

AUSTIN BUHL

# Nightwave

*Book One of The Ilioneus Chronicles*



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*For my wife, Savannah, & our two beautiful girls, Nevaeh & Ashlynne.*



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## The Shipyard

I sprint through the gates of The Shipyard, a vast cosmic salvage center in the outermost spiral of the Ilioneus galaxy, as thick strands of succulent green foliage race past my face. Behind me, I hear the swift stoppage of foot traffic as the fence slides shut and latches, the bandits' jealous pleas sharpening.

I twirl around and my eyes land upon about twelve miniature, furry creatures, their split-forked tongues slivering for the pile of clutter in my arms. I don't even have to whisper a sound to the ravagers to recognize what it is they seek. Their precarious behavior is what's believed to be the norm here on Ralorth. Elsewhere in the galaxy, this scorched rock is just a neglected thought - a burial ground for once-cherished treasures. But, for scrappers like myself, every single pile of junk on this planet means one thing - Oracle Credits.

The ravagers grow irritable, their wails strengthening as they try to scale the barricade. The last time the ravagers hastened off with my haul, my boss lost her mind. I worry about what will happen if they overpower me again. It hasn't been two weeks since the last time.

With my load secured in my arms, I turn toward the towering gatehouse and scramble toward the entrance, not looking back one

time. I won't let them take the upper hand again. The door slams shut behind me as I totter inside and let out a sigh of relief. I'm safe.

Or so I assumed.

I turn around the corner and see Stella, my revolting boss, waiting for me. Our eyes meet and I cross my arms, trying my best not to gag. Before I even paraded in, I could smell the fecux mucus glazing her dark lavender skin, which scorches my nostrils with each unpleasant whiff. Her eyes penetrate my soul and I know well enough she's about to burst.

"Goodness, Ms. Brincenn," Stella says with an eye roll. "I expected you back thirty minutes ago."

"They attacked me," I retort, though certain she would never take such an excuse. Stella is unrealistic about the life beyond her noble castle erected on the other side of the yard, a place I've only heard referred to as Virtue City. I'm confident she's never even embarked out into Mournfall Harbor to realize how treacherous that side of the yard is. She just doesn't understand.

"Well, what utility are you then?" Stella asks. "I figured someone with your expertise would have been suitable performing such a modest task as picking up a few spare parts."

She can't be serious! "You got your load, boss," I explain, offering her my full bin. "The looters took nothing. I'd say that's a success." And judging by Stella's reaction, I assume I'm the only runner who could say the same.

"Well, I expect you to be punctual from now on," Stella replies as she swipes the scrap bin from my arms and retreats into her private office.

Might as well rest up while I'm waiting on Stella's return. I walk into the recreation room and plunk down on the sofa, propping my feet up on the table as I lay my head back, my dark brown bangs smothering my eyes. It's not every day I get to unwind while I'm on the job. Actually, with my current homeless situation, I've not been



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doing much relaxing at all.

But it's okay though. Judging by Stella's presentation, tonight is the night I've been waiting for for a long time. Every few weeks, Stella meets a new guy at some bar in Virtue City and gives me the "unfortunate" opportunity to close the yard for the evening. I must admit, I will often poke through the daily intake of scrap for anything of value to bring to Mournfall Harbor to sell to Girsnio, a merchant and trusted associate of mine.

Now, I know what you're thinking: looting is wrong. However, I find it hard to consider what I'm doing stealing. I have struggled since my arrival on Ralorth just a little over a year ago because of The Shipyard. Stella pays me just barely a hundred credits a week, which is considerably below The Oracle's three hundred credit weekly minimum statute, despite receiving pay statements that also go to The Oracle that say otherwise. It's hard to live sometimes because of the wavering market on Ralorth, especially with my minuscule wage. I deserve my fair share of what we brought in.

A few moments later, I hear a knock on the door, followed by a startling stinging sensation in my neck. I turn around and see Stella's hand positioned over my neck, her face as red as a lobster.

