

The human's smile vanished the instant he remembered Tristan was there. "I—"

"It doesn't matter," Tristan finished for him. He didn't care if he thought he'd come up with a way to get to the target, or if he thought he had finally found a way to best Tristan. What Alex thought was irrelevant. He waited, gave Alex time to try to explain that smile.

Instead, Alex nodded. "What do we do then?"

"We get the target to come to us."

Alex began frowning, then looked at the door. The anger on Alex's eyes was muted. Not diminished, but controlled. He was coming to understand he had no say in any of this.

He sighed. "I'll get Emil ready for cryo."

"No. Continue searching for information."

Alex eyed him suspiciously, but he sat.

Tristan smiled as he headed for the boy's room. He was still seated on the bed, and looked up from his datapad. A smile began forming, then his face was neutral. Happy to see "Brian", but he'd been trained not to show his emotions. It was a good skill to have; he simply needed more practice at it.

"Hey, Buddy, it's time to go in cryo."

The boy put the pad down, face up. "Are we going to see my father?" More mathematical problems.

By reflex, Tristan flipped the boy's pad face down. "That's the plan. I think we found him."

"And the bad men?"

"Don't worry, I'll make sure to protect you from them."

"And my father?"

Tristan smiled. "Him too."

The boy nodded. He got off the bed, put the datapad in his suitcase, closed that, and stowed it away in a cabinet. He made sure the cabinet was latched before returning to the bed. Tristan observed him. The motions were natural, no thinking needed. He'd never been in a ship before, according to the job file and the academy's records, and yet someone had drilled ship behavior into him. Had his father left instructions for that? Or did the academy teach every child? Either way, the boy would be better prepared for what the universe would throw at him than other humans.

He tapped the control on the wall and the emitters raised along the sides of the bed. "Won't be long until you see your dad."

Emil nodded.

Tristan activated the field. There was a buzz and flash of static encasing the bed, and then everything within it was unnaturally still.

He opened the cabinet and pulled the suitcase out. It was locked with a simple biometric sensor. He bypassed it. The clothing within was folded. Identical copies of what the boy was already wearing. The datapad and a box of chips. History—general and military—social studies, multiple mathematical chips, psychology.

A human course load; he remembered some of those from when he'd joined the Mobile University. He'd needed to learn about human psychology to track down the mercenary who had tried to kill him. There had been difficulties being accepted there because he wasn't human, and only allowed once he demonstrated he was sufficiently intelligent, to the surprise of the humans. He'd been able to leave his planet. This should have been enough proof, as far as Tristan had been concerned, but the humans wanted numbers.

The datapad had a better lock, and he bypassed it. More courses, accessed from a data node on the net—a university one. A section with personal information, including the picture of his "father". It contained more information about his work for Vertex and notes as to what order to reveal it. Tristan shook his head. This section should have been memorized and deleted.

The hidden section he knew was there gave him some trouble. The program algorithm protecting it moved it about within the pad's memory. Once he found it, opening it was simple. Messages from his father, those were genuine as far as Tristan could tell. The image was of his target, and when he spoke there was a lack of caring in the tone, and didn't seem forced to Tristan. There was a distance here, between the real father and boy, that the way the boy had spoken of the false identity hadn't hinted at.

Tristan found a few replies from the boy asking when he could leave the academy, when his

father would come get him. The questions were direct, without any of the pleading human children used when they wanted something, as did some adults and, Tristan remembered, as did Justin.

The father's replies were short, and variations on: "I'm too busy right now." "It isn't safe for you to join me, yet." Through them, Tristan confirmed that Emil was the boy's real name. But he couldn't confirm the father's name. As Tristan had done his entire life, the boy only called his father "Father".

Unlike his own father, the boy's didn't seem to care about his wellbeing, about how he was progressing in his courses, about how he liked the academy, if he had friends, and if they were treating him well.

There hadn't been many—his father had been too busy teaching him how to survive—but Tristan remembered a few times around the fire when his father asked how he and Justin got along, how they thought they were doing in what he was teaching.

He and Justin always lied. They got along well, they were learning well, they enjoyed what they were learning. He had to know those were lies, but he never called out either one on them.

