

CHAPTER 1

You're quitting the Blackbirds?" The shock in Anthony's voice was at odds with the finger he was languidly sliding over my naked back. "*Why?* You just made squad leader last year."

"That's why," I said, swatting his finger away as I pulled on my shirt. "Nowhere left to go. Squad leader's the last promotion before they stick you in a desk job."

I stood up, grabbing my pants from the chair. Still naked, Anthony rolled over to watch me dress with growing displeasure. "I don't get you, Devi," he grumbled. "The Blackbirds are the top private armored company on Paradox. It takes most mercs ten years in a lesser outfit before they can even apply. The fact they let you in straight out of the army should be the miracle of your career. Why the hell are you leaving?"

"Some of us have ambition, Anthony," I said, sitting back down to put on my shoes. "I had five good years with the Blackbirds, made a lot of money, got my name out there. But you don't get noticed if you sit around on your laurels, do you?"

"If you got any more noticed, I think they'd have you arrested," Anthony said. "They were talking about that stunt you pulled on Tizas in the office just yesterday. The duke of Maraday's apparently thinking of offering you a fat contract with his Home Guard."

I rolled my eyes and combed my fingers through my hair,

wrestling the dark brown mess into a ponytail as best I could. My hair never could take mornings. “I am *not* joining the Home Guard. I don’t care how good the money is. Can you imagine me sitting around on some noble’s pleasure yacht playing bouncer for his cocktail parties? No thanks.”

“Home Guard *is* dull,” Anthony agreed, his boyish face suddenly serious. “But it’s safe.” He reached out, catching my hand as it dropped from my hair. “I worry about you, Devi. You’ve done eight full fire tours in five years. I know you want to make a name for yourself, but that kind of work will kill you, and I’m not talking about taking a bullet. If you got a job with the Home Guard, you could take it easier. Hell, if the Maraday thing actually came through, the duke never leaves the capital. You could live here, with me. I’d even let you redecorate, and we could be together every night.”

I didn’t like the way this conversation was going, but I knew better than to let that show on my face. Instead, I smiled and gently pried his fingers off mine. “It’s a sweet offer, Anthony, but I’m not looking to settle down. Here or anywhere else.”

Anthony heaved a huge sigh and collapsed on the bed. He lay there facedown for a moment, then rolled onto the floor and started pulling on his boxers. “Can’t blame me for trying.”

When he was dressed, we took the plush elevator down to the building café. I didn’t regret turning down his offer, but I had to admit Anthony had a nice setup. His apartment was in one of the new sky towers that dominated Kingston’s shoreline. Through the enormous windows, the royal capital lay spread out as far as I could see. Enormous skyscrapers rose like silver and glass trees from the dense underbrush of the older, smaller buildings. The sky was hazy with the usual smog and the clouds of commuter aircraft darting between the official sky lanes. The café was on one of the sky tower’s middle floors, but we were still high enough to see the starport and the towering shadow of the Castle behind it from our booth.

FORTUNE'S PAWN

I might just be sentimental, but seeing the Castle's shielded battlements and the shadows of the building-sized batteries of plasma guns behind it always filled me with pride. It wasn't the tallest building in the city anymore, but the Castle was still the largest, dwarfing even the deep-space trawlers that were waiting their turn to dock in the starport below. It was a good, strong fortress, feared by all on planet and off, and a worthy guard for the Sainted Kings of Paradox.

As always, I bowed my head before my king's sacred fortress. Anthony followed suit a second later. He'd never been as much of a believer in the power of the king as I was, but then, he hadn't taken as many bullets as I had.

Once we'd paid our respects, Anthony called the waiter over. He ordered large and well, and the spread of food that arrived at our table was a mini-heaven all in itself. Thanking my king again, I fell to with a mercenary's efficiency. Anthony watched me eat with amusement, drinking something red out of a tall, frosted glass that looked like a cocktail. I really hoped it wasn't. Even I didn't drink this early in the morning.

"So," he said, spinning his now nearly empty glass between his fingers. "Why are you really here, Devi?"

"Last night wasn't enough?" I said, popping a tiny coffee cake into my mouth.

"Last night was marvelous," Anthony admitted. "But since we've established you aren't exactly pining for my company, I thought we might as well get to the point before you crush my ego again."

