

Alex was still glaring at Tristan's back, wondering if he'd ever be let out of cryo. The visual changes were minor enough. He glanced at the controls to see if the timer hadn't activated to turn it on. As he saw it was deactivated, he noticed the lack of vibration. The ship was powered down. The lights were low.

Tristan had taken him out of cryo.

He looked at the closed door and stood. He didn't care what Tristan said about needing Emil; he knew the Samalian well enough that it could mean leaving Emil barely alive. There was a lot that could be done in anger that wouldn't kill.

"There's a list of items on your board," Tristan said before Alex could take a step. "Find me the best places to procure them. I'll also need the security layout of those places."

Alex looked over his shoulder. Tristan was still looking at the screens, and they weren't angled to reflect where Alex was. He could take the second or two he'd need to glance in the room. *Don't*, he told his leg. It didn't twitch, but he'd reminded himself what waited for him if Tristan decided to be pissed about the delay. He wouldn't beat him now, if he trusted his word, but when it came?

Alex shuddered and went to his seat. He fiddled with the earpiece, trying to find a comfortable position for it while he looked over the list. He glanced at Tristan. What were they going to do? Film a vid? Some form of live show? There was a full broadcasting setup on the list.

One screen gave him a sensor readout as it came on. They were approaching a planet. Liadon, based on the information scrolling down. With the ship powered down, he'd expected them to be groundside already. What was Tristan hoping to avoid? Could reserve power be detected? Active sensors were shut down.

He put that part out of his mind. Tristan was the pilot, he knew how to do this.

Alex did his search. Liadon had a thriving entertainment industry focusing on vid production, so they also had the associated businesses. They couldn't afford to order and wait for something to be shipped to them from some distant planet when they were in the middle of production.

The list didn't simply list cameras, Tristan wanted the RFE-321. He didn't want audio recorders, he wanted the Martom All-spectrum Recording Array. Same with the broadcasting rig, some long identifier Alex couldn't make sense of. When he looked them up, they were the best in their particular categories.

He found a handful of locations with most of what could be found. Tristan had picked the right place, it seemed. Only the broadcasting rig came with just one possibility: that was one piece of equipment that wasn't available to the public.

Following a hunch, Alex looked into how broadcasting worked, and after coercing his way into a peripheral branch of the Broadcast Control Agency, he added an item to Tristan's list, an authorization code for their broadcast to be accepted on the network.

Security for most of the equipment was respectable, but nothing that would stop Tristan, or him. The broadcasting rig would take more work. Production companies were protective of anything that central to their industries. And with only one local manufacturer for it? Well, Tristan would have his work cut out for him.

Alex leaned back and glanced at Tristan's back. Over his shoulder he saw the planet approaching on a screen. Very green, some browns and blues. The clouds were thin, more of a high-altitude haze than something that would block the sun.

Why did Tristan want to steal all of that? Why else ask for the security layout? Alex wasn't above stealing when needed. He fingered the earpiece. But what did that gain him in this situation? The cameras and recorders were expensive, but they were available for the public. And if he didn't want to spend that kind of money? He could go for something lower quality. It wasn't like they were competing for some sort of award, right?

They could even buy the rig, although that would eat up a large chunk of Alex's finances. That it wasn't available to the public was a minor thing. With a few hours of research and a few more of work, he could create a production company that would pass all but the most thorough of checks.

Alex didn't think it was about the money. Alex had never been able to work out exactly how much money Tristan had hidden over the banking institutions, but he'd found enough to know

he had more than Alex could even dream of having. And even without that, if they found the right market for them, the stuff in the duffel could bring in enough to outright buy one of the production companies here.

Money wasn't it. They had enough, and they both had the skills to make sure it was never traced back to them. What was left? The act of stealing? Theft was about the challenge, the thrill, or desperation. It wasn't the latter. So? Nothing Alex knew about Tristan said he was a thrill-seeker. That left challenge, but was that more important than the mission?

Alex felt like he was missing something, and he didn't like that. Alex could think on his feet, but it helped to have at least an idea what was coming. When that thing revealed itself, Alex had a feeling he'd be scrambling hard to keep up.

The ship shook as they entered the atmosphere. Tristan's screen turned off, as did others. Heat warnings came up on a screen. Tristan didn't react to them. He didn't do anything.

Alex wasn't a pilot; all he knew was how to enter courses to get to his destination. He let stations and planetary management systems take him in the final distances. A direct atmospheric entry wasn't something he'd attempt.

