

After Launch

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After Launch

by [StarryEyedSpaceGirl](#)

Summary

The continuation of Cee and Ezra's story after launch. I finished watching the movie feeling completely satisfied, but also feeling like I would go crazy trying to figure out what happened to this duo next. I love space dad Ezra and his brilliant adopted bad-ass book worm, and I want to see some real CLOSURE here people!!

So I created it for myself. I hope you enjoy the attempt!

EDIT:: I also wanted to tack on the playlist I created for Ezra and Cee that inspired me to create this story :)

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/4w14HOA4NVMMWFKxCMwx5g?si=UBkl0weIROupqzkUDQ6lrw>

Cheers friends!

Elation and Consternation

Chapter Summary

Hello all! I just wanted to add on this quick note to say that this story inspired me to make a Cee and Ezra playlist on Spotify, which I really felt personified my fav duo and the strange world they live in. If you want to check it out, the link is here —> (<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/4wl4HOA4NVMMWFKxCMwx5g?si=qF10h0OSmqBcmI79YZ-zQ>)

Anyway, cheers friends, and enjoy!

The atmosphere was burning bright outside the pod windows, and hope was at last burning brightly within, fueling a smile that had rarely been seen on Cee's face these last few years of her young life. When she at last opened her eyes, she could see the station rising up to meet them between the receding tongues of flame.

The green moon was at last behind her.

Or rather, behind *them*.

A glance to her left revealed that her pod mate's face was pale, his breathing harsh. Beads of sweat dotted his forehead as his face twitched with every jolt of the pod. He hadn't opened his eyes or spoken since she'd helped strap him on board.

His face fell into shadow as they breached atmo and were consumed by the dark vacuum of space. The pod lights activated, casting a pale glow by which she could see the interior of the escape vehicle they'd commandeered. Reality settled in as she searched the control board for anything that looked familiar. Nothing there sparked a memory.

A pod is a pod is a pod.

She clutched at the flight manual in her hands like it was a lifeline.

"Well, I'm sure if there's one thing upon which... we can both agree. That's one moon I'm happy to see the backside of... and will be in no hurry... to return to."

Cee shot Ezra a worried look. His frown had eased since the shaking of the pod had lessened, but the lines remained permanently etched between his eyebrows. Despite his valiant attempt at humor, she could tell he was fighting to remain conscious.

"If I recall correctly, you've got a rented space... up on that freighter."

"Yes."

"You ever docked a pod before?"

The empty space where his right arm had once been seemed to glare at her.

In her mind, that he had deserved to get shot wasn't up for debate. But for some time she had come to regret that her actions had caused him the loss of his arm. Not only had she deprived him of an essential tool in his line of work, but it was now creating a possible problem with their escape. He was clearly in no position to pilot the pod, and she'd never done a radio call before.

Not that she could have predicted that she would team up with, and even come to like the man who was her father's killer.

She bit her lip and worried the frayed edge of the book in her hand. "Not exactly, but... I've seen my father do it enough times. If I could just read the manual, then maybe..."

"That's a good start." He rolled his head to look at her, panting as he adjusted in his seat. He continued with difficulty. "Why don't you do some digging into that manual... concentrate on... getting this accomplice of our escape... into port while I... talk to control."

His words, though riddled with discomfort, eased the hard knot of anxiety that had taken root in the pit of her stomach. Talking on the radios had been her biggest concern.

"What's your docking number?"

"2742."

"Excellent. I have every confidence that you... will lead us safely home. Just... start reading up Little Bird. See if there's some sort of... automatic docking procedures you can engage. We clear?"

She nodded. "Clear."

The ghost of a cocksure grin momentarily overshadowed the pain on his pale features. "That a girl."

His confidence in her bolstered her courage. Her hands started flipping open the pages of the manual as if they already knew where to begin their search. As her eyes scanned the pages, she could hear Ezra grunting as he reached forward to hit the comms.

"Gridstock this is... 2742 on approach requesting dock... post haste."

When the reply wasn't immediate, the tight knot returned to Cee's stomach. Her eyes flicked to Ezra once more. He was lying back against the seat, eyes closed. She was afraid he had lost consciousness, but eventually she saw his lips begin to move. She couldn't be sure, but she thought they were forming a silent prayer.

Cee turned back to the task at hand and redoubled her efforts. As she paged madly through the well-worn sheets, she kept one ear strained for the reply.

For several beats the only sounds in the pod were labored breathing and the occasional turning of a page. Then the radio crackled.

