

The arc-welder was so loud Tristan barely heard Alex yell over the plating he was welding to the hull. He shut it off and raised the visor. "What?"

Alex was on the ground, looking up at him. "I said that we have incoming."

"Okay, let me know once they've landed and how far." He lowered the visor.

"They're half an hour away, on foot."

Tristan took off the visor. "Who?"

"No idea. I figured you'd want to know they were coming," Alex vanished back inside the ship.

Tristan climbed down, put his tools away, and joined Alex in the cockpit. He looked at the screen showing eight people approaching.

"My instinct," Alex said, "tell me these aren't your everyday mercs."

Seven of them were dressed in dark armor, too far to make out details, but the uniformity to the looks and motion marked them as fully trained military.

Tristan pointed to the lone figure not in black. "That's the mark." At this distance he could only make out pale, but he wouldn't be surprised when it turned out to be white.

"I have a program running to create a better image from all the angles," Alex said.

"How did they land without you knowing about it?"

Alex winced. Tristan wondered if a hint of a threat had slipped into his tone. He'd been too distracted trying to make out details to notice.

"We're on passive sensors, so anywhere outside a five-hundred-mile radius, it couldn't pick it up. If they were careful with their approach to minimize burn-off, they could land closer. If that's Masters, there's the possibility he has access to some SpaceGov tech that no one has ever heard of."

"If it exists, I've heard of it. There isn't anything that will allow a ship to do an atmospheric entry and not emit heat and energy." He made a note to do a deep search through the net in case something like that had just been invented. "Was there a meteorite burning off in the atmosphere?"

"No, they didn't copy your trick."

He considered switching on the active sensors. That would let him find the ship, unless it was on the other side of the planet, but what would that tell him? Where they'd landed wasn't useful now that they were here.

An image appeared on a screen. A still of the people. Alex enlarged it, and the level of detail was impressive. He could make out that their armor was military-grade Escossen Survival Skeletons. ESSs were expensive, and could survive just about anything short of being thrown into a star. Tristan had dropped one from orbit filled with sensors and, when it crashed, they told him that anyone in it would be delirious from the heat, have too many broken bones to be able to protect themselves, but they would be alive.

They had Harken rifles slung over their shoulders. Those were bad news. One of them could make a hole in light ship's armor. When the firefight started, he'd have to keep on the move and find thick cover.

As he'd expected, the mark wore a white suit.

"That's Masters," Alex said. "You were right, he came himself."

"You sound surprised. I told you he'd come himself. If he worked through intermediaries, he wouldn't have come in person to hire me. You know what to do?"

"I'm already recording the inside of the warehouse. As soon as you two start talking, I'll use the identity you created to leak the exact location of the meeting to the people in orbit. The moment that's done, I start broadcasting everything. That gives you at most five minutes before the shooting starts."

"They're going to land and confirm I'm here, and only then they'll start shooting. No merc wants to waste time killing the wrong target." He paused. "Well, no merc worthy of the title."

"These guys are going to know the moment they see you." Alex indicated the screen.

"I'm not concerned about them. So long as I have the boy with me, they won't shoot. Once the mark has admitted to being behind everything, all this will become pure chaos, and his guards will be too busy trying to keep him alive to bother with me."

"What about Emil?" Alex asked, his voice forcefully neutral. He was trying not to give away

how he felt, but in the attempt to hide it, he was showing how much he hated that the boy would be in the middle of it.

Tristan gave Alex his most charming smile. “Don’t worry, I need him alive until all of this is over.” He loved how it made the human’s hand closed into fists and his eyes burn with anger.

Alex took a breath, opened his hands, and typed, bringing up multiple images of their armament. “I expect you saw the rifles.” He pointed at something at a hip that wasn’t clear, even with the high resolution. “The projective algorithm I wrote says this is a gun; they probably all have one. I can’t find indications of knives, but if they don’t have at least one each, I’m a Tabaran roach.”

“A what?” The surprise undercut the pride he’d been feeling at Alex showing control over his anger.

“A thing we said back home to show we’re certain of what we’re saying. Trust me, no one wants to be a roach.”

Tristan wondered if Alex’s concussion might have caused lasting damage. Something else to deal with after all this. He opened the door to the boy’s room. “Buddy, it’s time.”

The boy jumped off the bed, his face lighting up. “My father’s here?”

“I think so.” Tristan crouched before the boy as his face lost the enthusiasm.

“You aren’t sure?”

Tristan placed a hand on each of the boy’s shoulder. “I think it’s him. It looked like the picture you showed me, but he had soldiers with him. And with all the bad men after you and him, it’s possible one of them found out what he really looks like and sent someone to pretend to be him.” He looked the boy in the eyes. “Bud—Emil, I’m going to be depending on you to tell me if it’s really your father. If he is, then it’s all good. If it isn’t, I’m going to take you out of there, do you understand? No matter what, I will keep you safe.”

The boy nodded, but looked uncertain. “If it isn’t him, what are we going to do?”

“We’ll keep looking, okay?” He stood. “Now, because of the soldiers, you won’t be able to just tell me if he isn’t your father. Tell me, would you ever be scared of your father?”

