

PILOT

VALERIE GAUMONT



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Dedication

This book is dedicated to all of those who read the early revisions and offered their help in the rough patches and to my family for always believing in me.

Chapter One

Elena woke curled in a ball beneath her covers. Only her nose was sticking out into the cool morning air. Bad dreams had chased her through the night and left her with only vague shadows and a raging headache. Deep in her comforter cocoon she groaned.

'At least it is Sunday,' she thought. The store was closed on Sundays. Today was the only day out of the week where the clamoring of customers was silent. Briefly she toyed with the idea of rolling over and trying for a few more hours of sleep but the thought drifted away as insubstantial as smoke. The pounding in her head would never allow it.

She sighed dramatically for her own benefit and sat up in bed. Her covers thumped around her waist exposing her t-shirt clad form to the morning chill. Fall was fading fast and soon Elena would have to break down and turn on the heat. She rubbed her goose bumps, slid out of bed and began gathering her supplies. A clean pair of jeans, a warm sweatshirt, and thick woolen socks formed a bundle in her arms. She topped it off with clean underwear and trudged into the bathroom.

Elena glanced at herself in the bureau mirror as she passed. She could almost see the headache pounding behind her black eyes and making her cap of chin length black hair bounce in time to the beat. She set her clean clothes on the closed lid of the toilet and absently ran a hand through her hair, still surprised at how short it was. For most of her life she had worn it long in a braid reaching nearly to her waist. She shook her head, dismissing the thought before it could fully form and continued on to the bathroom.

Her headache pounded drum beat echoes of her footsteps. *'It just isn't fair,'* she grumbled to herself as she turned on the water in the shower. *'If I'm going to suffer in the morning I should have at least had the benefit of a wild time the night before to go with it.'* Somehow she didn't think a night balancing her business receipts counted. As Elena stepped into the spray, flashes of her nightmares danced in

her head. There weren't enough images to make a complete picture of what had haunted her night so she let the water wash them down the drain with the suds.

The old pipes began to rattle and whine. Elena glared at the tiled wall, knowing the sound signaled the death of her hot water supply. She decided to wash her hair later and reached down to turn the water off. The hot water failed as her hand reached the tap and she yelped as icy droplets rained down on her back. She quickly shut the water off as her headache mocked her.

Once dry and dressed she headed to the kitchen knowing from experience caffeine would dull the pounding. She opened the freezer only to find three lonely little coffee beans at the bottom of the bag.

"Damn," she said, realizing she had forgotten to go shopping again. Elena glanced at the kitchen wall clock. 9:12. The coffee shop around the corner opened at 9 am on Sundays. Visions of vats of freshly brewed coffee swam through her aching head. She smiled, shoved her feet into a pair of leather clogs and grabbed her purse. She checked to make sure her keys and wallet were inside and headed out the door.

The street had that peculiar Sunday morning quiet to it. Everyone going to the early service at church had already left and everyone else was either still asleep or dawdling over his or her first cup of coffee. She took a deep breath of the cool air. Fall winds were definitely getting some bite to them. Bare black trees stretched cold fingers to the sky and sighed for their lost colors as the wind skritch through them and sighed over the parked vehicles lining the street. Elena hurried her steps without sparing them a glance.

As she rounded the corner the scent of fresh coffee beckoned her forward and into the shop. With the exception of the sleepy eyed clerk the shop was empty. Elena grabbed a bag of coffee beans as she crossed to the counter.

"May I help you," he asked.

"I'd like this," she said indicating the bag. "And a large coffee please."

"Regular or decaf?"

"Regular"

"Columbian or French roast?"

Elena dimly wondered if it mattered.

"Columbian."

"Any flavors in that?"

"No thank you just coffee."

"How about a shot of espresso?"

Elena ground her teeth.

"No thank you."

He poured the coffee and rang up her charges. She paid and walked out of the store, her newly acquired bag held under her left arm like a football while

the cold fingers of her right hand gripped the steaming cup. At the door she paused to pry the lid off her cup and drop it into the trashcan. The clerk's belated, "Have a nice day," drifted towards her as the door swung shut behind her.

As much as she wanted to gulp her hard won cup of coffee, the liquid's temperature was too high for her to do more than take delicate sips. She walked slowly, trying not to spill and hoping the cool air would steal some warmth from her drink. She felt tiny bites of heat as she sipped.

She looked up from her cup and saw two men walking towards her, no doubt heading to the coffee shop. It was, after all, the only business open at the moment. They had a similarity of appearance that marked them as coming from the nearby military base. After seeing so many of the military personnel around the sight no longer surprised her as it had when she first moved to town.

