

The Star Seekers

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Chapter 1: Dust and Dreams

The twin suns of Shameru cast long shadows across the rolling grasslands as Blake Morrison wiped the sweat from his brow with a weathered bandana. The cattle had been particularly ornery today, with the old bull Thunderhoof leading a small rebellion that had taken him and Sam nearly three hours to quell. Now, as the amber light of evening settled over their ranch, Blake found himself anticipating the quiet ritual that had become as essential to him as breathing.

"Sam, you coming up to the ridge tonight?" Blake called out to his lifelong friend, who was securing the gate to the main corral. Sam Hartwell looked up from his work, his sun-darkened face breaking into the easy grin that had been getting them both into and out of trouble since they were knee-high kids.

"Wouldn't miss it for all the credits on Centauri Prime," Sam replied, dusting off his hands on his worn leather chaps. "Though I still say you're getting soft, spending all that time staring up at nothing when we could be playing cards with the boys in town."

Blake chuckled, knowing full well that Sam looked forward to their evening stargazing sessions as much as he did, despite his friend's constant protests. They had been doing this for nearly fifteen years now, ever since they were twelve years old and Blake's grandfather had first shown them how to identify the major constellations visible from Shameru's northern hemisphere.

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That evening, the two friends made their way up the familiar path that wound through the scrub brush and scattered boulders to their favorite spot on the ridge overlooking the Morrison family ranch. Blake's family had worked this land for four generations, and Sam's family had been their neighbors and partners for just as long. The Hartwell spread bordered the Morrison ranch to the east, and the two families had long ago stopped bothering with formal property lines, treating the combined acreage as one large operation.

As they settled onto the flat boulder that had served as their observation post for so many years, Blake pulled out his grandfather's battered old telescope. The old man had been something of an amateur astronomer—unusual for a cattle rancher on a world where most folks kept their eyes firmly fixed on the ground and the work at hand. But Grandpa Morrison had always insisted that a man needed to look up once in a while, to remember there was a whole universe out there beyond the boundaries of any one world.

"Look at that," Sam said softly, pointing toward the eastern horizon where the first stars were beginning to appear in the deepening sky. "Clear as crystal tonight. Should be able to see all the way to the Outer Rim."

Blake nodded, adjusting the telescope's focus as he had done countless times before. Through the eyepiece, the stars seemed close enough to touch—brilliant points of light scattered across the velvet darkness like diamonds on black silk. He could make out the familiar patterns that had guided travelers across Shameru's surface for

centuries, but tonight, as always, his attention was drawn to the spaces between the stars. To the vast emptiness that somehow seemed full of infinite possibility.

"You ever wonder what it would be like?" Blake asked, his voice barely above a whisper. "To be out there, I mean. Flying between the stars, seeing other worlds."

Sam was quiet for a long moment. When he spoke, his usual joking tone was absent. "Every night, partner. Every single night."

It was a conversation they'd had in various forms hundreds of times over the years, but it never seemed to lose its power to stir something deep in both their hearts. They had grown up on stories of the great Space Armadas that patrolled the galaxy, keeping peace between the hundreds of inhabited worlds that made up the Galactic Federation. Shameru was a member world, of course, but it sat far from the major trade routes and political centers—a quiet agricultural planet that contributed beef and grain to the galactic economy but rarely saw visitors from off-world.

Blake and Sam had grown up riding horses, herding cattle, and learning the skills their fathers and grandfathers had passed down. They were good at what they did, respected in their community, and by all rights should have been content with their lot in life. But something in them yearned for more—for the adventure and excitement that lay beyond Shameru's atmosphere.

"My dad thinks we're crazy," Sam said, taking his turn at the telescope. "Says a man should be satisfied with honest work and a

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roof over his head. But I keep thinking there's got to be more to life than counting cattle and mending fences."

Blake understood completely. His own father, while more tolerant of his son's astronomical interests, had made it clear he expected Blake to take over the ranch when the time came, just as Blake's grandfather had passed it down to him. It was a good life, a respectable life, but it felt somehow too small for the dreams that filled Blake's head when he looked up at the stars.

"The recruitment officer came through Millerville last month," Blake said, referring to the small town that served as the county seat about twenty miles south of their ranch. "Jenny Patterson's older brother signed up. He's shipping out to the Academy next week."

Sam lowered the telescope and looked at his friend with interest. "Tom Patterson? That lazy good-for-nothing couldn't rope a sick calf if his life depended on it. What does the Armada want with him?"

