

Chapter One

The ISS

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Synopsis

Though still called the International Space Station, it is primarily American now, as most other space agencies rent space on the newest space station, Emperor Ho. The Argonauts are here to get final briefing orders delivered by courier and

Josh pulled himself down the ladder rungs to the second deck, where the airlock waited. Just beyond that door, he knew, yawned the International Space Station, America's greatest achievement of diplomacy and international scientific discovery. A shiver went down his spine as he thought about being on such a massive part of history for the very first time.

Checking the signal light, he saw the green of a good seal

looked at the readout. It read one BAR or one atmosphere of pressure on the other side of the hatch.

Josh cracked it open and saw the far hatch open as well. A moment later a sandy-haired man pulled himself through easily. Grabbing the support rail, he oriented himself into an upright position, floating just inside the lock.

"Hey there!" he said cheerfully. "Welcome to the International Space Station, the rusty gateway to the stars! I'm Barry, by the way."

He stuck out his hand.

Josh clasped it firmly in a handshake.

"Corporal Boone. It's nice to meet you." He replied. "The others are finishing their last checklists on Discovery and then we'll be able to turn this bird over."

"Great. I know everyone has been looking forward to getting back down to Earth." Barry said with a smile. "Of course, a lot of us wish we were going with you too."

"Yeah, I suspect before long everyone's going to wish we had more people on the ship too." Josh said seriously. "Ten years with just six people are going to get...tedious."

"I can imagine." Boone replied. "But we just couldn't build the ship any bigger, yet."

"Right, not without revealing our hand." Josh replied. "I'm amazed that magician's trick worked so well."

"It's a lot easier to do when no one is really looking for

you to try something so crazy." Barry laughed. "The biggest ones they wanted to take over were the Jupiter and Uranus refueling depot missions. Those were still a while from completion when they got shut down."

"Yeah, and the tech shipped to China or Mars." Josh commiserated. "But this is going to show the whole world what we can do." Josh replied firmly.

"But enough of that. I want to see the ISS! Are there still old experiments bouncing around this place? I heard that a while back somebody's rats escaped containment and have been roaming the station, turning ever more wraith-like in the low grav." Josh said with a conspiratorial grin.

Barry chuckled. "No, can't say that I've ever seen anything like that around here. The last crew down pretty much cleaned this place out. Didn't want to leave anything to the Chinese, I guess." Barry said a little more seriously. "If it wasn't for the fact you guys can't take the shuttle with you, I'd have said just shoot for the Argos direct, but the last of the space apes need a way to get down."

"And why we had to take the shuttle instead of another launch vehicle." Josh nodded, shrugging. "Needed a re-entry vehicle and the commercial ones are all Chinese-controlled these days."

"Right." Barry said seriously.

"Are there many left up here?" Josh asked curiously.

"Just about a dozen of us." Barry said. "That's why you're on the last load, so the bay could be filled with extra chairs."

Josh nodded, he'd seen that.

"How are you guys feeling about going down in the Discovery?" he asked.

"Well, Bill's flown a couple of missions on her, and he helped command that last New Shepard Mission before China shut them down a few years back. He was on old Mr. M's New Horizon launch program that got Argos into space."

"Again, before China bought them." Josh sighed. "Seems to be a recurring theme, doesn't it?"

Barry shrugged. "China wants complete domination of space. They seem to think that if they have the monopoly on Earth, they get to dictate the terms. This will prove them wrong."

"We can only hope." Josh agreed.

"What are you boys talking about?" Teresa asked, floating down through the hatchway behind him with a leash in her hand going behind her to what Josh suspected would be her bags. He wasn't disappointed for, after she cleared the hatch, she dragged what appeared to be five large crates with her.

"Shouldn't you get your gear?" she asked, arching her brow at him.

"Yes ma'am." He said. He nodded to Barry and then headed for the cargo hatch himself.

It only took him a few minutes to get his four footlockers and out from the hold where he'd carefully stored them in the huge shipping crate that was bolted to the floor. Someone else's stuff would occupy it for the trip home.

His lockers were easily lashed tightly together, and he brought them to the hatchway where the others had been gathered and were idly chatting with Barry. Seeing him arrive from the cargo container, Barry flashed a smile and said, "Follow me."

The others filed in front of him as they eagerly crowded forward to see the famed International Space Station. Ahead of him Doc was the last in line as he headed through the shuttle Discovery's hatch.

Josh turned around once more, staring at the last pieces of Earth he'd ever likely set foot on.

The ship is made over Earth, you stupid jarhead, he scolded himself.

Somehow, he knew that wasn't the same thing though. The shuttle would be the last different Earth thing he'd ever see, besides the space station. The shuttle would at least go back to the ground and be hung back up in the museum, it would see the sky and hear the familiar sounds of birds in the lawn, the rumble of millions of feet walking her decks once more and hear the echo of quiet, hushed voices through her passageways. Sounds he wondered if he'd ever hear again.

His mind flashed back to the time his father had taken them to the museum, back in the days when America still seemed grand and in charge.

It had been a quiet day at the Smithsonian, the snow outside making most people stay indoors except for those that needed to go somewhere. Their hotel had been just a few blocks away and they'd put on snow boots and coats and made their way there.

