

The station Alex looked at on the screen didn't inspire confidence, not that it had looked like a station once they were close enough to see details. The distant floating ring, where mercs came to sell and buy, relax between missions, or meet potential employers, had turned into a collection of ships or part of ships, welded together to form the outside of the station.

Even without the makeshift look to it, Alex knew it for one of the hidden merc stations when they entered its comm space and no request for the ship's registration ID came.

There were a lot of merc stations, since there were a lot of mercs. Alex had been on many of them, and while the well-maintained station was the exception, this one had to be the worst of the bunch.

By their nature, such places had to be built in out of the way places—uninhabited worlds, debris clouds or, like this one, in the void away from anything. They were in locations corporations had no reasons to go, so they couldn't complain to SpaceGov about the eyesore and threat on their bottom line.

What stations were built from depended on how much money the retiring merc had to put into the project. The majority were old or unprofitable space stations, bought then moved to their new place of residency. Those tended to be well-maintained, and a few could even claim to have a legal tourist business.

If the area had material, it might be built from scratch using them. Asteroids could easily be turned into permacrete and spread thick enough to withstand the rigor of vacuum. One enterprising merc had built his station inside an asteroid. Alex had felt like he was inside a cavern the entire time he was there.

And he expected a merc station to look like there was money put into maintenance, make them feel safe to be on. This one... This one looked like it could lose a section at any time. As Tristan flew them around, Alex saw a ship being maneuvered into place, bumping the station hard enough Alex swore he heard the impact in spite of the vacuum. He was surprised nothing came apart.

He focused on his screen, going over what he'd found around the location where the contact node for their employer had been. "Whoever did this is good; he didn't leave anything behind. As far as I can tell, there was never a node there. You think it's Emil's family?"

Tristan didn't reply. The cameras were giving him different views of the station, and he was studying them.

He didn't know what Tristan felt about coming here. This had been the closest station from a long list Tristan had. They were to wait for their employer to make contact with them. They couldn't initiate that anymore, but the man could do it the same way he'd tried to contact Tristan initially.

"I hope he hurries," Alex said, looking at the screen showing debris floating close to the station. "I don't think this place is going to be safe for very long."

The local chatter consisted of people arguing, screaming at each other over stolen berth, being cut off, at least one of them sounding like a ship had been stolen. Alex only kept a distracted ear on comms in case those problems came their way.

Tristan brought the ship to a stop and flipped it. During that time, the screens showed the vastness of space. Alex caught the flashes of a firefight. Closer, a cluster of ships, moving in all directions, and a small one dodging around them like it was some sort of sport.

Alex understood that mercs thrived among chaos; he lived it. But this was more than he could stand. It was like unraveling code, announcing the computer was going to crash at any moment.

Tristan was taking the ship closer to the station. He'd done three circuits around it, and now it looked to Alex like he wanted a good look. Only he realized there were clamps there, barely visible among the other things welded on the hull.

Alex did a quick scan, and what he got back didn't make him feel good about this. There had to be something better out there. Ideally on a different station.

The reverberation of docking came, and Alex waited for the clamps to come undone. They locked, making the ship vibrate. Alex kept looking at the screen showing around the clamp. The hull was going to rip apart any moment now.

"Check on the boy." Tristan stood and then headed down to the cargo hold.

So they were really doing this? Waiting here? Alex looked at the screens as he stood. The

clamps still held, the hull looked intact. Maybe this place wouldn't fall apart while they were there.

Alex checked the readout on the side of Emil's bed instead of looking at him. The cryo still ran—there was no fluctuation in the power. So Emil was fine. He would be fine so long as he stayed under. Hopefully that would be until they handed him over.

Alex sighed. A child didn't deserve to be in this situation. If the universe was just, merc, criminals, and whoever else felt the need to exert power over someone else would leave children out of their machinations. But the universe wasn't just, Alex knew that first hand.

"Everything's nominal," Alex said to Tristan as he exited the room. The Samalian had put on a gun harness, and Alex paused. The most he'd seen Tristan wear was pants. He had to readjust his expectations. Of course Tristan would arm himself, he was a merc. Claws weren't enough, no matter how good he was with them.

The harness had four holsters over his stomach, two in each direction, but only the two bottom holsters held large guns. Multiple extra power packs were clipped. There was a large knife at his belt, and a smaller one at his left ankle attached to what Alex first thought were boots, but only covered his ankle and the top of his feet.

