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Chapter 9 *Damnit Crit, I'm a Mechanic, Not a Killer!*

We made it the rest of the way around the pool without any more creatures surfacing from its depths. A stream cascaded down from the wall was fresh and clean, its crystal clear water that helped to wash the stench of the putrid yellow muck from my skin. Crit took only just long enough to rinse his face before boosting me up the incline and into the tunnel.

From behind me I could just see a pale, almost transparent hand break the surface of the pool, limp and lifeless. I didn't look back again as we trudged on, the smell of rotten eggs and sulphur biting at our heels.

The earth swallowed us again, covering up what little sun we had been able to see above, but now there was light at the end of the tunnel. Literally. We were sloping up at a slow but steady angle. It felt like we were walking towards heaven as the perfect blue punch-out of sky grew ahead us.

I began to make out Crit's face beside me again as we closed in on the end of the tunnel. He looked even worse than I felt. His fur was slicked down with frog spit, one eye all but swollen shut, and, now that I could see him better, he was limping again. One of his legs had been caught between the monster's massive jaws.

"Are you going to be okay, buddy?" I reached out to lay a hand on his shoulder.

He turned to me, raising a lip in a very human smile. "I'll be fine. And... thanks for getting me out of there."

I just rolled my eyes. "I could say the same to you. Call it a team effort?"

He snorted. "Working like a family, are we?" His jaw dropped open now, in a grin more befitting his own kind. "We may not be so different, you and I, puny human."

I gave him a punch in the shoulder. He didn't rock as I hit him. I doubt he even felt it.

We paused at the mouth of our little tunnel. Looking out, it was so bright that it almost hurt my eyes.

The stream that ran under our feet was one of a half dozen that split like arms of a starfish from the huge lake that lay before us.

The lake could be a good kilometre across for all I knew, and was clear enough that I could make out every stone and pebble on its bed far below.

Of greater consequence was the plastic tube that dangled limply down the steep bank on one side.

Crit kneeled in the shadows beside me, head cocked. He tapped his ear. A moment later I could hear it. The sound of a motor running. A pump.

"Did we find it? Are we there?" I couldn't keep a silly grin off my face. "Are we at the main complex?" The mere idea of getting off this hell-hole, even so much as seeing another human being, was nearly enough to pull me forward in a mad dash.

Crit shook his head, speaking in a whisper, "No. Not even close. We have to be at least another two days from there, even under the best circumstances. And we haven't exactly been walking a straight line."

My grin faltered for a moment.

"But... can you hear anyone?"

He nodded now, fangs showing in something that was most definitely *not* a smile. "I can. And they sound like those who sent us here?"

"Huh?"

"Pirates." His claws were glinting in the shadows now as he polished them against his pelt.

"How do you know?"

He didn't even bother to wink.

"I just do."

I didn't get a chance to say another word before he stalked from our hiding place. All I could do was scramble after him.

He moved like an actor on a stage, motions almost comically exaggerated as he slinked forward. I did my best to try and follow. His steps were silent, stride calm and confident. I tripped and stumbled behind him, unearthly aware of every spot of grit that ground under my feet, every pebble I sent skittering down to splash in the water.

The embankment was a good ten meters high, and all but sheer. Crit scaled it like a spider... or a cat. He didn't look back in my direction. I almost felt insulted that he so quickly forgot about me once anyone else showed up.

A moment later I heard an all too human scream, and the snap of a magnetic-coil slug thrower. A second later Crit flew back into sight, arcing backwards over the lip of the earth.

I'd thought he'd been shot, but he sailed too smoothly, too gracefully for his trajectory to be anything but intentional. I could see the disruption in the air where two more slugs ripped through the sky next to him. They both flew wide as he plummeted towards me.

With a flick of his tail he was twisting in mid-flight, tumbling end over end to catch the edge of the embankment. He slid for a good two feet as his claws dug into the rock to hold him fast. Ending up right beside me.

The maniacal glee that split his face now was enough to make me pull back. I'd seen him crack a human smile, and even the dropped jaw grin of his own kind, but this was something totally different.

His eyes danced, almost literally, pupils dilated and never seeming to stand still. He didn't say a

word, but his whole body vibrated like a whip ready to snap.

Even after breaking his fall I could still see his claws were dyed a crimson red. That of human blood.

"Crit...?"

He raised a single finger to my lips, silencing me. I could taste the salt of the blood that coated that claw. I almost threw up.

The voices above were shouting now, coming closer. They were speaking a mixture of languages, mostly Standard and Pidgin.

A second later a head poked over the edge above us, for a moment almost blocking out the sun. He was light skinned, a kid really, not more than twenty-five. He had dark brown hair and a good three day's stubble.

Crit reached up a single hand and wrapped it around the kid's neck, his claws ripping in, sending streamers of blood spilling forth. No more than an instant later he'd yanked the kid over the edge, tossing him offhandedly down the embankment behind us to splash into the lake. The kid hadn't even had time to scream.

I could hardly move as I stared at Crit. If anything, the grin on his face had widened.