Most of his sisters were less interested in the machines and more in the clothes that some of the dummies wore to show period costume, hiding their hands and giggling at private jokes. His brother had only been interested in the virtual reality ride simulating fighter plane combat than anything else, but he'd gone aside.

Past the quiet halls with the odd person strolling about, past the displays of the Civil Right movement and the procession of famous men, to the display on the Apollo mission, complete with an old TV playing and replaying footage from ABC that day. He'd seemed to be the only one there when a cough sounded right behind him.

Spinning, he saw his father with an odd smile on his face.

"Pretty impressive, isn't it, son?" the old man asked, gesturing at the model rocket with its long nose pointed towards the ceiling.

"Yeah dad, it is." Josh replied.

They stood in silence for a while, staring at the old tank.

"What'cha thinking about, son?" His father asked at last.

"What it would be like to drive it." Josh replied.

"Well, perhaps one day you'll find out." His father replied.

They'd left the museum a little later, but Josh never forgot how cool and powerful the rocket had looked, and how much he'd wanted to fly in her.

Looks like I got my chance after all, Dad. I just wish you'd been here to see it.

With a quick shake he put the thought away and hurried to catch up with the others.

"Welcome to the Space Station." Barry said once more when Josh had caught up with them, they'd been just inside the airlock hatchway.

"Sorry it's all a bit cramped up here, but it was a product of the times, back when she was on the cutting edge of space exploration. We've had over fifty countries participate in various outreach and friendly space programs. At present, every space-oriented country on Earth has been through this station."

Josh saw heads nodding. He tuned it out, he was already familiar with the history of the International Space Station,

though "International" was mostly honorific now. Ever since the Chinese built their Emperor Ho station in orbit, they'd used every trick in the book to draw other countries away from the ISS. Promising cheaper rates, or a spot on Mars for research, though America had been permanently banned from both.

Josh found his fists clenched, the sting of China's seemingly insurmountable victory in space harsh and ugly in his mind.

Historians pointed out that China had been diligent and industrious throughout its entire space program while America had lagged, the fine facilities and sharp scientific minds stagnating or decaying behind stifling layers of bureaucracy until the shine and luster of NASA had completely faded. No one viewed them as important or worthwhile. Their launch into orbit of satellites and things lost their place in the news. Instead of headlines they were pushed to four minutes at the end of the nightly broadcasts.

Of course, news of their departure wouldn't be released for several days, but Josh was certain that when it did, NASA and all they'd sacrificed for this mission would catch fire in the American public once again. They just had to pull it off.

He pulled his attention back just in time to hear Barry pointing to the small floating sleeping bags anchored to the rusty walls where station personnel used to sleep. At the attachment points and through the station there spread dozens of

brownish stains painfully familiar to anyone who worked with tools or metals in the open.

"What's with all the rust?" he asked in surprise. "I thought this environment was sealed against that sort of thing."

"Well, this is a closed atmosphere." Doc responded before anyone else could. "There has to be a certain percentage of water molecules in the air to let us breath comfortably without drying us out to a husk. The same thing is not so good for metal though, I'd imagine all the rust is on the inside while on the outside the hull looks much the same as when she launched."

Josh suppressed a flash of irritation at himself: he should have known that.

"Not quite." Barry corrected. "Though I wish that were the case, believe me. But this old girl has passed through her share of dust clouds and small clouds of debris that have pitted her surface. We've done what we could, but she'll never look the same as when she was brand new. That's just the sad truth: nothing can stop aging."

"Ah." Josh nodded. That was why he was a jarhead, his specialty lay in other fields.

"What will happen to her when we've gone?" Ryder spoke up suddenly.

Barry looked sad. "Without more funding, she'll be left up here. As far as I know, once we're back on terra firma, that's it; no one is scheduled to come back up here."

Jim looked sad. "Oh, I doubt that will happen, especially now." Doc said cheerfully. "She'll likely be preserved as HMS Bounty and your Enterprise and the other stepping stones taken on the path to the stars."

"That's...rather poetic doc." Raven said, giving a small, rare smile.

Flying Raven-Silver was their exo-biologist, exo-astrologist...pretty much anything dealing with what was out there itself, she would be their go-to gal. In her late twenties, part of the Snoqualmie tribe, and a certified genius, Josh knew how lucky they were to have her along, enough that he suspected the government had waived their policy of no familial attachments for this mission, though he couldn't be certain. He'd thought he'd heard that she had a family in an older article, but that was some time ago and he hadn't heard anything about it since.

They passed through more of the modules, listening to Barry as he gave them a running tour of the experiments that used to be run, more of the crew quarters, and parts of the station that were constructed in other countries. Josh found it all fascinating and he wished the tour didn't have to end so soon, but they were back to the docking module once more. Opposite the short tunnel to the Discovery was the second tunnel, ending in another airlock. Just past the window, he knew, was the short, ugly orbital craft that would take them to the Argos.

"Well folks, are you ready to see your ship?" Barry asked

with a smile.

"Yes, please." Jim replied, a hint of eagerness in his voice matched by the eager looks in the others. Josh was certain his face showed it to.

"Well, follow me to the tug, and then we'll head on over there...." Barry said, floating towards the airlock door.

They followed him one at a time, Josh feeling a rising excitement that grew hard to contain. He was ready to start.

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