He was still smarting from the rejection, so I let the comment slide. I'd known Anthony a long time; we'd been in the army together before he got his captaincy and his cushy desk job with the Home Guard. We had good chemistry, and he was always the first person I called when I came home. We'd been friends with benefits for nearly seven years now, and I'd thought we had

a good understanding. Obviously, things had changed. Still, this was Anthony. An apology would only make him feel worse, so I honored his request and got to the point. “I need you to tell me the qualifiers to become a Devastator.”

I had his full attention now.

“Are you out of your goddamn mind?” he cried. “*That’s* why you quit your job?” He flopped back against the booth’s deep cushions. “Devi, you can’t be serious. The Devastators are the king’s own armored unit. They’re *above* the best.”

“Why do you think I want to be one?” I said. “I’m sick of wasting my time on the edge of civilized space crashing pirate camps for corporate money. Devastators serve the Sacred King directly. They get the best armor, the best guns, they go on the most dangerous and important missions. They have power you can’t buy; even the nobility listens to them. I was the best in the Blackbirds—”

“This isn’t like the Blackbirds,” Anthony snapped. “I can’t even tell you the qualifiers, because there are none. You can’t apply to become a Devastator. They ask *you*, not the other way around, and they don’t ask anyone who hasn’t spent a minimum of twenty years in active field service.”

“Twenty *years*?” I cried. “That’s ridiculous!”

“They want experience—,” Anthony started.

“What do you think I spent the last nine years getting?” My shouting was attracting weird looks from the other diners, but I didn’t care. “I got twelve commendations in four years when I was in the army. You know, you were there. *And* I’ve gotten five promotions in five years in the Blackbirds. I’m not exactly fresh meat.”

“Devi, you’re not even thirty.” Anthony’s voice was calm and reasonable, the sort of voice you’d use with a child who was throwing a tantrum. It made me want to punch him. “You’ve already proven that you’re exactly the sort of suicidally brave, workaholic

FORTUNE'S PAWN

lifetime soldier the Devastators look for. They'll come calling, I'd bet money on it, but not yet. Not until you've got at least ten more years on your record."

"In ten more years, I'll be dead." I said it plainly because it was a goddamn fact. The average life span of an armored mercenary was just shy of twenty-five. I was two years past that. After thirty, survival rates fell to almost nothing. Shooting for cash was a game for the young. You either got a desk job, applied to the Home Guard, or went back to your parents in a body bag. A desk wouldn't impress the Devastators any more than it impressed me, but I couldn't do crash jobs and pirate clearing forever.

"I'm good enough to serve the king right now," I said, lowering my voice. "I've seen Devastators in their thirties, so I know they make exceptions to the experience requirement. I want to know what and how, and I'm not letting you out of here until you tell me." And just in case he didn't believe me, I kicked out my leg and slammed my boot onto the booth beside him, blocking him in.

Anthony glanced at my foot with a deep sigh. "You're impossible. You know that, right?"

I didn't answer, just leaned back, crossed my arms, and waited for him to cave.

It didn't take long. Less than a minute later, Anthony shook his head and pulled out his ledger. "It just so happens you picked a good time to have your crazy idea," he said, tapping the screen with his thumb. "Here."

I took the ledger he offered, squinting to read the glowing screen in the bright sunlight. It took me a few moments to recognize the short paragraph for what it was, a job listing from the general employment boards. A tiny one, too, barely three sentences long, but what I saw was enough to make me think Anthony was seriously trying to jerk me around.

“This is for a security position on a trade freighter.”

“Not just any trade freighter,” Anthony said, smiling for the first time since we’d gotten out of bed. “That’s Brian Caldwell’s ship.”

“I don’t care whose ship it is,” I said. “I am *not* doing guard work.” Guard work was just above deep-space mine clearing for crap armor jobs. No Blackbird would be caught dead on a freighter, even an ex-Blackbird like me.

“I wouldn’t have shown it to you if it wasn’t something you’d be interested in,” Anthony said. “Have a little faith, darling.”

When I finally relaxed my scowl, Anthony went on. “Caldwell’s a bit of a legend in trading circles. They say his ship is cursed. He gets into more trouble on one route than an entire fleet could find in ten years, and he goes through security teams like tissue paper. That’s where you come in.” He leaned closer. “Don’t spread this around, but the Royal Army considers one year with Caldwell to be worth five anywhere else. If you can survive a full tour on that ship, I’m pretty sure even the Devastators would sit up and take notice.”

