

HOT PURSUIT

By

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Chapter 1

Belt Central

Consciousness rose, with great effort, from the depths of the stygian abyss. It drifted upward toward the narrow band of light above. Suddenly, like a blast from a supernova, the light exploded and recoiling, it screamed silently in pain, as the light went out. Its next coherent thought was . . . *I think I'll keep my eyes closed for a while and just lie here . . .* Time passed . . .

Man, I haven't partied that much in years. I tried the eye thing again and this time it worked. My arm encountered something next to me, so I prodded it. The 'something' moaned and I turned my head in its direction. "Fi?" At least, I hoped so. A muffled voice responded, "sharrup an quit pokin' me or m' gonna belt ya." Yup, I recognized her lovely voice.

Easing my way out of bed, I stumbled into the bathroom. A face gazed out of the mirror at me, looking like something from a bad horror movie and my head felt like Dwarves were pounding on it with hammers. The medicine cabinet was well stocked with the usual hangover remedies and after staring at the bottle for what seemed like eternity, I grimly downed a dose of De-Tox. When I crawled back to bed, my better half leveled a baleful eye at me from under a crop of unruly red hair. "In er out, make up yer mind," she growled, sounding like I felt.

"There's still some De-Tox left, Sweetie," I said, trying to be helpful.

The eye blinked a few times. "You hate that stuff."

"Be that as it may, if you want to use the bathroom, you'd better hurry," I answered as my thirst grew. If you're not familiar with it, I'll give you the short version. De-Tox makes you really, really thirsty. You drink, then you drink some more, then you go to the bathroom. The cycle repeats itself until all the alcohol is flushed from your system. In addition, there are additives

for a headache and agents to counteract the toxic effects of your excesses. Fire got up and took my advice. I waited as long as I could, then I downed about a gallon of cold water.

The party at Rosita's had gone well into the wee hours. We celebrated our return with food, song and dance. Oh yeah, and drink. The revelers included all of us from Orion and a bunch of Lonetree people, as well as whoever happened to be there at the time. We were answering questions all night. It was surprising I could talk at all, this morning. Sounds of water running triggered the obvious biological response. "You in the shower, Honey?"

"YES."

"Good, 'cause I need the toilet," I said, as I entered. Her silhouette on the shower curtain was stunning, even in my present state, and I marveled at how lucky I was to have her. I turned to the mirror . . . unfortunately, there had been no visible improvement since the last time I looked.

"Gad, you look like death warmed over, Captain Honey," she said, sticking her head around the curtain.

"Gee thanks, and a good morning to you too, Sweetheart," I answered, giving her a kiss. "I'm going to call room service for some coffee."

"Breakfast would be nice, too," she suggested. She's blessed with a fast metabolism. The mere thought of food started warning grumbles from my stomach.

"Well, okay. What do you want?"

"Something light, you choose." I gave her another kiss and left the room. Eventually, we switched places. My head was doing better and the shower felt good. When I got out, breakfast had arrived and, much to my surprise, I was actually hungry. We were considering the possibility of spending another couple of hours in bed, when the Vid chimed and Melissa's unreasonably happy face beamed out from the screen.

"Are you guys still in bed? Marie and I are going shopping and sightseeing. Want to join us, Fire?"

"Sounds great Melissa, I'll be ready in a few minutes. Why don't you come by and pick me up?" Fire looked back over her shoulder at me. "On second thought, I'll meet you in the Lobby, Ice looks like he needs another hour or so before he'll be fit company for the rest of the human race." I put

on my best ugly face and peered around her.

“Yipe! You’re right, I’d lock that up before I left, if I were you.” They laughed and Fi cut the connection.

She snuggled closer. “You don’t mind, do you, Sweetheart?” I kissed the tip of her nose.

“Course not, Fire of my Heart, have a blast. Just try not to buy any more expensive weapons, okay?”

“Okay, no more expensive ones,” she said, getting up to dress. *Hey, wait a minute . . .*

After she left, I lay there thinking about the past couple of years. When I found the Alien ship, I had no idea that things would get as complex as they have. My original plan, for the four of us to glean its secrets and go exploring the universe, had taken some wild turns. We got involved with Lonetree Enterprises, Benton Carver of Mars Inc. and a host of friendly and not so friendly people. We went to Saturn and almost died. Fi finally agreed to marry me and Marie (of Lonetree Enterprises) and Brain also got hitched. Carver’s nephew, Dave, turned out to be a life saver and his girl, Melissa, made us famous. I’m not exactly happy about that though, fame has its problems.