The boy shook his head with the kind of certainty only the innocent and the idiots had.

“Alright, then if at any time you’re scared, I want you to take my hand, and I’ll take you out of there.” He offered his hand to the boy. “It’s that simple. That’s our signal that you don’t want to go with him, no matter what he says.”

The boy took his hand and held on tightly.

Tristan placed the small communication earpiece in his ear. “Alex?”

“I hear you. They’re still on their way. All recordings are going. Still no idea where their ship is. I’m running projections based on their path, but with only passive sensors, I’m not holding my breath.”

“We’re heading to the meeting point now.”

“Tristan?” Alex said, as he and the boy exited the ship. “Please be careful. I— I don— Just be careful, please.”

Tristan loved having Alex be this emotional mess who couldn’t work out what he wanted out of this. “Alex, I give you my word that me and the boy have nothing to fear from whatever’s coming. I promised to keep him safe from all of them.” The boy would only hear the certainty in Tristan’s voice.

“I hate you,” Alex said softly, having understood the implication.

Tristan guided the boy through the unused buildings until they reached the warehouse. Inside, they took position in the center of the large space, which happened to have a dozen cameras covering it. He placed a hand on the boy’s shoulder and squeezed it for comfort.

“Won’t be long,” he told him.

“They’ve crossed the perimeter,” Alex said in his ear, sounding professional. “The buoy has detected their electronics and gave one pulse. They received it and are now consulting their equipment. Most likely scanning equipment. They’re adjusting their course to take the long way to you. ETA ten minutes. Okay, on a related note, we’re starting to attract the attention of everyone in orbit. Active scans are going over our head. Doesn’t look like they’ve detected us. I’m picking up encrypted chatter, and by the tone, there’s a lot of bickering taking place out there. I’ll let you know if anyone makes a move. ETA to Masters reaching you, eight minutes.”

In the distance, metal hit metal, and the boy startled. “It’s going to be okay,” Tristan told him.

He placed his other hand in his pocket, closing it over the detonator. There was a slim chance he'd misread the mark, and this wasn't about negotiating his son's return. That was what the explosives were for.

Seven minutes after Alex's last communication, two soldiers in black armor appeared, rifles pointing forward. Tristan stayed relaxed, finger on the trigger. They did a visual scan, turning their helmeted heads and keeping the rifles pointed where they looked. Military training. The mark had borrowed soldiers for this.

They took their time scanning the area. Occasionally their rifles would pass over Tristan and he'd tense, but they kept going. After fifteen minutes they took position next to each pillar at the corner of the square formed by four of them. He and the boy stood in the center of it.

If they had scanners in their helmets they hadn't detected the explosives, since they now stood next to enough to turn each of them into mist. They might have detected the cameras, but Tristan didn't think so. It wasn't what the mark would be worried about.

They spoke, indistinct muffled sounds coming from their helmets. More steps came from the direction they had.

Alex cursed in his ear. "Two of them have just walked out of the cameras' view. I can't tell if it was on purpose or just bad luck."

The mark became visible, accompanied by three soldiers. They took position by the two already there, and the mark took two steps forward, making it clear he was the one in charge.

"Tristan," the man said. "This is a quaint hole you found to hide in."

"You haven't given me much choice."

"I've just leaked the location," Alex said in his ear.

"Release my son," the mark demanded.

"How do I know you're his father?" He looked at the boy. "Is that your father?"

Emil took a step forward, hesitated.

"Hello, Emil," the mark said, his voice all smiles. "I'm so glad to see you again. It's been a long time since I've seen you in the flesh."

"F-Father?"

The mark smiled. "Yes, Emil. It's me." It was good, practiced, and as fake as any smiles Tristan had used. "I'm glad to see you're all right."

The boy smiled and spoke with enthusiasm. "Tristan's been keeping me safe. He's been showing me things."

At those words, the mark stiffened. Not enough for the boy to notice, but Tristan saw, and he relaxed more. He'd read the situation correctly. He'd understood what the mark had expected and acted differently. Tristan hadn't hurt the boy; he hadn't worked out his anger over the double-cross on him.

The mark motioned to the boy. "Come on, Emil," he said, his tone more stern than caring. "I'm going to take you away from that...thing." The mark wasn't quite as adept at going off-script as Tristan was.

The boy took another step, which forced Tristan to let go of him. He stopped and looked at Tristan over his shoulder.

"Are you sure this is your father?" Tristan asked, putting the concern in his tone the mark hadn't been able to. "Remember what we know. Are you going to be safe with this man?"

The mark glared at Tristan. "What do you think you're doing?"

"I'm thinking of my buddy's safety."

The mark snorted. "His safety? You? You don't even know what keeping someone safe means. I'm his father. I've seen to it he was safe. I put him in the safest academy. I made sure he'd be prepared to deal with what the universe would throw at him. Even this is about making sure he's going to stay safe. To make sure he knows what your kind are like."

Tristan didn't need to hear this, but it was instructive. He looked at the boy, who was paying attention to every word the mark said. Did his father know how smart the boy was? Was the boy now savvy enough to understand what the words meant?