"2742 this is Gridstock. I have you on scanners, and your approach is approved. Prepare for immediate docking."

Cee's shoulders slumped forward, and she thought she heard her pod mate push out a strained chuckle. "Thank you sir for your swift response. We shall be all too happy... to comply."

"Lucky you called in when you did, in another couple hours we would have been locked down to prepare for the final sling."

"I knew lady luck hadn't yet forsaken me. Statistically speaking, I was bound to...gain access to her good graces... at some time or other."

"Maybe she owes you a favor."

"Though I run the risk of jinxing the entire operation... I must say that I could not agree more."

Cee's eyes at last found themselves trailing across familiar words. "I think I found it!"

"Praise be," He swallowed hard. "Gridstock, would you kindly send down the proper coordinates... for approach vectors."

"Copy that 2742, sending them now."

The control screen flashed, and though her heart was beating fast, her hands were steady as she locked in the approach and accessed the controls. "All I have to do is nudge her a bit in the right direction... and..."

A few solid blasts from the thrusters set them on an intercept course.

"Now I just have to program the proper vectors."

With intense concentration Cee focused on the many flickering buttons and toggle switches. She could feel the urgency of the situation pressing in, but pretended that she was once again on Jala Bhalu, where she'd learned the first rule of survival: you must set your fears aside, or be crushed by their weight. Do the impossible now, and think about it later.

At the last switch of a toggle the vector screen turned green, and she listened to the progression of sounds with increasing satisfaction.

"Don't know why I was... praying to the saints of Kevva, for a miracle, when they already... sent you."

His words were slurred, but pleasure warmed her cheeks. Silence filled the space between them as she checked and double checked the manual for proper inputs, cross referencing their position with the GPS. It wasn't until some minutes later that she realized just how quiet it

had become in the gently humming pod. She looked over at her companion, and fear burned its way up her throat.

He was slumped forward against his restraints, apparently unconscious.

"Ezra!"

Abandoning caution, she unbuckled from her seat. She stretched across the space between them and strained to push him back against the headrest. When his head lolled sideways, she could see his eyes were rolled back, and his mouth was slack. She put a finger against his throat to check for a pulse. It was weak and irregular, but definitely still there. A check on his abdomen confirmed her worst fears. Her hand came away sticky and red.

She rifled frantically through the myriad drawers until she found a cloth, and stuffed it against the wound. She knew he needed help from someone with a lot more medical expertise than herself, and he needed it soon. After a moment or two of internal struggle reached for the comms.

"Gridlock this is 2742 requesting immediate medical attention upon docking. I repeat, I need immediate medical attention. I've got an unconscious man here who's losing a lot of blood."

"I have your request 2742. We'll dispatch the doc to meet you at the door."

The next few minutes crawled by as they drew close to the freighter, the cloth she kept pressed against Ezra's side slowly turning crimson under her hand. An eternity passed before the hiss of the airlock confirmed a successful dock, and as soon as she hit the door release the doctor was striding through it, an assistant following close at his heels.

Bespeckled eyes took in the situation at a glance.

"We need to get him flat on the floor, quickly!"

Deft hands removed Ezra from her grasp, and she stumbled to the side as they unbuckled the unconscious man and lowered him gently to the floor. She brushed her hair out of her face with shaking hands. She was intent on the medics' movements as they cut away his suit around the injury and probed the area with instruments she had never seen before. For a while, no one spoke a word. In fact, the medic and his assistant didn't seem to need words to communicate. At the extension of the medic's hand, the woman would place in it one strange looking device after another.

She only spoke when she couldn't handle the silence any longer.

"Is he going to be okay?"

"Can't say yet for sure," The doctor responded curtly. "The cream protected him somewhat from contamination, but we need to clean the wound to be sure. One thing is certain, your father needs a blood transfusion, and quickly. Do you know his blood type?"

She didn't bother to correct the medic's assumption, and thankfully the man didn't wait for a reply. He pulled back Ezra's suit to look at his chest, where Cee knew he would find a small

tattoo located over his heart that would provide the answer. "O positive."

Cee felt hope bloom inside her. "I'm O positive as well."

"Get her down next to him, prepare for the transfer."

She was already on the move. She unzipped her suit and rolled up her sleeve, revealing the inside of her left elbow before lying down on the floor.

"By gods that's a lot of blood," the assistant muttered as she unclasped her pack. "Any of it yours?"

"No, it's just his. My father's I mean."