The plan was still in place, it just got . . . bigger. Orion’s test flight, after retrofit, had been a complete success and was the reason for the party last night. I drifted off with thoughts of Alpha Centauri floating through my head . . . The chiming Vid woke me up.

“Ice here.”

“Iceman, time to rise and shine,” my pal Brain said. “Doc, Dave and I are in the coffee shop.” He was right, we had a lot to do. I groaned in resignation.

“I’ll be right there, order me some coffee.” Terminating the call, I dragged my butt out of bed and got dressed. Down in the coffee shop, I surveyed the scene.

“Hey guys, what’s up?” Brain and Doc seemed to be awake and alert, but Dave didn’t look so good. “Dave, you’re a little green around the gills, there. Too much fun last night?”

He looked up, grimacing. “Nothing I can’t handle, I’ll be better as soon as the caffeine kicks’ in.”

“You should try De-Tox. It’ll Get You Going, as the ad says.”

He scowled at me. “Never Again.” His expression spoke volumes. We drank our coffee in silence, until Doc spoke up.

“Well, my boy, since the ladies are busy, perhaps this would be a good time to go house hunting.” Doc didn’t mean living quarters, he meant Headquarters. We couldn’t keep sponging off of Lonetree whenever we needed a conference room. It had become obvious during our breakfast planning sessions on Orion that offices, secretaries and all that other stuff, would be needed to get the Alpha Cee trip on the road. I checked the time.

“Rosita’s should be open in a little while, Tom might know some good contacts for office space.” At the mention of Rosita’s, Dave turned a little greener . . . if that was possible.

When we got there, the cleaning crew was still clearing up after us . . . good thing it was Tom’s idea, to have the party.

“Lads, I’m happy ta see ya none the worse fer wear,” Tom greeted us, jovially. “And where be yer pretty lassies?”

“Off spending our hard earned cash,” I answered.

“Ah, I see. Well, would ya be wantin’ a little hair o’ the dog, then?” I heard Dave gurgling, off to my left.

“Nah, better not, but if you’ve got some water, I’ll take a pitcher.” I was still thirsty, must be some residual De-Tox left in my system. Doc and Brain just shook their heads.

“One pitcher o’ water, comin’ up.” He turned to Dave while it was filling. “Dave, lad, ya don’t be lookin’ too good.” Reaching under the bar, he brought out a small bottle. “Here’s somethin’ that’ll fix ya right up.” Dave took it and started to unscrew the cap. “No, laddie, don’t be openin’ that here, it smells pretty bad,” Tom said, a look of mock horror on his face. “The restroom be right down the hall, there.”

“Tom, he’s gonna be really mad when he gets back,” Brain stated from experience, watching Dave’s retreating back.

“Aye, but he’ll be feelin’ a whole lot better.”

Tom’s cure was much worse than De-Tox. Its only saving grace is that it’s quicker. Tom caught the concerned look on Doc’s face. “Don’t be a worryin’ Doctor, it’ll only clean him out. Besides, he be a strong lad, he’ll survive.” Doc nodded but he had a dubious expression. “Now boys, wha’

can I do fer ya?"

"We're looking for some office space. Got any ideas? We need a base of operations while we get Orion ready to go," I answered.

"Yeah, someplace with a view so we can keep an eye on the ship," Brain added. He seemed to have gotten a little paranoid since our experience with the Pirates.

"Yes, and facilities so I can give physical exams to our applicants," Doc said.

Tom scratched his chin for a moment. "Ya know, some agency just finished attachin' a new rock. Ya might be able ta get a bargain rate, seein' as who ya are and all. It'd be good PR for 'em." He punched up a map on his Vid. "See, ya just go ta Rock 7 and head up and left, can't miss it."

About then, Dave returned. He wasn't green now . . . more of a pasty white . . . and he wasn't happy. "Gee, thanks Tom, you could have warned me," he growled.

Tom laughed. "An if'n I had laddie, you wouldna ha drunk it."

"Thanks for the info, Tom." I said, finishing off my water. "Come on guys, lets go look at real estate."

A trip through Belt Central can be a little . . . weird. The central rock was about three miles in diameter and had been hollowed out and sealed. When it was originally designed, Grav-plates hadn't been invented yet. Rotation was going to supply gravity, so all the older facilities were on the outer wall. With artificial gravity, the whole plan changed. The rotation was stopped and a central tube running from one end to the other was built. There was a real estate boom. To keep a long story short, down happened to be wherever your feet stuck to the ground, which was not necessarily down for someone else a few hundred feet away. Traveling was a blast, once you got used to it. It was just a matter of keeping an eye on the floor color. The newer rocks were laid out in a more conventional fashion, but their connecting tubes could come out in the strangest places.

