

Silence.

The only thing telling him the ship functioned was the vibration under Tristan's feet.

He kept his eyes closed and enjoyed it. When was the last time silence surrounded him? When could he reasonably expect not to be disturbed for days on end? Not to have to deal with anyone other than a daily meal?

Months now.

When Alex forced his way back into Tristan's life, he stole away his solitude.

He looked at the human, frozen under the cryo field, and he was tempted to keep him under there for the rest of time. Keep him out of his life this way. He could send the ship on a course through the universe and never have to think about him again.

At least he didn't need him awake right now. He could enjoy his solitude for a while longer.

From the cockpit he checked the passive scanners. They were faint, but it had detected pulses from active sensors scans. Somewhere in the system there was at least one merc looking for him. He'd expected that; not all mercs could be at the other end of the universe.

It was why he was awake, even if it would still be over a week before he reached Artus One at best speed. He didn't want to be anywhere within the system with his ship running at full power. He'd shut down everything but minimal life support and cryo, and gave himself the time to decide how to proceed.

He could do as he had on Liadon. Aim himself, shut everything down, and become a piece of space debris on a ballistic arc through the system heading for a fiery crash. He'd have to hope no one detected the faint energy radiation from having to keep the cryo systems powered up.

Hope was for those who couldn't plan properly. Those who had the luxury of depending on some imaginary force to nudge things in the direction they needed. He couldn't afford that, not when the universe hated him too much to let some other force save him.

If he wanted to be mistaken for debris, he had to do the work to ensure it happened. He activated the cameras. He couldn't use active scans. Just like he'd detected theirs, they would detect his. The area wasn't as dense with asteroids as he would have liked. He was going to have to maneuver to reach something he could use. Fortunately, he had time. If there was one person who wouldn't show up anytime soon, it was the mark.

One of the reasons he'd picked this planet was because it was as different from what his mark liked: a world with no one on it. No reporters to bask in his presence, and no SpaceGov representative to try to influence. He wouldn't want to come here and wait. He was going to make sure Tristan stewed here long enough to be even more desperate.

He waited until one of the larger asteroids moved between him and the inner system before giving his ship bursts of power, matching that of the asteroid so it would become a shield while he found something more appropriate for his trip to Artus One.

It took him most of the day to find an asteroid he could work with. It wasn't perfect—larger meant he'd have to use more power to adjust its momentum—but it had the right composition and a cavern large enough to hide the ship in once it was moving in the right direction.

He landed in the cavern, locked the ship in place, and went to the hold. With his injuries only hours away, subjective, and an intensive treatment under the medical table, he needed to rest.

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He came awake with the sense something was wrong. He didn't move; that would give away his alert state. The ship's vibration was minimal, which was normal, it was using barely any power. He couldn't smell any new scents. The sounds were those of metal, straining occasionally as a larger asteroid came close enough to add a new gravitational pull on this one.

Where were the sounds of Alex moving about? Breathing?

He sat with a growl. No, it couldn't be what woke him. He didn't need to hear the human to sleep. He didn't need him for anything. He looked at the chrono. He'd slept for six hours. Enough time. He gave himself an immune-booster injection and did stretches, both to limber himself up and to get a sense of the pain he still felt. He decided against the painkillers. He could function with the little the medical table had left him.

He put the EVA suit on and voided the air out of the ship. The boy and Alex were under cryo, so they wouldn't notice the lack of oxygen.

He walked on the ship to survey the cavern. It was larger than he'd thought. He couldn't

scavenge enough material to fully anchor the ship to the asteroid. His options were to look for another asteroid, or be satisfied with anchoring the ship only from the bottom and the sides.

He decided to stay. There weren't enough asteroids in this part of the system for him to waste the time. He could reposition the ship to maximize the anchor points. First he had to make sure the asteroid was heading where he needed it to.

He had the computer do the calculation, then used the ship to nudge the asteroid's trajectory and to cancel its spin. He needed the back of the cavern pointing away from the planet so he could use the ship's engine to adjust the speed until it matched what the program told him he needed.

It took two days of maneuvering to have the asteroid moving as he needed it. Then he landed the ship back inside the cavern and went to work on it. Four days later it was as firmly affixed to that asteroid as it could be. He started the engine and accelerated the asteroid to a fraction of the speed he needed. Everything whined loudly, but it held. He shut everything down and moved on to the next problem.

He was blind.

