

CHAPTER ONE

“We needs the money, Spiffy! It’s ‘pensive to keep this dippy ship from droppin’ parts all over the system! Wheeze takes what worky-derk we can gets.” The girl’s gravelly voice resonated from her chest cavity like a perverted wind instrument. She glared at her copilot, who was floating next to her on the flight deck of *The Raccoon*, an aging transfer ship.

Nixie Drake wore a purple jumpsuit that zipped up the front. Her head was freshly shaved, revealing a small birthmark high over her left ear. Her fingers were stubby, with nails chewed to the quick. The short, seventeen-year-old woman had girlish features: a doe-like face dotted with freckles, small breasts, and slender, pencil-thin arms and legs. Strangers often mistook her for a girl five years her junior, and Nixie depended on it. She could play the part with ease, concealing the truth that lay beneath her innocent exterior.

“I got a shiverin’ feeling ‘bout this run, Nix.” Spif was a handsome man, the kind of guy who looked good in anything. He was frightened and angry, but still looked like a vid-star. He gave Nixie a concerned look. She could tell he was struggling to control himself. His eyes were filled with dread. “We never shoulda done this.”

Nixie gave him an exasperated sigh, and then she hurled a torrent of words at him like a crazed dictionary with all its pages pulled apart. “Cap’n Grit calls the shotty shots ‘round here, Spiffy. He okeedokeed

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this jobber right tight, he did. We's gonna foller hors d'oeuvres like beer follers brandy on this shipper dipper." She slammed her fist against the instrument panel, which set her body tumbling about her center of gravity. Nixie was a hardened smuggler with a razor-sharp mind, but no formal education. She had been on her own for almost as long as she could remember, spending her childhood years on the Moon in the corridors of Copernicus Base. She had never spent a moment in school. Rather, she taught herself Standard English from old vid-casts and movies. Her odd dialect often confounded the people around her.

Spif's eyes narrowed. He pushed away from his seat and rendezvoused with a small piece of paper floating over Nixie's shoulder. "Damn that Ice," he muttered, venting his anger. He returned, hovering in front of Nixie. "Tell her to stop littering on the flight deck!" Spif held up a gum wrapper. "It's Fruity-Juice. Her brand." He balled it up and flicked it toward Nixie, the tiny projectile hitting her in the chest before she could snatch it out of the air. "You should get your Captain Grit to issue a command about chewing gum on the flight deck." He spat the words at her.

Nixie snatched the wad of paper. "Tells Icy yourself, Spiff-ball. Grits don't have no grouse with it. Me neither, as I sees it." She launched the crumpled wrapper back at him.

Spif snatched it out of the air, making a sour face. "I've been thinking about things, Nixie. When Captain Grit recruited me for this crew, he sent you. You spoke for him back then. You sweet-talked me into joining up." Nixie listened intently, but offered no rebuttal. "When I first saw *The Raccoon*, I couldn't believe my eyes. It hardly held an atmosphere, much less flew. I wondered what I was getting into. Grit was obviously putting together a new crew on an old ship." Nixie nodded. "I've talked to Ice and Slake about it. The same thing happened to them. None of us have ever seen Captain Grit."

"Whats yer pointy point, Spiffy?" Nixie was perturbed.

"I want to see him." Spif motioned toward a hatch on the rear bulkhead of the flight deck.

"Gritty won't sees you, Spiffy." She gave him a stern look.

Spif clenched his fists in defiance. "I have a right to speak with my captain."

"He don't sees nobody but meezy wheezy. You nose-hairs that."

Spif catapulted out of his seat, crossing the compact flight deck in the blink of an eye. He grabbed a handhold next to the hatch, bringing his body to a stop in the zero-g. There was a small plaque screwed to the portal. It read, "Josiah Grit, Captain." Spif raised his hand to knock on the hatch.

Nixie pushed away from her seat and bumped Spif as she came to rest next to him. "You's donut wants to dooze that, Spiffy. Grit's got a baddy-ass temper-tantrum, and he mighty likely send your butthole outside for a suckin' swim. How's your breasty stroke in vacuum?" Nixie gave him a sly smile. Spif was always thinking about sex. She hoped the innuendo would distract him. It didn't.