We found the new neighborhood with no problem and after introductions, the agent started showing us around some of the smaller units. At some point in the tour, he must have figured out who we were, because he finally showed us the suite we wanted. There were plenty of offices with a great view and I was all set to sign the lease when Brain stopped me. He thought we had

better get Fire and Marie involved. Good idea. They would be . . . upset . . . if they were left out of the process. Besides, Fi *was* the Chief Financial Officer.

“Right. I wonder if they have a Comm Link with them? Oh well, let’s give it a try.” I walked to the window. “Orion, can you read me?”

“AFFIRMATIVE, CAPTAIN.”

“Outstanding, Orion, what’s your status?”

“ALL SYSTEMS ARE NOMINAL. THE SHIP IS IN STANDBY MODE.”

“Good. Try to link me to Fire, please.”

“SHO’ NUFF, CAP’N SIR.” I turned back to the room, scowling. Brain was snickering and Dave was trying hard to keep a straight face.

“Brain, the first thing I want you to do, back on board, is FIX THAT! When I said I wanted something besides Complying, I meant something reasonable.”

“That is reasonable, Runt. It’s genuine vintage Americana.”

Fire’s return call put a damper on the moment. “Ice, what’s up?”

“Hey, Sweetie, we went looking for office space and found a really good spot but we wanted you to see it before we . . . uh . . . signed anything.”

“Smart move. Where is it?” She asked.

“It’s the new section, just off Rock 7. We’re in unit,” I looked at the agent with raised eyebrows, he held up his hand, “four.”

“We’ll be there in twenty minutes, out.”

The ladies arrived and after a round of haggling with the agent, Hera Hydrocarbons Inc., signed the lease. We spent the next two days getting furniture and office supplies delivered. There were two large conference rooms, separated by a removable wall, which we took down in preparation for the upcoming press conference. Fi and I left the rest of them to get things going at Headquarters, while we paid a visit to Inertial Propulsion Incorporated.

“Sir and Madam, welcome to IPI, how may I be of assistance?” The salesman asked.

“We’re off the Orion. A while back, you folks installed new drives and during our tests, one failed,” I informed him.

“Ah, yes. Well, it is probably just a minor adjustment. When would it

be convenient for our Technician to check it over?”

“It isn’t a minor adjustment, the main wheel is out of balance, so we need to arrange for removal and balancing,” Fire interjected.

The salesman gave her a condescending smile. “Yes Madam, I am quite sure that is what it seems like, to you, but our units go through rigorous quality inspections so that is just not possible. When our qualified Technical Expert checks it out, you’ll find I’m right.”

She would have probably dropped the conversation at that point as a waste of time, if it wasn’t for the attitude his smile and tone had conveyed. She doesn’t like to get . . . attitude. I didn’t even have to look at her to know what was going to happen.

The salesman took a quick step back, shocked surprise on his face, and my wife said, “I’m sure, that in most cases, you would be correct, SIR. However, I am Orion’s Propulsion Engineer . . . NOT . . . to mention, a PhD in PHYSICS. I am not some BIMBO off the street. I SAID the unit is OUT . . . OF . . . BALANCE!” During her . . . educational outburst . . . she had backed the poor guy into a corner and deciding that he had gotten what he deserved, I intervened.

“Fire . . . you’re scaring the man. We still need him to do the paperwork and if he’s petrified, it’ll be hard for him to enter data.” She looked at me, and for a second, I was in fear of my life. Well, okay it wasn’t that bad, but I was glad he was getting the treatment instead of me. I went over to the salesman, put my arm on his shoulder and said, in a confidential tone, “sorry about that, she’s a little touchy about her job, ya know? Anyway, if you could get a Tech, we’ll run him out to the ship right now.”

“Uh, of course sir, just wait here for a moment.” He scurried out a rear door like his life depended on it. I turned to Fi, mentally preparing myself for the task of cooling her off. She was calm and smiling, as if nothing had happened.

“Er . . . “

”Oh close your mouth, Honey. I was just practicing.”

Whew! “He deserved it,” I said, giving her a peck on the cheek.

About then, the Tech came out with his tool kit. He held out a hand. “Name’s Don. Mr. Sykes tells me you’ve got an IPI-37 that needs some adjusting.”

We shook. “Ice.” I glanced at Fi, she was still smiling.

