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. Ardam 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 should 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, Ardam 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. Ardam 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 to 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. Ardam 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 thay could do anyway. The only chance they had of stopping us from stealing this boat was before we got on board. Now theycan 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 them 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.