticed the trainee starting to setup the camp and grinned his approval. It made sense anyway, as low man on the totem pole Johanson had been carrying the ground sheet, protection ring and five individual tent/sleep bags. Ardam was carrying a backup set as always, it was something he did just to be safe, and its not like the ultra-low weight gear was really a burden. He always felt better when he knew that he had a backup. Besides, there was always the chance that the team could have to separate into two groups in which case having a second set of camping gear could be helpful.

“Good work Tim,” he said. “I see that you’ve got the eagers.”

“Eagers,” said Neema, a question on her face.

“That’s what you call it when someone starts something without being asked or told,” said PronDissy. “It’s a survey thing.”

“You were in the service,” the girl asked.

“She was,” said Ardam, “although she won’t admit it. I looked it up.”

“You don’t have the rank to pull up somebodies record like that.”

He laughed, “no, but Trent knows people who do.”

“Figures,” said PronDissy. “That man knows way too many people and gets them to do way too many things they shouldn’t.”

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The subject of PronDissy’s comment was at the moment in a dispute with Jonteel Cutler.

Jonteel said, “the answer is still no Trent. There is no reason to send the other shuttle down to look for the missile site. We don’t have the manpower and I’m not going risk a second shuttle.”

Trent, intent on heading down to surface after in depth sensor scans had turned up nothing, was standing his ground. “Look, that still leaves the cargo shuttle as a backup. I’m volunteering to go and it’s really just a one-man mission anyway. If that launcher has missiles left, it’s better for me to find out going down rather than them coming back up.”

“I’ll grant you that. They’ll be in boost phase when they launch and a missile attack then would be a whole lot harder to dodge. But look at it this way. If that launcher

has missiles left, it wouldn't make sense to get the other heavy shuttle banged up. I don't want to have to come after the whole lot of you in the cargo bus, it's slow, lightly hulled and flies like a rock."

Trent thought about continuing the argument but decided against it. He really didn't disagree with the engineer. Frustration at having no discernable course of action had always been a problem for him.

"Fine, you're probably right, but as soon as we're back into the daylight band I'm going to keep looking. We could go to a lower orbit, that might help."

The third member of their bridge group chimed in, "I like that idea, lower orbit, let's do it."

Jonteel starred at her, "not you too. With the gear we've aboard this boat it wouldn't make a difference."

"I don't care about that," said Cwen. But it might make us harder to find on a sensor scan from whatever ship just sent a recognize code to that beacon."

Jonteel's eyes narrowed. "What ship, and you might have led with that."

"Don't know what ship. I don't even know for sure that it is a ship. Something sent something from out-system that caused a response from the beacon."

Trent slid into the control seat to Jonteel's left. "Sounds like a ship to me. Did the ship get a recording on the transmission?"

Jonteel, his hands busy on the console, spoke almost as quick as his fingers were moving. "It was just a burst transmission, and no, we didn't get a good copy of it, our antennae are all facing down."

Trent, busy at his own portion of the console, turned his attention to the other two, mainly Cwen. “Stop.”

“What?”

“You were about to go active on the sensors, don’t.”

Cwen, her hand hovering over a particular spot, opened her mouth to say something else. She closed her mouth and moved her hand back. “Got it, don’t advertise. We’re not supposed to be here.”

Jonteel nodded agreement but added, “neither should anyone else. It would be strange if Survey choose this particular time to examine this system, and how would they know the beacon response code.”

“They wouldn’t,” said Trent, “there’s something going on here that we don’t know about. We need to warn Ardam.”

Jonteel leaned back in his chair, thought about it. “You’re right, but let’s make it narrow and just ask for a blip to tell us they heard. No point in letting whoever it is know we’re here.”

“They probably already know,” said Cwen.

“Maybe,” responded Trent, “but I think Jonteel’s right. Thinking we’re here and knowing for sure are two different things. Of course, it could be a coincidence.”

Jonteel gave him an amused look. “You’re the gambling man among us. Would you bet on that?”

“Hell no,” responded Trent and Cwen.

Trent went on, “but if they are looking for us it’s a good idea to find out what for before they actually find us. Easier to duck if they don’t know where you are.”

“Agreed. You get ready for a tight beam call down. We’ll be in position in about 40 minutes. Cwen and I’ll see if we can spot our new friend on passive scanners.”

