

Alex regretted asking the moment the smile formed on Tristan's lips. His Samalian read his screen, brought up new information, and with each new one, the smile broadened.

"We are going to survive whatever you're planning, right?" he asked, and the nod was distracted. Alex went over what he knew of the situation, of Tristan, and where the two intersected.

They couldn't blow the tower up due to the amount of energy required and how it would affect the atmosphere. Simply landing next to Hart's ship on the pad was out of the question because the scan confirmed there was a security system designed to cut apart any ship approaching without the proper authorization. Alex couldn't give them said authorization because the tower wasn't on the net.

The weapons protecting the tower lessened as they moved away from the landing pad, but there were enough of them it would take a maniac to attempt—

He looked at his Samalian. His undeclared adrenaline junky Samalian.

He breathed easier when Tristan took them out of the atmosphere; until he remembered a ship like this needed distance to accelerate.

"Isn't the kind of energy needed to blow up the tower, which would ignite the atmosphere, enough to turn this ship into slag?" Alex asked.

"I won't be blowing up the tower," Tristan replied. "Just getting us inside it."

"And doesn't that require energy on that same level?"

"Energy on that level, focused on a smaller target, isn't the same total energy. And this ship can survive a burning atmosphere."

"How about the impact energy?"

"The materials use in shipbuilding are made to endure much higher stress than any landlocked building will require. The tower has a protection system against the use of explosive, not again a kinetic strike." The look he gave Alex didn't look entirely sane, but he looked happy. "Put your harness on. This is going to overload the dampeners."

The stars moved to the side until the planet was the only thing Alex saw, and as he locked himself into the harness, it grew fast.

When Alex made out the dot that was the tower in the center of the puzzle pieces that were the surrounding cities, an alarm sounded, and suddenly, he was pressed against the back of his seat.

Then he could make out enough detail to tell they were approaching it at an angle. Then he was pulled left and right as Tristan avoided the beams trying to blast them out of the sky. Then he slammed forward in the harness hard enough he blacked out.

He gasped, then groaned. "I hate you," he mumbled, pushing himself back using his board, then undoing the harness. "You should have let me take heals before this." He forced

himself to his feet and headed for the cabinet containing the medical equipment.

“Forgot about that,” Tristan said, not sounding any better, but still grinning. “Definitely want to be on those before I do this again.”

“You ever think of doing this again, and I’m locking you in cryo.” He injected himself with combination Heals and painkiller, then lobbed the Samalian equivalent to Tristan. “Now that Hart knows we’re here. What’s keeping him from fleeing on his ship?”

“He won’t abandon his collection. Unless part of the tower is set to take off, which the sensor reading didn’t indicate it can. He won’t leave unless it’s clear that to stay means he’ll die. And by then, we will have cut off his access to our ship.”

Alex looked at the damage around them. “I guess this one’s not going anywhere.” He checked that the power pack on his gun was full. “So what direction are we going to find Hart?”

Tristan smiled, checking his weapon. “The same place anyone aiming to lord over their land will be. Up.”