

Alex spun and caught her clumsy attempts at hitting him. She fought his grip. By her expression, he should be dead.

“How could you do that to me? Do you have any idea how terrifying that was? I thought—”

“I saw.”

“You were watching?” She fought harder. “What are you, some pervert? Why didn’t you tell me they were with you?”

“Because I needed you scared. You think their security would have bought that you’d willingly turn yourself over for multiple death counts?” Something flashed on the screen. “You haven’t seen the charges I concocted to get you out. You’d have willingly signed your life over for slavery here rather than come quietly.” He cursed and pushed her away.

The recognition program he had running had just informed him someone he didn’t want to see again had just stepped into the hanger, close to the ship.

“Someone sit her down; I have work to do.” Come on, something had to know why he was here.

“If you think you can just tell me—”

“Sit the fuck down!”

Someone grabbed her and he got to work, only now noticing the earpiece he’d taken out. It was uncomfortable, and it had just been him, but he knew better. Never, ever, drop a mask. It had been among the first lessons Tristan had taught him on how to act like someone else.

He put it in and brought up the hangar. An older man in uniform was talking with the officer who had escorted Victor and Miranda. Alex sent programs to convince flight control everything was in order. He really should have taken control of the ship. He couldn’t afford any delays.

“What’s going on?” Miranda was behind him and he didn’t need that distraction either. “Well?”

“Someone who has no business being here just showed up.” Flight control informed him he was good to go. He initiated the takeoff procedure. So long as he did everything the way the system demanded, no living beings should get involved.

“And?” Miranda asked.

*And I’m busy*, he wanted to snarl. “He’s talking to your escort.” Why was it all so slow? Hadn’t anyone thought to design a streamlined takeoff procedure? For the people like him who were in a hurry?

“And?”

Couldn’t she just stop? Now he understood why Tristan kept snarling at him when he asked questions. In the hangar the discussion was becoming agitated. “Whatever your escort is saying, he isn’t happy to hear it.”

Finally the ship was released, and he instructed it to head for the “open” door. The forcefield was up, but all it stopped was the air. The general pointed at the ship and yelled something Alex was happy he couldn’t hear.

“And?”

Alright, enough was enough. “Sit down, Miranda, I have work to do.”

“This is my ship. I’ll—”

He whirled on her. “Do you want to fly us out? Do you want to deal with a system that might fully solidify the field because the general just figured out we have no business leaving? Because this is your ship and if that’s what you want to do, I’m going to fucking let you deal with all of it. Well?” He could hear the orders being sent to shut them in, but he waited. “Make a decision, because we’re about to hit a solid forcefield instead of a porous one.”

“Fine,” she snarled, and left.

He sent programs to intercept the orders and others to infiltrate the forcefield’s

control. He should have done that from the start and fuck the possibility they could've been found.

He could feel her glaring at him, but at least he could work in peace. The general was screaming and running after the ship. Did he think he could just hold them in place if he caught up?

Inside, the system communication ports were becoming active and swarms of programs headed for the forcefield's controls. The ship's coercionists were getting involved, but not directly yet. Alex distorted the space between the two to give himself the seconds he needed to exit. Once they were outside, there was nothing the coercionists would be able to do. He reinforced his program, made a wall around it. He didn't put anything offensive in it, hadn't done permanent damage yet, and if he could avoid that, maybe they wouldn't be too pissed at him.

Sure, because stealing an asset was an act of peace.

They were outside.

He engaged the propulsion system and left his programs to their fate. He set a course away as fast as Miranda's ship could go, much faster than a Valkyrie-class could reach, even if they could match his acceleration.

He took out the earpiece and relaxed.

"Care to explain what happened?" Miranda demanded. "Looks to me like you're no longer too busy for me." Right, Miranda took orders so well.

He didn't have to tell her anything. He was in charge, not her. Tristan wouldn't tell her, but Tristan also wouldn't need her. Alex did. He still needed her to play her role, so he'd have to placate her.

Not that he had to tolerate the attitude. He turned to face her. "First off, erase the attitude. This is my mission. I'm in charge, so you're going to give me the respect I'm due."

Her lips tightened, but she nodded.

"Secondly, the old man is a general of some sort, I don't know exactly what he does, but he's close to that ship's ruler."

"Lady Prian," Mary offered.

"He'd be one of the few people who knows about Mary, and for some reason, he cared that we took her."

"I thought you'd handled that, put the right files in the right places."

"I did, but I've yet to figure out how to insert information into people's minds directly. Considering his reaction now, we can count ourselves lucky he didn't bother checking his vault first, but then all he'd have done is ordered a lockdown. Someone must have told him."

"There was a woman," Victor said. "She wasn't happy we were taking their chemist."

"Biochemist," Mary corrected, sulking in her seat.

"I saw. And it could be her. I was busy keeping cameras and the security system from remembering you. I didn't follow individual comms. But considering you were basically in the bowels of the city, I doubt she'd have a reason to know him. That's behind us. You two go under, and I'll see to Mary once I've put in the course."

"Aren't you worried about a pursuit?" Victor asked.

