

SHIPMASTER'S SCALP

How to buy time.

BY JEREMY SZAL

They come to see me on day 289 of my captivity.

My throbbing head feels stuffed with metal wool, but I smear a smile on my face as Shipmaster Hargreave and Detention Officer Bossa unlock my cell. I'm strapped into this cradle by my arms, legs, wrists, waist, chest, thighs and neck, a thick prisoner's harness wired tight around my torso and magnetized to the rear of the cradle. And that's *before* they sealed me inside my prisoner's exosuit.

All in all, I take it as a compliment.

Bossa checks the status on a holograph. My smile widens as she glances at Hargreave. "No progress."

Hargreave raps her knuckles against the Wiring embedded in my temple. "Oh, he'll break, sooner or later. Or, you could just tell us. We'll dig it out eventually, Kharrus."

"Well," I rasp through the steel mesh muzzle affixed to my face, "you've done a great job so far."

Bossa's fist smashes into the side of my head. I roll with the blow, spit bloody saliva. I've had worse in spacedock bars.

"I've got to say, being a smuggler while Wired is a pretty stupid career move."

For once, Hargreave has a point. When implants, or Wires, came around, everyone thought they'd be exclusively purchased by the wealthy. The opposite was true. Wires became so cheaply manufactured that anyone hoping to maintain pace with modern life — storing, backing up and accessing memories and intel across the datasphere instantaneously — had to get one. On some planets, it's compulsory. Rich folk can afford remote storage accessed by internal wetware, the kind that isn't hackable and doesn't have their memories and places they've been and what they did registered in a semi-public database. In effect, you could afford *not* to be Wired.

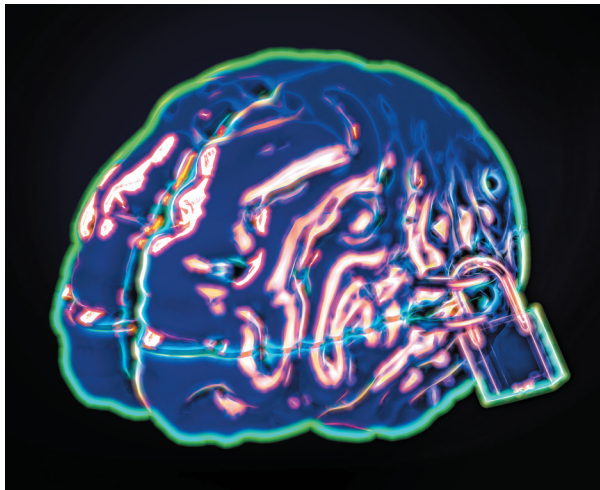
It's partially why I turned to smuggling. People across the Systems will pay solid u-credits for materials they don't want to register with customs. Narcotics, booze, databanks, artefacts, military-grade weapons, relics. Anything. Me and my crew had a solid career going

for about nine standard years. I made one slip-up, but one is all it takes. I was captured

by Systems Security and dumped here in a deep-systems Detention Centre for interrogation.

Hargreave leans against the mirror-smooth wall. "This could all be over if you gave up your crew."

I snort. "You don't do this often, do you?"
"Hey, we've got time. You don't."



For nearly 300 days I've sat here, resisting the Scalper software they've fed into my Wire as it sniffs through my mental server cabinets. Trawling for jobs I've pulled, clients I work for, items of interest I've smuggled. And most importantly: where my crew is going. My head pulses with a dull ache as I combat the Scalper. Filling my head with distractions and false memories and random statistics as if they were true, confusing it. Killing research patterns, mentally burying data. It's a literal battle of wills. An AI can't tell which memories are legitimate and which are fabricated, not unless they want to turn my brain into a stack of smoking neurons. But it's adapting, recognizing patterns, getting to know how I think. Perhaps I could fight it, if my exosuit weren't limiting my sleep to four hours a night, lowering my food and water intake to minimum. Blasting me with relentless white noise while wrapping me in sweltering, sauna-like heat, or borderline-permafrost colds. Civilized torture, barely within intergalactic legalities. My body is numb. I can scarcely stay awake, let alone perform psychological warfare.

But every day I resist, I give my crew one extra day's head start. That's how we dealt with botched broker deals. Not focusing on surviving next week, next month. Just tomorrow. We could effectively postpone

problems forever, as long as we lasted until the next day. Now, I'm doing that for my crew, day by agonizing day. It's what any good Shipmaster would do, and I pride myself on being the best. We swore absolute loyalty to each other when we became smugglers. A man's only as good as his word. I won't let it be said Alistair Kharrus lasted to anything less than the absolute breaking point.

"I hope he doesn't talk." I glance over my shoulder where Bossa's fiddling with my exosuit's restraints, tightening them with bone-crushing force. "More fun that way."

Hargreave leans in close enough to kiss, flicks a tattooed finger on my Wire. "You're a businessman, Kharrus. So let's do business. You talk now, I'll release you from the exosuit, unplug the Scalper. Give you a first-class stateroom. Hell, finger your crew in the line-up and I'll get you a Cobalt-class mental substrate. Not that cheap backalley trash. What do you think?"

I let her know by headbutting as hard as I can. Bone crunches and blood sprays. She staggers back, holding her broken nose. Despite my weariness, I wear a face-splitting grin behind my muzzle. "Is that really the best you can do?"

Bossa's about to shatter my jaw into sugar-glass when Hargreave stops her. "No. Crank the Scalper up to the next level. Actually, make it three levels. Get it to dig deep, permanent damage be damned. See how rebellious he is after a few more months. Kharrus, when you're drooling and being fed through a tube, you'll wish you took the offer."

Bossa overrides the system to adjust the settings below legal minimums. Machinery whirls and cranks. I grin at them as they leave me to prepare for the mental battle to come. My headache turns cold and throbbing as the Scalper burrows savagely through the geometries of my brain. My restrained fists shake as I encase the names of my crew in mental concrete. Preparing to resist for one more day. And the one after that. And the one after that.

That's all I need. Just one more day. ■

Jeremy Szal writes about galactic nightmares, wide-screen futures and characters fighting for hope in dark worlds. He is author of the dark space-opera novel Stormblood, forthcoming from Gollancz in February 2020. Find him at jeremyszal.com or @JeremySzal.

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