

Mary handed Alex a nutrient bar and glared at him until he ate it. He glared back. She'd made herself useful over the weeks he and Victor had done their research by making sure both of them ate and slept.

Victor had been good about taking breaks, but Alex still lost himself in the systems when he worked, so she'd resorted to using a low-level stunner to shock him out. He'd threatened her, to make her stop, but as the team medic she'd taken an unreasonable delight in making sure he knew this was for his own good.

She just enjoyed having a way to piss him off he couldn't do anything against.

Now, the time for research was done; Will's ship was due to dock in a couple of hours. It was time to work through what they'd found out, so the five of them were seated in a different room, around a table that could accommodate three times their numbers.

Victor tapped the table. Documents appeared over it, divided into stacks. He tapped a stack, and it moved to the center. "Alright. As we all know, there is no indication in anything the Sayatoga filed that they just recaptured Tristan."

"That's because they never acknowledged he escaped," Jacoby said.

Victor separated a document from the stack. Miranda's name was on it. "This is the only official document about Tristan's capture. The initial one."

"So the job to recapture him wasn't through the boards?" Jacoby asked.

"No, the Sayatoga contacted me directly, and paid me handsomely for an off-the-board contract. I don't remember the details, but I do remember an implication that if I took too long, they'd move the contract to someone else."

"If who you handed them wasn't Tristan," Alex said, "who was he?"

"No idea. He looked enough like Tristan to fool me. If not for the way he fought me, I'd think he was some Samalian who got paid to take his place."

Victor pulled a picture from the stack and Alex's breath caught. The Samalian there looked sufficiently like Tristan, he didn't think anyone else would notice the differences. The muzzle was narrower, the eye color was different, and the fur a little lighter. He even had white speckling in his fur, although not as much. It didn't evoke a night's sky in this Samalian's fur.

"I give you Justin, no last name. The only reason I was able to identify him is that I'm still officially Law, so I was able to request the security footage from when you captured him. As horrible as it is, I was able to isolate the sound and make out when he says his name. He also claims to run Luminex, which made him your boss back then, Alex."

Alex nodded. There had been a change in leadership while he was held prisoner.

"His name is noted as being the owner of the corporation for over a decade, but, and this is interesting, someone was very careful to remove any evidence he even exists otherwise. I can't tell you if that's a guy or—"

"Male, Alex said."

"How do you know?" Victor asked.

"Did you sleep with him too?" Mary commented.

"No, but I remember the company owner always being addressed as male in any communique."

"And you didn't know he wasn't human?"

"I was a corporate coercionist. That's not quite the bottom of the company, but just about, so nothing he ever had to say was that important to me, and I don't remember ever having visuals. It was always only a voice."

"Okay, so a guy. Other than that, nothing. No medical records, and I can't even find out how he got the position. As far as anything I can legally obtain, he just appeared in the position one day, and vanished years later. I ran a general search of the name linked to a Samalian, and all that came out were a few entries of a Samalian by that name running a few stations, as well as ships, but not at the same time. If that's the same person, he likes traveling."

Alex looked at the image. Stations and ships. “Do you have the name of the station?” he asked, wondering if his guess was right.

Victor looked through the documents. “Tetsui,” he finally said, reading one.

“The next one is going to be a ship, the Osagua.”

Victor looked through a few more documents. “Yes, how did you know?”

“Tetsui Station is the first mass destruction attributed to Tristan. The Osagua the second. I don’t remember the order for the rest, but my guess is that if we line up what this Justin ran with Tristan’s acts of mass destruction, they’ll match.”

“You’re making it sound like a feud,” Jacoby said.

“You realize the one flaw in that reasoning, right?” Victor asked.

Alex nodded. “It means he left Justin alive, multiple times.”

Mary studied the image, then looked through documents until she found a picture of Tristan. She placed them side by side. “If we remove cosmetic work as the reason for them to look this much alike, the only reason I can think of is that they’re related. It isn’t certain, not without looking at their DNA and studying Samalian genetics, but that would be my guess. It sounds like there isn’t any DNA of Justin available.”

Victor shook his head.

“There also isn’t any of Tristan,” Alex said. “I have programs throughout the network to clean up after both of us. Other than a few sightings, in the wrong locations, and enough warrants to keep our credibility as mercs, everything gets removed.” What bothered Alex was that this cleanup had begun before he’d started it. And it looked like whoever had done it also did it for this Justin. He’d have to mention it to Tristan when he had him back.

