

“The door!” Kaleb yelled behind Tristan. “Stop! We’re not going to fit!”

Tristan accelerated. The door had quickly opened nearly completely before closing again. That it wasn’t anywhere near as fast spoke to Alex’s programs, fighting against being removed and to keep the hangar door opened. They were going to make it. He smiled. But it would be close.

Something ripped off as the ship crossed the threshold. Then it was jerked hard just as he finished exiting. Kaleb screamed in fear, and Tristan wished he’d had the opportunity to weaken that seat’s restraint. That last hit would have sent the man flying fast enough, impacting the wall would have killed him. That death couldn’t be blamed on either of them since they hadn’t had a say in which ship they’d use. It was the inspector’s or nothing.

“I lost comm,” Alex stated. “What are the odds Karliak has fighter ships?”

Tristan aimed for the planet. A corporation like this wouldn’t need a space fighting force. He picked the densest cloud he saw. But it didn’t mean they didn’t.

“Kaleb, I’m talking to you.”

“Don’t talk to me like that!”

“Then answer my question. You know everything about them. Does Karliak have ships they can use to hunt us down?”

The scan of the atmosphere flicker on and off. That had been damaged when the comm array had been ripped out from the ship as they exited. The systems were installed close on this design because the designers had wanted to take advantage they shared components. This was the price for lack of redundancy.

He’d adapt. It wasn’t like this was his first time flying through an atmosphere that threw obstacle at him. Although this time visibility wouldn’t be as good.

This would be fun.

“I don’t know, I guess not. I’ve never heard of them sending something to chase people around.”

“And you’ve heard of a lot of people assaulting their station?”

“It’s not theirs!”

“It’s not yours either,” Alex snapped. “Tristan, are you sure about this?”

“What is it going to do?” Kaleb demanded.

“A corporation like Karliak,” Tristan recited, “will have contingencies in place to ensure no moves against them are allowed to go unpunished. I have our course set to maximize the odds of them being unable to track us once we are within the atmosphere.”

Alex wouldn’t comment on the fact Tristan didn’t have a course set. This was for Kaleb, and they both knew it. Keep him settled to ensure he didn’t cause them to crash.

“If anyone’s not strapped in,” Alex called to the back. “Do it now, because this is going to be rough!”

And Alex appreciated this kind of flying.

Visibility ended as soon as the wind shoved the ship to the side. Tristan righted it to the sound of cursing from behind him. Not Kaleb, his bodyguard. He scanned ahead for anything large enough to register among the rest of the particulate. He kept the scanner in his peripheral vision, but expected little from it. The hull was damaged, and while it hadn’t gone deep enough to break the inside’s integrity, there were a lot of system between the outer and inner hull.

This would get more interesting the longer he took to get them to the ground.

He banked hard at a shadow. Or an imagined one. It was better not to take chances.

“Are you trying to kill me?” Kaleb demanded, sounding pained.

Not at this moment. This would be too clearly his doing.

“Can you get us to civilization?” Alex asked.

That was an interesting question without scanners or comms. A barrel roll out of the way, accompanied by something scrapping against the underside of the ship, confirmed this one hadn’t been imagined. “Once we’re under the storm, I’ll be able to fly us to the closest city.” If the storm didn’t sandblast all the systems to oblivion on the way there. That would make any flying highly entertaining.

“Under?” Kaleb demanded. “You have walked around, haven’t you? There is no under one of these things. The planet’s set on blasting everything on the surface to nothing. Why do you think the

government took Karliak's offer? We can't live with this."

"Then you should let me focus so I can find us someplace to land that has options for us to make it back to your base of operation." Which meant he'd have to walk in this thing. Was there adhesive in here that was resistant to this level of weather? He'd need it to—

He sent the ship in a dive, and it shuddered.

—make sure his overcoat was sealed.

The wailing stopped, so it was from the passenger, not the ship. The shuddering did not stop. Stabilizer were failing. This was definitely getting entertaining.

"I hope no one gets motion sick!" Alex called.

Tristan smiled and glanced at him. He mouthed a 'I love you', which earned him a glare as he cut power to the engines. No faster way to reach the ground.

But not the smoothest.

He counted. Even with a scanner, this was more fun; relying on his understanding of planetary gravity to work out how long he had before restarting the engine.

The screaming did not help his concentration.

There was also the issue of his lack of familiarity with the planet's topography. For all he knew, there was a mountain under them and his counting was off.