She dismissed them as they passed, her mind beginning to run through her household chores for the day. She heard a shuffling behind her and started to turn toward the sound. She felt a sharp pain in her neck and before she could raise a hand to the sting, Elena felt her knees crumble. Strong hands caught her as she fell but they missed her cup of coffee. She watched it spill on the white concrete sidewalk as darkness took her.

Chapter Two

Elena opened her eyes. Her first thought was that her headache was gone. Her mind felt filled with cotton and she struggled to find her last memory. Coffee spilling down the cracks in a sidewalk. A sharp jab into her neck... Her thoughts formed a pattern and she bolted upright. She was slumped in a large cushy chair on wheels. As panic drove her to her feet the chair rolled away and softly thumped against the wall.

Her gaze jerked around the room. She was in a conference room. It wasn't opulent but it was large, comfortable and well appointed. Understated, was the word that flew through her mind as her eyes danced across the comfortable office chairs neatly arranged around the table.

There were two large mirrors at either end of the room. A designer would have said they created the illusion of space. To Elena's mind they seemed like the mirrors one would find in a police station merely decorated with heavy frames to fool the eye, although that was probably her innate paranoia speaking. There was one door. Elena rubbed the back of her hand across her eyes. Even with the adrenaline flowing she was feeling sluggish, slow like her brain was wrapped tight in a wool blanket. Her purse and coffee were nowhere to be seen.

Elena leaned on the glossy surface of the table and took a few deep breaths. *'Everything in the purse is replaceable,'* she thought to herself. *'I am not.'* She pushed away from the table and stood straight. Her first few steps were a bit creaky but she got herself moving towards the door. She edged around the table using the backs of the chairs for support when her vision seemed to fuzz.

"This is what happens when I don't get my coffee," she muttered to herself. "I'll have to get another cup." She tried to encourage herself with the words as she moved. "Different coffee shop though." She reached the side of the table. From here to the door she would have no more support. She took a deep breath and stepped forward.

“Not bad,” she complemented herself. She took another step, feeling steadier. Each step pushed the fuzz back and made her feel more normal. The wool around her brain was beginning to fray at the edges and the sharp bite of cold reality was beginning to sting. Panic started to bubble through her system helping to bring her into sharper focus. Someone had grabbed her off the street and brought her here.

‘Why?’ she asked herself. *‘What was happening?’* She reached for the door-knob, praying the door was unlocked. Her hand was a few inches from the knob when she saw it turn. She stared stupidly as the door opened and a man stepped into the room. She ducked into a defensive crouch really wishing she had learned some sort of fighting style. Somehow her kick him in the crotch and run away method seemed inadequate. He stared at her in puzzlement as he entered the room.

“Good morning Ma’am,” he said. Elena noticed he was carrying a tray and that he had a military haircut. Short on top and almost nonexistent on the sides. The rest of his features were rather non-descript. He wore camouflage fatigues and combat boots. The tray contained several ceramic coffee mugs and a carafe of what smelled like coffee. Packets of instant creamer and sugar were heaped in one corner. Lack of caffeine or not, there was no way she was taking a cup of this brew.

“Morning,” she replied. “I wouldn’t go so far as to say good.” He smiled and she put his age as early 20s at best.

“If you’ll just take a seat. The others will be along shortly. Your meeting will start then.”

“Meeting?”

“Yes, didn’t you come here for the meeting?” Uncertainty flickered across his face. Behind him an older man filled the open door.

“Of course she’s here for the meeting.” The younger man looked stung and quickly walked past Elena to place the tray on the table. He stepped around the older man, leaving the room and closing the door behind him.

“Please sit down Ms. Calabrese.” Elena stared at him. He had hard lines around his mouth and eyes and the look he gave her made her feel untidy. She started to run a hand through her hair, figuring it was probably a mess but stopped her hand before it could move more than an inch from her side. If she looked unkempt it was his fault anyway. She clenched her teeth, her temper burning away the last of the mental fog. They had no right to bring her here.

“Is this routinely the way you get people to your meetings?” She said, a snap of temper edging into her voice. She decided anger would serve her better than fear. This man also had a military haircut. Elena almost expected him to be in camouflage but he wore a black t-shirt and a pair of loose black pants with more pockets than seemed rational. He was wearing combat boots

to match the haircut.

“Not usually but you are a special case. Please have a seat.”

“And if I don’t want to?” Elena asked, knowing she sounded like a petulant child but unable to help herself. The man crossed to the table, poured himself a cup of coffee, and added one packet of creamer and two of sugar.

