

**Near-Star Planets**

**THE EVIL PLOT**

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Near-Star is a long way from Earth. But it is still one of the nearest stars. It has seven planets and a big moon. Here are some of the people of the Near-Star planets:

**Rayk Hazen:** His father came from Earth to explore. His mother is from Vork. He looks a little like people from Vork, and a little like people from Earth. Rayk has a fast space ship called Stardust Rider. He flies his ship all around the Near-Star planets.



**Consul Clay:** He came from Earth with Rayk's father. Consul Clay lives on the planet Leem. He works in the Near-Star Forum. The Forum makes the laws for all the planets. The Forum has a consul from each planet.



**Jan Clay:** She is Consul Clay's daughter. She just finished college on Earth. Now she works with her father at the Near-Star Forum. The consuls need Jan to find things out about life on all the Near-Star planets. This helps them make good laws.



# **CHAPTER I**

## **Going to the Races**

Rayk sat down at the controls of his space ship, Stardust Rider. Most of the time, he flew people around the Near-Star planets. But not now. There were aircycle races at the Star Fire Lodge. Rayk was going there to race. His aircycle and entry chip were in the Stardust Rider. He was all set to go.

There was a loud buzzing sound. The light on the com-link flashed. Rayk did not want to take the call.

He flipped on the com-link. “I’m not at work this weekend. Call back later,” he said.

“Wait, Rayk! This is Consul Clay. I know you are going to the Star Fire Lodge. The Race Board just called. They want Jan to give out the prizes. Would you take her with you?” he asked.

“Why did they call so late?” Rayk asked.

“They said the other girl got sick. That’s why they need Jan,” the Consul said.

Rayk needed time to get set for the race. But Consul Clay asked for his help. Consul Clay made laws in the Near-Star Forum. He did a lot to help the people of planet Leem.

Also, Consul Clay had helped Rayk’s father. The Consul and Rayk’s father were space

pilots from Earth. Rayk's father was the first Earth pilot to reach Near-Star. Consul Clay brought Earth people to Leem.

Rayk said, "Tell her to be fast."

Consul Clay's land van drove up. Jan jumped out. She ran to the space ship.

The Consul waved. "Take care of her," he yelled.

Rayk groaned. Taking Jan with him was not his plan. The Consul wanted him to watch her. How was he going to get set for the race?

Jan sat in the seat next to Rayk, and smiled. "Thanks for waiting for me. I know you just want to win the race. You will not have to take care of me," she said.

Rayk frowned. “It’s OK. Just get set for take-off,” he said.

He lifted the control stick, and they lifted off. Rayk was still a bit mad. He slid the control drive up a few bars. The hum of the rockets turned to a roar. The Stardust Rider shot up. Soon it blasted out of planet Nod’s air. Now they were in space.

Lots of people felt sick in a fast take-off. But Jan didn’t. She pointed to the bronze planet near them. “Isn’t that Vork?” she asked.

“That’s right,” Rayk muttered.

“Does your mother still live there?” Jan asked.

“Right again,” Rayk snapped.

“Dad likes to go to Vork for sailing. The seas shine like bronze. Dad said that’s why the plants have bronze leaves,” Jan said.

She was asking about his home. So Rayk smiled. He said, “Yes, all the water looks bronze. And the trees, too. I miss Vork, but I’m glad I left. And I can get away from Supreme Leader Hoil, who rules Vork now.”

“I would leave, too. Hoil is a bad leader. He has too much power. Do you think your mother will be OK?” Jan asked.

Rayk nodded. “I know people on Vork who help keep her safe,” Rayk said to Jan.

“Dad said Hoil has a plan that might hurt a lot of people. The Near-Star Forum will vote on

it soon. Hoil needs six Consuls in the Forum to vote it into law,” Jan said.

Rayk nodded. “It’s his Home Star Law. Supreme Leader Hoil said it’s to keep people from other stars out of the Near-Star planets. But he is lying. The Home Star Law will give Hoil power over all the Near-Star planets. Your father is trying hard to stop it. Most Consuls are with him. I think Hoil’s plan will fail,” he said.

