

The moment the ship was unclamped, Tristan started glancing at the scanner. He had them running at full strength. He wasn't worried about anyone behind them; the ship wasn't registered to him, so anyone who'd followed them would have to run back to their ship.

What concerned him were all the incoming ships someone could contact and inform them of which ship contained the enormous bounty. Any one of them could change course without warning. He counted on the fact that mercenaries as a whole were greedy and wouldn't want their cut of the bounty diminished by bringing in someone else.

He continued watching. All it took was one altruistic merc in it not for the money, but to rescue a child, and the universe would make Tristan's day so much more difficult than it had to be.

He destroyed two ships that broke from their approach to chase him. They tried to disable him, while a well-placed laser shot at their engine's power conduits reduced them to debris small enough to grab by hand. The advantage when you had something they needed alive, and they didn't.

The scanner told him a few fights had erupted as he put more distance between him and the station. Maybe the same kind of fight over who had the rights to what dock that often happened there, or possibly territorial ones, over who had the right to hunt Tristan down for the bounty.

He wanted to make sure he was too far for anyone to catch up to him before leaving the cockpit, but he had something to deal with right now. He programmed in a zig-zagging course to prevent anyone from locking a ballistic missile at him. He was too far for a lock, and if anyone got that close, the ship would alert him.

Alex was in front of the door—back straight shoulders square, jaw just short of being clenched. Determined, but not quite defiant, Tristan thought. He noted the way Alex rubbed the leg Tristan had broken.

"Please don't do this." He kept his voice low, but that same determination was there.

Alex didn't want the boy to hear. That suited Tristan; agitating the boy wouldn't help him. Tristan didn't reply. He fixed his gaze on Alex. He didn't even bother acting angry.

"He's just a kid," Alex said. "He doesn't have anything to do with what his father's planning." The confidence left his eyes at Tristan's unmoved expression. "You've got to see that, don't you?" he pleaded now. "Please don't take it out on him."

Tristan was disappointed, but he didn't show it. He'd figured he'd have to put the human in his place again—humans were so slow to learn—but he'd hoped Alex would be quicker. He'd learned everything else so easily.

He didn't punch Alex. It would be the most effective way to remind him of his place, but there was no way to do that quietly. He grabbed Alex by the neck and squeezed. He didn't put enough strength in the grip to break his neck, just enough to keep him from breathing.

Alex didn't react, keeping their gaze locked. He didn't show fear, only determination. Did he think Tristan wasn't serious? That this was what, some sort of tease? That Tristan would let him go if he was stubborn enough?

Worry crossed Alex's eyes. His hands twitched up, but he lowered them. He was searching Tristan's eyes, looking for what? Tristan had no idea; he wouldn't see anything in there that Tristan didn't want him to see. Fear replaced the worry, the searching. Alex tried not to react, but his body needed oxygen. He grabbed at Tristan's hand and tried to pry it open.

He didn't react. He watched Alex open his mouth and try to say something. Plead for his life, apologize, explain all the ways in which he was too valuable to kill. Tristan had heard every variation on "I don't want to die".

Alex would die if Tristan decided that was what needed to happen. Alex needed to remember he'd given up control when he decided to stay. Tristan had offered something he'd never offered anyone else before: an out. Alex had been the one who refused to take it.

"This is not a partnership, do you understand?"

Still fighting to dislodge Tristan's hand, Alex nodded.

Tristan relaxed his grip only enough to let Alex take in air. Once Alex was no longer gasping, he leaned in close and whispered. "Don't presume to tell me what I can and cannot do. Don't mistake your usefulness for indispensability. You live only so long as I want you around. Getting on my nerves does not make me want you around. Is that clear?"

Alex nodded, his eyes a mix of resignation and anger.

Tristan considered just letting him go, but he didn't like that anger. Alex might think he still had a right to say something. Killing him in the confines of the ship would be problematic; it would make the boy less cooperative. He threw Alex toward the cockpit.

"Get to work. You said you'd be able to get more information using my computer."

Tristan removed his gun harness and took a quick shower to remove the worst of the blood. He'd take a more thorough one after speaking with the mark.

