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Apogee of the Altered Moon

Altered Moon Series: Book Three

Written by

AZ Kelvin

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Light of the Altered Moon

“Gather up people, gather up close...
Come sit for the tale, 'tis after noon...
I'll tell the story of a light in the cosmos...
The brightest light that has ever shone...
It has twinkled off the temples of Octonus...
It has seen the Lost Ones returned home...
It has shone over the Xanxoux deltas...
It has even brightened the Imperial throne...
It has glinted among the Glimmerocks...
It has played amidst the clustered Qune...
What is that which shines so bright...
'tis the brilliant light of the *Altered Moon!*”

Boss Keltzer- smuggler poet

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Chapter One

Captain CJ Evermore sat in his chair at the command station on board the abnormally subdued bridge of the merchant starship, the *Altered Moon*. He absentmindedly rapped the fingertips of his right hand on the arm of the captain's chair while he rested his chin on his left fist. One more time he looked through the data on the planet, Hersch, which they were currently orbiting. He sighed, checked his chrono, and went back to drumming the armrest.

GABI, his operations officer, projected her 'holographic self' at the operations station behind him and to his right. GABI was an acronym for Generated Artificial Biological Interface, but that was just a forgotten label from a time before CJ freed her from her cybernetic restraints and she became a member of the crew. GABI could project holograms whenever, and of whatever she chose, to both the delight and consternation of her fellow crewmates. She had chosen a female persona for herself just after her creator, Nelson Moon, brought her online. The physical part of GABI was much like an apple of pure energy set in a containment matrix anchored to a hover drone, but in reality, she was much more. GABI was the only sentient being in the galaxy who could compute the complex calculations necessary for the instantaneous travel through quantum space without the aid of a jump computer.

Another member of the crew, Warren Caltrop, the ship's tactical officer, manned the tactical station straight off to CJ's right. Cal lost an eye in battle along with most of the scalp and an ear from the left side of his head. The scalp grew back, but the ear did not. A cybernetic implant replaced the

eye that could emit a bright strobe light. The effect had proven handy during more than one altercation. The shiny silver eye was a perfect complement to the golden hoop inserted into the nubbin that used to be his ear. Cal used the cuff of his sleeve to rub away a smudge on his monitor screen and then dug at something under his fingernail.

Star Pilot Gina Riley was exactly where she should be: at the helm, which sat directly ahead of the command station. Gina, whose 'Irish' contempt for anything that irritated her usually overflowed and ran straight out of her mouth, had been quiet since she took her station more than two hours ago. She looked periodically over to the empty science station where her superior officer, friend, and lover, Boss Keltzer should have been.

Boss had recently undergone a surgical procedure to replace his spine and central nervous system with crystalline implants designed by an alien race called the Keect'na. The procedure had been dangerous to begin with and had a discouragingly low survival rate to boot. Gina spun around in her chair, glanced at the science station again, and then at CJ. She almost said something, but instead set her lips firmly and returned to her duties.

A few minutes later, the entry hatch slid open and Boss Keltzer hobbled onto the bridge with Chief Medical Officer Zhu Katsu right behind him. With the help of two walking canes, Boss walked stiffly to the portside of the bridge and toward his position at the science station.

"Good morning, all," he said when he came in and was greeted in return.

"Finally, can we get started now, sir?" Gina chided him for being late.

“Hey, get off me,” Boss fired back. “I’m breaking in a new *everything*, you know.”

“Sorry, sorry, that came out rude.” She gave him a sheepish half smile.

“Ya think?” Cal said from the tactical station and grinned at her when she shot him a ‘piss-off’ look over her shoulder.

“I’m allowed a few extra minutes,” Boss said, matter-of-factly.

“It’s been an extra two hours, six minutes, and thirty-two seconds, sir,” GABI said, just as matter-of-factly.

“I had to help Pene clean up breakfast.”

“I’ll bet you did,” CJ teased him. He knew the big man’s affinity for mealtimes. “How’s he doing, Doc?”

“More than he should,” Cat answered in a disapproving tone.

“I’m just going to sit here and watch the screens, I promise. What is this, anyway, pick on the injured day?”

“Just want you to feel at home, Boss,” CJ told him with a wink.

“I know you guys were wandering around aimlessly while I was recovering. You all were lost without my guidance.”

“Exploring the Keect’na homeworld and the surrounding star system was not aimless,” GABI said. “Watching ancient Earth videos of three men who routinely slap and poke each other, on the other hand...”

“Watch it now! That’s sacred territory,” Boss said in mock dismay.

“Yeah, that’s right!” Cal said. “Leave The Boys alone. I don’t know how a comedy so old is still so entertainin’, but that shit’s too funny.”

“You know, there’s a museum on Earth dedicated just to them,” Boss said innocently.

“No!” both CJ and Gina said loud and clear.

“I am never going back to Earth with you, Bernard Keltzer,” Gina said, “not after the last time.”

“Why? What happened the last time?” Cal had to ask.

A short silence ensued while CJ, who’d heard the story before, tried not to laugh, and Boss made himself busy with the sensor screen at his station.

“Well?” Cal asked impatiently.

“He tried to make off with this guy’s hotdog cart,” Gina said and laughed out loud, triggering CJ’s outburst of laughter.

“I didn’t make off with it. I had to grab it. It was rolling away.” Boss winked.

“Uphill?” Gina laughed herself to tears.

They all shared in the laughter at Boss’ expense.

“Okay, it was a moment of weakness,” Boss said.

“That poor guy didn’t know what to do,” Gina said through occasional bursts of laughter. “I hear this guy yell and turn around...and...there’s Bernie running down the sidewalk with this guy’s cart.”

“What did the guy do?” Cal asked.

“The cart had brakes as it turns out,” Boss said, “which the guy locked up by remote.”

“Bernie crashes into the cart and then down to the ground he goes,” Gina said. “By the time I get there, here’s this little guy kicking Bernie as he’s getting up, which is like a mad bee attacking a bear. Ha ha ha, it was hilarious!”

“What did you guys do?” Cal asked.

“We ran away,” Boss said simply from under raised eyebrows, looking somewhat embarrassed. “That was just

before Zhu joined the crew. What was that...about eight years ago?"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, those were the days," Gina answered, with a hint of nostalgia in her voice.

"And now, my dear," Boss said cheerfully in a loud voice, "we have new friends, good friends, who are going to bring their old friend up to speed on—just—what's—happening!" He emphasized the last few words as he settled into his chair. Boss had just spent twenty-two months cooped up with his old pal Nelson Moon and the Keect'na medical technicians while recovering from his surgery and the subsequent complications. He looked at his friends and crewmates with a grin that indicated he was ready for anything interesting.

"Well, my old friend, as you know we are in the Jaquinn Star System." CJ leaned forward in the captain's chair. "In the last few weeks since we've seen you, we've managed to track down some leads on where Pene's parents may have made their last drop before they disappeared."

"That's pretty fast work," Boss replied.

"We had some help from Skriti Station, actually," CJ said.

"Skriti?" Boss was surprised by the news.

"Yes, Leland Stile and Bobby Bluay joined forces and bought the station from the Blood Stars. It's still a hive of black market activity, especially with those two running the place, but the Blood Stars are gone."

"Really? That's an unexpected turn of events."

