Chapter 1

She broke the silence. “I’ve never understood the need to put actual view ports on a station. You can just as well with a monitor.”

“Yeah”, he said absently, his attention on the details of the ship outside the floor to ceiling view port. He glanced over at his companion. She stood over him by a couple of inches, and her dark skin, muscular build and bright red hair clearly drew attention when contrasted with his dark hair and slender frame. Clearly, they stood out as a pair, not something he wanted.

Turning his back to the portal he scanned up and down the service corridor. It was empty. “Back when this station was built people were still excited about living and working in space. They liked views like this. Things have changed in a thousand years.”

“I’m aware of that. I’m older than you remember, and I still don’t understand it.”

“Of course,” he said. “When this station was built women didn’t want people to know they were old. That’s changed too.”

Her head turned down to give him a small frown, but any words she had planned to accompany it stayed unsaid. Instead she asked, “will she get the job done?”

He gave the ship highlighted by the station’s outer lights one more quick go over. The Warden was simple in design. A cone shaped engine section attached to the ships egg shaped hull by 50 meters of open metal girder with an enclosed passageway in the center connecting the two sections. “She should. I would have like something newer, but beggars and thieves can’t be picky. Well, they can, but what good would it do.”

She nodded in agreement. “Something newer might cause more of an uproar when we borrow her.”

He shook his head. “People get attached to expensive things. They really don’t care about the age factor. The man who owns that boat is going to be pissed.”

He paused for a moment to consider than went on. “But with any luck he’ll get it back in good shape and maybe some improvements made.”

“You plan on doing some upgrades for the mission?”

“No time for that now, but if we live through it we might put a little work into it as a token of our appreciation.”

“You intend to pay rent for a stolen ship?”

He nodded. “I said if it’s possible. Possible means me and my crew get paid and there’s no danger of getting caught.”

Glancing at his watch he started down the corridor to his right, careful of the light station gravity. “Come on, it’s about time to get this show started.”

------ Second pass

Ardam hated crew umbilicals. It wasn’t that he was claustrophobic because he wasn’t. It was more that they resembled the far end of a digestive track instead of a tunnel meant for human passage. Still, in a standalone space station they were the easiest way for egress to a ship. Humans had long ago gotten over the urge to hardpoint every airlock when an elastic tube could do the job without tricky maneuvering. It made the effort to board a ship a little harder for humans but far easier than maintaining a fixed attachment. Besides, when a ship was no longer experiencing high traffic it freed up resources.

He turned to the tall muscular woman beside him. “You ready?”

She nodded, “I never learned to like these things.”

That surprised him. “Well, that’s something we have in common. But this is the easiest way aboard if we don’t want to call attention to ourselves – and we don’t.”

She smiled, her light brown skin, white teeth and red hair presenting a somewhat comical appearance. Still her petite features and high cheek bones softened the effect and Ardam had to admit he liked the result. “I know. It just seems silly for a grown adult to crawl through a tube that reminds me of a children’s toy.”

He smiled himself. “You don’t want to know what it reminds me of.” With that he checked to pressure readings to make sure that the tube and room were equalized. 1

Beyond stretched the three-meter diameter of the docking tube. It looked like the inside of a snake with support rings every 5 meters. It was translucent and lit by the stations external lights, no internal illumination was needed. A loose plastic rope was tied to one 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 again, “and here I thought you just wanted to admire my backside.”

“Yea, well maybe,” he said. “But a retracted tube doesn’t catch anyone’s attention. If we just leaving it floating out there traffic control will notice.”