"That's just it," Blake replied, his excitement building as he spoke. "They don't care if you can rope cattle or plow a field. They're looking for people with the right attitude, people who aren't afraid of a challenge. Tom may not be much of a rancher, but he's got guts, and he's always been good with mechanical things."

The Galactic Space Armada served as the military and peacekeeping force that maintained order throughout the inhabited galaxy. The Armada operated with massive capital ships and fighter

squadrons patrolling the space lanes and responding to threats wherever they arose. The work was dangerous, but it offered opportunities for advancement and adventure that simply didn't exist on worlds like Shameru.

"You thinking what I think you're thinking?" Sam asked, though the gleam in his eyes suggested he already knew the answer.

"I'm thinking we're twenty-seven years old, and if we don't do something soon, we'll spend the rest of our lives wondering what might have been," Blake replied. "The next recruitment cycle starts in six months. We could apply."

Sam stayed quiet for a long moment, staring up at the stars with an expression Blake had never seen before. When he finally spoke, his voice carried a steady determination. "You know what? Let's do it. Let's actually do it this time instead of just talking about it."

They had discussed the possibility before, of course, but always in the abstract—as something they might do someday when the time was right. Tonight felt different, though. Maybe it was the perfect clarity of the sky, or the way the stars seemed to pulse with invitation, but for the first time, the dream felt within reach.

"We'd have to pass the physical and mental aptitude tests," Blake said, his practical side asserting itself even as his heart raced with excitement. "And there's no guarantee they'd accept us. Competition is pretty fierce, from what I hear."

"So we train," Sam replied with confidence. "We've got six months to get ourselves in the best shape of our lives. And as for the

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mental stuff—well, we may not have fancy educations, but we're not stupid. We can learn whatever we need to learn."

Blake felt a surge of affection for his friend. This was vintage Sam Hartwell—once he decided on something, obstacles became challenges to overcome rather than reasons to give up. It was a quality that had served him well throughout their friendship, and Blake had no doubt it would serve him well in the Armada if they were fortunate enough to be accepted.

"Our folks are going to have a fit," Blake observed, though he was grinning as he said it.

"Let them," Sam replied. "We're grown men, and it's our lives. Besides, it's not like we'd be gone forever. Armada service is what, six years? We could come back with enough savings to buy our own ranch." It was a compelling argument, and Blake found himself nodding in agreement. The Armada paid well, and veterans received substantial bonuses and benefits that could set a man up for life.

As the night deepened and the stars grew brighter, the two friends continued to talk. Their conversation ranged from practical concerns about the application process to wild speculation about what life aboard a starship might be like. They had both read everything they could get their hands on about the Armada, from official recruitment materials to adventure novels.

"I wonder what it feels like," Sam mused, "to look down at a planet from space instead of up at the stars from the ground."

"Probably makes you realize how small everything really is," Blake replied. "All our problems, all the things we think are so important—they probably look pretty insignificant from up there."

It was a sobering thought, but also somehow liberating. The petty concerns and social expectations that seemed so overwhelming on the surface of Shameru would matter very little once they were among the stars. Out there, a man would be judged by his actions and his character, not by whether he came from the right family or owned the right amount of land.

As the evening wore on, they began to make concrete plans. They would start a rigorous physical training regimen the next day, focusing on the kinds of exercises that would prepare them for the intense Armada Academy training. They would also begin studying the technical manuals and educational materials freely available through the planetary communication network, brushing up on mathematics, physics, and basic engineering principles. They would like to be pilots.

"We should probably keep this to ourselves for now," Blake suggested. "At least until we know whether we have a real chance of being accepted. No point in getting everyone worked up over something that might not happen."

Sam nodded in agreement. "Good thinking. Though I have a feeling your grandfather would have approved. He always said a man should follow his dreams, even if they take him far from home."

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Blake smiled at the memory of his grandfather, who had died three years earlier but whose influence still shaped his thinking in countless ways. The old man had been a dreamer himself, though he'd channeled his dreams into astronomy rather than any desire to leave Shameru. But he'd always pushed them to think beyond their small world's boundaries, to consider possibilities that others might dismiss as impractical or impossible.

"He used to say the stars were calling to us," Blake remembered. "That humanity was meant to spread across the galaxy, not huddle on one world like scared children."

As the night grew late and the temperature began to drop, the two friends finally began packing up their equipment and preparing for the walk back down to the ranch. But neither seemed eager to end the conversation that had changed everything between them. They'd crossed a line tonight, moving from idle speculation to concrete planning, and both understood that there would be no going back.

"You know what the funny thing is?" Sam said as they made their way carefully down the rocky path. "I always thought that if we ever did this, it would be some kind of desperate escape, like we were running away from something. But it doesn't feel like that at all."