"Pfff," Cal scoffed, "you can say that again, Boss. Who'd ever expect Leland Stile would end up a station manager?"

"So, how did he help us out?" Boss asked.

“He got us the route that Pene’s parents worked on their last run,” CJ explained. “From other information, we know that the goods were destined for the next drop after this one, Hersch, but they never made it.”

“So, most likely, this was their last stop,” Boss said.

“One way or another,” Cal added.

“Let’s be optimistic, for Pene’s sake,” Cat said.

“Just sayin’ there’s a chance this story may not have a happy endin’, is all,” Cal said back. “There aren’t many reasons that would make a mother leave her kid behind. I mean, bein’ smugglers and all, her folks could be—”

Cat narrowed her eyes at Cal.

“—alive and well.”

Boss smiled at the two and then turned to CJ. “How’s the new crewman, ah, *crewwoman*, doing? How do you say her name?”

“Iye. Think of the word ‘eye’ and the letter ‘A,’ Eye-A,” GABI answered.

“Iye’s doing fine. She’s quite a capable jump pilot,” CJ said. “She’s been with us for six months now since we hired her away from Outlook Station.”

“Never met anyone from Sanselis before,” Cal said. “It’s like she appears outta thin air. That girl could sneak up on a wildcat.”

“Really, that quiet?” Boss seemed intrigued. “What about—the other thing?”

“It’s kinda weird, but she controls it well.” CJ turned away and cleared his throat.

“Kinda weird? Kinda creepy you mean,” Gina grumbled. “How can someone influence someone else’s emotions anyway? It’s creepy.”

“She’s not creepy,” Cat spoke up for Iye. “In fact, she’s very intelligent and an incredible artist, actually. And, she doesn’t influence your emotions. It’s more like a blending of feelings.”

“Don’t get me wrong. I like her,” Gina said. “She just creeps me out a little, that’s all. But, if I can put up with Cal then living with Iye will be a breeze.”

“I aim to please,” Cal winked at Gina in response. He smiled and said, “Well, I like her.”

“Me too, Cal,” CJ said.

“Especially those lenses she wears.” Cal nodded his head enthusiastically. “Those are definitely stellar!”

“Her people’s eyesight and ability to communicate by focused pheromone release developed over centuries of existence in a low-light environment,” GABI said. “Facial expression and body language are major components of Human communication. Without them, the Sanseliseans developed acute senses of hearing, smell, and touch, to compensate for the lack of the visual components of communication.”

“Well, *she* doesn’t like them, I can tell you that. They make her self-conscious and she says they’re uncomfortable.” Cat turned to face Cal directly. “So, don’t go messing with her about them, *Cal*, and no strobe light pranks on her, either. Ever! You could do serious damage to her eyes.”

“Cross my heart, hon, not ever,” Cal said. “I won’t harm a single jet-black hair on her head.”

“Yes, please don’t chase her off,” CJ said. “We need more crew and Iye is a good find.”

“Roger that, Cap, no argument from me,” Cal said.

CJ thought back to his Career Academy days where he learned to navigate among the stars and pilot many types of

spacecraft. He could still see his instructor in his mind's eye: stern and no-nonsense as he lectured about the String Field Drive.

The instructor's voice carried throughout the large room as he spoke. "The jump pilot is responsible for the maintenance, calibration, and operation of the String Field Drive. It transports the ship instantaneously by the manipulation of quantum mechanics. Quantum energy exists as particles and waves in all places throughout the universe, even within the molecular structure of the dark matter that fills the void of space between the galaxies, stars, planets, and every other cosmic phenomenon in the universe. Waves of quantum energy, in quantities beyond the imagination, travel to and from every point in the physical universe, hidden away underneath the fabric of space-time.

"The jump engine, as the String Field Drive is commonly referred to, performs the complex mathematical equations necessary to identify and plot the waves of quantum level energy. A destination is entered into the String Field Drive and the quantum wave that exists between the specified origin and destination is identified. The jump pilot synchronizes the energy of the ship and crew to match the energy signature of the quantum wave.

"The quantum wave picks up the mimicked energy group and the ship slips from normal space to ride along with the quantum wave. The ship then emerges once again into normal space when the quantum wave terminates at the selected destination. The String Field Drive does most of the work, but the operator must be fluent in the complex language of quantum mechanics to even qualify for the position."

“Iye Shyn’s credentials as a jump pilot are beyond reproach.” GABI’s comment snapped CJ from his memories and back to the present. “Otherwise, I wouldn’t have recommended her as my replacement during my absence.”

The duties of a jump pilot were not required to keep a ship in orbit, but the operations officer is also responsible for the power requirements throughout the ship. The task to achieve and maintain orbit around any planetary body was a relatively mundane one, but one, nonetheless, that must be monitored constantly by a bridge officer at all times. This particular situation, however, warranted that a full bridge crew was on duty while Katy had the main engines offline and the ship would be limited to auxiliary power. Iye’s job to maintain power levels in critical systems would be much more difficult while the engines were down, but well within her capabilities.

“Strange to have a person as jump pilot again,” Boss said.

“Yes, it’s a good thing GABI doesn’t need to sleep. She’s literally been on endless duty as operations officer and jump pilot since...” CJ left off the rest.

“Since the mutiny three years ago,” Boss said. “Three years since I lost the use of my legs, which I have now regained.” He paused to turn a serious face to CJ and then grinned broadly. “Thank the Stars you were there to save the day, *Captain*.”

CJ nodded toward his operations officer in response. “GABI deserves part of the credit too.”

“Yes, she does. Thank the Stars for you too, my dear,” Boss said to her with a wink. “Can you give me a rundown on the planet?”

“Yes.”

Boss waited expectantly for a moment and then caught on. “*Will you* give me a rundown on the planet? Please.”

“Certainly.” She smiled. “Hersch is an arid planet with sufficient plant life and polar ice to maintain a low-level breathable atmosphere, however, supplemental oxygen and particle masks are recommended for travel outside the habitats. It has a diameter of eleven point eight thousand kilometers, gravity at the equator is seven point eight seven meters per second squared, the day is twenty-four point four standard hours, and the mean temperature is twenty-five degrees Celsius. The planet’s central position to several outlying star systems makes it a perfect hub for commercial traffic. The four spaceports are located at the industrial centers on the major continents. The planetary operations are governed by the Marlacuer Imperial Logistics Commission overseen by Commissioner William James.”

“And this was our target’s last stop?” Boss asked.

“Apparently so,” she replied.

“That’s what we’re here to find out,” CJ said.

“Where do *we* start?” Boss smiled widely at his captain.

“*You* start with minding the ship in the company of the good doctor.” CJ smiled back at his science officer.

“Well, then I count myself as the lucky one to be in such marvelous company,” Boss said with a smile at Zhu.

“As well as everyone’s favorite star pilot,” CJ added.

“Now that’s two against one,” Boss complained.

“Four actually. Iye will be on duty and Katy will, of course, be here as well,” CJ said.

“Arrgh,” Boss pretended to bluster, “me oarless dinghy ’as been set adrift upon a sea o’ estrogen!”

“Then you better hope for calm seas, my friend,” CJ replied. “You know we need all bridge stations manned when Katy takes the engines offline to swap out fuel plates. That means all hands on duty.”

