

“Well, they’re gone,” the human said. “We can get out of here.”

“No,” Tristan replied, without taking his eyes off the sensor screen.

He felt the hand on his shoulder before the man’s movement had registered. He clamped down on his instinctive reaction; he didn’t like being touched. Usually he’d rip the hand off, but doing that would lead to a fight, which he’d lose. He considered telling the man to take it off, but that would also result in a fight. He hated not being able to read him.

“Let’s settle something.” The human tightened his grip on the shoulder. It wasn’t painful yet, but Tristan made himself wince. “I don’t like being told what to do. I let you get away with it before, because we were in a bad spot, and you obviously knew what you were doing. Now we’re in the clear, so you’re going to do what I tell you to do. If you insist on being difficult, I’m going to find a locker and squeeze you into it.”

Tristan held himself very still. He hadn’t expected that from him; the Butcher had seemed reasonable, until now. The hand on his shoulder trembled very slightly. That meant it was entirely organic. Maybe he could take him in a fight after all. No, it was too risky. Even if he managed to win a fight, in quarters this close, they would damage something. To escape, he needed the ship intact, so to survive, he needed to placate the Butcher.

He nodded, looking at the man’s reflection in the screen. “Can I explain why I don’t think we should move right now?”

The man pursed his lips in thought. He released Tristan and took a step back, closer to the Pisteron. “Alright, I’m listening.”

Tristan slowly turned the chair to face him. He massaged his shoulder as if it had actually hurt. “The Sayatoga is used to dealing with escaped prisoners. I checked their records, this is the seventh attempt.”

“Attempt?”

Tristan nodded. “If we manage to leave the asteroid field without being captured, we will be the first ones to succeed.”

That made the man smile. Many of the top criminals took pride in escaping from supposedly inescapable places. Tristan didn’t see the point of pride; it only got in the way.

“That means,” he continued, “that they have an idea of what to expect. This field offers many places to hide in. They know that. They are going to wait for a time, let whoever is hiding get comfortable, and then send some of the trackers back to scan the field. If they don’t find anything, they will leave and come back some time later. They will do that for as long as the Sayatoga is in jumping distance.”

“How long with that be?”

Tristan didn't answer immediately. He knew the answer, anyone who'd bothered reading up on this model of vessel would know it, but he didn't want the Butcher to think he had easy answers. “Considering the probable speed the Sayatoga is traveling at and the short jump range of the trackers, no more than twelve hours.

The green glow in the man's eyes narrowed into pinpricks. “If you're trying to con me, I will find out, and I'm going to skin you before shoving you into that locker.”

Tristan felt like rolling his eyes, but instead, he acted afraid. He had to be careful. He couldn't seem too afraid, or the Butcher wouldn't take him seriously, but he had to let him think he was gaining control of the situation. Tristan needed time to plan. It was now obvious he couldn't afford to have the Butcher as a passenger.

Before he could say anything, the sensor pinged. “That's the sensor, picking up jump signatures.” He looked at the Butcher, waiting for him to do something. People who were afraid waited for authorization. The Butcher nodded, and Tristan turned to face the screen again. “Four of them.” The sensor now registered active scanning. “It will take them close to an hour to scan the entire field.”

“Then they're going to leave?”

“Yes.”

The Butcher grabbed his chair and turned it. “That isn't twelve hours.” His face was uncomfortably close. “You said we had to wait twelve hours.” The anger in his voice didn't show on his face.

Tristan wanted to push him away. Hadn't he listened to what he said? Instead, he tried to force himself into the back of the seat. “They'll be back.” He made his voice quiver. “They're going to wait a few hours, so we'll get comfortable, so we'll think we beat them. If we fly away then, they'll be able to pick up the engine's emissions, and follow it.”

The human took a step back, glaring at him. “How the hell do you know so much about that?”

“I researched.” Tristan kept the quiver, to hide his annoyance. Didn't he try to learn anything? “I knew I'd be captured at some point, so I researched the largest prisons. I knew I'd end up in one of them; I'm a high-value prisoner.” He calmed his voice. He couldn't act afraid all the time. “I also had time to kill on the Sayatoga, so I accessed their network and familiarized myself with their procedures.”

“Twelve hours,” the human grumbled, sitting down in the closest seat.

Tristan gave him a few minutes to have another outburst. When he didn't, Tristan stood and started going through the cabinets.

“What are you doing?” His voice sounded bored.