"Oh God..." I couldn't even find the words.

A pleased growl escaped the azlin's lips as he leapt once again over the lip of the embankment and sprinted off.

He'd... he'd just killed someone... just like that, without even thinking. Crit had murdered the kid.

I heard the cough of a gun firing again, and I doubted it was Crit pulling the trigger.

A half dozen deep breaths to steady my heart and I vaulted over the edge, landing in a roll on the sandy ground.

I should have gotten a moment to revel in the simple fact that we'd managed to get back to the surface again, but no such luck.

I'd only just gotten my bearings when the sand in front of me flew upwards, a line of micro-bullets kicking it into my face.

I dove behind the pumping equipment to my left. Not a moment too soon, the arc of fire followed me, rat-tat-tating against the metal cladding of the machinery, leaving pot marks in its already worn finish.

Poking my head out for a split second glance, I could see at least four of them running about. Two more bodies laid still on the ground. None of them were fur covered.

Most of those still standing were human, but there was a blue skinned *something* and a scaled orange thing that vaguely reminded me of Bulla.

Only one, a fellow human, was paying any attention to me. The rest were firing off, seemingly indiscriminately at anything they could lay their sights on. I had to laugh. Crit, a single unarmed and underfed azlin from a backwater planet had a half-dozen heavily armed pirates scared.

I almost wanted to sit back and watch this with some popcorn.

My split-second was up. The one guy who cared about me was holding his finger down on the trigger, sweeping his weapon back in my direction.

Behind my cover again, I was safe for now. But how long? My personal reaper would be all over me as soon as he realized I was unarmed. All it would take is a quarter-second under that stream of nettles to cut right through my body.

The pump beside me grumbled on, completely indifferent to my plight.

Well, that was a thought.

Somehow through all this I'd managed to retain my little diagnostic unit. Pulling it from my pocket now, I plugged it into the auxiliary port of the monster machine that sat beside me.

I almost breathed a sigh of relief when I saw the command screen flash to life. Not even the simplest of security on this thing.

I could still hear the occasional shout of the pirates as I worked. Once I heard a high pitched, inhuman scream. Score another one for Crit.

This pump, like most machinery designed for space travel, could do a half dozen things. A slight smile touched my lips when I found the command to switch it into blower mode.

Blowing is really more or less the same thing as pumping from a machine's point of view, just switching from water to air. Luckily, the blower exhaust port happened to be on the side opposite me, and towards the trigger happy targets.

One last punch of a button and the bone rattling hum of the pump died away, only to be replaced a moment later by the high-pitched scream of a blower fan starting up.

I poked my head out for just a second more. Most of the pirates didn't even seem to notice, and those who did hadn't the time to react fast enough.

The spin up only took seconds, and the result was a whirlwind strong enough to throw all the pirates from their feet, tossing them end over end across the ground. From the corner of my eye I could just see the tuff of a tawny tail disappear behind a nearby stack of crates.

My little distraction had been enough to buy us a few seconds, but none of the pirates had been anything more than stunned. That was until Crit leapt among them.

He'd jumped straight into the stream of air that my motor was spitting out now, using it to fly across the distance between them and practically land in their very laps.

His claws flew, and I saw one of the human's heads loll to the side, arteries geysering bright red blood that was caught in the wind, drops spreading like rain behind him.

I nearly fell to my knees and vomited right there.

A roar pulled me from my stupor. I turned to see Crit locked hand in hand with the orange scaled alien as the rest of the pirates still scrambled to regain their footing.

For a heartbeat it almost looked as though the two of them were perfectly matched. Crit's twined muscles writhing under his fur like snakes. Then he began to lose.

The other creature forced him back, down.

The lizard almost had Crit bent back to the ground when the azlin lunged forward with his jaws, snapping them around the other's neck.

Even the other pirates froze when they saw this. The only sound was the whine of the motor as the lizard's eyes went wide. He never did get another word out before sinking to the ground in a pool of his own blood.

The monster that was Crit didn't have time to turn on the remaining pirates before they opened fire on him. I could just make out a splash of orange-red as Crit leapt from sight, diving behind a stack of crates.

The two pirates that remained, a human and a blue skinned *something*, were fighting differently now. They'd been scared before, but experienced combatants. Now they were terrified and fighting for their lives.

I could understand the feeling.

There was something different about the terror that gripped your heart when someone held a gun to your head versus staring down the maw of a creature that was about to *consume* you.

Fear for one's life was one thing, it was logical, rational. Fear of a predator, of something that stalked and murdered as a way of life... that was something else. I couldn't speak for the blue alien, but Crit was close enough to the creatures that we humans had evolved with to spark that special kind of blind terror that tickled at the unevolved stem of the brain. The part that could still remember cold nights, undefended and unarmed against an entire world set to kill you.

The two of them were spraying slugs everywhere now, the barrels of their guns becoming so hot that they began to glow blue. Even the ceramics they manufactured those things out of would start to melt soon.