“The vote is in two days. Then the Near-Star planets will be safe again,” Jan said.

The Stardust Rider flew for a long time. The Star Fire Lodge was in orbit around Near-Star. The lodge’s orbit was between Vork and Zay. Rayk and Jan got there when it was

midnight back home. But it was still light at the lodge. The light from Near-Star shone on the lodge all the time.

Rayk flew his space ship by the Lodge. “Here we are,” he said to Jan.

There was no answer. Jan was sleeping.

The Star Fire Lodge looked like a huge disc. The lobby was in the center. Next to it were shops and places to eat. Rooms for people to stay in made a large ring around the outside. Each room had a port for a space ship to dock. A dome sat on top of the lodge. People would watch the races from there.

Rayk saw one of the lodge’s robot arms. He brought the Stardust Rider next to the robot



*A dome sat on top of the lodge. People would watch the races from there.*

arm. “Number X23,” he said into the speaker.

That was his room code.

The arm helped the Stardust Rider into its docking space. The Stardust Rider was next to the space hatch for his room.

A large space ship was docked at the next room. An evil face watched through the glass. It looked like Supreme Leader Hoil! Rayk was shocked. Could that be? He picked up his T-scope and looked. But the face was not there.

It could not have been the Supreme Leader of Vork, Rayk thought. Vork’s leader didn’t like races. And he would not show his face to watch them dock.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **The Space Hatch**

“Wake up, Jan,” Rayk said.

Jan rubbed her eyes. “Are we there?” she asked.

“Yes, come with me,” Rayk said to her.

He led Jan through the air lock. When Rayk said “X23” again, the hatch swung open into his room.

“What’s your room code?” Rayk asked.

“I didn’t get the code,” Jan said with a yawn.

They would have to go all the way to the lobby to get Jan's code. But Jan was going to sleep.

“Give me your ID chip and stay here. I'll get your code and sleep in your room. We will change in the morning,” Rayk said to her.

Jan yawned again. “Thanks,” she said.

Rayk went through a tube to get to the lobby. There was a robot at the desk. Rayk gave the robot Jan's chip and got the code. Then he went to Jan's room. He needed sleep, too.

Rayk walked inside the room and locked the hatch. Then he closed the shades. That kept Near-Star from shining in his face. A racer needed a good night's sleep.

Rayk woke up to the sound of the space hatch. It slid open, and then shut. There were soft sounds. The sounds got closer and closer. Soon they were next to the bed. Then Rayk turned to one side and kicked hard.

Rayk could hear a crash by the space hatch.

Rayk jumped out of bed and ran to the space hatch. He was hit in the face and he fell down. The hatch shut before he could get up. Rayk lifted the shade to see outside. The light of Near-Star was too bright. By the time he could see, there were no people or ships around.

Rayk sat down and thought. Was it a robber? What did he want? And how did he get in the room?

Rayk was going to call the main desk to tell about the man who broke in. But he felt so tired.

It was late when Rayk woke up the next morning. He called Jan. But she didn't answer. Rayk got dressed and went to look for her.

In the lobby, Toby Kast was standing at the desk. He was the boss of the Star Fire Lodge. He smiled when he saw Rayk. "Hi, Rayk, are you all set to race?" he asked.

"Yes, but I need to tell you what went on last night," Rayk said.

After hearing Rayk's story, Toby frowned. "I bet it was just a mix-up. The man must have tried the hatch next to his. Still he would not have the right code to get in. With no code, the

hatch should not open. I'll check the space hatch. It must be broken," he said.

"Maybe it was to keep me from winning. I'm a pretty fast racer. How many people do you have to keep the lodge safe, Toby?" Rayk asked.

"We only have five. But it's no big deal, Rayk. The Space Patrol is based on Nod. They can be here in less than a day. The Star Fire Lodge can deal with any thing that comes up," Toby said.

Rayk nodded and walked away. He hoped that Toby was right.