

Entrapment

by T. M. Hunter

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Entrapment

“You took too long!”

I glared at the portly man in disbelief. “I didn’t make a single stop. How could I have gotten here faster?”

“It doesn’t matter. I gave the job to someone else.”

“Listen here.” I pointed at him. My rough-hewn face and wavy brown hair reflected in the dark lenses covering his eyes. “A deal is a deal.”

He built up a wad of spit in his chubby cheeks and hocked it at my feet. “I don’t give jobs to people who can’t show up on time.”

He turned away and I grabbed his arm. “You never said anything about a time limit when you offered this job.”

He spun out of my grasp and pulled aside the flap of his blue vest, giving me a glimpse of the small, holstered energy pistol. “Back off.”

I took a step back from the olive-skinned menace. There was a chance I could pull my Mark II blaster first, but I didn’t want to take it. There was plenty of distance between this place and the space dock. Authorities around here wouldn’t be slow. Self-defense would be a tough sell if I shot him first.

He adjusted the dark blue bandana on top of his bald head. “I never want to see your face on Cam again.”

I growled. “You can count on that.”

He waddled away. I shielded my eyes from the orange sky as the double doors flew open. It took a moment to adjust back to the dimly lit room as they slammed shut again. Peace and quiet returned.

It wasn’t the first time I’d been stiffed on a job and it wouldn’t be the last. Normally, the payment side was where people revealed their inner tightwad. No one had ever promised me a job and shorted me before I even took it.

Good riddance to the fat slob.

The mere thought of venturing back into the arid heat made me nauseous. I turned toward the back wall and walked up to the bar. It was time for some liquid encouragement.

An older gentleman with a gray moustache and thin wisps of hair atop his head stepped up without a word.

I rubbed my face. “You have Vladirian liquor?”

He shook his head and wiggled his nose. His moustache twitched back and forth.

I cursed under my breath at my luck, then placed one boot onto a metal rail and leaned against the counter. “I’m game. What do you have?”

He grabbed a glass from an overhead rack, then pulled out a bottle of clear liquid stashed under the counter. He filled the glass, still without conversation, then capped it and held

up two fingers.

I slapped two white-rimmed golden coins on the counter. "I bet you're loads of fun at parties."

He drew closer and pointed at his neck with a scowl. A nasty looking scar ran clear across the front. The man was mute. I cringed.

He strolled over to the register near the counter's end. With a frown, he sat on a stool, crossed his arms and watched the rest of the room. His muscles bulged behind the yellow tee shirt he wore.

I sipped at the sweet liquid, then tossed back the whole glass. The idea of staying for another appealed to me, but money was going to be tight. I'd completely wasted a hyperspeed jump getting here and would end up with nothing to show for it. The bartender didn't hold a grudge, as he slipped down from his seat to serve me a second drink. I waved him off.

A hand came to rest on my shoulder, and I jerked around with a firm grip on the blaster under my jacket. A brown-skinned man stood beside me. His robe was silky white and lined with ornate jewelry. He flashed a bright white smile.

"Sir, do you have a moment?"

I eased off my blaster. "Do I know you?"

"I hope you'll know me better."

He was selling something. I could see a glimmer of hope in his black eyes. "Sorry, not interested."

"But, sir, I think you will be." He lifted his other hand and displayed a small piece of wire.

"Not in the market for wiring."

"But this isn't just any wiring, my friend. This is a new product developed by my business partner. Lighter, stronger, less resistance."

"Cheaper?" Not as if it mattered.

"Progress costs a little more."

"Still not interested."

He started into full harassment mode, before I placed my hands on my waist and moved my jacket aside. His eyes went wide at the sight of my weapon, before he gave a nervous smile. "Well, sir, I'll leave this with you." He set the wire on the counter, along with a small electronic disk which served as his business card. "If you ever find yourself in the market, contact me."

I scoffed. "I'll be sure to do that."

With that, he hurried off to another area of the room. I picked up the wire and examined it. Sure enough, it was lighter than the stuff I normally used for ship repairs. I slipped both it and the disk into my pocket and sighed. I couldn't afford to buy things I needed, let alone the things I could live without.

I looked down at the empty glass. I needed another.

An angelic voice called beside me. "So, stranger, come here often?"