They had Crit pinned behind a stack of metal shipping crates. I could just see him from my angle. He was keeled down on one leg, orange-red dripping from a gash across the other. Thankfully, all his limbs still seemed to be attached. His face and claws were drenched in even more gore than when he'd taken down the goat-cow.

The two pirates continued to lean on their guns, only letting up just long enough to keep them from becoming puddles of slag. The way they fired, I almost thought they were trying to punch a hole straight through the shipping crates. They were making good progress.

Neither of them even turned to see me as I carefully slid from my shelter. They were all a good twenty meters distant, but I crossed the empty space without them taking their eyes from Crit's hiding place.

The hole they'd punched in the reinforced metal of the shipping crate had grown, they were a good half way through whatever was within it by now.

Closer, I could make out the pirates more clearly. Their knuckles were white, wrapped around their guns that they clutched like crosses to hold back a demon.

I was only a few strides away from them now, crouched behind a discarded piece of scrap metal, likely part of the hover assembly for a heavy truck. The only thing between me and them was five meters of grey sandy earth.

Crit was pinned like a wild beast, and I didn't have a clue what to do. I'd never killed anyone. I'd never even thrown anything more than a bare handed punch. I just ran from my problems. That was what I was good at. But I couldn't leave Crit.

Two strides forward and I was right behind them. They didn't even hear me over the sound of

their guns pounding. They never even turned around.

Two hands together, I slammed my fists down onto the back of the human pirate's skull. I suppose I should consider myself lucky that he wasn't wearing a helmet.

I'd chosen the human because I knew that I had at least some chance of taking him down. My luck would have stated that the blue alien was just nigh short of invulnerable.

The pirate didn't even get a squeak out before he fell to the ground, finger coming free of the trigger.

The blue one took a couple of heartbeats to realize that his partner's gun had fallen silent. He never let go of the trigger as he turned to see his buddy sprawled on the ground. That creature, whatever it was, could move fast. I didn't even have the chance to blink before he turned, levelling his weapon at me.

The only thing that saved me was how close we were together. Guns make great tools for killing something at a distance, but they're all but useless when the guy is right beside you.

I ducked, pulling my knees to my chin and falling to the ground at the alien's feet before he took my head off with his stream of bullets. There was only one thing I could do while I was down here, so I lashed out at his legs with my fist.

The alien was built more or less like a human, so I hit where I would have on another man. My fist sunk into the meat on the side of the creature's knee. My hands were already bruised from hitting the other pirate; I wasn't sure who screamed louder on impact, him or I.

The bugger's skin was tough like leather and laced with tiny spines. I almost lost feeling in my hand as I pulled back to cradle it.

The alien fell to the ground before me, twisting to land on his side as he fought to keep the bead of his weapon in my direction. It did him little good.

The moment the blue skin had yelled out, the tawny horror that was Crit erupted from behind his concealment, rocketing towards us like an arch-demon at a fresh soul.

The blue skinned alien was so human looking that I half expected him to have red blood. Nope, it was a startling green, slowly spilling from him and looking like nothing so much as anti-freeze.

I couldn't even see the vaguest hint of civilization in Crit's slit eyes as he tore the man from me, bringing him into his embrace and systematically pulling him apart like he was nothing more than an anatomy lesson.

It was no more than ten seconds before the pirate's screams stopped, and no more than twenty before Crit had dropped his lifeless corpse to the ground. The only sounds now were that of the blower behind me still whirring away, and the pounding of my heart.

For half a second I almost thought that Crit would turn on me next. I could see him, how he'd looked when he nearly murdered me for my flesh. The glint was in his eyes again. There was nothing human about it. Crit was an alien, a beast. He'd torn half a dozen men apart and been smiling all the way.

Multi-coloured trails of blood were still dripping from his lips, at least three different species, as he raised his head to me. His voice was smooth and cultured, seemingly divorced from the mouth that formed the words.

"Good hunt." One of his lips rose in a smirk. "Though I'm not sure you were holding up your end."

I didn't say anything. I couldn't, the breath was caught in my throat as I fell heavily back to sit in the dust.

Crit was next to me a moment later, his blood stained claws reaching forward.

"Get away from me!" I threw my hands in front of my face.

The red haze of battle had just past. Breath was coming heavy to my lips, but I felt *alive*.

I hadn't been able to truly fight since I'd left home twenty years ago.

Frogs were one thing, people were another. The adrenaline was still singing in my veins as I surveyed the battlefield around me. Five down, and one for James. His kill was barely bloody at all.

The thought of James' combat left a sour note in my mouth. I'd expected him to leap in alongside me and do what was right, but instead he'd hidden and skulked like prey. He'd been useful, of that there was no doubt, but he hadn't acted like a true azlin.

The corner of my mouth hitched up at that thought. True azlin. Heh. He was my brother, but I had to keep remembering not to judge him by the same standards that my father had graded me. For all I knew he could have done the most his kind was capable of.

Turning to him, I had to take a deep breath to clear my lungs before I could speak. "Good hunt. Though I'm not sure you were holding up your end."