"What do you think you're doing, Sarah?" Stella shouts, pointing at my feet propped on the table.

"I'm sorry, Stella," I reply, standing up just in time for Stella's hand to once again crash into my face. I don't see it coming, but, oh, I sure feel it. My cheek throbs like a thousand needles are being jabbed again and again into it.

"I can't understand you people!"

I can't understand why you're so evil! My mind often mulls over what I'm still doing working here for Stella. Not only are my wages garbage, but Stella also is just not a healthy person to be around. However, any notions of deserting evade my mind after I take time to think about it.

There's no evading the Shipyard. There's no escaping anywhere in the Ilioneus galaxy.

The Oracle Job Board decides careers on each person's thirteenth birthday based on their performance at the Education Center. I think this is why many assume my prominence as a scrap runner makes me uneducated. But what they don't know is that I finished at the top of my class and was originally chosen to follow in my mother's footsteps as a politician within The Oracle. It wouldn't matter if I told them, either. Who would believe me? I still don't find it practical how I went from valedictorian to runner within just four short years. I made many mistakes and turned my back on many people. Now, I'm here, fated for a lifetime of ridicule and abuse, with no chance of escape.

"Listen," Stella says, waving her arms to get my full attention. "I've got a family emergency and need to leave the yard early today. Will you be okay closing up?"

"I guess," I reply, putting on a face of dismay to hide the ecstatic emotions inside.

Stella retreats into her office and I disappear to my workstation, pretending to sort through yesterday's load while I linger for Stella to leave. About forty-five minutes later, I hear the front door slam shut and I tear into the commons area, exploding with glee as Stella starts up her glider before disappearing behind the gate.

With Stella gone, I sprint outside, and my eyes can't help but return their gaze to the fence. The ravagers have vanished, presumably spooked by Stella's departure. But I know better. Once I leave the confounds of these walls, they'll be waiting.

I turn and begin my march toward the massive graveyard of fallen Oracle carriers and civilian starships that have piled up in the Shipyard over the past several hundred years, keeping my eyes peeled for anything of value. Just as I enter the junk necropolis - which is often called Salvage Mountain by the other runners - I fall upon the pile of

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scrap that had been dropped throughout the day by the various Oracle dropships. Not a single item has been documented and processed yet. I call that fair game.

The yellow sun reflects off a peculiar silvery object, nearly blinding my eyes. I clear the water in my eyes before nearing the anomalous object, knowing instantly what it is. “No way,” I say out loud. It’s a Samsun Drive, the device that first made faster-than-light travel possible. When it was invented, it was a truly groundbreaking achievement. However, with the worm drive, the device became antiquated and was fully withdrawn from production a few years ago. I have seen one before, during my early days at The Shipyard. When I brought the piece to Stella, she gave me a bewildering look before gasping with excitement. Evidently, they are worth a fortune now.

I saunter up to the Samsun Drive and clasp it in my hand. It’s been a few weeks since Stella last let me close, so the pile of scrap I’ve been building is quite large. However, there’s no way that rubble will be worth nearly as much as this. This is it: my chance to escape.

I tremble for a few moments while standing around the pile of debris, my eyes peeled for any watchers. But there’s no way Stella’s seen the Samsun Drive yet. If she had, someone on her team would’ve certainly transported it inside her office to be resold. Stella isn’t one to waste a quick profit. No. This is mine!

After placing the Samsun Drive in the brown burlap sack on my back, I rush to the front gates to lock up before tramping out into the Ralorthian desert to begin my two-hour journey to Mournfall Harbor. I am wary of my surroundings, knowing at any moment, a ravager could wait for me, ready to claim my treasure.

But, just an hour and fifty-seven minutes later, I arrive in the dreary town of Mournfall Harbor unscathed. The sun has set by this time, allowing the four Ralorth moons to glow in the night sky. Ralorth is

an insufferable smoke pit for most of the afternoon, but now a gust of cool wind grazes across my back, revitalizing my composure.

