



HONOR AND SHADOWS

JESSIE

FROM THE AUTHOR OF *HUNT THE STARS*

MIHALIK

HONOR AND SHADOWS

A STARLIGHT'S SHADOW PREQUEL SHORT STORY

**JESSIE
MIHALIK**



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HONOR AND SHADOWS

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To Dustin, my love

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And finally, thanks to you, reader. I get to write these stories because of you. I hope you enjoy this little bonus peek at Tavi, Kee, and Eli. This novelette takes place just before *Hunt the Stars* begins and can be read before or after the novel. Enjoy!

CHAPTER ONE

As we approached the landing zone, I couldn't decide if the man who'd allegedly stolen more than a million credits from one of the largest conglomerates in the galaxy had incredibly terrible or incredibly brilliant taste in hideouts. Either way, the tiny, dusty village on a backwater mining planet was not what I'd expected.

Starlight's Shadow settled onto the sole landing pad in the spaceport—a fancy name for what amounted to a glorified field. Nearby, a small cluster of buildings served as the village square, and a few dozen houses were scattered around seemingly at random.

Eli, my first officer, turned to me from his place at the tactical terminal and tilted his head skeptically. “Are you sure this is the right place?” Eli had the face of an angel on the body of a bruiser. Tall and muscled, with deep brown skin and warm brown eyes, Elias Bruck was uncannily handsome, a fact that Kee—my systems engineer—and I ribbed him about ruthlessly.

But he'd also hauled us out of more than our fair share of messes, something *he* didn't let *us* forget. The good-natured teasing went both ways.

“Kee tracked the bounty, and she's never wrong, so I'm going to go with yes.”

Eli grinned. “Well, there was that *one* time...”

“That wasn't my fault,” Kee said without looking at us. Her hands flew over the screen of her navigation and systems terminal. “They were using bad data and didn't know it, but that's not the case this time. Alan Hudson is here,” she said with complete confidence. There wasn't a system designed that Kee Ildez couldn't find a way into—legal or not.

If she thought Alan was here, then he was here.

Kee's pale skin, rainbow hair, and delicate build disguised a sharp mind and a fierce optimism. Kee and Eli had both been soldiers in my squad during the war, and pain and fear and death had hardened the bond between us into something as close as family. I would always, *always* have their backs, just as they would have mine.

Even if we did occasionally poke fun at one another.

“If I had a million credits, I'd be somewhere nicer than this,” Eli grouched. “How long do you think it's been since an outsider showed up?”

“Hopefully a long time,” I said, “or this trip is going to be worthless. If Alan is smart—and I have no reason to believe otherwise, since he’s eluded capture for more than two years—then he already knows we’re here. We need to move.”

Bounties from the big conglomerates weren’t my first choice, but the last few months had been extremely lean. We needed an infusion of credits however we could get them. But even when I was desperate, there were a host of bounties I wouldn’t touch. Anyone with credits could post a bounty and most of their reasons were shady as hell.

And I had enough blood on my hands without adding any more.

While I tried to stick with official government bounties or at least options from the slightly more trustworthy conglomerates, *everyone* competed for those bounties, so some months I had to dig deeper just to keep us fed.

This embezzler was the least distasteful option this month, plucked from a pile of much worse. I didn’t *love* working for a questionable conglomerate, but if we could catch Alan, I would be able to breathe easy for a few weeks until something better came along.

“What’s the plan?” Eli asked. “Are we going to do a quick grab, or do we need to run him down first?”

“He’s here, but I don’t have an exact location,” Kee said, finally turning away from her screen. “We’ll have to see if we can talk the locals into letting it slip.”

Kee and I glanced at each other, then we both turned to Eli who sighed and rolled his eyes. “Why do I always have to sweet-talk the locals?” he grumbled.

“You can take care of yourself—” I started, but Kee interrupted me.

“It’s because you’re pretty,” she said with a grin. “Tavi’s scowl isn’t likely to win us any friends.”

“Thanks,” I said drily. I didn’t scowl—*much*. My long, curly, dark hair softened my face, but not enough to disguise the hard edge honed by war. I looked like what I was: Octavia Zarola, former FHP lieutenant, current bounty hunter, and captain of *Starlight’s Shadow*.

Kee flashed me a grin, then turned back to Eli and continued, “If they don’t like your pretty face, then you can use your pretty fists to make an exit. One punch and they’ll move out of your way. Tavi and I would have to work a lot harder. So go, be charming. I sent you the information on Alan. Did you review it?”

Eli waved his hand. “Yeah, yeah. A man in his mid-twenties, kind of mousy looking. Speaks Common with an accent and is smarter than all three of us combined.”

“Pretty much,” Kee confirmed. “Don’t underestimate him. He’s eluded capture three times, and at least two of those teams weren’t stupid.”

Alan had escaped without injuring anyone, so I wasn’t *too* worried about picking him up, but caution was always warranted on bounty runs. “I want everyone in lightweight armor. Kee, stay with the ship and keep an eye on us. Eli, find the local hangout and start digging for info. I’ll see if anyone

wants to trade.”

I loved my ship and the familiar comfort of space, but I wouldn’t mind some fresh air and wide-open skies for a day or two. Plus, trading would give us a cover story, not that it would withstand much scrutiny. But people on tiny little planets didn’t ask too many questions when traders came by, so I hoped it would be good enough.

I scooped Luna from my lap and stood. The little burbu blinked her eyes open and chirruped grouchyly at me. Burbus were native to the Valovian Empire, and Luna looked like a cross between a house cat, a ferret, and an arctic fox, with dense white fur, rounded ears, and a fluffy tail.

She was our ship mascot, and she didn’t appreciate it when her naps were interrupted—unless it was for food.

Sure enough, a telepathic image of her empty food bowl appeared in my mind, and I scratched her behind the ears. “I just fed you, which is why you were passed out in the first place. No more food until lunch.”

Her chirp told me exactly what she thought of that, and Eli snorted in amusement, used to her antics. Luna jumped down to the floor, then left the bridge with a dismissive flick of her tail. I chuckled. I adored that little ball of fluff, even if she did have very sharp teeth and a mind of her own.

ICY, bitter wind chafed my exposed face, and the thin air had only the minimum amount of oxygen to support life, so walking on the flat ground felt like climbing a mountain. The frosty gusts sliced straight through all the layers I was wearing, chilling my arms and legs. I took back all of my kind thoughts about the pleasure of open skies—given the option, I’d retreat to *Starlight’s Shadow* at the first opportunity.

If the cold or the oxygen level bothered Eli, he didn’t complain about it as he headed deeper into town. We all had our comm implants active so we could communicate subvocally in case of trouble.

I pushed the levcart laden with supplies to the edge of the spaceport where a series of rickety stalls had been set up. I found the one that seemed least likely to come down on my head, then posted my trading information to the local network.

“I’m in position,” I murmured to Kee and Eli.

They each confirmed the message, then a few minutes later Eli let us know that he was heading into what appeared to be the only bar in town. I silently wished him luck and turned my gaze towards the huddle of buildings. Other than Eli, I hadn’t seen a single person out.

Was this a ghost town?

A few minutes later, the question was answered when a woman huddled in several layers of outerwear and a thick fur hat made her way toward me. When she arrived at the other side of the table, she pulled down her scarf, revealing her face. Age had barely begun to carve lines into her light

brown skin, but her mouth was pressed into a flat line, deepening the creases.

“Do you really have peaches?” she asked in accented Common, her suspicion clear.

“I really do,” I replied in the same language. “As I posted, five credits each, and one per customer.”

Her eyes narrowed behind the protective goggles she wore. “You could sell them for three times that much.”

“I could,” I agreed easily, “which is why there’s a limit. I don’t want someone else buying them all and undercutting me.”

“I could buy one and sell *slices* for that much.”

“And I couldn’t stop you. But I hope you’ll enjoy it yourself or share it with someone you love.”

When the suspicion didn’t clear from her expression, I smiled softly at her. “Sometimes, fresh fruit was the only thing that kept me going when I was stuck on a foreign planet, far from home. The trader who sold it could’ve charged us the moon and we would’ve paid, but she didn’t. I try to repay that kindness when I can, and our last stop had a surplus of peaches.”

This, at least, was the honest truth. Near the end of the war, our rations had been thin and tasteless as the supply lines started to fail, but somehow, once a month, a smuggler had shown up with a load of fresh fruit. Some days, a bruised apple, carefully hoarded, was the only thing standing between me and bottomless, screaming despair. If nothing else, I’d learned to never take small comforts for granted.

I shook off the memories of war and death and returned my attention to the woman across from me. “Would you like one?”

She rocked in place as longing fought suspicion. Finally, she nodded and held out her comm to transfer the credits.

When a chime indicated success, I waved a hand at the tray of peaches. “Take your pick.”

Her hand hovered over the tray, never quite touching the fruit as she made her decision. She had learned caution from traders who were more protective of their wares than I tended to be. After a moment, she plucked a golden peach from the center of the tray, and it disappeared into her coat.

Her eyes darted to mine, the suspicion banked but not gone. “Thank you.”

I dipped my chin at her. “You’re welcome.”

“You should leave,” she murmured, her voice barely louder than the wind. “No good comes from staying.” She turned and hurried away before I could ask what she meant.

“Well, that sounded ominous,” Kee said over the comm.

She wasn’t wrong. “Eli, watch your back.”

“You, too,” he murmured.

I grunted in acknowledgment and huddled deeper into my coat as a slow trickle of customers braved the frigid wind to see what I was offering. Most wanted the fruit, but a few bought some of the spare parts I’d brought along. All were wary and taciturn—something more was going on here than

suspicion of an outsider.

I was down to my last peach when an older man approached my stall, his back stooped and just a strip of pale skin around his eyes showing. “Is that your husband in the bar? If so, you might want to fetch him before he trips and falls into Megan’s pants.”

I shook my head. “He’s not my husband, and it’s not my business whose pants he falls into.”

“The girl’s daddy might have something to say about that.”

My eyebrows lifted in surprise. Eli wouldn’t flirt with someone underage. I knew it as an immutable fact, so something didn’t add up here. “Just how old is Megan?”

“Twenty-three,” the man begrudgingly replied, “but she’s still too young to know better than to be dazzled by an off-world stranger. Her daddy won’t like it.”

