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For ages 8 to 13, but I've received feedback that older kids and adults like the story, too.

Thank you and enjoy the free chapter of:

Castor Starlight: Race to Polaris

Chapter One

Farex

Castor Starlight balanced atop a wobbly crate outside a wind tattered tent at the outpost on planet Farex. He squinted into the sunlight, trying to make out the features of the tall merchant standing before him. Castor leaned to his left, using the merchant to block the glare, but the stiff cowl that the merchant wore enveloped his head and shadowed his face.

Castor craned his neck and stared into the hood. The only feature he could make out, a large yellow eye, stared back, but he had the oddest feeling of being watched by many eyes.

He had heard whisperings about a stranger who arrived today from the habitable zone of the terrestrial quadrant. The other traders said the newcomer's head brushed the top of the tent doors when he entered. They said his sturdy cloak covered him from head to toe. But sometimes his sleeve fell back just far enough to reveal the tips of his scrublime colored fingers.

Castor knew of only one merchant from that very quadrant, and he was skilled in developing rare technology— a technology Castor desperately wanted.

The problem? You had to be accepted as an insider to strike a bargain with this merchant. If you weren't, you'd better be ready to fight or run.

At the moment, Castor didn't know if he was considered an insider or an outsider. He had already figured out an escape route if the meeting turned sour. If he dived to his left, then ran up the narrow aisles between the rows of stacked crates, he'd make it out alive. That's what he told himself anyway.

"Tala?" Castor asked.

The merchant stared for so long that Castor wondered if the eye was real. When it finally blinked, Castor flinched. The merchant reached up and threw his hood back. The yellow eye sat high on his brow and a ribbon-like veil covered a portion of his face below the eye. He deftly unclasped the swath of cloth and let it fall away. He blinked again, and Castor couldn't stop himself from staring at the row of blinking eyes that trailed across the trader's face.

Castor forced himself to maintain eye contact—a trick he'd learned from an experienced trader. "If you want to be taken seriously, always look 'em in the eye." Not an easy undertaking when you're a thirteen-year-old Starseed haggling with a six-eyed alien from planet Sala.

The merchant's eyelids flickered like a flame caught in a breeze, seemingly searching the data bank of information stored in his ample-sized head. Then a spark of recognition flashed in his eyes, and his face softened.

"Ah-la-sa," Tala said in a singsong manner. "Starseed."

A wave of relief rushed over Castor. He traveled across many galaxies and had visited numerous worlds, including planet Sala, so he wasn't surprised that Tala had heard about him. But Castor seldom saw Salanites at the Farex trading outpost. The slender aliens had delicate skin with a subtle greenish tint that was easily damaged by this harsh environment. Most wouldn't take the risk of visiting this planet. Castor was glad that Tala was more daring.

Farex was flat and covered with raw desert sand. The upland where the outpost lay was barren of features or form. A windswept rock occasionally jutted above the surface, but if you looked away for the briefest time, the sea of sand would reclaim it before you looked back.

After today, Farex's trading post was closing for a year, maybe longer. To many, this was a problem. They'd have to travel farther to do their trading. To Castor, the shutdown presented an opportunity: this was the best time to barter for last-minute supplies. Traders who still had inventory were eager to exchange their goods for...well...just about anything to avoid repacking them and using up needed space on their ships. Or worse, going home empty-handed.

Castor had secretly wished for one unique form of technology ever since he had heard about it. With this technology, he might have a chance to learn about his past. And he'd walk across broken glass in bare feet to get it. He didn't know if this was a coincidence, meeting Tala on Farex, or if the Salanite needed to dump contraband before the intergalactic patrol searched his ship. Castor didn't care. Only two things brought you to this outpost: you needed supplies in a bad way, or you needed to get rid of something in a worse way. He suspected that Tala was in the second group.

Castor trembled at the thought of finally being so close to getting the technology. He took a breath to steady his nerves. This negotiation could prove challenging. He'd have to make his move with precision timing. He opened his mouth to speak, but before he could utter a word, a loud boom rent the air.