I glanced down at the ad again. It looked perfectly normal, the sort of short-notice grunt job that kept army dropouts in beer money, nothing like the deadly golden ticket Anthony was painting it to be. “You’re not putting me on, are you?”

“I wish I was,” Anthony said. “Maybe you missed the part about how quickly Caldwell uses up his people? I like you as you are, all in one piece.”

It was mean to laugh at his concern, but I couldn’t help it. “And maybe you’ve forgotten who you’re talking to.”

“I haven’t forgotten,” Anthony said, his voice deadly serious. “I’ve seen you fight, remember? That’s not something you forget. But this is the fast and dangerous route, Devi. I know you’re ambitious enough for any five normal mercs, but there’s nothing wrong with a life of being safe, prosperous, and happy.”

FORTUNE'S PAWN

"I am happy," I said, pulling out a pen and writing the dock number from the ad on the back of my hand. "And the faster I get to be a Devastator, the happier I'll be." I handed his ledger back. "You'll tell them, right?" The Devastators did whatever the king told them to, but they were technically part of the Home Guard. Anthony worked for them sometimes, which was why we were having this conversation.

"If Caldwell takes you, yes," he said. "Don't know if they'll listen, they mostly don't, but I'll be sure to tell everyone what a reckless glory hog you are."

I grinned and dropped the leg that had been fencing him in. "You're a prince as always, Anthony," I said, sliding out of the booth. "Thanks for the breakfast, and the job tip."

"I'll put them on your tab," he said. "You can settle up next time you're in town."

I kissed him on the cheek one last time and walked away. The last thing I heard before I squeezed into the crowded elevator was Anthony calling the waiter for another drink. I worried about that as the elevator whipped me down, but twenty seconds and seventy floors later, I had more immediate concerns.

The crowd on the street level was brutal, and I had to throw my weight around to break through the rush to the cab stand, something I enjoyed more than I should have. I'm five six on a good day, and between that, my bird bones, poofy brown hair, and the fact my face looks closer to thirteen than thirty, normal people tend to underestimate me. It used to piss me off to no end, but that was before I cultivated an appreciation for watching the patronizing look fall off a businessman's face when the little girl he was trying to push aside elbows him in the stomach hard enough to knock his wind out.

After a few minutes of unnecessary roughness, I'd made my way to the front of the taxi line and flagged down a ground cab.

Air would have been quicker, but I wasn't in enough of a hurry to justify the cost. Fortunately, my cabbie was a stereotypical Kingston driver, utterly insane. Despite it being rush hour on a workday morning, we made it to the starport in less than twenty minutes.

He offered to take me into the departures plaza, but one look at the traffic and I told him to drop me on the street. I tipped him well for not getting us both killed and ran up the pedestrian ramp, ducking through the enormous mirrored doors with the rest of the morning crowd before taking a sharp left toward the lockers where I'd bunked my gear when Anthony had picked me up late last night.

I found my locker and opened it with a thumbscan, pulling out my duffel. My handset was on top, right where I'd left it. I flipped it open, working fast. I trusted Anthony, but only an idiot applies for a job without doing her research first. A quick search for Brian Caldwell turned up surprisingly little, but Anthony hadn't been kidding about the prestige of serving on his ship. After five minutes of searching, I'd found no fewer than seven of his former security grunts who were now enjoying fantastic positions, including one who'd gone on to be a Devastator.

But my digging also showed that Anthony hadn't been exaggerating how dangerous Caldwell's ship was, either. The number of crew deaths and disappearances he had on file with the Trans-Galactic Trade Union was staggering for any vessel, but it was especially bad when you considered that Caldwell captained a ten-man freighter on a fairly safe route through the major systems. From his numbers, you'd have thought he was helming a battleship on a bloody front. All of this should have made me think twice, but I'd made my career by beating impossible odds. As soon as I'd verified Anthony's tip to my satisfaction, I got to work hauling my armor case out of the locker.

In addition to my fast elbow, I'm a lot stronger than most people think, a product of spending all day in armor with my resistance turned way up. Some mercs let their suit do all the work. Why

FORTUNE'S PAWN

bother with flesh-and-blood muscles if you're in powered armor all the time? But I don't like being weak in any way if I can help it, and real muscles come in handy when the most precious thing in your life folds up into a hundred sixty-pound case and all you can get is a top locker.

