



# JOE ERSKINE

THE WANDERING BOUNTY HUNTER

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**EDICIONES**  **ARCANAS**



The spaceship *R2-Scorpion*, or rather "R", as Joe liked calling it, approached the spaceport as elegantly and smoothly as a falcon, landing on the platform assigned to it from one of the control towers. After rising the wings to a landing position, it descended until touching the clear field, bouncing softly.

Silver steam oozed from the hydraulic and ventilation systems' hatches as the ship engines shut off with a noise as if a knife grinder had gone powerless. An intermittent beep blended with other spaceships' buzzing when landing, taking off or driving by as more vapour escaped from the hatches, this time from the gate hydraulic system, which soon descended from the cockpit and became a long boarding ramp. Joe Erskine, a distinguished stellar pilot and a respected bounty hunter—at least in certain guilds from the known space—, left his seat in the cockpit and went out of the spaceship.

He strode along the vast terminal, lit brightly and full of hundreds of stellar ships of all sorts of shapes and sizes. He walked by a cargo ship dismantled partially, in whose reparations worked a group of nirmides, also known as *blue skins*, natives from that planet. Their shining red eyes followed Joe as he passed, undoubtedly attracted to his weird clothing, not very common in that sector of the galaxy except for visitors from other worlds like him.

The bounty hunter was wearing high boots, pants, gloves and a grey leather shirt, reinforced with black titanium plates at the ankles, knees, thighs and abdomen. Hanging from his belt were two guns holstered in cases attached with straps to the exterior side of his thighs, and above all, he had an under-the-knee leather overcoat on, also reinforced on the shoulder and elbow areas. Lastly, he carried over his ears some headphones made of carbon fibre, with an

intercom and thermal and night vision retractile glasses integrated—an essential kit for tracking and monitoring.

*This time, try to go unnoticed, boss,* Joe heard a female robotic voice say from the intercom.

It was the ship computer nucleus on board, a sophisticated and very useful artificial intelligence which, in Joe's opinion, its only defect was not having a physical body. Well, that and its constant criticism towards its owner, as well as its excess of sarcasm—used time and time again with the only intention of mocking him. If he didn't know it was a machine, he'd think of it a human being with a terrible habit of, in lack of a better expression, fucking everybody around.



"Nirm is a planet with twenty billions inhabitants, R, half of which are humans," he answered, coming out of the spaceport into the busy city centre. "I think going unnoticed won't be a problem."

*You said those exact same words when we went to Kirun and you ended up arrested and questioned by the Planetary Government for three whole days,* R reminded him.

"Kirun barely gets to two million inhabitants," justified Joe, making his way through the people. "Only a quarter of which are humans. Besides, I remind you that was a misunderstanding."

*The Interplanetary Guard disagreed with you on that when they decided to make you go through a War Council, boss.*

"The guard..." huffed Joe Erskine contemptuously, stopping in the middle of a wide square next to a fountain with the statue of one of the past native heroes from that planet. "The guard never agrees with anything or anyone, except with those who serve their interests."

The Interplanetary Guard was the army from the Planet Union, which the Earth took part in, and Joe had never got on too well with his high command, even though by life's chance, he had to work with them in the past, helping them in several occasions arrest some terrorists and other criminal leaders. Events which provided him with a hell of enemies, and he didn't even receive a single 'thank you' from the distinguished majors of the IG.

Pulling a lock of his long, brownish hair away from his eye, he glanced at the huge skyscrapers standing over him—big steel arms made of a thick greenish blue crystal. His eyes stopped on one that reminded him of some ostrich legs holding the weight of a plate similar to a *kasah* hat. It was fully built with mirrors, in which reflected dozens of colourful lights from ad boards, streetlights and nearby buildings, or from hovercrafts and other transport means which ploughed through the sky through those safe places, reserved to planetary vehicles.

Joe looked down at the control panel on the forearm of his left glove and typed a brief message: "Just landed. Be there in a few. Remove the champagne from the fridge, you know I don't like it too cold." He added a wink before pressing *send*.

*Very subtle, boss,* said R, her voice hinting of some sarcasm.

Normally, her ironic comments were way better. Maybe she didn't make an enough effort.

"You know I don't like to show up by surprise, at least not when I visit people who are willing to offer me a job. That's a privilege I give to my targets.

*I've never seen you treat your employers so personally before, boss.*

"I like to cause good impression, you know? If I weren't just as I am, I'd find myself jobless in a second. People who require the services of a bounty hunter usually are very demanding, and they don't trust anybody.

*Sure, R huffed mockingly. The fact that this person who wants to hire you, unlike all the previous ones, is a gorgeous, young human female, doesn't have anything to do with your abundance of charm and friendliness, does it, boss?*

Breathing deeply through his frowned lips, Joe sighed.

"What would I do without your subtle and wise contributions?"

He felt as if he had a pain in the ass, whose only job was annoying him at all times.