I turned to find myself gazing upon what could only be described as a goddess. Her golden hair was a halo against her perfect skin. A pair of blue eyes sparkled as they stared at me.

I smiled. "Not often enough, I'm afraid."

She walked up to the bar, her slender hips tight against a silver one-piece dress. The woman motioned toward the barkeep, which gave me the chance to exhale. Being stuck for measureless distances was the cruelest joke anyone ever played on a living being. Loneliness sets in, and drinking to oblivion only helps for so long. You eventually have to face the universe sober again.

She turned to me, looked down at my empty glass and flashed a smile. "Want another?"
"Sure."

She held up two fingers for the bartender and he poured the same number of glasses.

She offered up a dainty hand. "My name's Kasey Reynolds, by the way."

"Aston West." I held on a little longer than I should have. It had been far too long since I'd felt the soft skin of a woman.

"Nice to meet you, Aston." She flashed another smile.

"Likewise."

Kasey wove her fingers around her glass. "So, what brings you here, Aston?"

I sighed. "I thought I was going to haul some cargo. Turns out the seller had other plans."

"Those things happen."

"Not often, they don't."

I drank about half the glass, before she interrupted. "So, you haul cargo for a living, Aston?"

"Sometimes. Other times, I stumble across cargo people have abandoned and resell it."

"Anything valuable?"

"Some more than others."

Lately, I hadn't found anything, regardless of the value. The offer of a cargo run was just what I needed, up until the point where it had been yanked away from me. I reached for the glass, but Kasey grabbed my hand. I looked into her eyes, unsure of what she was doing or why.

"So, how long's it been?"

"Excuse me?"

"Since you've been with a woman." She winked.

I chuckled under my breath. "Rather forward, aren't you?"

“I know what I want, and I usually get it.”

“It’s been a while.”

She laughed. “We can remedy that.” I moaned on the inside as she continued. “My ship’s at the spacedock.”

I grinned. “What a coincidence. So is mine.”

“Shall we go?”

Something wasn’t right about this. Intuition doesn’t always win me over, especially when my more primal instincts are involved. Usually it’s not far off, though. This time, my gut screamed a lot louder than usual, and finally got my attention. “Actually, I’m going to pass.”

“Pass?”

“Sorry.”

“Sorry?” Kasey’s hand moved up and clamped on my arm before she slammed her glass down. It was good to know my instincts weren’t completely dulled from drinking. Practice makes perfect.

Her volume increased. “You’re going to pass up a chance with me?”

“I guess that’s what I’m saying.” I stared down at her knuckles, which had turned white. It was going to take a lot worse to cause me pain.

She released her grip. “I’ve never been so insulted.”

A table crashed behind us. I turned to see two burly men hug in a not-so-friendly way. One pulled his mammoth arm free and pummeled the side of his opponent’s head. Repeated blows seemed ineffective until his victim finally slumped to the floor.

A green blast fired through the air with a quick, shrill whine. It struck the victor and he went down on top of his opponent. I turned back and saw the barkeep wielding an energy pistol. He stowed it back under the counter and resituated himself as if nothing had just happened.

I turned my attention back to Kasey. She smirked. “So, given your decision more thought?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Shall we go?”

I laughed. “I said I thought about it. I didn’t change my mind.”

She cursed me. “I hope I never see you again.”

“I don’t think you’ll have to worry.” I tossed back the rest of my glass. “It was nice meeting you.”

I took a step away from the counter and stumbled. What was going on? I hadn’t had but two glasses.

I turned back to Kasey “What is that stuff?”

She drank the remainder of her glass. She raised an eyebrow. "Camarian rum."

I shook my head to clear my double vision. There was no way I'd be messed up after two small glasses of anything that weak, even if I'd had a third. I was left with only one explanation, and looked into her eyes. There was something far more sinister than the outside image she projected.

Deception.

"You." I tried to grab her, but my vision blurred before I had the chance. The countertop slammed into my chin as I fell and my head came to rest on the cold rail where my foot had been only moments ago. Darkness slowly descended.

The warmth of Kasey's breath caressed my ear. "Sweet dreams, Aston."

* * *

Her voice was muffled as I came to. "Yes, I have him."

I blinked hard. My head hurt like nothing I'd ever experienced before, and my jaw still radiated pain from where it had struck the counter. I had no idea where I was, but this couldn't be good at all.