I pointedly looked around at the run-down buildings and empty streets. “You’re right. With all of this on offer, I can definitely see why she shouldn’t flirt with fresh blood.”

“Tavi,” Kee warned over the comm. “You’re supposed to be making nice.”

“This *is* me being nice,” I replied subvocally. The stranger wouldn’t know Kee and I were communicating because the subvocal mic on my throat worked with my comm to translate tiny, silent muscle movements into sounds.

The man’s eyes narrowed. “Where’s your captain? I want to speak to him.”

I waved an arm at myself and gave him a sharp smile. “You’re looking at her. Octavia Zarola, at your service.”

The sneer was immediate and obvious. He muttered something in the local dialect that I didn’t need a translator to know wasn’t a compliment.

I drew my plas pistol as the movement in my peripheral vision solidified into two people, both bundled against the cold. “We may have a problem,” I said subvocally.

“Scanners show all three are armed,” Kee warned.

“Fantastic,” I muttered before drawing a second pistol and raising both. “I wouldn’t try it,” I said, pitching my voice to carry over the wind. “I spent a decade fighting the Valoffs, and I’m still alive to talk about it. You won’t find me an easy mark.”

“Just give us the supplies and we’ll let you go,” the older man in front of my stall said. “We won’t even rough up the pretty boy in the bar.”

I rolled my eyes. It never failed to amuse me when people discounted Eli’s many, *many* muscles just because he had a handsome face. “They’re going to jump you,” I told him over the comm. “Try not to hurt anyone too badly unless they escalate.”

“Aye-aye, Captain,” Eli’s cheerful voice responded. The man lived for a bar fight. This was probably going to be the highlight of his month.

I returned my attention to the group that was attempting to rob me. “My systems engineer is still aboard the ship and in full control of its vast and lethal weaponry. If I don’t kill you, she will. Walk away and I’ll forget this happened.”

The three of them communicated silently for a moment before deciding my pitiful pile of spare parts wasn't worth their lives. They disappeared back into the town without a word.

I doubted that was the end of it, so I piled my supplies back onto the levcart and returned them to the ship. "Keep everything locked down," I told Kee. "And find Hudson. I'm going to rescue Eli."

CHAPTER TWO

By the time I made it to the bar, Eli had laid out half the room and the other half watched him with wary respect. His knuckles were bloody, so he'd started with fists, but now he held a plas blade. The long energy blade was blue, indicating that it was set to a nonlethal stun.

"Having fun?" I asked.

He grinned at me until it pulled at his split lip, then he grimaced. "Some of these people need to learn bar fight etiquette. That asshole"—he pointed to a man slumped unconscious on the ground—"pulled a plas pistol on me."

"Are you injured?" I asked over the comm.

Eli minutely shook his head. "But I was talking to someone potentially interesting before everything went to shit."

Before I could ask him about it, a pretty young woman with pale skin and dark hair crossed the room to Eli's side. She winced at his split lip and bruised jaw. "We have a first aid kit in the back. Come with me and I'll patch you up."

Eli turned to me. "Captain, meet Megan Gail. Meg, Captain Tavi Zarola."

I nodded at the young woman even as her expression cooled into wariness. "You might as well come, too," she said, her tone carefully polite. "I'm sure you'll want to verify your first officer isn't hurt."

Something in her tone warned me not to ask questions, so I inclined my head in agreement. She led us behind the bar and through a secured door—which she relocked behind us. She held up a finger before I could demand an explanation and then quickly checked the three rooms along the hall before returning to us.

"You have to get out of here," she hissed. "It's not safe."

Eli held up his hands in a placating gesture. "We can take care of ourselves." He grinned and hitched a thumb at the door to the bar. "Shall I go back out there and prove it again?"

Megan shook her head. "I'm not talking about the drunks. There's worse here, and you'll be better off if you leave and don't look back."

"Do you need help?" I asked.

She hesitated, clearly wanting to say yes, but not quite trusting me enough to do it.

I looked her over. At twenty-three, she should still be in her mandatory FHP military service period. The easiest way to get out of it was to pay the waiver fee, but the cost was so high that the vast majority of people couldn't afford it—and nothing on this dusty rock had led me to believe that she or her family *could*.

"Tell us what's wrong," Eli said, his voice gentle. "We can help."

Megan's short laugh had a bitter, desperate edge. "I should let you try, just to prove how wrong you are."

"Is it your father?" I asked.

Shock crossed her face before swiftly morphing into suspicion. "How did you know?"

"A few people warned me that your father wouldn't appreciate Eli flirting with you, right before they tried to rob me."

The color drained from her cheeks. "Then he already knows you're here. You need to leave."

"Why do you think your father is a threat to us?"

"Because you're here for Alan." She said it matter-of-factly, like it wasn't even a question.

Using a combination of keen observation and disarming charm, Eli could pick out the most interesting person in any room with an ease that I envied, and it looked like his streak of wins wouldn't be broken today. "Did you know?" I asked him over the comm.

"Not exactly," he replied.

Until I knew how Megan was connected to Alan, it was better to deflect. "Why do you think—"

She waved me off. "Don't bother. You're not the first to try for his bounty. It's the only reason anyone comes here."

"So your father is protecting Alan?" Eli asked, his tone careful.

She scoffed. "Hardly."

Eli didn't press, and I bit my lip to keep my questions contained. Our patience was rewarded when Megan sighed and continued, "Father finds Alan useful, and the bounty means that Alan can't escape him. Neither of us can." The last sentence was muttered beneath her breath with a wealth of weary bitterness infusing the words.

So much for my easy bounty. The young woman was obviously hurting, and while it wasn't any of my business, I had a very hard time walking away from someone in need. I rubbed a hand down my face. "Kee, have you found anything?" I asked over the comm.

"Gerald Gail—Megan's father—is a real piece of work," she responded immediately, aiming for my soft heart with unerring accuracy. While I had trouble turning my back on someone who needed help, Kee found it impossible.

Eli huffed out a breath. "We can't save everyone we meet," he said subvocally over the comm.

"But we can save Megan and Alan," Kee argued, unrepentant.

"We're here to pick him up for his bounty," Eli reminded her.

I blocked out their bickering and looked at Megan. Her chin was tilted at a defiant angle, but fear lurked in her eyes. “Alan has money,” I said gently. “Why hasn’t he gotten you both out?”

Her shoulders hunched. “He used the money to pay off my mandatory service waiver. When he returned for me, my father caught him. We’ve tried to run a couple of times, but we’ve never made it off-planet.” She clasped her hands in front of her. “I have some credits saved up. If you help us, I’ll give them to you. It’s almost as much as you’d get for the bounty, and I’ll make payments on the rest—I swear it.”

“Kee, find out if her story is true,” I murmured over the comm. If Megan was lying, then she was an incredible actor, but I needed to know the truth before I committed to putting my crew in harm’s way. Because although I helped where I could, my crew came first, always.

While Kee worked, I returned my attention to Megan. “What’s stopping me from using you to get to Alan?”

Uncertainty crossed her face, and I felt like I’d kicked a puppy. “But you’re a hero,” she argued. “I saw you on the vids a few years ago.”

I barely contained my flinch. The FHP *had* paraded me around as a hero, despite reality and my wishes. “Don’t believe everything you see,” I muttered. “Especially where the Feds are concerned.”

“How do we get out of the building?” Eli asked.

Megan pointed to the heavy door at the end of the hall. “There’s a back door, but if my father knows you’re here, then it’ll probably be watched.”

“Where is your father keeping Alan?” I asked.

Megan shook her head. “I’ll take you there if you promise to help, but I’m going with you.”

“Is Alan guarded?” I asked.

“He can move around the compound freely, but the access points are guarded.”

“How many guards?”

Megan’s eyes slid away from mine. “They’re spread out across the compound, so you’ll probably only have to worry about two or three.”

“How many total?” Eli pressed.

Before Megan could work out a convincing lie, I said, “If you give us bad information, it’s much more likely that Alan will get hurt. If we know what we’re up against, we can plan. If you lie to us, then I’m going to pull my team at the first sign of more trouble than I expected.”

She sighed, then admitted, “There are a dozen guards on duty at any given time and more who live on the compound and can be called to action. But they truly are spread out, so if we’re careful, we’ll only have to deal with a few of them.”

“Can you get Alan close to an exit without causing suspicion?”

She nodded. “There’s a garden near a side entrance. We often spend a few minutes in the evening there.”

Unfortunately, if she came with us, her father would know something was up before we got

anywhere close to Alan. But leaving her behind meant a different set of issues.

“How good are the guards?” I asked. “Are they former soldiers or just random muscle that lived nearby?”

“Most are off-world contractors,” she said. “They might be former soldiers, but they’re not exactly the best of the best. Father refuses to pay more than a pittance, so only the desperate ever make it this far, and even they leave as soon as possible.”

Most people wouldn’t die for a pittance, but nothing motivated like desperation, so it was impossible to say whether the guards would break and run or stand and fight when presented with an organized challenge.

I pressed my fingers against my forehead. Nothing was ever easy. “Patch up Eli’s face, and he and I will leave out the front. If we leave you here, will you be okay?”

The cautious hope on her face dimmed but she swallowed and nodded. She moved to get the first aid kit and opened it with mechanical motions.

I sighed and made a decision that I hoped I wouldn’t regret. “Tomorrow, four hours after sunset, take Alan for a walk in the garden.” Megan’s gaze flew up to mine, but I kept talking. “Don’t tell him anything. Don’t tell *anyone*. Only take what you can easily carry without packing a bag. And don’t deviate from your normal routine. If your father catches wind of our plans, I won’t be able to help you.”

Eli grumbled something under his breath, but he didn’t contradict me.

“Thank you,” Megan murmured, and she swiped at her damp eyes. “Thank you so much.”

“Don’t thank me yet. We still have to get you out, and I won’t put my people into more danger than we can handle. If you’ve lied to me, I’ll leave you.”

CHAPTER THREE

Megan patched up Eli's split lip. It didn't really need it, but it was a good cover for the time we'd spent together. When we emerged back into the bar, the room had grown noticeably more hostile, but no one tried to stop us as we left.

"How long before they jump us?" Eli asked over the comm.