Bracing my knees, I heaved my armor case down and set it on its wheels. When it was balanced, I slung my duffel over my shoulder and started walking toward the dock number I'd written on my hand.

Considering its black reputation, I expected Caldwell's ship to look sinister, but the freighter sitting at dock C23503 was disappointingly shabby. Its belly sat directly on the ground, while its hull rose in an old-fashioned, ungraceful beige block six stories into the air. The whole ship was spotty with patches, but thanks to a fresh paint job I couldn't tell if the repairs were from cannon fire or just the usual wear and tear you saw on older vessels.

Old or not, though, Caldwell's ship was still an impressive hundred and fifty feet long from nose to thrusters, with the vast majority of that in its cargo hold. The ship's nose was boxy as the rest of it, a squat thrust of metal with its windows covered by steel shutters coated in high-burn plastic against the heat of entering the atmosphere. The tail of the ship was all engine, a pair of long-haulers and a hyperdrive coil that looked pretty new.

That gave me hope. Hyperdrive coils weren't cheap. If this Caldwell could afford a new model, he could certainly afford a top line Paradoxian armored mercenary with an exceptional record.

Like all the noncommuter ships, Caldwell's was docked in the overflow landing. But, despite being in a good spot relatively close to the main port, no other ships were docked around him. That didn't surprise me. Spacers were a superstitious bunch. Docks would have to be pretty scarce for a captain to risk leaving his ship where Caldwell's curse could reach it.

I believed the Sacred King could do miracles just like any good Paradoxian, but I didn't believe in curses. Neither did a lot of people, apparently, or maybe most mercs just didn't bother to do their research, because as I rounded the nose of the ship, I saw that the ramp in was packed with people hauling armor cases not so different from my own.

Never one to let a little competition scare me off, I walked right up and got in line. There were fifteen people ahead of me, but the crowd was dwarfed by the enormous and strangely empty cargo bay. Other than a few dusty crates lashed down in the back, the only thing inside was a suit of armor.

Unlike my armor, which could be broken down to fit in a case, this was a serious heavy combat suit, Count class, the kind the army used to rip up Terran tanks. Even powered down, it was seven feet tall and obviously someone's baby, judging from how nicely the bright yellow paint job sparkled. I scowled. Armor like that belonged to a serious professional who'd spent a lot of time in the armored corps. Clearly, someone had already gotten a job today. The ad hadn't said how many openings were available, but the ship wasn't that big. It couldn't take more than two security guards to cover it all, and if one of those spots was already taken, then this wasn't the sure thing I'd been counting on.

I eyed the line with new rancor. None of them looked like serious competition, but then, standing around in the tight pants and flowy shirt I'd worn to meet Anthony with my hair tangled in a postsex ponytail, I probably didn't either. Nothing for it but to wait and see. I used the time to fix my appearance, brushing and braiding my hair as discreetly as I could. The line moved quickly, and by the time I was decent, I was next.

There was a stair leading up from the cargo bay to the rest of the ship where the interviews were being held. People had been going up and coming down again with only a few minutes between the

FORTUNE'S PAWN

whole time I'd been waiting. Some looked dejected, but most looked relieved, and I bet they were the ones who hadn't actually wanted a job on a ship that had a reputation for being a flying coffin, no matter how scarce armor work had gotten now that the king had wrapped up all our wars.

The man ahead of me was certainly one of these. He was almost grinning as he walked back down the steps and stabbed his thumb over his shoulder, letting me know it was my turn. Grabbing my bag and lifting my armor case so it wouldn't bang, I started up the stairs to tempt my fate.

The interviews were being held in what looked like a combination lounge and ship's mess. There was a tiny galley kitchen with a bar, a table for meals, and a small sitting area, all empty. My interviewer sat at a folding table with a small desk fan pointed at his face. He was older, maybe early fifties, and wearing an old-fashioned white button-up shirt and brown flight vest. His short, red-brown hair was frosted with silver, but his stocky body was still fit and solid when he stood to shake my hand and wave me to the chair.

"Name?"

