

Tristan pushed himself. He ran hard to burn off this sense that had crept over him during the last month. It wasn't Alex; he had that under control. It was the utter lack of things to do. He couldn't understand how it was that with all the people in the universe this could happen, but there hadn't been any new weapons, ships, security systems, or anything even remotely related to his survival to be developed.

It wasn't the first time such a thing had happened. The last one had resulted in him falling for a trap and ending up in prison. The one before that he'd ended up in the middle of a local war on a low-tech world.

These times when he had nothing to do never led to anything good. He'd even caught himself looking over mercenary boards, just to see what kind of easy jobs were floating around these days.

He stopped as he noticed something white down the hill leading to his house. This was the last section of this trail, the longer one. It went down a long hill, then the forest ended.

Alex stopped next to him, jogging in place to stay warm. The temperature wasn't cool enough to see his breath, but the human didn't have fur. Maybe he could force him to keep running naked when the cold began? No, there was no way he could convince the medic it had been Alex's idea.

He focused on the section of what he could see. Did anyone have something that stark of a white? No. Nothing stayed that pristine unless a lot of care was taken to keep it clean, and the people here had more important things to do than clean machinery.

He stepped to the side and saw more of it. Got a sense of size. A ship. A smaller one, maybe just a shuttle. What he saw could fit a dozen designs.

Alex shrugged, mistaking the glance for a question. This would be a reasonable test of Alex's ability to follow instruction, verbal or otherwise.

Tristan cut through the woods. Alex followed him, loud, in spite of his effort to be silent. Still, the effort was enough no one in the ship would hear them. He saw more of it through the trees, and he dismissed the designs he knew one by one. This was a custom job, which meant money.

He paused when he saw the two men standing on each side of the open hatch. Human, broad-shouldered, tall, and wearing expensive black suits. The cloth looked ordinary, but it would be armored. What grade of armor would depend on how much money their employer spent.

Guards came from two groups: military or Law. If they were military, the bulge under their jacket would be Kentrics—a B43 or C56, their preferred gun. If they came from the Law, it was looking like one of the heavier models from Azeru, or one of the weaker Dyrons.

They stood relaxed, but attentive. The ship had landed with the hatch facing the end of the path. The owner had scanned the area, and placed himself so Tristan would exit it right in front of them, if he'd stayed on the trail.

Time to deal with them.

He stepped on branches on the ground, and made sure to break those at body height. When he stepped out of the forest, the two men had already shifted position to face him, and had moved their jacket for an easier reach. The butt of the guns were the black bands that were typical of Kentric, but too thin for either of the models he expected.

Tristan put the Tech mask on and smiled. The only reaction from the men was to relax. They reacted more to Alex's nudity when he stepped out of the forest—a raised eyebrow—than they did to him. Typical, aliens were already strange, what did it matter how they did or didn't dress.

Still, it meant their attention was divided as Tristan approached. They waited too long to open their mouths. If they had something to say, orders to give, an offer to make, they shouldn't have waited for him to come within arm's reach.

He punched the closest one in the throat, pulled the gun out of the holster as he fell, the So3, commonly called the Perforator. The safety slid smoothly in the off position and he shot the other man in the chest before he could react. The shirt took the brunt of the blast, but nothing that looked like ordinary clothing could have enough armor to it to stop the Perforator.

"What is the meaning of—" The man stepping into the doorway stopped as Tristan shoved the Perforator in his face. He'd never tested the effect of this particular weapon on flesh. Maybe this would be an opportunity to run those tests?

Maybe later. First, he needed to assess who they were and, more importantly, why they were here. This wasn't a kill or capture mission, not enough people.

"I don't like trespassers," Tristan said.

The man straightened his white suit, just as stark as the ship, and glared at Tristan. This was a man used to being obeyed, respected. A flick of the eyes was all he needed for people to do things for him.

Tristan waited him out.

"I am not a trespasser," he finally said in a tone that implied Tristan had insulted him. "I have been sending messages for days informing you of my arrival. I am your new employer."

Tristan didn't react. The man said that as if it was all that needed to be said. Corporate, at least executive branch, but those people didn't usually come in person to hire mercs. They hated getting their hands dirty.

"I didn't get any such message." All the IDs he had as contact points were programmed to alert him any time they were contacted. Only the people he paid to retrieve information from the corporations he studied were supposed to contact them, but sometimes one of them thought he was being proactive by giving that contact to someone who shouldn't have it.

So this man had contacted him through his mercenary contacts. He hadn't grown bored enough yet to check those.

"Then I recommend you check them more often." The tone waved Tristan's denial aside. This man didn't care what Tristan wanted.

Yes, he should do the test now. Except Tech wasn't someone who shot people. Some hand to hand fighting with Alex was easy to explain, they were friends. Alex would want to stay in shape. It didn't give any indication of how good Tech was.

