

The lack of an explosion while they were outside told Tristan his ship would be untouched, but he still checked it over for any unorthodox attempts at boarding it before stepping up to the panel. He deactivated his security measures, unlocked and lowered the ramp, then stepped inside. Alex looked into the boy's room while Tristan headed for the cockpit.

He'd started the scan of the area by the time Alex sat at the communication board, fiddling with the earpiece in his ear. The human typed and talked in a low voice while Tristan confirmed they were the only people there. The local he'd questioned hadn't lied. It had only been the three of them.

He got a nutrient bar for himself, then also grabbed one for Alex, putting it on his console. The human didn't react, still talking and typing. While he waited, he looked through his communication nodes for anything from his contacts within the manufacturers. All they'd dropped were updated reports on new tests they'd devised for their creations. He checked them, but he'd already run those tests.

How could there not be anything new? It had been close to one objective year since starting this job. The target couldn't have so much influence that he got all of them to stop doing research. If he could do that, he wouldn't need this charade to launch his war on mercenaries.

Once done he glanced at Alex. He was still working. All that was left of the nutrient bar was the wrapper. Tristan looked at the screens, trying to determine how long this would take.

He looked around the cockpit. Was anything due for a check? No, but after the way he'd treated the ship during the fight, he should make sure the power distribution was still calibrated.

Alex looked at him. "You need to listen to this. I've tapped one of the local nodes, so this is live."

Voices erupted in the cockpit. Dozens of them talking over one another, making it difficult to make out individual conversation. The word "Samalian" kept coming up in them. He made out time frames, number of people. Arguments over them. Were they negotiating assault windows?

He looked at Alex, who kept watching him. The human shut it down. "A lot of people know we're here."

"How?"

"I've gone back through the conversations and isolated the ones that are relevant. This starts just about the time you leveled us off out of that free fall." He tapped the board.

"Anyone have the reading on that meteorite falling toward Gelentry?" a woman asked. Calm tone.

A different woman replied. "Not me. There was no warning of one dropping over there, so my array was pointed in the opposite direction. Why?"

The previous woman. "I only have a heat sensor in that direction, but I'm not seeing it break apart. Now it's below its range. Anyone recording seismic? Should be something in that region within a few seconds."

"I do." A man. "But there isn't going to be anything. Just pinged it off one of the amateur sky-watchers. It's leveled up. Not a meteorite."

"Oh." The first woman sounded disappointed. "A ship. That explains it then. Thanks."

Alex tapped the board and the sound cut off. "Scientists, watching the falling meteorites. They didn't tell anyone about the ship they saw, but this conversation is from a group that was listening in on them." Another tap.

"Hey, anyone over Gelentry?" A man, excited. "The big heads looking at the falling rocks just mentioned a ship. Anyone have eyes on it?"

"No ship through the sensor net," another man replied, sounding bored.

"It dropped like a rock, dumbass. The net wouldn't flag it. Is anyone looking up? Come on, someone tell me you don't all have your heads up your ass like net-boy here."

"Hey!" the other man objected.

"Gelentry's all forest," a woman said. "No one's going to have—"

"Saw them." A young-sounding voice distorted by high wind. "They're heading almost perfectly due west." There was some cursing. "I can't follow it. The road veers north and my speeder isn't rated for uneven terrain."

"Due west? The next place after that is Ducurt. We have anyone there?"

"I'm heading to the roof with my scanner." A man, older by the sound of his voice. Panting.

"I'm looking at the travel lane reports. No one's been reported as flying crazy, so the ship has to go through Ducurt no matter where they're going. The next junction is on the other side."

"I'm up. I have them. It's reading as a Juroky hauler. We know anyone who's modded one?"

"You have a design number? Juroky's kind of popular."

"What do I look like? The port authority? All I've got is a tracking array."

"Milicent bought one a few months ago. Rumors were she was going to gut it and turn it into a mobile lounge."