I flinched. He was speaking Universal. I spoke it, of course. Everyone did. It was the standard language of civilized space. But the Blackbirds were solid Paradoxian, and we spoke our own King's Tongue exclusively in everything we did. I'd been all over the universe, but because I'd always been with my unit, I hadn't spoken Universal other than to ask where the bathroom was for almost three years.

Looking back, I don't know why I was surprised. Traders, even Paradoxians, always spoke Universal. It was, after all, the language of trade. But the man at the desk didn't look Paradoxian, he looked Terran, and that could be a problem. After so long not speaking Universal, my accent was pretty thick, which put most Terrans off. Usually, I wouldn't care. Paradoxians don't like Terrans any more

than they like us. We might both be from Old Earth, but a century of border wars carries a lot more weight than a shared ancestry from some dead rock a thousand years ago. Still, if the Terran was the one with the job, then that was all water under the bridge so far as I was concerned. I'd just have to trust that he was willing to overlook a few dropped consonants in return for a stellar record.

The man glared at me, still waiting for his answer, and I snapped into business mode. "Deviana Morris," I said, pronouncing each syllable as crisply as I could. "I go by Devi."

I set my handset on the table and tapped the button for the projected screen. It flickered to life, throwing my record, commendations, and references into the air right in front of his face. The man flicked through my history with a finger, his expression neutral, though I saw his lip quirk when he got to my last tour with the Blackbirds. A glorious time, even for a glory hog like me.

"That's quite an impressive record, Miss Morris," he said at last. He spoke the words grudgingly, like he didn't like being impressed. "It's my understanding that most Paradoxian mercenaries spend their careers trying to get into the Blackbirds. Why did you leave?"

"I'd reached the top of the active duty promotions, sir."

The man smiled. "Your ambitions don't run to desk jobs, I take it?"

I smiled back. "No sir."

"Fair enough," the man said, glancing at my armor case. "What equipment are you bringing?"

My smile turned into a full-on grin. This was my favorite part of any interview. I reached down and turned my case so he could see the insignia on the front. "Custom Verdemont master craft knight's armor."

My opinion of the man rose significantly when his eyes widened in an appropriate expression of shock. "And this is your suit?" he said. "Not leased from the Blackbirds?"

FORTUNE'S PAWN

“No sir,” I said proudly. “I own all my own gear.” It had taken me two years’ wages plus some pretty extreme hazard pay to buy my armor, and it was worth every cent. “I also have my own guns and ammunition as well, and an automated repair case for my suit.”

“We’ll supply your ammo,” the man said, leaning back in his rickety folding chair. “This is a security position. Your job will be to work with your fellow security officer to protect this ship, its crew, and its cargo at all times. We usually run a wide circuit spanning Paradoxian space, the Terran Republic, and the Aeon Sevalis, but that can change without notice. The contract is for one galactic standard year with fifteen hundred Republic Script paid monthly. Shifts are twelve hours during flight with overtime for planetary landings and time off when we’re in hyperspace, plus one day paid shore leave per month. So long as you are an employee of this ship, we’ll provide food, lodging, and ammunition, as I said earlier, plus a stipend for maintenance and repair of your equipment.”

I considered this for a moment. It was a pretty standard contract, but the pay, while high for ship guards, was pretty low compared to what I’d earned in the Blackbirds. I might not be doing this for the money, but a merc had to protect her worth. “Is there hazard pay?”

“Thousand RS for every incident,” the man said.

I bit back a smug smile. That was where the money was hiding. Considering this ship’s reputation for trouble, that hazard bonus might well end up making me more than I’d earned as a squad leader.

“Sounds good to me, sir,” I said, reaching for my armor case. This next bit would be pure fun. I loved showing off my armor. “What would you like me to do for my demonstration? I can do any accuracy challenge you can think of, maneuvers, a strength test, whatever you want.”

“I don’t think we’ll need any of that,” the man said, turning off my handset and handing it back. “You’ve got the job.”

I blinked. “That’s it?” I blurted before I could stop myself.

The man shrugged. “Unless another decorated ex-Blackbird with her own suit of custom, high-end armor is waiting in my cargo bay, then yes. That’s it.” He held out his hand. “I’m Brian Caldwell, welcome to the *Glorious Fool*.”

I took his hand, head spinning. That was the fastest interview I’d ever had. “Fool?”

“The *Glorious Fool*,” Caldwell repeated, smiling like this was an old joke. “My ship.”

