

Leaving the asteroid field proved to be time-consuming, but simple, once he no longer had to deal with his passenger. Using the thrusters, he maneuvered the ship close to the top of the chasm he was hiding in. From there, the passive sensor was able to register the pulse.

They were spaced thirty minutes apart. The most common sensor beacon, the Houlmagan, was set to pulse once an hour. This meant two beacons or a Houlmagan that had been modified to pulse every thirty minutes. It could even be an entirely different company, with an even slower pulse rate. That would mean more beacons in the field. Tristan could drive himself insane trying to account for all the possible permutation. He needed to simplify the equation.

The odds were there was more than one, and he couldn't destroy all of them. Wherever they were at this point, he'd only be able to shoot down one of them. That would alert the other beacons, which would, in turn, alert the Sayatoga. Even if they didn't immediately turn around and return here, they would know about his escape and track him down.

The one advantage he did have was his ship's small size compared to the asteroids. While he was on the surface of one of them, the pulse wasn't precise enough to tell them apart, even if the beacon was on top of him.

All he had to do was jump from one asteroid to another between pulses. It wouldn't be difficult; he could already see three of them he could reach. Then it would just be a question of letting the gases in the thruster replenish and waiting until another asteroid was lined up. That would be the time-consuming part.

It took him thirty hours to reach the point where his sensor no longer registered the pulses. He used the time to put the cabin back in order; most of what had been loose had flown out when the ramp opened, including all the food, but whatever hadn't was back in its place.

He waited for when the next pulse would go by, even if he couldn't detect it, before firing the thrusters until they were empty. He then let the ship drift. He forced himself to stay awake for five hours, feeling he was still too close to not watch the sensors. His hunger helped keep him awake. He then kept himself busy by undoing the modifications he'd done to the ramp.

He slept for a few hours, then turned on one of the cryosleep chairs. Each of the six seats in the shuttle could function as a cryosleep unit. It cycled through its automated checks while he decided on his destination.

Going after the bounty hunter who had captured him wouldn't be the

best use of his time. She could be anywhere in the universe at this point if she were even still alive. When he caught her, all he'd find out was who had hired her. He already knew the job had been a setup, so the most efficient thing to do was go after the person behind it.

He wasn't supposed to know who offered the jobs. The job that set him up had come from one of his usual, and trusted, contacts. An easy job, something to get his need to feel excitement out of his system, and let new discoveries hit the networks. Then he would go back to his base and start taking them apart to understand how they worked.

That reminded him, once he was done with this, he needed to have a talk with Charip. He had to impress on that zuunan it was in his best interest to better research the jobs he sent his way.

Not that he could blame him for not realizing this had been a setup. Tristan had done his own research, and that was how he knew who was behind the job. He hadn't seen any indication anything was amiss. The information was supposed to be hidden, to keep people like Charip employed, but there was little Tristan couldn't find out if he took the time to look into it.

He set the planet's coordinates and sat in the cryosleep chair. The only way to survive the long trips between solar systems was in cryo. Older systems, like the one on the Sayatoga, used enzymes and micro-organisms to slow down his body almost completely. The chair was a more advanced system: it generated a field around the person sitting in it that stopped time within it. If he didn't set when it would turn off, it would keep going until the ship ran out of power. That could take thousands of years if the engines didn't run too hard.

He set it to turn off when the ship received the first buoy announcing it had arrived in the system. He programmed the ship to get there as quickly as the engines could. With this cryo system, he didn't have to worry about how long the trip took, he wouldn't age at all, but he didn't want to risk his target finding out he had escaped.

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As far as he could tell, the cryosleep went off the moment he turned it on. The ship had just passed the orbit of the furthest planet in the Helios system. It would be three hours before he was in orbit around Helios Two, where his quarry was. He used that time to find out what the security in the system was like. It proved to be minimal.

The Helios system didn't have much going for it, other than one planet with very mild weather and a stable planetary core. It made it ideal for people to live on and grow food. That made it one of millions

of other planets just like it. It also meant it wasn't a valuable target and therefore didn't have much security.

That didn't mean he could just show up at the station; he didn't have a transponder. He'd deactivated it as part of his plan to hide on the asteroid. According to the manufacturer, he shouldn't have been able to do that. Without the transponder, the station would know it was a stolen ship, and he didn't have access to the tools he needed to reprogram it.

