

# HIT ME WITH YOUR BEST SHOT

By

Cassiel Knight

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## Chapter One

*Earth Year 2285*

Jupiter's sun, Section 10 had gotten something right. Considering their score was zero for three on accurate intel, accuracy on this particular mission was all the more impressive. From behind a battered wooden crate that smelled like moldy bread, Constable Sidra Elvenstri eyed the reason for her current assignment.

A rusty metal cage packed with children, boys and girls, of various ages on their

way to new owners.

Not parents.

Owners.

As in slavery, which, despite the practice being outlawed for centuries, continued to be far too lucrative to stop. Her stomach knotted. She hated everything to do with slavery.

The parents who sold their children, the Slavers and the buyers.

The Government that lined its own pockets so refused to halt the traffic in children.

Sidra shifted her weight to her toes, wincing when the muscles in her calves tightened and locked. Gritting her teeth against the cramping pain, she eased her way upward until she could just see over the crate's top edge.

For the last hour, she'd seen only three drones. No echoing voices, footsteps or other noise hinted of more, but silence didn't mean the building was empty. Slavers had been known to leave quiescent drones behind, ready for activation with a keystroke. Lucky for her, the warehouse wasn't full of crates or boxes. This meant there weren't many places a drone could hide. Unlucky for her, there weren't many places she could hide either. Which was why she was reluctant to leave the dubious safety of the battered crate.

Patience wasn't a strength she possessed in any sort of quantity. Neither was stupidity and it would have been extremely stupid to have ventured out without knowing if there were other drones.

She glanced at the cage. Her stomach knotted again. No matter how often she'd seen children like this, she couldn't seem to turn off the emotions. Sidra took a deep breath and focused.

Despite the limited light filtering through the cracks and holes in the ragged ceiling, it was bright enough for Sidra to see the miniature shadows of the children shifting position.

Soft shuffling and murmurs whispered through the still warehouse telling Sidra the children were alive. Frightened, but relatively unharmed.

Her mission parameters were clear.

She was not to rescue them. She was to reconnoiter and report her findings to Def.

A strike team would then sweep the area, rescue the children and effectively halt Slaver operations out of this warehouse.

Oh, and recover the black market silk in the plastic crates near the children's cage. Sidra was sure the silk was part of the mission even though it hadn't been briefed to her. It wouldn't be the first time Triad had sent her on a cover mission while a sweeper team handled the real mission.

Not because she couldn't handle it. The first, and last, time she'd been sent on such a recovery mission, the black market product had, somehow, been misplaced.

At the bottom of the Grand Canyon River.

And if Def could have proven she'd had anything to do with the silk's disappearance, her career as a Constable, and her life, would join the silk.

Her instincts, and experiences, told her rescuing these children was an afterthought of the Triad. A timely, convenient afterthought meant to distract Sidra from the real purpose of getting the black market silk. And whatever else might be in those crates.

Triad sweepers had no empathy or caretaking instincts. In their zeal, no one would be concerned if a few innocents were killed in the crossfire. After all, the children's parents had sold them into slavery. They weren't wanted anyway and would only be a burden on the City-State. So, did it really matter what happened to the children?

Sidra's lips twisted. It freaking did to her.

She wasn't sure who bothered her more – the PR department and their sunshine-laden lies or the Triad leaders with their lack of basic humanity.

It was this trait, a willingness to sacrifice humans for the nobleness of protecting Earth that kept Triad's operations undercover. It wouldn't do for the public to find out hostages were expendable.

Sidra noted the position of the drones, than keyed the hologram switch on her wristband. No way was she leaving the children at the mercy of the “good guys.”

About to press the activation pad, she hesitated. This type of behavior, ignoring her orders, earned her a lot of desk time. Def Logan, Control's second, wanted her in solitary. This would be just the excuse he needed.

His hatred ran neck and neck with his desire for her. A double-edged sword. The hatred wasn't for her refusal to follow orders.

Okay, some of it was.

Most of his ire stemmed from the realization that not only was he so far down the candidate list for a hot and heavy bout of sex, he was pissed because she'd turned down a promotion to become Control's second.