Weird name for a ship, but I didn’t give it much thought. I was too busy absorbing the fact that the short, stocky man in front of me was the cursed captain, Brian Caldwell. The man who went through security like tissue paper, and I was now in his hands.

“Thank you, sir,” I said before I found some way to ruin things.

The captain nodded. “We’ll get you a bunk when we’re ready to go. In the meanwhile, you can store your stuff behind the bar. No one will touch it.”

No one but me could touch my armor without getting ten thousand volts, but I kept my mouth shut about that and stowed my bags as directed. Honestly, I was still reeling. My brain couldn’t quite get around the idea that after years of fighting like a dog for every step up the ladder, I’d gotten what could well be the make or break job of my career with an interview that had taken less than five minutes.

While I was putting my things up, the captain walked over to the cargo bay door and shoved his head out. “Position’s filled!” he yelled, and then he shut the door.

I thought that was a bit harsh, but the captain seemed to have forgotten the other applicants entirely the moment he turned away. “I have to go take care of some business,” he said, walking past me toward the hall on the opposite side of the lounge. “Basil will get you settled. He’s my second, and you’ll obey him as you would me.”

FORTUNE'S PAWN

“Yes sir,” I said, following him. “Who else do I follow?”

“Mabel, our engineer.” The captain wasn’t looking at me, but I caught his smile and gave myself a mental pat on the back. I’d impressed him. “But she won’t be here until later. For now, just worry about making Basil happy. You’ll find him on the bridge, straight ahead.”

He nodded down the hall toward a closed door at the opposite end. I noted it and then turned to face my new captain head-on. “Yes sir,” I said, bowing formally from the waist as was proper now that he was my superior. “It will be an honor to serve you, sir.”

The captain shook his head. “This is a Terran ship, Morris. We don’t do any of that bowing and scraping here. Just do your job, obey orders, don’t backtalk too much, and we’ll all be happy.”

“Yes sir,” I said, without the bow this time. Not bowing to a superior went against my training, but it was his ship. If he didn’t want me bowing, I was happy not to. Bowing to a Terran felt a little blasphemous.

The captain nodded and walked down the hall away from me, toward the engines. I watched him until he started down the spiral stairs to the lower levels and then turned toward the bridge as ordered. The hall ran down the ship like a backbone with the bridge as its head. Surprisingly, though the hall was reasonably clean, it was almost as patched as the ship’s hull.

The outside damage I could understand; pirates liked to take potshots, but the hall’s gray metal walls were peppered with blaster burns, bullet holes, even a few blast shadows from what I could only imagine were grenades. I’ve walked down worse, but not many, and only in war zones. Whatever had happened here had been serious, and I made a mental note to ask how the last security team had ended their tour.

The bridge door slid open the second I stepped up. I marched inside and stopped at parade rest just as I had back in my army

days, glancing around for this Basil I was supposed to be taking orders from. What I saw confused me greatly.

The bridge itself was a perfectly normal three-layer setup and far less scarred than the hall had been, though there was still a bullet hole in the ceiling. At the top where I stood was the monitor deck and systems desk, both empty. Down a step was the captain's chair, its leather seat and consoles worn nearly black from years of use. But at the bottom of the bridge, the seat at the ship's nose where the pilot usually sat was gone. In its place was what looked like a nest of bright-colored fabric, and sitting in this nest was a very large bird wearing a headset.

I'd seen aeons before, but never in person, and certainly never this close. The ones I'd seen had been brightly colored, pink and blue and green and every other neon hue you'd expect from a giant alien bird. This one was brown as a common sparrow. Sitting in its nest, it looked like an overgrown fluffy stork with short chocolate and cream feathers layered over white down. Its neck was long as my arm, and the head at the top was crested with a ridge of rust-red feathers that bobbed back and forth as the aeon studied the projected star map in front of it. Its wings, which looked large enough to be useful, were folded at its sides, each one tipped with four tiny, clawlike fingers at the joint, but the bird wasn't using them. Instead, it was tapping the ship's flight handle impatiently with its long feet, the yellow talons clicking so fast on the padded grip I could barely follow them.

Despite being the most populous race in the galaxy, beating out even humans for sheer numbers, the aeons stuck to their Sevalis and their own kind. I'd heard they disliked the other races with a passion bordering on violent xenophobia, which was a waste, because they were supposed to be the best navigators in the universe. Once I got over my initial shock at seeing a large alien bird sitting in a literal pilot's nest, that fact that Caldwell actually had an aeon to fly this hunk of junk ship was what astonished me the most.