“You’re Captain Ice, from the Orion! Wow, this is great!” He turned to Fi and shook her hand. “And Fire! My girlfriend is gonna have kittens when I tell her I met you, she’s a fan.” That was scary, Fi has . . . Fans? Huh.

She got a surprised look on her face, then grinned. “It’s a little more than an adjustment, but you can be the judge.”

The three of us boarded Fido and headed for Orion. Don was bubbling over with questions about Orion and the Saturn trip, which we were happy to answer. During deceleration, on approach to the ship, he made an observation.

“This is a top line Lander, Captain, but the number one drive seems to be a little out of whack.”

“Oh? How can you tell?” It seemed to be running smooth enough to me.

“Well, there’s a low level vibration every time you turn in that direction. The mount may just need aligning.” If true, this guy was good. I couldn’t feel anything.

“Well, we *have* put Fido through some tough maneuvers recently.” I gave him a short version of our trip from Earth.

“Wow, you folks just jump in with both feet.”

“Well, you know the old saying, watch out for the first step, it’s a doozy? I figure, might as well just jump, that way you have both feet under you when you hit.”

On the ship, we gave him the nickel tour, introduced him to Orion and took him to the ailing Drive. He plugged in some test equipment at a maintenance port and did his thing. He kept muttering to himself and shaking his head. At one point he slumped against the drive housing with a resigned look on his face.

“So, what’s the verdict?” Fire asked.

“The main wheel is out of balance and there’s no way to adjust for it. Man! Sykes is gonna have a fit, but I can’t fake a fix on you folks. It has to come out.” I scowled at him.

“What do you mean, fake a fix?”

Don looked up. “Well, the boss tries to keep the warranty repair costs down by having the Techs tweak the Drives past the adjustment specs. Since Drives are over specified by design, it doesn’t usually cause a problem. In

this case, there's no way I could do it without it failing again. It'll probably cost me my job, but a bad Drive's a bad Drive." He started collecting his tools, muttering, "it's not gonna be *my* fault if the first Starship has problems." He brought out a DataLog, filled the recommendation in, signed and gave us a copy. I took the Cube and put it in my pocket. The kid had a sense of honesty, unlike his boss.

"He can't fire you for doing your job, Don. If he does, there's always Arbitration."

"Yeah, but Arbitration costs money. It's easier to find another job." On the way back to Belt Central, he was pretty quiet. I was getting an inspiration.

"I know that look, Ice. But I bet I'm having the same idea," Fi said, quietly.

"Well, we could use the help and he does seem to know his stuff."

Fire swivelled her seat to face Don. "If your boss does fire you, we'd be happy to have you join our Engineering department."

His face lit up. "Really? That'd be great!" Then the smile faded. "I don't know though, you're taking Orion to Alpha Centauri. I don't think Irene would be happy about us being apart for two years."

"Tell you what, you and your girl come to the office tomorrow and we can discuss the problem," I suggested.

"We'll be there," he answered, with a face splitting grin.

Don headed to IPI and we went back to Headquarters. A few hours later, a call came from Sykes. "Captain Thomas, I'm sorry about that technician I sent, it seems he really botched the job. I'll send someone else around tomorrow."

"Mr. Sykes, the only person I want to see from you, is the person coordinating the removal and repair of that Drive."

"But sir, it's only a little out of alignment . . ."

"Sykes, you've already experienced what happens when my Propulsion Engineer gets . . . irritated. You don't even want to *think* about making *me* angry. I have the diagnosis of a qualified technical expert as to the repair requirements of that unit. Get it fixed, or I'll take you to Arbitration. Ice out." I disconnected, abruptly. Let him think about that for a while.

Next morning, bright and early, Don and Irene showed up. Fi and I talked with them for a while and hired them. Irene was actually in awe of Fire. So was I, but for different reasons. Don's first task would be overseeing the drive repair. That ought to jam a cork up Sykes' butt. We didn't know exactly where Irene could be used, but something would show up. I told them to take the day off. My guess was that Sykes would stew for a while before common sense, or maybe fear, made him call back to set up the job.

That evening, the seven of us got together to figure out a name for the new company. Hera Hydrocarbons Inc. was shifting goals. Somebody else could worry about Rare Ice, we were moving to Interstellar Exploration. After much discussion, we decided on Extra-Solar Exploration and Development.

Our double sized conference room was just barely large enough to hold everyone who came. Melissa and Dave had worked up a video presentation for the press that illustrated some of the interesting effects our test flight had uncovered. After it was over, I made a short speech about the upcoming trip, then it was Q and A time.

