

“How about you close the ramp?” Tristan said, working very hard at keeping his voice steady. “I don’t want anyone else walking in.”

Tristan was worried. He was locking himself in with someone he couldn’t take on, not that there was any alternative. He watched the Butcher reach behind him, without taking his gaze off Tristan, and hit the switch. He didn’t even search for it.

How had he managed to reach the ship without being seen? By the breathing mask hanging at his belt, he could tell he had traveled through the maintenance conduits, but how had he managed to move through the hangar? He wasn’t wearing any sort of camouflage.

The ship grew dark as the ramp closed, and then went almost entirely black. Even the luminescent green eyes had disappeared. The darkness didn’t last long for Tristan, his eyes adjusted quickly. The few lights from the control panel let him see the man. He’d lost colors, and his sight wasn’t sharp anymore, but he could see him well enough to watch the human silently creep along the wall.

How was he moving so quietly? He’d never encountered a human who could do that.

He let him take a few steps, before adjusting his aim to the new position. “Don’t think the darkness gives you an advantage.” Again, he had to force his voice to remain steady. He wouldn’t show how uncomfortable the human was making him.

The man stopped moving and leveled the weapon he was holding at Tristan.

Tristan studied the man’s form in the darkness for a moment. Lean and strongly-built, arms tensed and ready to move. He was a little shorter and had a few scars visible on his arms.

“How familiar are you with the Pisteron you are holding?”

“A gun’s a gun,” the Butcher replied in a voice that sounded far too young to be coming from the man who had murdered fifty-eight families, one by one, for no reason he ever gave. “I press the trigger and the thing it’s pointed at dies. That’s all I need to know.”

“The model you are holding has been modified.” He had to get some control of the situation. He couldn’t take that man on, but he couldn’t afford to have him dictate his demands either. “The beam strength is probably at the maximum its components can handle. If you fire it, it will take me out, but it will also take out the front of the ship. Unless you know how to reduce its intensity.” He continued to watch the man, but he was completely still, impossibly so.

He’d heard stories about him. Stories that claimed he wasn’t human, that he was a machine wrapped in flesh. The mask at his belt proved that to be a lie, but even his breathing didn’t change. It was completely

calm. Tristan was worried that even with the lights on, he wouldn't be able to read him.

The man remained still, and just as Tristan started to feel his nerves fraying, the Butcher's eye lit up. "You've got an offer?"

Tristan kept himself from reacting as much as possible and counted on the human not being familiar enough with his species to catch the few signs of relief he couldn't hide. He decided against putting on a mask as he slowly stood. The man's ruthlessness was legendary. He was reputed to have massacred an entire passenger ship because someone had bumped into him and made him spill his drink.

If he ever thought Tristan was attempting some kind of trickery, the result would be bloody, and Tristan wouldn't be on the winning side.

Of all the lessons his father had taught him, he'd worked the hardest to drill into him the one about survival. Survival was the only thing that mattered. The universe would throw obstacle after obstacle at him, but he had to survive them. Anything that ensured he would survive was allowed. He could never let the universe win.

If it meant acting like himself, then he would do so. If he had to debase himself before the Butcher to survive, he would also do it. Anything was allowed to survive.

He didn't show any signs of his internal debate.

"Obviously, we both want to get off the Sayatoga. It will be easier to accomplish if we work together."

It was the man's turn to study him. "Why should I trust you?"

Appeal to his vanity? No, too risky, then he would have to keep feeding it. The man was talking, that was good. Keeping things rational might be the best way. "Mutually assured survival." Tristan wished he could read him. "I have nothing against you, and I don't believe I would still be alive if you had something against me. If we fight, whoever wins will not be in a position to take advantage of the upcoming opportunity and escape. The only useful option left is cooperation."

The man considered him for a moment and then nodded. He rested the Pisteron against the wall. "What are you up to?" He pointed to the open panel.

Tristan put the Kytron in his toolkit where it would still be close enough to reach if he needed it. He noted that the human's hand stayed close to a large knife at his belt which he hadn't noticed before.

Tristan looked at the exposed wires and circuits. Was there anything he needed to do there to let him keep control of the ship? No, it was all programming, and that was already done. "Something I no longer need to do. Can you turn on the light?"

The man hit a switch, and the lights came on.

Tristan undid the modifications he had started on, closed the panel, and sat in the pilot's chair.

The man looked at the controls, and then back at Tristan. "What are you waiting for? We need to get out of here."

"We can't leave now. If we do, they will hunt us and either capture us again or kill us. I don't want either of those things to happen, do you?" The man remained silent. "I set a plan in motion using one of the convicts who was released to hunt you down."