The area at the base of her elbow was wiped clean, and a tourniquet was tied around her upper arm. She watched them cut off Ezra's sleeve and prepare him for the transfusion. A line of tubing was stretched across them, and a needle pressed into Ezra's arm. He didn't even flinch. She grit her teeth as assistant pressed the needle into her vein without preamble.

As she watched her own blood flow out of her arm and towards Ezra, she prayed that it would be enough to save him. If she'd learned anything from the sins of her father, it was that you should deal honestly, and pay off your debts quickly.

This wouldn't even begin to cover what she owed this man, but it was a start.

And if she were being completely honest with herself, she didn't want to be left alone. She had no more living relatives that she knew of, had never made any friends. Ezra was the only person she had left in the entire universe.

Without thinking, she reached over and grabbed his limp hand. It was clammy and awkward, but she couldn't bring herself to let go. She was only just beginning to understand how it felt to be trusted, and what it meant to trust another person. For the first time in living memory, she felt like she'd been seen, really seen, and the thought of losing that feeling was unbearable.

With a shaky sigh, she squeezed his hand tighter and shut her eyes.

Please, live!

Time to Reflect

She woke up slowly, her mind shrouded in a fog. The pod was no longer lit, but a faint glow emanated from the windows, casting hazy shadows across the unfamiliar room. She rolled onto her back beneath the scratchy blanket that had been pulled from one of the many cabinets that lined the crowded walls. She raised a hand to brush her matted hair out of her face, but stopped halfway through the motion to stare at it. She raised the other hand.

Her forearms, palms, and fingertips were stained a vicious red, and at the sight of them the memories began to return.

The last thing she remembered was the medic wrapping her arm, giving her a dehydrated fruit leather, and telling her that they'd be back to check on Ezra in an hour. They'd managed to find a cot for him to lay on, but there wasn't enough room for a second without removing a few of the seats. She'd been so exhausted that she'd simply grabbed a blanket and fallen asleep on the floor.

Funny thing was, she wasn't lying on the floor anymore.

"Look who finally decided to join the land of the living."

The lights flickered on, and the sound of that familiar drawl drew her squinting eyes across the room. She almost didn't recognize the man propped up against the wall. Ezra was freshly cleaned and shaven, nothing left of his scraggly facial hair except a finely formed mustache. At some point he had changed into a grey short sleeved shirt and black pants, and his socked feet were stretched out in front of him, crossed at the ankles.

He took a bite of something in cellophane wrapping before mumbling, "Hungry? They left us a nice little stash of rations and some magic juice up there on the table."

"How long have I been asleep?" She asked, sitting up to take a look around the room. Her quick glance confirmed that she was on Ezra's cot, which explained his current position on the floor.

"Almost twelve hours, and all of it well deserved, so I hear," he tapped his abdomen, where she saw the slight bulge of a bandage beneath the thin fabric. "I guess I have you to thank for saving my life. Again."

"It was nothing."

His voice turned somber. "My life is precious to me, and that ain't nothing."

She stared down at her lap. "It was the least I could do, considering..."

Considering I was the one who made you lose your arm.

She couldn't bring herself to say the words aloud, but she hoped he understood.

She didn't lift her head until she heard him drop heavily in front of her with a grunt. Ezra was perched awkwardly on the edge of the pod's central circuitry, left arm braced on his knee. He still looked pale, but he was much more alert, and he didn't seem to be laboring to breathe. His missing arm, also, was better bandaged than before.

His face was deadly serious. "Now I thought we already went through this. An eye for an eye Little Bird. I killed your father and you took my arm. What's past is past, and there ain't no point in dwelling. Besides, of the two of us I'd say you're the one who has more than adequately repaid your debt while I am still very much in yours."

With that he pulled her pack from somewhere out of sight, and set it in her hands.

Her eyes widened. She'd forgotten all about it during the urgency of escape.

"All your personal items are still present and accounted for. Headphones, map, your excellent work of fiction and- you must forgive me for my brief invasion of your privacy- those very impressive drawings of yours."

She dropped her head, her curtain of hair a shield between them as she pulled her meager possessions close. This small bag was all she had now, and she was just as grateful for its return as for the praise he so freely gave away. She couldn't help feeling it was unwarranted, but then again, her father had never been one for kind words. Maybe it was a normal thing to pay compliments with such apparent ease.

"There is also something else inside of there that is yours by right."

