

MADE OF STARS

JENNA VORIS



VIKING

An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, New York



First published in the United States of America by Viking,
an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, 2023.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.

Manufactured in Canada

ISBN 9780593525210

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Design by Lucia Baez • Text set in Aldus Nova Pro

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PART ONE

Shot in the Dark



You've read the story of Jesse James
of how he lived and died.
If you're still in need;
of something to read,
here's the story of Bonnie and Clyde.

—Bonnie Parker,
“The Trail's End”

CHAPTER ONE



The young ones died first.

Blood pooled between the stones and crawled across the floor with delicate phantom hands. Shane felt it sink into his bones the longer he lay in the cell. How long had it been since he tasted pure, unrecycled oxygen? Since he felt the steady weight of a weapon in his hand? His finger twitched as he imagined the shock of a rifle against his shoulder, the silent shot in the open vacuum of space.

You're not going to die here.

Shane rolled over, wincing as his shoulder twisted painfully. He'd popped it back into place after the fight yesterday, but the skin was still swollen and tender. His hands ached, too. He tried not to think about why, but the memories always overcame him in the end.

A pulse slowing under his fingers. The other man clawing at the floor, broken nails scratching down the dusty walls. Shane had always thought killing would be harder, that it would take a certain kind of person to wrap their hands around another's throat and squeeze until there was nothing left, but it had been over by the time the warden arrived, before the droids swarmed and the prisoners rioted. Killing was the easiest thing in the world. And Shane wasn't sorry.

He exhaled, grimacing at the sharp pain in his chest. They kept it cold in solitary. Add that to the list of things these people would pay for. He'd come for them all eventually—every officer, every warden, every droid. Everyone who funded a place like this. *You're not going to die here.*

Shane's last thoughts before the dark claimed him again were of his hands, pale and trembling without something to hold, and that man's vacant, lifeless stare.

CHAPTER TWO



Three months of planning and Ava had still managed to underestimate the cold.

She shivered as she followed a masked officer through the twisting corridors of the Opian prison moon. They had made it through the first security checkpoint without so much as a whisper from the alarms, but another officer stopped her before she reached the second. He yanked her into a corner between a damp, icy wall and a security droid, and Ava had to remind herself that *this was normal* as his hands closed around her waist.

This was Chess. This level of security was expected. Still, she had to force herself not to flinch, to focus on the camera embedded in the droid's flat, metal face and instead think about all the ways she could take this officer apart while his hands skimmed up her legs. He got as far as her left thigh before finding the protein bar tucked in her stocking. His face twisted into a mocking grin.

"Not allowed."

Ava tried to snatch it back, but the officer shoved it into his own pocket before giving her a pat on the back that lingered a bit too long between her shoulder blades and pushing her through the second checkpoint.

The officer in front of her now wore a thick padded jacket

and boots in addition to a mask across the bottom half of his face. Ava had to clench her jaw to keep her teeth from chattering as they walked. *What do the prisoners wear? How many freeze to death alone in these cells?* She tried not to think about what three months in a place like this might have done to Shane. The frigid climate on their home planet, Nakara, meant she wasn't usually cold, but Ava didn't think this chill was entirely due to temperature.

The officers tried to block her view of the cells as they walked, one after the other in a shifting wall of black fabric and polished weapons, but it wasn't necessary. Ava had stopped looking after she saw a girl slumped against the rough stones, eyes half-open as her fingers twitched in time to their footsteps.

"Are you a friend of his?"

The officer's question was too loud. Ava tensed as he looked over his shoulder, lowering her gaze to the floor. "Yes."

What she could see of the man's face relaxed and satisfaction heated her bones. This was why Shane had hired her, after all. This was why she wore pretty dresses and wove moonflowers into her long, dark hair and blushed at every question. Because she was a good actress, good enough to make it if she'd been born on any part of Nakara other than barren, wasted West Rama. Because she was *harmless*.

When the officer spoke again, his voice was almost kind. "Can I give you a piece of advice?"

Ava nodded as they stopped in front of a thick, steel-plated door. He could give her all the advice he wanted if he looked the other way in that room. "Of course."

The officer removed his glove and pressed one finger to the

scanner laid into the wall. "That boy is nothing but trouble. Everyone on this moon is trouble."

Ava did smile then, and she was glad his back was turned. She ran a hand down the front of her dress, tracing the sharp edge of the pistol still tucked beneath the fabric, cold against her skin.

He didn't know the first thing about trouble.

When the door clicked open, she used the time it took for the officer to put his glove back on to find the cameras—one in every corner. That was fine. Jared said he'd deal with those. He should be in the system by now; she just had to buy him time. Then the officer stepped aside and Ava's next breath caught as she locked eyes with Shane.

Three months.

Had it really only been three months? Ava could see his ribs against the thin fabric of his prison shirt, see the way he stood with one arm pressed against his side. *Too thin.* They had shaved his hair too, so only a thin buzz remained across his pale scalp, but Shane still straightened when he saw her, eyes widening in surprise before his face split into a painful-looking grin.

"Hey, baby, how's it floating?"

Same voice, same confidence, same wry smile. Ava grimaced. "You look like junkmatter."

She reached out a hand, but the officer caught her wrist before she could touch him. "That's close enough."

It took every ounce of Ava's self-control not to snap his fingers. She pretended to shrink away, hands shaking as they fell back to her sides. He didn't need to know it was from fury, not fear. *Harmless.*

Then she heard it—a faint *click*.

The cameras. Jared said anyone watching from the prison's control towers would see the room exactly as it had been seconds before, their images frozen in time. She had two minutes, but the only person Ava had to fool was the officer himself.

And Shane, who hadn't been expecting her, who had no idea what she was planning, who could barely stand.

Ava pushed the thought away. It didn't matter; they would make this work. She took a tentative step forward and silently begged Shane to play along. "I've missed you. How are you doing?" It was a stupid question. Purple bruises masked most of Shane's face and now that she was closer, Ava could tell he was keeping the weight off his left ankle, too. She swallowed her unease and added, "I tried to bring food, but they found it."

She said that part loud enough for the officer to hear, to let him think the game was over.

Shane's confusion only lasted a second longer. His face smoothed into an easy grin, eyes flicking toward each camera as Ava took another step. "That's fine. You were all I wanted anyway, baby."

Ava resisted the urge to roll her eyes. That was a bit much, even for him, but it worked for what she had to do next. Slowly, she lifted her hands to the front of her dress and unfastened one button. "Really?" she whispered. "That's *all* you wanted?"