“Right, I’ll send a compressed burst and ask for a single beat in response. Ardham and I have done that a couple of times over the years.”

“For no good reason I expect,” said Cwen. “Jon, you start looking at the passive and I’ll see if I can plot a direction for you from what little info we did get from their burst to the beacon.”

“I don’t hold out much hope. We don’t know how far out they are,” said Jonteel.

Trent froze for a second, his hands stopping in mid motion on the console. “I just had a bad thought.”

Jonteel look in his direction. “You mean like they were already in-system, waiting for us?”

“And we just slid right by them, not even looking,” added Cwen.

Trent nodded. “Makes sense, we had no reason to look. But let’s think about it. First there’s the beacon, on a world that supposedly no one but a remote drone has every seen. Then all of a sudden, we have company – and by that – I mean company, from a company. I think that Neema and her group are being setup for something.”

“You don’t think she’s involved?” asked Jonteel.

“Wouldn’t make sense. If she were involved the only people being setup would be one of us. I know that we all have some things in our past that aren’t exactly story book material, but I don’t think anyone would go to this much trouble and expense to get even. And believe me, this operation isn’t cheap, and since that beacon’s been there awhile, this operation isn’t recent either, or at least the reason for it isn’t.

Jonteel, returning to work on his board said, “yea, that makes sense. Whatever this is, it either started a long time ago or someone is just using the circumstances to make some kind of play.”

Cwen sighed, “And we get caught in the crossfire.” It wasn’t the first time that it/they had been in this position.

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The five had slipped into their snug one man sleeping tubes soon after finishing an evening meal of concentrates. The tubes were a combination of sleeping bag and tent. Designed to keep out the weather they also provided enough space when the head liner was expanded for pre-sleep activities such as reading and eating. In a pinch activities for two could be engaged in although not without a little crimping of style.

Ardam had just slipped into sleep when the insistent beeping of his comm unit woke him. He could hear the same annoying tone coming from the other sleeping tubes. Whatever the shuttle was alerting him for was obviously addressed to everyone.

He was the first to connect and get the message. Quickly he slid out of the tube to in time to greet the others as they also emerged. The look on their faces told him that they had received the same message.

“What the hell did that mean?” asked the doctor.

Since they had all heard the same message Ardam didn’t bother to repeat it. He confined himself to practical. “It means what it said. There’s another player involved, and if Trent’s right, they’ve been here all along.”



“And what he said about it being about me?” asked Neema. “Do you think that’s true.” From the tone of her voice Ardham could tell that the thought unnerved her, at least to the extent she could be unnerved.

“Can’t say for sure but he’s right about the fact that it wouldn’t make sense that somebody went to this kind of effort for any of the rest of us. As sad as it is to say, none of us are that important. The question is – what makes you that important?”

The girl sat back against her sleeping tube, a look of uncertainty on her face. Finally, her features relaxed as she came to a decision. “There’s one small thing I may have failed to mention, not because I was trying to hide it. Because it honestly never occurred to me that it made a difference one way or another. I still don’t see why it would matter.”

Ardham spoke for all of them. “Well, how about you let us decide on that.”

“Okay, and I don’t like doing this because family business is supposed to stay just that, the business of the family. But the fact is that I’m a Cassaway by blood, no my mother’s side. I got the information about this planet from a cousin, Donathan Claypool.”

There was silence.



## Chapter 6

“A Cassaway,” said PronDissy, “that makes you part of the Jameston Group.”

“Only by blood,” said Neema, her voice a little loud. “I was raised by my father’s family for the most part. My mother’s people tolerated me. That was about it.”

Ardam, trying to put all of the pieces together from his short history with the girl, asked what he thought was the most important question to be raised. “Tell me. Tell us. Was anything you told me true or is there some back story here that we don’t know? Some game that’s being played and we’re just some pawns littering the board.”

The red-haired head moved slowly from side to side. “What I told you was and is the truth. My farther really wants to start a colony. H wants to do it soon, not whenever somebody in some planetary government and some group of companies, decide that he can. Then there’s the survey service. They make the real decisions, and they’re not above using those decisions for personal gain.”

Ardam interrupted her, “now hold on. I was part of Survey for sixty years. It’s an honest group.”

“You never saw things that made you wince?”

“Sometimes, but it was mostly governments that made the raw deals. People don’t go into Survey for personal gain – at least not usually. There are bad apples in any group that wields power, but the bad apples are few and far apart.”