"No. A Valkyrie-class ship can't match the speed of this, and they aren't allowed anything that qualifies as attack ships; SpaceGov is already scared enough of them as it is. So the only ships inside are personal yachts. It's possible one of them can match speed with this, though it's unlikely they know which yacht can do what speed. No, what we're going to have to worry about are the bounties they'll put on us."

Miranda ground her teeth. "You're paying for the replacement."

Alex grinned. "I'm already paying you plenty. You can afford to get a new one. You can afford to get a dozen like this one."

“If I’d known this was going to happen, I would have thrown an expense clause in our deal.”

Alex shrugged.

She glared at him some more before turning. “Come on, Lawman, pick a seat and I’ll make sure you’re properly frozen.”

Victor sat as the ship stopped vibrating.

Alex turned back to the controls. The propulsion system was shut down.

He looked through the code. “How the fuck did you get in here?” He sent programs after the coercionists disrupting his propulsion. “If you think you can take control of my ship, you are in for a surprise.”

He found himself on the other side of the system.

That shouldn’t have happened. The coercionist was too busy to have been able to throw in a distortion. He saw it, the cloak around a second coercionist. Not quite a perfect copy of the code around him. Having seen him, Alex saw the other two coercionists cloaked in the same way.

There were four coercionists in his system. He cursed himself as he prepared the attack. He’d forgotten this wasn’t Tristan’s ship; it didn’t have any of the extra hardware the Samalian added. A lot of which was to make it harder for a coercionist to get in. It was amazing the number of gates that needed to be traversed to get into anything usable. He’d always added his own security to the communication ports on his ships, and the two combined made it virtually impossible for anyone to get in without their permission.

Here it had been barely adequate to slow them down.

The thrusters were engaging, slowing them down.

“Did you really think you could steal from me?” There was a woman behind him.

With a start, Alex was up and facing her, knife in hand. *How had she gotten in?* he wondered as he took in the details. Older, silver gown, long hair. Fuzzy at the edge, translucent. His heart slowed.

“Couldn’t you tell me you have a hologram projector on this thing?”

“Oh, excuse me,” Miranda replied, not hiding her anger. “I figured you knew what *your* ship had.”

Had he said that? Fuck. Well, that was for later. He looked at the holographic woman and decided to be polite. “Lady Prian.”

She studied him. “It’s Mister Crimson, isn’t it? Where’s your master?”

Alex raised an eyebrow. Was she trying to provoke him? If she was, tough luck.

“He isn’t here, but he sent me.” He leaned against the board.

She turned, studied the others. “He sent you to my ship, to take her?”

“Yes.”

She locked eyes on him. “Where is your master?”

No, this wasn’t her poking at him, it was how she saw their relationship. Well, she wasn’t wrong.

“Busy with something else. Do you really want to piss him off?”

Instead of worried, she became thoughtful. “What of our agreement?”

Alex straightened, and cursed himself for reacting.

“Interesting. He didn’t tell you. Tell me, did you run from him? Is this what this is about? You seeking to break your bonds.”

“No.”

She smiled. “I could offer you protection.”

Alex laughed. “Really? You think you could keep him from taking me?”

“My security is vast.”

Alex shook his head. “Look up Luminex, then consider if the vastness of your security force means anything. Anyway, I’m not running from him.”

“And yet, this isn’t happening with his approval. How interesting.” She said something that didn’t transmit, and Alex noticed the thrusters stop. She’d told her coercionists to stop what they were doing. The engines weren’t back on yet, though.

“I have to say,” she said, “I’m curious as to what this is about, but while the method is unorthodox, you have told me you are still his. If you’ve lied, I expect his anger will be directed at you, not me. When you see your master again, remind him I held up my end of our agreement. I expect him to hold up his.” She turned and vanished.

“What was that about?” Miranda asked. Her anger replaced by worry.

“I don’t know.”

Mary was glaring at him. She’d accused him of doing exactly that. Of making sure she’d be a prisoner until he came for her. He’d told her he wouldn’t do it. When he’d said so, he hadn’t considered what Tristan might do.

What had he just stepped into? And how pissed was Tristan going to be that he had stepped in it?

“It sounded like she didn’t know Tristan was kidnapped,” Victor said. “Why is that?”

“Really?” Miranda replied. “Officially he’s been on the Sayatoga ever since I caught him.”

“But he escaped, right?” Victor looked at Alex. “The Luminex thing happened after that.”

“Yes, but you, more than others, should know that prisons don’t advertise escapes unless they have to. Luminex made sure no one described him, so when Miranda returned him to them, they were satisfied no one realized he’d left.”

“Tricked me, you mean.” Had there been admiration there?

“Regardless, when Lady Prian hired us, Tristan was officially on the Sayatoga. If she heard anything, she has no reason to believe it.”

“And this thing about calling him your master?”

Alex considered not saying anything. But maybe this would make Victor stop dreaming and understand how things were. “Just what kind of relationship do you think we have, Victor? You saw how he talks to me; you can’t be so blind not to realize how he treats me. I tried to explain it to you, what I have isn’t something you want.”

The determination in Victor’s eyes told him he wasn’t listening. Well he’d tried, again.

