

The ship's vibration dropped to a barely perceptible level under Tristan's feet as he shut off the engines. He brought up the view from the cameras and saw nothing but distant stars. Their employer had picked a spot in the outer part of a dead system off any of the lanes SpaceGov looked after.

"Nothing," Alex said, worry in his voice. "There's no ship within range."

Tristan turned to slap the human for giving away their position. Did he think he'd shut down the engines because he wanted quiet? He saw the screen, saw Alex had only used passive sensors, and paused. He found that he was impressed with his forethought.

He shook away the sense. It didn't say anything about Alex, other than he had more common sense than the humans Tristan had been forced to work with previously. He relaxed as Alex turned. No sense putting the human on edge over something Tristan would do himself.

"You'd think he'd be waiting for us, right? For the kind of money he's paying, I'd have expected him to get here right after hiring you and wait."

Tristan nodded. He looked over the scans. Alex had been right—nothing out there emitting power, except them. "Take the boy out of cryo and see to it he doesn't get in my way." He began shutting down systems.

He didn't like this. Sure, if they manned the scans it meant they couldn't be surprised by anything, and in that sense it was a decent meeting place, but there was nothing to take cover behind if something showed up.

When he heard the boy speak, he did a hard shutdown of the cryo system; even on standby it drew more power than any of the other systems on the ship. He looked at the scans again, looking for the faintest indication of power. Nothing.

Alex's point was valid. Where was the man who wanted this boy?

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With nothing else to do, Tristan did the maintenance he could from inside the ship. With that done, he checked on the many message nodes he had set up for his contacts to drop information about new technology. One of them had a file on the Goliath-class warships from Herberru. Last he'd heard the Goliath class was being phased out of production, but this file contained blueprints with highlighted upgrades to the design.

At first look the modifications made sense, so he sent the payment. If he discovered this was a forgery, he'd pay that contact a visit and ask for an explanation. For the time being he studied the plans eagerly, and read the attached specifications.

Alex returned to his seat after making sure the boy was settled in the one room with a bed on the ship. He'd commented on how the boy was reading before asking for permission to access the net. He put his earpiece in when Tristan nodded, then he was talking softly as he looked through one network system after the other.

Tristan watched him work, captivated with the ease the human coded and made his way into various systems. He couldn't follow most of the code, but he recognized the structure of command instructions as Alex inserted them there, the structure of what looked like sleeper code in another location.

Tristan went back to his reading, checking the passive scans regularly. He had them set to sound an alarm, but he never trusted them enough to leave them unattended.

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After twenty-four hours, Tristan went over the passive scan's systems, physical and program. It occurred to him Alex might have been a plant and compromised them, but the human couldn't wear a mask to save his life. Still, he looked for any indication he'd managed to slip code within his ship's systems. It was untouched.

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After thirty-six hours, sleep became a concern. Alex had napped in his seat, and once stretched on the floor for a few hours. Tristan hadn't left the controls for more than taking care of the necessities. The longer it took for the employer to arrive, the more concerned he became, and the less inclined he was to leave the scans unattended.

Having Alex here meant he could leave the human to watch them while he slept, if he trusted him not to try something stupid, like getting into the ship's system and putting in some of his own code.

The other alternative was stims. He hated the stuff, but he could take them for four days with

minimal effect to his judgment. Every few years he tested himself to see how his tolerance changed over time.

He took the injector out of the cabinet where he kept the medical equipment and gave himself a doze. He needed to decide what he'd do if the wait went past four days.

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On day three, Alex's pacing was driving Tristan crazy. Why couldn't he be like the boy? Sit quietly and read. Alex had inventoried their food earlier that day. Tristan had let him, since it meant he didn't have to think about him. But that only took an hour; a year's worth of nutrient bars was easy to keep track of.

Alex sat at his console, tapped commands in, looked at the screen, and got up. His steps sounded on the metal floor, and exactly eight minutes later he returned. Tristan had found he couldn't keep himself from timing Alex since he had nothing to do but watch the screen.

The next time Alex returned, Tristan grabbed him and dragged him to the hold. It was just high enough for Tristan to stand, and there they fought.

Alex had improved every time they fought, and now he gave Tristan a good fight, protecting his neck, groin, and stomach reflexively. He rarely exposed his back anymore, and got in a few good punches.