There was nothing he could do to get the passive sensor to see through the asteroid. He could push the active sensors hard enough to get a sense of what was around them, but he'd announce his presence to everyone in the system. He pulled the cameras Alex had gotten him. He had sixty of them. How many could he spare? He went for ten. He could get enough of a field of vision with them and it wouldn't leave him with too few for the rest of the job.

He took his time installing them, admiring the universe, this vast and deadly being that was obsessed with crushing them all. "Not today," he told it.

From the cockpit, he made sure their signal came in. There were more blind spots than he liked, but he could now see what was around him. He would have the time to react when something went wrong.

He pressurized the ship, put away the EVA suit, showered, and then slowly brought up the asteroid's speed until it matched what the program needed. In two weeks they would be crashing in one of the four large oceans on Artus One, with the asteroid providing the needed protection for the reentry.

He gave himself one day to enjoy his solitude, then woke Alex. "Get to work."

Alex nodded and took his seat. "We're not on the planet?"

Couldn't he just work in silence? "No. Mercs are already here. I need to hide our arrival."

Alex looked at the screens. He didn't have access to the new cameras, but the ship's cameras gave him enough of a view to work out where they were. "This...is creative. You do know I could have blinded them, right?"

Tristan closed his eyes. Why had he taken him out of cryo again? "Your job is to turn my ship into a broadcasting unit powerful enough to send the signal it'll get to the ends of the universe. Nothing more."

Alex nodded, and Tristan got himself a handful of nutrient bars.

"Just something to keep in mind for next time," Alex commented.

Tristan made fists. *Stop pushing me.* He could imagine himself slamming Alex's face into the screen. He could feel the satisfaction in reminding the human who was in charge. He forced his hands to relax. Alex was fiddling with his earpiece, turning it this way and that. Why hadn't he fixed whatever the problem was with it? He settled on a position and got to work.

Tristan considered that he might have to put his claim on invisibility to the test at some point.

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Tristan looked at the boy, still on the bed, and took a moment to reconstruct the mask. This was his buddy, the boy they were escorting to his father. He was a friend. Someone whose life he'd saved because he'd been worried about him, because he cared. He deactivated the cryo field.

"Hey, Buddy. Rise and shine."

"Are we here? Is my father here?" The boy threw his legs off the side of the bed.

"Almost. There's something I thought you'd like to see." He brought the boy to the cockpit and pointed to a screen, then nodded to Alex. The image of the planet appeared. "Have you ever seen a planet from space?" They were still a few hours from entering the gravity well, and the

blue, brown, and gray sphere was fully visible on the small screen.

The boy shrugged. "I've seen pictures of them."

Tristan smiled. "I guess you have." He took the boy by the shoulder and turned him around. "Then, how about this?"

The boy gasped. Suspended before him, surrounded by the darkness of space, was the planet. The resolution was such that instead of appearing completely brown and gray, spots of green were visible, where the vegetation was coming back. The two visible oceans weren't dark green; they were dark in places, pale in others, and brilliant blue where it was shallow enough. They could make out mountains as well as pits where the mines had been.

This was what Alex had managed to do with his computer and three of the camera inputs. He'd shown it to him because he'd wanted to prove he knew what he was doing. Tristan had seen the image and known he could use it to continue bonding with the boy.

The boy reached for the image and his hand passed through it. "It looks so real."

"This is where we're going to meet with your father. I thought you'd like to see it before we enter atmosphere."

The boy's face showed wonder, and Tristan suspected his own had look like that, back when he'd climbed to the top of trees to look at those mysterious boxes flying in the sky.

The boy hugged Tristan. The gesture was so sudden that he dropped the mask and almost pushed the boy away. His hands were on his shoulder when he remembered this was what he wanted to happen. He placed a hand on the boy's back and held him against his fur.

"Thank you," the boy mumbled.

"I told you I'd bring you to him. We're almost there." Tristan grinned at Alex. The human's eyes, burning with anger, only served to make Tristan happier. He'd told Alex there was nothing he could do to keep this from happening. And now he was confronted with the boy having grown so close he was comfortable crying in his fur.

Alex turned his back to him and focused on the computer.

The boy pulled away and wiped his eyes. Tristan crouched down. "Now, you have a decision to make. You can go back under cryo until your father gets here, or you can stay up and help us get things ready."

"I want to help," the boy answered without hesitating.

Tristan smiled. "I knew you would. There isn't much to do right now, and things are going to get bumpy in a while, so stay in your room until I get you, okay?"