If he did turn it back on, it would identify the shuttle as belonging to the Sayatoga, which would inform the Sayatoga of where he was, defeating the purpose of escaping quietly. His best move was to aim directly for the planet, find a hole in the sensor field, and land someplace out of the way.

The sensor field was barely existent. Even for a low-value world like this one, he had expected better security. He slipped in, then flew below the monitored flight lanes. He stayed away from the cities, scanning isolated buildings until he found one that showed signs of being lived in but was not currently occupied. He landed the ship on the house's landing pad.

Getting in the house proved easier than he had expected, again. The lock was a Barrin, a company that hadn't been in existence for over two-hundred years. He knew about them because he had been thorough in his research on how to bypass locks. Even if he hadn't, one look at it would have told him it offered no security at all. His pace barely slowed as he got the lock open and entered the house.

Food was the first order of business, but he ate gingerly. He didn't want to leave any evidence he had been here. Once his stomach wasn't complaining loudly anymore, he looked for clothes; he needed camouflage. With his height and large frame, it wasn't easy, but he was able to replace the pants with something that fit, more or less. He also found leather boots large enough they didn't squeeze his feet too badly, and a large jacket, with a hood that covered his head completely. With the hood up, someone would have to look at him directly to realize his face wasn't human. He'd have to rely on the flight suit's gloves to cover his hands.

He relocked the house and flew to the edge of the city, hiding the ship in the forest an hour's walk outside of it. Now he could set out to find Jeremiah Blessing, the man who was behind the job.

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Once in the city, he accessed the Network. He could have done it from the ship's computer, but there was a chance a sniffer program could have queried it, and realized something was wrong with its

programming. His datapad wouldn't attract any attention.

Finding Jeremiah's residence was simple. Humans had this need to keep everything organized. So not only were all the names of the planet's inhabitants conveniently listed on the Network, with the location of their houses and a way to contact them, but Jeremiah hadn't bothered setting up any blinds or mirrors around his identity.

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Tristan watched Jeremiah's residence for a few days, from the roof of a building across the road. He lived on the edge of the city, in an area composed almost exclusively of single-family housing. He climbed to the roof during the night to ensure no one saw him. Jeremiah had two sons, quite young, but Tristan wasn't familiar enough with human youth to guess their age. Based on the way they behaved, and Jeremiah around them, if they had been Samalians, the smaller of the two would be a cub, while the other might just be entering pre-adulthood. He saw no females living in the house.

Their schedule was mostly the same each day. They woke a few hours after sunrise, had breakfast, and then the cubs walked twelve blocks to their school. Jeremiah cleaned the kitchen and left for his work, taking a personal flyer to the city core. He came back nine hours later, and an hour after that, the cubs returned. They would go to their rooms until it was time for them to eat. After that, Jeremiah retired to an office to work while the cubs occupied themselves.

Tristan didn't think much of how Jeremiah interacted with his cubs. He didn't seem to be doing anything to prepare them for life. He knew the school provided an education, as they had the equivalent on Samalia, not that he had gone to them. His father had provided all the training he needed. He had prepared him for how harsh the universe was, instilled in him the need to survive, and told him to not let anything stand in his way.

Jeremiah didn't seem to be doing any of that for his cubs. The universe was going to crush them once they left his protection.

He had formulated his plan: the cubs would be his pressure point. He would have access to them at the school since, like everywhere on this planet, the security there was pitiful. It would be in the afternoon, as any earlier and someone might notice, alerting Jeremiah. If he could only get to one, he would try for the smaller one. The way Jeremiah behaved around him showed he was the favorite.

Once that was done, getting in the house would be easy. Again, the locks were Barrins. He'd reached the conclusion that the people here

lived in denial of the realities of the universe. He couldn't believe anyone could think it was such a safe place, they could leave themselves unguarded like this. His own house and workroom had a top of the line Titanial security system, to which he had added his own upgrades. No one would get into them.

Now, he was just waiting for the opportunity to present itself. He watched them prepare breakfast, the smaller one making a mess on the table and himself, to the annoyance of the taller one, and Jeremiah's amusement. The sons left for school, and Tristan smiled. Today was the day he was getting his answers.

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Jeremiah unlocked his home, happy to be back. It had been a good day at work, but tiring. His clients had been very demanding today, more than usual. Some had requested he guarantee the quality of the food they were going to get before it was even picked off the trees. Others wanted to increase the quantities to levels they already knew his firm couldn't meet, while others wanted to change the shipments after they had left the planet.

He had been able to resolve all the issues to varying degrees of satisfaction, eventually. Now that he was home, he would be able to relax.