Several merchants started shouting. One of Tala's small eyes flicked to the right to follow the commotion. A wave of bickering broke out among the other merchants over lastminute trades and a second eye followed the new argument. Wind whistled across the compound, and the gusts played with tattered strips of tent fabric, haphazardly snapping them like a whip in midair. A third eye inspected the noise. Somewhere in the distance, food pavilion owners called out bargain prices for their remaining staples.

Tala's five smaller eyes followed every disturbance; each one cocked in a different direction. Castor watched the eerie scene play out before him. He fought to maintain his composure and ignored the temptation to follow the direction where each of the roaming eyes looked. Instead, he stared so intently at the Salanite's one large eye protruding from the center of his forehead that his own eyes stung.

"Trade-lade-sade?" Castor asked.

Tala's eyes snapped back to focus, now all six scrutinized Castor. The Salanite opened a bag hanging from a cord tied to his belt and pulled out a flat brown wafer. Castor crinkled his nose. He knew those brown smelly squares: tree fungus, a delicacy on planet Sala. Crunchy outside and slimy inside. They tasted rotten and moldy all at the same time. They were the grossest thing he'd ever eaten.

Once you took a bite, you had to finish the whole thing to avoid insulting every Salanite on their entire planet. Their culture was steeped in tradition. Some traditions were awe-inspiring, and some were just plain weird. But if you didn't follow their customs, and you messed up on Sala, word traveled, and it traveled fast. You could count on it bringing problems to your door just when you didn't need problems.

Castor had traded with other Salanites at friendlier outposts—places where you didn't have to balance on crates and hide behind tents to strike a bargain. Places where all the merchandise was above-board. This time, he wasn't interested in one of planet Sala's usual items. And this trader wasn't your everyday Salanite. SET, they called him: Six-Eyed Tala. But they only called him that behind his back. If you needed something that required secrecy, Tala would find a way to get it to you.

Computer chips, that's what Castor wanted. The chips were a coveted commodity, and they were black-market. Only insiders knew their real value. Only a very few knew that they were encoded with a secret program. You needed a computer with advanced technology to hack the source code and reveal that program. Castor had the computer. What he needed were the chips. Now, he was in the middle of a trade with the only alien who could get him that technology.

Castor held up his hand to the offered wafers and gave a slight head shake. "No trade-lade-sade," he said, and hoped that Tala wasn't as easily insulted as the rest of his species.

Castor would have to jump straight into it and use the best bargaining tool he had: a tri-ration of terranut butter. He wasn't particularly fond of it himself. But with only meager provisions left on his ship when he'd packed for the journey to the outpost, he had tossed it into his bag. Another lucky break. Terranuts were pebble-sized nuts dug from the ground, and a delicacy on Planet Sala. No self-

respecting Salanite would walk away from the chance to get their long bony fingers on terranut butter.

It's now or never, Castor thought. He plucked the tri-ration from his rucksack and held it tight, making sure that the label faced Tala. "Two chip-lip-sips for one tri-ration terranut butter."

Tala reached inside his robe and pulled out a small bag. He dangled it in front of Castor. "Two terranut for one chip-lip-sip."

Castor shook his head. "No deal-leal-seal."

"Ah-la-sa," Tala said. His lips grew taut. He withdrew his hand, and the bag holding the precious items disappeared up his sleeve.

Castor twisted the cover off one of the tubes, and the scent wafted into the air. Tala drank in the aroma, and his stern expression relaxed. Castor quickly screwed the cover on. "Are you sure-lur-sur?"

Tala hesitated, but only for a second. "Deal-leal-seal," he said reaching for the tri-ration.

"Wait-lait-sait," Castor said pointing to Tala's sleeve. "Same-lame-same time-lime-sime."

Tala passed the bag to Castor, and Castor handed over the tubes. He quickly stowed the chips in his backpack.

Tala bowed, preparing to leave, and Castor saw a trinket dangling in front of Tala's robe: a shiny silver necklace with a clear bulb swinging from the end. Inside the bulb, three tiny globes twinkled.

