

# HUNTER GREEN

GHOST PLANET



C J CADE



Windtree  
Press

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## CHAPTER 1



**Salty Way Galaxy**  
**Obsidian Rim, Sepa Quadrant**  
**Planet Vorona**

"*B*oss? Boss, you're gonna wanna see this," said an urgent voice in Lukas Verde's ear.

Lukas straightened from the hole he and two younger men had been digging in the rich, brown earth, and swiped the back of his hand across his forehead. Since he was sweating hard in the humid heat of a Vorona evening, this did nothing but smear sweat and dirt over his skin.

"What've you got?" he asked, bending again to grab one of the tall, narrow, recyclable containers they used to store drinking water. 'Pops', his crew called them, for the popping sound they made when opened. He twisted the top open and tipped his head back to pour water into his mouth, swallowing steadily.

"Got an intrusion attempt." The voice in his ear was Lune, the crew member most often on surveillance duty.

"What?" Verde stiffened, the pop forgotten in his hand. "Where? How many? Human, or creature?"

"Just human," Lune said quickly. "I think she must be off that big ship that's been hovering up yonder most of the day. A runaway, like."

"Armed?" If so, the intruder wouldn't live long enough to explain.

Out here, any visitors to any kind of civilization either announced themselves at safe range and waited for permission to enter... or they died. Because the only reason an armed intruder would not announce themselves meant they were thieves, spies, or killers—or all three.

And Lukas didn't trust the owners of the heavy cruiser, *Flora del Sol*, farther than he could throw them in heavy gravity.

"Uh, not that I can see," Lune said. "But she is trying to sneak into our camp."

"What? How?" Verde demanded, already moving. He looked to the two youths now watching him, their shovels idle. "Boys, keep working till the hole's deep enough for the plascrete. I'll be back shortly."

"Something wrong, boss?" Egan, the skinny redhead asked, scratching at a welt on his arm.

Lag, tangle of braids swinging around his dark face, looked around with wide eyes, scanning the camp. "We got creatures incoming?" he asked, his voice so hoarse it sounded as if the words were being ripped from his throat. Smoking cheap joy-smoke that had been cut with who-knew-what could do that. "Is it... them?"

"Nah," Verde said calmly. "Just someone trying to jump ship, I'd guess."

"Huh?" Egan asked. "Here? Don't they know about... y'know, them?"

He and Lag both looked over their shoulders at the forest clearly visible through the delicate tracery of the perimeter fence. The fence didn't look like much, but it was crafted of nearly indestructible cerametal fibers.

Also, it was electrified. Any being trying to breach it was going to get one hell of a shock—literally.

It wouldn't keep out the creatures that the Camp Verde crew feared the most, but it made them feel safer from other kinds of intru-

sion. And perhaps most importantly, it reminded them all to stay close, and stay together.

"Can we come see?" Egan asked, his thin face lighting up. Lag nodded, although he still looked nervous.

"Sorry," Verde said. "We need the plascrete set by dark."

"Yeah, boss." The two sullenly picked up their shovels. He knew they wanted to follow him. They were young and curious, and life had been quiet for the last few weeks, because they'd all been closed up in the camp.

"Get the hole dug, then you can come and ask Lune to update you," he told the two youths.

He and the two boys had been working near one of the two entrances to the camp.

They called this the 'west' entrance, but directions here were what they, as settlers, made them. The planet's magnetic poles weren't exactly strong, so compasses didn't work. For the little exploration they'd done so far, Lukas' crew had relied on holomapping their routes—creating a 3D map with their com units and the mapping tablet for Lukas had paid much more than he wanted to.

Camp Verde occupied the top of a hill, covered with short, greenish forbs that seemed to be a type of grass. The camp biologists, Ben and Hay, had already had it logged in the database they were building of life supported on this class M planet.

Below the camp, thick trees, shrubs and vines ringed the hill, deepening into a forest that spread from the foot of the hill.

Beyond the forest lay a broad valley bisected by a shallow river, its clear water tinted pale orange from minerals. The river meandered through grasslands and patches of forest, until it emptied into the glimmering waters of the nearest sea, just visible in the distance from the hilltop.

The sea was an even odder color than the rivers. It was pink.

Camp Verde consisted of a loose circle of plascrete-ribbed structures, the larger for supply and craft storage, the smaller for dwellings. The structures were shaped like a barrel half-buried in the earth. They resembled the tonts that settlers had been using across the galaxies for

eons past. The crew had developed the habit of referring to their dwellings as such.

The surveillance and tech tont sat near the camp's main entrance, near which the intruder had snuck in.

