

# THE SAPPHIRE HOUSE - PART 4

By Marileta Hunsford

*A*lsase, capital of Planet Alta in the Opala region

*The Bedouin* landed in the middle of the night. Katherine remained locked in her room for nearly an hour after she felt them set down. Outside the door, she heard feet rushing, but no one stopped to retrieve her.

After pacing like a mad person until her legs felt like lead weights, she finally made herself rest on the cot. "Smugglers," she muttered. Katherine could think of only one reason smugglers would want an information expert: to break into some sort of security system for money or salable goods. Whatever the actual reason, she had to escape and fast.

Just then, she heard footsteps. They stopped at her door and the lock clicked free. The door opened and, predictably, Caleb stood on the other side. He held a cloth bag in one hand. "Time to go, princess," he said as he threw the bag to her. She caught it awkwardly before giving him an inquiring glance. "Put those on. Nobody needs to know we got a PIL on board."

Katherine nodded and set the bag on the bed before getting to her feet. *It's now or never*, she thought and steeled herself. "Mr. Sachs, I've been thinking--I want to apologize for hitting you. No matter the situation, I believe in non-violence and am appalled that I struck a fellow human being. Please forgive me."

Caleb stood like stone, staring at her for a moment and then doubled over with laughter. His face grew red from the force of his guffaws while Katherine gaped at him. "Did I say something funny?" she asked when his laughter had calmed somewhat.

"Oh, I was just imagining how long you had to practice that load of crap to make it sound convincing," he answered, wiping his streaming eyes.

"Why you insufferable, mean-spirited, pig of a man! I--"

"Now, let's not get ugly," he scolded, "A good laugh's healthy once in awhile, but we do need to be getting to that all important interspace console you wanted." Katherine clenched her hands tightly with frustration. Then, she stepped up to Caleb with a scathing expression. He returned her glare with a half smile, raising an eyebrow. "Problem, princess?"

"Yes," she said. Without warning, she rammed the heel of her boot into his foot. Caleb shouted in surprise and pain, but Katherine gave him no time to recover as she brought her other knee up to connect solidly with his groin. He doubled over, uttering a primal cry of agony. She pushed him into the room and then slammed the door shut. With the sound of Caleb's banging fists ringing in her ears, Katherine ran down the corridor toward the cargo bay.

Skidding to a stop on the metal balcony overlooking the bay, she looked around for the rest of the crew. No one else was in sight, so Katherine raced down the stairs and down the ramp.

Outside, she froze, surprised by the rain that pattered on her head. In moments, her gauzy

blouse was plastered to her skin and her hair ran with water. Paying no mind to the frigid temperature of the rain, Katherine scanned her surroundings. There was still no sign of the other members of *The Bedouin's* crew. What she did see was a collection of ramshackle buildings that leaned together—held up by some mysterious fluke of gravity. Metal roofs, coated in rust, pinged with the steady downpour of rain. People moved quickly along the potholed street and sidewalks that surrounded the dock where *The Bedouin* had landed. Katherine jumped from the ramp and insinuated herself into the crowd. She looked behind her briefly and saw someone with cherry-red hair walking approaching *The Bedouin*. “Tandy,” she muttered. *I have a few minutes until she finds Caleb and breaks him out of that room.*

Galvanized, Katherine ducked down an alley and made for the street on the other side. Filthy shapes huddled against the steel and stone walls of the buildings on either side of the narrow street, but no one offered her any trouble.

Once free of the alley, she looked around and noticed an Info Post to her right. Katherine dodged through the crush of bodies to the blue and white station. Beneath the marquee, she called up the search screen and queried the home location of that particular post. The answer returned a few seconds later and said that the post was located on the southeast corner of Dempsey Street and Nugan Boulevard in the port city of Alsase on the planet Alta.

Alta was a rim planet that was used mainly for plathos metal mining. Why would they have brought her here? She was as far away from the Union center as possible before reaching uncharted space. Shaking her head, Katherine next typed in a query about the location of the main starport. From what she had seen, *The Bedouin* had landed on a private strip on the edge of town.

As the computer searched, Katherine glanced over her shoulder and around the girth of the Info Post. She could not see Caleb, but it was dark and the rain concealed much of the city in a curtain of icy water. A beep alerted her to the completion of her search. She looked at the screen and saw she was only a few blocks from the main port. *Not quite on the edge of town after all*, she thought wryly. With another furtive look around, Katherine left the shelter of the Info Post and plunged back into the wet crowd.