He reached zero and tapped in the command to restart the engines. He entered it again. Okay, this was not part of the plan. A third time. Particulate shouldn't have reached that far yet, although there were a lot of connections that might interfere with system talking. A fourth one and the vibration told him it had worked, and he pulled it up hard, and harder and he didn't get the response he expected. Either the propulsion system itself was damaged, which would be horrible, or the responsiveness was the issue. That one was bad, but any kind of responsiveness, even the bad kind, could help survive the kind of landing they were heading for.

First thing he needed was forward thrust.

Unless there was a wall before him.

But there shouldn't be.

He accelerated. Felt it in how his back pressed against the seat. Banked at something in the way. No scrapping this time, but righting the ship proved harder. Then he had to bank up hard at something much darker appeared, moved under the ship and kept on going.

He couldn't be going up something this big.

Which meant that was the ground, and he was entirely wrong about their positioning. He leveled the ship and considered his options. Which had to be diminishing the longer he kept the ship in the air and particulates made their way within the hull.

"It's going to be rough," he said.

"What?" Kaleb yelled, then they were tossed around at the ship bounced off the much closer ground than Tristan expected. He raised the ship, and the next bounce helped, but it twisted it sideways, and when he couldn't rectify that, knew the next one would be highly entertaining.

The ship hit and spun. That stopped hard and everything was still.

And at a thirty-degree angle with the front high.

Tristan grinned. He couldn't remember a more entertaining landing. He grinned at Alex. "We made it." And his heart rate was slowing.

"Are you insane?" Kaleb yelled. His forehead bled with a matching smear on the wall next to his seat. Just some weakness in the harness, and that might have been hard enough to shatter his skull.

Tristan held on to his seat as he undid his and slid to the angled floor.

"Nothing from my datapad," Alex said, sounding perplex.

"The atmosphere will be interfering," Tristan replied.

"I didn't know anything natural could block that."

"Anything sufficiently thick will disrupt signals. Which this is." He put on his overcoat. "Everyone suit up. We're on foot from this point forward."

"Out there?" Kaleb exclaimed.

"You're welcome to stay in here and wait for us to send someone to take you back." If not for the

lack of certainty of the result, that might be the simplest way. Forgetting to send anyone would ensure Kaleb died, or at least was out of the equation until his job was done and they had left the planet.

“You’re not abandoning me.” The man then yelled as he undid the harness and fell.

The others were in varying conditions, but all were mobile as they located their breathing masks. Tristan looked through the cabinets, but had no luck finding adhesives.

“The hatch won’t open!” someone yelled.

“Put on your breathing masks,” he instructed, tightening his overcoat as best as it allowed before putting his mask on. “I said,” he repeated, when they responded with protests at being trapped inside the ship. “Masks on.” His only covered his upper muzzle, so speaking wasn’t a problem. But glaring kept anyone from protesting further. Alex was at his side, with his masks on, so Tristan made his way back toward the cockpit, stopping by one of the chairs. If any of them had bothered researching the design, they’d know better than to waste time with the hatch. He pulled a panel off, revealing a red button, and pressed it.

The explosion sent part of the wall on the other side of the chair crashing against the opposing wall. His planned chastising was cut short by the torrent that entered from the emergency hatch and rendered the inside opaque with particulate.

“Grab someone,” Alex said, “and hold on. You don’t want to get separated in this.”

“This is insane,” Kaleb said. “We can’t go out. We’re going to get scrubbed to nothing.” Tristan had hoped he hadn’t put on his mask in time.

“You’re welcome to stay,” Alex said. “Like Tristan said. We’ll send someone to get you.”

“You are not leaving me behind.”

“Then grab onto your boyfriend and get him to grab someone, cause we’re moving out.” Alex handed Tristan a short range portable scanner that showed structures too angled to be natural.

This would make the trek less entertaining, but the look he saw in Alex’s eyes made him reconsider handing it back. He took his hand and stepped outside.

“We’re moving out.”

Following the scanner, they reached the buildings under an hour, and by then the storm had diminished enough they could see a few blocks ahead.

“This is in too good conditions to have been abandoned for long.” Someone said.

“Karliak had a dozen cities relocated over the last months,” someone replied.

“Right, like that’s what it really is,” another commented. “I’m telling you, they caused this as a way to take people and use them as labor for some secret project.”

“Machines are cheaper,” someone replied.

“Machines can’t work in these conditions. People can.”

And did.

Tristan saw the movements between buildings. Corporate crossed his mind and was quickly set aside. Corporate security would wear tactical armor in an environment like this one. These people wore loose clothing over something that would keep the wind and particulate out. That was what he should have taken the time to get, a hermetic suit. Not that he expected he’d find one that fit him here.

He smiled at Alex, who sighed. Things were about to be entertaining again.