Right on cue, the hatch slid open and Iye Shyn arrived to cover the orbital operations duty while GABI was down on the surface with CJ.

“Reporting for duty, Captain,” Iye said in a deep, rich voice. She stopped at the hatch for a moment to report in. Iye was pale in complexion, which was natural for a Sanselisean. The skin itself was still somewhat plump with moisture even after two years away from Sanselis. Her eyes were slightly larger than normal and covered by a special contact lens to protect the light-sensitive cornea from damage. The iris hidden underneath the lens was three shades of blue: a creamy blue with streaks of white was rimmed with a darker shade on the inner edges, and a shade darker yet encircled the outer edges. The iris could draw back almost to the extent of the orbital socket, or tighten to the smallest dot.

“Thank you, Iye. Take your position.”

“Aye, sir.” She moved to the operations station. “You are relieved, ma’am,” she said to GABI.

“I stand relieved,” GABI answered, turning to CJ. “I am prepped and ready to assume my away position, Captain.”

“Very well, proceed.”

GABI dispersed her holographic self and the hover drone that housed her containment module rose from the operations station and settled into a customized gear pack that Cal made specifically to hide GABI in during away missions.

“I tell you, Boss”—CJ turned toward his friend—“there were some long days on duty while you, Gina, Cat, and GABI were gone.”

“It felt good to sit in the pilot seat for a while,” Cal said, with a grin.

“I thought someone moved my chair up.” Gina smirked. “Thought maybe it was Pene.”

“No,” CJ answered, “Pene’s taller than him now.”

“She’s—no—no she’s not. I’m still...” Cal said in his own defense and held up his hand so his thumb and forefinger almost touched.

Iye smiled at CJ and Gina as they teased Cal.

“You did a fine job as star pilot, Cal,” CJ said, “and Pene got an introduction to tactical, so it was beneficial, but I’m glad to have everybody back and our new addition too.”

“Aye to that, Captain, twice,” Boss said.

“Thank you, Captain,” Iye said, with a slight head nod. “Thank you all.”

“With that, Mr. Keltzer, I am leaving the ship in your hands.” CJ got up from the command station. “Cal, GABI, prep what you need and meet in the shuttle bay in fifteen minutes.”

“Roger that, Captain, she’s in good hands,” Boss replied. “Safe journey.”

“Aye, there and back again, my friend, there and back again,” CJ said as he left the bridge with Cal and GABI.

CJ grabbed some equipment from the squad bay before he went back to his quarters to don his body armor and adventure gear. He poked the engineering icon when he finished his gear prep. “Hello, engineering...” he said, in a smooth and silky voice, “this is your man, your loving husband, your captain.”

“Umm, hi,” Pene sat down at the comms station.

“Pene? Hi, I, ah, was expecting Katy to answer.”

“Yeah? I never would’a guessed that. She’s in the...”

“Oh, got it, droppin’ the kiddies off at the pool.”

“Excuse me? Oh, *now* I get it. Ha! That’s pretty funny and kinda gross,” Pene said, with a laugh. “I learn something new every day around here.”

“Glad I could contribute such a priceless gem of knowledge.” CJ laughed along with her. “When she comes back, I need you to pop down and get *Moonshadow* ready to fly.”

“Copy that.”

CJ watched a smile grow on Pene’s face.

“Gina flyin’ you down?” She tried to act innocent about asking.

“No, Cal’s coming along on this one.” CJ paused for dramatic effect. Pene’s smile faded ever so slightly. “But, I’m sure he wouldn’t mind if you put some flight time in your logbook.”

“Stellar!” she said happily, and CJ saw her smile was securely back in place.

“You ready for this next stop? Might be that we get some real answers this time.”

“Absolutely. I’d rather know what happened to my mom and dad than wonder about it the rest of my life.”

“You’re a good girl, Pene, sorry...you’re a good *woman*, Pene,” CJ corrected himself. Pene’s efforts over the last year toward her duties along with her dedication to her ship and crewmates had proven that while just shy of her fifteenth birthday, she was no longer a child.

“Thanks, Captain, for that and for giving me a place I can call home.”

"You'll always have a home on the *Altered Moon*, Pene. For as long as she's in the sky."

"Here comes the chief. I'll go fire up *Moonshadow*." Pene got up when Chief Engineer Katy Evermore returned.

"Good, see you down there."

"Thanks, Pene." CJ heard Katy in the background. "Who's on the horn?"

"Your *man*, your *hubby*, your *captain*," Pene said loudly, in a sarcastically sexy voice.

"Can the shit Burnette, and get back to work!" CJ yelled over the comms in fun.

"Aye, *sir*!" Pene continued in her playful voice and she left to warm up the shuttle for departure.

"What was that all about?" Katy asked as she took Pene's place at the comms station.

"*Captain Smooth* called down expecting you to answer."

"Oh, I see," Katy said, with a smile and a quiet laugh. "So how much time do I have?"

"We'll take up a high orbit, so three hours probably before we have to worry about orbital decay."

"That's plenty. I'll have the fuel plates changed and the engines back up inside of two hours." She turned to make sure Pene had left the bay and looked back at him.

CJ already knew what Katy was going to say. "She'll be fine. She's a strong kid."

"I know that she's strong, hon." Katy fidgeted with the edge of the console. "But, she's on her way to find her parents or to find out that she doesn't have any. That could be major for her."

"We'll take good care of her," CJ promised his wife. "It's just a recon trip."

A skeptical look settled over Katy's face. "That's what you said about Century Four."

"Come on, Katy, this isn't a Kang-occupied planet in a war zone. It's an industrial planet under Imperial rule. Totally different." He continued in a quieter voice, "Besides, if her parents were still alive after three years, it should've been easy for a pair of smugglers to find a way off this planet."

"So, you don't think there's any chance?" Katy asked.

"I don't know, but no contact after this long? Hersch was the last stop on their route that got a drop, so if we don't find an answer here, then the trail goes cold."

"What then?" she asked.

"Then we move on to the next item on our treasure list."

"Pfff, that Snallygaster thing?" she scoffed.

"Yes, that Snallygaster thing," he said in a snarky tone of voice.

"You don't even know what it is or what it does," she said, scoffing even more.

"That's the mystery, babe."

"We'll see." She left it at that. "Have a safe trip."

"Roger that. See you in three or so."

"I love you," Katy tacked on.

"Love you, too." CJ closed down the comms station and headed for the shuttle bay.

~~*

Chapter Two

Cal sat in the copilot's seat and watched Pene closely while she took *Moonshadow* into the atmosphere that hugged the planet Hersch. The drop from the void of space into the dense mass of air and moisture that surrounds a planet is by far the toughest part of flight operations. If you come in too shallow, the ship will skip right off the atmosphere like a stone across a pond. Come in too steep and the ship will incinerate from the heat buildup. All shuttles have automatic entry assist, but a good star pilot can read the atmospheric currents to determine the smoothest course.

Cal noticed the white areas in the skin where it stretched tight over Pene's knuckles. She jumped slightly when an alert began to beep a speed warning. A slight shudder began as the atmosphere's surface tension resisted the shuttle's mass and speed. Her eyes jumped all over the flight panel in search of the speed indicator that was directly in front of her. The air felt thin like there was not enough oxygen.

"Helps a little if ya breathe when yer flyin'," Cal said calmly.

