Chapter 21

Being without gravity for so long took it’s toll on me. The marine drop shuttle had the artificial grav plates but I couldn’t spare the power. After each jump I had to do an EVA to check and sometimes service the drives too. Most components were not accessible from the interior. My biggest issue was the inertia compensators started failing. They were old and generally you just replaced the whole unit. I had only brought three spare units with me. They were relatively cheap but where was I going to find a parts dealer out here? Eve said I should just rebuild them which I tried but couldn’t. My problems had stemmed from the extra cargo container mass and volume had stressed them beyond specs. I had been so diligent with the FTL micro jump drive but failed to foresee this issue. It was a stressful three weeks getting to my destination. Just before the last jump I cut free the mostly empty cargo container. My shuttle would look silly carrying the thing to the station and it had nothing I needed.

The shuttle emerged on the last micro jump and I was tense. I should be 250,000 km from the station. I waited nervously as the plot updated. Before it could update completely I was hailed by a system patrol craft. I immediately sent a friendly IFF and my shuttles credentials. I waited and the plot was updating. Twenty-six ships between me and the station. Two were red on my screens as they had a long-range weapons lock on my shuttle and were closing.

I got a response on my comm. The station flight control was asking for a weapons lock down on the shuttle. Weapons? I had two heavy anti-infantry lasers in recessed laser turrets, micro missiles for missile defense and one forward heavy ‘splash’ plasma gun. I checked my shuttle computer and partitioned off the weapons control from the rest of the systems and turned over the controls for the weapons to the station’s flight control. It was mostly symbolic in nature. If I took control back or blocked them then I could be fired upon though.   
  
Coasting toward the station Eve updated me from the co-pilots chair. Thirty frigate sized system patrol craft in a one million kilometer envelope from the station. There were also two cruisers. These were the transponders that noted them as part of the station. She also found twenty seven Union transponders, all corporate transports of varying size. Thankfully no Union navy ships. My shuttle was a generic assault shuttle and I had been careful in removing all markers that could tie it to the Union. There were four hundred and seventeen other star ships with active IFFs. So it was a moderately busy station. Eve then added there were sixty eight closed docking bays on the 400 km long station, all of them big enough to hold up to a cruiser. So maybe a little bit more than moderately busy.

My transponder listed my shuttle as salvage with simple documentation and my name was listed as Devon Wellspring. I was tense as my computer communicated with the station and then I was given a green light to dock at Shuttle Bay L-67 with a flight path. Eve said the bay was near the station’s commerce deck after checking. I had listed my cargo as precious metals for sale so that was probably why. Eve was downloading and processing the station laws and rules. After a minute she said a station bursar would meet me. They would take the goods into custody after first scanning them. Then I could either place them for sale at a fixed price or auction them. The station would take 5% either way. Running the numbers Eve said I would get a better return if I did it as a 24 hour auction.   
  
The problem with the multitude of space nations was currency. Everyone had their own and their own exchange rates. At least with precious metals you got a fair exchange. According to Eve the market was hot right now too. She said before the war the Union of Humanity exchange rate was 8 Union credits to 1 Silverstream Station credit. It was fluctuating daily.

Approaching the station I was impressed with its size and scope. Eve’s readings had it at 409 km long, 84 km in height and 92 km in width. That also didn’t include the missing aft section of the station. Apparently a good portion of the engines had been lost to an explosion and that was why the Sylvan had abandoned it according to the histories I was able to find.  
  
We docked into our bay and the doors closed. The bay could hold six shuttles my size but I was the only one. I opened the back cargo ramp after securing the shuttle and found a Sylvan woman with six human guards behind her. She had a soft green hue to her skin, silvery white hair and light blue eyes. She introduced herself as the station intermediary for cargo transactions. We started with idle talk and she seemed in no hurry and the guards seemed content to wait as well. Her name was Sha’lua and seemed nice enough. She seemed pretty enough but the alien elf thing didn’t do it for me. She assumed I had a larger ship somewhere close as my shuttle was short range and I didn’t dissuade her from thinking that.