Everyone knew Def had been Control's next choice. That didn't sit well with a man who believed women had only one purpose. What a bastard. Such an archaic way of thinking.

Of course, her inability to keep her smart-ass comments to herself when he was around didn't help.

Sidra rechecked the position of the drones. She could easily handle the three, but why work up a sweat when she didn't have to? After spinning the dial on the holo emitter fastened to her waist belt, she punched in a code on her wristband, hoping this latest invention worked as she was told it would.

Usually there was time to test Triad's gadgets. Not for this mission. She'd barely had the chance to shower after the last before leaving on this one. So, here she was, stuck with a new piece of equipment that might or might not work.

The hologram, a fairly recent tech toy from Triad brain guys, projected a holo image across the gray interior of the storage bay.

The drones froze for a moment than grabbed their weapons. The holo fired a few sim shots, turned and ran. Two of the drones followed. The third stayed near the cage. Sidra shook her head. A freaking miracle. Something the Triad scientists developed actually worked as intended.

This made their record higher than Intel's.

She crept forward, the ninja-like slippers gliding silently over the concrete. The drone guarding the cage craned his neck and peered into the semi-darkness where his partners had disappeared. His focus was so intense Sidra's presence went undetected when she moved out from behind the crate.

Slipping into the shadows surrounding the cage and its whimpering occupants, Sidra drifted closer. Damn Slavers. These children belonged with someone who loved them, not stuck in a dirty holding facility waiting to become someone's laborer or worse – someone's sex toy.

When she glanced at the children, her gaze locked on a young girl, her hair stringy with dirt and sweat. Not much more than ten, the girl's brown eyes held betrayal and loss. The despair tore at Sidra's heart.

The girl shrank back, fear tightening her thin lips. Brown eyes stared at Sidra's face. Sidra frowned. What was wrong? The girl lifted a scrawny arm, her fingers brushing against her cheek.

Understanding flared. Shred it, she wore a mask. Of course the children would be frightened. Sidra unsnapped the collar and pulled the edge of the mask up and over her head. She tossed the mask onto a nearby box, then faced the children.

“Better?”

A slight nod. Fear faded, hope taking its place. Sidra smiled. “I think it's time to get you out of here,” she whispered.

She reached out a hand to pull open the cage door. With barely a flicker of

movement, the girl looked upward. Her eyes widened. Sidra jerked her head in the same direction.

A thick rod honed in on her face. She swore and bent backward. The metal bar missed by inches before slamming into the steel cage with a loud clank. A couple of the children screamed.

Damn! Focus, girl!

Calling herself all kinds of stupid for being taken off guard, Sidra stepped back. In a swift, smooth movement, she side kicked with her right leg. The drone's arm blocked the blow.

Dancing on the tip of her toes, Sidra spun and lashed out with her left arm. She quickly ended with an elbow to the drone's head. The shock of the blow shot electric tingles up her arm. The strike did more damage to the drone. His knees buckled, and he crumpled to the ground.

Out cold.

Sidra smirked. Drones were lousy attempts at artificial intelligence -- mass-produced, lacking independent thought and action. They did what they were programmed to do.

That's it.

This, combined with their lack of serious strength, made them weak fighters. More suited to passive guard duty than kicking ass.

Unless, of course, they caught you unprepared as had nearly happened.

What a freaking foolish way to behave. If it hadn't been for the little girl's

warning, Sidra would be the one on the floor. Then who would take care of the children?

Satisfaction faded as soft whispers came to her ears. Time was short. The other drones would return soon. Sidra whirled and advanced on the cage. Shred Def and his orders. She had to free the children.

The laser knife made short work of the lock. The cage door snapped open with a faint squeal marking the rust covered hinges. She winced. If her luck held, the absent drones would still be, well, absent.

Now within short range, she saw boys, along with girls, staring at her, wide eyes unblinking. Of various ages and heights, all the children had the same thing in common.

Huge eyes shadowed with betrayal and loss.

Holding a finger to her lips, Sidra cautioned silence. “Go through the tunnel and get out of here,” she whispered, gesturing for the children to hurry.

They didn’t need any urging, melting into the entrance to the tunnel. There was no sign of the little girl.

