

CHAPTER TWO

Wynn looked from me to Donice and back again. “We can’t linger while you take time decoding what to do. Either pick up the pace – or find your own way outta here.”

The chicas huddled together, their unease pulling me deeper into my gravity well of self doubt. The grey, rough-rippled walls felt oppressive.

Maybe this is all a bad dream and I’ll wake in my cabin. Still in disgrace.

The Cap’s voice jeered in my head. *You think Command is all about giving orders. But it isn’t. Command means dodging the dross – and keeping your people safe.*

He was right. I’d hauled my amigas into this - it was up to me to get them back to safety.

“So, what’re we doing here?” I gestured at the low-slung tunnel that felt far too much like a trap. *Would I have trotted so happily behind this hombre if he looked like Norby? Nah. I’ve been blinded by a hermoso face.*

I tried not to lose myself in his beautiful eyes, “What’s to stop us stepping into the nearest lift?”

His voice was low and urgent, “They’ve wired them. We take a ride on a Minus Zero lift and we’ll be going nowhere.”

He shifted, fear flickering across his face. “Now would be a good time to use your [Panic] stud. Whatever slimy chore your capitan might hand out is better than-”

I looked away, feeling muy stupida, “We didn’t bring them. They’ve got locators so we...”

Donice vetoed the [Panic] studs. I wanted them along – but let her talk me out’ve it.

Rubbing his eyes, he muttered a curse. “We better warp outta here yesterday, hadn’t we? Thing is,” he gestured up the tunnel, “I need my tools. Two more mins and we’ll cut free.” He pinned me with his gaze. “My word.”

He lowered his voice, “Also – we got word from above that there’s deeptime miz happening on the docks, sometime soon. Which could skew things down here, majorly.”

“Stat,” I muttered, torn between weak-kneed delight that he was taking me into his confidence – and weak-kneed fear at what he was saying.

“Dios mio,” Donice muttered in my ear. “If he told you to slit your own throat, you would. You got it bad, Jezzy.”

Basta!

I spun round, breathing hard. “Which is entirely beside the point, senorita. So far, we are all Code Green, with not so much as a scratch ‘tween us. We have two mins to find out if the hombre is a lying dog. If he is, then I give you permission to tell me how fully wrong I been.” I stepped inside her personal space, “Till then, you keep it sealed. Comprende?”

Her face blanked, “Si, jefe.”

Wynn hadn’t waited. His blonde hair flared in the dwindling light as he turned into a right-hand opening, about thirty feet away. Scurrying after him in a crouching run, I fervently hoped Wynn was trustfast – and Donice would stop doubting me.

Rushing after Wynn, I turned the corner, expecting yet another tunnel, but the opening led into a room four paces wide and three paces deep with a modcrete bed fashioned along the far wall. Four hooks hung with clothes were on the wall over the

bed and underneath it were two storage bins. Apart from some cushions and blankets crumpling the bed, that was it. Except for two carvings in the corner. One was a galloping horse and the other was a fish, leaping out of the waves. They weren't the intricate 'bot-crafted figures I was accustomed to, but they had a sense of movement that drew the eye. They were the first articles I'd seen down here worth anything.

I ran my fingers across the rough-hewn lines of the fish. "Hermoso es."

On his knees, scrabbling in the storage bins, Wynn's voice was muffled, "It's how I eat. Selling those. Which is why I need my tools." Straightening up, he scooped the clothes off the hooks, stuffed them into a battered carriesac and squeezed past us back into the tunnel. "Let's get outta here while we still can,"

Avoiding Donice's gaze, I muttered to the girls, "Vamonos, amigas."

"Hope you know what you're doing, chica."

So do I, Donice...

Even after all these years, my memories of our retreat are pin-sharp. During the next sweaty hour of scrabbling along crawlways and clambering up slime-coated ladders towards Maintenance - Level Zero, I was humbly grateful that *Hawking* had 0.8 gravity – and that the Cap chose to run the ship at 1.0 g. Many ships didn't. But then, he was old-school. All crew had to work out at least twenty mins a day – another detail I was glad about.

