**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 klicks, 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. The 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 disaster on Paxider 3 had made him more cautious then most in his profession. Then again he told himself, perhaps he was now gun shy.