He ignored the confused look the human gave him as he stood before the door to the boy's room. He closed his eyes and considered him, his mark. How best to go about extracting information from him? What had his world been like before? Orwell Academy was a structured environment, rules and people telling him what to do. What was the mark's free time like? Tristan didn't know. Until now he'd just been a package, not someone to research, but he could make educated guesses.

Human children were left to roam, but the academy wasn't about the child being human, only controlled. They had him exercise, but did they let him experience pleasure? Have fun? Even Tristan, for as strict as his father had been, had found ways to enjoy being a child.

He went to a locker, searched through it, and pulled out a sealed box the size of his palm. He'd gotten it a long time ago, specifically in case he'd have a child as a mark. He ripped the top open with a claw, dumped half the contents in the disposal, and crumpled the box in his hand until it no longer looked like a box. Then he put it in his pants' back pocket.

He went back to the door, relaxed his features and body, put a warm smile on his face, and opened it. "Hey, Buddy."

The mark was seated on the bed, a datapad on his lap. He looked up. "Hello." The word was tentative.

"How is it going?" Tristan closed the door behind him. The mark shrugged. "Sorry things are taking longer than planned."

Another shrug. "Aaron said you were attacked."

Tristan sighed in annoyance. "Yeah, we were." He made his voice forcefully jovial. "But don't worry, we'll get you to your dad."

The boy's expression was guarded. The file said he was seven, but Tristan didn't know when it had been compiled. What Tristan did know was that the expression on his face belonged on an adult. Even he, for as rough as his childhood had been, hadn't learned it until a few years before he left. That was when he'd realized that his father had held ulterior motives for teaching him to survive at all cost.

He pulled the rumpled box from the pocket, took one of the hard pills, and popped it in his mouth, not reacting to the unnatural and far too sweet taste of it. He hated those things. He offered the box to the mark. "You want one?"

The boy shook his head. "They're not good for me."

Tristan gave him a closed-mouth smile. "Of course they're not; they're candies. They're just supposed to be good."

The mark shook his head again. "Thank you, but no."

Tristan put the box away with a casualness that belied the annoyance he felt. If he'd known he wouldn't have had to take one... He swallowed the pill whole and wished he'd brought something harsh to drink and wash the taste off.

Tristan indicated the datapad. "What are you doing?"

"Problems."

"What kind? Can I see?"

The boy handed him the pad. Mathematical equations, advanced ones. Tristan knew mathematics; he'd had to teach himself in the process of learning how to research everything he needed to know about to survive once he left his planet. This didn't look like something a young boy would be studying. He bought up the header, and the detail of this section indicated it was for thirteen to fourteen-year-old students.

Tristan studied the mark as he handed the pad back. He was too small to be thirteen, he was sure of that. "You like math?"

The boy smiled. It was small, but honest, unguarded. "I do." The smile vanished.

Tristan chuckled. "I wasn't much for math. I had to learn it to fly a ship, but it was hard. If it

wasn't for that, I'd have preferred playing with friends. You have many friends at the academy?"

The boy thought his answer over, and when he spoke, Tristan knew it was a lie. "A few."

"When's the last time you saw your dad?"

"A few months ago." This lie was smoother, but the academy's record had no indications his father had ever visited, or that anyone else had, for that matter.

What perplexed Tristan was the ease with which it was given. That spoke of either a gifted liar, or someone who had practiced it often, been told to practice it. There had been no wistfulness in the voice. The boy didn't feel the need Tristan had observed in children of all species to make believe their father was close by, even when he wasn't.

"Cool." Tristan moved his tongue about, giving the impression he still had the pill in his mouth. "You have a picture of him?"

"Why?" the boy asked suspiciously. "Didn't you meet him?"

"Nah, the contract came over the system. Where to pick you up, where to bring you. That's where we were attacked. I think I need to make sure that when someone finally meets us, it's really your dad, don't you think?"

The boy nodded and began typing with quick, practiced motions. Easy ones except for one moment, when he glanced at Tristan before continuing. When he handed over the pad, the picture was of a man with a long face, curly black hair, and pale green eyes. Tristan could see the resemblance. The boy's hair was much paler which, with humans, could be attributed to his mother influence. The same could be said with the waviness of the boy's hair, instead of curls and the blue eyes.