Law of averages says that even he has to make the occasional correct decision – doesn't change the fact that he also gets it wrong far too many times.

I was wheezing louder than a leaking airpac, so I stopped wasting my energy thinking about the damn Cap and focused on getting out of here. Soon... Please...

At the foot of yet another sodding ladder, Alita bent over, sounding as bad as I felt, when she gasped, "Need... a nanosec... to rest up..."

Wynn stopped so abruptly, I cannoned into him.

If this was some romvid, I'd be telling you how good his firm bod felt – and how we stayed together longer than we needed. But as I bounced off his back, he hobbled to the ladder, muttering about my dregging workboots climbing all over the back of his legs.

Didn't know you were going to slam on the reverse thrusters, did I?

I didn't say it. For one thing, I was too busy trying to keep going on the fifth rate muck that passed for a breathable atmosphere down here. While also concentrating on not thinking about the *Estrella Fugaz*. Because by now, I couldn't think of any scenario where we wouldn't be missed.

"How... much... further?" Donice asked the question I didn't want to face.

"Depends if we can get ahead of them." Wynn flexed his shoulders, "Likely, they'll be moving faster than us. Stimmed to the eye-balls with Blastdust or Seven2One, probably."

"Dios mio!" Alita said it for all of us.

Donice took out her gun and made a show of checking the canister. "They want trouble, then we can give it them."

"Not with those, we can't!" My voice rang round the stinky tunnel, louder than I'd intended – but I wasn't backing away. Not this time. "You tired of shipboard life, chica? Cos if you is, then you're going the right way to be marooned back at Nuevo Madrid. Or handed to some ape-brained grunt on *Santa Maria* or *Don Quixote*."

Hands on hips, Donice squared up to me, "How do we get back to *Estrella* fully intact without using our weapons?" Her mouth was a slitted line, "Cos the

damned Cap is fading into the background ‘gainst the looming possibility that we mightn’t walk away from this one.”

I was *mighty* sick of Alita muttering in the background. If she had something to say, she should have the cajones to speak out – figuratively speaking, of course.

I stared at each of las chicas, before locking looks with Donice, “But *after* we get outta this, we got to have somewhere to go, nina.” I folded my arms, “Or have you forgotten just what a dead-end armpit Nuevo Madrid is?”

That frothed her. “No – I haven’t. But shipboard life for the rest of us – not being the Capitan’s hija – isn’t all that stimtrend, either.” The half-light falling across her face made her look older. And harder, “Why d’you think I came along? Sure – you was handed a stale airpac with that biz over the watches...”

It was sodding unfair, is what it was!

“...mainest reason for coming along was to show that demon-damned tyrant that he can suck on hard vacuum ‘fore I get myself impregnated just to suit his up-swept notions.” Her bitterness blasted through my snug illusion of friendship.

Dry mouthed, I stared at Donice’s angry face. *She didn’t get close to me cos she liked me. She reckoned that by flushing herself off the ship and taking me with her, she’d get back at the Cap. And I was too fuse-brained to see it...*

Turning to the others, I opened my mouth.

Donice beat me to it, “Before you ask – yeah – they’re with me.”

Suddenly, their odd objections to this outing made horrible sense.

They’d planned to strand me here. But when they saw just what a dead-end hole Minus Zero is, Alita and Efra wanted to back out – and Donice didn’t...

Efra put her hand on my arm, “Jez... it’s not... It wasn’t *just* that we wanted to flick some dreg at the Cap... You’re a laugh – and a trendedge chica, right enough.” Her eyes were liquidly pitying.

I *hated* her for it.

“Oh yeah? Well, you sure as hell are a dreggy bunch of droop-tailed losers.”

I’ll see them at the bottom of a black hole ‘fore I let on by a flicker that they got to me.

I shrugged, “Still, a chica has to pass the time somehow – and you was the bestest of a dank choice, I’ll give you that. So...” I swallowed down the hurt aching my throat, “I’d better get your sorry bods back in one piece. And firing your weapon down here won’t do it.”