"Phooo." Pene exhaled in a whoosh.

"Relax. Look ahead. Read the indicator. Drop yer speed until the readout goes green. Watch yer angles. Now ya got it." Cal coached her through the entry process.

The shuttle steadied somewhat and then it started to sink down toward the surface of Hersch. A different sensation took over when *Moonshadow's* flight computer automatically switched over to atmospheric flight controls as the shuttle began to fly through the air.

“Thanks,” Pene said, with a quick glance and smile at Cal.

“Yep, remember to increase thrust to compensate for the air drag as we descend,” he said. “Be gentle, make small corrections.”

“Got it,” she answered.

CJ could not help but smile as he watched Pene pilot the shuttle with a good deal of skill. Her flight training had come a long way in the last year. Experience would soon smooth out the rough edges of her technique and soon enough she’d be ready to pilot larger ships. CJ knew that he wasn’t truly responsible for who Pene had turned out to be, as she had been with the crew for only the last year, but he still felt proud of her.

Pene’s parents were a pair of smugglers who had disappeared during a routine contraband job two years before CJ and the crew found her. The smuggler’s base where they met her was not a child-friendly place by any means, and Pene ended up in harm’s way. CJ, Gina, and Cal happened to be in the right place at the right time to step up when Pene needed help the most. She had been a crewmember of the *Altered Moon* from that day on. Now, barely a month before her fifteenth birthday, she had taken on engineering duties in addition to her standard duties as the ship’s cook, all of which, naturally, centered around any chance to pilot a shuttle now and again.

“Remember, Hersch airspace is restricted to spaceport quadrants, so don’t wander out of the flight path,” CJ said.

“Understood.” She checked the nav screens to be sure she was on the right heading.

The beacon for Southend Mercantile Spaceport synchronized with the shuttle's flight computer a few minutes later and a waypoint appeared on the nav screen. Pene banked *Moonshadow* to starboard until they were on course for the beacon.

"Keep us above six thousand meters until we're past the outer marker," Cal told her. "Then bring us down to a thousand."

"Roger that," she replied, and dropped to ten thousand meters.

"Call 'em anytime now," Cal said.

"Roger. Southend Control, this is civilian shuttle *Moonshadow* on approach and requesting clearance to land. How do you read?" Pene hailed the spaceport tower.

"We read you loud and clear, *Moonshadow*. Squawk transport ID for landing clearance."

The last request took both CJ and Cal by surprise. It was not unheard of, but a mandatory ID check was unusual at most spaceports.

"I got it," CJ spoke up. "Southend Control, TID as follows: Bascher Star Runner class shuttle, hull number three-three-niner-three-niner, registered to West Bcreth Trading Company."

A few uncomfortable moments passed when the reply came through. "Acknowledged, shuttle *Moonshadow*, you are clear to land at platform baker-two-five."

"Roger that, Southend, proceeding to LP baker-two-five," CJ responded. A bright blue square began to flash on the nav screen that represented the landing platform. A line of blue arrows shimmered from the shuttle's position to the blue square.

“Go ahead and switch over to autopilot for the landin’,” Cal said.

“Belay that,” CJ said. “Set down manually.”

“Cap, that’s a baker-level platform,” Cal said over his shoulder.

“She can handle it.”

“I can,” Pene agreed enthusiastically. “I’ve done them on the simulator.”

Cal looked at them with a grin and a nod. “Well then, next stop Southend Mercantile.”

The outer marker beacon came up quickly. Pene dropped the air speed and descended to one thousand meters.

A perimeter of landing platforms more than large enough for commercial class vessels surrounded the massive wheel-shaped spaceport complex. The complex itself was a ring of terminal buildings encircling a generous flight tarmac with the main control tower in the center of it all. The smaller landing platforms jutted out from the top six levels around the interior of the terminal buildings.

The tough thing about landing at this style of spaceport was how a shuttle landed. It was not just a ‘fly up and set it down’ type of landing. The pilot had to maneuver the shuttle down to the designated level and then move in and over the landing platform before the upward thrust was cut.

CJ watched Pene focus on the landing procedures as they approached landing platform baker-two-five. She used the ventral thrusters on the bottom of the shuttle to slowly descend until she reached the baker ring of platforms, second from the top. She watched all screens intently as she moved the shuttle over and then down to the platform.

“Touchdown! The crowd goes wild!” Pene said out loud.

CJ knew she liked to borrow some of Boss’ favorite ancient Earth phrases just to add some flair.

“Nicely done, Pene,” CJ said. The compliment was simple, but he knew the subtle flight operations necessary to maneuver a shuttle the size of *Moonshadow* in a limited space environment was a challenge for her.

“Thank you, Captain.” Pene’s response was just as simple, but CJ suspected she was nervous if the tense movements of her fingers were any indication.

“Secure from flight operations and lock out the nav computer.”

“Aye, Captain.”

“Cap?” Cal handed CJ a Rellia K-13 sidearm: a charged hydrogen-particle weapon that packs quite a wallop with a slight incendiary quality just for good measure.

“Yeah,” CJ replied, as he took the weapon and secured it just below his hip. He saw the unasked question in Pene’s eyes as she watched them strap on the guns. “No, we talked about this—for now the charge emitter and a knife, that’s it.”

Pene nodded. “I understand.” She took up the tactical stun gun, which was just as effective in a close quarters fight. She secured the stun gun at her right hip and tucked the knife into her belt along the left side of her back. One of Gina’s old flight jackets that Pene had taken for her own hung down far enough to make things look normal.

“Remember, if you have to use that on someone, don’t touch them when you do,” CJ warned her, “or you’ll share the shock.”

“Roger dodger,” she said as she donned an *Altered Moon* flight cap and stood ready to go. Pene had grown quite a

bit since joining CJ and the crew. She would scoff and say, “Yeah—all of it up!” whenever someone mentioned it. She stood eye to eye with Cal now; not a huge achievement relatively speaking, as Cal was not very tall, but she was almost a head taller than an average fourteen-year-old girl.

CJ had overheard Pene lamenting her height earlier in the month. “Nobody wants to be gangly,” Pene had said to Gina.

Gina had smiled and told her, “Tall, beautiful women have to start somewhere, honey.”

“GABI, test the new connection with *Moonshadow’s* flight computer,” CJ said. He checked to make sure she was free to hover if necessary.

“One moment. The connection is solid and secure, Captain.”

“Good, and remember no holograms while we’re here. Monitor all security transmissions and send me any updates.”

“Understood.”

“See ya, Gabs,” Cal said on the way out.

“Good-bye, Warren. Stay out of the bars.”

“Ha!” he called back.

The trio left the shuttle and biometrically locked the hatch so only a crewmember of the *Altered Moon* could open it. A short walkway led them to an entry hatch and into the spaceport. Armed guards lined the corridor inside, which funneled all arrivals to the security station for that level. Two sections split the entry point, one for cargo of any nature and the other for personnel only. CJ stepped up to the guard booth and presented his datpad with his civilian ID encoded on it.

“Check all weapons,” the guard said stoically. Another guard shoved a lockbox across the table. CJ put his knife and

K-13 into the box and the guard took it. He placed a security lock on it and then handed an ID tag to CJ.

