

“We don’t have that mint anymore, Spike.”

“Yeah, I know, damn...”

By his rough count Spike could tell it had been four years since leaving his home planet, after which that special brand of mint sold only there became his reminder, and he ran out of stock two years ago.

“Don’t worry, you’ll get back there one day,” Bato put down his glass, “just hope for that company to last that long.”

“If this one goes well, I’ll get there real fast,” Spike smiled, “the contractor this time promised to get me a ship with FTL drives for 2 billion.”

“Only if this one goes as planned – as far as I could say, with you little bastard things never go that way.”

Bato buckled himself up, and fired the thrusters.

“It’s just another score, nothing more.” Spike reassured his partner.

Just another score, as simple as that.

He never planned for all this – it was a total accident for him to leave his home planet and being trapped in an unfamiliar world with only the clothes on his back. For someone fresh off the ship, with no skill or connections useful for a trip home, all he could do was to stay, and to survive.

So he resorted to hiring himself out as muscle, hunting for the highest bidder. Space bounty hunters – it was nothing like what it sounded like, but with wits and luck, he not only survived, but got real good at his job.

Good to the point that the amount on his own head was larger than his regular paychecks, and that no one in the system would risk it to give him ride back home, a place light years away, far beyond his own ship’s reach.

He needed a ship with FTL drives, but such a piece of hardware was impossible for even his income. Or at least until he found a job that paid enough.

She readied all her gears and weapons, loaded the stun rounds she made herself, and took a deep breath. It felt kind of strange to hire someone to kill herself, far worse than “killing” someone to get him back.

He disappeared four years ago, and all of a sudden, she lost the balance of her life. Maybe he didn’t even know if it was friendship or love, but she was sure about what she wanted deep down.

Someone once said, when it came to the end, we often regret more of the things we didn’t do, than the things we did. Following that, she made up her mind to risk everything to get him back.

But when she tracked him down, he was already a bounty hunter with a weird new name. But that was the least trouble she had with his new identity. To get near him, she had to deal with the contractors. The ones who offered him jobs wouldn’t tell her anything about their precious field asset, the rest of them questioned her motivation for knowing his whereabouts.

“I’ll get rid of him for you.”

That was the only reason she could come up with.

She had to learn all the ropes to get such a job done, but with a few tricks up her sleeves, that wasn't impossible. A degree in biology did help with faking someone's death. Then she'll get him, and bringing a "dead body" home with all the money made by "killing" him would be easy. At least theoretically.

But she didn't account for his partner to show up that fast and in the deadliest manner possible, leaving her no choice but to bail. The mission failed, the contractors were displeased, but by some miracle they agreed to give her another chance. With no room for failure, she chose to be the bait herself. His life worth 4 billion, so it seemed appropriate to offer the same amount for hers. She did "kill" him once after all.

"She is no hunter, she came to rescue him."

"How do you know?"

"I found this in him – modified form of tetrodotoxin, fake a death, perfect for someone wish to disappear."

"So you are telling me, she wanted to make him look dead, claim the bounty on his head, and bring him somewhere else?"

"Exactly."

"So..." the contractor seemed in doubt, "why are you telling this, Mr. Bato?"

"You want Spike dead, and you got an unreliable employee. I'll kill both of them for you, if you give me that 4 billion you offered her."

"If you get them both, I could go up to 5," the contractor said with a smile.

"Then we have a deal," Bato finished the wine and put down the glass, "now if you'll excuse me, I have a score to get ready for."

"Something isn't right."

"I hear nothing," Bato replied, scanning down the valley through the scope.

"That's the problem, too quiet here," Spike hesitated, "maybe your hunch was right."

For the split second Spike saw a flash on the ridge ahead, then something hit the rock next to him, and sprayed dirt all over his face.

"Sniper, get down!" Spike shouted.

"That's the target, correct?"

"Affirmative," Spike replied, carefully getting back to his feet without exposing any part of himself, "cover to cover, let's flush her out."

"Well, I got a better idea."

She was certain that shot wasn't aimed at him, but after hearing a second gunshot from that direction, she saw him slowly rolling out of the back of a rock. Something must have went terribly wrong, as blood was pouring out of his forehead.

"What the hell is going on?" she thought, unaware of a figure getting out of cover in the distance, and was carefully taking aim.

She felt something hitting her in the chest. There was only the initial impact, then nothing left.