Lukas paused at the hatch to the tech tont, looking to the holocam reader above the hatch. Recognizing him, the cam blinked blue, and the hatch slid to one side.

Inside, a long table bisected the tont, with seats on both sides. Only two people were there now. Lune, a lean man with a clever face and a shock of blue hair, cut short on the sides and waxed up on top into a ridge.

Standing beside him, arms crossed and a frown on her square face was Deeka, her cap of short brown hair mussed from running her fingers through it. Both wore the same clothing as Lukas, tan pants tucked into tall boots, and fitted tees.

"Show me the replay," said Verde. "Deeka, you keep eyes on her in real time.

"Replay, coming up," Lune said, and manipulated his tech.

A holovid sprang into view in midair above the tech table.

He and Lukas watched and listened as outside the perimeter fence, a small, slim, white-haired female reach up to grasp the hanging branch of the thorn tree, and use it to swing herself up into the tree itself.

"The branches, hells, even the leaves on that tree are so damn thorny, none of us can even touch it," Lune said wonderingly. "And she just grabbed it like it's cerametal."

"Yeah," Lukas said. "Where is she now?"

Deeka flicked her holovid controls to a larger display, and they watched the female creep along the side of the storage structure, set just inside the fence.

It too was built Quonset-style, with expedition-strength gaulite stretched over plascrete ribs. Lukas watched her slide around the edge of the building to the front and examine the entrance.

Lune winced audibly when the intruder reached for the door latch. "Merde, she's gonna get burned."

"Dial down the shocker," Lukas ordered. "I want to know what she's doing here, so I want her uninjured—makes questioning easier."

"Okay." Deeka touched the controls, and they both watched as the female reached out one hand, hesitated and then touched the latch. She flinched visibly, jumping back.

"Yeah, that stung, right?" Deeka muttered, satisfaction in her voice. "You're lucky it was turned down."

"Anyway," Lune said, "What you want us to do about her?"

"Knockout shot?" Deeka suggested, her eyes lighting up.

"No," Verde said. "Let's net her instead."

"Yeah, she won't get outta that." Deeka grinned.

Lune moved to the controls and zoned the holocams in on the small female, who was now crouched by the storage structure, peering at the camp.

The intruder looked up, directly into the approaching camera.

"That's right, nothing to see here," Lune crooned, maneuvering the controls. "Just a night-bird flying by."

The female's eyes widened, and her mouth made a perfect 'o' of shock in her pale face.

"And... gotcha," Lune said with satisfaction, as the holo vid registered a snap of motion, and the female became a bundle enclosed in light, stretchy plasnet, struggling on the beaten earth by the storage shed.

"What should we do with her?" Deeka asked.

Lukas considered. "Already have enough unwanted visitors to deal with this eve," he said. "Put her in the storage tont. I'll deal with her when I have time."

Right now, he had to go clean up and get ready to greet their formal guests for the evening. They weren't exactly welcome either.

But at least they'd requested to land, and been approved.

## CHAPTER 2



When the hatch to the storage tont where she was being held finally opened, Pleiades Jones made herself relax... on the outside, at least.

On the inside, she was coiled tightly as a vine under pressure, ready to spring whichever way she must to reach freedom. She lifted her head from where she'd been leaning against the wall and looked over the man who entered the open hatch.

At least he wasn't a guard from the Flora del Sol. And he wasn't bearing a deadly weapon trained on her.

But she did not make the mistake of believing him harmless.

He was tall, around two meters, with the solid, muscular build that said he used his body often and hard. Like he'd set his feet and stand firm, no matter what came at him.

Under short, dark hair, his square face was handsome, but in her opinion, his looks were ruined by the absolute coldness of his expression. His dark gaze said he was in charge, and he liked it that way. Bully for him.

Whoever he was, he had credits, too. His tan shirt and pants fit well, woven of some light, stretchy fabric with not a single rip or snag, or stain. His sturdy boots were well-made, as was his belt.

For a moment, they both stood motionless, eying each other.

Pleiades wasn't sure if he was ally or foe, but in any case, the strain of holding that piercing gaze finally became too great.

She tipped her head and smiled at him.

"Nice place you have here," she drawled. "Know where a girl can get a drink? I helped myself to a couple of mealpacs, but you have kind of a shortage of fluids in here."

His gaze flicked to the empty mealpac containers on top of the nearest stack of plascrete containers, then back to her. "How'd you get the storage bin open?"

Ple lifted her hands, palm out. "Hey, it was unlocked. I didn't break the lock or anything. Now, about that drink?"

He held up a drink container, the flexible, recyclable kind. His hand looked capable of crushing the slim container without effort.

