



**HEROES  
DIE  
YOUNG**

**T. M. HUNTER**



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# Heroes Die Young

(Chapter One Sampler)

By

T. M. Hunter



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# ***Dedication***

To all the heroes in my life.

# One

I awoke to a seductive female voice. "Aston..."

Too bad for me, it belonged to Jeanie, my ship's computer. A cruel joke designed for mostly male pilots spending long periods alone. It was even worse when I ignored the fact she was simply a machine programmed to think.

"What?"

"We're entering the Toris system."

Our current destination was my gateway to temporary financial security. I sat up from the hard, low-lying bunk, stood, and walked to the bridge. It was a short distance, nonetheless painful, as metallic floor panels clanked under my feet louder than normal.

As I walked onto my bridge, the hyper-speed engines disengaged and slowly wound down. I held onto my captain's chair to steady myself until the ship reached a constant velocity. I sat down in my chair, reached into the side pocket, and pulled out the same bottle of Vladirian liquor that put me down.

"How are we doing on time?"

"Far ahead of schedule," responded Jeanie.

The second of my four cargo hatches held a cargo container full of blue organic crystals. When I picked it up, the seller told me to take it to Toris, the outer planet in the system of the same name. I didn't know why, but I'd double my pay if I made it to Toris fast enough ahead of schedule. They didn't have to tell me twice.

"Let me know when we reach the station."

I took a small taste of the light yellow liquid in the

bottle. The storekeeper peddling the stuff at my last stop had filled me in with the full story behind the drink. A small animal called a Roshtu secreted the liquid as a defensive measure when attacked. The sweet smell and taste caused the attacking predator to lap it up and become intoxicated, while the Roshtu escaped unharmed. I took another drink, this one longer.

"So, Jeanie, what would you like me to buy you once I get paid?"

"I am currently running at peak performance, and have no requirements."

I smiled and leaned back in my chair. I usually found scuttled and abandoned cargo, then sold it for profit. Scavenging was a less aggressive form of piracy, and usually safer, since you didn't have to carry out threats of violence. Unfortunately, such cargo tended to be scarce, and had been more so lately. So, when I'd stumbled into an opportunity to carry cargo, I jumped at the chance. An extra bonus for speedy delivery didn't hurt matters.

I took another sip of the Vladirian liquor and put it away. There needed to be something left to celebrate my fortune.

"ETA?"

Jeanie ignored my question. "I'm picking up a ship on medium range sensors."

The hair on the back of my neck rose. "Show me."

My view screen lit up along the front wall of my bridge. A couple kilpars in length, the lines of the ship were smooth, tapering from the nose to a constant, rectangular cross-section around the first quarter of the hull. Near the back of the ship, I could see bell-shaped nozzles behind four embedded engines, darkened against the starfield. I recognized the configuration, but wanted some confirmation.

"Rulusian freighter?"

She gave the designation. "Green Three."

I took another look at the sensor screen over my left armrest. "I don't see any other ships out there."

"There are none in the vicinity."

A Rulusian freighter in an alien system, all by itself, made no sense. They often stuck together in vast convoys, to give themselves a better defensive position through sheer numbers.

"Status of the freighter?"

"Engines and main power are down, backup systems are in effect. No shields, no weapons charged." She paused a moment. "No life signs."

With the condition of the ship and no crew, I wondered what happened. Then a smile crossed my lips. I was a scavenger pirate at heart and wasn't about to let a prime opportunity escape.

"Any cargo in the bays?"

Jeanie was hesitant. "Yes."

"Well," I chuckled, "what is it?"

"I'm picking up signs of cargo without accompanying records in the transport manifest."

*Contraband.*

My smile grew. Rulusians were usually law-abiding. I had no idea why one of their ships would be hauling illegal cargo, but with three open bays on my ship and plenty of time to spare, there was only one thing on my mind.

Jeanie was too smart for her own good. "The logic of this situation does not compute."

"It's nice you worry about me, but I'll be fine." I nearly laughed at the thought of a machine with feelings.