But he did think the pilot should be doing something while the ship seemed to be doing a ballistic drop toward the planet. Alex swallowed. He thought he noticed Tristan's lips curving up. He wanted to say something, but his mouth was too dry. He looked at his screen, trying to get some information from passive sensors, but the atmospheric disturbance was blinding them.

He tried again to speak, but his tongue was a mass of lead.

Tristan leisurely tapped controls. The ship shuddered as the engines kicked in.

Alex could swear he felt the inertial dampener protest. Passive sensors came back. They were a half a mile off the ground, still dropping, but slowing. Alex found he was able to breathe again.

"What was that?"

Tristan glanced in his direction and went back to controlling the ship.

"Did you just drop us through the atmosphere blind?"

"Best way to fool the type of sensor array they use. They have too many loose remnants of planetary bodies in the system. A handful of them fall through the atmosphere every day."

"We were blind." Alex might shriek. "We could have crashed. What would have happened to the mission then?"

Tristan looked at him. There was no anger in his eyes, but was the hint of a smile still there? "We didn't crash. I knew how long it would take for us to drop below the sensor grid, and I had a good idea how far the ground was below that."

"A good idea?"

Tristan shrugged. "It's tough to take into account high altitude air current. I was confident of the area we'd end up, and—" He lightly tapped a command, and information scrolled on the screen. "—we're only a little over a quarter mile off the mark." Tristan smiled. "Not bad."

Tristan looked at him. "Relax. I'm going to have us in the approved travel lanes quickly enough." Tristan turned to his screen.

Alex watched him, his fingers dancing over the commands as he leveled the ship. That small smile was still there. Alex thought Tristan was bobbing his head. Who was that?

He almost asked. He almost called to Jack. But then the signs coalesced into a more probable possibility. Jovial, taking serious things lightly, not focusing too well. Alex had seen that before. Often even. Mercs tended to develop bad habits. Many of those involved drugs.

Tristan was acting like someone who'd just gotten a hit of his favorite drug. Alex looked away to hide his dismay. Tristan was a thrill-addict? He couldn't be. He was always controlled. Every documented mission Tristan had done spoke of careful planning, step-by-step execution, until things descended into violence.

How had he never made the link before? Easy. Thrill-addicts always went looking for more. Tristan could take years between missions.

"Did you find what I asked for?" Tristan broke him out of his thoughts. He sounded like his usual self again.

"I did." What was he going to do? What could he do? Did this change anything?

"Well?"

Alex wasn't sure what Tristan was asking about. "Oh." He sent the locations he'd found to Tristan's screens and stood. He needed to do something. Sitting and thinking wasn't doing him any good right now.

"Stay seated." Tristan was looking the list over.

"I'm going to check on Emil."

"He's still in cryo. There's no point in looking in on him."

Alex considered, then sat. "I'm guessing you have a plan?" One of Tristan's screens showed them traveling within an approved travel lane, under the authorized speed for it.

"I do." Tristan was doing a search on broadcast authorization codes.

Alex waited for more. When it didn't come, he looked at his own screens, bringing up the cameras and watching woods and small towns fly under them. He brought up the planetary travel lanes report. They were far away from the major centers so no one traveled along with them. He tried to work out where they were going, but the possibilities were too extensive.

What he didn't do was think about how they'd gotten through the atmosphere, and what that could mean for how Tristan would handle the rest of the mission.

Alex had gotten bored with the scenery and was looking through what attractions the planet had to offer, other than the vid industry related ones, when the engine's pitch changed. He glanced at the time. They'd been flying for just under three hours.

Tristan dropped them out of the lane and headed for a town. Even at a distance something felt odd about it. Where was all the traffic that came with population centers? Why was there so much green on and around the buildings? He zoomed on one—plants were climbing up its walls. The windows were broken and vines climbed through those too.

"Well," Alex said, more to himself than Tristan. "This is quaint." He looked at the Samalian. "What's this place?"

"This is where I'm going to have my showdown with the boy's father."

"He has a name, you know."

"That doesn't have any bearing on the situation."

"So, a showdown? As in gun fight?"

"I expect so."

"Isn't there an easier way to get what you want?"

"Not that I can see."

*How hard did you look?* Alex thought. "What happened here?"

"It was abandoned." Tristan maneuvered the ship low and flew them between buildings.

"Why?"