Shane blinked, color deepening on his bruised cheeks as she opened another button, then a third. Ava glanced over her shoulder to find the officer suddenly very interested in a spot on the floor. She undid another button, finally revealing the barrel of the gun stashed down the front of her dress, and Shane's

expression shifted into cool understanding. This time, when he reached for her, the officer didn't intervene.

Because she was a simple, harmless girl caught up with a boy from the wrong side of town.

Ava slid her hands across Shane's chest as he lowered his face into the curve of her neck. She could feel him shivering under her fingers, and her next words caught in her throat as one of his hands groped at her chest, grabbing the barrel of the gun.

"There's a droid at the first security checkpoint," she breathed, and Shane's answering nod was almost invisible. He slid the weapon into the front of his pants and Ava stepped back, hurriedly buttoning her dress. Every few seconds she threw nervous, purposeful glances over her shoulder at the officer, who still had his gaze fixed on a crack in the floor, but it was Shane who spoke first.

"All that and I don't even get a kiss?"

Ava's hands stilled on her collar, and when she glanced up, Shane looked like he was fighting the urge to laugh. *He thinks this is funny*, Ava realized. Here he was, barely able to stand, and he still wanted to embarrass her.

Unbelievable.

So instead of blushing and turning away like she knew he expected, Ava smiled, grabbed Shane's face with both hands, and kissed him right on the mouth. He let out a pained grunt at the sudden movement, but Ava ignored him, and when she pulled back, the officer seemed to decide that was the last straw. "Time's up."

Ava patted Shane's cheek and stepped away. "Bye, baby."

The last thing Ava saw over her shoulder before the door closed was Shane's grin, wicked and cutting as he lifted a hand to his lips.

The man behind the visitor's desk handed Ava her bag and fake ID as she signed out, but her heart was still hammering as she stepped outside and picked her way through the docks. Their Cruiser was easy to spot, clunky and out of place among the shiny patrol vehicles. The ship wasn't particularly fast, but the boxy model and nondescript paint job blended with the commuter traffic on almost every planet. Shane never would have stolen a Cruiser—they weren't flashy enough for him. But Shane hadn't been there when they needed a new ship. And given the circumstances, Ava thought she'd done a decent job.

Jared was already sitting in the front, feet propped against the dashboard. He scrambled up when Ava hauled herself into the ship. "Did you see him?" he asked without waiting for her to sit down. "What did he look like? What's going on?"

His fingers danced nervously over his skin screen and the sound of fingernails on glass raked down Ava's spine. She shuddered. "Bad."

"How so? What—?"

"It was *bad*, Jared!"

He flinched and Ava immediately regretted snapping. "Sorry," she murmured, running a hand across her face. "I'm sorry. It was bad."

There was a moment of frosty silence before Jared leaned forward, tucking his chin against her shoulder as they waited together. Ava had debated pushing him out the airlock half a dozen times over the last three months, but she was glad he was

here now. She wouldn't have made it this far without him. Jared was only fifteen—two years younger than she was—but he was the best hacker she'd ever met, and he still had the skin screen to prove it, despite ditching the Nakaran military years ago.

Ava wound the chain of her necklace around one finger until the small, rectangular charm landed in her palm, gleaming silver in the harsh light of the docks. They shouldn't linger here, especially in a stolen ship. The flow of traffic on and off Chess was almost as strictly regulated as the prison itself, and any minute someone would notice she was still here.

And that a prisoner was making his way toward the exit, shooting down everything in his path.

She checked and rechecked the Cruiser's landing gear, trying to ignore the weight of each passing second. Then, when nothing happened, she checked it a third time before pulling the mirrors forward to reapply her lipstick. It was still smudged from kissing Shane. That was going to be a lecture for sure—he didn't like surprises. She glanced back toward the entrance, certain she would see him dashing across the docks, but the doors were still firmly closed.

He's taking too long.

How long did she wait before calling it and leaving Shane inside? What if he never made it past the guard in the visitor's room or the droid at the checkpoint? Ava reached down and started the Cruiser, wincing at the sharp rattle of the engine. *Just a few more seconds . . .*

"What's the holdup?"

Jared jumped, scattering wires and spare parts over the floor, as another voice echoed across the docks. He turned panicked

eyes toward the approaching officer as Ava jammed a finger into his chest.

"Do *not* speak," she hissed. Then she turned and plastered on a smile. "Hi, Officer, is there a problem?"

He didn't smile back. "What's the holdup?"

Ava could only make out his eyes, narrowed over the top of his mask. Shane always said the people who worked on Opia's prison moons hid their faces because they didn't want anyone to know what they were capable of. She remembered his bruises, the girl from the cell, and it was an effort to keep her smile from slipping. "Nothing, Officer, we were just leaving. You know these old Cruisers take forever to start."

The officer ignored her and peered into the back, where Jared was running his hands through his nest of white-blond curls. "What's your business here?"

Ava risked a glance toward the controls. Three switches. That was all it would take to get them in the air. As long as she was through the prison checkpoint before the alarms sounded, she had nothing to worry about.

"Hello!" The officer snapped his gloved fingers in front of her face, and Ava wondered how long it would take to break his hand. Could she do it before he called for backup? Before he reached for the assault rifle strapped across his chest?

"I'm sorry," Ava gasped. Her eyes blurred with fake tears. "We were visiting a friend."

"Who?" The officer's gaze didn't soften. He didn't even flinch. When she didn't answer, he reached a hand toward his ear, and Ava barely had time to open her mouth before he pressed a finger to his portable comm and said, "Air control, this is—"

He never finished the sentence.

One second, he was standing in front of the window and the next he had tipped forward, blood blooming across his chest as he choked on a strangled cry. Jared yelped and Ava shoved the body to the ground, already feeling for her own weapon. Her hand had barely closed around its barrel when she saw Shane limping hurriedly across the docks.

He came to a stop outside the ship, and Ava watched him glance at Jared, who still cowered in the back, before his gaze slid over to her. She opened her mouth, three months of practiced conversations blurring together the longer they looked at each other, but Shane held up a finger before she could say anything at all.

"I cannot *believe* you stole a Cruiser."

CHAPTER THREE



“Cyrus! Watch your six!”

The enemy dreadnought appeared out of nowhere. Cyrus threw himself to the side, gloved hands tightening over the controls of his own Falcon fighter as he watched the rest of the ship materialize: five miles of steel-plated armor and deadly heat cannons. *Who was guarding the jump point?* He pressed a finger to the comm in his ear as the dreadnought cruised overhead, lithe enemy Falcons dropping in its wake. “Cornelia, where are you?”

The only answer was the faint hiss of static.