By the time she reached the plate glass doors of the Alsase Starport, Katherine was soaked to the skin. The skirt of her P.I.L. dress hung like a muddy, wet shroud around her feet. Her hair was loose and stiff from the water in it that had solidified to ice. The few people in the starport looked at her askance, but no one accosted her. Exhausted and chilled, she walked up to the nearest ticket kiosk and pulled out her Union Citizen ID card from the pocket of her dress. She slid the little piece of plastic into the reader and brought up ticket information.

“Where’d you think you’re going?” a cold voice said softly behind her. Katherine’s blood congealed at the sound and she looked over her shoulder. Caleb stood very close to her, his green eyes snapping with wrath. Her attempt to jump away was foiled when he grabbed her arms and stepped closer, whispering, “You and I are gonna have a long, involved conversation about this.”

Katherine’s breath caught at the definite menace she detected in the first mate’s voice. “I’m not going to stay here and help you all run a smuggling operation right under the Union’s nose,” she answered breathlessly.

“You’re going to do whatever the captain tells you to do,” he replied as he jerked her around. He reached toward the ticket kiosk and extracted her UCID card. With a quick gesture, he snapped the I.D. in half and dropped the halves into the recycler can. Katherine looked on, dismayed. Without a UCID card, she was completely trapped on this planet. No one would sell her a sandwich, let alone an offworld ticket, without it. Her whole identity was now being mulched.

Caleb started to pull her along after him, but Katherine jerked free. “Get your hands off me!” she cried and turned around to run again.

He caught her arm and marched into the men’s room just a few feet away. Shoving her face first against the wall opposite a bank of sinks leaned forward and hissed, “Personally, I don’t care if you

leave or stay. In fact, I can't wait to be rid of you—one way or another.” Katherine flinched at his awful insinuation. “But you got a job to do,” he continued in a calmer voice, “And the Captain’s waitin’. So, you’re coming back to *The Bedouin* whether you like it or not. Understand?” He held onto her until she nodded, then, let go and stepped back.

Katherine turned and rubbed her arm where he had gripped her too hard. She eyed him as her hands balled into fists. *His eye needs another coat of black*, she thought with hard determination. Suddenly, Caleb yanked her close and stuck his face within inches of hers. “You hit me again and I’ll hit you back, harder,” he whispered.

Hands sagging to her sides, Katherine looked up at him with impotent rage. He returned her stare, then clasped the back of her neck and steered her from the bathroom. Just as they were about to make for the doors of the Starport, Caleb cursed and tightened his hold.

“What is it?” Katherine asked irritably.

“Moths,” he replied. She swiveled her head as much as possible and spotted the Union troopers, known as Moths because of their blue-grey and brown uniforms, just outside the Starport doors.

*How can I get their attention?* Katherine thought frantically.

Sudden pressure on her neck made thoughts of escape scatter. She looked up into Caleb’s warning gaze. “If you call for them, it will be the last thing you do,” he growled. Katherine chanced another glance at the Moths, willing them to look her way, but they kept their eyes focused on the rainy night.

*Where were you guys ten minutes ago?*

“Come on,” Caleb ordered, half-dragging her away from the doors. A swish of metal behind them indicated that the Moths had just entered the starport. Katherine tried to drag her steps and give the soldiers a chance to spot them, but Caleb pulled her inexorably towards a bar further up the corridor.

Billows of cig smoke puffed through the door as they entered the dark drinking hole. Techno pounded from speakers on a broken down stage and covered the sounds of clinking glasses and conversation. A couple dozen people occupied the chairs and tables spread around the room. A dance floor, surfaced with light panels, stood at the foot of the stage and boasted its own crowd of gyrating drunks.

After he had pushed her to a table far in the back, Caleb pulled out a com-link from the breast pocket of his vest and yelled into it. “Babe?”

A soft rustle of static sounded and then Babe’s voice, calling cheerfully, “Yeah?”

“I got her,” Caleb said, eyeing Katherine. “But there’s Moths outside. We can’t leave through the front.”

Another thoughtful hiss of static and then, “Where are you now?”

“We’re in the starport bar,” Caleb replied.

“Is there a back exit?” Babe asked.

Caleb looked around and then said, “Yeah, but its fire rigged. We go out that door and the alarm’s gonna sound.”

“Don’t matter,” Babe dismissed the concern, “Just give me ten minutes and then leave through that door fast. I’ll be at the end of the alley.”

“Fine,” Caleb said and turned the com-link off.