The glare Tristan gave Alex was entirely devoid of levity. Tristan was off his high, and it was clear he had no plans on acting as a tourist guide.

Alex wondered if Tristan realized he was a thrill-addict. Unlike drugs, he didn't have to go and get something to get his high. Addicts simply let themselves fall into situations that would get their adrenaline up. As a merc, situations like that were easy enough to get into.

The ship maneuvered between buildings until it came to a crumbling tower with the front fallen off, and enough space to land inside it. Tristan turned the ship so it faced out before landing and shutting it down.

"Gear up."

Alex put his gun belt on and made sure each sheath on his harness had a knife in it. Most were mono-blades since they were the most dependable, not needing power. He had a handful of vibro-edge and two laser blades. He knew from experience that even deserted places could hold untold danger. He put his jacket over the harness and returned to the cockpit.

Alex saw Masters on a screen before Tristan shut it off. "Keep watch." The Samalian went down to the hold.

Alex reactivated the screen. News feeds, from local to distant, all talking about the kidnapping. News didn't work that way. Something new always replaced what had happened hours ago, let alone what had taken place months before, objectively. How much money was Masters pouring into this to ensure the story didn't die?

Tristan reached around Alex and shut down the screen. He had his gun harness on, with four guns on the front and two at the back.

“Is that going to be a problem?” Alex asked.

“No.” Flat answer, no flicker of excitement at the prospect of more violence.

Alex followed Tristan off the ship, then out of the building. The sun was bright and low, with the breeze doing little to make it bearable.

In the silence, Alex heard insects and nothing else. This looked like a small city, but nothing else matched. No sounds of hovers, no people, no talking, no arguments. What had happened here?

Tristan walked like everything was normal. He studied buildings, pausing at some before continuing on. Alex tried to understand what he was looking for.

“Any chance you can let me in on the plan?”

“The boy’s father wants to use his son’s kidnapping as a launching point to convince SpaceGov to go to war with mercenaries.” He sounded annoyed, but was that because he had to explain to Alex? Or was it the idea of having to fight SpaceGov?

“He made that pretty clear.”

“For his plan to work, he can’t get his son back publicly. A broadcasted reunion will sap the energy out of his fight. His plan hinges on never officially getting his son back. Putting him back into hiding, probably. That way he can claim I killed him, or that one of the mercenaries did in their carelessness. He doesn’t care who he can blame for his son’s death, he will use it to rally everyone behind him and use that momentum to get SpaceGov to eradicate us.”

“Alright, then why are we here? You don’t hide from threats like this. You said showdown.”

“He wants secrecy. I will deny him that. This is sufficiently isolated he will believe he can prevent anyone from finding out about the exchange.”

“And we’re going to broadcast the reunion. Like you said, that’s going to kill his momentum.”

Tristan snorted. “The broadcast will be him revealing how he arranged the kidnapping. I’m curious as to what SpaceGov will do when he’s exposed like that. How all these mercenaries he has hunting us will take having been manipulated.”

“He’s never going to admit to that. It would kill him.”

“He will. It’s simply a question of making sure the events line up properly.”

The road before them opened onto what had been a plaza, once upon a time when the city was thriving. Now it was overtaken with low grass and multicolored wildflowers.

“This is where the meeting will take place.” He pointed up at the surrounding buildings. “The cameras will go there and—”

Alex looked at Tristan. He was standing still, looking where he was pointing. No, searching. Before Alex could voice his question, Tristan backed up, forcing Alex to do the same. The ground where they’d been standing became puckered with holes.

Alex ducked behind a building and took out his gun. He worked out the general area where the shooter had to be, and found the spot where the light reflected at the edge of it. Alex pulled back just before the corner exploded, sending shards of permacrete flying.

Alex ignored the cuts and looked around again. The sniper was gone. He fired at where the shooter had been in case they were just ducking down, and ran across the street, putting a small building between him and the shooter. It had too many windows to stop anything coming from ground-level, but the roof blocked the view from most of the floor where the shooter had been.

Safe, he looked around for Tristan. He’d lost sight of him in his hurry. Tristan would go for the sniper, so Alex looked for the others. He couldn’t imagine the shooter being alone. They’d want backup specifically in case their targets managed to find cover.

As he scanned around, Alex saw a shadow move through a window, indistinct because it was on the other side of the building, but too large for an animal. He continued scanning, acting as if he hadn’t noticed it. A second shadow was moving in the other direction. To flank him, or following Tristan. A sniper and two backups were too few people to take on Tristan, so the others had to be elsewhere, maybe forming a net.