Alita’s whispered curse and Efra’s step backward had my pride-demons howling in triumph as I copied the Cap’s snarling grin. “Here’s an info-nugget you bilge-suckers won’t know. The Cap isn’t ‘xactly *lurved* on this here space station...”

Donice made a show of flicking the safety off, “Don’t know why you’d think that was news – it’d surely make every journo-spot in the galaxy if any air-breather cared enough to piss on him if he was on fire.”

I ignored Alita’s sniggers, “...so if any crew member from *Estrella* was found breaking such a major reg, Stationmaster would bounce their sorry bods straight into the brig. And,” putting my hands on my hips, I tried out the Cap’s hard glare for size, “if they was a pack of mutinous chicas, the Cap would probably hawk them ‘round any ship that suited his cred-grabbing notions rather than bother to bring them back on board.”

Efra put a hand up to her mouth, “No! Papa wouldn’t let-”

In a parallel universe, Efra. Josian Blanco would sooner space himself than lift a finger against the Cap.

I wasn't the only one who figured that Efra was skipping along an unreality axis.

Donice rolled her eyes, "Your Papa'd shake his head and – maybe – shed a tear or two if you was lifemated off the ship. But he won't lock horns with the Cap over you, chica." Her eyes hardened, "If you was his hijo, maybe. But you're only a girl."

Wynn cleared his throat, spearing me with his blaze-blue gaze, "Fit to go on?" Alita chirped up, "Yeah, I'm good, now."

"Wasn't asking you, as it happens. You want to tag along, I won't stop you. But you three are a waste of good air." His tone made the frozen emptiness of space seem cosy. "Faking friendship with his daughter to get back at your captain is a stale trick."

Efra's voice wobbled, "I-I just want you to know, Jez – I had nothing to do with the set-up over the watches-"

"Slam it, you fuse-brained suck-up!"

Efra raised her voice over Donice's howl, "I reckoned it was a slimy way to go, if you want the truth."

Donice must've put my name down on the watch rota after it was posted - making it look like I hadn't bothered to turn up. Knowing that would flix the Cap deeptime. And it worked. The Cap jumped on the excuse to shame me in front of the whole damn bridgedeck with outright glee.

I thought she was my trustfast friend... But it was also her idea to sneak down here, wasn't it?

Wynn had already started up the ladder. Buzzing with pain and fury, I stumbled after him on shaking legs.

Don't think about it, just now... Breathe... step... don't think...

I was good at locking down my feelings – living with Mama was solid training for it. And keeping up with Wynn's loose-limbed trot along yet another tunnel took all my effort, anyhow. My lungs were burning when he finally swung round.

I sank onto my haunches, avoiding the wall, just grateful for a chance to rest.

He spoke in a strained whisper, "Right. We got another couple of intersections to go before arriving at the ladders leading to Maintenance – and the lifts. If they've caught up, I reckon they'll be waiting for us somewhere there."

Donice was in full sneer-mode, "Thought you said that the lifts was wired. Compadre."

"They are," his voice was cool. "On Level Minus Zero. We're using the lifts on Maintenance Level. Station Security is far too interested in Level Zero to let the likes of Norby get creative there."

His eyes rested on me and then Donice, "Whatever's going down 'tween you, you need to hold it together as a team. Or we won't get outta here in one piece."

Standing up, I turned to Donice, "Hand over your gun. Now."

"See you spaced, first!" she snapped.

"You really wet-headed enough to reckon I'd take us somewhere like this without being fully tooled?" It took every atom of self control to talk to the slimy spawnling like she was worth the air.

I extended my hand, the other in my pocket. "I'm asking for the second time, Donice. Hand over the gun. We can't use it onstation. And you know it."

Her face ugly with dislike, she opened her mouth to wordsmack me some more – when I snatched my hand out of my pocket and jabbed it into her ribs. Hard.

"Or I taze you flat and step over your twitching bod, chicita. Your choice."