"They're waiting halfway to the ship," Kee responded. "At least six."

As long as they were just trying to scare us off without killing us, then Eli and I could take six. But if things turned ugly, the odds weren't in our favor. "Is there a way around?"

"Not really, but we can do a hot pickup on the other side of town. Sending the location to your comm now."

I checked the location and fixed the pickup point in my mind. "Got it. Thanks, Kee." I turned to Eli. "Ready to make a break for it?"

He grinned. "Always."

As soon as I heard *Starlight's* engines spin up, I pulled my plas pistol and bolted for the pickup point. My lungs burned as my body tried to draw in enough oxygen from the thin atmosphere.

Eli kept pace beside me, his breathing as harsh as mine.

A glance around proved the tiny village didn't look better from the ground. All of the buildings needed repairs and the street was filled with potholes. Whoever was in charge wasn't doing their job.

A faint shout rose behind us, far enough back that I wasn't too worried about it. We hit the edge of town just as *Starlight* dropped to the ground in front of us with a flurry of dust and engine exhaust.

The cargo ramp was halfway down, and I scrabbled aboard, Eli at my back. Once we were both safely inside, I slammed my hand on the cargo bay control panel. The door closed and the ramp retracted. "We're in," I wheezed over the comm. My lungs felt like they were filled with shards of glass.

"Where to?" Kee asked.

I straightened and took a slow, deep breath to help slow my racing pulse. "Head for the nearest city. If we're lucky, they'll think they've driven us off. And that'll give us time to plan without having to watch our backs."

Eli and I made our way through the hatch into the main part of the ship. Halfway to the bridge, Luna launched herself at me from the railing near the ceiling and landed on my shoulder. I wasn't wearing the padded shoulder guard she usually used for a landing pad, but thanks to my heavy coat and lightweight armor, her claws didn't reach my skin, so I didn't scold her for it.

I reached up and scratched under her chin. The little burbu chirruped at me, then sent me another telepathic picture of her empty food bowl.

"Okay, you little glutton," I murmured affectionately. "I suppose it is almost time for lunch. Let's see what I can rustle up, hmm?"

"Pushover," Eli murmured, but he reached over to scratch behind Luna's ears. We all spoiled her rotten, but she was just so damn adorable it was hard to say no to her big violet eyes.

Eli turned his attention to me. "If you're going to be in the galley anyway..." His voice trailed off, and he gave me his best impression of Luna's pleading look.

I smothered my laugh and raised an eyebrow. "I don't know if I can cook for someone who thinks I'm a pushover."

Eli flashed me a charming, dazzling grin—the one that would be classified as a weapon of mass destruction if he deployed it on a busy street, even if it was somewhat marred by his bandaged lip. "I was referring to Luna, of course. I would never say *you're* a pushover, Captain."

"Nice save," Kee whispered over the comm, her voice hilariously dry.

Eli and I cracked into laughter at the same time. After I wiped away the tears and got myself under control, I waved at Eli. "Go help Kee. I'll fix lunch, and then we'll figure out a plan."

Eli tossed me a jaunty salute and continued toward the bridge.

I entered the galley and fed Luna first because I wouldn't be able to get anything else done while she was hungry. The little burbu dove into her food with a happy chirp. Once she was taken care of, I quickly put together a simple meal of pasta and veggies. We were running low on supplies again, and I'd been counting on this bounty to see us through.

I sighed. I would make it work, somehow. None of us *loved* eating rice and generic protein, but it would keep us alive until I could find us another job.

By the time the food was ready, Kee had landed us in the nearest city, which was still more a town than a proper city, but at least the spaceport had a dozen landing pads, and half of them were taken.

Kee and Eli joined me in the galley, and we all grabbed a bowl of pasta before settling at the end of the long table closest to the door.

"Tell me what you've found on Gerald Gail," I said to Kee.

"He owns the town, basically, because he owns the mine that's the only real source of employment. He's also the mayor. He's won in a landslide every election."

"People are too scared to vote against him," Eli growled.

Kee nodded. "Pretty much. The last challenger was about five years ago. The woman went

missing before the election and never turned up again.”

I rubbed the bridge of my nose. Nothing was ever easy. “And his compound?”

“It’s almost bigger than the village. Security is second-rate, though, because no one is stupid enough to steal from him. He relies mostly on contracted guards, with only a few electronic security measures. Makes my job both easier and harder, because I can’t just tap into his cameras to see where everyone is.”

“So you can get us in?”

Kee waved a breezy hand. “Of course. And I have the blueprints as well.”

“Good work.”

Kee beamed at me, but Eli grumbled, “I still think it’s a bad idea. Walking away costs nothing. These aren’t our problems. And it sounds like we’re not the first to try for Alan’s bounty. They’re not going to let him go without a fight.”

It wasn’t that Eli didn’t want to help—he did—but he would always prioritize Kee and myself above strangers. Honestly, if he were the only one breaking into the compound, he’d be far more likely to agree than when Kee and I were involved.

“As much as I hate to agree with grouchy here,” Kee said, hiking a thumb at Eli, “he’s kind of right. Alan is making Gerald a *lot* of money, voluntarily or not. Gerald isn’t going to want to let his golden goose go. Add his daughter and the man is going to be furious. We need to be careful.”

I tipped my head back in thought. “We’ll need transport. We can’t get *Starlight* close enough without tipping them off. So after we grab Megan and Alan, we’ll need something to keep the compound too distracted to immediately follow us.”

“If I get access to the security system, I can lock them in,” Kee said. “Or at least lock most of their vehicles in.”

“Let’s look at the blueprints. Did you find the garden Megan was talking about?”

Kee nodded and pulled up the image on her slate. “It’s here,” she said, pointing at one edge of the outlined compound. “It’s on an outside wall near a small gate.”

The rest of the compound looked like a fortress, but this little garden wouldn’t be too hard to breach. “If they’re not in the garden, we bail,” I said.

Kee opened her mouth to protest, but I cut her off. “We’ll wait as long as we can, but we don’t have the time, supplies, or information to take on a guarded, fortified compound.” I studied the blueprint. “How tall are the walls?”

“Two and a half meters, topped by razor wire,” Kee said. She swiped on the slate’s screen and a satellite image appeared. I zoomed in on the garden. It was surrounded by buildings on three sides. The roofs weren’t connected, so there should be walkways between them, but it still wasn’t ideal.

“If we lose the gate, we’ll be trapped,” Eli said.

I tapped the table thoughtfully. “Ideally, we’ll get in, get Megan and Alan, and get out again before they have time to raise the alarm. The gate will be guarded, so we’ll need to move fast once we

start.”

“The extraction should be easy enough if Megan and Alan are in position,” Eli conceded. “Especially if Kee can slow down anyone who would give chase. But that leaves the return to the ship. If Kee doesn’t shut down their comms, we might have a nasty surprise waiting for us at the spaceport.”

I looked at Kee. “Try to find me some higher resolution satellite or drone images, and start working on the security system. Eli and I are going scouting.”

IT’D TAKEN us the better part of the afternoon to find a fast, lightweight transport that didn’t look like it would fall apart at the first opportunity and then haggle a fair rental price.

The rest of the afternoon was spent losing the tail we’d picked up.

Now we were nestled against a tall rock outcropping, several kilometers away from Gerald Gail’s compound. Bitterly cold wind tugged at my clothes as I passed Eli the digital binoculars. “Lots of activity during the day.”

He scanned the buildings and surrounding area and sighed. “Not a lot of cover, either.”

Eli wasn’t wrong. The plants that were hardy enough to stand up to the icy, brutal wind were short and scraggly. They wouldn’t provide enough cover to hide our approach unless we hugged the ground, which was a risky proposition on unfamiliar terrain. Once we made the grab, we’d have to rely on speed over stealth.

We hunkered down and waited for the pale sun to set. We watched the compound until the first of the twin moons rose, a tiny sliver in the velvety sky.

“It’s doable,” Eli said at last, “but I still don’t like it. It would be better if Lexi were here.”

I murmured my agreement. Lexi was the fourth member of my military squad, and she’d never met a door she couldn’t open. She’d decided to go her own way—with my blessing—but I still felt the hole she’d left behind.

“We’ve seen enough. Let’s head back and see what Kee has found.”

Eli nodded and piloted us back to *Starlight*. The transport just fit in the cargo bay, which would keep anyone from messing with it. Kee could find any trackers our tails tried to add, but it would be easier if she didn’t have to. She was already overriding the onboard trip computer, so she didn’t need to spend extra time searching for trackers.

As far as the transport—and the company we’d rented it from—were concerned, we’d spent the day scouting the eastern mountains, far from Gerald’s compound.

I poked my head into Kee’s control room to find her scowling at her monitors. Luna was curled up on a perch near the ceiling, her nose tucked under her tail. “Everything okay?” I asked Kee.

She grunted something that might’ve been an affirmative and stayed focused on the screens in front

of her.

“Did you eat dinner?”

That caused her to blink and look at me. “Is it dinnertime?”

I smiled, used to her tendency to get so focused she forgot to eat. “Past. I can’t believe Luna let you get away without feeding her for so long. Eli and I had meal bars while we were scouting. Keep working; I’ll make you something and let you know when it’s ready.”

“I fed Luna,” Kee said absently, already turning back to her terminal. “And a meal bar is fine for me, too. I’ll eat and work. I’m nearly there.”

I shook my head in fond exasperation. Of course she’d fed the burbu but not herself. And if I didn’t bring her food or convince her to stop and eat, she’d keep working until she’d solved the problem or starved—not that I would ever let her go that far. Taking care of people was one of the things that brought me joy, so I headed to the galley to make something delicious and filling that Kee could eat while working.

Because I’d learned from experience that cooking was far easier than trying to tempt her away from the data in front of her.

CHAPTER FOUR

I stopped by the hydroponic garden and harvested some spinach before continuing to the galley. I found Eli staring at the mostly bare dry-goods shelves, lost in thought. When he heard me, he looked up and grimaced. “We’re getting low on food.”

“I know.” I ran the mental math. Without the bounty money, the next few weeks would be tight. I didn’t want to dip into my limited emergency funds, but there might not be another option. “We’ll buy some extra supplies tomorrow morning, but we’re going to be eating a lot of generic protein this month, so brace yourself.”