"Can't be her. She's still filming a vid on Aflon Eight."

"Anyone has a search algorithm going? We know anyone heading this way who might own a Juroky?"

Tristan silenced the conversation.

"What is this?"

"Amateur ship-watchers."

Tristan waited for Alex to say more.

"Planets like this, there isn't all that much for kids to do. You have gangs paying attention to the local industries. I used to keep tabs on Toprod shipments. Here they look for vid actors coming and going. From what I've gathered, a lot of them try to avoid being seen arriving, so they find creative ways to get groundside. These people look for them."

"For what? To blackmail them?"

"No, just for something to do, as far as I can tell. They're kids, no older than twenty-five. They do this for fun. Anyway, this goes on for about an hour, plenty of theories as to who we might be. Then it gets interesting." He typed.

"Guys, guys!" a woman said. "You won't believe this, but I think it's him!"

"Oh boy," a man replied derisively. "Everyone better sit down, B.B.'s going to dazzle us with how she worked out which one of her dream actors it is."

"Shut up, Chastity."

"Well?" a different woman asked. "I'm waiting."

"Okay." B.B. went back to it. "Well, since we've confirmed it's sticking to travel lanes, I knew the ship would fly by my place. So I set up my gear, and I got a crystal clear recording. It's definitely a Juroky, but I didn't see much external modification, so I widened my search parameter to anything that's been on the net. I thought maybe it's a brand new purchase and they didn't mod it yet so we'd think it's just a regular old hauler."

"Okay, okay. We're impressed." A man said. "Spit it out, who is it? There's a pool going."

"Glen, let her speak. All you ever contribute is bitching. I'm warning you, if you don't start bringing in sightings, I'm kicking you out. Go ahead, B.B."

"Well, hold on to your scripts everyone. This isn't a vid star, it's the kidnapper."

"What kidnapper?" Glen asked. "What are you talking about? I thought this club was about watching—" His voice cut off abruptly.

"You know the one," B.B. continued. "It's been in the news like, forever."

Alex brought up one of the target's interviews with the sound off. The image switched to a view of his ship flying away. Tristan growled. Based on the other ships he could see, this was from the station's records. His target had bought it off them.

Alex paused it. "I don't know if he did it on purpose, but I did a search, and there are enough different views of this ship that anyone can build a full picture."

It wasn't enough that random mercs were after him. A station had broken what should be its prime rule, and made its records public. Tristan added them to the list of people who needed to learn that working against him was a bad idea.

"This goes on for a bit longer, them debating if we really are the kidnappers or if B.B.'s imagining things. The consensus seems to be that we can't be kidnappers, but that we're probably just black marketers, so they lost interest. But that's right about when this group picks up."

"I'm telling you." The voice sounded like the one who'd been cut off. Alex nodded his agreement. "It's him."

"You remember what I did to you the last time you promised me a score?" This man sounded much older and harsher.

“Of-of course I do. But I swear, I checked it this time. The bounty on that guy is enormous. And it’s in SpaceGov credits, so it’s worth even more here. My one percent finder’s fee is going to set me up for the rest of time.”

“If it’s him, sure. If this is another one of your wild chases, your time is going to end a lot sooner than you’re hoping for.”

For the next minute, all they heard was rhythmic clicking.

“A code of some sort,” Alex said. “I have a program working on it, but based on the fact that all we get is people joining the node, I think it’s a meeting signal.”

“You guys heard,” the harsh voice said. “I had my good friend Fooddy from the center give me the most likely destinations. Who do we have there?”

“Rod was around the old Tekton, hunting Karpip with a couple of friends.”

“Jezz lives in Warlet. She can probably reach the ruins before they get there.

“We don’t have anyone close to the Sasen Falls, so we’re fucked if that’s where they’re heading.”

“Then how fortunate is it for you that I happen to have someone there?” a woman said, sounding amused.

Cursing.

“Now, now. Is that any way to speak to a lady?”