Sidra pressed the talk pad on her earpiece. “Team Leader, this is Alpha 6. Jewels are on the move. Recover ASAP.”

A squeak of protest from the team leader sputtered through the headset before Sidra cut it off. She didn’t want to hear his pompous reciting of Triad rules and the mission parameters.

After all, she’d hear them again from Def before being thrown into solitary. She glanced about the warehouse. Still no sign of the other two guards. The hologram

was a greater distraction than she anticipated. Or the drones were denser than she realized.

One thing for certain - the Techs deserved a medal.

A slight metallic rattle above had her recoiling and settling into a fighting stance. Oops, spoke too soon. Sidra yanked out her Glock and sighted at the direction of the sound.

At nothing.

A rush of air was all the warning she received as a shadow detached itself from the top of the cage.

Sidra skittered back. The shadow kicked her gun out of her hand. The weapon hit the floor, metal clanking against cement. She aimed a lethal punch at the mysterious stranger only to find him no longer there.

Strong arms grabbed her from behind, locking her arms to her sides like a vise. She slammed her head back, trying to connect with his nose. A miss but the momentum threw them both off balance. It was enough to break free.

Sidra spun, and using the advantage of surprise, she leaped at the unbalanced stranger, hooking a foot behind his. That should have knocked him to the ground. Instead, he did some leaping of his own, grabbing hold of an exposed pipe a few feet above his head.

She shot him a look of annoyance and was caught off guard when a low rumble came from his chest. Was he laughing at her? She hated to be laughed at.

“Coward. Afraid to be beaten?” she challenged. Good idea, Sidra, bring him

back for more.

The stranger let go of the pipe, landing on his feet in a smooth motion. Like a cat. In fact, his lean figure, definitely masculine, stalked her with all the appearance of a feline. Panther actually.

The form fitting black suit covering every inch of his body also outlined every inch of his body, stretching tight over bulging muscles and well-proportioned surfaces. Yum. If not for this fighting bit, she'd be tempted to see what was really under all that unrelieved black.

The only feature she saw with any clarity was his eyes. Bright green surrounded by thick eyelashes. And either his eyes reflected the dim light or the green was tinged with a slight tawny gold. One terrific effect either way. She was a sucker for unusual eyes.

Shred him.

Instead of responding to her taunt, the stranger tilted his head and waited. "I see. You're the strong but silent type." Sidra paused and tilted her own head, mocking his movement. "Probably a good idea. Most strong but silent types are abominably stupid."

Laughter flowed, low and dark. That was the only sound he made. It was still enough to make her angry. It was that laughing-at-her-thing again.

She aimed a front kick at his head, hoping to knock him back so she could leave. Not fleeing. Leaving before the sweeper team came in which, if she knew anything about the team leader, would be very soon.

A blurred movement. The stranger grabbed her ankle, twisted, spinning her in mid kick. She came out of the spin, landing on one knee. The stranger was gone.

A second later, she found out where he was. Before she could recover her breath, he had both her hands in one of his and an iron-laced chokehold around her neck. Sidra struggled but couldn't release his steel grip.

"Enough games. Who are you?" Her captor's liquid voice, tinged with an unrecognizable accent, purred up her spine, leaving behind tingles of awareness. "What are you doing here?"

"Bugger off," she responded, the words forced between clenched teeth. Splendidly male or not, she'd keep her secrets.

Voices sounded nearby. Instantly, Sidra and the stranger stilled. The other two drones were returning.

Impeccable timing.

The stranger said a few choice words. Interesting and colorful ones. She didn't know any of them.

"I don't have time for this," he finished.

The room whirled as he yanked her around to face him. She looked into the darkness surrounding his eyes. This close, the deep green of his pupils seemed larger than was possible, the tawny color brighter. That's it. His eyes. That's all she saw.

She wasn't so fortunate.

Because she hadn't wanted to frighten the children, her own mask lay on a box near the cage, mocking her empathetic, rather pathetic, decision. The stranger had a

clear view of her face.

Sidra knew what he saw. Blonde hair, short and spiky. Hazel eyes with a light spattering of freckles dancing across her nose. Nothing remarkable. Nothing unforgettable. Just the face she'd looked at for twenty-nine annals.