His face was pale, even more so than normal, one could have used his skin for chalk. He didn't say anything, but only stared at me wide eyed. A moment later he wavered on his feet, falling back to sit in the sand.

Dear gods, had he been injured? Had one of the prey attacked him when I wasn't watching? My heartbeat sped more quickly now than it had even in battle. I was by his side in the blink of an eye.

I couldn't see any wounds upon him, none of his unworldly red blood spilling across the ground. I reached for him. Perhaps he'd taken an injury somewhere I couldn't see...

"Get away from me!" He pulled his arms over his head and rolled into a ball, refusing to meet my eyes.

He could have just as well slapped me across the nose for how his words had stung. What was wrong?

Looking down, my hands were still dripping. Oh, that could just as well be it. James never seemed to see the value in blood, tended to avoid it.

"I'll be back." I wanted to pat him on the shoulder as I stood up, to touch him, to make physical contact in some way, to let him know I was still here after the battle, but I fought it back.

I looked over my shoulder as I made it to the lip of the lake. James hadn't moved. He still sat curled into a ball on the sand behind me.

One more step and I was airborne, crashing into the water below a second later. A month ago an act like this would have been unthinkable, but I was getting more accustomed to immersing myself in water.

It didn't take long to wash the blood from my fur. I'd had to do it so many times in the last week that it was becoming commonplace again. Soaking wet and dripping, I hauled myself back over the lip of the earth. I moved more slowly this time, the rush of combat was long gone.

James still had yet to move a muscle. I approached him again, free of dripping blood this time, resting a hand gently on his shoulder.

He didn't react when I touched him. "James?"

His head jerked up the moment I spoke, body flinching away from me. He scrambled away, backwards on all fours, eyes wide. It was an odd and ungainly motion for him. I couldn't understand why he was doing it.

"Keep away." His voice was high and panicked.

It was my turn to flinch back. What had I done, what was wrong? We'd just defeated half a dozen enemies with little more than our bare claws, yet he acted like he'd just seen the destruction of his family.

"You killed them..." He was stammering now, words coming out in rapid fire bursts. "You killed them. All of them."

I blinked. I thought that was already well understood. Their bodies, after all, were arrayed around us.

"Yes." It was the only thing I could think to say.

"You killed them." There was no question to his voice now. It was an accusation. "You murdered them."

I took a deep breath, trying to keep my voice level. I'd never had any experience in talking to kitts. That had been part of father's role. Reaching out, I gently took his hand, tightening my grip when he tried to pull away.

"They are with the gods now..." I had to pause for a moment, "Whatever gods they have. We fought. We won." How else could I explain it?

"How can you take it so coldly?" His eyes had moved a step back into focus now as he passed his gaze over the bodies. They were beginning to age now, the stench of their entrails tickling my nose. "You didn't even talk to them, didn't even try to sneak by."

"Sneak by?" I couldn't hold back the laugh the came to my lips. "To *sneak* is not the way of a hunter. They were pirates. They were the ones who put us here. How could you ever expect to do anything else?"

"How did you know?" He turned to me. There was a spark of flame now in the damp of his shock. "How do you know they were pirates? They could have been stranded here just like us! You murdered innocents for all we know!"

I raised the back of a hand to my chin, stifling yet another laugh before it could escape. "They were no innocent bystanders."

"How did you *know*?"

This was getting annoying. "I just knew. Alright? They were no innocents. They didn't smell--"

"You killed them because of how they smelled?!" He was pulling back from me again, more violently now, almost ripping his hand from my grasp. I had to tighten my grip. I could feel my claws begin to dig into his soft flesh.

"Well, not how they smell *now*, obviously. But they weren't family anyway..."

He did pull free from me now, leaving oozing cuts down his palm. He scrambled off, never turning from me as he backed away.

"That's all that matters to you? Family? You've just killed half a dozen sentient creatures and all you care about is if they were related to you?"

I felt a growl growing at the back of my throat. "Do not presume to lecture me on etiquette, little brother." I was on my feet now, stalking forward before I even knew what was happening.

"Stay away from me, Crit." He held his hands before him in a sad display of defense, but his voice shook.

"And what do you say for yourself in this battle, James?" My voice was steady, "You took your share of blood as well."

"I didn't..." His arms fell as his voice failed, "I didn't kill him."

On cue, I heard an engine whine to life behind me.

Spinning, I had just time to see the pirate that I'd *thought* James had dealt with open the throttle on a hover bike. It rose from the ground and shot off into the distance before I had so much as the time to run two steps.

"He... you..." The thoughts barely connected in my mind. One did not leave a conquered opponent in battle. It wasn't the way of the hunt. There was mercy in death, nothing but shame in life after having been defeated.

"Crit!" James had snapped back to the present, leaping atop another bike. "We can't let him get back to base!" He smacked the control panel in front of him with the heel of a hand and it came to life, the bike rising from the ground in a cloud of grey dust.

It was only two steps to him, but he was already moving by the time I'd crossed the distance. A single leap and I landed astride the bike.