"One more-lor-sor trade-lade-sade?" Castor asked, searching in his sack for something else to use as barter.

Tala hugged his butter and narrowed his eyes. "Mor-lor-sor?"

Castor held up a ration of jel; a sweet, gooey concoction that countered the salty taste of terranut butter. He pointed to Tala's necklace. "Stardots."

Tala chuckled, and Castor knew the Salanite thought that he had gotten the better deal. Tala yanked on his necklace, breaking the chain. He tossed it to

Castor. Tala took the jel and walked away humming, clutching both items tightly to his chest. His robe ballooned about his ankles. Dust clouds trailed behind him, kicked up by his brisk pace.

Castor inspected the stardots. They rained down on Sala during storms, which didn't happen often. Afterward, if you were quick and searched in the right place, you might find a few. But you had to bottle them fast to capture their power, or the energy quickly dissolved into the ethers.

Stardots brought stars to life. And they guaranteed a good price, especially in galaxies like the Milky Way. He secured the necklace in a narrow, padded pocket in his rucksack.

Back aching, Castor stretched to work the kinks out of his muscles. His hair, peppered with rust-colored sand, hung over his eyes. He'd long since given up trying to separate the sticky residue from the clumped strands. His lips were dry and cracked, and his body thirsted for water. He tipped his canteen back to take a drink, but the container was empty.

He mustered his energy and set off to finish gathering his supplies. The outpost was bustling with activity. Most of the tents were disassembled. Ripping sounds of boards being torn from make-shift booths filled the air. Tarps piled high with planks and rolled awnings were already stacked at the starship launch pad.

Castor caught up to a three-legged alien with warty skin who sold poppuffs. He was hurrying to get to the ships, and Castor fell into step alongside. He bought a box of the snacks and a few other treats before the bumpy stranger scurried up a gangway and boarded his ship. Castor ran back to his teraboggin, already stuffed to the brim, and checked these last few items off his list.

He was lugging his supplies across the outpost, not paying attention to anything in particular when he turned a corner and then stopped dead in his tracks. He backed into the shadow of one of the last remaining pitched tents and held his breath. Tala and a thin, ashy-skinned trader who had a protruding stomach and green hair were in the middle of an intense negotiation, and Castor had almost run into them.

The trader held a container of small wiggling brown life forms up to Tala's eyes. Castor picked up a few words of Kinuease spoken between Tala and the

alien. Tala offered a wooden box with elegant carvings on the sides as trade for the life forms. A few heated words were exchanged, then a settlement reached. The trade completed; the two aliens walked away in opposite directions. The short alien headed toward the launch pad. Castor noticed the line of starships waiting to blast off had already dwindled to a few stragglers.

Loose sand picked up by the gusting wind pelted Castor as he turned toward the horizon. The sky, already pink when Castor had started bartering with Tala, now blazed a deep cherry, a sure sign that Farex had started its red phase. This unbridled phase was always full of storms, tornado strength winds, and volcanic eruptions. And Castor didn't plan to be caught on Farex during it.

With his supplies secure in the strong net fastened to the sled, he dragged his teraboggin through the mounding sand, across the plateau, and toward a huge crater. He never used the pads when he visited a questionable outpost. It was safer that way. The outpost launch pads weren't guarded. Castor figured that if they couldn't find your ship, then they couldn't take it. He pulled the teraboggin up to the edge of the crater and unhooked himself from the harness.

Wide and deep, the crater was large enough to hold a fleet of starships. He'd heard the stories passed down through the generations about this part of the planet once being green and lush. Then an object had collided with Farex. The impact had destroyed every bit of vegetation as far as you could see. Nobody knew how long ago it happened—just that it had happened.

Above the mountains, at the other side of the crater, flashes of heat lightning forked across the sky. By nightfall, the outpost would be deserted.

All in all, Castor thought, it had been a good trip. He made some good trades and had managed to keep out of trouble. He avoided the thugs. He even made good timing hiking back to the crater. There was a little time left before he really had to leave the planet, time enough to catch his breath at least. Castor was gazing at the mountains, lost in thought, when a shadow fell over him.