She remained silent.

"Access their computer, and drop their cargo."

"Unable to comply."

If she wasn't programmed to obey, I would have been upset. There had to be something wrong.

"Explain."

"The on-board systems were placed under a command-level lockout by the Captain of the vessel. Only the Captain can remove it."

I clasped my hands behind my head and sighed as Green Three grew larger in the view screen. Finding the freighter made me think my luck was turning for the better. Now, the situation was tougher than it first seemed. My thoughts drifted to the state of the ship.

"Looks like they didn't want anyone else gaining control. Maybe they abandoned her."

"That theory appears plausible."

I ran my hands through my dark brown, wavy locks, then massaged the tension out of the back of my neck. "I guess I'll just have to go over and drop it manually. Move us to the starboard docking port."

~ \* ~

Soon, I stood inside the airlock compartment of the Rulusian freighter, my crude and stubby Mark II blaster in my right hand. It was small enough to hold with one hand, and a recoil guard was propped against my elbow.

I lifted my left sleeve and spoke through the transmitter embedded in the black jacket. "Can you get me through the airlock hatch?"

"Negative."

Green indicator lights above the inner circular hatch told me the pressures had equalized. I stooped to the left and looked at my reflection in a dark computer monitor mounted in the wall. My face was rugged, covered with a few lines and weathered by experience. My once bright blue eyes were dim from the passage of time. I quickly grew tired of looking at myself and pulled the screen out as it dangled from a large jumble of wires.

It was a mystery as to which ones controlled the locking mechanism, so to save time, I yanked all of them out amidst snapping sparks and rancid fumes. The display dropped to the floor and smashed. The door popped loose, just enough where I could put my fingers around the edge. The muscles in my arms bulged slightly as I strained. Finally, the door hit a point where it rolled out of the way on its own. I ducked through the entryway.

"I'm in," I announced to Jeanie.

"Be careful."

Inside, I broke into a sweat from both the physical exertion and the climate controls aboard the freighter. Rulusians were from an extremely warm and humid jungle planet, and liked to make their ships feel like home. My heavy jacket didn't help matters. Lines of sweat made their way down my face as I stepped away from the airlock hatch.

I turned my gaze to the entry corridor and saw carnage I wouldn't soon forget. Rulusian bodies lay on either side of the hallway. Burn marks from energy weapons shone as black patches on a background of dark green skin. The putrid scent of scorched flesh was in the air. I passed an open doorway on my left and looked inside at crew quarters. More Rulusian corpses lay amidst sparks and clouds of smoke.

I lifted my sleeve again. "You're sure there isn't anyone on this ship?"

"Affirmative. All scans show nothing but you."

"This damage is too recent for my liking."

"Did the crew abandon ship?"

I grimaced. "Doesn't look like it."

I continued toward the bridge. Dark blast marks lined the floor and frame around a blown access hatch. Smoke particles lingered in the air, and I detected a faint chemical odor as my eyes watered. I took slow, cautious steps through the opening and became witness to even more carnage. Ten more Rulusians were collapsed against the wall or slumped over consoles, all roasted by weapons fire. I definitely didn't need to meet up with the people who had done this. I didn't get into the scavenging business to be a hero. Everyone loves heroes, but heroes have a tendency to die young.

I glanced at displays as I stepped around the short end of an oval-shaped outer wall. All of them flickered with minimal power from backup systems, while I stepped over a pair of corpses. I stopped at a console and attempted to bypass the lockout. The sweat dripped from my face onto the screens and formed little pools that slowly worked up enough courage to slide down the panel. I realized my attempts were useless and walked to an access hatch at the back of the bridge.

"Jeanie, which bays contain contraband?"

"All of them."

A huge smile spanned my face. *My dream come true.*

Unfortunately, I only had three bays open, and there was no way I was dumping the crystals. Perfect opportunities like this were the exception and after these weapons were sold, I'd likely have to run more regular cargo. Even in such a huge galaxy, it wouldn't take long for word to spread that I couldn't be trusted to complete a delivery.