After a slight pause, the stranger had her wrists bound and was dragging her off into the gloomy corners of the old building.

A first date.

Sidra thought about struggling, but with the drones returning, she didn't want to call attention to their location or the children's absence. And, shred it, she had to admit to some curiosity about this man who had disarmed her so thoroughly.

Of course, Control might be interested in knowing what other agency tracked the Slavers. Returning with this information could give her points for good behavior.

Worth a shot.

As Sidra and the stranger slipped through the shadows, reverberating shouts alerted her to the Slavers return and subsequent discovery of the empty cage. She hoped the children had been smart enough to go all the way through the tunnel.

She thought briefly of the girl, her old eyes and scrawny body. If not for this hulk of a man dragging her around, she would have gone back for the girl. A set to the girl's jaw and proud stance reminded Sidra so much of herself at that age.

Tough. Independent. Arrogant.

Idiotic.

A sharp tug on the bonds sent her stumbling forward almost into the back of the

stranger. Ducking under the top frame of a smallish door, he went out first, then pulled her forward.

She tripped on the doorjamb. He caught her by the elbow, keeping her from crashing into the metal. Annoyance rose. She was getting tired of being dragged around.

Sidra had barely set a foot outside when he whirled and slammed her back inside the building. She let out a soft growl. He pushed his body against her, molding to her front like a second skin. Her backside ground against the splintering wood. Something jabbed.

And not only against her rear.

She tensed, and her stomach clenched. Familiar panic rose with each in and out bump against her body. Okay, now he was leaving pushy and entering intolerable. Her cooperation was about to end.

The stranger leaned in, his mask inches from scraping her cheek. Sidra inhaled, her nose tantalized by his musky scent. Hot male combined with a fresh, clean smell. What was that?

“It’s blocked. We need to locate another exit. We don’t want to lead them to the children.”

Mentally, Sidra slapped her face, shaking off the sensation his scent had created in her. Remembering the position she was in, she glared. No man had been this close to her in a long time.

At least in a touchy, feely, physical sort of way. Plenty had as they were getting

their asses pummeled but like this...?

No way in hell!

“Get off.” She found her voice and spoke through clenched jaws. “Right now.”

All thoughts of discovering who he was and what he was about flew away.

Despite the men coming into the storage facility any second, she was going to seriously hurt this man if he didn't back off.

Something in her expression must have warned him because there was less pressure against her breasts and thighs. Fantastic. Now she could breathe but the bastard was still too damn near. She sensed amusement radiating from his shrouded figure.

Her teeth clenched. His pleasure at her expense left her treading a fine line between anger and a desire to maim. Caught up in her fuming, she didn't realize he no longer held her captive. A crash sounded nearby, snapping her out of her dead-on mimic of a piece of deadwood.

Sidra hooked a leg behind the stranger's knees. Using her shoulder, she shoved. Both of his knees collapsed. A surprised grunt escaped as his backside hit the floor. Without hesitation, she leaped forward, bolting for the far side of the facility. The side that bordered Ocean Bay.

In her recon she noted a small side door with failing hinges. A hard whack would easily break them. The exit was a bit high above the water, but hey, a girl had to take every opportunity available. Even with her hands tied.

A couple of sharp kicks snapped the rusty metal, and the door crashed open. One hinge barely held the old door to the frame. She risked a glance behind her.

The dark stranger was nowhere to be seen but the bad guys were. A shout rang out. They had spotted her. She faced the opening.

Laser blasts creased the walls. Chunks of plaster flew at her face. She swore and flattened her back against the wall. Luckily the drones were not good shots.

A quick peep out the door, and she grimaced. Higher than she had realized. And the water stank. A strong odor of fish and some kind of fuel assailed her nostrils. Just great.

Her hands were tied.

She had farther to fall.

And the water was filthy.

What more could she ask for?

A flicker of movement from above caught her attention. The stranger crouched on a beam, staring directly at her. How had the bastard got up there so fast?

Sidra hovered. Bad idea. A laser blast came close to singeing the hair on her head. Okay, okay, so one of the drones was actually pretty good. Time to go.

With a final glance at the stranger, who merely inclined his head in her direction, she turned and dove out the door.