Eli’s grimace deepened, but he didn’t complain, and my heart twisted. As the captain, it was my job to look out for my crew, and I was failing. But when success meant crushing a young woman’s hopes and dreams, I just couldn’t do it. I would find another way.

Somehow.

I nudged Eli aside and started pulling out ingredients for a simple pasta with vegetarian protein and wilted spinach. “I’m making dinner for Kee. Want some?”

“If you don’t mind,” he said, subtly eyeing the shelves.

“You know I don’t. Go ahead and get out three plates. I’ll probably have to take Kee’s to her, but maybe we can lure her out long enough to eat.”

Eli nodded with a grin, then started pulling out plates and cups while I started boiling water for the pasta. I usually made this dish with spaghetti, but that would be too messy for Kee to eat while working, so I pulled out penne instead. She could stab the noodles with a fork and work at the same time.

I lost myself in the familiar routine until Kee burst into the galley. “I’m in!” she crowed, waving her slate. “Gerald Gail’s systems are shit, but I have access. And I pulled some better images of the compound and surrounding area.”

“What did you find?” Eli asked.

“There are surprisingly few cameras spread around the buildings and none inside. I couldn’t find another security system inside, and I looked hard. But I did get access to all of the locks that are attached to his security system, including the ones that control the garages.”

“Why aren’t there any cameras inside?” Eli asked.

Kee shrugged. “Based on the state of the rest of his system, I’m going to guess it’s because he’s cheap. Or paranoid. Or both.”

“Did Megan give us good information?” I asked as I plated the pasta.

“As far as I can tell,” Kee said. “Gerald isn’t exactly advertising that he has Alan working for him, but he suddenly started making a lot of money on a mine that was *losing* money every year.”

“He could’ve hit a new vein of ore,” Eli said.

“He could’ve,” Kee agreed easily, “except that his exports didn’t increase, and he didn’t hire any new miners.”

I set the food on the table while I considered our next step. Eli and Kee joined me, and we dug in. The generic protein wasn’t great, but the garlic and cheese made it palatable enough.

“What about the compound?” Eli asked after he’d helped himself to a second serving. “How many guards?”

“At least two guarding each entrance, with more at the main gate.”

Eli and I both frowned. Every guard meant a possibility of injury, and while I trusted that my team was better than most, it just took one unlucky encounter to put their lives in danger.

Kee easily caught the direction of our thoughts. “I can turn off their security, including the systems that alert to incoming transports, so we’ll have surprise on our side. As long as we’re quick, we should only have to deal with the two at the garden gate.”

“There’s a lot riding on that ‘should’,” Eli growled.

Kee lifted one shoulder. “Every job has risks.”

Eli’s scowl deepened, and I interrupted before he could say something he’d regret. “Do you have live access to the cameras?”

Kee nodded and passed me her slate. Gerald Gail certainly wasn’t paying for top-of-the-line equipment. Grainy, black-and-white video made it difficult to pick out details. Part of it was because the cameras were in night-vision mode, but a lot of it was because they were using tech that was at least a decade old.

Kee pointed at one of the feeds. “That’s the garden. The gate is on the right.”

I selected it, but the bigger video just made everything blurrier. Honestly, if this was the state of his tech, then this job might not be as bad as I’d feared. There was a small guardhouse just inside the gate with two guards inside.

I squinted at the screen as two people moved through the garden itself. Were those guards or civilians? The person on the right reminded me of Megan, but it was impossible to tell for sure with the angle of the video.

They stopped at the guardhouse, and the person on the right handed over a tray before they continued on their way. Dodging kitchen staff was easier than dodging guards, but they were also more unpredictable. As long as they delivered food at the same time every day, they should be gone

before we arrived, but counting on probabilities was a dangerous game.

If they hadn't shown up by the time we arrived, we'd have to be very, very careful.

"Two people just delivered a tray to the guards," I said.

Eli checked the time and swore quietly. "Going to be close."

I nodded in acknowledgment, then handed the slate back to Kee. "Let's look at the approach path."

She pulled up high-resolution satellite images of the compound and the surrounding area, then laid the slate flat on the table. "This is the garden," she said, pointing at one edge of the compound. "There's not much cover."

"We saw the same," I murmured. I zoomed in, surprised by the resolution. The images looked military rather than civilian. "Do I want to know where you got these?"

She held up her hands. "It was legal!" Then her nose wrinkled, and she winked as she tacked on, "Mostly."

The three of us discussed options and plans and contingencies until we knew exactly what we would do—and what we'd do when something inevitably went wrong.

I yawned and stretched. "I'm heading to bed, and I suggest you two do the same. We'll spend some time in town in the morning to assuage suspicion and get supplies. Add anything you need to the list."

They nodded, and I waved as I left the galley. Luna was curled up asleep on my bed, and she didn't wake as I brushed my teeth and changed into my pajamas. She did, however, chirrup grouchyly at me when I scooted her over to claim a tiny slice of the large bed for myself. For such a small creature, she certainly took up a lot of space.

I petted her gently in apology and let her low, rumbling purr soothe me into dreams.

COLD VALLEY LIVED up to its name. The town was surrounded by old, worn-down mountains on two sides, and the constant wind was biting cold. But the buildings were in far better repair than the village where we'd found Megan. If I had to guess, I'd say that Gerald Gail didn't own this town.

But that didn't mean that he didn't have allies here.

Kee, Eli, and I left the ship just after sunrise. I left Luna behind, much to her vocal displeasure, but I didn't want to have to worry about her if something went wrong. And we'd barely hit the dirt when Eli's voice crackled across the subvocal comm. "Captain."

"I see them." Two people were casually lounging against nearby buildings, not even trying to conceal the fact that they were watching us. They were wrapped up in multiple layers of clothes, making recognizing their faces impossible, but they were tall and muscular—mercenaries, if I had to guess.

Kee waved at them, and I could practically *see* their puzzlement before the one in green and black

hesitantly returned the gesture. The merc in tan just stared at us.

Well, I knew which one I was going to shoot first, if it came to that.

Despite my worry, the two mercenaries merely followed us. They stayed far enough back to give us the illusion of privacy, but we'd done surveillance of our own and knew just how sensitive directional microphones could be. Our conversation stayed light and boring.

Our first stop was a tiny bakery a block from the spaceport. An old-fashioned bell over the door jingled merrily and a middle-aged man appeared from the back, wearing an apron dusted with flour. His brown hair was graying, and his deeply tanned face was wreathed in laugh lines.

He greeted us in the local dialect, then switched to accented Common when we didn't respond. "Welcome! What can I do for you?"

"Two coffees and a hot chocolate, if you have it," I said. Spending a little of our money on a small splurge was worth it if it bought us either information or cover.

"Only the best in the city," he declared with a grin.

Kee bounced on her toes. Hot chocolate was her favorite, but she rarely indulged.

"What brings you to Cold Valley?" the baker asked.

"Just passing through," I said. "We're trying to do a little trading to make the trip less expensive."

"Good luck," the baker said with a dry chuckle. "Outsiders are regarded with suspicion. I've been here twenty years and people *still* think I'm new. But it's far better here than some places. Avoid heading over the mountains to the west, if you can."

"Luckily, we're heading east," Kee said. "What brought you here?"

"After my mandatory service, I came to work in the mines. Then I got too old and tired, so I decided to try my hand at baking. Turns out, I'm pretty good at it." He chuckled and waved at the empty tables. "Less good at running a shop, but what are you going to do."

Kee eyed the case of baked goods. "Give me three of your most delicious pastries and three cookies." She glanced at me and smiled. "My treat."

We weren't so broke that I couldn't afford a few pastries for my crew. "Kee—"

She held up a hand to ward off my argument. "You're welcome."

I took a deep breath and relented with a tiny nod. "Thank you."

She kept chatting with the baker, holding his attention, so I moved to the window and checked on our shadows. The two mercs were waiting across the street.

It wouldn't be too hard to give them then slip, but that wouldn't do anything to make us seem *less* suspicious. I wouldn't let them track us straight to Gerald Gail's compound, but for now, I was perfectly happy to let them stand in the cold and keep watch.

Thanks to Kee's love of sweets and inability to choose just one, we ended up with an entire box of pastries and three hot beverages to go with them. We sat at one of the tiny tables and enjoyed our breakfast while the mercs glared at us.

Eli saluted them with his coffee cup, then took a long drink before biting into yet another pastry

with exaggerated delight.

“Having fun?” I asked.

He grinned. “Yes.”

AFTER BREAKFAST, we moved on to grocery shopping. Look at us, doing normal things without a care in the world. We definitely weren't getting ready to break into a guarded compound later, even if my nerves were winding tighter with each passing minute.

The food prices were high, as expected on a planet that made farming difficult, but they weren't as bad as I'd feared, so I was able to get enough food to get us to the nearest station without having to break into the emergency rations. The meals wouldn't be fancy, but they would be filling.

I looked at the pile of groceries and winced. Most of the staples I'd bought were heavy, and it was eight blocks back to the ship. I should've brought our levcart, but it was still piled with the trading supplies from yesterday.

Eli picked up the ten-kilogram bag of rice and slung it over his shoulder. Then he grabbed the four next heaviest bags, leaving ten lighter bags for Kee and I to split.

He had to be carrying nearly twenty kilograms, but you couldn't tell from looking at his face.

“You good?” I asked.

When he nodded, Kee and I picked up the rest of the bags, then we headed for the ship. I didn't know if the mercs were keeping people at bay or if the town really was as empty as it seemed, but we only saw a handful of people on our way back, and none of them approached.

By the time we'd climbed the cargo ramp into the ship, we were all breathing hard. My lungs burned, and I wasn't carrying that much weight. The lack of oxygen made even easy exertion feel like all-out effort. That was something I would have to account for tonight.

We caught our breath, then put away the groceries. Kee put her box of pastries on the bar in the galley and patted the lid. “I'll be back for you later.”

I fervently hoped that nothing would happen to turn that into a lie.

CHAPTER FIVE

Nerves fluttered in my stomach as I piloted the transport centimeters from the dark ground. We'd shaken the mercs tailing us in the eastern mountains, and now we were closing in on Gerald's compound.