A waitress stopped at their table just as he stuffed the little metal tube into his pocket. “What’ll you have?” she shouted above the music.

“Give me a shot of tuli,” Caleb called back and then looked at Katherine. She turned away and remained silent. “Make that two and make them doubles,” he amended. The waitress glanced at Katherine before she nodded and left to get the liquor.

“You might as well relax,” Caleb hollered to his prisoner, who sat like a steel pike on the other

side of the table.

She cast a derisive glance at him and replied, "I'm not going to relax until you take me home."

Before he could answer, the waitress returned and set the shot glasses on the table. Each held two fingers of bright red liquid. Caleb picked up his glass and used it to push the other towards Katherine. She looked at the liquor and then back at him. He shrugged and tipped the glass into his mouth. A pained expression passed over his face followed by a deep sigh. He set the glass down and rolled his eyes as though massaging them.

"Yeah," he breathed.

Curiosity overcame Katherine's scruples and she picked up her glass gingerly. She sniffed the liquor and pulled back at the fire that licked at her nostrils. "What's in this?"

Caleb looked at her with a raised brow. "It's tuli," he said as though speaking to a child.

"I realize that," she shot back, "What is tuli made from?"

He shrugged and began beating his hand on the table in time to the music. Katherine looked again at the drink doubtfully. *It doesn't seem to have hurt* him, she thought before throwing the red liquid down her throat.

Katherine squeezed her eyes shut and gasped. It burned and soothed at the same time. As it slid to her stomach, the tuli ignited her esophagus but, just as quickly, coated the tissue with ice.

"Good, ain't it?"

Katherine opened her eyes to look at Caleb, who was grinning at her. Her vision had somehow changed, the edges blurred. A soft glow began in her belly and she wanted to giggle for no reason.

"You don't drink much, do you?"

"What makes you say that?" she asked sharply.

Caleb rubbed a hand over his jaw and eyed her. "Well," he began, "You're face is bright red after only one drink and you just don't strike me as a cut loose kind of lady."

Katherine harrumphed and turned away. The two sat silently for a few moments and then Katherine frowned and looked at her companion. "I have to know something."

Caleb met her gaze with a questioning one of his own. "*Are you going to kill me?*" she asked softly.

His face lost some of its harshness for a moment—Katherine thought she even saw compassion light his eyes. But the expression was gone before she could be sure. "Are you?" she asked again.

"Not today," he answered and looked away. A second later, he stiffened. "Damn, they're coming in here," he hissed.

"Who?" Katherine asked, bemused by his discomposure.

"The Moths, you little idiot!" he snapped.

She straightened and said, "There is no need for insults, Mr. Sachs. I--"

He pulled out the com-link again and hissed into it, "Babe, get to the back door now!" And, without waiting for an answer, he stood and dragged Katherine up beside him. The two edged toward the fire exit. With a last glance over his shoulder, Caleb pushed the handle on the door. A screech of alarms filled the bar.

"Come on," Caleb barked as he pulled her towards the head of the alley. *The Bedouin's* supply wagon waited at the far end, Babe in the driver's seat.

Once they reached the wagon, Katherine hauled up the hem of her ruined uniform before stepping into the hovering green vehicle. Caleb climbed in after her and the wagon took off.

Behind them, patrons of the bar rushed into the wet night from the back door and out the front of the starport. A growing whine heralded the arrival of fire personnel. The wagon turned out of the starport's complex and crawled along the streets of Alsace.

All three passengers remained silent through the ride. Katherine found it discomfiting that Babe had not even greeted her when she boarded the wagon. *They must all be furious with me*, she thought.

Part of her felt some pride at inconveniencing her captors, but another part felt uneasy about the consequences that might result from her failed escape.

The wagon could not accelerate to more than thirty miles an hour so Katherine had plenty of time to look at the dark, wet city she had dashed through just a couple of hours before. Streetlights illuminated all the intersections, which, even at this late hour, were crammed full of hover vehicles. Katherine saw more supply wagons and utility vehicles than passenger cars as Alta was not really a colonized planet, merely a post for supplies and a mining community.

The few shops and restaurants that Alsase boasted were uniform and hardware stores and greasy-spoon diners, all of them closed for the night. With a small blush, Katherine noticed one establishment that was still open.

The lurid red lights of a pleasure kennel reached into the streets. A few half-naked women, braving the rain, were perched like birds of prey on the kennel's steps, calling out invitations to passersby. Katherine looked away, embarrassed, only to find her eyes colliding with Caleb's. He was watching her, a strange half-smile on his lips. She twitched her eyes away and stared, without seeing, at the passing city.