He bristled when I wrapped my arms around him.

"Get your own bike." He tried to shake me off as we twisted around to follow the pirate.

"Don't be a fool," I responded. "I don't know how to ride."

We were picking up speed now, the ground shooting by not a foot beneath my outstretched toes. Our bike was fast, but not enough to catch him. He could speed away faster with a single rider than we could ever hope to with two.

"Can't we go any faster?" The only response to my question was a grunt from James.

We skirted an outcropping of rock, James trying to cut the turn tighter than our escapee. I reached out a hand to grab a stone.

We flew past the stones so fast that my hand was nearly rendered numb when I scraped it out against the rocks, but I came back with my prizes.

Three good size rocks, with just enough heft to hurl.

I wasn't a bad hand at dropping a bird from the sky back home, but aiming while hurtling forward on a hover-bike was a different matter.

My first shot went wide, not even close to the mark. The pirate didn't even notice as my stone pinged off out an outcropping far to his left.

A slight growl grew in my throat. I could feel my claws slide and skitter as my grip tightened around the remaining stones. My next shot missed as well, but still had more effect. It flew across his vision, landing heavily in the sand just a couple of feet too far ahead of him. The pirate turned to glance at us. I could see his blond hair whipping in the wind.

He was ducking back and forth now, using anything he could to block our line of sight. That did nothing but help us. Every turn he made let James gain another precious second on him.

I could just make out the scratches on his bright red bike now. I threw my last stone.

He almost ducked in time, but the stone smacked him in the head none the less.

His long hair must have provided some protection, but it was a far cry from a proper helmet. His hand came off the accelerator for a moment, just long enough for James to pull up alongside.

"Now what, Crit?" I could just hear James' voice over the wind howling around us as he dodged rocks and sand-dunes. It was taking everything our bike had to stay neck in neck with the pirate.

In the serials, one would expect to ram the other bike, bump up against him, knock him off course. Such things are never as easy in real life.

"Get closer." I was shouting, my lips no more than an inch from James' ear. He nodded. Our bike began to edge towards his.

Reaching out a hand, my claws just failed to snag the rider's flapping clothing. Another swipe and I caught him, but my claws simply shredded the cheap fabric, offering no purchase to pull him from his seat.

His bike dodged away again, returning into range a second later. I swiped my hand down now, aiming to rake my claws across his back. I missed. All I caught was the rough, synthetic fabric of his bike seat.

My claws quickly tangled in the fabric. I couldn't get free. A moment later I felt the bike shift under me as the pirate began to pull away again.

My hand was still stuck fast, and what little leeway I had was quickly disappearing. James was following the pirate as best he could, but the other driver was faster.

I was already stretched across the space between the two bikes, and there was nothing more I could do. A kick of my legs and I was airborne. Trying to land on a moving hover bike while it dips and dives at full speed would be impossible under normal circumstances, but all I had to do was pull my arm in and I couldn't miss.

A fraction of a second later I was sprawled across the back of the other bike. The craft's compensators whined as they fought to keep us from pitching over from my weight.

I could see the pirate's back stiffen as I landed behind him, but he didn't have the time to turn and deal with me. All his attention was taken by just trying to keep the bike from spinning out of

control.

James was beside us again, moving more nimbly now that my dead weight wasn't holding him back. He was so close that I could almost reach out and touch him.

Scrambling to keep my balance on the bike as it bucked beneath me, I pulled my hand free from the tangle of fibres that had caught it.

Not a good move. My claws had been the only thing anchoring me to the bike. Now I was very nearly thrown free. The pirate had gotten his craft under control, and was throwing his weight around in an attempt to dislodge me. He was doing a good job of it.

He gave up rather quickly once I wrapped my arms around him. Any attempts to throw me loose now would simply take him with me.

I had to fight back the urge to squeeze, to pull my claws down his skin and flay him. I couldn't drive this bike. If I killed the pirate I'd be signing my own death certificate.

"Slow down!" I roared it in his ear, loud enough to deafen.

He simply sped up.

"Fuck you." His voice was young and raw, with the accent of a world I'd never heard before.

"I won't kill you if you stop. You can walk home."

He didn't respond. The throttle was already maxed out, but I would have sworn that the ground was passing even quicker under our feet.

"I said *stop!*" My heart was starting to beat faster now. I could deal with many things, but not with someone else being in control.

"Jump." He swerved the bike, aiming us at a distant outcropping of rock, one large enough to smash up against. He was playing chicken that I would abandon him before he crashed us headlong.

My claws dug into the pirate's side. I could feel the human's pulse race under my fingertips.

"Stop!" I couldn't hold my voice. I wasn't even speaking in Standard anymore, the language of my birth taking over.

"Crit!" From behind me I could just hear James' voice over the whipping of the wind.

We were only scant meters from the rocks now. I could almost see each individual vein of colour that snaked through them.

I jumped.

I could only trust that James was behind me. It was not a comforting thought.