FORTUNE'S PAWN

The bird hadn't noticed me yet, and I took a moment trying to decide if it was safer to call the thing sir or ma'am. Neither seemed good. I didn't even know if aeons had the usual genders, actually. But since this was a Terran ship with no appreciation for proper hierarchy, I decided to risk dropping the honorific, just this once.

"Excuse me," I said. "Are you Basil?"

The aeon's head whipped around, and I found myself being glared at by a pair of yellow eyes as large as my fists with round, black pupils set in a flat face above a long, curving yellow beak that practically dripped with disapproval. "Oh goody," it said. "A Paradoxian."

The bird's voice was more like a whistle than words, but I didn't like the tone of it one bit. "That's what you get when you advertise for a security team on Paradox," I said, fighting the urge to cross my arms and glare.

The aeon arched a feathered eye ridge and then, in a flurry of flapping, launched itself into the air. It cleared the captain's chair in one leap and landed right in front of me. Standing, the bird's head was a foot higher than mine. Its yellow eyes gleamed as it set down, no doubt waiting for me to scramble out of the way. But I'd faced down much scarier things than overgrown chickens with bad attitudes, and I held my ground.

The bird looked disappointed. "My name is"—it gave a shrill whistle that faded into a chirp. "But your soft human palate couldn't possibly manage that, so you may call me Basil. I'm the *Glorious Fool's* navigator and Captain Caldwell's second in command. You will address me as sir at all times."

"Yes sir," I said, hiding a smile. An officer with literal feathers to ruffle. This was going to be rich. "The captain said you would show me around."

The bird heaved an exaggerated sigh and pushed past me. "Come along, monkey. And don't touch anything."

We spent the next hour going over a ship that should have taken ten minutes to walk through. The *Fool* had the fairly standard spacer setup of cargo bay, engine room, lounge, two levels of crew cabins, and a surprisingly nice infirmary (or not so surprising with as much action as this ship supposedly saw). The most interesting thing I noticed was that the damage I'd seen in the main hallway continued through most of the ship.

Hearing about trouble was one thing, but going by battle scars I'd say the *Fool* saw more action than my former crash team's ship, which we routinely dropped on pirate camps. Everywhere I looked, things had been damaged and patched over. Even the out-of-the-way bulkheads were burned or scraped in some fashion, and more than a few still had bullets lodged in them. The floor was rubber coated for traction, but the coating was melted in several places from what looked like plasma blasts. We didn't run into any other crew members, but that didn't matter. In between boring me to tears with details of the ship's mechanics, Basil took every opportunity to talk about them.

"As our engineer, Mabel is responsible for everything mechanical," he said as we walked up the tiny spiral stair from the engine room. "You'll obey her as you obey the captain or myself. Nova is our systems analyst. She helps me run the bridge. The two of you will be bunking together until I can talk some sense into the captain."

His head swiveled to glare at me. "Honestly, if we weren't short on room, I'd never have let it happen. A nice girl like Nova shouldn't be exposed to Paradoxians. Sometimes I don't think you people even understand words that don't have to do with armor, fighting, and king worship."

"We also talk about shooting, sir," I said dryly. "And bird hunting."

"Good thing for us then that you and that other idiot are the only of your barbaric kind here," Basil snapped, feathers standing

FORTUNE'S PAWN

on end. "Though two is more than enough." He pressed his wingtip to his head. "Moving on, and do try to remember this because I'm not telling you again, cleaning duty follows a standard rotation. The cook takes care of the lounge, but all other responsibilities are shared between the crew. You'll be expected to contribute at least five hours a week or face a pay dock. In addition, our records require that you file daily reports..."

I tried not to let my eyes glaze over as I tuned him out. Normally, I am the perfect picture of the professional merc. I try not to swear because swearing is for grunts, not officers. I maintain decorum, I follow orders, I never drink on duty, and I do my job with a flair and efficiency designed to land me glowing reports. But after half an hour of listening to Basil squawk, my professional front was starting to crumble.