"Like you were." The voice was cold.

As he'd guessed, and feared, the face was completely impassive. Tristan couldn't read anything on it. "Yes, but like me, I expect very few of them are interested in you. They just want off the Sayatoga. I gave them a way to move freely, and now I'm waiting for them to come here and steal one of the ships."

He brought up the Sayatoga's chatter, trying to get an idea of what the inmates were up to. There still wasn't any indication they were free, according to the ship's news. He couldn't get access to the implants' locator without drawing attention to himself on the system. Not that the information would be useful if they had done as he expected.

All he could do now was wait, with the human behind him making his hackles rise. If he hadn't been there, he would have used the time to look for more information on Miranda, but he wasn't going to give the man any more details about his situation than required.

So he spent the time working on his mask, the pilot. His name was Corin Barton, based on the ID. He couldn't risk accessing Corin's records. He hadn't been impressed with the security measures, but finding out now their records were monitored would be dangerous. He had to hope that, like most pilots, Corin didn't socialize with the command crew, and that the pilots who would show up for the hunt wouldn't be familiar with him. Corin had been leaving the flight deck late at night, so it was reasonable to expect those he worked with were also asleep now.

An hour later, the chatter intensified. The convicts were now officially on the loose, shots had been fired, crew killed. Not long after that, the noise level outside the shuttle went up. There was an explosion somewhere on the flight deck, then the general alarm sounded. All the available pilots were ordered to prepare for flight.

"You're going to want to strap in," he told the human while fastening his own harness. Then he sent the program to change the shuttle's status and waited for it to work. "This is Corin Barton," he told control.

He gave his voice honey, and an ease with people, built on a little over-confidence that was common for many pilots. “I’m in carrier ship tee-cee-eight-three-five-ex, reporting. Please provide a status update.” His body language changed. He stood straighter, radiating the confidence. Corin liked taking risks and challenges. He never backed down.

“Three-five-ex,” a woman answered, and Corin immediately liked the sound of her voice. “Please be advised that three hunter fighters have been commandeered by escaped convicts.”

“Understood, Control,” Corin responded. Now that the mask was fully on, Tristan didn’t have to think about his responses, the persona was acting by itself. “Please, call me Corin, Control. And what can I call you?”

“This is an inappropriate use of this band, three-five-ex.”

“Come now,” Corin purred, “What’s so inappropriate about wanting to know the name of the woman I’ll be celebrating my victory with?” While he talked, Corin did a check of the systems.

Control was silent for a long moment. “My name is Talina,” she finally said, sounding less official now.

Corin smiled at his success. “It’s nice to meet you, Talina.” All the checks came back green. “Control,” he said in an official tone, “this is three-five-ex. I have green across the board. Awaiting authorization to ignite the engines and leave the Sayatoga.”

“Three-five-ex.” Talina’s voice was all business now. “This is Control, you have clearance to join the lineup. This is a capture mission. Orders from the top are that every effort is to be made to avoid killing them. They want to punish each one personally.”

“Understood, Control.” Corin engaged the engines, and the ship started vibrating. As the front display turned on, he let the vibration settle in him, learning how the ship felt. When the flight deck became visible, he set the ship moving sideways, to get in line with the others, waiting to join in the hunt.

“Talina, what should I wear for our celebration? I see you in a black dress, something enticing, but not too revealing. I want to leave what you look like to my imagination, at least until I take it off you.”

“Well, I think you should...” She stopped, and Corin noticed the light indicating it was his turn to exit turn yellow, and then green. “Three-five-ex, you are clear to go. Come back safe.”

“No worries, Control. With you waiting for me, they won’t be able to keep me away.” Corin let the thrusters loose, and the ship jumped through the forcefield keeping the atmosphere in.

Once in space, Corin switched the comm to the channel for the

hunting group, but only listened in. He turned to the Butcher. “Go to the scanning controls.” He sent a group of elements to that screen. “While I’m in the chase, I need you to scan the asteroids and find one that’s as close to those as you can.” He focused on his piloting for a moment and then added. “It’s going to block their scans while we’re hiding.” He couldn’t have the Butcher wonder why he was having him do something.

“We’re not bolting?”

Tristan maneuvered the ship to join the others. “No. Doing that will mark us as escapees. The Sayatoga would then hunt us and only stop when they have our bodies back.”

“Three-five-ex,” a man’s voice came over the radio, “this is six-vee-two, please copy.”

The Corin mask slipped back on effortlessly. “Hey there, this is three-five-ex. What can I do for you?”