“Your weapons will be returned when you depart the spaceport,” the guard informed him and turned away. “Next one through, come on.” The guard noticed CJ waiting for the others. “Move along,” he said with a snarl.

CJ held up his hand and backed away to show he meant no threat. “Easy there, buckaroo, I’m going.”

Shortly after, Pene and Cal passed through the entry point as well and joined CJ in the main building.

“Things seem a little tense around here to you, Cap?” Cal asked when he came out.

“Is a frog’s butt watertight?” Pene said, with a snort of laughter. Both CJ and Cal slowly turned to look at her until she lost her smile.

“Where do you learn such nonsense?” CJ asked in mock seriousness.

Pene’s smile returned, and then she gave her captain the ‘whatever’ look. CJ was well aware of who would teach her such things.

CJ and Cal smiled at Pene’s expense as they moved down toward the transtube. “Yes, Cal, I think the frog’s butt is very watertight around here,” CJ said. “The sooner we’re started, the sooner we’re departed. Let’s start with the merchant level.”

“Whaddya expect to find here, Cap?” Cal asked.

“Probably not much more than an idea of where to go next.” CJ looked around as they made their way down to the lower levels. Security stations with a clearly newer look than the surrounding building materials dotted the spaceport on every level. “Security’s been beefed up recently by the look of it.”

“Aye to that,” Cal answered.

The merchant level of Southend Mercantile was loaded from end to end with more products than you could see in a week of browsing. Patrons, merchants, and vendors packed the bustling market floor. Each and every one of them had only the best goods, which of course, could be found nowhere else. CJ did not have a clue where to start but the smells drifting from the food vendor court drew his attention.

“Hello, friends! Come, come, succulent fruits from around the galaxy.” One very pleasant merchant smiled widely, as he offered bits and pieces for them to try. “Sweet candies and tasty treats. VerNeer toffee apples straight from Revellia.”

CJ and Pene looked at each other and shared a smile, as they’d both visited with the VerNeer family on Revellia not so long ago.

The merchant plied his wares to the three crewmates with such skill CJ felt almost obliged to buy something from the man. CJ picked a slightly fuzzy deep red fruit and bought one for each of his group. The merchant showed more after the purchase, but CJ caught his eye for a moment.

“I understand that Yulean pears have to be kept refrigerated.” CJ used the correct code phrase that Leland Stile had given them.

“I do not deal with products of such nature, good day.” The merchant’s expression became wary.

“My mistake, friend.” CJ quickly held up his fruit. “Many thanks.”

The plaza buzzed with activity. Great grills and hearths smoked with cooked meats and roasted vegetables. Crowds of people lined up at every booth and all under the watchful eye

of the Imperial security forces. CJ, Cal, and Pene munched the delicious fruit as they walked along the market aisle.

“Oh, wow, what are these?” Pene asked as she caught the overflowing juices that dripped from her chin.

“I don’t know, but they are good.” CJ leaned forward to miss his clothes with the fruit juices dripping from his hand.

“We’re good,” Cal said as he finished his fruit.

“Oink!” Pene said in jest.

Cal smiled and burped in response.

One shopkeeper stood quietly just outside his door when most others hawked their wares as loudly as they could. The slim well-groomed man had sharp features and keen eyes. He wore an elegant overcoat hanging almost to his knees and pleated to reduce restriction. His eye caught CJ’s from across the plaza and the two measured each other up. The shopkeeper bowed his head and made a sweeping gesture toward his shop before he turned and disappeared inside.

“Did you see that?” Cal asked.

“Yes,” was all CJ said.

“What?” Pene asked.

“That guy wants us to come into his shop,” Cal said.

“Don’t they all?” Pene asked rhetorically.

“Yeah, but this guy was different,” Cal said.

“Does he know us?” she asked.

“Not personally,” CJ answered, “but I imagine that he sees our kind every day.”

“Our kind?” Pene repeated.

“Someone who’s looking for something that they’re not going to find out in the open,” CJ answered cryptically.

The shop was dim before their eyes adjusted to the lower light level. Bottles and decanters of many shapes, sizes,

and colors lined the shelves. The slim man waited just inside for them to enter.

“Greetings, friends. I am Rimwald. Please sit.” He motioned to a small round table.

“Thank you, Rimwald. I am CJ Evermore. This is Penelope Burnette and Warren Caltrop. I apologize—my hands are covered with fruit juice.”

Rimwald looked at the fruit Pene still had and stopped her from finishing it.

“Here, my dear, may I...?” Rimwald took the fruit from Pene and examined it. “Is this raw?” he asked, and to their surprise immediately tossed it in a receptacle. “One moment please.” He went behind the bar and gathered some items. “Moldovian nectares need to be cooked before they’re eaten, just so you know for the future.” He came back and set down a tray with water and glasses. He handed them each a sealed vial with a thick fluid inside. He filled the glasses from the pitcher and then sat down himself. “You’ll want to drink that.”

“What is this?” CJ asked distrustfully.

“An antidote. It’s to kill the worm larvae that are already growing in your stomach from eating uncooked Moldovian nectares,” Rimwald said, with a semi-amused, matter-of-fact tone of voice.

“Seriously?” CJ asked.

“I’m afraid so,” Rimwald confirmed. “You could always go to the infirmary to get checked out, but the worms attach themselves quite quickly. On my honor, this is the antidote and it works immediately.”

Pene suddenly blew the contents of her stomach all over Rimwald’s floor.

“That doesn’t get rid of them, I’m afraid,” Rimwald said with a tone of wry sympathy.

"I'm sorry," Pene said, with a miserable and embarrassed look on her face.

"Don't worry, my dear girl. I'd probably do the same thing." Rimwald called into the back of the shop in a strange language and a pair of servants came out to clean up the mess while another took Pene to the lavbay.

"Hang on, Cap," Cal said. He brought out his scanner and ran it over his vile. He nodded when the readout confirmed that it was what Rimwald had told them. CJ and Cal both drank the contents of the vile and washed the disgusting paste down with the water Rimwald had poured.

"My thanks again, Rimwald, that's more than generous," CJ said after he drained the water glass.

"Think nothing of it. What kind of merchant would I be if I let travelers get sick and die in my own plaza?"

"Still, allow me to pay you something," CJ said to him.

"No, no..." Rimwald waved it off. "Now, perhaps something to chase the water?" he asked, and without expecting an answer, he brought a bottle and four small stocky glasses from the bar. "Well, now that we've taken care of that, how may I assist you?" He slid two glasses over to them and let the third stand empty for the time being. He raised his own glass. "Clear horizons," he said, and the others returned with compliments.

"I don't know. How *can* you assist us?" CJ asked after he set down his glass.

"I'm a man who finds things that might be difficult to attain," Rimwald said vaguely, with an expression that was just as vague.

"I see. I do have this friend that loves Yulean pears." CJ said with mock indifference. "But I understand that they need to be kept refrigerated."

Rimwald answered blandly, "Yulean pears are out of season." He provided the proper response.

"Ah, Lady Misfortune frowns upon me," CJ gave him the next phrase.

"Lady Misfortune frowns on us all," the man finished the code.

Pene returned just then and faced their host. "I'm really sorry, Mr. Rimwald."