PronDissy cut in, “now to say that survey doesn’t have problems. There is a lot of mediocrity, you have that in any large group.

Neema shook her head again, but this time with vigor, and she wasn’t agreeing, at least not completely. “Bull. I know that people don’t really do things for money anymore. Not the way they used too in the past, long life has made that wealth less important. There’s always time to get rich if you want to. People do things for other reasons. You guys accepted this mission, not because you want or need money, but because you want to do your job, or at least a job. That’s what my father wants. To do something that makes a difference to others. He wants a new colony. A place where some new things can be tried without someone looking over their shoulder and judging.”

Ardam nodded. He could understand that. As it stood now getting a new colony approved was difficult. It took a lot of resources and the number of available planets was not great. The unwritten rule about leaving some worlds fallow was over enthusiastically enforced by some. The thing about long-life is that it made everything less immediate. Another thing it did was cause a change in the way populations grew.

“Okay, but why the rush. Your fathers not that old. He has centuries to plan and get ready.”

“I don’t know,” she said. “All I know is that he’s decided that now is the time to do this and he’s a great believer in acting on what he feels when he feels it. I sometimes think he’s stuck in the past, trying to get in all the living he can before the end.”

Susan, being a doctor, said. “That’s silly, the only end that any of us face is death by mis-adventure as they used to call accidents. We don’t really have wars anymore.”

“My dad thinks that just because you have all the time in the world is not a reason to waste any of it.” She paused for a second, a sheepish look on her face. “Besides, I think part of him is jumping at this chance just to get back at the Cassaway’s and the entire Jameston group. He feels that they didn’t treat him with respect. That’s probably true. My grandmother Trala is a real bitch.”

“I have a stupid question,” said Johanson. He looked reluctant to ask it.

Ardam prodded, “Go ahead Tim.”

“It’s just that it doesn’t make sense. I mean, why would anyone care about this planet? There are a lot of reserved worlds.”

“True,” said PronDissy. “But this isn’t a reserved world, or a fallow one. It’s off the books. It doesn’t exist. A colony here could go for centuries before anyone knew it was here.”

“And the longer no one discovers it,” said Ardam, “the more chance that it’ll be just left alone, subject to no one’s jurisdiction.”

“That’s what appeals to my father,” said Neema.

Susan, a perplexed look on her face asked, “Why would it matter how long you a colonies been here. Chances are the people who find them will have been alive when the colony was founded. They’ll still think it’s a crime.”

Ardam laughed. "Pron, you see what I mean about the younger generation."

Susan snapped, "I thought because of long life that we were all part of the same generation?"

"We are. It's a matter of how you look at things. If I find a colony that's more than a couple hundred years old," he shrugged his shoulder. "I'm going to figure it doesn't matter. I come from the time when people still died of natural causes. We tend to forgive things after time has passed."

"I guess I do to," she said. "I just never thought about it before."

Neema cut in, "that's kind of what my dad is counting on. I think."

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Jonteel felt himself growing irritated. Knowing that there was another ship somewhere close meant that the Warden was in danger. You can't defend yourself against something you can't find. He wasn't that attached to the Warden personally, but he looked favorably upon any ship that was currently protecting his backside. Besides, the Warden was their ride home, wherever that was.

He glanced around the control room. Cwen and Trent were both involved in finding the unknown vessel. Frustrated he asked, "I don't suppose anyone has found a clue."

Cwen shook its head. "I can't see a thing. If it's out there its running dark, no sensors, debris shields or internal leakage." She paused for a second. "Of course, that may say more about the poor quality of our sensors than anything else."

Trent's voice was hard when he broke in. "Or it could mean we're idiots. I've got her. She's coming from in-system. We've been looking in the wrong direction."

Jonteel asked, “how far away?”

“Twenty million clicks, give or take. She’s slowing down now. They must have boosted hard from a short orbit. I’d give an ETA of about 4 hours.”

Cwen shook his head in disgust, “You may be right. About us being idiots I mean. We should have figured out where they were from the position of the planet. The beacon had to be in sight for them to send to it.”

Trent shook his head. “It was half and half, the beacon was right on the edge of radio visibility from both directions. What makes us idiots is the fact that we assumed they were coming from out-system.”

“So, they didn’t follow us. They were waiting,” said Jonteel.

