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, Ardam 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 Ardam 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.”

Ardam, 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 came 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.”