

“Bridge, update,” Gralgiran demanded when the lift became visible in the distance.

“We still have control of the access,” the hunter replied, “and there is no movement on the dock or around the ship. We also kept them from getting into our systems. The pilot indicates he’s ready to move us. Scans show that the docking anchors will tear away before the anchor points.”

The question of where the Earthers had gotten enough of their programming language was for others to deal with. “Inform the station of our imminent departure, and that they should be ready to unclamp the ship. Use a polite tone. This is you following procedures, not making threats.”

“Yes, Alpha. Magnetic seal has been activated against the chance they release the clamps before you have boarded.”

A pack increased their pace and called the lift on reaching it. Four of them entered, leaving three behind.

“The civilians, with an escort,” he instructed, and when the lift doors opened, Thuruk Sel Minial ushered Jeremy into it.

“I will join you shortly,” he assured his Heart, as a hunter joined them with the ambassador. He then took position with his hunters in preparation for an attack.

The lift opened, and four went in. And when the lift returned, four more entered, leaving Gralgiran and a Beta to protect them. This, he expected, was when the commander would make his move, if his anger overtook his knowledge of the danger attacking put the Earthers in. When he’d be confident his people could overpower two hunters. He counted on the bridge to warn him on any approach, and then they would show what made alphas and betas.

The lift doors opened, and they backed into it. Even with only the two of them, it felt was too small. Everything about the station was so small. It opened, and they stepped among the beta’s pack.

“Seal the ship,” he instructed once they were in.

The ambassador had already been escorted deeper, but Jeremy was still there, and he no longer looked worried. He looked determined.

“You need—”

“You aren’t throwing me in a room, even if it’s for my own safety. Querik might be okay with that, but I’m not.”

“You are a civilian, Jeremy.”

“And you said you were a merchant, so don’t give me any lip about where I’m supposed to be. I’m going to engineering and figuring out a way to give you the power you need before the commander decides to blow us up.”

Gralgiran smiled and placed a hand on Jeremy’s cheek. His little warrior, indeed. He looked at Thuruk Sel Minial. “Hunter, take the Engineer with you. He should know my ship’s full capability now.”

Jeremy resisted.

“You will see,” the hunter said. And Jeremy reluctantly followed.

“The chase is done,” he told the two Betas. “Your packs performed well. Go rest.”

“Yes, Alpha,” they replied.

He walked with them until they headed for the combat area. He continued for the

bridge. He'd get out of his armor once his people were safe.

* * * * *

The air was tense when he stepped onto the bridge, but he didn't address it or those there until he reached its center, where the captain belonged. "All returned safely," he informed them, the traditional message when an Alpha returned from a chase without losses. "Have there been any actions from the Earthers?"

"Weapons have gone live," the hunter at scan replied. "But haven't targeted us. We have a full scan of the station."

At least the hunt he had been sent on had a proper conclusion. But it was something else to address once they were safe.

"Station hasn't acknowledged our request for departure," the hunter as comms said.

"Send the bracing warning through the ship. Pilot prepare to—" The shudder was faint, but noticeable.

"Clamps have been removed," Toom said. "Initiating motion."

"Weapons remain untargeted."

"Station is silent."

"Remain alert," he instructed, then activated all-ship. "Civilians of the Bane. This is your Alpha. I am initiating emergency procedure. All civilians are to proceed to the closest bunkers. Emergency frequencies are open to divided families for the purpose of confirming where your members are. I repeat. We are now under Emergency Protocols." Better the chaos of harried civilians than the Earthers having weapons that could penetrate so deep.

"Captain," Toom said, the only title he could use, as a civilian, "we have now reached minimum safe distance for full thrust. All I need is the power."

He shifted to the emergency reactor room's frequency. "Status."

"I have no idea what I'm looking at," Jeremy replied, "which I'm guessing is what you asked for. But there are a lot of technicians working and Thuruk is giving me a nod and two fingers. So...two minutes? Yes, that's what that meant. You have a lot of explaining to do, Growler."

First of which would be teaching him to pronounce his name. As endearing as it had been, Gralgriran could envision getting tired of the Earther moniker. "I will answer all the questions your technicians have not, once we are safely away from the station."

"I am so holding you to that. Jeremy out."

"Power is coming shortly, Pilot."