“Looks like,” said Trent. “They must have had a drone waiting for us to leave hyper, sent a message to tell them before our own sensors recovered enough to detect it.”

“Maybe,” said Cwen, “it’s not like the Warden is the quietest ship I’ve ever been in.”

“Either way,” said Jonteel, “we assume that they know we’re here. If they don’t, they will when they get here. What say we get an idea of exactly what we’re facing.”

Trent nodded, “going to active scanners. About 6 minutes for an accurate reading. Evade protocol?”

Jonteel nodded. “Yea, Cwen as soon as he has a full reading change our course and go dark,”

It nodded. “Fine, but this ship isn’t going to be real quiet even with things turned off. Do you really want to turn off the debris field. A loose rock could ruin our day as easily as a missile.”

“Only if it hit the right spot. Missiles are less demanding of a good collision spot. We’ll only keep the debris field and sensor off long enough to make sure they don’t throw something at us.”

“Trent, do it.” Jonteel slumped back into his chair. As the old saying went, ‘the cat would be out of the bag soon’, or something like that.

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Ardam was naturally an early riser and it was fast approaching the time he would be up. He felt there would be little benefit for them to try and eek out any more rest this night. They were all a little too tightly wound up and weary at the same time, weary of subject – not body. They discussed the disclosure of Neema’s past and its implications for them most of the night.

Finally, it had been decided that until further information was forthcoming there was little to be gained by additional discussion.

Ardam had summed it up. “As we see it – speaking for the group if no one minds – we’re probably part of some inner family or company drama. We won’t know which until we get more info. It’s almost time to get going. I suggest we eat, break camp, and look for that beacon. Any objections?”

PronDissy laughed, “he’s just being polite. He doesn’t really care if anyone objects.”

Johanson, already starting to dismantle his tent, asked, “what about the shuttle?”



“What about it?” responded Ardam.

“Well, its sitting there, in the middle of a clearing. Wont it be visible to sensors?”

“Hell,” said PronDissy. “It’ll be visible to anyone with a good telescopic camera.”

“That may not matter,” said Ardam. “Chances are no one’s going to the trouble of spending that much effort to examine the surface. An AI might do it provided the conditions are right and they decide to make the effort.” He paused. “But they won’t look for us that way. They’ll look for leaks from the boat’s systems. Hell, they might just send an id query. The shuttle would just answer.”

“True,” said PronDissy, “We can make it harder. Turn off the ship remotely. I mean they know we’re down here, but they don’t know where.”

Ardam thought about it for a second. “I don’t know if I like that. To keep it from responding to an auto ID request we’ll need to shut it down entirely. With the damage from that landing we may not be able to power it up again.”

“At least not remotely,” said PronDissy. “Chances are we’d have to restart it in person.”

“I don’t think that matters much. If we need to restart the thing it means that we need to try and fly out of her. That means we’ll be at the boat anyway.”

The doctor asked, “what about talking to the Warden?”

“I’ve got an emergency sat-comm unit. It probably wouldn’t matter for a while though. I’m sure the first thing Jonteel is going to do is try and hide from the newcomers, at least until he gets and idea of who they are and what they want.”

“That means he’s going to go dark. I doubt if he’s going to give away his position with idle chatter,” said PronDissy.

“How can they hide?” asked Neema.

“Simple,” said Ardam. “You get into a low orbit and stay on the daylight side of the planet. It’s not that easy to find a ship against the background noise of a planet and reflected solar radiation. Unless it’s a military ship,” he added.

Ardam paused to think for a second and quickly reached a decision. “I’m going to shutdown the ship. It’s not doing us any good from here and I see no point in leaving a sign post as to our position. The warden knows where we are, which is what’s important. If something happens to them I don’t think we’ll be looking to advertise to whoever’s out there.

“In the meantime,” he continued. “Let’s see if we can find that beacon. That’s our only way for now of maybe finding out what the hell is going on.”

It took them only half an hour to eat, pack up the camp and get under way. The terrain became steeper, and the number of trees increased steadily. Soon they were forced to walk single file in most places and the slope of the hill made for slow progress. Although in good shape this was a kind of exercise that they were unaccustomed too. In most cases in their lives changes in elevation were accomplished by mechanical means, or at worst by simple flights of stairs or gentle ramps, like the one in the Warden. The continued uphill climb soon became a factor in the speed of their progress. Ardam found himself revising his estimate of how long it would take to reach the summit.