Transports were designed to fly at least a meter higher, and even higher than that when flying over rough terrain. Keeping them this close to the dirt was dangerous, but we were trying to avoid notice. To that end, I was also flying with night-vision glasses and no exterior lights. The manual controls were augmented by the transport's autopilot, so the system would intervene if it looked like I was going to hit something, but otherwise, it was leaving the navigation to me.

"I've overridden the compound's sensors on this side," Kee confirmed from the seat behind me, her voice low. "No alarms have been raised."

"Are Megan and Alan in the garden?" Eli asked without looking away from the front window, his hands tense on the co-pilot's controls. I knew it was taking considerable willpower for him not to pull us up to a safer height.

"Not that I see," Kee said. She tapped on her slate. "The two guards are in the post at the gate."

I swore under my breath. We didn't have the time or resources to go searching for Megan and Alan. A boulder appeared from the gloom, and the autopilot beeped a warning at me. I slid the transport sideways, narrowly avoiding the huge rock, and Eli cursed.

A few minutes later, I let out a deep breath as the transport settled to the ground behind the meager shelter of a clump of spindly shrubs. We were twenty meters from the garden's gate.

I turned around so I could see Kee. "Any sign of them yet?"

She silently shook her head.

Fuck. They should've been in position ten minutes ago. "Any chance they're out of view?"

"Maybe," Kee allowed. "The camera angles aren't great. But the dinner tray was delivered, so we don't have to worry about the kitchen staff."

"Okay, we'll enter the garden. If Megan and Alan aren't there, we bail." Kee made a soft sound of protest, but I shook my head at her. "Megan knew the rules. We can't go in after her." When Kee's expression turned pleading, I sighed. "We'll give her as long as we can."

I looked between Kee and Eli, two of the people I loved most in the world. “Stick to the plan. If we get separated, make for the transport—but don’t get separated. Kee, you’re on doors and security monitoring. Eli, you’re with me on the guards. And neither of you are allowed to take stupid risks.”

“Let’s do this,” Eli grumbled.

I affectionately cuffed his shoulder, then high-fived Kee. It was part of my pre-mission ritual, as was the silent little prayer I said every time I led them into danger.

We were all wearing our standard lightweight armor and night-vision glasses. Kee had overridden the light controls on the transport, so it remained dark when we slid the door open. I had a plas pistol on my left hip and a plas blade on my right.

The plas blade would be my main weapon tonight. The twenty-five-centimeter energy blade had a nonlethal setting that would stun the guards without injuring them. We had the authority to retrieve Alan from anyone who was “helping” him by any means necessary, but I didn’t really want the FHP to get involved.

We crept toward the gate. Kee was directly behind me, and Eli brought up the rear. It was our standard configuration. Kee was a crack shot, but Eli and I were far better at hand-to-hand fighting, so we always kept her in the most protected position.

And the arrangement let us keep an eye on her while she kept an eye on the compound’s security system.

I hugged the wall outside the gate. “Status,” I asked over the comm.

“Guards are in their post,” Kee responded, eyes on the small slate strapped to her forearm. “They haven’t moved. The garden is clear from what I can see. Looping the video now. When you’re ready, the gate will unlock. It might be loud enough for the guards to hear it. I’ll shut down their comms, but we need to work fast.”

“Everyone ready?” I asked. Kee and Eli both confirmed. “On my mark.” I moved closer to the gate and drew my plas blade but didn’t activate it. “Now!”

The lock disengaged with a metallic groan that was clearly audible over the howling wind. I activated my plas blade and swept into the dark compound. The guard post was on my right, a small hut that kept them out of the elements and let them monitor the few cameras scattered around the complex.

Both guards were slouched at their stations. Neither moved, though they should’ve had a clear view of the gate—and us. I couldn’t see well enough to tell what was happening, but my instincts were screaming.

“Something’s wrong,” I murmured over the comm. “Be on guard.”

I opened the door, plas blade leading the way, and still the guards didn’t stir. They were sitting slumped over, like they’d fallen asleep in their chairs. A teacup had dropped to the floor, spilling its contents, but otherwise, the room looked untouched.

“Someone beat us here,” Eli whispered from behind me.

If a team had someone on the inside capable of drugging the guards, then we were fucked. “Out,” I ordered.

Eli eased from the room on full alert. I followed, my gaze darting around the garden. The area wasn’t very big, but it was filled with tall, hardy shrubs and interesting bits of sculpture. There were too many places to hide.

Movement caught my eye, and I spun to face it. Eli pulled his plas pistol and stepped closer to Kee. A head popped out from behind a statue, and I breathed a sigh of relief as I recognized Megan.

“Who’s there?” she called as she squinted at us. Without night vision, she would only see shadowy shapes.

“Your ride,” I said, pitching my voice to carry just enough to reach her.

She sagged in relief and disappeared. When she came back into view, she had Alan Hudson with her. Both had small bags slung over their shoulders.

“Did you poison the guards?” I asked when she neared.

She nodded. “I’ve been bringing them tea for months, biding my time. If you hadn’t shown up, we were going to try on our own.”

“How long have they been out?”

“Half an hour. But don’t worry, they only check in every hour or so. We have plenty of time.”

I herded Megan and Alan toward the gate. Saying shit like that was just *inviting* the universe to strike you down. “Eli, on point.”

He nodded and slipped through the gate, Megan and Alan on his heels. Kee paused and scowled at her comm. “Incoming,” she murmured.

“How long?”

“We should have time to get clear if we move fast, but they’ll find the guards.”

I shoved her through the gate, then pulled it closed behind us. Kee pressed something on her slate and the lock slid home. “Run,” I demanded over the comm.

Megan and Alan weren’t linked into our comms and didn’t have night-vision glasses, but they got the hint when Eli grabbed them and took off. He kept them upright with sheer strength as he hustled them across the rough ground to the transport.

By the time Kee and I entered the vehicle, Eli was already working on the startup sequence. I strapped in and took over as floodlights illuminated the area. Kee growled under her breath and the lights died.

“Most of their transports are locked down,” Kee said, her fingers flying over her slate. “I’ll keep them from tracking us with technology, but they still have eyes.”

“High and fast?” I asked. When she nodded, I checked on our guests. They’d already strapped into their seats. Megan’s face was pale but determined, her chin tipped up at a defiant angle. Alan watched us with open suspicion. “Hold on,” I told them. They both nodded.

After a final check of the instruments, I launched us into the air hard. The transport groaned as we

rocketed upward, and Alan bit off a curse.

A few minutes later, Kee murmured, “Two transports just launched. They must’ve been outside the garage. They don’t have a lock on us yet. I’m blocking their scans, but we need cover or distance.”

It was fifteen minutes back to *Starlight* at our current speed, and I had to have enough time to drop off the transport—I couldn’t afford to replace it. I pushed the throttle all the way to maximum. The engine whined, but the transport shot forward.

I skimmed over the growing mountains, close enough that Eli’s knuckles went white on the co-pilot controls. As soon as we crested the summit, I dropped down the other side, still flying dangerously fast.

“Where did you try to escape from last time?” I asked Megan.

“Cold Valley,” she said, naming the town where we’d left *Starlight*. “It’s the only thing around. But I left a few subtle clues hinting that I was heading for Copper City this time.”

Copper City was the largest city in this hemisphere. I doubted anyone would fall for her ruse, but I admired her foresight. She really *had* been planning to run again, with or without our help.

“Kee, how are we looking?” I asked.

“Clear so far. They’re not over the mountain yet.”

I swung the transport in an arc to the north, aiming for the location I’d marked on the map.

“Where are we going?” Alan asked.

“They’re going to be looking for you in Cold Valley. We’ve already had to shake a couple of tails, and our ship is under surveillance. If we take you into town, we’ll have to fight.”

“Isn’t that what you bounty hunters are good at?” he scoffed.

“Yes, we are, but are *you*? Is Megan? Are you willing to risk her safety on our skill when you know nothing about us?”

That shut him up. “I apologize,” he said, voice stiff.

As we neared the tiny maintenance shack we’d found while scouting, I glanced at Eli. “You ready?”

“For the record, I hate this,” he growled.

I nodded. He’d made his displeasure clear, but we both knew it was the best option. He would stay behind with Megan and Alan while Kee and I went for *Starlight*.

I’d tried to convince them that Kee should stay behind, too, but they’d threatened to mutiny if I didn’t have someone to watch my back, so we’d compromised. We’d talked about leaving Kee behind while Eli and I went for the ship, but Eli was best equipped to defend if Gerald’s people found them—or if Megan and Alan decided to turn on us.

It was a hard fifteen-minute run to town from here, and that was before the lack of oxygen was factored in, so we couldn’t count on Eli’s help unless things were truly dire.

I hovered the transport near the door. “Be careful,” I demanded.

He unbuckled from his seat. “I will be.” He turned and looked at Megan and Alan. “You two with

me. Move fast.”

I waited until their feet hit the dirt, then I pulled the transport up and away. I needed to put distance between us before the other transports cleared the mountain.

CHAPTER SIX

We approached the city from the far side. Kee had already altered the nav log, so that the transport would report we'd spent the day east of town. I returned to the vehicle to a sleepy, uncaring clerk, then Kee and I made for *Starlight's Shadow*.

"Both transports that were following us came directly here," Kee said over the comm. "None deviated toward Eli, but they're already moving to block our path to the ship."

"How many people?"

"Eight so far, but two more transports are inbound. Turn left."

Two more large transports could mean another dozen people or more. We needed to reach *Starlight* before they arrived.

I drew my plas pistol and turned left, following Kee's directions as we wound our way through the dark streets at a brisk pace that caused my lungs to burn. Kee wheezed along beside me, growling under her breath, "Damned low-oxygen planet. Why don't our bounties ever end up in some tropical paradise?"

I could just see the top of *Starlight's* hull when our luck ran out. Four people stepped out in front of us, their weapons clearly visible. I'd bet good credits that the stooped, older man in front was the person who'd tried to rob me when we'd arrived.

Two of the mercs beside him were the ones who had followed us earlier, except they'd lost some of their extra layers and gained a few weapons. The woman in tan held a plas rifle cradled in her arms, and the man in black and green had a drawn pistol and a holstered plas blade.