Tristan could believe this was the boy's father, if he hadn't met him. The boy shared the hair color, eye color, and square jaw, but the telling feature was the intensity in those eyes. The boy was thinking hard, as his father had been. Tristan didn't think the boy was looking to manipulate him, or rather not purposely. In any other human boy Tristan wouldn't even have considered it, but this boy was intelligent, attentive.

How deep did the lie go?

"I guess you can't wait to see him again, right?" Tristan handed the pad over. The boy nodded. "What's he do?"

"He's a manager."

Tristan could laugh at the blatantness of the lie. No mere manager could afford to send his son to a place like Orwell.

"Neat. Where's he work? Whoever attacked us destroyed the contact node. Maybe I can contact him there."

The hesitation, this time, stemmed from worry, but over what? "He works for Vertex Industries."

Tristan wasn't familiar with the company, but that only meant he hadn't had to deal with them. There were too many companies in the universe for Tristan to do more than research the largest ones. He wanted to ask for the name of the boy's father, to see which one had been used, but that would tip his hand, and he thought the boy was smart enough to catch that.

Was he wrong? Were the lies the construct of a boy so lonely he needed them to function? In a way, the boy reminded him of Justin. His brother had begun lying young, possibly around the boy's age, but even then, as masterful as Justin became at them, his lies hadn't always made sense if Tristan could have the time to think about them.

The boy's lies were too well structured. He could be smart enough to build them, but Tristan found it easier to believe this was a script the boy had been given to tell. Why tell it to Tristan? The most likely use of the lie was to protect the boy's father from enemies, but the boy believed Tristan was taking him to his father.

And the boy knew what he'd said was a lie. There had been a conscious decision to give Tristan the wrong picture, which meant the real picture was on the pad. But again, why?

Tristan patted the boy on the shoulder. "I'm going to contact them. Hopefully they'll put me in touch with your dad."

The boy didn't flinch at the touch. He wasn't afraid of Tristan, but those eyes lacked trust. Someone had taught the boy some of the realities of the universe, and Tristan had the impression that hadn't been a course on the datapad.

He headed for the door. "Me and my friend are going to take good care of you until we get

you to your dad.”

“He isn’t your friend.”

Tristan froze. The boy had said it softly, maybe thinking he wouldn’t be heard. Tristan turned and made his expression curious, rather than concerned. “Why do you say that?”

“I don’t think he’d be afraid of you if he was really your friend.”

Tristan reconsidered this boy. Alex constantly broadcasted his fear, if someone knew what to look for, but why would someone this young know those signs? And humans didn’t have the advantages Tristan did. Had Alex said something? No, Alex wanted to keep him safe, which meant not scaring him. So the boy had worked it out himself. Even if he was thirteen or fourteen, this wasn’t something a child should know. Not unless he had first-hand experience with it.

*Stop cowering, boy! Cowards don’t survive!*

“Are you afraid of me?”

The boy shook his head. “You haven’t done anything to me.” The implication being that someone had. Tristan fought the impulse to go change the coordinates on the navigation system. He could go to Orwell Academy later, once the job was done.

The lies fell into place.

Alex was afraid, and Tristan claimed he was a friend. The boy wasn’t afraid of Tristan, yet, but he knew enough to be wary. Things on the ship were not as they seemed. Could he know they were his kidnappers? No, the leap from Alex and Tristan not being friends to them being kidnappers was too much.

Still, Tristan would have to be careful when handling the boy. Getting him to drop his guard and tell him the truth about his father wouldn’t be easy if the boy was constantly on his guard, and Tristan needed that information. He didn’t want to rely only on Alex.

Alex wouldn’t lie, of that he was sure, but how reliable would the information be? If the boy’s father had gone to this extent, how much misinformation might he have spread?

He needed the boy’s truths to know how true what Alex found was.

He returned to the bed and crouched. “Me and Aaron, it’s complicated. I’m not going to claim you wouldn’t understand, because something tells me you’re a lot smarter than you let on, but I don’t think it’s something a kid should have to hear about, okay?”

The boy nodded.

Tristan stood and gave his shoulder a gentle squeeze. “You can trust him. He’ll do everything he can to keep you safe.”

“And you?”

Tristan smiled. “You have nothing to fear from me,” he lied.