Blake considered this as they walked. Sam was right—this didn't feel like an escape or a rejection of their life on Shameru. Instead, it felt like a natural progression, the next chapter in a story that had been building toward this moment for years. They weren't

running away from anything; they were running toward something, toward a future that had always been waiting for them among the stars.

When they reached the bottom of the ridge and began to part ways toward their respective homes, Sam turned back to his friend with a grin that was visible even in the dim starlight. "Six months from now, we could be looking at this place from space," he said. "Think about that when you're mucking out stalls tomorrow morning."

Chapter 2: An Unexpected Visitor

Three months into their training regimen, Blake and Sam had settled into a routine that would have impressed even the most demanding drill sergeant. Every morning before dawn, they met at the old water tower that marked the boundary between their families' properties for a five-mile run across the rolling hills. After completing their regular ranch duties, they spent their evenings working through the technical manuals they had downloaded from the Galactic Education Network, quizzing each other on everything from basic physics to starship navigation principles.

The physical transformation had been remarkable. Both men had always been in good shape from their work with the cattle, but the focused training had added endurance they'd never possessed before. More importantly, they'd developed the kind of mental discipline that would prove essential for military service, learning to push through fatigue and discomfort to reach their goals.

"I think I'm actually starting to understand quantum mechanics," Sam announced one evening when they finished their study session in Blake's kitchen. "Either that, or I've been staring at these equations so long that I'm hallucinating."

Blake laughed, closing his own manual on advanced propulsion systems. "Join the club. Yesterday I caught myself trying to calculate the orbital velocity of our moon while I was branding calves. I think we might be getting a little obsessed."

"Obsessed is good," Sam replied. "Obsessed is what's going to get us off this rock and into the stars." It had become their catchphrase over the past few months—a reminder of why they were putting themselves through this intensive preparation. The application deadline was still three months away, but they wanted to be as ready as possible when the time came.

The evening was warm and clear, perfect for their usual stargazing session. But as they prepared to head up to the ridge, Blake noticed something unusual in the western sky. A bright point of light was moving against the stellar background—too fast to be a satellite.

"Sam, look at that," Blake said, pointing toward the anomaly. "What do you make of that?"

Sam followed his friend's gaze and immediately tensed. "That's not supposed to be there. And it's getting brighter."

As they watched, the light continued to grow in intensity and size. It became clear that whatever it was, it was descending toward the surface of Shameru. More concerning still, its trajectory seemed to be taking it directly toward their section of the valley.

"That's a ship," Sam said with growing excitement. "An actual spacecraft, coming down right here."

Blake felt his heart pound as the reality hit him. In all his years scanning the skies, he'd never witnessed anything like this. Shameru saw a few off-world visitors each year—usually a government inspector or trade rep who touched down at the capital's spaceport,

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hundreds of miles from here. For a ship to drop into ranch country meant either an emergency or something far stranger.

"We need the emergency kit from the barn," Blake said, his practical side kicking in. "If that pilot's in trouble, he'll need help."

They sprinted toward the Morrison family barn, where Blake's father stored a full first aid kit and emergency supplies. As they gathered what they might need, the approaching ship's sound reached them—a deep, thrumming roar that seemed to vibrate through their bones.

"There!" Sam yelled over the noise, pointing toward a spot half a mile out where a brilliant column of light had erupted. "He's touching down in the south pasture!"

They snatched the emergency supplies and leaped into Blake's old van, bouncing across the rough ground toward the landing site. As they topped a small rise, they caught their first clear view of the spacecraft—and both men went silent.

The ship defied anything they'd ever seen, even in pictures. Sleek and angular, roughly the size of a small house, its hull shimmered with an inner glow. Strange symbols marked its sides, and what looked like weapon ports dotted its circumference. This was clearly military hardware—and sophisticated at that.

"That's an Armada fighter," Sam whispered. "A real one."

Blake nodded, recognizing the design from their technical manuals. A Raptor-class interceptor—one of the fastest, most agile ships in the Armada fleet. But something had gone terribly wrong.

Scorch marks scarred one side of the hull, and what appeared to be emergency foam leaked from several damaged panels.

As they neared the landing site, a hatch cracked open, and a figure stumbled out. The pilot wore a full environmental suit, but even through the helmet's visor, they could see he was hurt. He swayed as he tried to walk, and Blake and Sam rushed forward to catch him before he collapsed.

"Easy there, friend," Blake said, steadying the pilot's weight against his shoulder. "We're here to help."