“Looking for something to eat,” Tristan replied, opening one that contained food. He kept talking, humans tended to talk when nervous. “I haven’t had anything to eat since they let me out. I’ve been too busy, and keyed up, to eat.”

“Well, while you’re at it, empty it. That way I won’t have to go looking for a place to shove you into when you give me a reason to do that.”

Tristan paused for a second, and then looked over his shoulder at the Butcher. The smile he was given wasn’t friendly at all. The locker was one foot deep by one high and two wide. The threat was quite clear. Tristan opened other cabinets.

“What are you doing now?” The Butcher asked.

“Looking for space to move the food too.”

“Just throw that stuff on the floor.”

“You don’t leave anything unsecured on a ship. If the gravity inducers fail or you need to do a sudden maneuver, it could end up killing you.”

“I said to throw it on the floor. You need me to pound your head in so you’ll get it?”

Tristan took a second to control himself, then he went back to the cabinet and threw everything in it on the floor.

He crouched down and looked through the selection. He wanted something high in protein and caloric energy. He would need it, he was sure of that. With a hand full of concentrated meat bars, he looked for something to drink. One of the cabinets he’d opened had a water processor with bottles next to it. He took one of the bottles and went back to his seat.

He was halfway through his food when a thick cloth draped itself over his head and fell over his shoulders. He tensed, would the Butcher try to suffocate him?

“Put that on,” the Butcher said. “I don’t want to have to look at your furry ass every time you get out of that chair.”

Tristan pulled the cloth off his head. Pants, from a vacuum suit. He looked over his shoulder. One of the tall lockers was open, the top of the suit on the floor, along with an oxygen bottle. The helmet hung on the back. They were made for a human so he wouldn’t be able to use it.

He took off the remnants of the pilot’s suit he was wearing and put on the vacuum suit’s pants. They were adjustable, so he set them to be comfortable. He then went and put the top back in the locker, as well as the bottle.

The Butcher smirked at him when he went back to his seat. Let the human think he had him whipped into the shape he wanted, Tristan

thought. Any experienced spacer knew better than to leave things littered around, where they could go flying during quick maneuvers.

He started gathering the food on the floor.

“What are you doing?” The Butcher sighed in annoyance.

“Putting the food in the vacuum suit locker.”

“Leave it.”

“I explained why I don’t want the food lying around,” Tristan replied, having to work at keeping his tone neutral.

“I said, leave it!”

Tristan froze. This went past the Butcher not knowing anything about safety. He was asserting his authority. If he insisted on this, no matter how valid his arguments, it would end up in a fight.

He dropped the food. He’d have to clean this up after he took care of the Butcher.

He ate and relaxed as best as he could, considering his passenger. This was going to be a long wait. Plenty of time to formulate a plan, but the human was putting his patience to the test

As he’d predicted, an hour after they arrived, the four trackers jumped out. By the time they dropped back in, three hours later, Tristan had worked out the only way he could see to get rid of his passenger. Unfortunately, he needed to make alterations to the ship. He needed the ramp to open much faster than it currently did. There was a mechanical system that regulated the speed, so he needed a way to change that.

He hadn’t figured out how to accomplish that, but there were still other things he could do from the pilot’s seat to get ready. He slowly reprogrammed the failsafe that kept the ramp from opening to hard vacuum, while keeping an eye on the Butcher. He would pace for a time, then sit at a terminal and look at a screen Tristan couldn’t see. Any time the Butcher looked in his direction, Tristan made sure nothing gave away what he was doing. Once the failsafe was done, he added a program to disable the gravity plating when the ramp opened, as well as life-support. No point in wasting his oxygen.

Somewhere in the middle of that, the trackers left.

While he worked, and even after he was done, his passenger was silent, for which Tristan was grateful. The trackers returned four hours later, scanned the entire field, and left. As far as Tristan could guess, that had been their last run.

By the time they reached the Sayatoga and came back, they wouldn’t be able to short-jump back to the ship. They’d have to go into cryosleep, which meant they couldn’t navigate. The Sayatoga would have to stop moving for them to know where to aim the trackers.

He couldn't see them doing that. Even so, if the Butcher started insisting they leave, he had half a dozen reasons why they shouldn't. Not that he expected him to do so. It was apparent he wasn't technologically knowledgeable. He was the 'pull the trigger, and things explode' type of criminal. He couldn't be bothered to know how things worked. He reminded Tristan of someone else he'd had dealings with before.