"Expecting trouble?" Alex smirked.

"Always." Tristan handed Alex his knife harness.

Alex took it and put it under his jacket. It had sheaths on the front and back. He adjusted the jacket so the hidden slits were lined up. "You know these are all going to trigger the scanners. My stealth knives are still in my pack." He took the other knives Tristan handed him. Ankles, forearm, hips, and calves. When Tristan handed him his gun, Alex finally felt like he was properly dressed.

"If there's a scanner, just shoot it. No one will notice."

Alex narrowed his eyes, trying to decide if that was a joke. If Tristan could make jokes then maybe, just maybe there was a chance he had a heart somewhere under all that fur and muscle.

Tristan opened the hatch in the ramp, and Alex knew it hadn't been a joke. The sounds were that of chaos: repairs, yells, pain, anger, frustrations; lights flickering in time with the sound of sparking. The walls were a jumble of mismatch plating.

Yes, Alex could destroy anything that looked like a scanner without anyone being the wiser.

Tristan stepped out, and the cables hanging from the ceiling he'd moved out of his way almost slapped Alex in the face. He was too distracted by the sound of something shearing off in the distance to care. Maybe the place wouldn't hold for all that long after all.

A fat man waddled in their direction. "Welcome to Derelict Station!" He gave them a wave of a cybernetic arm. "I'm Warick, master of this little corner I like to refer to as the Sturdy Wing." The floor shuddered, but the man didn't react to it. "Docking fee's fifty SpaceGov standard credits a day. If you don't have those, I offer very generous conversion rates. It's half your planned stay up front." He offered his arm, which had a port on the forearm. "I take any form of electronic transfer, so long as they can't be traced. Anything gets flagged and I'm going to be hunting you down."

Tristan flicked a credit chip to the man who caught it and looked it over while the Samalian closed the hatch. Warick didn't seem to know what to do with it for a few seconds, then pulled his datapad from a pocket and scanned the chip.

Alex noticed the man's bald head had a joint in it by the way the polymer didn't reflect the light the same way as the flesh. A quarter of his head. Injury or implant?

The man looked up from the pad as Tristan turned. He was eying the Samalian speculatively. "You planning on being here a while?"

"Unknown at this time, but that isn't only the docking fee. It's insurance against anyone touching my ship. Encouragement for you to ensure it is unmolested. You won't like what will happen if anyone touches it."

"Of course," the man replied agreeably. "I will personally see to your ship's safety."

Tristan took a step, and when he spoke there was the hint of a growl in his voice. "If you want your little wing of the station to remain sturdy, you will make sure no one touches my ship. Is that clear?"

The man looked around Tristan to the hatch. Whatever the implied threat was Alex didn't get, but the man got it.

“You have my word. This is the safest part of the station; I see to it personally.”

Alex almost rolled his eyes.

“Now, about the weapons. Derelict has strict—”

“I’ve been here before,” Tristan said. “I know the rules.” The man’s disappointment showed. When he didn’t move, Tristan moved him out of the way.

Tristan walked quickly, and people got out of his way. Alex followed in his wake as they passed vendors of weapons, prosthetics, computer parts and, according to one sign, uncloned organic body parts. Alex would have liked to look at the guns, but he couldn’t risk losing Tristan. He had no idea if a place like this had a central computer for him to talk to and get directions from. The way the corridors changed shape every so often, he didn’t think this place had any unified system.

The Samalian’s gait made it clear he had a destination in mind. None of the vendors distracted him, he didn’t pause at intersections. He wasn’t even consulting his datapad.

Alex, for his part, couldn’t keep from looking around. After the first few vendors it wasn’t the signs of the wares on display that attracted his attention. Ultimately one merc station was much like another, once you got over the fact that this one looked like it might break apart at any moment.

What kept him from keeping his eyes on Tristan was his instinct screaming that this was going to become a very bad situation. Alex was still alive because he’d learned to listen to his paranoia, so he tried to keep up with Tristan while figuring out what was setting off his mental alarms.

No one stood out as particularly more of a threat than anyone else. This was a merc station, everyone was dangerous. Any one of them might want him dead, and was sufficiently armed to give it a good try. The looks Alex received could be equally curiosity or evaluation.

He had so many reasons for his alarms to go off he couldn’t figure out where the threat was.

Which might be why he almost walked into Tristan’s back when the Samalian stopped walking.