"Payment as agreed?"

I couldn't hear the other half of the conversation. I turned to look and everything above my neck flared in excruciating pain. Kasey sat in the cockpit, mostly blocked from view by the forward divider. "Good. I'll be there soon."

I sat in the center section of another ship, identical in every structural detail to my own. Aft, the standard set of cargo bays had been reconfigured into an extension of the living quarters. A bed rested at one side, with various closets and dressers, while a shower cube took up the other.

I had no idea why I was here, but I doubted she truly wanted to remedy my companionship drought.

My hands were shoved behind my back while I sat on soft cushions. As I grew accustomed to the dimmed lighting of her living quarters, I saw the long blue couch underneath me. My jacket was tossed over the far end. A set of electronic restraints rubbed against my wrists.

Maybe I spoke too soon. It was always possible she treated all of her dates this way.

"Ah, you're awake." Kasey entered from the cockpit, now sporting a black body suit. A scattergun was attached to her hip, the barrel cut down by half. The silver garment lay draped over a closet door at the front of the compartment, just next to the exit hatch.

The goddess had fallen from grace. "Who are you?"

"I told you my name. Are you stupid?"

I frowned. "What do you want with me?"

"I don't want you at all. The Birolian authorities, though, want you bad."

"Who?"

“I don’t repeat myself for the incompetent.”

She was probably a lot of fun at parties, too.

“I do have to say, you were the easiest fifty-thousand credit catch I’ve ever taken down.”

I whistled. “I’m in the wrong business.”

“Breaking the law is always the wrong business. Maybe you should learn that.” She opened her forward closet and hung the silver dress inside. My holster hung from another hook on the door, the stubby blaster still in place.

“I haven’t broken the law.” Not in the Birol system, anyway. I scowled. Not that I knew of.

“You stole a shipment of live waterfowl from their space station.”

A shiver ran up my spine. My luck couldn’t be that bad. “Fifty thousand for waterfowl?”

She chuckled. “They belonged to the crown prince. Maybe you should watch who you steal from.”

It all seemed forever ago. “Listen, someone just hired me to transport them. I didn’t steal anything.” I really should have done better checks on the people I dealt with and the cargo they wanted hauled.

“You know what I’ve discovered in my line of work? Everyone is innocent.”

I fumed and pulled against my restraints. “I am.”

“I don’t really care if you’re guilty or innocent. I get paid to bring you in, regardless.”

“You’d hand over an innocent man just to get the payout?”

“I’d hand over my own mother if someone paid me to carry out an arrest warrant on her.”

“So, how did you figure out where to find me?”

“Don’t be so naive. The successful in life don’t rely on chance. They always have a plan.”

I cursed. “The buyer was bait?”

“The unemployed come dirt cheap, too. He agreed to do it for just a hundred credits.”

I pursed my lips for a moment. “And drugging me?”

“When you didn’t bite on the seduction, I had to go to my backup plan.”

I sighed. “Distract me with the fight, so you could drug me. What, did you pay them off too?”

“You might not be as stupid as you look. They both did it for fifty.”

“You won’t get away with this.”

She chuckled under her breath and walked toward the cockpit. “Try to relax. It’s a long trip back to Birol.”

I mentally smacked myself. Being lured here was something I couldn’t have prevented, short of giving up on a job when I had none. From that point forward, it was all on me.

I'd let my guard down and now I was going to be arrested for a crime I hadn't committed. Unless, of course, I escaped.

The best chance of that happening was going to be getting Jeanie involved. I kept an eye on Kasey as she sat in the pilot's seat beyond the divider.

I heard her bellow. "What do you mean, wait for clearance? I'm ready to go now."

I didn't have a lot of time. I scurried over to my jacket and the transmitter in its left arm. With both eyes on my captor, I leaned down and whispered. "Jeanie?"

She thankfully mimicked my volume. "Yes, Aston."

"I'm inside a ship. Can you locate me?"

A short pause. "Yes. I've found you. Why are you on-board another ship?"

"Long story. Can you get me out of here?"

A little longer pause, before she returned. "I can open the exit hatch, but that will be the extent of my capabilities."

My hopes were dashed. "No way to undo my restraints?"

"I do not detect any."

