

PIPER DEEZ
AND THE CASE OF THE WINTER PLANET

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First edition published 2017
by The Reckless, an imprint of Candlemark & Gleam
Second edition published 2025
by Candlemark & Gleam

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Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
In Progress

eISBN: 978-1-936460-81-6

Cover art by Chelsea Neveu

Editor: Athena Andreadis

www.candlemarkandgleam.com

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.

* * *

Manager Tchivon invited me to dinner and after dropping my pack in the claustrophobic room—flattery didn’t appear to cover the accommodations—I joined her in the Pavilion’s brightly lit and immaculate restaurant.

The décor left me a little queasy. Its lines were simple and delicate, but with a tendency to wander off plumb. Our host—a small woman with a pretty nose—was a welcome distraction.

“Table for two?” she asked, a shy smile on her face.

I smiled in kind. A year ago, I might have offered to buy her a drink after her shift ended and seen where the evening took us. But now I’m an old *shidahn*, as my grandfather jokes derisively—not only wedded but handfasted to one person only—off the market. No more fun with strangers in strange beds for me—a change of habit I’m gladly getting used to, but change is never easy.

We followed the host into the busy dining room. People in business suits, all likely associated with the mining company or its service divisions, filled the tables. Tchivon acknowledged a few of them as we walked past. Tourists were also plentiful, some discussing the insulated tube tours they would be taking in the morning.

Our host offered us a comfortable-looking table, took our drink order, and hurried away.

I turned my attention to the menu screen built into the table. “What’s good here?”

“I’m partial to the shrimp—they’re bio-cultured in Eye of the Storm.”

“Fascinating. How much of its own food does the town grow?”

Tchivon gave a rueful laugh. “Hardly enough. But it’s getting there.”

I nodded encouragingly. “I’ve read some of the reports you’ve sent the consortium. My family’s very interested.”

“I’m sure they are.” Her tone was dry.

“Sarcasm, Manager Tchivon?”

“Not at all, Detective. I’m grateful for the Drell’s entrepreneurial spirit. I wouldn’t have this job otherwise.”

“You like your work?”

Always a loaded question, but Tchivon responded with genuine enthusiasm, going on in some detail about her plans for the mine. Soon, though, her words stumbled and her smile faded.

“This tragedy has been difficult, of course,” she admitted. “I knew the guards who were killed. They were good people.” She shook her head. “I lie awake at night thinking of what I could have done differently—anything to prevent their deaths.”

“What could you have done?” I meant that as a rhetorical, comforting question, but I wondered at the answer, too. From her description, the investigation of the killings and thefts had been handled properly, but that hadn’t been enough, had it?

Tchivon chose my first meaning. “You’re right. I follow protocol in all aspects of the company’s operations. I would have to be clairvoyant to have known this was going to happen. It’s just…” She took a long drink. “I’m the one in charge. I should have saved them somehow.” She sighed heavily.

I nodded. “I understand how you’re feeling, Manager Tchivon, but you shouldn’t take this on your shoulders. It’s much too heavy a load.”

She emptied her glass. “Thank you. You’re more than kind.” She chuckled drily. “Even though I must be on your list of suspects.”

I laughed too. “Everyone on Alta-na-Schell is on my list right now.”

“Of course.”

But I’d looked into the mining executive’s record—she was a shining star in the consortium’s constellation of employees, poised for bigger things. It seemed unlikely she would sabotage that. Unless she had a *very* good reason.

Our conversation turned to more amiable topics after the meal arrived—we had both ordered the shrimp—and I felt the tension of a new planet and new people slipping away. Tchivon’s

handheld chirped as we considered the dessert menu. She pursed her lips as she read the message.

“Problems?”

“My granddaughter’s ill.”

“Anything serious?”

“No...but my son’s working third shift at the mine tonight and can’t find anyone to stay with her. I’m sorry to cut our evening short.”

“Family comes first. I completely understand.”

Tchivon stood. “Thank you. But please, stay for dessert. I’ve already put the bill on the company tab.”

I smiled as we touched palms in farewell. She hurried out of the restaurant and I turned once more to the menu screen.

“Let me go.”

The demand came from a young couple seated across the way. A broad-shouldered woman, her chestnut hair clipped short, face bearing a small clanmark I only vaguely recognized, held the wrist of the other woman tightly. She, grimacing and trying to pull away, bore no clanmark.

“I thought you liked it when I took charge.”

“Yes, but—” She shook her head, eyes downcast. “Not now, Kenta. People are watching.”

The big woman gave a short, harsh laugh. “I don’t care. You belong to me.”

“Please, don’t do this.” Her eyes caught mine, flicked away just as quickly, but then returned.

A plea for help perhaps? Couldn’t hurt to find out. I pushed my chair back and approached their table. “Good evening.”

The aggressor looked up, scowling until she recognized the ridges on my face. Anger turned to confusion. “May I be of service, *sala*? It’s an honor...”

“Is there a problem here? I couldn’t help but overhear—” My gaze focused on the hand pinning the other to the table.

She lifted it away as if she’d been stung and tried to smile. “My apologies. I didn’t realize how loud we’d gotten. We...um...” She gestured toward the other woman. “Her name’s Shilpa. I give her to you and beg your forgiveness. Please. Take her.”

Both my and Shilpa’s eyes widened at that.

“That won’t be necessary.” I smiled at Shilpa. “I’m Piper Deez. Are you all right?”