Spif balled his fists and planted them on his hips. "There are too many secrets around here, Nix. Grit's got us carrying sealed cargo. We never do that. We don't know if it's a load of crackers or some virulent disease. We've never dealt with this client before, either. I've heard he's a real hard-ass. Why are we smuggling unknown materials? It's not safe, no matter how much he pays us." Spif's tone was pleading.

Nixie could tell he hated groveling with her. It was an affront to his masculinity. She remembered the first day she had invited him to join the crew. She would never forget his initial hesitation, how he had bristled at negotiating terms with a young girl. Spif still looked good, though; maybe even better. She thought men were more handsome when they were subservient. "You gots to trusty trust Grit. He's gots more 'sperience than you does." She could tell she was losing the argument.

"It's not too much to ask, Nixie. I want to face the man and hear it from his own lips. Why are we taking these risks?" Spif was boring a hole through her with his eyes.

"Things been squeezy 'round 'bout, Spif. Wheeze had lots o' teeny tiny smugs, but nothin' coverin' over our bills. Case yer not notifiyin' much, *The 'Coon's* jiggered by bale wire and ducky tape."

"I want to see Grit."

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“He won’t see ya, Spiffer-doodle.”

“Why?”

“You nose-hair wise. Got his face all blundered up fightin’ Meridian scurity.”

“I know!” Spif nodded his head, having heard the story too many times.

“Got his-self pop popped through the forward viewport. Spent three minutes in sucky space-nothin’. Bubbled his smacker up bad. Doesn’t like company.” Nixie gave Spif a matter-of-fact look, suggesting the story explained everything.

“So what?” Spif shot back. Nixie masked her surprise. Spif had always been awed by the story. Now he was dismissing it as fiction. “I am tired of hearing you tell his damned legend. I don’t like taking orders from a...” Spif sized her up, looking for the right word. “I have never liked taking orders from a girl!” He said it like a curse. “It’s time for the captain to face me, man to man.” Spif punched the hatch control. Nothing happened.

“Heezy keeps it locky docked, Spif.” Nixie gave him her best glare.

Spif swore under his breath and started banging on the hatch. “Captain Grit! It’s Spif! I want to talk to you!”

Silence. Not a sound escaped from the captain’s cabin. Spif was rattled by it, his courage shaken by the lack of response. Nixie put her hand on his arm, urging him to refrain from another round of knocking. “Besty you nots dooze that,” she warned. “The vacuum poppy popped his ear drummers, too. Gritty’s kinda deaf. You’re lucky ducky he didn’t notice you hump dumping his hatch like that.”

Spif took a breath, glancing at the hatch and then at Nixie. “You know what I think, Nixie?” The small woman stood her ground, her hand still on Spif’s arm. “I think Captain Grit is dead, and you’re keeping it from us.”

Horror marched like an alien army across Nixie’s face. Her eyes went wild for a second, and she pulled away from Spif. Her cheeks turned red, and she sucked in a long breath. Then, with a power unexpected from such a small body, Nixie shrieked at Spif. “Hell’s bells to you, goddamn Spiffer!” The two moved apart for different reasons. Spif

gripped the handhold by the captain's hatch and pulled himself backward, fearing Nixie's wrath. The tremendous force of air from Nixie's mouth was like a vernier thruster, pushing her head back and threatening to put her spinning head to toe. Nixie kicked at the bulkhead and twisted away from Spif, propelling herself toward the flight deck hatch. Then she disappeared into the bowels of the ship.

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The first inhabitants of the Moon came to Cabeus Settlement at the Lunar South Pole in the late twenty-first century. Meridian Earth sent them there to mine ice deposits and perfect the technologies necessary for a sustained presence on the Moon. The modest outpost was very successful as men and women demonstrated humanity's keen ability to adapt to new environments. Meridian Off-World was established, and Copernicus Base, or the Cuss, became the first major habitat, tapping water ice like its predecessor and then developing a formidable ore mining and processing operation.