Like in Tristan's life, there didn't seem to be a mother in the boy's. He idly wondered if the boy had any memories of her or, like with Justin, she had been removed from his life when he was too young.

Tristan erased his usage log and put the pad back in the suitcase, replaced the clothing as it had been, and put the suitcase back in the cabinet, latching it.

He went over the messages as he studied the room for any other indication he'd been there. The coldness, the distance, led Tristan to think there had been no emotions in the boy's conception.

It wasn't like his own father, who'd felt he'd had something to prove by taking him and Justin away from their mother. From what Tristan had pieced together from the little his father had let slip, he hadn't known about either of them until that day.

No, the boy's father had wanted him, but not for the reasons most human parents wanted children. This had been academic, something planned for. This meant his desire to get his son back was also genuine; he needed the boy for something. Tristan smiled. If his target wanted the boy, he'd make sure he didn't get him.

The simplest way to do that was to kill the boy. He could make it quick, make sure he didn't suffer. But that wouldn't fix the overall problem his target had created. In fact, killing the boy would play into that.

He needed to use the boy to get his target to reveal the truth. Only if it came from him would anyone believe it. Torture would be the simplest way, but that meant inflicting pain on the boy. He wouldn't do that.

The revelation needed to be public. It would do no good for Tristan to be the only one to hear that all of this had been a setup. Even if that was recorded, it would be easy enough for his target to then claim it had been fabricated. It needed to be broadcasted as it happened.

Tristan smiled. It needed to be broadcasted to the ends of the universe as it happened. Not only would the target not be able to renege on what he'd said, but SpaceGov would find out and act before he could mitigate the damage. SpaceGov might be willing to overlook much in its enforcing of the laws, but Tristan doubted arranging his son's kidnapping just to push his agenda would be one of those.

The course he was seeing would be more work, but Tristan didn't mind work. It kept him busy, kept his mind occupied. That was why he took these occasional jobs when there was nothing else to do, after all.

Anyway, using the boy in such a way would be fun.

He closed the door behind him and was still smiling, at least until he saw Alex and his determined expression.

"Tristan," he began, "I don't think you..." The rest trailed off under Tristan's less than amused glare.

He felt his claws dig in his palm as he contemplated punching the human—a reminder of his place. He forced himself to relax. The new plan meant he couldn't simply beat Alex. He needed the boy to become comfortable with both of them, and he was observant enough that he would notice details like Alex fearing him more than he already was.

Which wasn't enough, it seemed, as the human opened his mouth again.

"Do not speak, Alex. I will not beat you now for it—the job needs you emotionally intact—but give me reasons, and when this is over, you will get a reminder of how deep my anger can run. Do you understand?"

Alex searched his face, not the search of before, looking for that Jack mask, but trying to determine how serious Tristan was.

"I understand."

"Go under cryo."

The human opened his mouth, and closed it. This soon after the warning and he already had trouble. The tally would be high by the time this was over, Tristan knew. Well, it wasn't like he'd need Alex alive by then.

Alex went to the chair, tapped the controls, paused. "What parameter do I put in to be woken up?"

"I'll wake you."

Tristan sat in the pilot's seat, feeling the human's eyes on his back, but instead of saying anything, there was the buzz of the field being activated.

Tristan sighed. Finally alone. No one to bother him with questions, or demanding explanations. Now he could focus on what needed to be done without any distractions.

He made a list—recording and broadcasting equipment. Something capable of reaching the whole universe. That meant one of the larger companies. Difficult, but Alex claimed to be good. This would be a verifiable test. A location.

It couldn't be on any of the major worlds—too much security—but not on a periphery world either. They wouldn't have access to the equipment he needed, and he didn't want to spend too much time in transit. Too much could happen while he was under cryo.

Going through the list of worlds, Liadon came up as a good choice. Two months of objective travel time and it had a blossoming vid industry, so the equipment he needed. It was still minor enough to like its independence, and that meant none of the major corporations and the high security they brought with them. They also didn't have a SpaceGov office, not that they cared about planetary security.

Yes, Liadon would do nicely. He set the course and put himself under cryo.