“So?” Miranda asked. “The universe’s big. Everyone’s got a double, right?”

“That’s only true for species that have spread around,” Mary said. “How many planets do they have?”

“Only one,” Alex said. “SpaceGov won’t let them get others.”

“There’s no proof of that,” Jacoby said, “but I can tell you there are only around a hundred Samalians in space, and I never came across two with a similar fur pattern.”

“You mean like these two?” Miranda pointed out, smiling.

“Regardless, unless we’re interested in explaining how she was fooled,” Victor said without looking at Miranda, “why they look alike isn’t important.”

He removed the stack of documents and brought up another one. “The Sayatoga is one of eight prison ships out there, and the only one claiming less than ten attempted escapes in its lifetime, all of them a failure. We know that’s a lie since Tristan was walking around. How many other prisoners have actually escaped?”

“I don’t care,” Alex said.

“Right. Likeliest scenario is that at some point they realized they have the wrong Samalian. Instead of even risking news of how they were tricked leaking out, they arranged for the retrieval themselves. I haven’t been able to work out how they knew where Tristan was hiding.”

“No one home told them,” Jacoby said.

“You’re the only one who knows, right?” Alex said, letting some accusation slip in his tone.

“As far as I know, and I wouldn’t tell them either.”

Alex sighed. “My best guess is that Tristan made a mistake on the way back. I went over the navigation system and there were none of the usual maneuvering feints he puts in. He did a straight line.”

“But you were in Katherine’s ship,” Victor said.

“Which I took over and reconfigured the way he likes. He then attempted to go over my code to make it is. He did a poor job, but there’s enough there that someone determined, who knows him well, could identify the system as his when it talked to the

network.”

“You’re thinking this Justin?” Jacoby asked.

Alex shrugged. “If they found out he was the wrong guy, it would make sense they took him out of his cell. He could sell the knowledge for his freedom.”

Victor started shuffling documents, spreading some in the air. “Okay, okay, this might explain something.” Alex watched the documents, made out requisition forms and orders for food and medical supplies.

“I’m assuming that him giving them the information would have them ramp up sending people out. What I’m seeing still doesn’t really makes sense, if all they’re doing is looking for Tristan, but at least it’s better than what I had before.”

“Are you going to tell us, Vickie Boy?”

“Starting about a decade ago, objective time. There’s an increase in ordering supplies of all sorts: medical, weapons, leisure, food. To match that, there’s also an increase in coming and going, but it doesn’t correspond to going out for those supplies, unless those orders are picked up on more than one ship, which doesn’t make sense.”

“Unless they want to minimize the risk of losing a large quantity of cargo to pirates,” Jacoby said. “The other ships could be escorts. One thing you want to protect when you’re going to battle is your supply line.”

“I can go with that. I’m not sure why they would be doing that, but okay. The problem is that I can’t account for is all their pilots. The Sayatoga has eighty ships, but only thirty-eight pilots.”

“The extra ships are being used for parts,” Miranda said. “It’s a money-saving thing. They always order the same models, so they keep the ships they don’t use in service to make them look better-equipped to deal with an escape attempt. Ground prisons do the same thing with shuttles and ground vehicles.”

“Alright, that works, except that there’s currently sixty-two ships outside their hangar. Who’s piloting them?”

“Ships aren’t exactly difficult to pilot,” Alex said. “I can get one from one side of the universe to the other without any problem.”

Jacoby looked through the documents. “You have one advantage most people don’t: you can just tell the navigation what to do.” He showed a document to Victor. “Those are the ships?” He read through it. “They use four models: two types of strikers, a carrier model, and a class of yacht—only a handful of those, since they’d be for the officers, when they want to take a trip. Those, anyone can pilot. The rest, they’re military-grade. You need specialized skill to pilot them. The strikers more than the carriers, but still. Even on with the size of a crew on a ship like that, I can’t see many of them having the training and not be actual pilots. I agree with Victor, something strange is going on here.”

“Can’t they be picking up more pilots on those trips?” Mary asked. “I mean, it’s been going on for a while. Can you see if they started with fewer flights and increased over time?”