Tristan called an end to the fight when Alex could barely remain standing. He pulled a roll from storage handed it to the human with an order to sleep. Tristan went back to his seat and cursed himself. In his hurry to stop Alex's pacing, he'd forgotten to transfer the sensor's alarm to the hold, which meant that if the Law had shown up, they would have been blown up before Tristan could do anything about it.

He'd also forgot to lock the boy in his room.

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On day four he stood by the cabinet, looking at the injector in his hand. It was that, or sleep. One meant leaving Alex unattended, the other meant having to trust that his judgment wouldn't be so hampered he couldn't handle whatever would happen.

"What?" he growled at Alex, who'd stepped near him.

"You've been staring at that for ten minutes now. I'm thinking sleep would be a better option."

He rounded on the human. "And leave my ship for you to coerce? You really just walked up to tell me that?"

Alex didn't react to the anger, and that pissed Tristan off. "I've been standing right here for the whole ten minutes. You just now reacted to it."

"Fuck!"

That made Alex take a step back, and Tristan found that funny. He kept himself from chuckling. Over-fixation and losing track of what happened around him were the first signs he was pushing himself too far with stims.

He glared at Alex. "I promise you, if I find any code in my ship I didn't put there myself, I am going to make you regret it." He didn't give the human time to reply. He headed down the hold, took out another bedroll, and lay down on it.

He slept for eighteen hours.

When he woke, he scoured the system for any changes Alex might have made to it, twice.

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For the next five days they fell in a routine. Tristan slept, they kept busy until Alex grew restless, then they trained, after which Alex slept. Once Alex woke, Tristan slept again, and they repeated the process.

Throughout that, the boy only came out of the room to eat with them. Unlike Alex, he ate his portion of the nutrient bar without complaint.

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On day ten, Alex had begun tapping his fingers on the console—the initial sign of his growing restlessness—but suddenly stopped.

Tristan looked at him as Alex said, "Something's coming."

Finally. Tristan didn't mind waits—they were part of the jobs—but this was ridiculous.

"Man, that ship is fast."

Tristan snapped to attention and brought up the sensors.

Alex whistled. "That is a lot of power that ship's emitting."

A glance at the scans confirmed Alex's words. He tried for a visual scan, but the incoming ship was still too far. He recalled what he'd seen of their employer's ship. Custom job, the engine had pushed hard when taking off, but it had been controlled. It had power, but that kind of control came at the expense of speed. The extrapolation showed the ship was headed for them. He didn't like that.

He brought up the active sensors, and before he'd read half the result, he was waking up the ship and moving them away as fast as it would go. Small, too damned small.

"What's going on?" Alex asked.

Tristan scanned their surroundings. Nothing in range. The closest planet would take hours to reach, and—he looked at the readout on the other ship—it would be within firing range long before that.

"Who's that?"

"Be quiet," Tristan growled. The screen flashed red and a point detached from the following ship. Too far to get a lock, so that was a smart missile. What kind? He cursed all humans for preferring convenience over the practicalities of having cover.

He launched a heat-flare, and made a turn that stressed the dampener system. Heat sensors were the most common tracking system on smart missiles. The missile ignored the flare to follow them. Smarter heat sensors? No, that would be locked in the engine's pattern, and it had changed as he pushed them.

Electronic profile lock.

Tristan cursed. He hated those things when used against him. Which of the systems was it using to stay on them?

"What can I do to help?"

Tristan wanted to kick him out of his cockpit; he had enough to do with keeping the missile from catching up to him and figuring out how to lose that lock. He couldn't just shut down random systems and hope that would work. What he needed was another set of hands to—"Make a full scan of that missile and send the result to my screen."

He finally stopped feeling Alex's eyes on him as the human set to work. Details scrolled down a secondary screen.

The computer already had a match for it. Good, that meant something he'd taken apart. A Barlium Chaser. A takedown missile. At least a hit wouldn't be fatal in and of itself. Those were designed for capture missions. It would disable the ship, leave them dead in space to be boarded. Except his pursuer wouldn't bother with that.