He closed the door, put his work bag down, and picked up the holographic projection of his deceased wife from the shelf in the hall. He loved seeing Isabelle when he got home. She had been the light of his life, the mother of his children, and such a vibrant woman when alive. He had been devastated when the sickness had claimed, first her joy, then her life. He'd only kept this holo of her, one in which she still radiated life, as a reminder. Everything else had been removed from the house, being too much to bear.

He put the holo down and ran a finger along the base, smiling as he remembered her dancing across the living room, then headed to the kitchen. He wanted a snack before his children got home.

He didn't make it.

He stopped in the entryway to the living room. Someone was sitting in his favorite chair, a large and plush model Isabelle had helped him pick out early in their lives together. The person sitting in it didn't seem to be relaxing like he would. Instead, he was studying him, his eyes hard and unblinking.

Jeremiah swallowed. The way those eyes with their slit pupils just kept staring at him made him uncomfortable. It didn't help that he was

imposing, and not human. That much was obvious by the muzzle on his face, the fur covering it and his exposed chest and arms. At first, Jeremiah thought the fur was black, but then realized it was a deep brown, with lighter colors speckled throughout.

Jeremiah wondered how he had gotten in since he had locked the door. Had one of his neighbors let him in? If so, he had to have a reason to be here.

“Hello.” He hesitated. “Can I help you?”

The man, or rather alien, he guessed, nodded slowly. “You can tell me why you arranged to have me captured and sent to a prison ship, where I spent ten years of my life.” His voice was deep and had a growl to it, but he enunciated the words perfectly.

Jeremiah was shocked at the accusation. “I’m sorry, I don’t understand what you mean. I’ve never seen you before today.”

The alien slowly, and deliberately, got out of the chair. “You are going to want to think very carefully about how you answer my questions.” He threw something at Jeremiah’s feet.

Jeremiah looked at what seemed to be a bloody rag. “What is that?” he asked, recoiling slightly.

“Take it,” was all the alien said.

Jeremiah hesitated for a moment, and then picked it up. It was a small shirt, too small for an adult to wear. It had been ripped at the right shoulder and cut across the chest. There was blood soaked in the shirt around the cuts, and he got a little queasy, as he guessed a lot of it had flowed from those wounds.

He still didn’t understand why this stranger wanted him to look at it. He turned it over and got a sense it was familiar. It was the right size for a child. He looked at the alien as the realization hit. It was Israel’s shirt.

The alien opened his mouth in a smile that exposed his vicious teeth. No, Jeremiah told himself. It couldn’t be. He looked at the shirt again, looking for something that would confirm it was someone else’s shirt. Instead, he found stains, partially hidden by the blood. Israel had insisted on having chocolate spread on his toast this morning, and he’d given in. He’d even let him spread it himself, and his son had made a mess in the process. There had been chocolate over the table, on the floor, and on his shirt. This shirt.

“No...” Jeremiah whispered.

“Do you want me to tell you how the small one screamed as I sank my teeth into his shoulder and ripped the flesh off his bones?” The alien’s voice was calm and even. “Maybe you prefer hearing about the sound his bones made as I broke them, for being so noisy? Or maybe

you want to hear about the larger one, bouncing off the floor as I threw him away, for trying to protect the little one?" His tone was inquisitive now.

Marcus? Jeremiah's sorrow turned to anger as the creature spoke. How dare it talk in such a way about his children? With a scream of anguish, he ran at it. "Monster!" He was going to pummel it until it was a bleeding heap on the floor, for what it had done.

He didn't get to hit it. The alien pushed the striking arm aside and grabbed him by the neck. It easily lifted Jeremiah until his feet no longer touched the floor. Jeremiah didn't care that he could barely breathe, he kept trying to hit this thing. The creature looked at him with an amused smile. Jeremiah's arms weren't long enough to reach its face, so he hit the arm a few times. When that didn't elicit a reaction, he sunk his fingers through the short fur, dug his nails into the flesh, and pulled hard.

The alien roared in pain and slammed Jeremiah to the floor. The impact made him lose what little air he had left.

"Listen to me very carefully," the monster said in a low growl of anger. Jeremiah fought for breath. "You still have a cub who is alive. If you cross me, I will send him back to you, broken in so many ways, you will wish I had simply killed him."

Jeremiah's eyes went wide in horror at the thought, and the reaction seemed to satisfy the alien. It released him and looked at its bleeding arm, while Jeremiah coughed and wheezed.