Cyrus swerved as the oncoming swarm of fighters opened fire, one after the other. He accelerated forward, stomach dropping through the floor, and tried the comms again. “Cornelia?”

“Are you planning on dealing with that cannon anytime soon?”

It was Lark’s voice that crackled through Cyrus’s headset then, not Cornelia’s. “I’m having a wonderful time up here,” he continued, “Truly, but I’d love to get home before our retirement benefits kick in.”

Cyrus rolled his eyes. Like that was *his* fault? But he kept his voice light in case any commanding officers were listening and said, “On it. See you there.”

"My hero." Lark's sarcasm was clear, even across the empty void of space. "Whatever would we do without your unmatched skill, your unwavering bravery, your—"

Cyrus switched off his comm, plunging his Falcon into a brief, blessed silence. Of *course* Lark didn't want to deal with the cannons himself. They were huge. Why would he risk it when he could swoop in at the end, after Cyrus's ship had been blasted out of the sky, and claim the final victory for himself? Cyrus craned his neck for any sign of his squadron but saw only stars glinting faintly in the distance.

They had been on the way back to Opia when the dreadnought appeared. Now they were surrounded, pushed into a lone corner of the Valentina System, half a jump point from the nearest planet. Cyrus hadn't even finished breakfast. But this was what he lived for: the thrill of the chase, the desire to prove himself, the tingle across his skin as he flipped his comms back on and dodged another oncoming Falcon. He fired back instinctively, each shot sending another enemy ship spinning. Satisfaction flared warm in his chest. *This will look good on a report.*

"Nice!" Cornelia's voice echoed in his head as Cyrus made it through the first wave and he faltered.

"Where are you?" he asked, scanning the sky for the familiar glint of her ship.

"Already here, Cy. Starboard!"

And there she was, a brilliant streak diving for the dreadnought's exposed side. Falcons were made for speed and so was Cornelia. She dropped her missiles one after the other, the force of the blasts tearing one of the cannons off from the dread-

nought's hull entirely. But when she circled back for the second cannon, she missed by almost a foot.

Cyrus bit back a grin. Cornelia could fly better than almost anyone at the Academy, but she was a lousy shot. "They're right in front of you. How did you miss?"

"Shut up."

He could practically see her exasperated expression, the same one she'd had since they were kids.

"I mean, they aren't even moving," Cyrus added, watching her double back. "How hard can it be? Do you need me to—?" He broke off as something tore past his window. "Cornelia, look out!"

But it was too late. The enemy Falcon opened fire and Cornelia had nowhere to go. The bullets sliced through her ship one by one. She cried out once before tumbling back, and in the second it took Cyrus to watch her fall, the enemy Falcon circled around. Three bullets lodged under his feet with solid, definite *thunks*, and he yanked the controls to the side so fast his own ship rolled, narrowly avoiding the rest of the attack.

Get it together.

Cornelia was gone—he would think about that later. Right now, Lark was hovering around the main engine, ready to fire as soon as Cyrus took out the remaining cannon. They had to work quickly, before the other Falcons came back to finish the job. Cyrus let his hands steady, listening to the hum of the engine through his seat, familiar as his own heartbeat. Then he dove.

He followed Cornelia's original flight path, dodging enemy Falcons and bits of debris as he went. The remaining cannon

screeched as it wound up to fire again, and Cyrus felt the roar deep in his bones. "Lark?"

"I'm ready!"

Cyrus blew out a breath, whipped his ship around, and unloaded the entirety of his arsenal straight into the cannon's gaping mouth. To his right, Lark turned his attention to the main engine as the rest of their squadron fell into place behind him. The shock of each impact rocked Cyrus side to side, his Falcon creaking from the force. *More time.* He needed to give his team more time.

There was a high-pitched groan, a split second of silence, and then the dreadnought exploded.

The blast tore Cyrus's hands from the controls. His Falcon rolled, stars blurring overhead in a twisted black vortex until he couldn't tell which way was up. He couldn't grasp the trembling control wheel. He couldn't *think*. Then one by one the stars flickered out. The ship steadied and Cyrus was left staring at a blank, pixelated screen. An automated voice blared through his pod.

"Simulation complete."

He had time for one shuddering breath before his door slid back and blinding, blue-tinted light cut across his vision.

"You distracted me!"

Cyrus blinked as Cornelia yanked him to his feet. He took off his gloves, shaking out his left arm as his skin screen flickered back to life. It was hot from running the simulation, and Cyrus could feel the glass embedded in his forearm radiating energy through his flight suit as it disconnected from the servers and linked back with the wires under his skin. The rest of his

team clambered out of their pods, but Cornelia was still glaring at him, arms crossed, toe tapping on the worn cement. How she managed to look down on him when she was an entire foot shorter was a mystery Cyrus had been trying to solve his entire life. He shrugged. "You should have been paying attention."

He should have been paying attention. Those Falcons shouldn't have been able to sneak up on him, much less land three shots.

"I got that cannon for you," Cornelia pointed out. Pieces of her bright-red hair still clung to her neck as she removed her helmet. "You're welcome for that, by the way."

Cyrus tucked his own helmet under his arm and glanced around the training center lobby. There were more people here than when they had started the simulation an hour ago. Fresh-faced first-years jostled for a position on the stairs, upper-classmen leaned over the railings, and senior officers stood at the front, arms folded across their uniforms. Despite their varying ages and ranks, they all seemed to gravitate toward the center of the room, and Cyrus felt a thrill spark under his skin as he recognized General Pelara Noth among the crowd.

Her sleek, graying hair was pulled back in a low bun, uniform pressed and spotless against her white skin. Cool, stark perfection. The superintendent of Opia's Air Force Academy didn't have room for error, but Noth wasn't the kind of officer who mingled, and Cyrus knew her presence in the training center now could only mean one thing.

"I think you got it," Cornelia whispered, following his gaze across the room.

Cyrus didn't want to think about how much he hoped she

was right, what it could mean for him if she was. After that simulation, it didn't seem possible. He could still feel the bullets hammering into the hard exterior of his ship, one mistake after the other.

"What?" Cornelia chewed on a nail, brow furrowing as she surveyed the room. "I don't see how it could be anyone else."

She still had blue polish on one hand, chipped and messy. Because only Cornelia could get away with violating dress code so openly. If she didn't fly as well as she did, Cyrus thought someone would have kicked her out of the Academy ages ago.

The rest of the cadets gathered in the center of the room without being told and Cyrus joined them, eyeing his squadron with renewed unease. He wasn't the only pilot with a good record. There was Essie, with their near-perfect aim and sharp eye. Lark, who constantly found ways to remind Cyrus that *he* was actually ranked first in simulated flight times. Cornelia, who once ran a sim in a thirty-year-old Star Rover as a dare. Cyrus knew them all, had lived and worked and fought with them for the last four years. There had been more in the beginning.