"Station still hasn't—weapons are moving."

"No lock established."

"Have scans provided information on their weapons?"

"Energy based, with twelve active anti-matter generators to power them."

It took him seconds to absorb the number, then he forced the question that raised aside. They weren't relevant to the situation. What did was that if they were all assigned to power the weapons, only distance would save them. It would be impossible for them to keep a lock if they were far enough; the fractional error in the angle would compound the further they were.

Where had they gotten so much anti-matter?

“Initiating thrust,” Toom announced.

“Weapons tracking.”

“Still no lock.”

“No words from station.”

“Remain alert,” he needlessly instructed. His hunters knew better than to let their attention wander while active.

“Five percent of Speed,” Toom announced. “Ten,” a few seconds later.

“Do the Earthers have pursuit ships?”

“Fifteen.”

“No, Alpha. All ships at the station are cargo or passenger.”

“Twenty.”

“Have they established communication with anyone outside the station’s light year?”

“Twenty-five.”

“Yes, but they are all red-shifted.”

So opposite from their direction. Was the commander being clever? Bouncing whatever message to ships ahead of them off other further stations to avoid him realizing it? Once they were outside Earther territory, there shouldn’t be any Earther ships, but by that same reasoning, the Bane shouldn’t have been within unclaimed territory to start with. At this point, he was confident there were things the Earther hadn’t told their allies; his people.

“Thirty-five.”

“Sensor, status.”

“The station is the same.”

“Forty. Forty-five. Fifty.”

“Shift scans to ahead of us. Maximum range. Report anything out of the ordinary.”

“Fifty-five.”

“Still no lock.”

“Sixty. Sixty-three percent of Speed, Captain. That’s all I can give you on the backup unless you divert power.”

“Shift course to Kersosteron.”

“Altering course to the Garan Home World.”

The star was well beyond the station where the Federation Security Council resided, and not a course the Earthers had any reason to think he would take.

He did not relax.

* * * * *

“We have crossed into unclaimed territory,” the hunter announced.

“Sensor?”

“Nothing within range that registers as process metals or polymers, Alpha.”

“Nothing on comms.”

He allowed himself to relax. “Pilot, shift course to the FSC.” He activated the all-ship. “This is your alpha. Emergency Protocols are now ended. Civilians can return to their homes. Reunite your families. We are on our way toward friendly space. Emergency frequencies remain open.”

He couldn't reunite his family yet. His duty wouldn't be over until he was certain they were safe, and they needed to be further before that came.

"Alpha, I have a civilian demanding—apology, it's the Ambassador."

"Transfer."

The male's face appeared on the central screen. People moved around him. "Alpha Hunter," he greeted Gralgiran. "If the emergency is over, I need an office from which to contact the Federation Ambassadorial Department. They will have questions about the report I sent earlier, and delays in making myself available will not result in them being gentle."

"I will send a hunter to escort you to an available office, Ambassador. Once things have settled, I will see to it you have adequate quarters assigned."

"Thank you, Alpha Hunter."

He wished he could lead him to those quarters personally, but Gralgiran wanted time with his Heart before that.

Now that they were out of Earther territory, he did allow himself to move from his command position. He placed a hand on Toom's shoulder and squeezed. "Thank you for your service."

The male snorted. "Come on, this is why I'm on the ship. Not like this pushed what I can do." He looked up. "How are you doing?"

"I can't wait to hold Jeremy."

Toom chuckled. "Does he have any idea what's waiting for him?"

He snorted. "I have self control." He sobered. "You didn't see how he looked when they brought him to me. He was better once we were on the ship, but I suspect he is more interested in why we were at the station than letting me show him what he means to me."

"Don't worry. Even if he wasn't your Heart, he'd understand. He loves you and that can help work through anything."

"I'm starting to think you like the old ballads more than you admit."

"I just know you."

Gralgiran squeezed his shoulder again, then moved on to see to each of the hunters on the bridge. With that done, he returned to his station. He still had duties to perform. One of which he wasn't looking forward to, but he had said he'd do this once the hunt was done.

He contacted the brig.

"Alpha."

He had no doubt Xenial er Ta Halan would still find ways to aggravate him, but now, he shouldn't be able to start a cross-species conflict in the process.

He hoped.