*Certainly, you'd feel lonely, boss. Although... no offense, I think you already feel that way since you've gone across half the galaxy at FTL speed (Faster Than Light) to attend to the call of this mysterious woman from your past. I guess my company is not enough for you. She faked a wounded sigh.*

"Your company?" Joe couldn't help a smile and huffed. "R... you know you are an artificial intelligence program, right? A machine with no body? A voice with no soul?"

*My apologies, boss, but I find your questions senseless.*

Joe rolled his eyes and snorted.

"Doesn't matter... I'm getting there." He had just stepped into the spacious hall from one of the building's 'ostrich legs'.

He headed towards the reception area, but the woman working behind a crystal desk—a cutting-edge touch screen which played holograms—spoke before he could even open his mouth.

Smiling broadly, she said, "Welcome to the Norosama Tower, Mr. Erskine. Ms. Noro is awaiting you. Please, go to the elevator." She pointed at the hallway on the right side of the lobby. "The EN button."

*EN?* he wondered a few moments later as the doors closed and the elevator went up swiftly. He guessed it would stand for Enoki Noro; her initials.

It'd been almost ten years since he last saw her, and for that reason he was a bit nervous. Last time they met, both of them were twenty. He was an orphan with a dubious future, who made a living by dealing spices on his first stellar spaceship, an old, slow junk that, miraculously, could fly across the space. It was ideal for the job, though, because it counted with a great deal of secret compartments.

She, on the other hand, was an exemplar student, the daughter of a businessman who was also the head of one of the most respected families in Japan, which liked danger and speed. Thus, they spent a lot of time together, sometimes competing with their hovercrafts dodging Tokyo's skyscrapers or flying into space with his ship while they kissed and admired the Earth from the window in the cockpit. Good old times.

Joe felt his heart rate speed up as he walked through those passages in his head, where he kept those events. Back then, both his and Enoki's lives were a whole lot easier. Now he worked chasing and arresting criminals, or getting goods or other stolen objects back in return for a reward. And she had inherited his father's company, a whole galactic empire in the sector of aerospace technology.

Hissing softly, the elevator's doors opened and revealed the indoors of a big room subtly and relaxingly illuminated. The furniture was all designer: sofas, chairs, shelves, glass tables, a piano as shiny as if it were made by diamonds, a bar with its fridge and everything, a desk and bookshelves... The walls and the ceiling were made of glass, large window through which at that moment it could be seen the night sky full of stars, the immensity of the urban landscape surrounding the building and the never-stopping traffic, formed by the smudges left by the rushing shuttles.

At the back of the room, seated on a soft, fluffy, red velvet sofa was Enoki, a glass of wine in her hand. She was looking at a big cylindrical control panel showing some holograms on its crystal surface—latest technology regarding televisions.

"I'd been told this tower was impressive, but from the inside it is even more amazing."

Turning her head at the sound of his voice, a beautiful and white smile appeared on her face, one Joe remembered clearly.

*Nice words to break the ice, boss,* he heard from the intercom.

After leaving her glass of wine on the coffee table standing by the sofa, the woman stood up elegantly. Erskine closed the distance between them and hugged her tightly.

"You can't imagine how happy I am to see you, Joe," said Enoki as she enjoyed his arms' warmth. "Thank you for coming in such a short notice."

They pulled back but kept really close, staring at each other to see their changes over time.

Time had barely passed for Enoki. Except, perhaps, on the certain maturity her features had acquired, replacing that innocence she'd shown when younger. Other than that, she was still as gorgeous as he remembered, even a little bit more so. She was as tall and thin, her skin slightly pale. Her eyes were still as green as the star-shaped emeralds she wore around her neck. And her hair, black and silky, fell over her shoulders as two sparkling, darker-than-a-starless-night waterfalls. She was dressed in a smart red dress which left uncovered a great deal of her slim legs, and she was wearing some matching heels which stood her up enough to be at the same eye-level as the bounty hunter.

"You're looking good," added Enoki a while later.

"S-so do you, beautiful." Her smell was so good that he got nervous and his voice trembled and sounded husky. Both laughed like a pair of teenagers as R let out through the intercom, *Careful not to choke on champagne, boss.*

As Enoki invited him to take a seat, Joe pushed a button on the control panel on his forearm and muted the intercom. A few moments later, he received a written message from R, which said, *That was utterly inappropriate and rude.*

He ignored her.

"Unfortunately, I don't have any champagne," Enoki excused herself, pouring an abundant quantity of crimson liquid into a glass and offering it to him.

"Don't worry, I prefer wine," he said, smiling. When she sat next to him, he added, "What's the matter, Enoki? When you contacted me you seemed anxious and concerned."

"That's because I am, Joe. I have a problem and I'm in need of your professional help."

Biting her lip, the woman sighed. Perhaps a simple gesture, but to the bounty hunter it looked tender and even inviting.