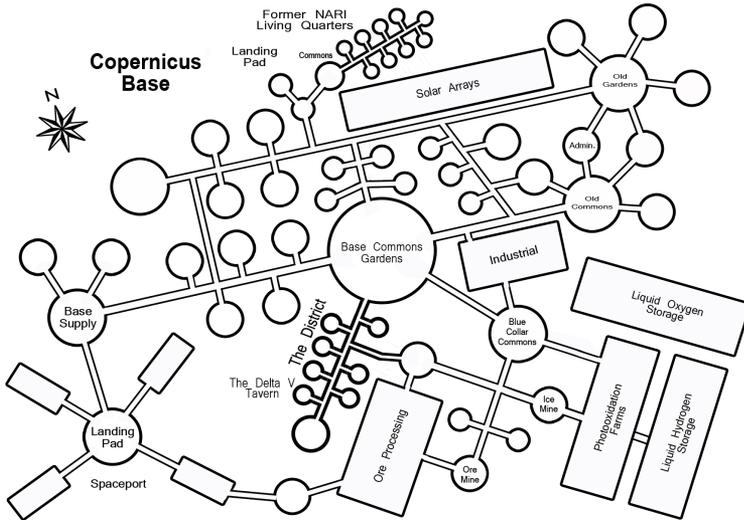
Over the one hundred fifty years since its inception, The Cuss had grown into a bustling city, sheltered under a vast complex of concrete domes and tunnels. It had served as the headquarters for Meridian Off-World, until disagreements with Meridian Earth over the establishment of a presence on Mars caused a veil of distrust to descend between them. A large base had already been established at Jackson Crater on the far side of the Moon, and Meridian Off-World relocated their center of operations there, to avoid the prying eyes of their Terran counterpart.

Copernicus Base remained an important industrial center, its spaceport serving as a major waypoint for lunar commerce. Her vast stores of oxygen and hydrogen, drawn from the lunar ice deposits deep beneath the surface, provided for her own needs as well as thousands of other small settlements and mining operations. The Cuss was a popular and necessary regional supply depot. Her corridors were filled with a human stew of every sort of person imaginable.

The Copernican spaceport and mining operations were located on the south side of the base. This was the realm of the hardworking men and women who wrestled the native elements from the grip of their

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lunar mother and poured out their health and longevity to produce the raw materials used to build Meridian's off-world empire.



A small complex of domes, threaded together with a central corridor, was nestled conveniently between the spaceport and the ore processing plant. This was "The District," the underbelly of the Cuss, where all manners of liquid and physical pleasures were available. Those who labored hard went there to lose themselves, their minds occupied with lust for a cold drink and hot sex.

A lone figure walked southward from the large garden in the Base Commons toward The District. He had a weathered face and hard eyes. His hair was heavily oiled and slicked back. There was a tattoo of a woman on his forearm, and he walked with a determined step. His body was lean, and there was a sizable bulge between his legs. The protuberance swung back and forth beneath his pants as he moved.

There was an unspoken threat in Pierre Antoine, an aura of melancholy mixed with a sociopathic disregard. A naked woman stood at the threshold of one of the brothels that lined the central corridor of The District. Pierre looked at her, first gazing deeply into her eyes and then at her body. They both knew she was eye candy for potential

customers. She had no pride, no shame. She appeared to be a bag of used skin. What little color remained in her pale complexion drained away as his eyes lingered on her. Pierre knew he had screwed her. He knew because of her reaction to him, rather than any memory he might have had of their encounter. He gave her a menacing smile, and she withdrew into the brothel. Pierre laughed to himself, amused by the absurdity of a naked whore trying to hide her body.

He walked toward the end of the corridor and paused in front of the last dome on the right. It was the Delta V tavern, a popular watering hole. He checked his wrist comp and then looked back the way he had come, scanning the passage for any possible threat. A man in his position had to be careful. Then, he pushed his way through the massive doors that covered the entrance to the tavern.

A woman of older middle age stood silently behind the bar. She was a portly woman, powerfully built. She glanced in his direction, and their eyes met. Pierre knew Kate Sloan. She had been the owner of the Delta V for as long as he had been in the Cuss. Unlike the whore in the corridor, Kate didn't flinch at the sight of him. She held his gaze with a steady confidence. She was the only woman he knew who wasn't threatened by him. He didn't care. She was too old and fat to be of any use to him.