The pilot's voice crackled through his suit's external speakers, distorted but clear enough. "Thank the stars for that. Wasn't sure I'd make it to a proper landing field."

Up close, they could see the pilot was a man of perhaps thirty-five, with weathered features that spoke of years in dangerous places. His uniform bore captain insignia, and various medals and ribbons marked him as an experienced combat veteran.

"I'm Blake Morrison, and this is Sam Hartwell," Blake said as they guided the pilot toward their truck. "What happened out there?"

"Captain Marcus Kane," the pilot replied, wincing as they eased him into the passenger seat of the ranch van. "Ran into pirates about six hours out. Managed to drive them off, but not before they tore up my ship's systems."

Pirates plagued the outer regions constantly—raiders who hunted merchant vessels and isolated settlements. The Armada fought to suppress them, but space was vast, and pirates were

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cunning. It was dangerous work, and Blake felt a surge of respect for the man who'd chosen this profession.

"How bad are you hurt?" Sam asked, sliding into the driver's seat.

"Nothing that won't heal," Kane replied, though his labored breathing suggested otherwise. "But my ship needs work before I can rejoin my squadron. Don't suppose you boys know anything about starship repair?"

Blake and Sam exchanged glances. They'd been studying starship systems for months, but their knowledge was purely theoretical. Still, they were both skilled mechanics with ground vehicles and farm equipment—the basic principles couldn't be that different.

"We can take a look," Blake offered. "But first, let's get you back to the house and patch you up properly."

The next few hours passed in a blur of activity. Blake's parents proved remarkably adaptable to the situation, treating their unexpected guest with the same hospitality they'd show any neighbor in need. Blake's mother, Sarah, took charge of treating Kane's injuries—mostly cuts and bruises from being thrown around the cockpit during the battle—while Blake's father helped Blake and Sam examine the damaged spacecraft.

"Wow," John Morrison muttered as he studied the ship's propulsion system. "It's more complicated than anything I've ever seen."

Kane, feeling better after Sarah's care and a hot meal, joined them at the ship as they worked to assess the damage. "The main drive is intact," he explained, "but the navigation computer took a hit, and I've got coolant leaks in three different systems. Without proper repairs, I'll never make it back to the fleet."

"How long would it normally take to fix something like this?" Sam asked.

"At a proper shipyard, with the right parts and equipment? Maybe six hours," Kane replied. "Out here, with improvised materials and hand tools? Could be days, if it's even possible."

Blake studied the damaged components with the same methodical approach he brought to repairing farm machinery. The technology was more advanced than anything he'd worked with before, but the underlying engineering principles were familiar. More importantly, he and Sam had spent months studying exactly these kinds of systems to help with their Armada applications.

"I think we can do it," Blake said finally. "It won't be pretty, and it won't be regulation, but we can get you flying again."

Kane looked skeptical. "No offense, but starship repair isn't exactly ranch work."

"Maybe not," Sam interjected, "but we've been studying Armada technical manuals for months. We know these systems better than you might think."

To prove his point, Sam began explaining the function of various components, using the correct technical terminology and

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demonstrating a thorough understanding of how they worked together.

Kane's expression shifted from skepticism to surprise to something approaching respect. "You boys thinking about joining up?" he asked.

"We've got applications ready to submit," Blake replied. "This is actually perfect timing—we could use the practical experience."

Kane fell silent for a moment, studying the two young men with the calculating gaze of a professional soldier sizing up potential recruits. "All right," he said finally. "Let's see what you can do. But we do this my way, step by step, with no shortcuts. One mistake out here could get us all killed."

What followed was the most intensive learning experience of Blake's and Sam's lives. Working under Kane's watchful eye, they dismantled damaged components, fabricated replacement parts from materials scavenged around the ranch, and slowly brought the ship's systems back to life. The work demanded absolute precision, but it was also incredibly rewarding.

"You're naturals at this," Kane observed as Sam successfully rerouted the coolant system around a damaged heat exchanger. "I've seen Academy graduates who couldn't have managed that repair."

The compliment hit Sam harder than Kane could have known. For months, he and Blake had wondered whether their rural background would handicap them in the high-tech world of the

Armada. Learning that their hands-on skills and problem-solving instincts were actually advantages felt so encouraging.

As they worked, Kane shared stories from his years in the Armada, painting a picture of life among the stars that was both more dangerous and more rewarding than anything Blake and Sam had imagined. He had served on half a dozen different ships, visited worlds that existed only in their dreams, and fought in battles that had shaped galactic history.

