



PIPER DEEZ
and the Case of the
WINTER PLANET

M. Fenn

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FOR ROY

Piper Deez

and the Case of the Winter Planet

My small ship floated in synchronous orbit. A planet covered in a never-ending blizzard circled below—Alta-na-Schell, the solar system’s last reliable source of myatritium-laced ore, the fuel that keeps civilization running. Permission to land was long in coming, and I waited impatiently, lounging at the ship’s control board. I uncrossed my arms and flexed my fingers, willing the port authority to make up its mind. The new silver tattoo on the first finger of my right hand, my wedding band, caught my eye as it often did, bright against my dark skin.

I’m a newlywed. Handfasted six months, with only one night of bliss to show for it. Once I finished this job, there was still three months’ travel standing between me and Shyreï.

“*Bacza*,” I cursed under my breath. Was everyone on holiday down there?

Raging winds and constant subfreezing air temperatures had prevented mining Alta-na-Schell’s ore at first. That is, until laser drills owned by the Drell Consortium Mining Company—my employer, also my clan—tapped the heat of the planet’s core and drone ships installed a large, clear dome strong enough to hold back the weather. A myatritium mine and the town to support it sprang up soon after and prospered. Eye of the Storm, they called it. From orbit, all I could see was a whiteout. Neither that nor the radio silence was welcoming.

<“*Solo class 37-482, come in. Over.*”>

Finally. “Solo 37-482 here. Over.”

<“*Permission to land granted. Execute flight plan 14-K33. You’re looking for berth 106. Welcome to Alta-na-Schell. Over.*”>

“Thank you,” I responded. “Over and out. Computer, you heard that?”

<“*Engaged. We will dock in five minutes, nineteen seconds.*”>



“Detective Deez, it’s a pleasure.”

I recognized the woman extending her hand in greeting from the case files. The top of Manager Tchivon’s head only came to my chin. Her hair was the color of burnished steel and she wore the standard business suit of a mining executive, wrinkle-free and spotless.

I smiled to myself as I offered the palm of my hand in greeting. She pressed hers to mine. Mining executives stayed as far away from actual mining as they possibly could. The muscles in her hand were strong, though. A single ridge across her pale forehead marked her as a member of the Jevrem clan.

Clans—large, extended families—are what hold this society together and threaten to tear it apart. Hierarchy’s an ugly thing if you kneel at the bottom of it. Not so bad if you sit on top and don’t think too hard. The Drell clan perches on top, along with the Toshir and Edos, each trying to shove the others further down.

“Manager Tchivon, thank you for meeting me.”

“Not at all. My division is honored the company chose to send you. Your reputation precedes you.”

“I’m flattered.” I turned to the ship. “Computer: standard lock-down, please.”

<“*Engaged. Good luck with your case.*”>

Tchivon led me out of the docking area and through the terminal. The building looked like the terminals on the two other mining planets in this system. Even though the others were managed by my family’s competitors, the Toshir and Edos, they were all the same. The ships’ berths were always in fine

working order, while the ticket counters and waiting areas were run down, as were the ubiquitous cafés selling overpriced food. I shifted the pack on my back as we passed tables crowded with hungry customers and stepped through the terminal's large, tinted glass entrance doors.

The air was warm and stale, recycled but not as bad as I was expecting. As we waited for a cab, I looked down into the city, a bustling place only a few miles in diameter. A second industry of tourism had developed around people's fascination with Eye of the Storm's location and semi-miraculous ability to survive. Several thousand people lived here, working in the mine or in one of the businesses that kept things running. The streets were crowded with people, all sizes, shapes, colors and clanmarks, residents pushing by the gawking tourists. Vehicles—both personal- and business-class—zipped or lumbered through the air. Above them all floated the clear dome and the white light of the eternal winter kept at bay.

I ran a finger over the ridges on the left side of my face that marked me as Drell. "What's developed while I was en route?"

"Two more thefts."

"Shipment gone and the guard dead like the first?"

Tchivon shook her head. "We increased security after the first crime, but *two* guards were killed in the second incident anyway. We doubled the guards again after that, and armed them with more firepower, too. No deaths the third time, but more ore was taken."

"What happened next?"

"After the last robbery, we shut down the loading bay, awaiting your arrival. Everyone hopes..." Her words trailed off, her face crinkled in concern.

"What about the local police? Have they found anything?"

She shook her head again. "No. They conducted an investigation, but...to be honest, that's why I requested the consortium's help. This case is out of their league. And you've heard the noises Toshir is making about it?"

I nodded. The Toshir clan was questioning the Drell's ability to deal with this problem. I, or one of my colleagues,

would have been brought in eventually, regardless of Tchivon's call for help. A vote of no confidence in the world assembly could lose my family this planet.

But Tchivon's admission concerning the police surprised me. It's not like theft and murder aren't common on the mining planets—or anywhere else, for that matter. The local cops usually have a good setup in place. And I knew the man in charge here, Lohoot Degon.

"Any clues?" I asked.

"Perhaps. No fingerprints or DNA, and the surveillance equipment was taken offline. The ore isn't showing up on the offplanet black market like we'd expect it to, either. But the four guards who survived the last attack gave statements."

"What did they say?"

"Nothing very useful." She raised her hand, drawing the attention of a cab just gliding in. "Apparently, the thieves wore masks and had some sort of device that incapacitated the guards."

"Interesting. I'd like to begin my investigation as soon as possible."

The small cab pulled down alongside us and opened its doors.

<"Two seats available, kind visitors. Quiet, clean, and affordable transportation anywhere in town,"> a pleasant, electronic voice announced, apparently programmed to respond generically to anyone needing a ride. Everyone was a tourist.

"After you." Tchivon stepped back, letting me enter the car first.

<"Destination, please?">

"The Pavilion," the executive answered, taking her seat.

The car lifted away from the pavement and headed downtown.



About the Author

M. Fenn was born in Salt Lake City, Utah and grew up in Omaha, Nebraska. She's lived in eight U.S. states and visited forty more, as well as three Canadian provinces. M. Fenn has been a veterinary technician, a radio dj, and an office manager for a house museum, among other things. She has rescued marine mammals in California, seen the full moon rise over Chimney Rock in Colorado, hiked Chaco Canyon in New Mexico, marched for women's rights in D.C., and driven U.S. Hwy 50 from end to end by herself. She spent one winter with the ghost of Herman Melville, reading his first editions and watching the great whale of snow-covered Mt. Greylock from his study window.

Apparently permanently stuck to North America, M. Fenn now lives and writes in the wilderness of southern Vermont with her furniture maker husband and a clowder of ghost cats. Her short story "Chlorophyll Is Thicker than Water" can be found in Candlemark & Gleam's 2016 *To Shape the Dark*. Her near-future dystopian novella "To The Edges" begins *Crossed Genres' 2013 Winter Well: Speculative Novellas About Older Women*. Her alternate history novella "So The Taino Call It" appears in Candlemark & Gleam's 2012 *Substitution Cipher*. Science fiction seems to be M. Fenn's main bag, but she also tinkers with horror and fantasy. She blogs spasmodically at mfennwrites.wordpress.com.

About the Illustrator

Chelsea Neveu lives and works in Adams, Massachusetts. She studied studio art and art history at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, where she concentrated in painting. Carrying a passion for the ever-changing scenery within the Berkshire hills, Chelsea is most interested in creating foggy, atmospheric works — but sometimes, they take place in outer space. Chelsea can be contacted at chelsea.neveu@gmail.com.

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