She unzipped the pack, and it didn't take much rummaging for her find the unfamiliar cloth bag from the bottom of the pack. She slowly untied it and stared dumbly at its contents.

Three large gems stared at her from the depths, glinting dully in the harsh light.

She raised her eyes to his, confusion warring her features. "But we didn't get anything from the dig."

"You and I had a deal to make an even split of the proceeds of our endeavor, and I am nothing if not a man of my word."

It took her a moment to put two and two together. "You mean... this is from your trophy case?"

"Originally those gems were meant for both myself and Number Two, so it's no loss to me. That there is worth at least 50,000, enough to take you anywhere you please."

Her mind started reeling with the possibilities. With this much money, she could pay off her father's debts, buy a pod, and have some money left over to make it back home!

Home.

Somehow the word didn't quite have the same lure it used to. And even with the infinite future looming before her, she couldn't bring herself to touch the gems. In the back of her

mind, she was afraid that even gazing at them for too long would invite the same greed that had consumed her father, and led to his demise.

Before she could give herself time to think, she shook her head and pushed the bag back towards Ezra. "I can't take this. It's too much. I wouldn't know what to do with it."

He quirked a grin and ignored her outstretched hand. "Too much? My dear girl, there is no such thing as too much aurelac, as any self respecting prospector will tell you. Besides, without you I'd be nothing more than a festering corpse back on that godforsaken moon. Consider it a life debt that I wish to repay."

"But-"

He raised a hand. "Don't argue with me now, for I am sorely tired. And in case you haven't noticed, I am still recuperating from a wound. I do not wish to enter into a debate with an educated young lady such as yourself without first having had time to recover what few wits I do possess."

She bit her lip to hide her smile, but she could tell he caught it when his own mouth twitched in response. He stood with an exaggerated groan and took several laborious steps across the room. "And while you take the appropriate time to consider what to do with your share, why don't you go and get yourself clean? You're beginning to resemble those channelrats I was telling you about, in looks as much as smell."

He picked up a package from inside a cabinet and tossed it her way. "I was able to rustle up some kind of digs for you. They seemed to have belonged to that devil of a woman who gutted me down on Bakhroma Green. They ain't what you'd call proper clothes, but they're the best I could do under the circumstances. You're a rare breed of bird out here girl."

Cee slowly rose and exited the pod to find her way through the many halls to the showers. She took every last second of the five minutes allotted to her, enjoying the heavenly sensation of clean skin after three days of humping it through the woods in a sweaty space suit. Some of the time was spent scrubbing her own clothes with soap, hoping to remove as many of the stains as possible. It was her only remaining personal outfit, the rest having been stashed in the pod back on the green.

The clothes that had been requisitioned for her were slightly overlarge, so she had to fold up the cuffs of the sleeves if she wanted to use her hands. The pants, at least, had a stretchy waistband that fit well enough, but it was the smell of them that bothered her the most. The scent wasn't anything she could easily recognize, but it brought back memories of being pressed down to the ground, suffocated under that mercenary's weight, and her terrible, hungry eyes.

The very thought of it made her shudder. Before her next shower, she was going to take all the merc's clothes and wash them until every last bit of that scent was gone forever.

Ezra was gone when she got back to the pod, but instead of hanging out alone in that cold, unfamiliar space, she collected her journal and headphones and found her way to her special

alcove. It was warm, as usual, and she settled herself happily into the corner to gaze out at the passing stars. Her music was blaring out a jarring but familiar rhythm that calmed her mind, and drew her thoughts inward.

She hadn't given much thought to Ezra's suggestion to think about her future when they were down on the Bakhroma Green. Considering everything that happened in the last few days, fighting for survival against the mercs, she hadn't really had the time. Now that she did, she found that she had no idea where to begin.

She pulled out her mother's picture and rubbed a thumb over her smiling face. It didn't really matter if she went back to Lao, where she was born, or Kamrea, or Central. There would be no one there to meet her, no one to help or protect her. While she considered herself to be a pretty independent person, she'd been trained to do one thing, and one thing alone: follow in her father's footsteps. The only problem was, he had kept most of his trade secrets to himself. Ezra had been right when he'd called her nothing more than a utility.

Which brought her to her next problem.

Ezra.

They hadn't exactly talked about what would happen next. Especially now that it appeared the people of the freighter believed them to be family, they were going to have to share the same pod all the way back to Central or else risk a lot of unpleasant questions.

She began to chew her nails.

