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 are 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 five him a 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 to 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 involatile. 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.