Not everyone made it to eighteen at the Academy.

"Congratulations, cadets." General Noth turned in a circle, and Cyrus straightened at the sound of her voice. "You survived your last sim as Academy students. How does it feel?"

A few of the younger soldiers clapped, but Cyrus didn't move. It felt like a trick question. Anticipation pulsed under his skin, somewhere between dread and excitement, as he tried to remember if Noth usually came to congratulate the graduates. His mind came back frustratingly blank.

"I know graduation isn't until tomorrow, but we always like to give out a few of our own awards before your families arrive. After all, you've been physically, mentally, and emotionally tested since the day you arrived on campus. Isn't it time to celebrate?"

Lark elbowed Cornelia in the ribs. "Emotionally tested, huh," he muttered. "That's one way to put it."

Cornelia didn't look at him. "No one cares about your love life, Lark. You are *not* that interesting."

A few of the cadets snorted as Lark tried and failed to look annoyed, but Cyrus couldn't relax. Lark might love the attention of a roomful of officers, and he might be able to get away with holding it, but they were still in class. There were still rules Cyrus couldn't break. But even Noth was grinning as she waved Lark back in line.

"As you know, cadets are ranked by combining academic standing, simulated scores, and merits," she said. "Graduates will receive their final rank tonight, but we like to take a minute to honor the year's valedictorian cadet ourselves—a student who has been an example to us all from the day they walked through our doors."

Cyrus's nails dug into his calloused palms. When Noth spoke again, her voice was another enemy Falcon, sharp and deadly and aimed right for the center of his chest.

"It is my absolute honor to introduce this year's valedictorian cadet, Cyrus Blake."

It wasn't until Cornelia poked him in the ribs and whispered "*That's you!*" that Cyrus fully registered the sentence. *Valedictorian cadet*. He remembered to salute just in time, and to his surprise, General Noth mirrored the action.

"Congratulations, cadet." She looked him up and down, eyes glittering in the fluorescent light.

Cyrus wondered if that was supposed to be encouraging. He risked a glance over his shoulder and found Lark's brow furrowed with annoyance. Most of his classmates were smiling, but Cyrus watched a few exchange puzzled glances, saw apprehension echo itself on the faces of his commanding officers, and knew what they were thinking. The valedictorian cadet was supposed to go to someone like Lark, someone whose family name was plastered on Academy buildings, who had photos of grandfathers and great-grandfathers hanging in the alumni hall.

General Noth seemed oblivious to the tension as she raised her voice to address the room again. "You should all be very proud of yourselves. But please celebrate responsibly tonight," she added, eyes narrowing on the line of waiting cadets. "If any of you embarrass me, I'm giving you asteroid duty."

Then she left, flashing a wink in Cyrus's direction on her way out, and his response caught in his throat at the familiarity of it. Like they were friends, even equals. It wasn't until the rest of the officers filed out behind her that Cyrus realized he hadn't said a word.

"I *knew* it was you!"

Cornelia threw her arms in the air, and Cyrus grunted as all five feet of her slammed into his chest. Her exclamation broke whatever spell General Noth had cast on the training center and the rest of his classmates trickled forward, patting each other on the back. Lark let out the longest, most dramatic sigh Cyrus had ever heard.

"Congratulations, I suppose. I still think your time was a fluke, considering *I* took out the engine."

Despite the sim helmet, Lark's golden hair was still frustratingly perfect, slicked to his scalp with an amount of hair gel that made Cyrus immediately wary of open flames. Still, he didn't have the energy to argue. He was less than twenty-four hours away from never seeing Larksarid Belle again. "Do you want to try and beat it?" he asked, jabbing a thumb over his shoulder at the simulation pods. "We could go again."

Actually, Cyrus thought he *should* run the sim again, to pinpoint where he'd gone wrong.

Lark glanced at the pods, like he was seriously considering it, then shook his head. "Wouldn't want to make you cry on our last night."

"Of course you don't." Cornelia grabbed Cyrus's hand, fingers slipping into the familiar spaces between his. "I'm so proud of you, Cy. You'll get the best assignment for sure. Where do you want to go?"

Lark rolled his eyes so impressively Cyrus half expected them to fall out of his head. "They'll probably send you to one of those prison moons. Hey"—he straightened—"did you hear Chess had a breakout last night? You'd fit right in since those officers are also, apparently, incompetent and—"

Cornelia laughed. "You want to talk about incompetent? You almost shot me thirty seconds into the sim. It's literally our last day!"

"Okay, but I *didn't*."

Cyrus was only half listening as Cornelia threw out more guesses. Maybe he'd join Atmosphere Patrol and fly along the edge of the system. Maybe he'd run security for the planetary leader, live in a towering building in the capital, and take impor-

tant meetings. Cyrus tried to pay attention but the itch lingered in the back of his mind, clawing down his spine to his boots, where he could still feel those three bullets slamming into the bottom of his ship.

Mistake. Mistake. Mistake.

He should have gotten through the sim unscathed. A proper valedictorian cadet would have. Cyrus glanced at the pods again. It wouldn't take long. He needed one more run, one last time behind the wheel.

Cornelia's fingers tightened around his. "Stop it," she whispered. "I know what you're thinking."

Cyrus scowled and yanked his hand away. That was easy for her to say. Cornelia had stopped being the girl from the Port City gutters when she flew literal circles around their commanding officer on day one. She would be assigned somewhere she could fly and no one would think of grimy piers and smoking factories when they looked at her, because girls from Port City didn't end up top of their class at the Air Force Academy and boys like him were never supposed to be valedictorian cadets.

But he was here now. He had made it, and as Cyrus exhaled, he felt some of the tension melt off his shoulders, where that same nagging itch still buzzed. Only now it felt like a voice, a warning whisper in his ear.

You're ready, it seemed to say. Let's go.

CHAPTER FOUR



"You're *serious*?"

Jared was pacing back and forth behind Shane's seat, footsteps too loud in the open bay of the Cruiser. He hadn't stopped moving since they'd fled Chess with three separate squadrons in pursuit. Shane had lost them in an asteroid junkyard hours ago, but Jared was still looking over his shoulder, flinching at every passing satellite. He leaned forward when Shane didn't answer and tried again. "You really think that's a good idea? Because what if—?"

"I can eject him if you want." Ava propped a foot against the dashboard and flipped the page of her magazine. "There's a lever in the back."