"It's not all glory and adventure," Kane warned them. "There are long stretches of boredom, broken up by moments of sheer terror. You'll see things that will haunt your dreams, and you'll lose friends who were closer than brothers. But you'll also witness wonders that most people can't even imagine, and you'll know that you're making a real difference in the galaxy."

"Sounds like it's worth it," Blake said, carefully calibrating a sensor array.

"For the right kind of person, it is," Kane agreed. "And from what I've seen tonight, you boys might just be the right kind of people."

By dawn, they had the ship operational again. It wasn't perfect—several systems ran on jerry-rigged repairs that would need proper attention at the next starbase—but it was spaceworthy. Kane ran through his preflight checklist with the thoroughness of a man whose life depended on his equipment, then turned to Blake and Sam with an unreadable expression.

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"I owe you boys a debt I can't repay," he said. "You've saved my life and probably the lives of my squadron mates who are counting on me to return. If there's anything I can do for you, anything at all, just name it."

Blake and Sam exchanged glances, and Blake could see that his friend was thinking the same thing he was. This was an opportunity that might never come again—a chance to get an insider's perspective on their chances of being accepted into the Armada.

"Actually, there is something," Blake said. "We're planning to submit our applications for the Academy in a few months. Would you be willing to look them over, maybe give us some advice on how to improve our chances?"

Kane's face broke into a grin. "I can do better than that. How would you like to skip the whole application process and come with me right now?"

The question hit Blake and Sam like a physical blow. They had been planning and preparing for months, but they had always assumed the process would unfold according to the official timeline. The idea of leaving immediately, without preparation, was both thrilling and terrifying.

"You mean it?" Sam asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

"I've got the authority to field-recruit promising candidates," Kane explained. "It's not common, but it happens when we find people with exceptional potential. And what you've shown me

tonight—the technical knowledge, the problem-solving skills, the ability to work under pressure—that's exactly what the Armada is looking for."

Blake felt his heart racing as the implications sank in. This was it—the moment they had been dreaming of for years. But it was happening so fast, so unexpectedly, that he could barely process it.

"We'd have to leave right now?" Blake asked.

"My squadron is scheduled to rendezvous with the fleet in eighteen hours," Kane replied. "If you're coming, it has to be now."

Blake looked at Sam, seeing his own mixture of excitement and uncertainty reflected in his friend's eyes. They had talked about this moment countless times, but they'd always assumed they would have time to prepare, to say proper goodbyes, to tie up loose ends.

"What about our families?" Sam asked. "Our responsibilities here?"

Kane's expression softened with understanding. "I know it's a big decision, and I know it's sudden. But opportunities like this don't come along often. The Academy has a waiting list for thousands of qualified candidates. Field recruitment bypasses all of that."

Blake thought about his parents. He thought about the ranch, the cattle, the life that had been mapped out for him since birth. And then he thought about the stars calling to him as they had every night for as long as he could remember.

"Sam?" Blake said, turning to his friend.

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Sam was staring up at the sky, where the first light of dawn was beginning to fade the stars. When he looked back at Blake, his eyes were bright with determination. "We've been preparing for this our whole lives," Sam said. "Maybe not in the way we expected, but we're ready. I say we go."

Blake felt a surge of affection for his friend, mixed with gratitude that he wouldn't have to make this decision alone. Whatever lay ahead, they would face it together, just as they had faced everything else in their lives.

"All right," Blake said, turning back to Kane. "We'll come with you."

Kane nodded approvingly. "Good. But first, you need to say goodbye to your families. They deserve that much, and you'll regret it forever if you don't."

The next hour was one of the most difficult of Blake's life. Explaining the situation to his parents broke his heart, but their reaction surprised him. After the initial shock wore off, both John and Sarah Morrison expressed pride in their son's opportunity, even as they struggled with the reality of his departure.

"Your grandfather would have been so proud," Sarah said through her tears. "He always said you were meant for something bigger than this ranch."

John Morrison, a man of few words, simply embraced his son and whispered, "Make us proud, boy. And come home safe."

Sam's farewell with his own family was equally emotional, but by the time the sun was fully up, both young men stood beside Kane's ship with small bags containing their few possessions. Everything else—their lives, their plans, their carefully constructed futures—was being left behind for an adventure that would take them to the stars.

"Ready?" Kane asked, his hand on the ship's hatch control.

Blake looked back at the ranch one last time, memorizing the sight of the rolling hills and scattered buildings that had been his entire world for twenty-seven years. Then he looked up at the sky, where the stars were fading into the blue of morning but still called to him with their ancient promise of adventure and discovery.

"Ready," he said, and stepped aboard the ship that would carry him to his destiny among the stars.