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. Ardam 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 Ardam.

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

Of the other three at the table Ardam knew only Cwen Livingston, a short stout engineer with no discernable sexual characteristics and a voice that was soundly androgynous. For his part Ardam 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.

Ardam 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.