Eventually she came on board the shuttle with two guards and a massive scanning device on a hover sled. I had 32 crates of metals with me. She scanned each one and had me confirm her scans before calling for a stevedore to take the crate away. She did seem a bit surprised at the wealth I was hauling around by her facial expressions. I got a data pad from her and a physical receipt for the crates and their contents. I owed 100 credits a day for the shuttle bay and Sha’lua didn’t hesitate to run a line of credit for me up to 5 million. She did say my synthbot should remain on the shuttle.

Eve supplied the reason why she had to remain behind. Her processing AI exceeded the stations allowances. Well that sucked and put a crimp on my plans for safely operating within the station. I was given a handheld computer for station access that was keyed to my biometrics, another 300 credits charged to my account. Sha’lua and her party left me with Eve.

Eve had taken the data pad with the receipts and was already working on posting the metals for auction. After four minutes she said I could expect between 60 and 66 million credits of local currency from the sale of everything. That was great and should be enough for a ship. I still had a crate of the alien jewelry and artifacts to sell as well. I was anxious to get onto the station but decided to do some research now that I was here.

The war was progressing on the news feeds. The Union controlled only 30% of their original systems. Estimates had them lasting a year or surrendering soon. Most likely the corporations would control the negotiations so they could keep their power. My debt wouldn’t be erased in that event so I should plan to find a way to pay it off. Checking and I found there was a bank here that would facilitate that and the exchange rates were extremely favorable right now. I checked on my home planet and it still fell within the Unions influence. I turned to focus on my current needs.

The station had over 3 million inhabitants! Six races lived here with humans being 90%, Sylvan being 8% and 2% being races I was not familiar with. Drusi, Mourau, Wren and Tirani. The station did have shipyards for repair and construction and lots of ships for sale besides. There were six separate docking rings not attached to the station. Curious I looked in the directory for ships that were for sale. There were 186 starships from 800,000 credits to 12 billion credits. This was promising but a lot of the ships were being sold for scrap.

In addition there were 17 starships being auctioned. I interfaced my terminal with the station network on the shuttle so I could refine my search better. I needed a ship with a good cargo hold, something I could manage with Eve and a small crew…no more than 10 crew. It had to be fast in FTL and also normal space. It also had to be repairable…no exotic starships for me. Price…ideally between 40 and 50 million.

Filtering I had four options for sale and one option on the auction. Two of the sale options were Freetown Traders. They were built by the Freetown company that operated across various star faring nations. The ships were the same model but one was 34 years old and the other was 47 years old. The ships had good FTL drives and decent in system speed. They were a bit pricy at 50 million and 52 million according to Eve’s research. That was probably why they hadn’t sold. The third ship was bulk marine transport from the Gander Kingdom. I wasn’t familiar with them but the specs did match my needs. The fourth was my ideal ship. A six year old Darwin class merchant vessel. It was smaller than the Freetown traders but moderately faster. Unfortunately it was out of my price range at 77 million.

The ship that was being auctioned was a Europa Ambassador Class Passenger Liner. It was old, 188 years old, and supposedly built in Sol system where Earth was located. The specs were good, it had the fastest FTL of the ships I was interested in. Even with its advanced age. What attracted me to it was its shape, it looked sleek. The vessel was 252 meters in length, 40 meters in height and 70 meters in width. It listed six cargo holds and six shuttle bays. Checking the holds…two were two larger holds, 15m x 8m x 50m and used for trade goods. The other four cargo holds were 8m x 4m x 16m and used for passenger luggage. The six shuttle bays, 3 port dorsal and 3 starboard dorsal, were slightly oversized. Back when this ship was built shuttles were probably bulkier. I checked and the auction was in two days and had a walkthrough before it began. I registered for the auction and the complete walkthrough which was a six hour tour of the vessel.

If the passenger liner fell through I would look closer at other ships. The only negative for the passenger liner was I would need a larger crew…probably upwards of 15 to 20 people…or a lot of bots.

I had two days to start working on other things on the station. I downloaded the maps to my PerCom and packed up some alien jewelry and left the ship. I felt naked as I walked since no sidearms were allowed on station. I made my way to the station’s bazaar.