“You can of course remain standing if you wish. We only want to talk with you. Present a proposition of sorts. A business proposition. Then you will of course be able to leave.” A tight knot in Elena’s throat loosened. She would be able to leave.

Elena stepped back to the table and pulled out the chair at the head of the table.

“A business proposition,” she repeated.

“Yes,” he confirmed settling himself in a chair.

“You wanted to suggest a business proposition to me so you kidnapped me?”

“Ms. Calabrese, this is hardly kidnapping.” Elena’s eyebrows shot up.

“The hell it’s not!”

“Please calm down.” Elena took a couple of deep breaths. The sooner she found out what he wanted the sooner she could leave.

“Why didn’t you just come to my office if it is business?”

“We did not want to risk the possibility of being overheard. All of this is highly confidential.”

“Highly confidential.” She repeated, wondering what highly confidential thing the military could want her for. Surely they couldn’t know about the guild.

“Yes.”

“Why didn’t you just ask me to come to your office?”

“Well, Ms. Calabrese, your kind doesn’t exactly have a history of cooperation with the military. If we had contacted you there were a number of things you could have done other than come here. None of them would have suited our purpose.” He answered, leaning back in his chair. She swallowed hard around the thought that was beginning to form. There was only one reason they could have grabbed her and these were dangerous waters. They knew.

“My kind?” she asked, keeping her suspicions from her voice.

“Yes.”

“And what kind would I be?”

“Let’s see, what did he call you...Ah yes I remember, The Pilots.” Elena could feel her stomach begin to knot into big greasy twists.

“Pilots?” She asked, trying to keep her voice calm. “Like in planes?” She tilted the end of the word up in puzzlement.

“No Ms. Calabrese,” he said with a smile, “You know the kind of pilots we

mean.” His words came out with a certainty that sped up her pulse.

“I’m afraid I don’t,” she said.

“There is no need to play dumb. We know all about you.”

“I’m afraid you have the wrong person.

“I don’t believe we do.” He said he took a long drink from his mug. Elena willed her face to calm.

“Who do you think I am?” she asked.

“You are Elena Bastianne Calabrese, a pilot of the Calabrese family. The pilots as you know have the ability to navigate the world gates.” The man sat back in his seat and silently sipped his coffee as he studied Elena’s reaction. She kept her expression calm with a forced effort but felt the blood drain out of her face. This man was speaking of the channels.

Whatever he called them, he was talking about the channels. She had opted out of that world more than five years earlier and had not looked back. But even for one who stopped riding the channels there was punishment for revealing family secrets. Talking to the military of any nation about the channels was forbidden. In the Law of the Families, forbidden was always enforced, usually painfully.

“I’m afraid I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Elena stated. It was a statement she could not afford to deviate from. Punishment for an exile was likely to be even harsher than normal.

“Ms. Calabrese, there is no need to keep up the pretense. We are well aware of the world gates. We know where they are, where they lead and how to access them.”

“I don’t know what you are talking about,” she said. Her voice was rough and came out as less strong than she would have liked. She cleared her throat. “I’m sorry I have never heard the term world gates and I am not a licensed pilot. I know nothing about planes.”

“Ships, Ms. Calabrese, ships, as you well know. The pilots, well, pilot ships across the world gates. Or they did anyway. Now we have a more advanced mechanism. You see the pilots, their guild and their secrecy have become obsolete. We have ships that can take us through the world gates with out the special skills of a pilot.” Butterflies swirled in Elena’s brain. A question began to form and she wondered if she could ask it without stating that she knew about the pilots and the channels.

“I am a bit confused sir,” She began, weighing each word before it left her lips. In here words had meaning. “I do not know what these world gates are but you seem to be able to deal with them just fine. If you can deal with them better than these pilots then why would you need to kidnap someone you thought was a pilot? Or are you just telling me this so that I can be certain that I don’t need to keep a secret that is apparently not a secret?” Elena forced a

puzzled expression to her face.

“Ah, well that is the business proposition we have asked you to consider. Obviously the world gates are a military concern. Therefore since the Pilots are already working with them, we thought you might like to work with them and us.” He gestured towards Elena with his cup. “You are about to be obsolete. This would be some way you could be still involved. Sort of keep your hand in.” Inside Elena snorted. Her stomach began to settle. His contempt was oddly reassuring.

“If this group is about to be obsolete then why would you want them to work with you?” The man took a deep drink from his mug, finishing his coffee. He reached forward and poured himself another mug. This time he didn’t bother with the sugar or creamer.