She and her father hadn't exactly been close, so communication had been almost nonexistent. But he had been an ever fixed presence, someone with confidence who knew exactly where to go, who to talk to, what to say. She wanted to live a life of her own, but she just had no idea how to go about doing it. Her time on the Green had proven just how few usable life skills she had. If it wasn't for Ezra, she probably would have wandered around the moon until her filter expired, then simply laid down and died. She needed guidance, or she risked falling into even worse situations than she'd found herself with the mercs.

She hoped Ezra would be willing to help her. Around him, she felt she could do anything, face anyone.

But what if he didn't want to help, or wouldn't? She had saved his life, but she'd also ruined it. He might want them to go their separate ways when they reached Central Station.

And what about family? Did he have a wife? Children? Friends? She didn't think so, but then again she knew almost nothing about him.

Which made this whole situation so much worse.

How would one even begin to start that kind of conversation with a virtual stranger? She thought it would be easier to mine aurelac one-handed than to broach the subject herself. Besides, what could she possibly offer a well traveled man like Ezra that would tempt him to give up whatever life he had, just so she wouldn't have to face the future alone?

She pushed out a sigh and leaned her head back against the wall.

No, she couldn't ask him to stay. She wasn't the only orphan in the universe, and she was certainly better off than most. With all that aurelac in her possession, she could really make something happen.

If only she could figure out what that something could be.

Partners

And here we are already at the final chapter in the story! I'd like to extend a huge thank you to everyone who has read it and encouraged me with kind reviews.

This fic rapidly became very near and dear to my heart, and I'm grateful that it touched some of you as well!

I hope you enjoy the final installment.

Cheers friends!

"And so the prodigal daughter returns from her travels. I wondered if perhaps you had decided to fly the coop, but I am grateful to learn... that I was mistaken."

Cee took in the scene before her with confusion. Ezra was sitting shirtless on his cot surrounded by the medkit and several rolls of bandages, blood seeping out of the wrappings he was unsuccessfully trying to unbind.

"What happened?"

"I was attempting to... test my strength by means of physical exertion, but I fear I may have overestimated my abilities, and have begun to bleed anew."

It was then that she noticed the missing seats and the beginnings of a metal frame propped up against the wall.

A secondary cot.

At the apparent strain on his face, she hurriedly set down her things. "Let me help you."

"Thank you kindly," He panted, relinquishing control of the situation with a sigh of relief.

She removed the wrappings and set about wiping up the carnage. She was no medical expert, but while the skin around the wound was bruised and bloody, it at least seemed free of infection.

"I see you put your time alone to good use," He said at last, when the silence had lengthened between them. "Did you give any more thought to what you are planning to do with all that gem you've acquired?"

She smothered a sigh.

In truth she hadn't the faintest idea.

The only thing she knew for certain was that she had enough money to pay off her father's debt, and if she was careful she could spend many years living off the rest. Though that didn't

solve the problem of a concrete, long term plan, it was a start. All that was left for her to do was decide what kind of a life she wanted to live, now that she was no longer restrained by the limitations of her father.

But after spending almost half an hour in her alcove brainstorming with no ideas forthcoming, she'd wandered back to the pod. Which is when she'd walked in on Ezra in his state of disrepair.

When it was clear he was still waiting for an answer, she feigned an indifferent shrug. "I'm not sure yet."

"Well, there's still plenty of time to decide. The BG-Line will take at least a fortnight to get back to Central. Which reminds me, while we're on the subject..."

He gasped when she splashed a cap full of alcohol on the wound. It took him a few moments of hard breathing before he could recover his train of thought.

"While I was out on a... solitary ramble of my own, I ran into the conductor of this train and struck up a friendly conversation. He seemed to be under the impression that I am Damon, and that you are my daughter. Having ascertained that he is a God fearing man, I did not believe it would be wise to disillusion him. Therefore, for your safety as well as my own, I'm afraid we must stick together for the duration of the ride."

She never thought she'd be grateful to learn that no one recognized, let alone cared, that her father had been swapped out for another man. Yet in this instance at least, humanity's apathy was working out in her favor.

She covered her satisfaction with a nod. Two more weeks with Ezra was better than nothing.

He released a dry chuckle. "You really are a rare breed. I do not believe anything short of a truly horrifying disaster could rattle your nerves. If I might offer up an unsolicited opinion, I believe you would make an excellent field nurse. Though your bedside manner is somewhat lacking in vibrancy, as an invalid, I can attest that you have a very calm demeanor."