Still, the Butcher had surprised him once already. He didn't want that to happen again. He had his explanations ready.

"Okay," the Butcher said, his voice low enough that he had to be speaking to himself. "What the hell is that?"

Tristan's ears went up, and he took the chance of stepping behind his passenger to find out what he was looking at. He realized that if he had something hard, or sharp, he could dispatch him right now. His claws wouldn't be long enough, and the only club-like thing was the Pisteron, which was too close to the Butcher for him to try for. Maybe he should go get his Kytron?

Tristan's thoughts froze when he noticed the screen showing an outside view. His hands clenched. He wanted to smack him over the head. He was certain the Butcher didn't know the cameras ran off emergency power, so he hadn't cared if they had been detected. He forced himself to calm down. He couldn't take him down in one blow right now. All he'd end up doing was start a fight he couldn't afford to have.

If he hadn't noticed what he then did on the screen, he would have gone to get his gun in the hopes the Butcher was too focused on the screen to see.

The Butcher was looking at a ten-second loop. One of the trackers flew into view, paused, and left. Checking the time stamp told him that hadn't happened while the ship scanned the asteroid, so what had it been doing?

What was that? When the ship left, there was something there; almost nothing more than a glint of light. Light reflecting off something. Could they have left a ship? No, it wasn't a ship. The light didn't reflect off them, and the finish was matte and dark so they would be difficult to see in space. And this thing had drifted out of view. No, it hadn't moved, the asteroid they were on had moved. The object was stationary?

The Butcher noticed him. "What is it?"

"Can you zoom in?"

He couldn't.

Alright, what did he know about the Sayatoga? It was a

decommissioned military vessel, now used by a private firm with ties to the law and military. It performed missions, as well as held prisoners. Because of its size, it needed regular refueling and restocking so it couldn't stand still any longer than absolutely needed. Whatever that thing was, it couldn't need to get back to the ship anytime soon. It would have to stay here until the Sayatoga passed back through the area and picked it up.

He had it.

"It's a sensor beacon," he exclaimed, exaggerating the surprise he'd felt. "That has to be it."

"Why?" the Butcher's tone was dubious.

Tristan shoved aside the annoyance he felt at having to explain his reasoning. He'd wanted to be asked. He wasn't the Butcher's servant, but he needed to guide him toward the conclusion he wanted.

"The Sayatoga is now too far to leave ships and pilots here. They already lost some during the escape, and can't afford to be without them. So that has to be automated. The only reason they would leave something here is to continue scanning. If it detects something, it will transmit the information to the ship, and they can decide if it's worth coming back or not."

"Are you saying we're stuck here? You said we only had to wait twelve hours." The Butcher stood.

"I didn't expect them to do this." He took a step back. He had to play the rest carefully. "Look, we got lucky. If you hadn't seen that, we would have flown out and been caught." He looked at the sensor screen to confirm something. "Alright, they aren't in active scanning mode."

"So?"

"It gives me something to work with." He started pacing, another thing human did when nervous and thinking. He was careful to always keep the Butcher in sight. "So, it's on passive sensor, but it can't be just that. Passive is too easy to work around. They have to use something else." He paused, giving the impression he was thinking. "Okay, I can't know the model number, but it has to be somewhat recent." Hopefully not too much, as he had that ten-year gap in his knowledge. "It's going to be using a diffuse pulse, doing scheduled checks. If it detects something, it'll do a full scan." He sat at the sensor's screen, not asking for permission. If the Butcher wanted to take exception to it, he was welcome to do so. Tristan was the one with the knowledge.

"Then we leave between those pulses." He didn't seem to mind the change in power, not for the moment, anyway.

"We need to find out the delay." He adjusted the settings.

"Just read it off the screen."

Tristan thought quickly. "I can't," he lied. "We're too deep. The rock is absorbing the pulses." This was his opportunity to make the adjustment to the ramp he needed.

"I thought you said passive scans were easy to work around?" The threat in the Butcher's tone was evident and Tristan suppressed a smile. He was reacting exactly as he needed.

"It is." He leaned back in the seat. So long as the Butcher was as ignorant as he seemed, he wouldn't pick up the lie, and as he was getting desperate to get out of here, he would be more amicable to letting Tristan work out of view.