“Identify yourself.”

This was the moment where Tristan would find out if he’d calculated correctly. “This is Corin Barton, pilot extraordinaire, bane of criminals everywhere.”

“You’re not part of this squad, Barton. What are you doing here?”

Good, he’d been right about that. “I was just in my shuttle, making sure this baby was in top shape when the call came in, so I figured you could use the help. Don’t worry, I’ll let your squad take the credit for my captures.”

There was a sigh. “Look, Barton, can the attitude. Guys like you are who give the rest of us a bad name. This squad doesn’t show off, we get the job done, got that? I need you to focus. Can you do that?”

“I’ll be happy to do that,” Corin replied like it was the easiest thing in the universe. “I’m always glad to keep the squad leader happy. Do you need me to do anything else? Now or after the hunt?”

There was an exasperated sigh. “No, just fall in formation, on my flank. Let’s hunt some crooks.”

Corin followed the instruction but didn’t stay with them long. With an “I see one,” he broke off to chase it by himself, not listening to the curses sent his way. The ship he was chasing wasn’t piloted by a great pilot, not even a very good one. Tristan had to reign in his own abilities to avoid overtaking them. “Are you finding anything we can use?” he asked over his shoulder as he dodged incoming fire.

“Some. I don’t like the idea of hiding.” The tone was neutral.

“No choice.” He returned fire, doing little more than scratching the other ship’s paint. “Unless you have another option that ensures our survival?” he added, realizing that if his passenger felt like he was

being ordered around, he might not like that.

“No,” he answered, in a tone that gave absolutely no indication of how he felt about it. Maybe the stories were true, perhaps the Butcher did have a computer for a brain. “This is the best bet.”

The readings appeared on his screen, and Tristan looked them over, flying around an asteroid to get back to his quarry. He nodded. It wasn't perfect, but it would have to do. The craters were deep enough to hide the ship from view, and the composition would mask them from the scanners.

“Yes, you're right. This will do nicely. Please keep a live feed of its location, in relation to us, on my screen.” He removed the composition readout. “Alright, human, let's see how good you are at taking directions.” The Asteroid's location appeared on his screen, and he did a quick calculation.

He positioned himself behind the convict's ship and fired. The outside pressure door blew off. That should inform them he was serious now. He fired again, but the other pilot made sure not to be hit. Good, Tristan thought and started herding the ship.

Corin was back on, and he gave a running commentary of his exploits. This caused the other pilots to curse him and tell him to get off the wavelength, but he didn't listen. He was in the zone, and he needed everyone to know about it.

They weaved over and under asteroids, and sometimes across other ship's path. Corin cursed every missed shot, proclaiming the other pilot's amazing skills and sheer luck. He also made sure the entire universe knew when he scored a hit.

Even if someone were tracking him, they would be hard pressed to see they were heading to a particular place, while guiding the other ship; with each hit softening them up.

They circled the asteroid twice, while Tristan looked for the best crater to hide in. Once he found it, he maneuvered the other ship in place, and with a yell of victory, Corin destroyed it. An instant later it turned into horror. He screamed about debris, and Tristan cut the transmission in the middle of what he had been saying.

A moment later, the ship was nestled in the bottom of a crater, with everything but minimal life support and passive sensors turned off. The panel was off the controls, and he was digging in the wires, looking for the recorder.

It should be screaming right now since the shuttle was supposed to have been destroyed. They would be too busy to pay attention to that at the moment, but if it weren't deactivated soon, they would activate it, and it would betray their location.

He saw it and had to reach in to dislodge it. It hadn't been built for ease of removal, but it wasn't welded in place, so that was good. He pulled it out, cut the cover off, and disconnected the broadcaster, then the power.

Now, they were safe.

His passenger looked at him, impassive, then nodded toward the pilot's seat. "Neat trick." Was that a hint of awe in his voice?

Tristan stood and stretched. "I spent years practicing my piloting skills after I left home. In this universe, it helps ensure my survival."

The man studied him and nodded. "I mean the act. I've never seen anyone able to switch so easily."

Tristan shrugged. Putting on masks came easily to him.

"Can you do that at will?"

Tristan thought about it for a moment. "When the mask is fresh, yes. But, if I don't use it regularly, a few times a day, it fades away. Then I have to spend time rebuilding it."

The human nodded, and Tristan sat back down. He kept his eyes on the sensors, watching the explosions die down. He couldn't tell if they had been captured, or destroyed, but it was over. Not long after that, one of the ships scanned their asteroid, and soon after, the Sayatoga left, leaving behind only its jump signature.