"Don't bother yourself about it, my dear, and please it's just Rimwald." He motioned to a seat where the antidote and water waited for her. CJ nodded when she glanced at him for approval. Pene grimaced at the taste of the thick fluid and quickly drank most of her water. Rimwald returned his attention to CJ.

"Some friends of ours are lost," CJ began. "Friends who might *transport things*, as a side job, you understand."

"I do," Rimwald answered stoically.

"We need to contact their last...appointment," CJ said.

"I see and how long ago was the appointment?"

"Three Imperial years."

"Oh, my." Rimwald raised his eyebrows.

Pene had picked up that they were talking about her parents, but she did not want to interrupt.

"The merchants who were here then, are here no longer. The recent changes in law enforcement have ended many *unregulated jobs* of late."

"Surely, there must be someone?" CJ knew that black market activity was still present on Hersch.

"Yes, but not here." Rimwald activated a desktop map. "I recommend a visit to the settlement east of the spaceport, but its several kilometers away. You'll need to rent ground transportation if you don't have it. If you do choose to go, see

this man at the east gate and you'll get a good price." Rimwald handed CJ a small card.

"Again, my thanks, Rimwald," CJ said as he took the card. "I'll be sure to steer clear of unknown fruits from now on."

"That would be wise," he replied, and they closed the conversation with empty glasses.

"That has a good flavor, like smoked cherries almost," CJ said as he set down his glass.

"Sanselisean brandy, aged twelve years," Rimwald informed him.

"Sanselisean?" CJ asked. "We have a crewmate from Sanselis."

"Indeed? A rarity for one of their people to leave the planet, I understand."

CJ rose from the table. "I'd take a bottle of this if you have it, actually. It'll be a pleasant surprise for our friend, I hope, as well as good cover for our visit."

"Certainly." He rose as well to transact the deal. "Best of luck with finding your friends, Mr. Evermore and party." Rimwald nodded to each of them in turn.

CJ led the way from Rimwald's shop to the gate on the east side of the complex. They turned in the lockbox tags at the security station and got their goods back. They did not walk far before they found Sidewinder Sam's Used Scramblers.

"Sidewinder Sam's?" Pene said in amusement.

An overweight middle-aged man huffed and puffed his way over to meet them as they entered the grounds. A high-pitched whiny voice cracked now and again when he spoke. He poked constantly at the sweat drops that ran down his bright red face with a worn-out handkerchief.

“Hey there, how can I help ya?” he asked between wheezes.

“Rimwald said we could rent a scrambler here,” CJ said and handed him the business card.

“Rimwald, that weasel. I’ll cut ya a deal regardless. Come on, this way.” Sidewinder Sam made about another ten meters and sat down on the front frame of a scrambler. It groaned under his weight. “*Ronald!*” he roared, his sudden burst surprising from one so out of shape.

“What?” a younger man yelled back from the mechanic’s bay.

“Get these folks set up with a scrambler,” he yelled in return. He turned to CJ. “Ronnie’ll get ya set up there, folks”

“Thanks, Sam,” CJ said.

Sidewinder Sam just waved and nodded in response.

“You okay, mister?” Pene asked him.

“I missed lunch.” Sam wheezed with every word and almost whistled the word ‘missed.’

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that.” Pene looked mildly confused as she turned to follow Cal toward the garages.

Ronnie took them over to the prep shed to fuel up a scrambler. Cal took one look at the machine and volunteered to drive immediately.

“Cap’n, I wouldn’t want ya to hav’ta worry about both—where we’re goin’ *and* how we’re gettin’ there—so I’ll drive. Just to ease your burden, ya know.” He put on his most serious face.

“You are so full of shit, Cal,” CJ said and got a laugh from Ronnie and Pene. “Fine, but just so you know, I’m driving back.”

“Shotgun!” Pene quickly yelled out.

CJ turned the ‘I don’t friggin’ think so’ look on her and shook his head. “No way, hotshot, you got to pilot the shuttle.”

“Ohh, farts,” she said because she couldn’t argue with that.

“You guys’ll be needin’ dust coats and goggles,” Ronnie said. “They’re over there on the wall. The scrambler’s fueled and checked. There’s spare O-two in the cargo bin if you need it. The locator beacon is on all the time. There’s a waypoint already in the GPS for the only settlement on this side of the spaceport.”

“What’s it called?” CJ asked.

“Here and There,” Ronnie answered cryptically. “If you’re there, then it’s ‘Here.’ If you’re not, then it’s ‘There.’”

“Uh-uh! Seriously? No way!” Pene said.

Ronnie slowly nodded his head. “Yep! This place is f...” he glanced at CJ then turned back to Pene, “far from normal.”

Pene smiled shyly because she could probably guess what he meant. Ronnie went over the operation of the scrambler, checked to make sure they understood, and then he opened the garage door to let them on their way.

CJ told Cal that as long as they basically stayed on course, how they got there was up to Cal. The scrambler lived up to its name as Cal took the scenic route, and then some, on their trip out to There.

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Chapter Three

The settlement of Here sat a fair way from the perimeter of a fuel processing station, but it was not far enough. The air was thick with a pungent odor that left a metallic aftertaste in the back of the throat. A bluish-white dust coated the ground around the station itself. The shifting winds carried the dust high into the air where it drifted down to cover everything outside of a shelter. Diffused light from the late afternoon sun only brightened the dust hanging in the air, making it even tougher to see clearly.

Pene pulled the edge of her coat collar up to cover her nose and mouth. "This place is nasty," she said, her voice muffled by the fabric over her mouth.

"Ya got that right. This place should be called Southend," Cal said. "Smells like the south end of a north-goin' wollerbiest."

A provision vendor's flag, striped in yellow, green, and blue, snapped in the wind outside one of the more permanent buildings.

"Let's try over there," CJ said. He opened the door for the others and entered the store. Empty tables and chairs filled a small area off to the side. The rest of the store stood walled off by the service counter. A tall, well-muscled man behind the counter put down the crates he had in his arms when they came in.

"Hello, friends," he said as they approached the counter.

"Hello," CJ said back. "Rush hour?"

"Ha! Thank the Stars, no," he answered with a smile. "Everybody who lives in Here works at the fuel station. There

won't even be room to stand in here after that whistle blows. I'm Sitric." He stuck out a ham-sized paw.

"CJ." He shook Sitric's hand. "This is Pene and Cal."

"How may I help you folks?" he asked.

"We're looking for friends that may have passed this way some time ago," CJ said.

"Better have been in the last year," Sitric replied. "Before that, anyone shadier than star shine was run off, or worse, when Imperial forces took over control of the refineries. Not to say that your friend was shady, or anything, but you are in Here, aren't you?" His question was obviously rhetorical.

"Three years, actually," CJ answered.

Sitric shook his head. "Here wasn't even *here* three years ago. Look—there are no Imperial ears in Here. You can narrow things down, I imagine."

"They're my parents"—Pene stepped up to the counter—"they ran goods for the Blood Stars outta Skriti Station."

"And do your parents have names, child?" Sitric asked.

"I'm not a child!" Pene said from under furrowed brow. "I—I—I flew the shuttle here!"

"My apologies, Pilot, I meant no offense," Sitric said respectfully.

"I'm sorry," Pene said. "I don't know what's wrong with me lately."

I do, CJ thought to himself. *Hello, Aunt Flow.*

"Ari and Mike Burnette were"—a look of shock passed over Pene's face—"are...are their names."