"Now, tell me what I want to know," the creature said.

"I don't know what you mean!" Jeremiah screamed at his torturer, once he was able to breathe properly.

"Years ago," it began, in that frighteningly even tone. Other than the momentary flash of anger, it didn't seem bothered Jeremiah had hurt him. "You offered a contract involving the recovery of the item you caressed coming in. I took the job, and as a result, I was captured and imprisoned for ten years. I do not take kindly to anyone stealing from me. Now, you will tell me why you did this, and I will take my revenge on you, instead of your cub."

Jeremiah looked at the alien, his blood turning cold in horror. "I didn't! I didn't do anything! I swear!"

"Very well." The alien turned.

"My wife's hologram was stolen! A friend told me someone might be able to help me get it back! That person told me what to do! I swear that's all I did!"

That made the alien pause. It looked at Jeremiah for a moment, and then crouched next to him. "Who did you contact?"

“I... I don't remember.”

The monster looked at him, sadness in his eyes. “Listen to me.” Its voice was soft now, almost caring? “Someone has to pay for what I lost in those ten years. You say you were used, and I believe you. I will not make you suffer for it, but someone needs to pay. If you cannot give me the name of the person who used you, it will have to be your cub.”

Jeremiah looked at it, stunned. It couldn't mean that. Marcus hadn't done anything to him. “Wait!” he yelled as he remembered something. “My friend gave me this thing.” He scrambled up and ran to the fireplace mantle. It had to be there, he was always putting knickknacks in the old wooden box he kept there. Trying to open it with shaking hands, he knocked it to the ground, and its contents spread across the floor.

Jeremiah was on all fours, looking for...a data chip, he remembered now. “Please, God, let it be here,” he prayed as he searched through the spilled items. Could he have put it elsewhere, he worried, despairing at not finding it. No, it had to be among these. It had to be there, for Marcus's sake, it had to be.

As if God had heard his prayer, he spied it near the foot of the same chair the alien had been sitting in. He lunged for it, an irrational fear that it would run off gripping him. He closed his hand around it and sat up.

“Here! This is it! It has the contact information for the person I called! It's all I have! It's all I know! Please, take it!”

The alien walked to him, unhurried, and took it. “Thank you,” it said before it turned and walked out of the house.

Jeremiah was too stunned to do anything until the door closed. “Give me back my son!” His voice was raw, and his cheeks were wet as he stared at the closed door, for what seemed like an unending moment. He crawled to the remnant of Israel's shirt, cradling it tightly, mourning the loss of his son.

Jeremiah had no idea how long he remained there on the floor, crying. He didn't even hear the door open, only looking up when someone called him.

“Father?” The voice came again, and Jeremiah looked up to see Marcus, looking back at him with worry.

Jeremiah scrambled to his son and held him tight. He had kept his word, he had given him back his son. The relief quickly soured. But he'd taken Israel away. He wouldn't let him get away with that. He would send Marcus away, somewhere no one could ever find him, and then he would hunt the monster down. He didn't care if he died in the process, he would have justice.

As he thought those dark thoughts, he saw the door open, and Israel entered, bathed in sunlight.

Jeremiah had trouble believing what he was looking at. His mind refused to acknowledge that his youngest son was there, walking toward him. Only when his child smiled at him, did he realize he was indeed there. He let go of Marcus and ran to Israel, taking him up in his arms, holding him close.

“You’re safe, it’s a miracle,” he said, over and over.

“What’s wrong?” Israel asked.

“Nothing’s wrong,” Jeremiah answered, through his tears. Only then did he notice what his son was wearing. “What happened to your shirt?”

“Marcus pushed me, and I fell in the mud.”

“Did not,” Marcus piped in.

“This nice furry man said he would get it clean for me and bring it home. He gave me this one to wear. Is my shirt here yet?”

Jeremiah realized he was still holding the bloodied shirt. He shook his head. “No.” He smiled. “But that’s okay. I’m sure it’ll be here soon.” He hugged his son, before putting him down. For a moment he thought about hunting down the creature, to punish it for forcing him to live through this nightmare. But he wasn’t so overcome by emotions to miss the message given to him by his son’s return, and the bloodied shirt.

‘I got to him once, I can do it again.’ That was the message implied here.

Jeremiah looked at his sons, Israel happily running to the kitchen, and Marcus looking back at him, a frown on his face. He had gotten them both back, unharmed. He would be happy with that.