The third mercenary was a young man in his late teens or early twenties, twitchy and nervous. He was holding his pistol too tightly with a hand that trembled. He would be trouble if things went badly.

I kept my expression even, but my smile was sharp and dangerous.

"Odd time for a walk," the older man called.

I shrugged. "It's a free planet."

"Where is Megan?" he demanded.

"Who?"

"Trust me, girl, you'll be better off if you talk to me rather than waiting until Mr. Gail gets here."

“More people are heading this way,” Kee murmured over the comm.

“I’m not waiting for anyone. Move now or I will assume you have hostile intentions,” I said, my voice as cold as the wind tugging at my clothes. The two mercs behind the speaker held their weapons like they knew what they were doing, but the kid was clearly out of his depth. Going through them wouldn’t be my first choice, but I couldn’t wait for their backup to arrive, either.

“You’re outnumbered,” the older man said. “You’re coming with me, one way or another, but if you put down your weapons and give yourself up, I’ll let your friend go.”

He absolutely would not—I wasn’t born yesterday. “Are you sure Mr. Gail is worth dying for? I survived fighting Valoffs for a decade; I can certainly survive *you*. But I’m feeling generous. Leave now and I’ll pay you five hundred credits each. Stay, and I will consider you an immediate threat.”

The dent to our budget would hurt, but it was better than getting into a firefight. Eli cursed over the comm. We’d left the channel open so he could hear how it was going, but I knew it had to be killing him not to be here with us.

The merc in green and black stepped forward, only to jerk to a halt when the older man snapped something at him too low to catch. After a moment, the mercenary shrugged, then turned and pointed his pistol at the older man. The kid swung his gun around, but froze when the man growled, “Don’t.”

The woman remained expressionless, but the older man was visibly furious.

“Five hundred and I leave,” the merc in green called to me. “Or I’ll help you get to your ship for a thousand.”

I considered it, but I didn’t want a merc who could be easily bought watching our backs. “Five hundred. Half now, half when we are in the air.”

The merc shrugged again. “Suit yourself.” He backed toward us. “Name’s Matt.”

“You’re going to regret this,” the older man threatened. “You’ve just made a very powerful enemy.”

“A powerful enemy who should pay more,” Matt quipped. “I’ll make more by not working tonight than he was going to pay me *this week*. Besides, I’m tired of this cold rock.”

The older man spluttered while Kee quickly handled the money transfer.

“Don’t stiff me,” Matt murmured. “I know who you are, Octavia Zarola, and if you don’t pay up, every merc in the system will know your word isn’t worth shit.”

My eyebrows rose, but I *just* managed not to point out that he had very little room to talk. “Don’t shoot us in the back, and you’ll get your second payment.”

Matt nodded and edged away into the darkness.

And then there were three.

“I’ve got the woman,” Kee said, her voice steady. “And I’m recording this in case we need proof that we didn’t attack unprovoked.”

“Try not to kill her—we don’t need the trouble, recording or no. I’ve got the other two. As soon as there’s an opening, we run for the ship.”

Kee whispered her assent, and I snapped my pistol up before the remaining trio could raise their weapons. They had assumed I wouldn't attack first. If I had been trying to kill them, that would've been a lethal mistake.

I shot the older man in the thigh, and he went down with a shout. The kid jerked sideways and the pulse that had been meant to clip him punched through his shoulder instead. I winced as guilt hammered me. I hadn't expected him to dive *toward* the fight, but he would survive if they got him to a medic.

The other merc was down, clutching her arm, proving that Kee's aim was better than mine tonight.

I pulled Kee into a run, half dragging her, and forced her shorter legs to keep up with my longer strides as we raced for the ship. My knee burned with old pain, but I pushed through it. "Check on the ship," I commanded as we reached the edge of the spaceport.

"I would," she wheezed, "if I could reach my slate."

I slowed and dropped her arm. "Sorry."

She flashed a grimacing grin at me. "Don't be," she panted. "I'd still be losing a lung two blocks back if not for you."

She tapped her slate as I led her through the ships hunkered on the landing pads. When I got a glimpse of *Starlight's* ramp, I cursed soundly.

A half a dozen people had gathered around the back of the ship. At the base of the cargo bay ramp, an ancient woman with snowy hair and leathery skin held a shotgun that had to be as old as she was considering explosive projectile weapons had gone out of style sometime last century.

But despite her age and the cold, she held the heavy gun like she knew how to use it and was willing to shoot anyone who got too close.

There was no way to slip past her into the ship.

"Can you activate the ship's defenses?" I asked.

Kee nodded but bit her lip. "It'll be messy," she warned.

"Hopefully it won't come to that. Turn on the outside lights while you're at it."

The distinctive sound of weapons charging cut through the rushing wind. When the lights came on, some of the crowd backed away, but the woman remained planted.

Her head tilted. "Octavia Zarola, show yourself. I'm the mayor of this town, and I'd like to speak to you—and your friend." She pointed the gun at the crowd. "You lot stay back."

It would take at least fifteen seconds for the cargo bay door to open far enough for us to roll inside, and we'd be vulnerable the whole time.

"Let's see what she wants," Kee suggested.

"And if she wants to lock us in jail?"

"Eli can bail us out."

"Kee," Eli growled over the comm, clearly unenthused about her plan.

I sighed. The longer I waited, the more time Gerald Gail had to get people here and potentially

find where we'd stashed Megan and Alan. "Stay behind me," I ordered.

Kee grinned and fell in behind my right shoulder.

"This is such a stupid idea," Eli growled. "If you all are caught, I'm going to let you rot."

"No, you won't," Kee sang.

An angry snarl was his only answer.

We crept around the side of the ship, pistols at the ready. The woman kept her attention on the crowd as we came into view.

"What's this I'm hearing about you causing trouble in my town?" she asked.

"Your town has trouble enough without my help," I said.

Her eyes cut to me, deep brown and as sharp as a blade. "Where's the girl?"

I stared at her without comment.

"You're not going to give her up, even with this crowd calling for your blood?"

"My ship is armed. I don't want to slaughter a crowd, but I will if it keeps my people safe. We've already been attacked once tonight, so I have cause."

"And you weren't breaking into Mr. Gail's compound before that?"

"If you check our transport's logs, you'll find we were scouting land in the eastern mountains. Mr. Gail has exactly zero proof that I was anywhere near his compound."

A tiny smile pulled at the corner of her mouth. "My son made it off Rodeni thanks to you," she said softly.

I locked down the memories of blood and death. "I'm glad he made it," I said through stiff lips.

Her voice dropped to a thin whisper. "Will you ensure the girl gets a clean head start so her daddy can't find her so easily?"

I studied her for a long moment, then my chin dipped a bare millimeter.

It was enough. Relief suffused her face. "I should've done more before, but I didn't know how bad it was for her." She turned back to the crowd, who had swelled to more than a dozen people, all of them armed. "Get on your ship and leave them to me. Don't kill the idiots, if you don't mind. I don't want to deal with the paperwork."

"Mr. Gail isn't going to appreciate your interference."

"Mr. Gail can bite my wrinkled ass," she said. "There's a reason he prefers his side of the mountains. I'm not without power here." She gestured to the ship with her chin. "Go on."

"Kee," I murmured, but the cargo bay door was already beginning to lift.

The mayor stepped away from the ramp, her shotgun resting easily in her arms. "There's nothing to see here, folks. Go back to your houses."

"You know we can't do that, Francis," a man called. "Just step aside."

Her chin lifted along with her shotgun. "Make me, if you think you can."

I ducked under the door before the man responded. "Get us in the air," I told Kee. I moved to the controls and retracted the ramp and closed the door.

Kee darted for the bridge while I watched the outside cameras. The crowd hadn't attempted to get past Francis despite their escalating threats. But it wouldn't surprise me if Mr. Gail didn't already have ships in the air or launching soon.

Francis only moved away from her position when the launch alarm sounded. I was glad to see her seek shelter next to one of the other ships. It wasn't safe to be so close when a ship built for space lumbered into the sky.

Starlight's Shadow lifted from the landing pad with a jolt. "So far, the sky is clear," Kee said. "Eli we'll be at your location in two minutes. Be ready."

"We're ready," he confirmed.

Kee easily piloted us to the maintenance shack and something tight unclenched when I saw Eli emerge with Megan and Alan. They were okay.

The three of them scrambled aboard, and I left Eli to secure the cargo bay. I needed to be on the bridge.

CHAPTER SEVEN

We had just cleared the atmosphere when an unknown ship hailed us. Megan and Alan were in the galley, hidden from the bridge's cameras, so I accepted the communication request.

Gerald Gail appeared on screen. Based on the video's background, he wasn't on the ship. They must be rebroadcasting the signal for him. His lip curled into a sneer when he caught sight of me. "Return what you have stolen." His tan skin was nearly as leathery as Francis's, and his dark eyes were cold and furious.

"I've stolen nothing," I said mildly.

"Return Alan Hudson, and I will pay you twice the current bounty."

I blew out a slow breath. Whatever Gerald had Alan doing for him, it must be very lucrative indeed. Also, it didn't escape my notice that he had not yet mentioned his daughter.

"I will not be returning to the planet."

Gerald's face flushed red, and his jaw clenched. "Return or die."

Kee sent the schematics of the nearest ship to my terminal. It was larger than *Starlight's Shadow*, but not as well armed. *Starlight* had been designed and built for long voyages in dangerous areas. We had enough weapons and shielding to deter even the most desperate pirate.

I let ice creep into my expression. "Firing on me would not be wise," I said, my voice lethally soft. "Unless you'd like to lose your entire fleet." *And your daughter, you incredible asshole.*

I could practically see the calculations running in his head. Space battles were long and costly, even for the so-called victor. His crew was probably running the same scans on *Starlight* that Kee had run on his ships. He would know he was outmatched.

If he was smart, he'd tail us to our destination and pick up Megan after she'd left the ship—it's what I'd do in his situation.

"I will not forget this," he said. "You've made a powerful enemy today, Octavia Zarola."

I waved a lazy hand. I'd made far more powerful enemies than him. He'd have to get in line.

The video cut out without another word.

"Well, that went well," Kee said.

"Keep an eye on them. I don't think they're stupid enough to fire on us, but you never know."

“They’re going to track us,” Eli said.