The pirate must have been ready to pull away the moment I fell from his bike, but I never gave him the chance. I raked my claws down the front of his throat before I leapt, consigning him to the grave a split second before his bike smashed into the stone.

For a moment I hung in the air, seeming to float. I could see the pirate accelerating away from me, but that was all. I couldn't even see the ground below.

Less than a heartbeat later I felt the hard impact of the ceramic hood of James' bike as it slammed against my back. He was beneath me, pulling up.

We cleared the rocks by scant inches. I could have sworn that I heard the bottom of the bike

scraping.

Twisting, I was only able to latch onto the hood of the bike for a handful of seconds before I fell loose. We were no more than a meter from the sandy ground, but at this speed it felt like I was hitting reinforced spaceport concrete.

There wasn't anything I could do as Crit slipped from the hood of my bike. I could just see his body impacting on the sand dunes behind me as I raced on. For just a moment I thought about leaving the monster there, bruised and broken in the sand, a hundred kilometres from anywhere.

It passed quickly. He'd murdered a half dozen people, but I needed him. And he was my friend.

Hover bikes don't tend to bank, their repulsion systems generally keep them upright, but my turn almost had my elbow kicking up sand.

I left the bike a dozen meters behind me as I sprinted the rest of the distance to Crit's crumpled form. He wasn't moving.

The blood nearly froze in my veins as I reached out to his still body. He was laying face down, his face pillowed in the sand.

I could hardly move him, but, straining, I was able to roll him over. His face had been cradled in his arm. The backs of his forearms had been cut by the sand, but his head was unharmed. And I could just see a ghost of movement as he breathed.

It took me a good two hours to get him back to the pirate camp by the lake. I had to get a trailer just to haul him. He never even so much as twitched an eye the whole time.

There wasn't much at camp, only a handfull of vehicles and some random equipment stacked up here and there. There was, however, food.

Not much mind you, but even just a different *brand* of survival ration was just short of ambrosia.

I'd flipped on some flood lights to keep back the darkness as night fell. It was good to even have so much as light in this desolate place.

Crit still hadn't moved... and I almost feared going near him. I'd known he was a killer, but seeing him do it in plain sight was something entirely different.

I forced my mind away from his still form as I explored the tools that the pirates had stashed here. This looked to be nothing more than a pumping station used to collect fresh water. There were no transport trucks here, but impressions in the sand showed where they must land to empty the massive tank that sat nearby.

There must be other stations like this across the planet. This place, despite the pirates that had been here, wasn't well defended. Not even a pirate crew would be stupid enough to leave something as critical as their water source undefended unless there were others.

One of the few things I managed to find here was a pen knife. It wasn't much, especially compared to the guns that the pirates had levelled against Crit, but I tossed it into my backpack none the less. I'd looked at the firearms, but frankly I would be more likely to shoot myself than anyone else. The knife would do little compared to Crit's fangs and claws, but it made me feel better none the

less.

I was rooting through a crate of tools when I heard a snort from Crit's direction.

Peering over the edge of the crate, I saw him roll slowly to his side and sit unsteadily up.

"Well, at least someone's back in the land of the living." I couldn't keep the acid from my voice as I walked towards him. I stopped well out of arm's reach.

He just growled something unintelligible and pressed his hands to his head. It was a long moment before he opened his eyes to look at me.

"Did we win?" He paused for a moment, half closing his eyes before continuing. "Of course we won. We're still alive. To lose means death."

I couldn't help but snort.

"Yeah, sure, Crit. We won. It was only the other people who died."

His eyes focused on me more tightly now. "That is the way of the world." He laughed for a moment before rolling back with a groan and clutching his head even tighter. "The way of every world, it seems. The strong eat the weak and become more powerful. Families work together to be strong."

I didn't bother to respond to that. Instead, I threw him a can of rations.

"What's this?" He sniffed the unopened container.

"Food."

He shot me a glare. "I thought we'd already decided that I can't eat your worthless gruel."

I held my hands out before he could slug it back at me. "I found it on one of the non-humans. It claims to be meat of some sort. You should be able to eat it if I understand its ingredients."

I got another glare, but he dutifully pried the top off.

The scent that wafted out was less than encouraging. It smelt like week old road kill.

Crit seemed to take to it better than I. A moment later he dug his hand in and pulled out a chunk of what looked like old boot leather. It disappeared between his jaws with a wet slurp.

I was about ready to vomit, but he was already pulling another strip to shove in his mouth.

"It'll do," he said between chews, "But I need to get butchering. Who knows how far it is to the pirate's main hold."

I could feel the blood draining from my face.

"Butchering? What?" I had a sinking feeling.

"What do you think?" Any human would have looked ashamed at nothing more than the thought. He met my eyes without concern. "We're surrounded by meat. I won't let it go to waste."

"No." I had to fight to keep my voice level.

He didn't bother to even look annoyed as he spoke. "It's non-negotiable, James. I need to eat. There is meat to be had, so I'll make use of it. If you can provide me with something else, then I'll eat that instead."