Tristan let a smile spread on his muzzle. "I know how to do it. It won't be quick, but I can get us up there without powering up the ship." He turned around. "I can use the maneuvering thrusters to do it. The only problem is that, right now, they use an ion stream, which means I'd need to power up the ship. But I can modify them to use compressed gases, generated by the life-support system instead." He paid close attention to the Butcher's body language. If he'd picked up on the lie, Tristan wouldn't have much time to react. "With that, I can get us close enough to find out the delay, and we can plan what to do next."

Tristan remained still while the Butcher looked at him, "What are you waiting for?" he finally asked. "Get to work."

Tristan nodded, grabbed his toolkit, and then reached for the Pisteron leaning against the wall.

The Butcher grabbed his arm, squeezing it tight. "What do you think you're doing?"

Tristan made himself wince in the grip. "I need to move it. I have to remove all the wall panels to access the circuitry behind them."

The Butcher looked at him for a moment, then nodded. He grabbed the Kytron out of Tristan's toolkit, then picked up the Pisteron, and went to the back of the ship, leaning against the closed ramp. Tristan wished he could just pop the ramp open right now. The blowout would send the human flying away from the ship, but that wouldn't work until he had disabled the compression system for the ramp.

He set to work, making much more of a mess than he had to, and preferred. He wanted the Butcher to know he was working, even if he couldn't tell on what. He started from the front, disconnecting and reconnecting various cables. He couldn't just go to the ramp system since he told the Butcher he needed to modify the thrusters, so he had to look like he was doing that. He spent ten minutes working around each thruster. When he reached the back, he modified the ramp's compression system.

He moved to the other side of the ship, and did the same, back to front. Then he went into the ceiling and floor. He'd considered not doing those, but the Butcher had to be familiar enough with thrusters to know how limited their movement was. He wouldn't believe the sides would be sufficient.

With that done, he was ready for the last part of his plan. He needed to get his hands on the breathing mask and tank. He couldn't use the ones that were with the vacuum suits; his head wouldn't fit in the helmet. The mask wouldn't be great, but it would let him breathe.

He put the panels on the floor and ceiling back, then started on the wall at the back. "You know," he said, looking up at the Butcher, who was still leaning against the ramp. "You could help out."

"What did you say?"

"I said, why don't you help put the panels back on? I did all the work of rewiring the thrusters. The least you can do is help close it up."

The man grabbed him by the throat and shoved him against the wall.

"Didn't I make it clear? You're my bitch. You do what I tell you, or I shove you in the locker you were so kind to clear out."

Tristan grabbed the arm and tried to get him to release him. Not that he was worried. His neck had a series of bones that protected his windpipe. Still, he didn't want the Butcher to realize that.

"Now, are you going to continue being an idiot? Or are you going to get back to work?"

Tristan opened and closed his mouth as if he couldn't breathe while nodding eagerly. He was released, and his legs gave out. He fell against the Butcher, who caught him and shoved him away.

Tristan staggered back to the pilot's seat, hugging the oxygen bottle and breathing mask to his body, and grabbing the toolkit as he passed it. He sat down, made sure the magnetic strip was active on the bottom of the kit and put it down.

He had his back to the Butcher, so he looked at his reflection in the screen. He was looking back at him, smug. Tristan put the oxygen bottle between his legs and grabbed under the control board with a hand.

"I hope you can breathe vacuum," he said, as he hit the ramp release. The Butcher's eyes went wide, and he reached for his missing mask as the ramp dropped open. The Pisteron and Kytron went flying into space. The rush of air shoved Tristan back in the seat, and it creaked in protest, but it held.

The human was blown back on the ramp, but caught the frame, and tried to keep himself there, but some of the wall panels hit him and made him lose his grip. He slowly drifted away, looking at Tristan, rage



in his eyes.

Tristan's breath had been shocked out of him. He put the mask against his muzzle. The air he was getting was thin since it couldn't seal, but at least he was getting air. He reached into the bottom of the toolkit, pulled out the Azeru, and shot the Butcher in the chest until the power ran out.

He watched the Butcher float there for a moment, unmoving, bubbles of blood clinging to him, then closed the ramp. He turned the gravity on and sat down. He turned the life-support system back on and rested his head in his hands.

Then he smiled. It wasn't a pleasant smile, cold fire filled his eyes. He had survived. The universe had thrown the Butcher of Kraven Klaw at him, and he had WON!

His smile became even more vicious as he looked up. The sensor beacons, however many there were, and whoever had arranged to get him imprisoned, didn't stand a chance against him.