



HUNT
THE
STARS

JESSIE

FROM THE AUTHOR OF *THE CONSORTIUM REBELLION* SERIES

MIHALIK

HUNT THE STARS

A NOVEL

JESSIE MIHALIK



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Dedication

To my mom, who taught me to love reading from a very young age and took me to the library to check out towering stacks of books.

And to Dustin, who makes my books possible.

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Chapter One

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.