I had to suppress the shiver that ran up my spine at the thought of Crit carrying around a

backpack full of human flesh to snack upon.

He seemed to finally click into at least some small part of what disturbed me. His tone softened a measure, "I won't touch the humans, James. You can lay them to rest however you want."

That wasn't enough.

"It can't be that far from here to the base, Crit. They didn't have many supplies." I had to turn and root around in the crates behind me again. It took an effort to turn my back to the azlin, but I did it. "We've got at least another day's worth of rations here for you."

"You'd have me eat that slop when there's perfectly good meat rotting away here? Didn't your father ever teach you the way of nature: never let anything go to waste." He paused for a moment as I turned to face him. He lowered his eyes before speaking again. "Sorry." His tail fell to rest on the ground, still as a rope. "I wasn't thinking..."

With a slight effort, I shrugged it off.

"No, he didn't. He failed to teach me a lot of things. I learned them all for myself, Crit. And if you eat those people, I'm getting on that bike and leaving you here with them."

His eyes narrowed slightly at me. "Is that a threat, James?"

I didn't bother to avert my gaze. "Yes."

I almost thought he was about to start growling when a smile dawned on his face.

"Very well then." He tossed the now empty can of food aside. "You're starting to act more like a man. I can respect that." His grin faltered for a moment. "But if we run out of food before we get to the base, I'll need to eat *something*."

I threw another can of food at him. He caught it nimbly in mid-air.

"It's a deal, Crit. As long as it's something and not someone."

The luxury of even having so basic as floodlights to fight back the night was almost more than I'd ever hoped for again. My aches and pains wore at me, but I'd had worse.

James still cast a wary eye at me every so often, but he seemed well enough at ease.

Seeing all the perfectly good meat going to waste around me was almost enough to make me cry. I'd been starved to the point of madness not days ago, and now that we had fresh food, I couldn't eat it. I almost wished I'd been stranded here with one of my azlin brothers rather than James. But then we'd be dead by now.

I joined James in ripping apart what supplies were here, there wasn't much. We found more on the pirates themselves than in the camp.

I could have leapt to the moon when James found a map in one of the pirate's pockets. It was an old copy of a copy of a faded print out, but it was obvious where we were. And where we needed to go.

Despite my bravado to James, I too had harboured my doubts about if these were truly pirates, if they were the ones who had sent us here. But now there was little doubt.

It wasn't as though they were carrying business cards, but the mishmash of equipment they wore

came inscribed with the names of a dozen different ships, and much of it wasn't available on the respectable markets. I knew the equipment that one didn't buy over the table – Bulla had held a fondness for such things when he'd been alive.

The sun was far from the sky now as we stripped what clothing we could from the bodies. I'd rended and ripped much of it, but there was still enough to kit James out. He hadn't much cared for the idea of wearing the clothing of a dead man, but his stained ship uniform from the Sirius was long worn thin.

The serials like to costume fictional pirates in leather and plate, looking like they had just finished a whirlwind trip through a fetish shop. These men were dressed more appropriately to their work.

Thick cloth and reinforced boots had served them well both in space and on the ground, but had done little against my claws. Washing out the blood, James seemed as though he could pass for a bonafide pirate any season. Just as long as they didn't look to close at his eyes. Or have a fine enough nose to smell his fear.

"What about you, Crit?" James asked, tugging the wrist ties of his new jacket tight. "It's not as though we can exactly dress you up. I doubt they have any other azlins prowling around."

That could be a problem. I simply shrugged my shoulders. "No. There won't be any others of my kind. There are many species among the stars, James. We'll just have to hope I don't raise too many questions."

I touched a claw to my chin before continuing. "If worse comes to worse, you could always pretend I'm your prisoner."

That got little more than a snort from the human.

"Yeah, like that'll work. No one would ever believe I managed to capture *you*." He rolled his eyes, "You've been watching too many serials, Crit."

I huffed and walked away. I'd thought it was a good idea.

We stayed at the camp overnight. I'm not sure if either of us got much sleep. The next morning came as dry and faultless as every one before, a pale orange sun in the empty blue sky.

James was tinkering with the hover bike as I finished off my third can of food. This dried mash was hardly enticing, but anything is better than subsisting on water alone. My stomach still growled when I looked at the meat laying about us.

The first thing I was going to do when I got off this dirt ball was find an all you can eat buffet and put them out of business.

A squeal came from the bike under James, followed by the hiss of static. I threw my can away and walked up behind him.

"Well," he said, flicking a switch to turn off the din, "I guess that answers the question on if they were able to get a warning out about us. The jamming in this solar system is so bad that I can't even pick up any signals from the base, and it's no more than an hour's ride away."

"That's to our advantage." I reached out to play with one of the switches, a bright red one, but he swatted my hand away.

"And just what are you planning to do once we get there, Crit?" He kept fiddling with the controls, flipping toggles and pulling at wires behind the console.

I shrugged. "Whatever we have to." Reaching down, I pulled him from his work, forcing him to meet my eyes. "I'm not a beast, James. I don't *want* to kill... people. I just want to go home."