Jared stiffened, like he couldn't decide if Ava was joking, then sighed. "Fine. Go ahead, plan another job. It's not like we just *broke you out of Chess*."

The words hung in the air with a dangerous finality. *We broke you out of Chess.*

Shane had never really let himself think about the possibility of serving his full sentence. Thoughts like that tended to snare people, to drag them under when no one was looking. They wanted him on that moon for sixteen years, but he'd barely survived three months. Three long, brutal months where

he had plenty of time to think about what they would do the second he got out.

Behind him, Jared inched across the dusty floor until he was sitting cross-legged next to Shane's seat. "A government building?" he asked, voice creeping higher with every word. "You want to rob— I know we've done it before and it was really great, excellent times—but given the circumstances, don't you think—?"

"What circumstances?"

Shane could feel himself shaking in time with the Cruiser. He wanted Jared to say what he was so obviously thinking. That he thought Shane was weak. That he *couldn't* do it. That Chess had changed him somehow, shattered something that couldn't be fixed by an odd job or a risky heist. But this plan, this idea of a plan, was going to work. It had to. He was going to fly right into the Nakaran capital and fly out with someone else's money.

Because he wanted to. Because he could.

Jared was the one who looked away first. "Sorry," he muttered. "But do you really need to go home, too? We could refuel anywhere, West Rama's the first place they'll look for you."

Shane clenched his teeth. Like he didn't know that. Of course it was dangerous, but this was how they worked. Every few jobs, he and Ava would fly through West Rama, dropping whatever extra cash they managed to score at their parents' doors. It was routine by now, and Shane wasn't stopping because a few officers on a foreign prison moon thought they owned him.

"Ava wants to visit her mother," he said. "It's been a long time."

It wasn't technically a lie, but Shane didn't meet Ava's ques-

tioning gaze. He would visit his family, too, but not because he wanted to. He was their only source of reliable income, and Shane didn't want to think about what a six-month absence had done to the farm. He had never been gone this long before.

Did they know where he'd been?

The thought was cold. A thief in West Rama was nothing. All of Shane's friends could pick locks by the time they were ten, and most parents pretended not to notice when their children stayed out too long and came back too late. But those boys didn't get hauled off to Chess because the wrong officer caught them at the wrong time.

Jared shifted closer, his bony knee knocking against Shane's ankle with each movement. "So not only do you want to rob a government building," he said tentatively, "but you also want to risk our lives for your parents?"

"*Stars*, Jared," Ava put down her magazine. "Don't be so dramatic. No one's risking anything. Just because you don't have a family to check on doesn't mean we don't."

"And no one's looking for Ava," Shane added. "We'll take advantage of that while we can—have her do a supply run and find another ship."

"They might be looking for me. I'm dangerous."

The corner of her mouth lifted, and Shane had to look away as the memory of her kiss seared through him. She had done that on purpose, for no reason other than she thought it was funny. Maybe it would have been, once. Maybe three months ago he would have kissed her back, but now he was exhausted. The bruises on his face throbbed along with the engine, his muscles ached from flying this far in a stars-forsaken Cruiser,

and the last thing he wanted was to let Ava know she'd rattled him.

He didn't get rattled.

Shane braced himself as he guided the ship through the last stretch of bone-shaking turbulence into Nakaran airspace. He'd done this countless times, knew every bump and turn. When they slammed out of the jump point, space dust spilling in their wake, Nakara loomed below, a desert storm spewing clouds of sand into the atmosphere.

Home.

Nakara sat at the very edge of the system under a constant veil of dust and sand. With limited sunlight and a climate too cold for most plants to survive, the Nakaran capital and most major cities lived under the protection of glossy, temperature-controlled domes. They allowed life to flourish in the manufactured warmth, but in West Rama, the desert city Ava and Shane both called home, that luxury didn't exist. People survived on root vegetables and desert herbs, whatever they could grow themselves outside of the dome's protective embrace.

The planet's real income came from the rich axium deposits below its surface, the miles of mines and tunnels that kept their people employed and other planets happy. When Opian ships landed on Nakara centuries ago looking for something to fuel their dreadnoughts and sprawling factory cities, no one had been able to fight them off. Opia was a weapon disguised as a planet, honed to take and conquer and steal. Nakara traded time in the mines for the food and supplies they desperately needed. It was an agreement they said would benefit everyone.

Now Shane watched the dome flicker over downtown Rama as he merged with local traffic on the surface, light fading as the city settled into dusk. He used to wonder what the domed cities felt like, who he could have been if he'd gone to sleep every night with the reassurance that there would always be light when he woke. But he felt the cold now, a crushing weight that deepened the farther they flew. It thrust him back to a night-cloaked cell, reminded him of cold hands and sharp steel. Shane's fingers tightened on the controls. How long would he feel the blood coating his skin? How long would he see the bodies of those who didn't make it?

Ava shifted in her seat, and the sound dragged him back to reality. Shane released a tight breath. He couldn't do this now, not so close to home. Not when they had a job to do. Usually, Shane could hear the familiar roar of the trains from the road, but tonight, the streets of West Rama were quiet and still. Even the streetlights wavered, like everything was low on fuel.

"How long were we gone?" he asked. The silence was too consuming to be comfortable.

"Six months," Ava whispered. "We did that job over in Melesink and then you were . . ."

She trailed off, the unspoken words clear. *Six months.*

"The Opian supplies should be here by now." Shane knew he was thinking out loud, but he couldn't stop. "Why does this town look like they haven't seen a fuel cell in weeks?"

Ava didn't answer. Even Jared was silent. Shane tried not to let his unease show, but there went his plan to steal a ship from West Rama. If the trains didn't have fuel, nobody did.

He parked a few streets down from Ava's house and released

the side door. Something in his chest unfurled as he inhaled his first lungful of frigid Nakaran air. Rationally, Shane knew this city was nothing. He knew the entire planet was slowly sinking into the desert, one bad storm away from disappearing, but he was *here* and the lingering smell of damp sewage was nothing compared to how good it felt to breathe.

Ava was halfway out of the ship before Shane opened his eyes. "Wait!"

He grabbed her wrist, fumbling with the storage compartment under his seat. Their stash was still there, bags of coins stuffed under the floorboards, and he almost laughed. If their positions were reversed, Shane would have taken the money and left Ava and Jared to rot on Chess.

No you wouldn't. He would have left Jared, maybe, but not her. Never her.

Shane realized he was still holding Ava's arm and released it immediately. "Here." He shoved a bag in her direction. "Tell your mother I miss her. She's devastated by my absence, I'm sure."

Ava's eyes widened. She didn't even laugh at his weak attempt at humor. "Are you sure?"