There was a modest late-afternoon crowd in the public area of the tavern. Perhaps half of the tables were occupied, some with lone drinkers, others with men and women with sex on their minds. A bank of large viewports filled the outer rim of the dome, offering a panoramic view of the stark lunar landscape and the spaceport. Several transfer ships stood on the pad.

Pierre Antoine turned away from the scene and studied the far corner of the room. A man was sitting alone at a small table, tucked into a half-alcove in the wall. The concavity offered a modicum of privacy. The man looked up and gestured toward Pierre. He nodded in return, threading his way through the tables toward him.

"Pull up a seat," the man said.

Pierre sat down across from him. He had known Remson Burke for many years. Remson ran a large shipping business, and the two men

had worked together more than once. While most of Remson's work was legitimate, the projects he pursued with Pierre were not.

"Been a while, Rem." Pierre caught the eye of a barmaid and summoned her with a quick twist of his wrist.

"Like a planetary alignment, Pierre," Remson muttered. "My needs and your services come together, and we make a deal."

A young woman stepped up to their table, her scalp bald, her jumpsuit worn but clean. Pierre looked her over like a rancher examining a cow. "What'll you have?" she asked.

He swung his arm smoothly off the table and reached for her. As his hand grew close to her buttocks, the woman shifted her weight, moving her body away from him. Pierre let his hand drop to his side. "A Forty-Two, if you please, mademoiselle." He spoke French only to his female conquests.

"Coming right up," she replied evenly, turning away from the table.

"Nice piece of meat," Pierre commented. "I could find a use for her."

"I wouldn't, if I were you," Remson countered. "That's Kate Sloan's daughter. You touch her, and your corpse will likely be found with your head bashed in."

Pierre rolled his eyes, unimpressed. "The old woman doesn't threaten me."

"She should. Kate's like a mother to everybody in The District."

Pierre studied the cost-benefit ratio of adding the nubile barmaid to his collection, then decided that he had better things to think about. He turned back to Burke. "Why am I here?"

"I have a certain friend at Rinker's Knot. He needs some supplies."

Pierre raised an eyebrow. "Rinker's is way the hell out on Vesta. It's a four-month trip to the Asteroid Belt."

"That's right. My guy is used to paying shipping charges. It will be worth your while."

"How much product does he require?" Pierre felt excitement rising within him. He loved closing on large orders.

"I'd say thirty."

"Three zero?"

"That's right. All female, under the age of fifteen. No fat ones. Any skin color will do."

Pierre glanced across the tavern; the barmaid was returning with his drink. He smiled at her as she approached the table. "There's your Forty-Two, Mr. Antoine."

Pierre was surprised. "You know my name."

"I do," she replied confidently.

"Then you know I can have you, if I want." His mouth smiled, but his eyes were cold.

"I have refused much more powerful men than you, Mr. Antoine." The woman turned away dismissively and went on about her work.

"God, I want that," Pierre muttered.

"I think you'd find her too much to handle," Remson remarked.

"I doubt that." Pierre took a long pull on his drink.

"She's just like her mother. If you're going to mess with her, wait until this job is done. I don't want your death messing things up."

The Frenchman laughed. "Okay, okay."

"How long will it take you to get the shipment ready?"

"Three weeks, maybe more. That's a lot of units. It will require considerable discretion."

"I'll want to inspect the cargo and sign off on it before you depart for the Belt."

"No problem." Pierre gave Remson Burke a toothy grin. "Now, let's talk about payment."

* * *

Meridian Corporation was the largest commercial enterprise in the solar system. Meridian Earth had been established in the late 21st century to develop technology for sustainable lunar prospecting and habitation. As the company grew and established a footing on the Moon, the Meridian Off-World Division was created. Then, as humans began to colonize Mars, Meridian Mars was formed. Conflicts arose between Meridian Earth and her off-world divisions, and the company

fractured. Meridian Corporation established its headquarters at Jackson Base on the far side of the Moon and thrived. Meridian Earth could not compete economically with her off-world counterpart because of the immense cost of placing goods into Earth orbit.