“Oh we really don’t,” he said. We just thought it would be good for you to remain in contact and maybe give the project a sense of history. Maybe you could teach the history of the thing or something since your skills are no longer needed.”

“I see,” Elena said. “That is very generous of you.” The words fell heavily from her lips, weighted with meaning and import. Elena could almost feel them hit the table between them. “So you want these pilots to teach history?”

“More or less,” he replied.

“Well, I wish you luck with that. I’m afraid you are mistaken about my being a pilot and I really don’t have any inclination to be a history teacher. So I guess I would have to decline the position.” She let the silence stretch while she counted to five. “May I leave now?” The door opened and Elena started as the man in front of her shot to attention nearly spilling coffee down his shirt in his haste. His lazy manner evaporated.

“That will be enough. Be seated.” The man sat back down. Elena turned her attention to the newcomer. I am Macmillan and that is Smith.” He gestured to the seated man before walking around the table and seating himself. He thumped a large file on the table. “Let’s cut through some of the bullshit here.” He opened the folder. “We have ships that can go into the world gates. It is a new project. We have one that is completely operational and one that will be online in three months. We have recently run into a snag. We believe that while rather limited and out dated, your prior experience may prove helpful in this instance. Our fully operational vessel, The USS Navigator went through a world gate at precisely this location.” Macmillan unfolded a map and shoved it towards Elena. It slid across the slick wood and she stopped it from sliding off the edge out of reaction. She looked down at the map in her hand and frowned at the location marked. “It is currently missing.”

“How long has it been missing?” She asked.

“It went missing on August 25th of this year at approximately 1400 hours.”

Mentally Elena translated the time and added that data to her mental files, several things were not making sense but to ask would clearly state that she knew what was going on, a statement she was not inclined to make.

"I'm very sorry sir but I am afraid you have the wrong person. I have no idea what world gates are or what you expect them to do or what you expect me to do about them."

"26 people were aboard the Navigator, Ms. Calabrese. Our second ship will not be operational for another three months. Your involvement could save their lives." Macmillan pulled out a sheaf of photos, laying them out on the table in front of Elena. Bright young people in uniform stared out at her. Inwardly, she sighed. She looked at the pictures, committing the smiling faces to memory. Her mind put the facts together as only a well-trained pilot could do and she knew that not one of those people were still alive.

"They have families who miss them. Who want them home. You can help get them home."

"I'm sorry," she said. "I can't help you." Smith looked as though he wanted to say something but Macmillan silenced him with a look.

"Will you at least think about it and give us your answer in a few days?"

"I can give you the answer in a few days if you'd like but nothing I can do could help those people. I'm sorry." Macmillan's eyes narrowed and for a moment he studied her. His eyes made her think of one of her high school math teachers. He could stare at you and tell if you had ever even thought of cheating. Elena reminded herself she was no longer a student. She met his gaze.

"I only ask that you think about it. We will contact you in a few days." He stood and Smith leapt from his seat. "Smith will return you to your home." Macmillan held out his hand and Elena stood holding hers out for him to shake. "We will contact you in a few days when you have had time to think. Oh and Ms. Calabrese, one of the reasons that you were brought here was to illustrate a point. We can find you whenever we want." Macmillan walked around to the desk, opened the door and let himself out without a backward glance. Elena felt goose bumps rise on her arms from his words.

"If you will come with me," Smith said stiffly. Elena followed him out the door. The young man who had brought the coffee was waiting outside the door, her purse in his hand. He passed it to her as she walked out.

"Thank you," she said automatically. He smiled and turned away. She didn't ask him about her coffee beans. Smith escorted her through the hallways and out the main door. Elena found herself blinking in the sunlight, the relief at being allowed to be free of the building washed over her. She was not being held. She looked around amazed at how beautiful the world was. As she turned, her eye caught the profile of someone familiar. She blinked hard, the oddity of seeing a familiar face in an unfamiliar environment momentarily jar-

ring her. She blinked again as if clearing her vision.

“Ian?” she said her voice tilting up to make the name a question. His head turned in her direction at the sound of his name and his eyes went wide when he saw her standing there. Smith cursed under his breath and stepped between her and Ian.

“This way ma’am.” He pointed in the opposite direction. Elena felt her jaw clench. She knew who she had seen. At least now she knew how the military had come by their information. She allowed Smith to lead her from the building and into a car parked in the small lot in front.

More was becoming clear every second she thought about it. Elena managed to keep herself calm until Smith stopped in front of her apartment building. She stepped out of the car closing the door without looking back. If Smith minded he didn’t show it. He simply sat there and watched Elena enter the building before driving away.