The bad thing was that the Barlium had a customizable lock. There was no way to know which one it had settled on. The manufacturer had claimed that rendered the missile unbeatable. They were wrong, Tristan had found a way, he just had—

The screen flashed red, and he banked hard. The hull registered the heat of laser hits, but no significant damage.

"Do you want me to—"

"Be quiet!" Tristan banked, trying to guide the missile in the way of the laser, but it wouldn't. Barlium did make their missile smart, they hadn't lied about that.

"You do know you're wasting your time, right?" The voice that came from the comm was calm. Tristan didn't recognize it, but he hadn't expected to. "You can't outrun me or the missile, so why don't you stop trying? You'll be able to repair the damage once I've got the kid and I'm gone."

Tristan shut the comm down. When this was done, he'd have to explain to Alex about leaving the communication system down. At least this told Tristan why the other ship was here. The disappearance would have been noticed in under a day, but how long for them to accept that the driver whose hover they'd used wasn't responsible? How had this merc figured out where they'd be?

Questions for later.

First, get rid of that missile. He did a loop as tightly as the ship could stand, and ended up behind the missile. That couldn't break the lock, but the Barlium needed a wider arc to turn. Tristan fired on the ship he was now flying toward, jerking in all directions to keep his pursuer from getting a lock.

He didn't hit the other ship, but that wasn't the point—not that the other pilot knew that. Unlike him, Tristan had no need to keep him alive, so he had to act as if death was the intent and focus on evasion. Their ships crossed paths close enough they might have scraped the protective coating off in places.

Tristan shut everything down, even life support. They became a piece of space junk on a ballistic trajectory toward infinity. They were blind, deaf, and if Tristan didn't do this correctly, dead.

“Did something hit us?” Alex asked.

Fifteen seconds.

The thing Tristan had discovered when he'd taken apart a Barlium Chaser was that it was a genius of a missile. Barlium had wanted it to be able to adapt to just about any situation. That meant the onboard AI knew that the ship's profile could be modified on the fly. His experiments had shown it took between twenty and thirty seconds for the AI to go through the calculation needed to reestablish a lock.

Twenty seconds.

His pursuer might, or might not, know that, so he might not think to override the missile. Most mercs who used them thought of them as a launch and forget system. But even if their pursuer knew about it, he'd be too busy trying to figure out what Tristan had done, and why.

Thirty seconds.

The one variable Tristan couldn't account for was the broad difference between the electronic profile of his ship compared to his pursuer's. How much longer would the AI take to decide it was the new profile it needed to lock on?

Thirty-five seconds.

Tristan hesitated. If the missile hadn't reset the lock, it would come back to them the instant he powered up. If he waited too long, even with the missile after him, his pursuer would be able to find him visually and shoot at the undefended target.

Forty seconds.

Tristan powered up and banked the instant the ship was responsive. The screens came back—nothing red, nothing locked on. Sensors came back, and he found the other ship trying to outrun and outmaneuver the missile.

He could outrun it; his ship was faster. Given enough time, the merc might remember he had the override codes for the missile. If he was given time to think. Tristan had no plans on giving him that. He fired at the other ship and grazed it.

The comm light flashed. In his peripheral vision, Alex looked at him and then the light. Tristan ignored both, firing on the ship again. The ship dodged and vanished from the sensors. *Really?* Tristan thought, *stealing my own trick without knowing why it had worked?*

Tristan locked on the missile while it was resetting and destroyed it. It only took a few seconds to find the ship using the cameras. He was tempted to wait until the merc powered back up, so he'd know he'd been bested before dying, but that was how stupid mercs ended up dead. Tristan fired on the ship until it exploded. He smiled as the flame vanished, then set a course to a location he would be able to regroup and work out how this had happened.

“Get the boy ready for cryo.” Tristan typed a quick message to let his employer know the location was compromised, and sent it to the agreed communication node. He didn't say where he was going, since that node was the most likely unsecured point.

“Who was that?” Alex asked. “What was this about?”

“A merc, after the boy.” Wait, what was he still doing here?

“You began evasive maneuvers before he did anything. How did you know it was a threat? That could have been our employer.”

Tristan spun and glared at the human. “I told you to get the boy ready.”

“I just want to understand. It isn't like a few minutes is going to make a difference. We're not flying any faster when we're under cryo.”