Space Elevator Four hung majestically in geosynchronous orbit above the South China Sea. Tethered by six slender nanotube ribbons anchored on the Island of Sumatra, approximately one hundred sixty kilometers south-southwest of Singapore, the platform was the orbital gateway to Southeast Asia. The elevator had been in service for a year and was one of five such nanolifts girdling the equator. Each of these revolutionary orbital systems provided low-cost transit to and from the Earth's surface. The elevators were causing a seismic shift in the economic balance between Earth-based manufacturers and the gigantic Meridian Corporation that had ruled off-world commerce for over two hundred years.

Sprite Logan stood quietly before one of the immense viewports on the observation deck. She wore a dark-blue jumpsuit with a scarf wrapped around her neck. A woolen watch cap was pulled over her head, covering her ears. She was a slender young woman, six months into her twentieth year. Her eyes were bright, revealing her keen intellect. Her body was lean and muscular, her breasts firm, her hands small yet powerful. Her skin was deeply tanned, unusual for someone who had spent the last three years on the Ice Line, the boundary between the outer gas giants and the inner rocky planets. She could feel her heart racing in her chest, partly from excitement and partly from fear. She had spent four months on a transfer ship from Rinker's Knot, a supply base on the asteroid Vesta, and was now at the threshold of her college career. She was on her way to Cornell University's orbital campus, located at the Earth-Moon L1 point. In a couple of hours, she would board a jumpship that would take her to her new life.

Sprite watched the scene spread before her. Scores of spacecraft were clustered around the waist of the platform with even more cued nearby, waiting for their turn to approach the docks. The ships moved in slow motion, their AI guidance systems chattering back and forth, choreographing a graceful mating dance. The tranquil scene belied the well-orchestrated chaos a few decks below her. Men and women, partnered with intricate machines and AIs, directed the loading and

offloading of passengers and cargo into the central core of the platform. The observation deck was perched at the top, or starward, end of the elevator. A hundred meters below, on the earthward end of the platform, a long tubular passageway jutted out, paralleling the orbital plane. Six nanotube ribbons hung down at intervals along the structure, disappearing into the atmosphere below. Half a dozen nanolift pods, each embracing its own ribbon, moved up and down the slender cords in an endless cycle, carrying their loads from orbit to the Earth's surface and back again.

Sprite felt the synthetic gravity pressing the soles of her feet against the decking. It was new technology, touted by Meridian Corporation as one of the company's great scientific advancements. The boast was one of Meridian's many lies. Sprite knew full well who had developed the new innovation.

Sprite's uncle was Prescott Logan, a comp specialist and encryption expert. His wife Maria was an accomplished physicist. They had become entangled with Meridian Corporation almost twenty-five years earlier and had fled to the Asteroid Belt. Maria's goal had been to make their secret home more comfortable, and it was she who had developed the synthetic gravity system. A couple of years ago, she and Prescott licensed the technology to Meridian through a dummy corporation. The deal made them financially independent. That wealth was making Sprite's college education possible.

Sprite gazed through the large viewport, feeling a wave of gratitude fill her. The pull of the synthetic gravity and the amazing generosity of her aunt and uncle mingled within her, creating a profound moment she could not share. She was proud of her family, but she knew firsthand how important it was to keep a low profile.

Three years earlier, Sprite's parents, Hunter and Adrianna Logan, had been working on a project to create nanoscale machines that could be taught to destroy harmful pathogens. When a saboteur's bomb unleashed the un-programmed nanobots, the tiny machines killed many of their friends. Amos Cross, the leader of Meridian Corporation, wanted to use the bots as a weapon. He forced her parents to work at Meridian 6, a research settlement in the Asteroid Belt. When they refused to cooperate, Amos had one of his agents kidnap Sprite. Her

parents rescued her, but now they were enemies of Amos Cross, his hatred for them burning like an eternal flame. Since that time, they had been hiding in her aunt and uncle's home.

Sprite looked down at her carry-on bag, making sure it was wedged between her leg and the aluminum silicate glass of the viewport. She glanced around, taking inventory of the people around her. She took note of an unshaven man sitting a few meters away. He was staring intently at one of the overhead screens, which protruded from the ceiling. He wasn't interested in her. Sprite's eyes shifted to a woman dressed in a gray jumpsuit. She was standing across the observation deck, looking directly at her. Sprite turned away and stiffened. Her father had warned her. "Don't react," he had said. "Stay calm. Blend in. Never run." Sprite peeked at her again out of the corner of her eye. The mysterious woman was looking in her direction. Sprite turned away slowly, gripping the rail that ran along the viewport and willing her body to be still. There was a sudden movement in her peripheral vision. She glanced up, expecting the woman to be at her side. Instead, a young man who had been sitting between them rose from his seat. The strange woman's face burst into a radiant smile. She mouthed something, perhaps the man's name, and stepped toward him. They embraced warmly. Sprite let out her breath.