“I’m already on it,” Kee said. “I’ll make it a little more difficult for them, as long as Tavi can put some distance between us. Speaking of... where to, Captain?”

There was only one wormhole anchor in this sector, so it would be pretty obvious where we were heading. Our only hope was to get there faster than the people following us.

“Let’s head for the anchor. There’s a station on the other side where we can drop our passengers, but we’ll need to move quickly.”

Kee plotted the course and sent it to my terminal. I looked it over. It’d taken us nearly five days to travel from the anchor to planet, but Kee had cut the return time to just three and a half. Pushing the ship that hard was potentially asking for trouble, but it would give Megan and Alan the best chance to escape.

I approved the course and let the autopilot take over. “Eli, go see if our guests need food, then give them bunks. And introduce them to Luna. She’s in my quarters.”

Eli slipped from the bridge with a nod. I kept an eye on the sensors. We were in the backwater of nowhere, so there were only a couple of ships in range, which made it painfully clear when one peeled out of orbit and followed us.

“Bold, aren’t they?” I murmured.

“Leave it to me,” Kee said. “We’re faster. We’ll lead them on a merry chase, then vanish.”

I grinned at her, and we lapsed into silence, each lost in our own little world.

KEE HAD long since left to find her bed, and Luna was napping on my lap when the bridge door slid open. It was well after midnight, but I had a pretty good idea who was lurking in the hallway.

“Captain, can we talk?” Megan asked from the doorway.

I waved her in. She perched on the chair at Kee’s terminal and wrung her hands.

“What’s wrong?”

“I don’t have the money for the bounty,” she blurted, expression fearful. “But I swear I’ll make payments for however long it takes. I can pay you 20 percent now, and I have some jewelry I can sell ___”

“I know you don’t have the money,” I interrupted gently.

She blinked at me. “But... how?”

“If you had that kind of money, you would’ve already found a way to escape.”

She clasped her hands together, her knuckles white. “Please don’t turn Alan in. I *swear* I’ll pay you the full amount. Once I get a job, I’ll send a payment every week.”

“I didn’t rescue you for the money,” I said. “And I’m not turning him in.”

True bewilderment crossed her face. “Then why would you help us?”

“Because I could. Because I hope that if I’m ever in a desperate situation, someone will help me.” Because I’d seen enough despair for this lifetime and the next. I couldn’t change history, but I could make the future a little less bleak, one person at a time.

“Where are you taking us?”

“There’s a station past the anchor. It’s not very big, but they have a decent amount of traffic. Kee will set you up with new identities, and you can hop a liner to wherever you’d like.”

“Thank you,” she breathed. Tears glistened in her eyes. “Thank you so much.”

I nodded at her, and she slipped from the bridge, cautious joy on her face. The tightness in my chest eased. I might not be able to save *everyone*, but that wouldn’t keep me from trying to save those I could.

Because the day I stopped trying was the day I’d lose what was left of my bloody, battered soul—and I refused to turn into the monster the FHP had tried to make me.

Not today. Not ever.

EPILOGUE

We successfully sent Megan and Alan on their way with new identity documents and a false trail that would hopefully keep Gerald Gail busy long enough for the couple to make a clean getaway. And as a bonus, it would also make it more difficult for future bounty hunters to track Alan.

Once Megan and Alan were gone, we lingered on the station. *Starlight's Shadow* needed some minor repairs, and I was hoping for a lead on a new job.

Jobs were few and far between, but at least the local parts dealer had the hydroponics part I'd been meaning to replace for the last two months.

Unfortunately, it was currently refusing to slot into place. I swore and tried it at a slightly different angle. I desperately needed a mechanic, but until I landed a bounty or seven, I couldn't afford one, so *Starlight* was a patchwork of quick fixes.

The part finally clicked in, and I sighed in relief.

Kee entered the garden, practically vibrating with excitement. "Have you heard the news?"

I looked up from my place on the floor. I was tired and wet and grouchy. "Did my long-lost, extremely rich aunt just die and leave me a fortune?"

She blinked momentarily thrown, before shaking her head. "Sadly, no. And you know all of your aunts, so unless there was a secret baby somewhere, I'd say your odds aren't great."

"Tell me about it," I grumbled as I climbed to my feet. "What's up?"

"A Valovian ship just docked at the station."

"*This* station?" I clarified, incredulous.

Kee nodded. It was rare for Valoffs to venture this deep into human space. We'd been at peace for three years, but the truce was an uneasy one. If I'd needed a sign that it was time to leave—other than my dwindling bank account thanks to the docking fees—this was it.

"What do you think they want?" Kee asked.

"I don't know, and I don't plan to hang around long enough to find out. Tell Eli to go grab the supplies on the list. I'm going to get cleaned up, then we'll leave as soon as he's back."

"Aren't you curious?"

I was, but not enough to stay. In fact, it would be fine with me if we never saw the Valoffs at all.

But fate had other plans.

EXCERPT FROM HUNT THE STARS

Want to learn more about Tavi, Eli, and Kee? Read on for the first chapter in
Jessie Mihalik's latest romantic science fiction novel,

Hunt the Stars

Available now from Harper Voyager!

I leaned against my ship's cargo ramp and watched with narrowed eyes as four soldiers in Valovian armor stalked through the landing bay. This was a human station in human space—Valoffs shouldn't be here. Yes, we were at peace—for now—but both sides had made it clear that they preferred it when everyone stayed in their own sectors.

The soldiers advanced from ship to ship. At each, the group leader spoke to the ship's captain for a few minutes before continuing on. They moved like Valoffs rather than like humans wearing stolen armor, so I raised my mental shields as they approached. It wasn't easy for a human to learn to shield against Valovian abilities because we had no natural defenses, but I'd learned the hard way during the war. Certain death provided excellent motivation.

The leader was male: tall and muscular, with thick black hair, dark eyes, and skin a shade or two lighter than my own golden tan. He looked vaguely familiar, but I couldn't immediately place him. He was encased in layers of synthetic black armor from neck to feet, and I knew from experience that it would deflect all but the strongest plas pistols and blades. It had exactly two weaknesses, and you had to be within reach to exploit either of them.

The group stopped several paces away, but even at this distance, their leader looked almost human. In general, Valoffs had a wider variety of hair and skin color and were a little taller than humans, with a slightly finer bone structure. However, their eyes were the biggest giveaway. Their irises were often threaded with multiple vibrant colors, and they had better-than-human night vision.

They spent a lot of time in the dark—days on Valovia were only ten hours long.

There were a few other minor differences between us, but at a glance, most Valoffs could be mistaken for human easily enough. Scientists had confirmed that they *were* nearly human, a branch that had diverged several millennia ago. The constant debate was whether they'd settled Earth and created the human branch or if some long-forgotten humans had hitched a ride to Valovia.

Or maybe an unknown third party had created us both. The speculation and conspiracy theories were both varied and unending.

I felt the slightest brush of a mind against mine. It felt cold, as always, even though I didn't think it really had a temperature. When he encountered my mental shield, the leader raised an eyebrow. He was all hard angles and harsh beauty. Sharp cheekbones, strong jaw, straight nose.

And a mind that could kill with a thought.

Three soldiers in full armor—including the battle helmets that covered their faces—waited behind him. I couldn't tell if they expected trouble to find them or if they were prepared to *be* the trouble.

“Are you the captain of this ship?” the Valovian leader asked in lightly accented Common.

I straightened away from the ramp. I wasn't particularly tall, and I had to look up to meet his eyes, which added an annoyed bite to my tone. “Yes.”

“I am Torran Fletcher. I want to hire you.”

Now I understood why all of his previous conversations were so short. This one would be, too. “No.”

“Why not?”

“I'm a bounty hunter. I hunt criminals and murderers; I don't work for them.” And I *especially* didn't work for one of the top Valovian generals who'd led the war against the Federated Human Planets, commonly shortened to FHP or Fed. No wonder he'd looked familiar. He'd been one of our priority targets, but as far as we knew, he'd never been anywhere near the front lines. Disgust pulled at my lips. *Coward.*

His piercing gaze seared me. “I know you. Lieutenant Octavia Zarola, hero of Rodeni,” he said with mocking reverence before his expression hardened. “*Slaughterer*. You are worth a lot in Valovian space.”

Memories of blood and death and war and betrayal caused my mental shields to falter. Torran's expression went carefully blank—the look of a Valoff using their ability—and once again I felt his mind touch mine. I slammed up my shields and locked away the pain.

I hoped that whatever memories he'd glimpsed gave him the same nightmares they gave me.

My palms itched with the desire to grip a weapon. The enemy stood at my door and there wasn't a damn thing I could do about it unless I wanted to cause an interstellar incident—*which I did*, very much. But the thought of my crew stayed my hand. I couldn't go and get myself killed for a vengeance that was three years too late, not when two people still depended on me.

I returned to the conversation, pretending the lapse hadn't happened and that I hadn't imagined sinking a plas blade into his armor's weakest point. My smile was not kind. "Then it's good that we're not *in* Valovian space. And I know who you are, too, General Fletcher. You're not worth anything at all, but station security might make an exception on principle alone."

Torran tilted his head as he considered me. "I could tear through your flimsy shields in half a second. You can barely maintain them as is."

"Try me," I taunted with a careless shrug. "You will be dead before they fall. As you mentioned, I've fought your kind before." And they'd always, *always* underestimated me. It was why I was alive and they were not.

He stared for a few moments longer before apparently coming to a decision. "I will pay you two hundred thousand Federated credits to retrieve a missing item for me. Half up front, yours to keep as long as you make an honest effort, and half on successful delivery."

I blinked at the number, certain I'd misheard. Just the up-front half was ten times more than the largest bounty we'd ever landed. It would keep us in food for over a year, allow me to hire an actual mechanical engineer or two, *and* provide for the ship upgrades that Kee, my systems engineer, desperately wanted. There had to be a *huge* catch or every other captain in the landing bay would've snapped up the offer, Valoff or no.

When I didn't say anything, Torran frowned. "Did you hear me?"

"I heard you just fine. I'm waiting for the catch."

"My team and I will accompany you for the duration of the search."

Uncomfortable, but not so much that the other captains would turn down a fortune, especially if they were smart enough to limit the search to a set amount of time. There had to be something else.