The boy nodded, and he disappeared into the room,

With the door closed, Tristan stood and grinned. Alex was looking at him, which made him grin wider, showing teeth.

"Don't." Alex's voice was shaking. "Don't tell me how easy this was. How simple it is for you to wrap us around your finger." He fixed his angry gaze on Tristan. "Don't gloat."

Tristan took a step forward, his face hardening, but Alex didn't seem to care.

"If you want me to do my job, do not rub my face in this."

Tristan could tell the human was working at keeping his voice low. "You knew what I would do. I told you."

"He's a kid." Alex rubbed his face, and for a moment, Tristan thought he was going to claw his skin off or do something else futile in an attempt to stop him. "Don't you get that? Damn it, Tristan, doesn't it mean one fucking thing that he's just a child?"

Tristan took another step, hands closing into fists.

Alex's anger turned cold and hard. "Don't. I'm warning you, don't even think of laying a finger on me. You can beat the crap out of me when this is all over, but right now I'm so fucking angry with you I'll probably have the computer commit suicide if you give me a reason."

Tristan froze. It wasn't an idle threat; Alex still had the earpiece in. A word might be all that was needed. Alex meant to carry through with it, but he wasn't doing it for his protection.

"Do you understand what you're doing to that kid? You're making him like you. Fuck, you're making him love you."

"That is what I need." He didn't put any emotion in his answer.

Alex wanted to scream. His whole body was shaking. Tristan was fascinated by the reaction. He couldn't ever remember driving someone to that level of anger when his attention wasn't

directed on them.

With visible effort, Alex calmed himself. An act of pure will, since he was still shaking. “You don’t feel anything, do you?” Alex searched his eyes. He desperately wanted to see something there. “You have no idea what it’s like to have your heart broken, do you?”

Tristan didn’t react, or bother answering. Of course he didn’t know what that felt like. He didn’t shackle himself by caring for other people. *He was screaming, trying to reach for his mother as his father dragged him out of the house.* Caring was just another weapon for him to use.

“What’s going to happen to him when you’re done using him?”

Tristan tilted an ear.

“You don’t care.” Alex deflated, falling back in his seat. “You just don’t fucking care.”

Tristan evaluated the situation. He shouldn’t let Alex get away with this. He could wrap a hand around his neck while he was distracted, keep him from saying anything. Take the earpiece out, bring him to the hold where he could explain in painful details just how this wasn’t acceptable. He could even do that in a way that would let the human continue with his part of the job.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” he said. Alex’s head snapped up. “I said I would judge you on the work you do here and now. There’s too much still to do. I can’t afford to have you work against me at this junction.” He watched Alex’s eyes, let him get over the surprise. He’d fully expected a beating out of this. “But Alex, I’m going to remind you again that you’re here by your own choice. I told you to leave. I warned you nothing good would come of you staying. If you consider betraying me, or endangering this job, I will kill you. I will do so slowly, do you understand?”

Alex nodded. “I’m not going to do that. I wouldn’t. It’s just that I was hop—”

Tristan got in his face, his voice was low and hard. “I do not care, Alex. I don’t care how you feel. This isn’t some vid where you’re the hero and you can reach inside me, find my heart, and unlock it by saying the right words. You are mine to do with as I please. You are nothing more than some pet I took in because you looked miserable in the rain. When this is over, Alex, if you expect to live, you’d better leave. You’d better run far and fast, because once the euphoria of the victory has passed, I can’t promise I’ll be able to look at all the little ways you’ve betrayed me and find a reason to keep you alive.”

Tristan looked in Alex’s eyes, and he saw hope die. Finally. Maybe now there was a chance the human would be able to stop messing up.

“Go to the hold and rest.”

“I can still—”

“Do not argue, Alex.” The rage Tristan was trying to contain slipped out, hot and sharp. “You threatened to kill my computer. Do you understand the level of betrayal that is? I know I can’t go in and find what you did, not after giving you full access for all this time. But I’m still going to go through every line of code, and you better hope I don’t find something as simple as a one-word self-destruct command, because if I do, I will have to finish this job by myself.”

Alex took the earpiece out and fidgeted with it.

“So sleep, Alex, I have work to do.”

Alex stood took a step. “There isn’t— I didn’t— I wouldn’t.” He sighed. “I’m sorry.”

“Sorry, Alex? If you are so sorry, why do you always put me in this position to be so angry at you?” He sat at the computer, took a breath, and began looking through the code Alex had added.