Alex was here. He could be the explanation. He could kill these people if he thought Tech was being threatened. He considered it, but what then? Study this ship? It was a one-off—he wouldn't encounter another one like it again. Maybe more research would come his way in the meantime.

Maybe not.

"Why would I want to work for you?" If he didn't like the answer, he could still kill this man. If he did like it, then it would be something to do. He needed something to do.

"May I?" He indicated to the side, to something Tristan couldn't see. He nodded, and the man pulled a duffel bag and dropped it on the ground at Tristan's feet.

Without taking his eyes off the man, Tristan pushed it behind him with a foot. The bag had weight to it. "Tell me what's in it."

Alex whistled. "There's a lot of gems, diamonds, rubies, gold, silver, all mixed together like he emptied a bunch of bags of the stuff in here. There's also a gun of some sort, in two parts. A rifle by the looks of it."

The man smiled in pride. "That's Dolfic's latest. The RJ-23. I happen to know you're a collector. Even the military doesn't have access to it yet."

"I already have it."

"Ah." If the man was disappointed, he didn't show it. "Well, this was primarily a demonstration of what I can get you. I can get you something else if you prefer. I have contacts. If you do this work for me, not only will I pay you a second bag's worth of gems, but I will acquire any tech you want, no matter how early in its production."

Tristan preferred credits when it came to payment. Anyone could print gems, but there were plenty of primitive worlds that still valued those, so he could get them exchanged. But the access to technology? That wasn't an offer he got often. The man spoke the truth; if he'd gotten the RJ-23, he had contacts. If those contacts happened to be able to get him earlier designs?

Corporate, definitely corporate. Which meant the real question was, could he be trusted?

"How did you find me?"

"My wealth is vast, as is my network of contacts." The man looked at his nails, a rehearsed gesture. "Finding someone who knew where you lived only took that, and time."

That was a lie. No one knew he was here. No, one person knew. He'd made sure any other evidence had been destroyed. Still, a lie didn't mean anything when corporate was involved; they always lied. The worrisome part was that this location was compromised from another direction, one he knew nothing about. He'd have to decide what to do about that.

“What’s the job?”

The man smiled. The smile of someone who’d gotten what he wanted. “I need someone acquired.”

Tristan raised an eyebrow. “Anyone can do that.”

“True, but I only employ the best.”

Tristan nodded to the man massaging his throat, glaring hatefully at him. “The best doesn’t forget to activate the palm lock on his gun.”

The man looked at them, his expression not changing when he noticed the second man was dead. “I was told they were the best. Clearly I was misled. Get up,” he told the guard. “We’re leaving.”

“Pick up your garbage,” Tristan ordered before the guard moved toward the shuttle.

The guard glared at Tristan.

“Well?” the man in white asked. “What are you waiting for? Do as you’re told.” He scowled. “Yes, someone definitely misled me.” He disappeared behind the ship’s wall as he moved aside for the guard and the body he carried in, then reappeared. “The information you need is on a chip in the side pocket. As is how to contact me once it’s done.”

“I haven’t taken the job.”

The man smiled, and Tristan almost shot him. He hated how smug it was. “Tell me, how is the research these days? When was the last time you received some documents on a new invention in the security industry? How about ships, or weapons? As I mentioned, I have contacts within those industries. You know as well as I do this is a dry spell. Have you gone through everything that came out before this yet? How long until you do? I expect not long.”

The man leaned against the hatch’s side and studied Tristan. “How do you deal with mental inactivity? Do any of your previous outings during such lulls have anything to do with boredom? Those were rather violent, even for you. Think of this as a way of controlling what you do until the business picks up again.”

Nothing showed on Tristan’s face, on his body, of his desire to kill this man. He knew Tristan too well. Only one person knew him that well, and he was floating inside a cryotube on the Sayatoga.

He didn’t need this man alive now that he had the information on the job. But what was the point of acquiring the target if he didn’t have anyone to deliver them to? If Tristan killed him, there was no job.

He could find something on the boards, something simple, easy to do. Just like he had the previous times, and each time it had been anything but.

The hatch closed. Then the ship took off so smoothly Tristan’s fur wasn’t mussed. He’d made his decision. Now he needed to confirm something. He turned and pointed the Perforator at Alex’s head. “Who did you tell?”

Alex stood. He didn’t twitch. There was no fear in his eyes. “No one.” Part of the lack of fear was an acceptance he couldn’t control what Tristan would do. The rest was knowing he was being truthful. “He might have gotten it from the same place I did: a Lawman on Bramolian Six. He had a list of possibilities. I went through it, and the last one was this place.”

Tristan considered this. He’d taken care of that list, and planned to remove that man when he had the time, but while anything the man had compiled had been destroyed, he couldn’t account for what he had done with the knowledge.

He lowered the gun, grabbed the bag, and headed to his workroom. Alex followed him as far as the door, then waited for instructions. When Tristan didn’t say anything he walked off, the door closing.