Shane knew what she meant. They never gave away money, but he owed her more; he owed her everything. This was the best he could do right now. "Just take it, Castor."

This time, Ava did. "How long?"

"Half an hour." Shane flipped the Cruiser back into drive. "We have a job, remember? Don't do anything stupid."

One of Ava's eyebrows lifted. "I survived three months on my own, Shane."

Her gaze was so direct Shane was momentarily convinced he'd be the one to do something stupid before Jared leaned forward and cried, "On your own? What am I, space dust?!" and the moment vanished.

"Half an hour," Shane repeated. "Don't be late." He slammed the door and accelerated so quickly Jared tumbled across the back. "Seat belt, Jared."

His family's farm was a neighborhood over, on the other side of a river crusted with brown ice. Shane brought the Cruiser down between two dunes and cut the engine. It spluttered into silence with a grating rumble he decided to ignore. "Stay here," he told Jared. "Watch the ship. I'll be back."

Shane's knees buckled as he hit the sand and he had to grip the side of the Cruiser to remain upright. Ava had wiped the blood off his face as they flew and he had found a clean shirt in their extra supplies, but the Cruiser only had a small bathroom in the back. No shower, no way to wash the feeling of Chess off completely. He knew he couldn't hide the bruising entirely or disguise the bones pressing against his pale skin, but as long as no one looked too closely, it would be fine.

He'd broken out of Chess. He wasn't scared of his family.

The windows were as dark as the street, cold and empty as Shane approached the shabby farmhouse. No water gurgled from the well in the back and even the root garden was dry. He lifted a hand, then hesitated. This was supposed to be his home, but something felt different. Something had changed.

You changed.

Shane pushed the thought away and knocked. There were a few heartbeats of aching silence before the door flung back and he was face-to-face with his older brother.

"Shane!"

He tried not to cry out as Glen pulled him into a crushing hug. There was another scurry of movement before their mother appeared in the doorway, and Shane watched the same combination of relief and outrage flicker across her face before she threw her arms around him as well, tugging him over the threshold. "Where have you *been*?" she gasped.

Shane patted her on the back as best he could. When she pulled away, he noticed her hair was gray and new lines creased her broad forehead.

"I've been around." Shane felt her eyes narrow on his bruised face and tilted his chin so she couldn't see the worst of it. "Working jobs, saving money."

"What sort of jobs?"

She lifted a hand to smooth back his hair and Shane flinched instinctively, arms flying up to shield himself. He realized what he'd done too late and tried to disguise his growing panic by brushing at Glen's shoulder. This had been a bad idea. He should leave, get out before he ruined this, too. But before Shane could think of an excuse, his father rounded the corner.

The last few months had hunched his shoulders and whitened his hair, but his eyes were the same—an ashy gray so piercing Shane felt it all the way down to his frozen toes. His father considered him before folding his arms and saying, "You look like you need a hot meal."

Glen and his mother wavered in the hallway a second longer before slipping into the kitchen. Shane wished they would stay. Under his father's watchful gaze, he was painfully aware of every misshapen bruise, his shaved head, the gun tucked against his too-sharp hip bone. His mouth twisted and Shane

didn't have to wonder. He knew. And the judgment wasn't fair.

Heat sparked under his skin despite the desert chill. He had spent his entire life at the edge of West Rama, living through fuel shortages and wearing Glen's old shoes. He dug his family out of sandstorms until his fingers bled, waved off offers to join the men on the rails or the Nakaran military. The men in this town lived and died within the same three blocks, memories lost to the sand as soon as they took their last breath. That thought didn't seem to scare anyone else, but it had scared Shane. He'd told himself he would be different.

He would get out and he would do it his way.

Slowly, Shane reached into his pocket, pulling out the second bag of coins. It was an effort for him to stand still as he watched his father's gaze narrow on the bruises ringing his wrist. Then, without a word, his father took the coins and tucked them into his own jacket pocket.

There weren't a lot of things money couldn't fix.

"We don't have the fuel for anything hot right now—what about leftovers?" his mother called from the kitchen.

Shane turned, grateful for the distraction. "What do you mean, you don't have fuel?"

He slid into a chair and immediately wished he hadn't. He didn't like how his back faced the open kitchen, like he was asking for someone to jump him, to steal his rations, to drag him into a corner until the guards thought to check. They never thought to check.

"There's a fuel shortage in Rama," Glen said. "And in the capital. Our supplies came a few weeks back, but it wasn't much. Apparently Opia had a bad year."

Shane's jaw tightened. Opia's bad year hadn't prevented

them from keeping Chess stocked with soldiers and droids. It hadn't prevented them from opening new mines in his absence and continuing to suck Nakara dry. His mother slid a plate of sandwiches across the table and Shane felt his stomach churn. They looked congealed around the edges, but he didn't care. He hadn't seen this much food in months. He was halfway through the second one before he thought to slow down. When he looked up, juice dripping over his chin, he found his family staring down at him, wearing identical expressions of concern.

"Shane?" His mother spoke first. "Where were you?"

Shane dragged the back of his hand over his mouth. "Working."

"Working where?"

Resentment prickled over his skin. *Do they want the money or not?* "Around."

"Are you—?"

She broke off, mouth half-open, and it was another second before Shane felt it, too. A hum in the air. The rattle of dishes in the cabinets.

He leapt up and hobbled to the window in time to watch an enormous black warship roar overhead. It flung sand in its wake, clouding the windows, but Shane saw the sharp, triangular brand stamped against the side of the ship. The same one stitched on the pants he still wore.

Chess.

Shane was achingly aware of his family behind him—his father's fingers tight on Glen's shoulder, his mother's hand clamped over her mouth. Shane swallowed his panic, forcing it all the way down as he leaned one arm against the window.

"So," he said as casually as he could. "What's for dessert?"

CHAPTER FIVE



One year earlier

“Stop it, you look *fine*.”

Ava scowled as Sayra, slapped her hand away from her hair, and forced a glass of rootwine into it instead. The fermented liquid stung her throat, but Ava didn’t care. She had just finished a shift and knew the diner’s ashy smell still clung to her skin. There hadn’t even been time to change before Sayra dragged her downtown, and she wasn’t in the mood to mingle.

“I can’t stay,” Ava said, raising her voice over the music. “I have things to do.”

Sayra shook her head. “No you don’t. Come on, you have to meet Katia, at least.”

Ava surveyed the writhing crowd before them. She couldn’t pick Katia out if Sayra paid her. Everyone on this planet looked the same—graying hair and thin, translucent skin from lack of sunlight and nutrients. But Ava could always tell who was lucky enough to live under Rama’s protective dome, because the veins latticed beneath their skin were blue, not black, and when they laughed, Ava thought they looked like they meant it. Even manufactured sunlight had its perks.