He finished scanning the area and took position at the corner, aiming where the sniper had been. He looked left and right, scanning the other building, but also keeping the closest person in his peripheral vision as they approached. He could hear footsteps now.

When the steps stopped, Alex spun and fired. She ducked out of the way, surprised and yelling something that wasn’t SpaceGov Standard, but the tone was harsh. The other rounded the opposite corner, firing blindly. Alex returned fire, forcing the man to take cover. These

couldn't be mercs. Well, he'd confirmed it easily enough. He aimed at where the man had vanished. The head came poking around just before it acquired a hole in it.

Alex spun and readied himself. The woman didn't show herself, but she'd stopped yelling. Alex followed the wall to where she'd taken cover. He listened—fast, heavy breathing. She was scared. Whatever she'd expected, it wasn't this. No other sounds. Was it really only the two of them down here?

He stepped away, putting distance between them, and made a wide arc around the corner. The knife that flew at him made his shot miss, and then she was running at him with another knife. Amateur. Alex hit her in the face with his gun. She dropped and didn't move.

He leveled his gun on her and waited. One blow? He'd knocked her out with one blow? Alex kicked the knife away. She was breathing in that regular way people unaware of their surroundings did. In her early thirties, scars on her face and neck spoke of a violent life. He rolled her on her stomach with a foot before holstering his gun.

He patted her down. The clothing was just clothing, no armor to them. It was worn, had been repaired multiple times. She didn't have any other weapons. He looked where she'd been waiting for him. She'd dropped or left the gun there.

"Stupid. So fucking stupid." He reached in a pocket for the ties he kept, but what was the point? "If you'd kept your distances and shot at me, I'd have shot you dead."

Now he was going to have to kill her in cold blood.

There was a scream, terror. It came to an end with the sound of an impact on the ground.

Alex could justify not killing her; she could have information. How she'd known they were here, if nothing else. But something told him she wouldn't volunteer the information. Which meant hurting her and then killing her in cold blood. And realistically, what could she know? The odds were they'd been here for something else, and thought he and Tristan would be easy targets.

He pulled out his gun and aimed it at the back of her head. He cursed and rolled her on her back.

"I'm sorry. I'm no longer in charge of my life anymore." Bullshit. Alex could walk away. He could leave. Tristan didn't have a bomb implanted somewhere in his head. It wasn't like the Samalian would waste time chasing him.

Alex shook his head. "I can't be alone anymore. Not after thinking there was someone who loved me out there. I'm sorry you have to pay the price for my weakness." At least she wouldn't know what had happened.

He shot her in the head.

Fuck. He was a sick man.

He took position at the corner and went back to scanning the building. There was a splash of red that hadn't been there before at the foot of the building. Probably the sniper.

The next person he saw was Tristan, exiting the building carrying a rifle over his shoulder. Alex moved from his cover, but continued scanning the area. Tristan's nonchalance didn't mean much.

"How many did you kill?" A steady, serious tone.

"Two." Alex indicated the woman and pointed to the corner where he'd shot the other one. "Not mercs." Maybe he was wrong? Maybe Tristan's jubilant mood had been caused by something after all. Alex knew he hadn't imagined it, so he'd keep an eye out for other hints.

"Local gang, according to the sniper," Tristan said. "This is a Karovan Hunting Carbine. Not a weapon a mercenary would use. At the distance he was, the shots wouldn't have done much damage. He said it was only the three of them."

"So we just happened to stumble on them while they were doing what? Scavenging the area?" Alex couldn't believe it even as he said it.

"No, they came here to kill us. He had no problem admitting that. I took out a knife, and he began talking."

"Did he say how he knew where we were?"

"He fell before I could get him to talk."

Alex raised an eyebrow. "He fell?"

"Yes. He fell."

Alex opened his mouth.

“I do not kill someone until after I have gotten all the information I need.”

Alex took a step back under the anger.

“He wouldn’t talk, so I reached for him. He backed away, stepped on the carbine he’d drop, and tripped. The railing broke under his weight and he fell.”

Alex raised his hands. “I’m not arguing.”

Anger flashed again, and then it was gone. Tristan’s eyes went back to being cold and calculating. “Let’s head back to the ship. We need to find out how they knew and who else might know we are here.” He looked at the carbine, then tossed it on the woman’s body.