"There you are," Alex said. "The two went the long way around, keeping out of the cameras' view, so they know about them. Probably think it's just security since they haven't disabled any of them. They're behind you, three pillars back."

“Buddy,” Tristan said, “what am I like?” He filed Alex’s information away for use when it became relevant.

“You’re nice,” the boy said, his expression puzzled. “You’re smart and brave. You tell me fun stories.”

Tristan smiled at the mark, the same kind of fake smile the man had used earlier.

“You’re wrong,” the mark said, angry. “That thing’s a killer. He hurts people for money. His kind are what I need to keep the universe safe from.” He got himself under control and when he continued, his voice was calm, welcoming. “He lied to you, Son. Come to me. I’m going to keep you safe from people like him.”

The boy took another step forward and stopped. When he looked at Tristan over his shoulder again, the mark’s face became pure exasperation.

“Do you really hurt people?”

Tristan shrugged. He kept his tone neutral. “Sometimes I don’t have a choice. Like with that animal, I didn’t want to kill it, but the universe was testing me. Sometimes, other people are the test.”

“For money?” the boy asked.

Tristan shook his head. “I’ve never killed for money.” He sighed. “Buddy, I’m not a nice person with everyone, I can’t be. There are people out there who are worse than me. You know, like I do, there are bad people in the universe. Sometimes you can’t be nice with them.”

“He’s lying!” the mark yelled as the boy nodded. “He’s nothing more than a killer, a murderer. He’s the worst kind of mercenary scum. He doesn’t care about anyone but himself.”

“You’re wrong,” the boy said softly, but it was enough to stun the mark into silence.

“You have incoming,” Alex said. “They’re early.”

“Do you really think you can tell my buddy that I’m a monster when I spent months protecting him from the people who want to hurt him?” Tristan motioned around them. “We were betrayed at the rendezvous you arranged. How did that happen? Who told all the mercs out there we were meeting here? You say you kept him safe? All you did is put him in a prison and told them never to let him out. I’ve spent more time actually looking after him than you ever did.”

“Emil! Come here, now!”

The boy took two steps under the strength of the order.

“Please think, Buddy,” was all Tristan said, and the boy stopped walking. He was halfway between the two of them. “Are you certain this man has your safety in mind? That he’s going to look after you? Are you sure he isn’t one of the bad men?”

“No! I will not have you make my own son doubt me!” The mark ground his teeth to keep from adding more to his outburst. He crouched. “Son, everything I did was to prepare you. You have to see that. I have your best interests in mind, but that doesn’t mean I can always be nice. Sometimes there are hard lessons that have to be learned.”

“Tristan?” Alex sounded worried. “Exactly how many mercs were you expecting? The sky’s turning dark out here. Oh shit!”

There was an explosion, the building shook. Dust fell from the ceiling. In the distance, a beam crashed to the ground. Startled, the boy ran back to Tristan, took his hand, and clung to it.

“No!” Another explosion punctuated the mark’s yells. “I didn’t set all of this up for you to run to him! Emil, get back here this instant!”

Tristan held the boy against him and smiled at the mark. This time it was a genuine smile. He mouthed, “I win.”

“No!” the man growled. “I hired you for one reason and one reason only. I paid you so hand my son over to me.”

Tristan tightened his arms around the boy. “No.”

The man was shaking. “You think you’ve won? There’s no one here to say what happened. When you’re both dead, I’ll just claim you killed my son. This is going to ensure that—”

Tristan picked up the boy and ran. “You better have gotten that,” he growled.

“Been broadcasting since I leaked the location, as planned,” Alex replied. “The signal is strong and clear, and the only people who won’t hear it are those primitive worlds who don’t need to know about this anyway.”

“What are you waiting for?” the mark yelled. “Fire, kill them both!”

“But we have another problem,” Alex said.

“Just one?” He reached in the pocket, darting about to avoid the rifle shots. He pressed the detonator and there was an explosion behind him.

“I was so preoccupied with the broadcast and keeping an eye on all our friends in orbit I never saw the rest of Masters’s men approaching.”

“How many?” He threw himself toward one of the lone guards.

“Oh, just about a hundred.”

He hit the ground on his back, rolled, and let go of the boy as blaster shots flew over him. He jumped up, grabbed the soldier’s rifle out of his hand, and slammed the butt in the helmet, cracking the visor. While he was stunned, Tristan found the camouflaged sheath attached to the man’s leg, pulled the knife out, and buried it in his chest, where the two plates connected. It sunk in easily, cutting through the atoms in the material.

He used the body as a shield and motioned for the boy to join him, and in seconds the boy had grabbed his hand.

“It won’t take long for the broadcast to do its job, then the mercs are going to be firing at everyone, not just us.” He stood and fired in the direction where the mark had been. Shots had kept coming from there, so the explosion hadn’t killed everyone.

“Considering the number of mercs that are landing, going after everyone isn’t going to slow them down all that much. We have what we needed, I suggest we get out of—” The rest was static.

“Alex!” Tristan took a step to run toward the exit, but a beam grazed him and forced him back. What had he been about to do? Run blindly to Alex’s rescue? That wasn’t part of the job, which was done, so he no longer needed Alex. He needed to focus on his own survival.