"Get ready to pull three containers in. The winches should be adequate." I had a mechanical claw installed and even though it was more accurate, it was slow and cumbersome. There was still a bonus to keep in mind.

"Acknowledged."

The hatch to the cargo hold opened easily, which I found odd, but walked inside anyway. The air was stale and dry in my lungs. The floor panels clanged and echoed with each step. As the door closed behind me, I glanced down the corridor at six bays on either side. The best plan would be to

drop the first three bays and ignore the possibility of a better catch in the rest.

A computer console, inset next to the bay door, monitored the ambient conditions inside while a marked service panel underneath drew my attention. I shoved my Mark II into its holster and knelt down next to the panel. The cover came off in no time and I set it aside. A lever on the right, and two dimmed lights next to it looked like what I needed. Even though I'd never jettisoned cargo manually from a Rulusian freighter before, there were plenty of bays to find the proper technique. After I pulled the lever, the lights flashed in sequence a few moments.

A miniature explosion sounded off inside the bay.

Just to make sure I hadn't destroyed a perfectly good cargo container, I spoke into my transmitter. "Do you see it, Jeanie?"

"Pulling in the cargo now."

"Two more on the way."

I moved to other bays, going through the same process. As the third bay jettisoned, another floor panel echoed farther down the hold. Every hair on my body stood on end.

I yanked my Mark II from inside my jacket and jumped to my feet up as the panel at the end of the hold flew up. A woman with bronze skin and black hair burst out from the crawlspace underneath and pointed a disintegrator cannon right at me. I fell to the floor just before her first shot hit the bridge door behind me, showering sparks onto the grill. I fired a three-shot burst as she dove down in the crawlspace again, leaving minimal damage to the aft bulkhead. It gave me the opportunity to run toward the bridge door, where the impact mark from her first shot still glowed. Eager for cover, I ducked around the corner into a small alcove as another shot hit nearby. Sparks fell at my feet, and I shoved my back against the cold, hard metal. My heart beat faster than it had in quite a while.

I yelled out. "You can have the rest. I've got all I can carry." I had no idea how this person evaded Jeanie's scans, but my main concern now was to get out of this alive.

"This is my ship, idiot." Her footsteps drew closer.

"Funny, you don't look Rulusian." I eased my head out and jerked back as another shot hit the corner. More sparks showered the grating at my feet.

"Come on out. You can't escape."

"And get myself shot? No thanks." The blaster felt loose in my hand, my palms damp.

"Slide your weapon out first."

I had no choice. Disintegrator cannons were outlawed for civilian use almost everywhere, and for good reason. "Okay, okay. I'm coming out." I slid the blaster along the grill and walked out to face her.

She taunted me. "You board ships, and arm yourself with a toy?"

I didn't care for her insults, but wasn't in a position to complain. "I didn't expect visitors."

She smirked. "Glad to see some old tricks still work."

Jeanie's voice was frantic over my transmitter. "Aston, Aston!"

A little late, I thought. I looked at my captor with an edge to my voice. "Mind if I take this?"

She scowled and grabbed her weapon a little tighter.

"My ship's computer."

She gave a stern nod, and I held my wrist to my mouth. "What is it, Jeanie?"

"Attack cruisers are on an intercept course from Toris."

My captor relaxed her grip. "You're not part of a boarding crew?"

"I'm just a scavenger pirate." I reached down to pick up my blaster. "We need to go."

She was loud and abrupt. "Hold it."

I looked up. The barrel was still in my face.

Faced with the choice between disintegration and being blown to bits, I wasn't as afraid of this woman's weapon as I once had been.

"Come on. We don't have time for this!"

"How can I trust you? You're a thief."

I let the insult slide. "Right now, it doesn't look like you have a choice. You can stay here and wait for those attack cruisers to show up if you want. Me, personally, I plan to be on a ship that can run." I grabbed my blaster and stood.

The reality of her situation finally sunk in. "Okay, let's go."

"Finally," I muttered as we ran back toward the docking port.

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