"Captain, will you be taking anyone with Diplomatic experience to interface with the Aliens on a first contact basis?"

"First, a comment, just to clear up definitions. There is strong evidence that the Aliens are actually from the semi-mythical land of Atlantis, so they won't be truly . . . Alien. As far as your question goes, no. If there are Atlanteans at Alpha Cee, I think diplomatic posturing would start us off on the wrong foot. We're human, they are too. Simple greetings and guarded openness should be all that's required."

"But, what will you do should they attack you?" Stupid question.

"We'll defend ourselves, of course."

At this point, Brain expanded on my . . . explanation. "It is highly doubtful that there are any people there. If there were, they would have been here by now. After all, we're right next door, cosmically speaking."

The next question brought up the issue I was hoping to avoid. "If there are habitable planets, what is your plan of action?" Well, here we go, I guess we'll need to hire a legal department when we get back.

"Any uninhabited planets we land on, will be considered the domain of Extra-Solar Exploration and Development. Our first action will be to land

an unmanned probe to test and observe the environment. That will be followed up by a manned landing and after a suitable site is secured, a habitat will be set up. Next, the Scientists will be brought down and then, we get to work.” There was an increase in the noise level. Several people vied for attention. “Quiet down a minute . . . yes, you sir . . .”

“What makes you think you can claim . . . a planet?”

“You are aware of the precedent set by Rhea and Titan, aren’t you?” I asked him.

“But those are just moons, we’re talking whole planets here.” The hubbub rose in volume. I held up my hand and they got quiet.

“I’m a resident of the Belt. To me, a rock, floating in space, is just that. I don’t see what size has to do with it. Some rocks are worthless, some have ice or metals. Really, really big ones have atmosphere, water and weather, we call those planets. Besides, we don’t intend to run the place, we just want to make a profit, to fund continued exploration. Any use of the planet, assuming there is one, will be a pay-as-you-go proposition. You pay to go there. We won’t make any guarantees and we won’t tell the colonists what to do.”

“What about the Alie . . . I mean, uh . . . Atlantean technology. Do you plan to make that information available to the public?” I wonder where this guy has been for the past seventy years.

“For a price, obviously. Ceres Corp. and Lonetree Enterprises have already purchased the Data Package and are currently constructing ships. Any purchase inquiries should be directed to our offices. Yes, Mam.”

“A new planet may have any number of dangers. How are you going to insure the safety of the explorers and the System from contamination by unknown life forms?”

“The unmanned probe should show us any, immediately, dangerous animal life and . . .”

“My boy, if I may?” Doc interrupted.

“Sure, Doctor Richards . . . be my guest,” I said, stepping back.

“Ahem, yes. Orion’s medical staff and Sickbay will be well equipped to handle any physical injuries. During the first phase of exploration we will be in sealed Environmental suits when outside of the Habitat. For the first few weeks, animals will be used to test the air, water and plants for

microorganisms which may be deleterious to our health. You may rest assured, we will deal with any problems long before we allow ourselves to return to the System. I hope that answers your question, Young Lady,” Doc said, sitting back down.

The questions continued until Melissa cut the conference short. “One last thing before you leave. EED is currently accepting applications for crew members. The contact data is in the press packages, near the door. Feel free to take a copy of the video also, thank you all for coming.” We were feeling generous and didn’t charge them for the movie.

After the news conference, Doc and Fire went to Ceres. Fire, to negotiate price with Jason Arbellus, CEO of Ceres corp. and Doc, in his words ‘to familiarize myself with the latest advances in Medical and Biological technology’. Right. I think the real reason was to see Dr. Andrea Barinsky, the Scientist who may have cracked the Chicken Problem. I think he’s sweet on her.

Even though she would only be gone a couple of weeks, saying goodbye to Fi was . . . hard. “Fire of my Heart, wear a gun, okay? We’ve been gone for a while, the Pirates might try again.”

“They wouldn’t dare, Captain Honey. After all, my husband is the most famously dangerous man in the Belt, not to mention, Captain of the Invincible Starship Orion,” she said, smiling. I held her close for a moment. If anything ever happened to Fi . . .

“Doc, keep an eye on her, she’s convinced that I’m some kind of super hero. As much as I’d like to be, I can’t be everywhere at once.”

“Have no fear, my boy. I’ll be on the alert.” I knew I shouldn’t worry so much, she’s a much better shot than me, but I couldn’t help it. They left on the regular shuttle between Belt Central and Ceres and I was missing her as soon as it cleared the dock. Oh well, work awaited.