Tristan played the message waiting on his computer. “Tech, Jacoby. A small ship just broke atmo, the buoy calculates it’s heading to your place. If you need help, call me.”

A call came in as he erased it.

“Tech?” The portmaster sounded worried. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” Tristan answered.

“Are you sure? They left scanner range, who was that? The tag didn’t give me any result.”

Definitely corporate. “No one you need to worry about.”

A pause. “Tech, I’m here if you’re in trouble, you know that.”

Tristan had to stop himself from snapping. Tech would understand the portmaster's concern. "It was just someone offering me work. I need to go." He disconnected.

The portmaster wouldn't call again, but he would have questions when Tech informed him that he had to leave.

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He left the workroom to the smell of grilled meats and vegetables. He thought the job over as he ate. It was simple enough. Like any job, there were variables that could complicate it, but he'd accounted for as many of them as he could. What was left shouldn't be too problematic.

He stood. "Pack your things, we're taking the job."

"We?" Alex looked up from his plate. "I'm going with you?"

Tristan leveled his gaze on the human. "I'm not leaving you here unsupervised."

"I wouldn't touch anything."

Five months, at the most. That was how long he gave Alex before his curiosity would override his common sense and he tried to enter his workroom. That would certainly resolve this problem.

"I swear," Alex said, "I wouldn't."

But the explosion would destroy his things.

"You're human. You can't help touching things you shouldn't. We leave in an hour." He went back to the workroom and put his things away. The security system was already programmed to activate once he and Alex were out of range. Anything he'd need for the job was already on his ship, or he'd get it locally.

He sent a message to the portmaster about his departure, and shut down the terminal before a reply could arrive. The only thing he brought with him was the bag with the half of his payment, minus the RJ-23—he stored that with the other one.

Alex was waiting for him with his bag over a shoulder, but without the case. So Alex expected to come back. It was better that way. The human wouldn't be suspicious of what Tristan had in mind for him.

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As expected, the portmaster was waiting for them. He didn't have to be there. His office in town controlled everything, but he liked to be hands-on. The way the human gritted his teeth and had his arms crossed over his chest indicated this wasn't about "the personal touch".

"You said everything was okay," the man said.

"It is."

"Bullshit. They show up, and not four hours later you take off? Tell me it isn't related. Who was that? You said it was about a job. Is it—was that your boss?"

"No."

"Then who?" The portmaster glared at Tristan, not getting out of his way. "Are you going to tell me it's some competitor trying to steal you away?"

"Something like that." It made as good an explanation as anything else.

"Did you take it?"

Tristan didn't reply.

The man's face softened. "Are you leaving? Was that someone who shouldn't know you live here?" He took a breath. "Tech, talk to me, please."

"I may have to leave," Tristan conceded after thinking it over. "If I can't resolve this, it's possible more people will find me if I remain here."

"We'd help, you know that. We look after our own here."

"You couldn't help."

The man's face hardened, but before he said what he really wanted to say, he closed his eyes and took control of himself. "Fuck, I hope you fix this then. We miss you when you're away."

Tristan looked back the way he'd come. "I do too," he replied truthfully. Having this place to come back to between jobs, where he knew no one would bother him, had been good. He would miss having that if he couldn't return.

The portmaster got out of his way and walked alongside to the hangar. He opened it, and Tristan headed inside to unlock his ship.

"Is there any chance you can convince him not to make this permanent?" the portmaster

asked in a low voice, probably thinking Tristan wouldn't hear. "Convince him we can help with this?"

"He does what he wants," Alex answered, his voice forcefully casual.

"What is this? Alex, you were there, what hap—"

"It's what he said," Alex snapped.

"Damn it." The portmaster stopped and Tristan heard the exasperation. "You think I don't know this research crap is hiding something else? No one comes to a place like this because they like the soil. We're all hiding from something. Doesn't he get that?"

"You're wrong. He's just a tech who needs privacy for his work."

"Fuck. Fine, play that game too. But I'm asking you, as one man who's been in the life to another, look after him. I know you care about him, but try to remember you're not the only one. You're not the only family he has. Try to make him understand that."

"Let go of me," Alex growled, and Tristan turned to stop whatever was about to happen.

The portmaster took a step back, hands in the air, placating Alex. Alex's hand was under his jacket, where one of his knives was sheathed. He was angry, bordering on rage. Tristan wondered which of the portmaster's words had caused this.

Alex regained control of himself and turned, heading inside the hangar. Tristan lowered the ramp and entered it before Alex.

The ship had been a Juroky cargo-hauler in a previous incarnation, which he'd acquired as part of his last job. He'd refitted it to better suit his needs and brought it here, leaving his previous ship hidden. The ship was small, designed for two people, but with only one bed. Alex could use that if he felt so inclined.

He indicated the communication and scanner station. "Sit." Tristan took the pilot's seat. He took the chip and handed it to Alex. "Familiarize yourself with the job," he said as he set about taking them off-planet.