She tried to shake off her anxiety. As much as she was excited about going to college, she had dreaded the long trip. Although she had used three different names since leaving her parents, she still felt exposed. At any moment, one of Amos Cross's security officers might detain her. Many times over the last four months, she had wanted to turn around and return to the safety of her uncle's home, but Sprite wasn't going to succumb to her fear. To do so would mean that Amos Cross had won.

Sprite reached down and felt the card comp in her pocket. The tiny device was the size of an old-fashioned credit card and contained Wiley/Athena, Sprite's artificial intelligence and his mate. In reality, her card comp hosted a compressed copy of the digital beings. Wiley/Athena had taken up residence in the Deep Core Retention Well beneath Meridian Corporation's headquarters at Jackson Base. The card comp periodically synced with the real AIs, permitting Sprite to stay in touch with her friends. Sprite wanted to talk to Wiley/Athena, but she

knew it would not be wise to do so in public. She patted the slender rectangle and smiled.

In a few days, she would be studying advanced digital intelligence on Cornell's orbital campus. Her father's best friend, Tyson Edwards, taught there. The educational habitat offered top-flight instructors and a secure environment. Sprite couldn't wait to see a familiar face. Uncle Tyson and his son Kell had been with the Logans when they were under Meridian's thumb. Sprite felt a warm tingle through her body at the thought of seeing Kell again.

A young girl brushed by her. Sprite jumped, chastising herself for letting down her guard. She watched the girl walk away from her. The child was alone, sliding her fingers along the handrail; her eyes were glued to the sweeping panorama beyond the viewport. She was oblivious to everyone and everything around her. The girl couldn't have been more than ten years old. Her body still sported a layer of baby fat. The elastic of her pants was pulled way up above her waistline. She wore a multicolored top, which was tucked into her slacks; the image of a popular children's ANI character was emblazoned on the back. She had a beaded purse slung over her shoulder. It flopped back and forth as she bounced along. Her blond hair was shoulder length; an Earther, Sprite reasoned. Off-world women kept their hair short. It was more convenient in zero-g. The girl was the personification of innocence. Sprite couldn't remember the last time she felt that way.

Sprite turned away, refocusing her gaze on the ships cued up at the docks. There was a sudden motion to her left. She looked back toward the young girl. She was gone. There was no place for her to go, Sprite thought. She pivoted away from the viewport and glanced down the aisle that curved around the circular observation deck. In the distance, she saw a flash of color, then the image of the ANI character bobbing up and down. The child's mother, a woman with copper-colored hair, gripped the young girl by the shoulder and dragged her quickly through the press of humanity loitering on the deck. As the pair disappeared around the curvature of the observation area, Sprite could tell the youngster was upset with her mother. Sprite understood. She had felt that way about her mother, too.

There was a commotion behind her. A woman shrieked. Sprite whirled around to see a man and woman pushing their way through the crowd. “Molly! Molly Winters! Where are you?” The woman’s eyes were constantly moving, darting back and forth. The man with her was beside himself. He was panting, obviously exhausted from the frantic search. He planted his feet and tipped up his head. Then, with a loud voice, he spoke. “Any of you see a girl, ten years old, blond hair, about this tall?” He gestured with his hand. “She’s wearing a ‘Wiry Willie’ sweatshirt.”

“Where is my daughter?” the woman wailed. “She's gone!”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dan Moore lives with his wife Diana near Syracuse, New York. He is a freelance video producer and the proud father of two sons, two daughters-in-law and three grandsons. He holds degrees from Cornell, Boston and Syracuse Universities. Dan has written two previous novels, The Rings of Alathea, and Meridian's Shadow, which is the first novel in the Meridian's Shadow series. He is currently writing his fourth novel, Broken Bridge.