"Starry," she said, brightening her smile. She straightened away from the wall, and stepped forward between the storage crates, holding out her own hand for the bottle.

When she reached the open area near the door, he moved, pulling the bottle back a few centimeters. "You can have a drink after you answer a few questions," he said.

His voice was deep, clear and cold as the vent of a cryo-unit.

And familiar.

Oh, hells, he was the one who'd ordered her tossed in here, after they'd caught her in that quarking net outside.

What had he said then? Oh, yeah, she remembered—that she'd talk after she was locked up for a while.

Anger boiled inside her. She forced back a snarl of frustration. She was thirsty, quark it. So thirsty she'd consider lapping water off the floor if there was any. But there was not, because this storage container was well-built and contained a humidity-control unit high up on one wall. And now he wanted to chat?

"Fine," she said. "Ask."

"Who are you? And why are you here?"

Okay, that was direct. She widened her eyes at him. "Me?" she asked, letting her voice go small and breathy—feminine. "I'm no one

in particular. Just a female looking for a safe place to land. Willing to earn my keep."

His expression didn't soften one bit. "Are you chipped?"

This time her blank look was real. "Huh?"

"Since you won't give me your name and ID, I assume you're a criminal. Therefore, I ask again—are you chipped?"

"No!" she said indignantly. The one thing she'd stolen in her life, she hadn't intended to. She certainly wasn't one of the beings so unsavory they'd had chips inserted to track their whereabouts. "Why? Is this place a hideaway for chippers?"

"It is not. One last time," he said, his voice deliberately even. "Your ID."

She glared at him, equally incensed at the terrible dryness of her mouth and the chilly indifference of his expression. "Pleiades Jones. Age, thirty. Place of origin, unknown. Last residence, Star Station L-39, Sepa Quadrant."

She'd begun in a creche on the station, but who had left her there, she'd never learned.

"Occupation? Skills?" His expression didn't change outwardly, but some charge in the air between them sent the hairs on her skin standing up. Her answer to these questions was crucial, if only she knew in what way.

She could lie when she had to, although it wasn't her favorite thing—too much to keep track of afterward. But right now, she had no idea whether truth or lies would be best.

"Skills? A variety. Grew up on the station. Turned my hands to whatever needed doing." Some of which had been disgusting, but at least she'd never had to work in the sex trade. She wasn't much for being pawed by strangers or station techs who hadn't bathed in recent memory.

"This L-39 have a grow pod?" he asked.

She froze, searching his face for a hint of smugness, or malice. Quark, there was no way he could know about what had happened... could he?

If anyone knew, or even suspected, they'd have taken her by now. Locked her up and forced her to spill her guts... literally, if necessary.

"Uh, yeah," she said, her voice just this side of shaky. "Sure, there was a grow pod there. Why, do I have dry leaves in my hair again?"

She made a show of running her fingers through the flyaway cloud of her hair.

But though his pale gaze followed the motion, he didn't exhibit even the faint signs of amusement.

Well, it had been a pretty feeble attempt at humor. And now his silence brought her nerves bubbling to the surface.

"Course I wouldn't have any leaves on me by now, would I?" she babbled to fill the silence. "Been gone from there for a standard lunar month. But I'm really good with plants."

"That what you've been doing on the Flora?"

She shook her head, doing her best to look embarrassed. At least this part she had rehearsed. "No. I've been volunteering. Foolish, I know."

The lift of one heavy brow said he agreed. No one in the Rim did anything for free. "For whom?"

"Jor El Blartes," she said. "The Savior of the Rim gives a fine speech about making the Rim a better, safer place."

No one needed to know that she didn't really care about such lofty goals. She just wanted a better, safer place for herself. Everyone else was on their own. That's the way it was on the Rim.

He was still watching her, his face impassive. Quark, this guy was a tough sell. He didn't look one bit surprised that she'd been with Blartes' entourage, she noted.

"Really," he said. "Because he dropped in for a visit this evening."

"I just bet he did," she mumbled. That was the reason for this voyage on the Flora—visiting as many outposts and pieces of civilization as possible, cementing support for Blartes' campaign to take office as Director of Sepa Quadrant's Commercial Enterprise Office. He already had the backing of the powerful Cordones clan.

"He didn't mention a missing volunteer. But he did say one of his indentured servers seems to have jumped ship here."

Pleiades froze. Hells, unless another person had jumped ship too, which she doubted, as they'd all heard the stories about Vorona, this man was talking about her.

Blartes must know what she'd done. He wanted her back, badly enough that he'd lied about her status in his entourage. Indenture was a serious business, one that carried serious obligation.

And any attempt to escape it carried serious penalties—sometimes even death.

Had she come so far, and dared so much, only to die?