Even without the bird's talk about cleaning rotations, the tour had been unappealing. The blast marks were exciting, true, but the rest of my duties sounded dull as, well, guard duty. I had a patrol path I was supposed to maintain during flight, hourly check-ins, report writing, inventory control, all the routine, mind-numbing idiocy that had led me to avoid guard jobs like the plague my whole career. Much as I'd grown to dislike crashing pirate camps over the last five years, the idea of hopping out of a drop ship on some remote moon and landing on a pirate's head was starting to sound like heaven at the moment. When the bird turned us into the lounge and launched into a lecture on fire regulations *again*, I rolled my eyes to the ceiling and prayed to my king that all those dead security teams had actually died in combat and not from boredom.

Basil's safety lecture was interrupted by the sound of someone coming up the cargo bay stairs. I looked over, hoping to see the captain or maybe my fellow security team member, anyone who could save me from the bird. But it wasn't the captain or a merc, it was a girl. I placed her at about fourteen, maybe a little older. She

was dark skinned with a cap of straight dark hair cut just above her shoulders and almond eyes that were almost too focused as they moved from me to Basil.

If it hadn't been a horrible breach of decorum, I would have rolled my eyes again. I hate kids when I'm working. If Caldwell tried to make me babysit on top of report writing, I was going to tell him he could shove this job, fantastic recommendation or no. I was already working out all the excuses I could use to get out of any potential kid duty when I caught sight of the man behind the girl and everything else became superfluous.

Now this, this was more like it. The man was gorgeous. He was tall and pale, but beautifully so, with shoulder-blade-length black hair tied at his neck. His eyes were a lovely bright blue under dark eyebrows, and his mouth looked quick to smile. He was wearing a black suit, not the ones they wore in Kingston with the wide lapels, but the old-fashioned Terran kind with the high collar that I'd always considered dashing. Even hidden behind the girl, I could see enough of his posture to know that he had some military training. Combine that with his long-fingered hands and broad, sloping shoulders and I was suddenly feeling much, much better about this job.

"Ah," Basil said, his snarky tone fading just a hair. "This is Ren, the captain's daughter."

It took me a few seconds to realize Basil was talking to me. I looked away from the man with some difficulty and studied the girl instead. She must have taken after her mother, I decided, because no matter how much I looked, I could see nothing of the stocky Captain Caldwell in the girl's dark, delicate features. The disconnect made me curious, but I stomped down the urge to question. Nosy mercs were dead mercs. Instead, I nodded to the girl politely: "Miss Caldwell."

FORTUNE'S PAWN

Ren didn't even look at me. She just walked past Basil and me like we weren't there and sat down on the couch behind us.

If her antisocial behavior bothered him, Basil didn't let it show. A second later, I let it go as well, because Basil was now introducing the man. "This is our cook."

The tall man's face broke into a smile that only made him more handsome as he held out his hand. "Rupert Charkov," he said, his voice curling around the letters with a soft accent I couldn't place.

"Devi Morris," I replied, doing my best not to let my own, far less attractive accent leak through as I took his hand.

When you live around mercs, you get used to bone-crushing handshakes. It's a dominance thing, a power game, and like all games, I play to win. But Rupert took me by surprise, closing his hand around mine gentle as a caress. His soft grip forced me to dial back my own at the last second, which had the funny effect of sending my fingers sliding under his in a way that felt shockingly intimate between two people who'd just met.

Rupert must have felt it too, because the sudden, knowing look he gave me made his eyes sparkle. "I look forward to working with you, Devi."

"Same," I said. I could certainly stand hearing him say my name in that lovely accent a few more times.

Terrans accuse Paradoxians of being overly forward and completely unable to comprehend subtlety. I think that's an exaggeration, but I have to admit I watched Rupert blatantly as he walked behind the kitchen counter and began moving supplies from the bag he'd been carrying into the fridge. I can't help it, I'm not a subtle girl. When I see something I like, I go for it, and I liked what I saw very much. Even unloading groceries, Rupert moved gracefully, and as Basil led me back toward the bridge, all my earlier misgivings seemed less damning. Yes, I decided, Rupert would

Rachel Bach

definitely make this job more bearable. All I needed now was for my fellow security merc to be minimally competent and this guard business might not be half bad.

Feeling more confident than I had since Caldwell told me I'd gotten the job, I strode after Basil, nodding where appropriate as he started explaining the dreadful burden of navigation, which my unevolved brain couldn't possibly comprehend.