"I don't think I'd like it very much. I think I'd prefer something a little less dirty, maybe... maybe something where I don't have to meet too many people like you."

He threw his head back as he barked out a laugh. The sound warmed her cheeks and spread a comforting heat throughout her chest.

"You are even smarter than I gave you credit for. In that case, I suppose you might like to find your way to the Bowsun Conservatory. Return to the society of people your age, make memorable friendships like Clo and Reive. Find a story of your own."

Her hands froze in the middle of their task as she stared at him, wide-eyed. "You remembered."

"One must have the mind of a steel trap in order to survive in this universe, and so I've made it my business to fortify it. And it's a good thing too, for now it seems I may be forced to rely

further upon my brains than my hands from this time forward."

Her eyes skirted the stump of his arm. It wasn't until she'd applied more cream and began to re-wrap his torso that the words building up inside demanded to be let out. "What are you going to do now? When we get back to Central I mean."

"I don't rightly know for sure. My ego would tell me that I can do my job just as well with one arm, but the other, more sensible self would counter that I need to take some time to reevaluate my situation. Learn what it's like to live with only one half my trusted tools at my disposal."

He gazed at his stump as if it were an interesting puzzle to be solved, rather than a serious set back in his plans.

She tried to keep her tone casual. "So... What about your family? I'm sure they'd be able to help you out, if you asked them."

"If I had one, I'm sure they would. Yet I do not. You and I are in the same boat, Little Bird. Alone in the universe. No job, purpose, or partner."

He said this with a rueful smile, but the words hung heavily in the air between them.

Her fingers fumbled a little, but with a final twist the bandage was tied.

After a cursory inspection he tugged his shirt down over the top of it and eyed her gravely. She met his gaze with what she hoped was a sufficient degree of confidence, though acid churned in her stomach.

"Why don't you sit down next to me for a moment. I believe you and I need to have a serious conversation about what our next steps are going to be."

The cot barely moved as she sat beside him, her hands clasped tightly in her lap.

He sighed and ran a hand over his face.

"I'm not sure I can rightly put myself in your shoes, but one thing I do know is how strange this must be for you, holing up in a foreign pod with a man who is practically a stranger. And while I want to respect your rights to privacy and independence as much as possible, I'm afraid I cannot in good conscience part ways with you without knowing that you will be adequately prepared for whatever lies ahead.

"Far be it from me to suggest you are incapable of surviving on your own, but I will say that from what I've gathered, your father has failed to impart to you any amount of proper life training. And I do not believe that two weeks on a freighter will provide you the opportunity to gain the requisite skill sets."

Something like hope bubbled up inside her, but she tried her best to tamp it down.

"Now I must be honest with you. The aurelac I have retained from this venture will not keep me in cash for long, especially if I continue to seek medical attention for my wounds, and I

do not know when I might have opportunity to work with a crew again. All these things considered, I firmly believe that together, our chances of survival are far greater. Therefore it is my hope that we can strike another deal."

"What kind of a deal?"

His grin was immediate. "Well now I'm glad you asked. You see, by right of piracy this pod is ours, but rather than sell it and split the proceeds, I propose that we sell her and go in on a real ship, as partners. We have already proven to be an effective team, and I will be happy to teach you and impart as much of my wisdom as I can spare. All I ask for in return is your assistance on whatever jobs we may find, and your medical expertise."

As he finished speaking, an enormous weight seemed to lift off her shoulders. Everything she'd hoped for was suddenly coming true, her future much less uncertain than it had seemed before.

The same giddy smile she'd worn during launch was trying to work its way back onto her face, and she had to curb the mad impulse to reach out and hug him.

He apparently misread her conflicted expression, because he put up his hand in a placating gesture.

"This will be an equal partnership, you understand. We'll make an even split of all our earnings. You will be your own master, free to come and go on the ship as you please, until you feel that you no longer have need of my services. And I promise to make every effort to steer clear of any jobs where you might come in contact with any more of my kind."

She bit her lip and smiled, unable to contain it any longer.

"We can even go so far as to form a written contract and have it signed and witnessed while still in Central, if you so desire. Feel free to draw up a list of demands regarding what you come to expect from our partnership, and I will do the same, so as to eliminate any potential confusion. For example, an important issue that I would like to address is that you would reconsider holding a thrower to my back whenever you are afraid I'm going to go back on my word."

She stifled a giggle as he winked, then extended his hand. "Do we have a deal partner?"

For her, there was no need to consider.

Cee took his hand without hesitation. "Partner."

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