"Ava Castor." Sayra folded her arms. "How many people do you know here?"

Ava rolled her eyes. "Literally just you. This was your idea."

"Exactly. So no one knows who you are and no one cares that you smell like diner food."

"Wait, I do?"

Sayra's manicured fingers tightened around Ava's shoulders. "What's wrong?" she asked, and for a second, Ava thought she genuinely wanted to know. "Is this because of your new boyfriend?"

"No!" Ava pulled away, but she knew she'd spoken too quickly.

Is Dominik here? Was that why Sayra brought her? She hadn't spoken to him since yesterday, which was apparently not something people in relationships were supposed to do. They were supposed to like each other. They were supposed to care. But sometimes Ava didn't think she'd mind if Dominik Parker disappeared from the planet altogether.

"I like him," Sayra said, pouring herself another drink. "His family's rich, aren't they?"

Ava nodded. "They sell sunlamps."

"You don't have to sound so bitter."

You're lucky. That was what Sayra meant. *You're dating a nice boy from a domed city who'll whisk you off to a palace made of sunlamps, where you'll have beautiful babies who won't know what it's like to get cold in the desert.*

Ava sipped at her drink to avoid answering. Dominik Parker was the kind of boy who made her want to put her fist through his teeth, just to see if he'd break. Because he was tall and hand-

some, and for a while, she had really thought he was her ticket out of here.

But Dominik wasn't leaving Nakara. He would probably never leave Rama. Why would he? His family had more money than Ava's entire neighborhood, and the market for sunlamps was booming. He had no reason to leave, and she had no desire to stay. She hated the cold, the desert, the constant grit of sand under her feet. Sometimes she hated her mother for falling in love with a Nakaran miner and leaving her sunny home planet of Veritas behind.

I could have been an actress on Veritas, Ava thought bitterly. Here, she was a waitress.

"You drive people away when you look at them like that," Sayra muttered.

Ava scowled. "Like what?"

"That. Would it kill you to smile? We're at a party. Here." She shoved her glass into Ava's hands. "I'm going to find you someone to talk to. Please try not to pout at everyone while I'm gone."

Ava didn't have time to protest before Sayra tossed her glossy blond ponytail over one shoulder and disappeared into the crowd, leaving a trail of citrus-scented perfume in her wake. Only dome kids paid to smell like fruits they would never see, let alone eat. Ava turned her back on the dance floor, shifting Sayra's drink from hand to hand. She usually loved parties, but something about Rama always set her on edge. Like even if the city couldn't say it out loud, it knew she didn't belong.

"Hey, waitress, can I get another drink?"

Ava turned and found a boy lifting an empty glass in her

direction. He wore a faded shirt that looked several years out of style, and he'd tied half his hair up in a knot, the rest brushing his collarbones as he grinned at her. She must have looked murderous, because his smile faded almost immediately. "That was a joke," he said. "Because you're wearing that apron?"

Ava glanced down, and her face heated at the sight of the dirty apron still wrapped around her waist. How long had she been walking around like that? She ripped it off and tossed it into a corner, but the boy caught her arm as she tried to slip past him onto the dance floor.

"Wait!"

What happened next wasn't really his fault; Ava had spent too many years fending off unwanted advances from stingy customers at the diner to not have developed an instinct of her own. She seized his wrist, twisting as hard as she could, and it wasn't until he let out a pained gasp that she remembered where they were. Probably not the impression Sayra had in mind. Ava released him immediately.

"I'm sorry."

The boy shook out his hand, expression still twisted with pain. "No, that was my fault. *Shit*, where did you learn that?"

Ava folded her arms. "I'm a waitress."

It didn't matter if she knew most of the people who came through Swiss Diner. Everyone was unpredictable after a few glasses of rootwine. The older girls had taught her the basics during her first week—how to go for the eyes, where to bite so it left a mark, how to come away with evidence under every fingernail. It wasn't much of an explanation, but the boy nodded. He was still looking at her with thinly veiled amusement, but

there was something else there, too. Admiration. Apprehension. Like he was wondering how many bones she could have snapped if she wanted to.

Good, Ava thought. Fear was always better than pity. She didn't think Dominik would look at her like that if he knew what she was capable of.

This boy, though, handed her a fresh glass of wine. "Swiss Diner, right?"

Ava glanced at her discarded apron. "That obvious?"

"It's the only place worth going around here. Excellent drinks, decent menu." He paused before adding, "Prettiest waitstaff."

"Of course," Ava said. Maybe she had apologized too quickly. "How often does that line work?"

The boy shrugged. "Like four times out of ten."

"Those aren't great odds."

"Better than nothing."

His profile was strong and sharp in the flickering light. Ava looked away before she could linger on the way his lips curled when he called her pretty. "What year are you?" she asked. "I haven't seen you in class."

The boy shook his head. "Don't go to school."

"Really?" Ava couldn't help the flicker of surprise. He couldn't be much older than she was. Everyone went to school, even the West Rama kids who worked two jobs. It was one of the only places to get a hot meal in the desert. "Why not?"

"I have better things to do."

"Like what?"

"Are you trying to get me in trouble?"

The words were hushed, secretive. The party, the people,

even the thumping pulse of the music faded and Ava forgot her training. She forgot the warnings, the stories of boys who seemed too good to be true. They always were. But this one had the most interesting eyes Ava had ever seen—a pale gray so soft it blended into white.

“What about you?” He sounded like he was humoring her. “Why are you in school when you clearly have it made as Swiss Diner’s most valuable hostess?”

“I’m going to be an actress.”

It had to be the wine making her brave. He was so close Ava could smell him—damp desert earth and something sharp and snappy, almost electric. She expected the boy to laugh when she said that, like her friends did, or shake his head and smile, like her mother. Instead, he nodded, like it was the most logical thing in the world.

“An actress.” He wasn’t much taller than her, so Ava didn’t have to look up as he took another step and said, “Good. You look like you should be famous.”

Something about his voice made her response catch in her throat. Before she could speak, Sayra melted back out of the crowd. She threw an arm over Ava’s shoulders. “I’ve been looking for you,” she said too loudly. “Your *boyfriend’s* here.”

She gave the boy a pointed look, and Ava remembered the party around her. The music, the people. The thought of Dominik somewhere in the crowd. “I have to go,” she said. This was safer, anyway. “It was nice to meet you.”

The boy reached out, then froze, like he was still thinking about what she could do to his hand. “Can I get your name?” he asked. “To follow your film career, of course.”