"And the search will begin on Valovia."

Ah, there it was. Valovia was the heart of the Valovian Empire, and humans who ventured into Valovian space tended to disappear. That, plus the bounty on my head, meant that I wouldn't fly there even for the fortune on offer. I mentally blew a farewell kiss to the most money I'd ever almost earned. "I decline. I suggest you find a Valovian crew to help you."

"I can offer you and your crew safe passage for the duration of our contract. You will not be bothered and once the contract is complete, I will accompany you to whichever human station or planetary system you prefer."

"I would have to trust your word *and* the fact that you are even able to offer safe passage. I don't, for either. So my answer remains the same."

One of the soldiers behind Torran stepped forward, their body language furious, but Torran held up a hand and the soldier fell back. Ah, right. It was an insult to question a Valoff's honor. They were all about to be very, very insulted, then.

"A human stole a family heirloom," Torran said. "I want it back. And I want the thief caught."

Whatever had been taken must be beyond priceless if he was willing to pay so much for its

retrieval. But the thief had probably long since fenced it, meaning it could be anywhere in the universe. It was an impossible task, and one I didn't relish tackling while a Valovian general breathed down my neck.

This mission was a hard pass from me. Dead women couldn't spend credits.

Still, I couldn't stifle my curiosity. "Why not have your own people look into it?"

"We need a human crew to track a human thief." I could hear the subtle sneer beneath the words. It took all of my strength not to point out that a human had gotten the better of him and that now he was asking humans for help. The irony was not lost on me, but apparently it was on him.

"Why did they all turn you down?" I asked with a wave toward the other ships. I knew some of those captains. At least two or three were stupid enough to take this job.

"They didn't turn me down. I didn't ask them. They were clearly incompetent. You are... less so."

My comm implant crackled to life before I could tell him exactly where he could shove his faint praise. I held up a finger, so Torran would know that I wasn't just ignoring him, even though I'd like to. The implant piped Kee's voice directly into my inner ear. "Tavi, don't say no. We have to help. They must be desperate if they're coming to us."

It didn't surprise me that Kee was eavesdropping. She was plugged into every system on the ship and could easily hack her way into the whole station if she felt like it. Hell, she was probably linked in to my personal comm and listening through my microphone, never mind that that was supposed to be impossible.

Kee's heart was like the finest china—proudly displayed, incredibly delicate, and easily broken. She'd never met a creature she didn't want to help. I'd known her for years, and she was one of my closest friends, but I still didn't understand how the universe hadn't shattered her yet. Somehow, no matter what happened, she just kept putting herself back together and believing the best of people.

If everyone were like Kee, the universe would be a far better place. Unfortunately, it was filled with vicious bastards like me and General Fletcher.

"No," I responded subvocally.

My subvocal microphone was a tiny, flexible sensor patch stuck to my throat with clear adhesive. It was barely visible, and if anyone noticed it at all, it looked like a small, silvery tattoo.

Thinking about words was enough to move the throat muscles by minuscule amounts. Together with my comm implant, the patch picked up these subvocal movements and translated them into words using my personal voice sounds. The transmitted result was close to my speaking voice, and no one standing next to me could tell that I was communicating.

Not even a Valovian general.

Using a subvocal microphone well took quite a bit of practice and calibration. The trick was to think loudly about the words you wanted to send and very quietly about everything else, unless you wanted your whole squad to get a running monologue of your internal thoughts.

When we'd first started there had been a lot of embarrassing incidents, but now we tended to

leave them on all day without issue. Subvocal comms were a crude form of synthetic telepathy, but they would never match the natural telepathy the Valoffs enjoyed.

“Come on,” Kee wheedled. “We need that money, and it’ll give me a chance to study Valovian tech up close. And everything I’m seeing says that Fletcher *does* have the authority to offer safe passage. He’s kind of a big deal in Valovia now; a war hero turned rich noble or some shit. And his ship is broadcasting a diplomatic registration.”

Kee might be all emotion and sunshine, but she knew me well enough to use more pragmatic levers to move me. She had wanted equipment upgrades for years, but I kept putting her off because I didn’t have the money. We barely earned enough to keep us in food and supplies.

But if I accepted this job, I could afford the upgrades and more, even if I didn’t find the stupid heirloom or the thief who’d stolen it.

I’d risked my life for far less, and if Kee’s research said his offer was good, it was good. I sighed in silent defeat, and she let out a delighted whoop. “Don’t get your hopes up,” I warned quietly. “We’ll see how negotiations go. And I’m not committing to an indefinite wild goose chase. They get eight weeks, max.”

“Give ’em hell,” she agreed cheerfully. “If you can raise the price enough, I can get *two* new processing units and drag this scrap heap into the current century.”

I patted my ship lovingly. *Starlight’s Shadow* wasn’t the newest or fastest or prettiest, but she got the job done—kind of like me.

Torran stood silently waiting for my answer with the kind of coiled strength that could flash into deadly action at a moment’s notice. His gaze never wavered from me. Behind him, his soldiers kept careful, discreet watch on everything in the landing bay. They moved like a team who had been together for a long time. If Torran wasn’t a general anymore, who were *they*?

Had he, like me, tried to keep his squad together after the war? I laughed under my breath. Of course not. He’d been a general. He didn’t have a squad—he had underlings.

I centered myself and *focused*. The three soldiers behind Torran were not suppressing their power and their auras sparkled and danced around them in beautiful jewel tones: ruby, sapphire, and topaz. Torran was another matter entirely. His aura limned him in brilliant platinum that sparkled with hints of color, like light hitting a prism.

I’d never seen an aura like it. Of course, humans weren’t supposed to be able to see auras at all, but in the last, desperate years of war, the FHP had come up with an experimental augmentation, and I’d volunteered in a reckless attempt to save my squad.

Most of the test subjects had lost their minds from the strain. I had not, but it had been touch and go. Chunks of my memory were still hazy.

Ultimately, it didn’t matter. Aura colors didn’t seem to be directly related to power levels or abilities, at least not in any way we’d been able to determine with our admittedly limited study. Maybe the FHP knew more now, but I’d cut ties and ensured they stayed cut by making myself scarce.

I'd served my time. I wasn't giving them any more to be a test subject.

I stopped focusing and my head throbbed. It'd been a while since I'd used that particular ability and my body wasn't used to the strain anymore. Or maybe time had softened my memory of the constant pain of war.

The soldier with the ruby aura turned their head toward me but didn't attempt to enter my mind. Had they felt me looking at their auras?

I mentally shook off the past and met Torran's dark eyes. I wasn't close enough to see all of the colors, but a clearly visible line of silver traced a vibrant lightning bolt pattern across both of his irises. I forced myself not to look away. "What was stolen?"

"A family heirloom. I will explain further once we've reached an agreement."

His tone said he wouldn't elaborate, but I pressed anyway. "It's hard for me to agree when I don't know what I'm hunting. If the thief stole a unique, easily identifiable piece of art then finding it is far easier than if they stole a generic piece of jewelry."

Torran said nothing. His team's subtle movements highlighted his incredible stillness. He could've been carved from stone. And, indeed, I'd met rocks that were more forthcoming.

I tried again. "How long ago was your mystery item stolen?"

"Approximately eight standard days." The tiniest curl of his lip told me exactly what he thought of referring to human time units as the standard.

I wrinkled my nose, both at him and at eight days. More than a week was a long time for a trail to go cold. We'd gotten lucky picking up older bounties in the past because of Kee's ability to find information, but that might not help us on Valovia. "Kee, you finding anything?" I asked under my breath.

"I'm looking, but I'm not seeing anything. Either they haven't reported it, or the Valovian police force is better at keeping secrets than the FHP. And based on what I've seen before, they're not."

"Did you get the authorities involved?" I asked Torran.

There was the tiniest crack in his calm facade, and his glare became even fiercer. "No. This is a family matter."

"Who assessed the crime scene?" I asked, my limited patience running dangerously thin.

"I did," he replied.

"And? Did you find any leads?"

"Yes."

When he didn't say anything else, my patience snapped. "So you expect me to agree to help you find an unknown item stolen by an unknown thief over a week ago with nothing more than your word that this isn't just an elaborate plot to lure me and my crew to our deaths in Valovian space?"

He stiffened and his glare turned icy. "I already offered you safe passage and agreed to explain after the contract is signed."

"So you said." I blew out a frustrated breath. I didn't like going into a contract blind, but with half

of the money up front, I would make a tidy profit even if the task was as impossible as I feared.

I knew what I had to do, but I still didn't like it. Working with the enemy felt like betrayal, and bitterness filled me. I tried to think of it as relieving a Valovian general of as much of his money as possible.

It didn't help.

Before I could change my mind, I spoke. "Double the price and deliver a signed guarantee of safe passage, and I'll give you four standard weeks of my crew's best effort. If we haven't recovered the item or the thief by then, I keep the first half of the payment and we go our separate ways—after you've escorted us to safe territory. You and your team will be allowed on my ship, but you must respect my crew and follow my orders. Rifle through anyone's head without permission and I'll dump you into space. Do we have a deal?"

Torran's expression remained frustratingly blank. I would have better luck reading a painting. My patience was shot, but I had stubbornness in spades. I stared him down.

Finally, after an age, he said, "Give me twelve weeks and I'll give you two-fifty."

I laughed in his face. A Valovian squad on my ship for three months? No thanks. "Eight weeks, three hundred thousand credits. That's my final offer. Take it or leave it."

When he didn't respond, relief chased disappointment. Kee *still* wouldn't be getting her upgrades, but at least I wouldn't have to deal with Torran and his squad for two months. I tossed him a mocking farewell salute and turned to my ship. I'd been waiting for Eli, my first officer, to return from a supply run, but I could just as easily wait inside.

I was halfway up the ramp when Torran stirred. "Wait."

The extra height from the ramp meant he had to look up at me. It was petty, but I enjoyed it anyway. "Yes?"

Torran raised his chin. "I accept."

Fucking hell.

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Jessie Mihalik has a degree in Computer Science and a love of all things geeky. A software engineer by trade, Jessie now writes full time from her home in Texas. When she's not writing, she can be found playing co-op video games with her husband, trying out new board games, or reading books pulled from her overflowing bookshelves.

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