"Sorry, Pilot, they don't ring a bell with me. But the Blood Stars pulled their operation out before the Imperials got here. Maybe your folks pulled out with them."

“Do ya know to where?” Cal asked.

“I don’t know where this lot went, but Kaleva is the closest planet with Blood Star connections and it isn’t particularly close to Hersch.”

A commotion with shouts and weapons fire from the street outside caught their attention. Sitric grabbed a long gun from behind the counter and ran to the front of the shop. CJ’s group followed right behind him. A dirty tan blur passed by Sitric’s shop followed by a hailstorm of weapons fire.

A tall man in a dust-covered tan long coat and wide-brimmed hat ducked around the corner of a building, fired a couple of shots from his own weapon, then turned to run the other way. He stopped short when a second group of ruffians came from a different direction. He ran back to the main street where once again the original group of assailants confronted him. The man spun around twice as he fired in both directions. The trademark bright blue blasts of charged hydrogen-particle weapons sizzled through the air around him. The weapons fire hounded him across the street and left holes smoldering in the wall he leapt over and ducked behind.

“Well, you folks may be in luck, or maybe not,” Sitric said. “That man over there”—he pointed with his gun toward the man in the long coat—“calls himself, Ooscarito Cavaliere. Thinks he’s some hotshot, but he’s just another rascal in the rough. He used to work with the Blood Stars on some occasions.”

CJ watched as the hunting party cut off any escape for the man and closed in on him. “Ehh...shit,” he said under his breath. “What’s his name?”

“Ooscarito Cavaliere,” Sitric said, with sarcastic flair and rolled Rs.

“Cavilla...” CJ stumbled over the word.

“Ca—va—lee—air—eh. Believe me, if you’re around him, you’ll hear it enough,” Sitric said with a snort of amusement.

“Ooscarrrito Cavalierrre...” Pene went a little overboard with her rolled Rs.

CJ looked at Pene, “*You* stay here.” He looked at Sitric, “Is there a back way out of here?”

He pointed to a back wall. “Just behind that partition.”

CJ nodded to Cal, and the two left by the back door. They checked both ways before they ducked behind some crates in the alley.

“GABI, do you copy?” CJ said through his earbud.

“Roger, Captain, I read you.”

“Go to condition yellow and monitor all crew life signs. We’re about to stick our noses where they don’t belong.”

“Again,” Cal added.

“Do not violate the no-fly zone unless you get our signal,” CJ said.

“Understood,” she said. “Condition yellow has been set. I am standing by for emergency pickup.”

“Very good, we’re out.” He closed the comms.

They moved down the alley to a side street and checked for any armed personnel.

“We’re going to circle around behind the larger group,” CJ said in a quiet hurry. “I want you to cross the street and come up behind their right flank and I’ll take the left. We fire a couple of warning shots and tell them to back off.” Cal just looked at his captain. “I know, I know, but we really don’t know who’s who out there. We don’t know if this...Oosca-whoever guy is legit or not, so we give everyone a chance.”

“And if they shoot at us?” Cal asked.

“Well then, shoot back, *son*,” CJ said, with a smirk.

CJ and Cal worked around behind the group without being seen and got the drop on the attackers. CJ shot a nearby post and yelled out. "Cease-fire and lower your weapons!"

The group apparently was not law enforcement or legitimate security if the ensuing weapons fire from them was any sign. CJ and Cal opened up on the attackers' position with weapons fire of their own. CJ caught one of them dead center; the impact blew the man backward several meters. The momentum of the engagement had changed for the attackers with the arrival of CJ and Cal. The three thugs from the side street ran up from where they had the other man pinned down, which was a mistake. The attackers were now under fire from two positions without adequate cover.

CJ analyzed the encounter as it went on and amazingly, it looked like they had the upper hand. The last four attackers made a break for it after most of their group lay dead in the street around them. CJ almost cheered until he saw they ran straight into Sitric's shop.

"Oh, crap," he whispered.

The four attackers smashed through the door of Sitric's shop in an effort to escape with their lives. Sitric blew a monster-sized hole through one of them before the thug could raise a gun, but his cohort shot Sitric several times in return. Pene stood frozen in fear as another one of attackers raised his gun at her. A flurry of sudden activity, several gunshots, one dead attacker, and Pene was swept off her feet. She and the tan blur tumbled over the store counter and landed in a heap on the floor behind it.

"*Esta bien, niña?*" Ooscarito asked.

Time seemed to slow down as Pene looked up at her rescuer while he traded fire with their attackers. Long black hair streamed down from under his hat with waves so tight they almost curled. A thin moustache swept out to points on each side, with a tapered soul patch under his bottom lip. Heavy black eyebrows arched over blue eyes that were so bright, Pene was sure they sparkled in the dark.

“Ha ha, *tener que, sinverguenza!*” he yelled enthusiastically, as the last attacker fell to the ground. He turned his attention to Pene and helped her get to her feet. “*Hola, esta bien? Aqui, permitanme...*”

Pene took his hand and looked into his eyes as he helped her up. Her breath caught in her chest and her heart skipped every other beat as a strange knot began to form in the pit of her stomach.

“Are you all right?” Ooscarito asked in the common tongue, but with a strange alluring accent. “Hello?”

Pene could not tear herself away from those eyes.

“Pene?” CJ called out, as he ran through the front door. He brought up his weapon and trained it on Ooscarito. “Let her go!”

Ooscarito held up empty hands and stepped away from Pene just as Cal came in from the back with his gun raised.

“No, Captain, wait.” Pene managed to find her voice. “He saved me.”

The tension eased up a bit. CJ and Cal lowered their weapons.

“I’m okay, we were...” she started to tell them about what happened when she saw Sitric’s body in a pool of blood.

“Ay yi yi, Sitric, poor soul,” Ooscarito said. “May I attend him?”

CJ nodded while he and Cal holstered their weapons and Oscarito unfolded a blanket to lie over Sitric's body. He crossed his chest and said some quiet words in his own language.

"Thank you, my friends, for your most timely intercedence. Allow me to introduce myself, I am *Ooscarito Cavaliere*" Oscarito said, with a great flourish of his hat and a half bow.

"That's quite the handle ya got there, friend," Cal said.

"Indeed—a name to be spoken with grace and elegance, I assure you. But, *por favor*, it is Oscar, to my friends."

"Ooscarr..." Pene said his name softly, and then blushed when she saw that CJ and Cal watched her with strange smiles.

"Focus," CJ said to her. "Oscar, is it? I'm CJ." He pointed a thumb at the others. "This is Cal—and Pene."

"A pleasure, *senor, y niña*," he nodded to each in turn. "I thank you for your assistance, *senor*." Oscar seemed to be on the watch for other possible assailants.

"In a hurry?" CJ asked.

"Perhaps," Oscar answered vaguely. "Do you happen to be going to Southend by chance?"

"You need a ride? I need information on Blood Star activity from three years ago," CJ said while he crossed his arms over his chest.

"Who?" Oscar feigned innocence.

CJ frowned and raised an eyebrow.

"Three years? Tthat is a long time, my friend," Oscar said. He laughed nervously as he vacillated over answering.

"Cap, we got armed personnel comin' in," Cal said in a hurry from the doorway.