Around the street corner, I bump into a family of three, forcing the youngest to the ground as I get sickening looks from her parents. I extend my hand and the young girl grabs ahold of it, lifting herself to her feet. Her gaze falls from me toward her parents, locking hands with them in an instant. She's so innocent - so naïve to the world around her. I can't help but stare... I envy her. Oh, how nice it would be to feel my mother's pacifying touch or to hear the melodic sound of my father's voice. I guess it's what I deserve, though. Actions have consequences. And oh, were my actions wrong? I don't even know why I'm dwelling on this. My parents are never coming back, anyway.

I snap out of my trance and walk forward, praying the girl's family doesn't stop me to question my extended stare. The last thing I need is someone confusing me with a pickpocket.

Just a few blocks ahead, I stumble upon Sanguine Plaza, a vast skyscraper in the core of Mournfall Harbor, which houses the Ralorth Trading Grounds. The Oracle Security Force - or OSF, as I call them - considers the Ralorth Trading Grounds a hot zone, playing host to some of the basest criminals in the galaxy. But I honestly don't think they really understand just how precarious this place is.

In just the few moments I'm inside, a woman brutally stabs a man to death, another is severely beaten, and a young woman's eyeball is gouged out. But this is nothing. Two months ago, a ferocious crime lord massacred over twenty people right before my eyes. He was across the street having a beer not even ten minutes later, as if nothing had happened. No one even batted an eye.

I wave off the negative energy and continue onward before Girsnio's trading post appears. He notices me as I approach, jumping to his feet with glee from an irked stature. I can't help the excitement I feel each time that I see Girsnio. During the past eleven months I've been

on Ralorth, he's become a good friend. My only friend, in fact. He's been there for me since day one, even going as far as taking me in on my first night to ensure someone properly acquainted me to my new planet.

"Greetings, my friend," Girsnio says with a charming smile. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

I reach into my bag and pull the Samsun Drive out, handing it to Girsnio. He stumbles behind the counter, nearly falling over his chair as he analyzes the device.

"Hmm," Girsnio grumbles. "Where did you find this?"

"I'd rather not say," I reply with a stern grin. "Is it worth anything?"

Girsnio disappears under his counter and returns a few seconds later with a pair of spectacles, sliding them over his eyes as he inspects the device with intense care. He's always so thorough - and one of the smartest people in the galaxy with old technology. But, after a few moments, his eagerness fades as a look of angst swamps his face.

"Is something wrong?"

"I'm sorry, Sarah. It's... It's fried," Girsnio replies. After analyzing it for a few moments and seeing my reaction, he reiterates, "The best I'm going to give you is... five hundred credits."

"What?" Five hundred credits? That's garbage - barely enough for a modest meal and a ragged place to lay my head for a few nights. I could take it away, march down to the saloon and make a killing.

"I'm sorry, Sarah," Girsnio says, barely able to even look me in the eye. "It would take at least a few hundred thousand credits to restore such a monstrosity."

Ah, who am I kidding? This pile of junk is not even worth the walk here. Might as well take what I can get! "Fine, thanks for giving me what you can."

"Of course, my friend," Girsnio replies, tucking away the Samsun Drive before transferring the credits to my ComPad. "So, are you

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looking for some work?”

“What kind of work are we talking about?”

“The kind where your level of expertise would be valuable... Nightwave!”

Ugh! To this day, I still don't know how Girsnio found out about my past, but it irritates me when he brings it up. I'm done with the deals. The part of me that was known as Nightwave is dead. “That's not who I am anymore, Girsnio,” I say, crossing my arms. “I have no desire for that kind of life.”

“There's no killing involved with this job, my friend,” Girsnio replies. “Just a clean hunt.” Girsnio's eyes grow mystic. “And, if what I'm told is true, you'll be a millionaire by sun fall tomorrow.”

A million credits! Wow! Is that even possible? How? One million credits. That would be life-changing. Maybe... no! I'm on the straight and narrow path now. I can't go back down this road.

“I'll think about it,” I reply before retreating from the trading grounds toward the nearest inn.