I really didn't want to leave behind either my blaster or my jacket. Sometimes, sacrifices had to be made. And if it meant being carted off to some prison somewhere, I could always find ways to ease my guilt.

"Okay, get ready to open the hatch." I looked over at the door and prepared to bolt.

She continued before processing my last statement. "If the restraints were somehow wired up to the rest of the ship, I would likely have a chance of releasing you."

Sometimes life is funny. An event occurs, and it ends up being your way out of a tight spot. Sometimes luck really does happen. Not often enough in my case, but I wasn't going to nitpick at the moment. By pure luck, I'd been given a small wire sample, and it was going to be my way out of these restraints. I looked down at the pocket I'd put the sample in.

Kasey's voice was far closer than it should have been. "What do you think you're doing?"

I looked up and saw her standing in the cockpit doorway. My eyes went wide at the intrusion, and I mumbled instructions into the transmitter. "Set off every alarm in the cockpit, Jeanie."

"Would you still like me to open the hatch?"

"Yes!"

Kasey scrambled over. "Who are you talking to?" Without warning, she pulled the scattergun off her waist and smashed the side of my waiting face with it. I flew to the other end of the couch, my vision blurred and my skull ringing.

I shook my head to clear things out, then caught her grabbing at the jacket. She reached

the end of the left sleeve. “A transmitter? Who were you contacting?”

Before I had to come up with a response, Jeanie set off the cockpit alarms and the exit hatch opened. Kasey was caught off-guard by it all, then realized my transmission had to be involved.

She pointed at me with my jacket in hand, then tossed it into the far corner and turned the scattergun on me with the other. “I’ll deal with you shortly. If you try to escape, I’ll shoot you.” Then, she raced off for the cockpit.

I should have bolted for the open door immediately, but didn’t want to try anything with these restraints on. Mobility was what I needed, so I rushed over to the corner, turned myself around and contorted just enough to reach into my jacket pocket. I snagged the wire sample and with fear in my heart, fumbled blind to slip one end of the wire into the left restraint’s key slot, then did the same with the right. A satisfying fizzle of the shorted-out device accompanied the loosening around my wrists. I let them fall to the floor, then slid into the comfort of my jacket.

I had to hurry. The question was whether I could get to my Mark II before she saw me. In retrospect, I should have just left without it. Trouble was, I was on an emotional high from figuring a way out of my restraints. Now, I felt cocky, which was never a good thing.

I moved toward the closet, eased the door open and pulled out my holster. Kasey chose that moment to shut off the cockpit alarms and turned to face me. “You!” She bellowed, and bolted from her seat. I yanked my blaster free and flipped the side selector switch to a triple-shot burst.

“Before you get any bright ideas, drop your scattergun and kick it over.”

She put her hand on the weapon, the venom building inside her. “How about I use it to bring you in dead? I’ll only get ten thousand, but it would be worth it.”

I steadied my blaster. “You don’t want to do that.”

Kasey pulled the weapon from her waist and took a single step. “I guess you’ll have to shoot me, because I’m taking you in one way or another.”

“Stop right there.”

She took another step. So, I pulled the trigger. Three energy bursts landed square on Kasey’s chest and knocked her to the floor, unconscious but alive. I shook my head and sighed.

“You should have listened.”

I raced out the open door and stepped out into the dry air. I shielded my eyes from the bright sky. My ship sat across the dusty landing pad, and was a welcome sight indeed.

I hoped Kasey Reynolds and I wouldn’t cross paths again. Unfortunately, there was still a bounty on my head. Any other time, I wouldn’t have given it much thought. There were plenty of bounties and warrants on my head from various exploits. But she seemed more intent on taking me down than most others I’d dealt with, not to mention the fact she now had a score to settle. I had no doubt we hadn’t seen the last of each other.

Next time, I hoped to be ready.

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About the Author

By day, T. M. Hunter designs aircraft. With any other free moment he gets, he designs an entire universe. His short stories have appeared in such publications as *Ray Gun Revival*, *Residential Aliens* and *Golden Visions Magazine*. These stories have received critical acclaim, twice (2007, 2009) receiving a top ten finish in the P&E Readers Poll. His two novels from Burst Books, *Heroes Die Young* and *Friends in Deed*, continue to receive a fantastic reception from his readers. His short story collection *Dead or Alive* from ResAliens Press, and his novella *Seeker*, are both available as well.

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