“The Earthbound aren’t ladies, they’re bitches,” the harsh voice snapped.

“I guess that makes you Glamours, my puppies?”

“The Glamours don’t work for you or anyone else.”

“Is that so?” she replied. “Maybe you need to be spanked again?”

“Oh, come on,” a new voice said. “Can’t the two of you get a private channel before devolving into that obscene stuff?”

“This is a private channel. How the fuck did you get in it?”

“Way too easily. Maybe if you had some decent security, we wouldn’t all know about your little hobbies. But then you prefer things being indecent, don’t you? I swear, you Glamours get off on being bent over.”

“You come here and try it, Hardcase, and we’ll see who gets f—”

“Language,” Hardcase said. “There’s a woman present. And don’t worry, the Glamours aren’t our type. We like our men to have more of a spine than you fellows.” He continued over the other man’s sputtering. “So I am going to guess you two were ‘discussing’ who has the rights to go after this supposed kidnapper?”

“He’s ours! We found out about him first! I already have people ready to take him.”

“Do you?” The woman sounded amused again. “Are they willing to fight the Red Blood or the White Souls for the privilege?”

“What are you talking about?”

She sighed. “I swear, Alton, if you weren’t such a good lay I’d wonder what good you are. If you’d bothered doing things the way we’ve all agreed to, instead of going behind all our backs, you’d know we’ve been discussing how to proceed with this for the last twenty minutes. I actually came checking on you because I’ve never known you not to be there to try to steal a few ruand from all of us.”

More cursing. Alex typed again, and a cacophony of voices erupted. Alex silenced it. “This node took longer to find, but it’s the one I played in real time. They’re still arguing over who gets to try to bring you in. The Glamours got first try because we showed up where they already were. The agreement is that whichever gang catches us gets half the bounty, the rest is split evenly among the others. Anyone interferes and they forfeit their share, even if they catch us in the process. The people here have an hour to report in. When that doesn’t happen, the White Souls get to attempt it. I’ve tracked them, they’re a little under half an hour away still. I’m counting four of them.”

“Four amateurs to catch me? They have to realize this is futile.”

“They don’t know who you are; Masters made sure your name never came up. Mercs will figure it out, but the rest? They just see a criminal who can make them rich, and an alien at that. It isn’t like anyone’s going to care if the wrong alien goes missing, even if you aren’t the one who’s wanted.”

“Humans,” Tristan cursed. He dropped in his seat and powered up the ship. “Give me their locations. All of them. As well as any array capable of detecting us.” Why were humans so idiotic? Couldn’t they understand that the larger the bounty, the more dangerous the criminal? They should be proceeding carefully, so Tristan would have time to do what he wanted, instead of having to dodge every idiot out there looking to be killed.

His screen filled with spot overlays on the map of the area. White for the idiots, orange for the private sensor arrays, and red for planetary systems. He carefully maneuvered the ship out of the building, and then took off. He wanted to blast holes in everything in front of him, and just make a straight line for the people who’d decided to get in his way.

Instead he hugged the ground, flying as fast as he could and staying away from anyone and anything that could detect him. He forced his jaw to unclench. Anger wouldn’t help him, and he couldn’t unleash it on Alex. This was one situation the human wasn’t responsible for.

He silenced the proximity alarms. He already knew he was too close to everything for the speed he was going. He didn’t care. He needed to think, and this calmed him.

The plan had to change, but how? Did this open up new opportunities? The big change was that Alex would have to procure everything. Was the human even capable of pulling this off? He was tenacious, but Tristan hadn’t tested him. He’d have to write everything down, give Alex a step by step run down to ensure he wouldn’t screw this up. He’d have to find a new location for the showdown, but that was minor.

And a thought occurred to him. If he wasn’t busy acquiring everything, it left him free to work on something else, something he could use to drive his target to make his mistake. He smiled and pushed the ship harder. He knew the kind of place they’d have to hide in.