Raising a hand to call for a pause he said. “At this rate we’re not going to get to the top until midafternoon, and then we’ll still need to find the beacon.”

Neema asked, “can’t we just follow the signal beam?”

“Maybe. I checked before we left camp and the only thing sensors pickup is general background noise from the signal. The beam is going outwards, the only thing we can pick up is whatever is reflected by the atmosphere. At the frequencies the beacons using that means very little gets reflected. It’ll help when we get close, but by the we should be able to see the damm thing.”

With that Ardam broke the rest stop by starting again up the hill. Now that the sun was getting closer to being overhead the shadows that had made seeing the ground a challenge were rapidly disappearing. The trees were taller and wider, reaching impressive heights and girths. Ardam found himself comparing them to other worlds he had visited and was favorably impressed. If nothing else, a colony starting here would not be pressed by shortages of building materials. Even with advanced technology one of the crucial needs of a fledgling colony after food and water was shelter. You had to build structures and that meant some kind of local source for construction materials. On some worlds that material consisted of dirt, making compressed blocks out of the ground itself. Other places, worlds like this one, trees were in abundance and man’s love affair with wood continued. A few worlds were barren of tall plants and wore soil that wasn’t particularly suited for making blocks. On these worlds man resorted to using his homes of his first type – caves. Truth be told even on well provided for planets man sometimes elected to go with the ease of living below the surface. Most places, like the planet he grew up on, utilized a combination of living spaces and construction materials. However, when first starting on a new world, materials at hand were very important and Nix seemed to be well equipped to start as a new home for man. Of course, he reasoned,

they had seen little of the planet so far. His skills as a planet surveyor told him that even with the so far acceptable weather and surplus of building material that there were still questions in his mind about the use of the planet as a home world. The disaster on Paxider 3 had made him more cautious than most in his profession. Then again he told himself, perhaps he was now gun shy.

## Chapter 7

Jonteel, usually a patient man, found himself chewing the inside of his upper lip, a habit he thought well lost in the past. But, without anything to do for the moment while waiting for the active sensor sweep, he spent the time studying his two companions.

Trent was a little odd for his tastes. The thought of going bald intentionally at a time when science had solved that particular malady offended his nature. The I'm an engineer – I can design and or fix anything, everything in its place – mentality that his ordered mind demanded couldn't reconcile the idea of letting a repairable system fail. The man was also a bit of a free spirt, liable to be involved in pursuits of things that most would find outside the norm. The man liked his fun. He was Jonteel admitted, a fair engineer and one of the best pilots he had ever met. Besides that, he was Ardam's best and oldest friend.

Cwen was a different kind of odd. She was something that the human race had long outgrown but no longer looked on as different. He wasn't sure what body parts

Cwen came with or if they were original. Cwen preferred the pronouns it and they for reference to itself. Still, as in Trent's case, she was a reliable well-trained engineer and pilot. She also pulled double duty as a companion in virtually any type of endeavor except one. He had never known her to engage in any type of sexual liaison. That in itself was not odd. A lot of people were still somewhat private about affairs of the heart or skin even in the age of very long lifespans. Cwen, however, seemed to take no interest in such goings-on at all. He didn't think that it even occurred to it.

It was Trent who broke his internal musings. "Oh crap."

"I gather from your response that I'm not going to like what you're about to tell me."

"Me either," chipped in Cwen.

Trent shook his head. "Well, I thought it was probably a company ship of course. A survey ship wouldn't have bothered with this cat and mouse stuff. They'd have just sailed up and asked our business."

Jonteel prodded him, "okay, you've told us who it isn't. Who is it?"

"A company ship for sure, but it's a damn big one. I'd say heavy cruiser of some type. Looks like a Fermon hull, one of the extended jobs, and in case your wondering I read several weapon ports and emitters."

"You're sure it's not survey?" asked Jonteel.

"Not unless they're using a false 'who am I' responder, and a ship that big doesn't need to lie about who it is."

Jonteel nodded, "any sign of those weapons being active?"

“No, I don’t even read any active sensors except for normal nav stuff. She’s just moving into orbit. If our active sensor sweep surprised them, they’re not showing it.”

Cwen sighed. “I’m sure that’s exactly what they want to get across. They know we’re here and they have nothing to say, at least for now.