A slight smile made it to his lips. "Thanks. I needed to hear that from you. But really, what's the plan?"

I froze. "I thought you had one."

He clasped the palm of one hand to his forehead, it made a slapping sound.

"God, Crit. You're the fighter here, that's your job. I get you there, you get us through."

"Through to what? I'll get you anywhere you want to go, but you need to give me a destination."

He sat in the grey sand. I slid down the side of the bike to sit next to him.

"Well, all we need is a ship, right?"

I nodded. "One with a transit drive."

"That's not going to be a small order." He rolled his eyes as he spoke, "Any ship with a transit is likely to at least be a few hundred meters long. Not exactly something that folks normally misplace. Ships that large tend to have a *crew*."

"I can handle the crew." I let my claws slip from their sheaths. "But you'll need to handle the ship."

"I'll get it running, Crit." He was smiling now. "But you need to fly it."

"Why me?"

"Because any ship that size will be expecting an engineer, and I doubt the transit system would do much good with you drooling on it."

I let a slight chuckle escape my chest. "I can accept that."

"Hey, Crit?" I looked over at him. "Do you think we'll really make this?" His eyes were wide, looking like nothing so much as a kitt's.

I reached out to gently rest a hand on his shoulder, letting my claws out just enough that he could feel them, but not so that they broke his skin.

"We'd best. I want to be able to tell this story to my future children. I'm the scion to my family. I expect to return and eventually take the mantle from my father. You haven't forgotten, you're my brother. You're coming home with me. I have a duty to protect you, you defenseless little runt."

"Defenseless?" His face screwed up. "I'll show you who's defenseless once I get my hands on a gun and a shock rod."

"And you even know how to use those contraptions?"

He rolled his eyes. "Nope. But I'll make an exception just for you. I can do a lot when my life's in danger. You should know that by now."

"That I do. I still have the bruise across my nose to prove it."

We'd strained the hover bike yesterday with our antics. It whined under our weight as I urged it from the ground.

Crit was behind me, arms wrapped around my chest as he clung tight. I wasn't sure exactly what my meagre weight was supposed to do if we encountered turbulence, but it seemed to make him feel better. I was getting the impression that his flight yesterday hadn't exactly endeared him to travel via bike.

The hands clasped together in front of my chest were washed clean, but I could still see it, stained with the blood of three different species. I had a killer clinging to my back, and I needed him to get me off this planet.

Well, there was more to it than that, but I'd worry about the rest if we made it out of here alive.

One of the downsides of hover transport is that it never touches the ground. Normally this is a good thing, no need for roads, but it was a bloody pain when I wanted to follow someone. The map we'd found showed where the main base was, but tracking it down on this desolate planet was another thing.

I'd set our radio to high gain, receive only. Squelching out the dampening static had been a trick, but I'd managed it. It paid off. Our first sign of the base was when we began to pick up short-range traffic over the speaker.

Crit was the first to hear it. To me the sounds were whipped away by the wind around us. He tapped me on the shoulder, directing me to come to a stop.

I wasn't sure exactly what I'd been expecting on pirate radio. A bad sitcom perhaps? Status reports? 'We are evil pirates who kill people' over and over?

What I hadn't really been expecting was the sounds of a city. Spaceport radio was just short of universal. Everyone spoke Standard, everyone said the same kinds of phrases. They talked about approach corridors and delays. From where we were it sounded like we'd snuck up on nothing more than a small city. That would be except for people announcing their latest 'takes'. Some of the descriptions of what people had done were enough to make my stomach turn.

Back on the bike, we took it slower now. I almost jumped out of my skin when we saw our first contact.

They came from behind us in a sprint speeder, roaring past like we were standing still. They didn't even pause to look at us, just raced by. It wasn't five minutes later that craft began appearing everywhere, going every which way. Not one seemed to care who we were or where we'd come from.

All I could do was keep driving in a straight line. We still hadn't seen the city yet.

It crawled slowly into sight, perched atop a mountain. The summit had likely been leveled off just for the purpose.

It was huge. We could only see one side of it, but the buildings seemed to stretch on forever. There had to be a million people in there.

Wait. A million people in a pirate base? What was this, 'skull and cross bones united'? Pirates don't have local four-oh-fours, they don't have labour unions or holiday retreats. And they certainly don't have bases this large.

Crit tapped me on the shoulder again. It took me a while to find a place to land, but I found a secluded little gully where we could talk in private.

I twisted on the seat of the bike, not willing to take my hands from the controls. "Crit, what's going on?"

He just shook his head. "I don't know, James. I swear. I never knew this was here."

I just let out a quiet laugh. "Well, we don't have to worry too much about being recognized. There's enough people that we could likely spend our lives here without trouble."

He narrowed his eyes at me. "You're not suggesting..."

I snorted. "Not in the slightest. The sooner we can get off this God forsaken hell hole the better. Let's see if we can find the spaceport. With a city this size it must be possible to book passage off-planet."