Ava's face warmed. She bit back a grin and said, "Ava," at the same time Sayra said, "No."

But he heard.

"Ava." It sounded like he was turning the name over in his mouth. "That's pretty. I'm Shane."

Now

Ava's kitchen smelled like smoke.

She could taste it as she walked up the front steps and pushed at the unlocked door. Guilt rooted in her chest when it swung easily open. Of course her mother forgot. She had always been scattered and distant, sick from radiation most days, and Ava had left, just took off across the system in a stolen ship. She would leave again, as soon as Shane came back.

Maybe that made her a bad person.

Her mother was asleep on the couch, tucked against the worn cushions. Ava sank to her knees on the floor, and something in her chest loosened at the familiar sight. *Six months*. Her mother always looked less frazzled in sleep. Ava could almost see the resemblance between them. Her mother had grown up on the watery planet of Veritas, tanned and healthy from the perpetual sunlight on the white sand beaches. She had the dark, thick hair and brown skin of the islanders, but decades of living in West Rama had turned her as gray and lifeless as the rest of the planet.

"Mom." Ava rested a hand on her mother's shoulder. "It's me."

It took her mother a minute to wake, blinking like she

couldn't quite remember where she was. Then her gaze cleared and she sat up. "Ava!" she gasped. "What are you *doing* here?"

Guilt flared again, hot in her chest, and Ava had to bite her tongue to keep it from spilling over in the form of endless apologies. When Shane had hired her, she'd told everyone she had been accepted to an acting program in Melesink—a domed city on the other side of the planet. The lie had been innocent enough; Ava had every intention of going as soon as they had the money, but one stolen ship turned into three, then six, and then she lost count. The coins piled up, but it was never enough. The ships needed maintenance. She had a sick mother to care for. Shane felt responsible for his farm, no matter how vehemently he denied it.

They needed more, and opportunities like that didn't come in West Rama.

"School's out." Ava forced a smile. *Put that fake acting program to good use.* "Thought I'd stop by."

"So you're back?" The hope in her mother's voice was crushing.

"No. I have a job in Melesink. A good job," Ava pulled the bag of coins out of her pocket. "I didn't know things were still this bad here."

Of course she hadn't known. It wasn't like she'd bothered to check.

Her mother waved a hand. "I get by. Dominik comes every once in a while." She paused a second too long before adding, "You should let him know you're back."

Ava grimaced. She would rather bury herself in the desert. She'd never actually *told* Dominik she was breaking up with

him, but he probably put it together the day she vanished without saying goodbye.

Her mother clicked her tongue. "He's a nice boy, Ava, I like him. But you've met plenty of nice boys in Melesink, I'm sure."

Ava wondered what her mother would say if she knew the last person Ava had kissed had been Shane, bloodied and bruised in the middle of a high-security prison moon. "Shouldn't the Opian supplies be in by now?" she asked, suddenly eager to change the subject. "It's so cold. Is there a reason they're late?"

"Late?" Her mother's brow furrowed. "They dropped the supplies weeks ago."

Ava glanced around the room. *Weeks?* The smell of smoke lingered, but now that she thought about it, the stove in the corner looked unused. If the supplies came weeks ago, why was the house so dark? Why were ships sitting abandoned on the street?

Why did West Rama feel like it was made of ghosts?

"It wasn't much," her mother added. "Opia had a bad year, apparently."

Ava's nails bit into the rough skin of her palms. She was willing to bet the domed cities weren't suffering like this, regardless of how bad Opia's year was. Because they made things worth paying for, because they could stockpile supplies, bask in the glow of synthetic sunlight, and turn their backs on the outside world whenever they wanted.

"What are people doing, then?" she asked. "How are they getting to work without fuel?"

Her mother twisted a strand of hair between her fingers. "A lot of us are out of work at the moment."

"Us?"

"I'm fine. Don't worry."

But it took her mother too long to haul herself to her feet. Ava gripped her arm and wondered if the medical supplies had run out, too, if there were fresh radiation burns under her mother's clothes. That was something no one had told her about leaving Veritas. The Nakaran atmosphere was thin, the change usually too abrupt for outsiders to handle for long. The domes blocked the most harmful rays for those inside, but everyone else either adapted or died. If her mother hadn't been so consumed with grieving a man who had been dead almost as long as Ava had been alive, she might have left Nakara while she still had the chance. Now this house was all she had, their combined wages barely enough to cover daily expenses.

"I pick up shifts at the diner," her mother continued. "The pay's decent, but this . . ." She clutched the bag of coins in a trembling hand. "Thank you. I don't know what I did to deserve you."

Ava squeezed her eyes shut, and when she opened them again, the room swam. Maybe she should tell her mother everything. Their city was fading, and she had been halfway across the system, breaking into prison moons and stealing Cruisers for fun. *But why shouldn't you?* The voice in the back of her mind was low and dangerous. *You hate it here. You never asked for this.*

Why should she deal with the consequences of other people's mistakes when she and Shane were doing so well on their own?

The rumble of an engine cut through the silence before Ava could speak. First it was one, then two, then six roaring

overhead, rattling the dishes in the cabinets. An icy fist closed around her chest as three jet-black warships landed in the open desert across the street. Ava yanked the curtains back across the window, heart hammering. Chess. They had come for Shane, for *her*.

Her mother craned her neck as neighbors poked their heads out of doors, watching the officers and droids file into the streets, but Ava didn't linger. She crossed the room in three strides. She only had one number memorized, and Shane picked up on the second ring.

"I know," he said before she could speak. "Can you see them?"

"Six Catapult warships," Ava muttered. "Three on my street. Lots of officers. Some droids."

Shane was quiet for a long minute. "Stay there. I'm coming."

"No! They're *here*, Shane, I'll come to you."

"They'll catch you before you get half a block."

Ava scanned the ships through her window, forcing her panicked thoughts to still. She had been in charge while Shane was gone. She might not have Jared's mastery of tech or Shane's skill with a ship, but she was a survivor, too. Outside, black-clad officers pounded across the cobblestones. Ava watched her neighbors pull their curtains tight at the sight of the droids and the hulking ships behind them. The ships that were now sitting empty on the sand.

Ava's breath caught. "Shane?"

"I'm here."

Something about his voice calmed her ragged nerves. "Grab Jared and anything we need from the Cruiser."

"Ava, I don't—"

"Shut *up* and listen to me!"

She could feel Shane's surprise on the other end, same as when she'd kissed him. Someday, he'd get used to this.

"What are you going to do?"

Ava glanced over her shoulder to where her mother still peered through the curtains at the massive warships and grinned.

"I'm getting us a new ride."