“*Mierda*,” Oscar swore quietly and rolled his eyes as well as his Rs. He smiled at CJ. “I am your most humble servant, señor.”

“Great! Then let’s get the fug outta here,” CJ said, indicating the door.

“What about Sitric?” Pene asked. She felt bad about leaving him on the floor.

“His friends will even the score, *niña*,” Oscar told her.

The ride back made conversation near impossible due to the wind noise of ground travel in an open vehicle. The late afternoon sun was gone completely now and a moonless night turned the ride back to the spaceport dark and cold. They returned the scrambler to Sidewinder Sam’s garage, where Sam lived up to his promise and let them go with only a fuel charge.

Oscar led them to an open-air café where he ordered the traditional Hersch favorite: herbed breadsticks and black roast coffee. The server brought the bread with an arrangement of oils and spices while another poured the dark and bitter coffee. The night on Hersch was cool yet the ground radiated the thermal energy of the day, making for an odd mix of cool and warm currents. Clusters of bright stars filled the dark sky. The Qune Star Cluster was clearly visible from this quadrant of the galaxy. Torches burned around the café perimeter while soft lights lit the walkways outside the spaceport complex.

Pene was stoked. She had never seen the stars so bright. The experience of the night’s harrowing adventure and the fact that she sat here with her crewmates under a starlit sky on a faraway planet were brand new for her, and she drank it in like a woman dying of thirst who’d found a spring of clear water. The new experience was not the only

thing Pene drank in that evening. ‘Ooscarito’ kept running through her head, ‘Ooscarrrrr...’, ‘Ooscar-rar-rar-rar,’ she snickered unconsciously at her own thoughts.

“You okay?” CJ asked her. The snicker had stopped the conversation the others were in for a moment.

“Nothing,” Pene said quickly. “I mean, fine, Captain, I’m fine.”

“Coffee too strong for ya?” Cal asked. He knew Hersch black roast coffee was not a delicate flavor.

“Would you care for something else?” Oscar asked, “I can get you whatever you like.”

“No, thank you, Oscar.” Pene could not keep a corny smile from her face when she said his name and felt immediately awkward about it. She fiddled with a breadstick to avoid the smiles the others focused on her.

“So, it’s *Capitan* CJ, eh?” Oscar asked.

“Si,” CJ said, which got a nod from Oscar. “CJ Evermore, actually to make it official, now that we’re not under fire.”

“A pleasure, Capitan. These friends you search for, you say they moved goods for the Blood Stars?”

“Yes, before the Imperial security moved in,” CJ confirmed.

“Si, si,” he sat and thought for a moment, “I knew the ones you speak of, but where they are now”—he shrugged his shoulders and then looked at CJ—“Information is valuable, no?”

CJ knew this was coming, “How much?”

Oscar leaned forward and spoke in a hushed tone, “I need to get off this planet.”

"I don't captain a taxi," CJ said sternly.

"Do you know where they are?" Pene asked Oscar, "Oscar, please, they're my parents!"

"What's that you say? *Ay Dios mio...*" Oscar's demeanor changed when he saw the look in Pene's eyes and he stopped negotiating quite so hard. He nodded his head. "Si, niña, I do not know who went with them, but I know where they went."

"Ari and Mike Burnette," she said hopefully.

Oscar slowly shook his head. "No, sorry, niña, these names, I do not know."

"Please, Captain, can't we give him a ride somewhere if he takes us to them?" Pene asked. The same look from Pene that seemed to melt Oscar's resolve also eroded any objection CJ might have tried to bring up.

"Argh—yes, Pene, we can," he answered grudgingly and turned a narrow eye on Oscar. "*After*—he takes us to them."

"*Excelente Capitan!*" Oscar said. He seemed happy he may get off this rock after all. "*Bueno!*"

CJ was mildly surprised when no alarms went off or that no squad of armed guards ran out when Oscar passed through the security station to enter the spaceport. Pene went through next and CJ turned to Cal. "Keep your eyes on him."

"You got it, Cap."

"GABI?" CJ called the shuttle.

"Here, Captain."

"We're at the spaceport and we have a guest. Remain hidden for now and inform Boss to set condition yellow."

"Acknowledged."

CJ passed through the security station and the group made their way across the market floor where Oscar knew almost everyone.

"I certainly hope you didn't want your leaving to be a secret," CJ said to him.

"Sneaking about through a crowd of friends would arouse even more suspicion, no?" Oscar said. "I have now planted a half dozen different stories about where I, ah—we are off to."

CJ had to admit that was a pretty slick move on Oscarito's part, but it confirmed what he had suspected earlier. He stepped directly in front of Oscar and met him eye to eye. "I can smell the grifter on you, pal, so before we go any farther, you're going to tell me just how big this trouble is that you're in."

"Not big enough to follow us off Hersch, Capitan."

"Then why all the stories?" CJ pressed him.

"Because bastards have brothers," Oscar calmly replied. "Because a fish is harder to catch in muddy waters. How else can I say, just to cover my ass?"

"Your ass'll be tossed out my airlock if any harm befalls my crew while you're aboard my ship," CJ said in an icy tone. "Are we clear?"

"As a bell in the night, Capitan."

CJ flipped a hundred eighty degrees and put on a big smile, "*Excelente!*" he hollered out and clapped Oscar on the back several times while he laughed. Oscar immediately fell into character beside CJ; the two men loudly told jokes and stories as they left the market floor.

The group made it back to the shuttle with no problems at the security station or anywhere else. CJ took the

copilot seat while Pene slid into the pilot seat. Cal and Oscar sat behind them.

“Pene is your pilot?” Oscar whispered to Cal in surprise.

“Pene is *our* pilot,” Cal whispered back.

“Ay, Dios mio,” Oscar said under his breath.

Pene sat at the control panel for a moment. She looked more nervous than usual for some reason. She shook out her hands and hit the ignition. Alarms and warning lights suddenly went off, scaring the daylight out of her. She freaked and looked back and forth to find the problem.

CJ reached over and flipped a switch that silenced the alarms, “Preignition purge,” he calmly reminded her.

“Oh, yeah—sorry, Captain,” she said. Her face flushed with red. This time, she triggered the preignition purge before she fired up the engines. No alarms went off this time. “Oookay.” She relaxed with a sigh.

The flight back to the *Altered Moon* took a short time and soon she was visible through the forward viewport.

“Truly an impressive vessel, Capitan,” Oscar said when he saw her. “I was not aware merchant ships carried such formidable weaponry. Missiles, launch bays, falconets, and SlyCore hull plating, is it not? The *Altered Moon*: a very poetic name, indeed. Si, I could do wonders with it.” He changed to a singsong voice. “A solitary loon...sings a lonely tune...in the early light of the *Altered Moon*...”

CJ smiled as he glanced over at Pene. *If the shuttle had a rearview mirror, Pene’s eyes would be glued to it.*

“Ha ha, oh man, Boss is gonna love ya,” Cal said.

“The Boss? Who is the Boss?” Oscar asked.

“No, just Boss. It’s his nickname. Bernard Keltzer,” Cal said, “he’s the science officer, second in command. The man loves a good phrase.”

“I see, then I shall have to sharpen my wit in anticipation of a syntactic challenge.” Oscar wiggled an eyebrow and smoothed out the end of his moustache.

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