He left the glass on the table and looked straight into her eyes, trying to seem formal and in control of his own emotions.

"Tell me, Enoki-chan. If it's up to me, I'll help you."

She smiled at the sound of his pet-name along with her name, and yet her face became serious quick after.

"You see, Joe... Some days ago, some thugs broke into the tower and stole a memory stick with vital information to my company. I need to get it back or I might lose it all..."

Shocked at such fateful news, he frowned. That kind of information, so valuable, used to be kept well protected, so professionals must have carried out the deed.

He let her continue speaking.

"The main reason why I'm worried is because my company is about to close an all-important deal with Transquare Light. Do you know them?"

Joe nodded. "I've heard about them. They're one of the most important companies in the spaceships manufacturing sector. Their yearly income, according to some, gets to high unimaginable numbers."

"Exactly. It's one of the most important companies nowadays and they want to invest a huge amount of money in a new model of hyperdrive we've created. It's a very valuable prototype that can warrant us a several-billion-dollar contract. You can imagine the significance of this matter..."

The bounty hunter nodded once more. "Now I understand the urgency behind your call."

"While we were negotiating with TL," she kept going, "Global Wyr, a military and arms developing company and also the main supplier for the Interplanetary Guard, contacted us because they're interested in the hyperdrive as well, since they're about to release a new line of war aircrafts. Their offer is a whole lot better than Transquare Light's one; however, due to some illegal transactions they're being investigated for, the general shareholders' assembly and I have decided not to seal an agreement with them. It's better to earn a little less money and not be involved in matters that could damage my company's image."

"That's a wise decision, Enoki."

"It is. It was..." Her face suddenly saddened, but her slightly Asian features didn't lose their beauty. "I suspect the disappearance of that memory stick has something to do with our refusal to GW. I believe

they hired someone to steal it and thus, hold me from signing anything with TL."

"That's more likely from a criminal family rather than a lawful company," declared Joe, thoughtful. "Do you have any idea about who might be behind the burglary?"

Enoki nodded, forgetting about her glass of wine.

"Some members of a bike gang. The Mahang'Ru, to be more exact. Their leader is a nirmide named Velko Kang, son of the extremely well known crime lord, Bin Kang. Velko and his gang are simple hired thugs who couldn't have planned such a robbery on their own. That's why I think people a lot more important and influential hired them—shareholders from GW. I imagine they'll want to threaten me to sell the memory stick to our competitors. Should that happen, I'd be in serious trouble, Joe. My entire company would hit the skids. That storage device has secret information about highly important patents and contracts. It's not the sort of information that we can afford to expose without resulting in serious consequences."

Thoughtful, Joe stroked his jaw and raised his eyebrows.

"Of course, whoever planned the job knew what they had to steal to put you between a rock and a hard place." He looked into Enoki's eyes. "Velko is the name of that bike gang leader, you say? What makes you think it was them who orchestrated the theft?"

"The security cameras captured the faces of some of the robbers. I've looked into it a little and they're members of Kang's gang. I've no doubt Velko is behind it. He's a robber and an extortionist, famous among the city scum. The kind of mercenary someone richer and more powerful would hire for such a job. That's why I can't let the memory stick fall into the wrong hands. I must get it back, Joe!" she exclaimed, closing her fists tightly because of the anger and helplessness she felt.

"It's okay, Enoki, don't worry. I can track that Velko Kang, and if he has it, I'll get it back for you."

"Really?" A ray of hope thrived on the woman's face, replacing for a moment the anxiety that controlled her. "I'll pay whatever it takes, Joe. Whatever. You set the price."

"Don't worry about that now, Enoki. We'll speak about my fees later." He winked at her. "Now I need you to tell me everything you know about that guy. If he's working for others, we barely have time before he hands them the memory stick. Do you have any idea where I could find him?"

Shaking her head, she said, "He's very elusive and keeps a low profile. He never goes anywhere without his thugs. His father, Bin Kang, spends most of his time at a very important hotel he owns in the Light Sector—restaurant, spa and a golf club for the rich guests included. A cover to hide all his illegal businesses. However, Velko's whereabouts are a total mystery. No one knows or wants to say where he is."

"If it's not possible to locate the son, I'll have to pay his father a visit," he said more to himself than to her. "Don't worry, Enoki, I'll see to it from now on. I'll find that robber and recover your memory stick no matter what."

"Thank you so much, Joe." She kissed him on the cheek, giving him goose bumps everywhere in his body. "Really, I can't thank you enough. But, please, be careful. Those guys are low-life criminals. They don't hesitate to kill."

"That doesn't worry me, Enoki-chan. They're the kind of criminals I'm used to dealing with. My favourite, to tell you the truth." He smiled and winked at her.

She smiled back at him and pulled him into a warm embrace again. Joe Erskine wouldn't have minded spending the rest of the night that way.