She nodded, but said nothing. Her red hair was pulled back in an elaborate curl, and an almost sweet smile crossed her lips as her grey eyes locked on mine. The look she gave her tablemate cut deep, however. *Frightened but not fragile*, I thought as I admired the way her low-cut, dark purple dress hugged her willowy figure. Gaudy in an old-fashioned way I found charming.

I returned my attention to her companion. “I take her under my protection, nothing more. You won’t hurt her again.”

“I...” She looked at each of us and slumped into her chair. “As you wish, *sala*.”

I smiled at Shilpa again before returning to my table and ordering dessert. Reading my case notes, I glanced occasionally at the couple. They were quiet until after the server, a young man bearing a strong resemblance to the cute-nosed host, arrived with my chocolate raspberry torte.

Kenta stood in a huff when I was halfway through my treat. “Are you coming?”

Shilpa frowned and shook her head. Kenta stormed off, shoving another diner out of her way and shooting a surreptitious glare at me. I raised an eyebrow and turned back to my notes.

“May I join you?”

Startled, I looked up into Shilpa’s eyes. “Certainly.” I motioned to the chair opposite me. “You lost your companion?”

She shrugged as she sat. “So it would seem. She doesn’t like being told what to do with her property.”

“Slavery’s been illegal in this solar system for five hundred years.”

Shilpa pointed to her face. Its features were sharp, but with a touch of baby fat around the cheeks, and the skin was smooth. No ridges of cartilage graced it. “I’m clanless. Those rules don’t apply.”

“They do where I’m concerned.”

The clanless cower at the bottom of society’s pyramid. Exiled from their families, sometimes for the thinnest reason, forced to have their clanmarks removed, not quite shunned but certainly not accepted, they’re treated badly. At best.

“That’s very kind of you, and I shouldn’t complain. She paid good money to close out my contract with the pleasure house downtown—what would be a dowry for someone with family.”

Her voice dropped. “And she claims to love me...we’re betrothed, you see.” Shilpa shook her head and raised her hand. “Pardon my going on. I’m Shilpa Raytan.”

I touched the offered palm with mine. “I’m glad to meet you. Would you like a drink?”

“I would.” She smiled in a way that warmed the room, or so it seemed to this lonely detective. “But I’d rather have it somewhere else. Somewhere more fun. Would you join me?”

Old shidahn, I thought as I sat back down. But what could a drink hurt? Or a dance?

It could hurt a lot, that small voice living in the back of my head pointed out. My resistance to things leading to other things was weak, and those grey eyes watching me were not helping. I cleared my throat, my smile turning sheepish.

“Sounds great, but I’m still adjusting to the planet’s gravity. It sometimes takes me a night to feel normal. Can I take a rain check?”

“Some other time, then. I should go.” She leaned forward to whisper in my ear. “I want to thank you for helping me, though.” Her breath made my skin tingle and I closed my eyes. *Old shidahn*, I told myself again. Shilpa pulled back, a small smile on her lips, and I wondered what those lips tasted like.

“You don’t need to thank me.”

“But I want to.” She tilted her head to one side and studied me. “Good night, Piper Deez.”

I coughed and put on my best patrician voice. “Good night, Shilpa Raytan.”

I watched her leave and let out a long breath. Frustrated and tired, I pressed a key on the table, informing the server that I was finished. Leaving the restaurant, I set off for my small room with its empty bed wishing Shyreï was here to share it with me, to share everything. She would have loved the shrimp.

* * *

The hallway was dimmer than it had been when I went to dinner. It was hard to see anything but shadows.

“Detective Deez?” a smoker’s voice asked.

I stepped back but it was too late; the elevator doors had already shut. One of the shadows punched me in the stomach, doubling me over. Another one shoved me onto the floor. I tried to pull my gun out of its holster, but the second shadow—bigger than the first—kicked me hard in

the back and sides with heavy, pointed boots that felt like they were built for the job. I instinctively rolled over toward my assailant's legs, wrapped them up in my own limbs, and rolled again, knocking the shadow over. I jumped to my feet, gun finally in hand, and looked down at my attacker. It was Shilpa's dinner companion.

"Why am I not surprised?" I said wearily.

I glanced between the two women. The larger one—Kenta, I recalled—stabbed her finger at me, but clenched her fist instead when she saw the gun.

"You've ruined my betrothal."

I laughed. "Shilpa's your mate-to-be and you gave her to me like you did? I'd say you're the one doing the ruining. Speaking of which," I added. "Why is this even an issue?"

"It—she—wasn't a formal gift," she snarled. "She's still mine." Kenta took a breath and looked me in the eye. "And we would have made it up without your interference. Shilpa likes how I treat her."

Her gaze shifted and her partner rushed me. I pushed her aside, but that was all the advantage Kenta needed. She leapt to her feet and hit my temple, dropping me back to my knees. My gun hit the carpet. I shook my head, trying to remain conscious, and arched my neck so I could see what was going on. The other woman grabbed the gun, almost fumbling it, and pointed it at me.

"Do it!" Kenta hissed. "Kill the swell."

"No!" A panicked whisper came from the raspy voice. "I didn't know she'd turn out to be Drell. Do you want to bring her whole clan down on us? This'll ruin all our—"

"Shut up," Kenta growled. "I'll do it, then. Give me the gun, coward."

She pushed my head back down. I struggled against her, expecting to feel the muzzle on the back of my head when the sound of the elevator doors opening startled us all.

"*Bacza!* Let's go! "

One of them kicked me in the stomach and ran off as I collapsed.

* * *