“Can I ask a question?” Mary asked.

“Sure,” Alex replied.

“If she caught him and brought him to the prison, doesn’t that make her his enemy? Do you really want her on the team?”

“I’m not his enemy,” Miranda said. “It was just a job. He’s a merc. He knows how those things go. Considering how he tricked me, he probably considers us even.”

Alex didn’t say anything. He’d seen the file Tristan kept on her once. She wasn’t someone he actively hunted, but he certainly didn’t consider them even. He wasn’t sure there was such a thing with Tristan. You crossed him once, and he was going to make you pay; it was just a question of time. Miranda would do well to learn that, but from someone else.

“Okay, this disaster has been avoided. You two go under.”

“I can deal with Mary,” Miranda said.

“I think you terrified her enough already. I’ll handle it. I just need to restart everything and set in the course.”

He got the ship going again and made sure there were no hidden surprises leftover from his unwanted visitors. When he confirmed the system was safe and completely his, Victor was in his seat, still, the light on his armband blinking a steady green. Mary was seated in the seat at the end of the ship, away from them.

He looked into Miranda’s room and she was on her bed, the field active. Good, it was only him and Mary.

“Come on,” he told Mary, “that’s your seat.” He indicated the one next to Victor.

“I’d rather be in this one.”

“That one doesn’t work. We had to cannibalize parts to fix the other two. Miranda’s not great at maintaining things she never needs.”

With a sigh, Mary got up and took a step forward. Alex grabbed her arm and slammed her against the wall. He had his forearm against her throat. Not a knife, not yet. He wanted answers before he decided if he was going to kill her.

“Let me make something very clear, Mary. I don’t like being played.”

“I—I don’t know—”

He pressed harder, let her choke for a few heartbeats and released it. “Victor knows you. He knows your file. He told me you’re native to Bramolian Six.”

“So what?” she spat. “You weren’t exactly honest, Mister ‘don’t worry, you’ll be set free after this.’”

“I didn’t arrange that,” he replied, keeping his anger at bay, “but I should have expected it.”

“Oh, so you would have warned me of what your master was going to do to me?”

“No.”

“Then forgive me if I’m not heartbroken about telling you a sob story in the hopes you’d be on my side.”

“That’s fair, but here’s the thing: I can’t trust you anymore. So I’m going to ask you a few questions, and you fucking better hope I believe your answers, because while I might need a medic, I’m not going to keep a potential traitor on my crew. And before you ask, no, I’m not going to make sure there’s atmosphere before throwing you out the ship. Are we clear?”

“And you trust *her*?”

“Her I know how to control. How I controlled you was based on the lie, so now I need to figure out if I can control you. Do you understand?”

She nodded.

“Did you work for Baran?”

“Are you craz—”

“Don’t play with me.”

“That guy was insane; he wanted to commit mass murder. You think I’d have anything to do with that willingly?”

He searched her eyes, looking for any hints she was lying.

“You wanted to keep the virus. Why?”

“Money, why else? The thing’s deadly. Do you have any idea how much a weapon like that’s worth?”

“You still wanted to keep it after you knew how it worked. How it would kill the universe.”

She shrugged. “That’s if I believed you and your partner. Which I had no reasons to, and I had the cure. I could have made even more profits off that.”

“Money. That’s what you want? That’s why you did all that?”

“It’s what everyone wants.”

“You didn’t ask for money.”

“I didn’t have to. You offered me a brand new identity, do you have any idea how much that’s worth? Even if I keep it, it’s a clean slate. No Law after me because I screwed up in the process of learning what I needed to know.”

“You have rich clients. Why hasn’t one of them given you that?”

“Because needing them gives them a way to control me. That ID gets me free of them, too.”

He let her go. He’d prefer it be more clear-cut, but if that was what he wanted out of life, he could go back to Luminex. He was reasonably sure she’d told the truth, so he’d

have to be happy with that.

“I want your word you’re going to keep me safe from him.”

Alex laughed. “That’s not even on the table.”

“Damn it, that monster told her to keep me for him—I don’t even want to consider why—and you expect me to get anywhere near him without some promise of protection?”

“You agreed to the job. I can keep you safe for the duration, and I’m confident I can arrange for you to have a head start afterward with an ID I won’t tell him anything about. So it’s going to be on you to not be noticed.”

“Really? You’re not going to tell him? The guy who beats you and you go back to?”

“Mary, unless you want to fly to Mobius under your own power, shut up. I told you then, what me and Tristan have is something I’ve accepted. I’m not going to tell him about your ID because he isn’t going to have a reason to ask about it.”

She sighed. “I guess it isn’t like I have any choice. You’ve said my other option is a walk out an airlock. I’ll take it and make the best of it.”

“Good, now sit down. You’re going under.”

“Is that chair really broken? Or did you say that just to get me standing?”

“It’s not working. Miranda only works with one other person normally, and she’d been solo for a few years. She’s kept the ship in good condition, but I don’t think she ever looked at those seats.”

She sat, and he attached the armband. He turned it on and watched her grow still.

She’d believed him. That was good. So long as she kept believing him, she’d play her part. After that, whatever Tristan wanted would happen.