Soon, they reached *The Bedouin* again. It gleamed like a dingy white star in the well-lit dock. For the first time, Katherine noticed that its name was painted in black letters on the haul, but the paint job need refreshing. Babe stopped the wagon so Caleb and Katherine could climb out then he continued to drive into the cargo bay.

"Contact the captain and let him know I went ahead and took her to Marion," Caleb called after Babe as he took hold of Katherine's wrist and pulled her away from the ship toward a shack-like building near the street that ran alongside the dock. A bluish light hung by the door, illuminating a sign that read 'Marion Moon, dock manager.' Caleb knocked twice on the door and waited a moment, then twice more. After a second pause, he knocked once and waited again. Locks and chains were released before the door banged inward.

From inside the shack peered the strangest looking man Katherine had ever seen. He was completely white. Not just albino white, which always had a slightly pink undertone, but true white. Even his lips were colorless. Not a single hair grew on his egg-white head. He was very tall and thin, without a scrap of discernable muscle. Dark eyeglasses concealed his eyes, but Katherine suspected they would be as colorless as the rest of him.

"Thou hast found the prodigal daughter, I see," the man said before stepping back and allowing Caleb and Katherine to enter.

After the door was shut and locked behind them all, Caleb said, "Babe'll probably stay with the ship so don't expect him."

The white man nodded then said, "Will thou not present me to this vision of loveliness?"

Caleb turned to Katherine, "What was your name again?" She stared at him indignantly and then stepped to the man she presumed was Marion Moon.

Holding out her hand, Katherine said, "My name is Katherine J. Beauregard. I believe you are Mr. Moon?"

Marion took her hand in both of his and raised it to his lips. "That I am, sweet lady. Pay no mind to the mannerless cur with whom you journey. He is not worth your anger." He pulled her further into the front room of the shack and offered her a seat on the shabby red and blue couch, not bothering to acknowledge Caleb any longer.

"Might I ask what the 'J' stands for," Marion asked as he made his way to an armchair made of cracked simulated leather.

"Juta," she answered.

"Ahhh, so the 'J' has the old German pronunciation."

"Marion," Caleb said abruptly. Both Marion and Katherine glanced at him. "Time's limited. I

got to get some things from the ship, so if you could just set her up, I'd appreciate it." With that, Caleb let himself out the front door.

With a deep sigh, Marion shook his head and cast a woeful look at Katherine. "Some just have no manners. I prefer to socialize a bit before getting to business. There is always a few minutes for civility, don't you agree, my dear?"

"Yes," Katherine said warily, unsure of what his definition of "civility" was.

He rose from his chair and went to a side table where he poured her a glass of a crystal blue liquid. "With my compliments," he said and handed her the drink.

Katherine raised the glass to her nose and sniffed curiously. A faint scent of annis wafted from the liquid. She looked at Marion. He smiled and said, "It will warm you."

Shrugging, Katherine took a swallow.

Her body convulsed as the fiery liquid ran down her throat toward her horrified stomach. She coughed and gagged violently, while Marion watched with placid amusement. When she had recovered herself somewhat, she looked at Marion accusingly and croaked, "What was that?"

"'Hu's Fire' is the artistic name for it, I believe," Marion said, "But in official circles it's called Itifol."

Katherine shot to her feet, dropping the glass and spilling the remaining liquid. "You gave me Itifol!" she cried. "That's used to execute murderers!"

"Well, this is a much milder dose, my sweet," Marion soothed, "Believe me, it won't harm you in any way. And you are much warmer now, aren't you?" Katherine stared at the pale man as her head began to spin. She felt blood flood the skin of her cheeks and chest as her whole body caught fire. Katherine sat on the couch quickly and rested her head in her hands. "Recline on the sofa if you need to, darling." Marion's voice was muffled and distant to Katherine's ears. Without meaning to, she slumped to the side and laid her head on the seat cushions. The last thing she heard before her eyes drooped closed was the distorted sound of a door opening and a muted yell.

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Marileta Hunsford is a librarian for a county library in central Indiana. She has been writing poetry and stories since she was in elementary school and her love of writing motivated her to get her B.A. in English. She completed her masters at IUPUI.

"Writing is my escape and safety valve. It's kept me from despairing and helped me focus my eyes on the peace at the end of a struggle. If I didn't write I would probably be in an asylum right now. I can take out real-life frustrations on fictional characters and find courage by giving my protagonists the strength I long for."