Tristan's hands closed into fists. Alex glanced at them, but instead of panicking, he looked at Tristan again and spoke calmly.

“If I understand what you saw that I didn't, I can react better next time. I'll know what to look for and you won't have to wait until you get the scan to react.”

Tristan didn't relax, but the argument had some validity. While the human was around, it

would be better if he didn't get in the way with stupid questions like what he'd asked during the fight. And if he could anticipate what Tristan needed? Even better.

He opened his hands and brought up the scans of the other ship. Multiple screens lit up with them. "This is a Valie Striker. It is fast, and can be set up with a variety of weapons." He looked at Alex and saw understanding there, but not recognition. Alex didn't know the ship. "The first thing I noticed was the size." He tapped another screen. "The Striker has a cockpit and ten cubic feet of cargo space. The next thing I noticed was the state of the hull." He indicated another scan highlighting every scar and visible repair on the outside. He looked at Alex again.

"Okay." The voice was tentative. "The size told you this wasn't our employer's ship. It was much bigger than that, but he has money. He dumped a lot of that at our feet like it didn't matter to him. So he could have hired someone to pick up the kid. It would be the smart thing to do, add another level of separation between him and the kid."

Tristan didn't smile, but he was pleased that given time and starting information, Alex could come up with a valid conclusion. "Our employer only hires the best—he said as much—and the quality of his bodyguard notwithstanding, I believed him when he said so. The thing about the best is that they take care of their equipment, and they also use the best. The Striker is an okay fighter, but it isn't the best. The Gerdeck Lance is better than this."

"And this ship has scars and bad repairs, so he didn't take good care of it."

Tristan nodded. "A common merc."

"So if it wasn't our boss, or one of his representative, by default he didn't have good intentions, and you acted. How did he know where we'd be?"

"That is the question. We know we didn't tell anyone where the meeting point was." Tristan fixed his gaze on Alex. "Right?"

"I didn't tell anyone, I swear."

Tristan believed him. "Which means it's on my employer's side. Possibly he told someone he shouldn't have. More likely the communication node was compromised. Does that explain everything to your satisfaction?"

"Yes, thank you."

Tristan pointed to the cockpit's door. "Then get the kid under cryo." He didn't bother hiding his annoyance. He turned to the controls, and the comm let him know he had a message waiting. It was an automated message telling him the node he'd been trying to contact couldn't be found. Now, why would anyone want to keep him from contacting his employer?

"Is it over?" The boy's voice, showing no traces of fear.

"Yes." Alex. "It is."

"Were they bad men?"

"Yes, but you don't have to worry anymore. You're safe now."

"They're going to try again. They want to hurt my father by hurting me."

Tristan's ears went up, and he turned to face the door. He couldn't see them, but he could see the open door to the room. The boy knew he could be used against his father?

"Why do you say that?" Alex.

"My father explained it to me in one of the messages. It's why I was at the academy. So I'd be safe."

"Don't worry, no one is going to hurt you. I'll make sure of that. Now, you need to go in cryo again."

Tristan stood, the anger surprising him. What was that human doing telling such a blatant lie to the boy? He couldn't be so stupid as to think letting a child think he was safe would do him any good.

Alex exited the room and stiffened on seeing him. "Emil's under."

"You lied to him." Tristan's voice was cold.

"I didn't."

Tristan crossed the space and got in Alex's face. "You told him no one was going to hurt him."

Alex opened his mouth, but no words came out. He looked away. "He's just a kid."

"And the universe is supposed to care?"

Tristan remembered the beatings. Could still feel them, feel the pain his father inflicted on

him. *"Stop crying, boy. I'm just preparing you for the future. Life is just pain. The earlier you get used to that, the better. Don't just lie there. Fight back!"*

"Children have a right to think they're safe."

"They have the right to be ready for what's coming. There's someone out there who is going to use him. You think he's going to be gentle about it?"

"Fine!" Fire flashed in Alex's eyes. "Do you really want to have to deal with a freaked out kid? That's what's going to happen if I go in there and tell him that he's got nothing but pain to look forward to. At least while he's here, he's going to be safe. I'm going to see to that. While he's under my protection, no one is going to hurt him."

Tristan bared his teeth. "How certain of that are you?"