I should have felt some flicker of triumph as she sullenly handed her weapon over. But I kept remembering her laughter – her funny, sharp comments, her support when I fedded the Cap-

Nah – that wasn't the truth, was it? She was the one who'd set me up. Even now - even after hearing the words fall out of her mouth, I found it hard to accept. Till I saw the stone-hard contempt in her eyes.

"Don't. Please." Wynn's voice was gentle as he laid a sharp-bladed tool against Alita's cheek while prising her gun out of her hand.

Visibly shaking, Efra handed her gun across to me.

What's she doing, here? She hasn't the guts for this biz...

Then I recalled Efra's need to be on the inside track with the decision-makers around her.

Like father – like daughter... Maybe we're not so different, after all.

"Here they come." Wynn's voice sounded resigned.

Donice wasn't. "Caught like roaches inna pest-ray. Just cos you're still trying to live up to what Papa wants outta you, we're gonna end up as target practice for these slimers!"

I heard the words. Remembered them. And for weeks after kept worrying at them like a dog returning to his vomit.

But most of me was watching the bunch of dreggers flooding down the tunnel towards us. Wynn was right. They were surely stimed on something. Howling and half mad, they rushed towards us. Didn't seem to occur to them that we might be armed. And the noise they were making meant that negotiation was zilched.

Jesus and Mary, Mother of God, hope this works...

I pushed to the front of our group and hauled at Wynn. "Get behind me. Now! Or my weapon will attack you as well." There was no time to explain – not at the speed they were moving.

He opened his mouth to argue when a thin, long-handled knife suddenly sprouted from Wynn's shoulder. As he stared at it, blinking in shock, I shoved him out of the way, fumbling in my pocket. As I aimed it, arming the thing, my fingers felt like sausages.

Please – let it activate first time... I won't get a second chance.

Someone, somewhere, heard my desperate plea. Not a min too soon.

The air between us shimmered. Knives and spears of all shapes and sizes bounced off the force field and crashed onto the floor. Battle cries from the chem-stimed pack morphed into hoots of anger.

"You gotta come outta your bubble sometime, shipscum," Milla screamed, "And we'll be waiting!"

The rabble around her ululated in triumph.

"So. What happens, now? *Jefe.*" Donice's question pulled me back from watching the dreggers' antics in stunned disgust. "You got to give us back our guns."

In a parallel universe, Donice. Wouldn't trust your warning of an approaching black hole till the marrow started leaking from my bones.

Turning towards my happy band of compadres, I noticed Wynn's white face. "How're you holding?"

His grin didn't mask his pain, "I've been better."

Efra was busy tearing strips off her overalls and binding up his shoulder.

"Reckon the knife missed anything vital. Biggest risk now is blood loss. So I'm not pulling it out. I'll pack as much around it to slow the bleeding." Gone was her earlier fear.

I watched her with new respect. *So this is what gets her juices going – looking after folk.*

Donice punched my arm. Hard. “What strength is that running on, *jefe*?” She jerked her head towards the force field.

I flicked a look down at the controller. “Just over 50%.”

“So, how long we got before the damn thing runs dry? Because it can’t recharge in these light conditions, can it? Ten mins – maybe fifteen, tops?” Her voice was hard.

I nodded. “Unless the dreggers charge. Then I’ll need to crank it up.”

“What’s the damn point? We die then – or we die now.” Alita’s voice cracked, “less you give our guns back.”

“You have my word.” I kept my voice steady. “If they charge, you’ll have your guns back. We won’t go down without taking a whole bunch of them with us.”

“You sound just like Papa!” Donice spat, “Death or glory – well here’s a thing. I don’t want to die.”

“You’re not the only one who doesn’t appreciate a half-hour lifespan.” I glared at her, “So slam it shut, and gimme a chance to think.”

Because... I surely need to think. When packing, I hadn’t counted on Wynn being here. If I sic my particular weapon onto the Dreggers, there’s an even chance he’ll be attacked, too. And if they lock onto him, then we’re not safe.

Oh, Jesus, Mary and Joseph – what do I do, now?