“That isn’t how it works,” Jacoby said. “The Sayatoga is a corporation. Even if they are going to hire mercs, forms need to be filled and filed. I think if they had hired more pilots, Victor wouldn’t have mentioned the inconsistency.”

Victor nodded. “It’s why Alex went in to get me all this. SpaceGov is obsessed with documenting everything; and corporations have to do what SpaceGov says if they want to keep running, especially prisons, and especially a corporation that only exists to run a prison. I can tell you how much water has been processed over the last five years, and I can tell you that they haven’t increased their employee pool. The only changes in pay I see are as people leave and are replaced.”

“Okay, so they have a new captain,” Miranda said. “And trying to boost the bottom line she has her pilots train others, not to the point where they can chase crooks down, but she can give them supply runs. She doesn’t change their job descriptions, so no change in pay.”

“That could account for some increase, but just how far can you push people? Piloting a ship isn’t like working on one. I found that out during my trip from Bramolian Six to here. What are the accommodations like on them? Even cryo via fluid feels like you haven’t slept at all. The way the flights are filed, they leave, get there, get loaded, and come back. No time to stop and take a nap. To have those sixty some ships always flying you need twice the pilots so they can rotate. And Jacoby confirmed that the odds of having thirty pilots on record and ninety off it is unlikely.”

“I know I’m coming across as being ignorant and that you’re going to shoot me down,” Mary said, “but don’t some prison put their prisoners to work?”

“They do,” Jacoby said, “and it’s possible the Sayatoga does it too, but only on the Sayatoga. With a planetary prison, letting a prisoner out under supervision doesn’t carry the same amount of risk as putting that prisoner in the pilot’s seat of a ship. That’s a lot of temptation for one person to resist, even with a gun to his head.”

“That’s not to say what an enterprising prisoner can do with access to the right chemicals,” Alex said. “The Sayatoga is a sealed box with the air inside it. Blow a hole in the hull and he can hurt a lot of people. The Sayatoga doesn’t hold your small-time criminals. They hold people like Tristan, like the Butcher of Kraven Klaw. I don’t think they want to give them that sort of opportunity.” Something occurred to Alex. “Are they still taking in prisoners?”

“Not as much as they used to—they’re close to capacity—but yes, they still do.”

“Not a prisoner takeover then. It would account for the increased demand in supply, but not in a continued intake of prisoners. They’d bring in allies to work with them, or rivals to eliminate them, but the criminal system doesn’t give them enough control to rely on that.”

“Unless they have someone on the bounty hunters’ boards,” Miranda said, thoughtful. “Then they could control who’s worth what and justify taking them in.”

“A ship full of criminals?” Jacoby asked. “Working together? You guys are mercs, right? We can barely follow orders, and we have some ingrained structure. You’ve worked with enough criminals to know how they’re like. The kind the Sayatoga holds would rather cut each other’s throat than shake hands.”

Mary raised her hand. “I don’t—”

Alex and Victor glared at her.

She glared back. “I don’t understand how we’re getting in if they aren’t taking just any prisoners anymore. Isn’t the plan for Miranda to deliver Alex?”

“No, I’m not,” Miranda said. “I’m delivering Crimson,” she said proudly.

“Who’s Crimson?”

“He’s Crimson,” Victor said, pointing to Alex. “Didn’t you hear that woman call him that during our escape?”

Mary looked at him. “You mean when you two scared me to death by letting me think I was going back to Bramolian Six to face the system for crimes I didn’t commit? Letting me believe I wouldn’t be there when Alex came to pull me out? If that’s what you mean, no, I’m sorry, I wasn’t hanging on every word the scary lady was having with him. I was trying to get back some sanity after getting scared half to death.”

“It didn’t really work then,” Miranda commented.

“Well,” Alex cut Mary’s reply off, “I am Crimson, who is wanted for piracy in a bunch of systems, kidnapping a child, and more counts of murder than you can keep track of.” He looked at Miranda. “Am I forgetting anything?”

“Attack on a Law precinct,” Victor said dryly.

“That one can’t be traced back to me.”

“He’s wanted for a lot of stuff, but what will draw the bounty hunters is the twenty-eight-million bounty on his head.”

Mary looked at Alex. “This is insane.”

“Not really; that kind of bounty puts him in the lower echelon of the criminals the

Sayatoga wants,” Miranda said.

“Not what I mean,” Mary replied. “You’re a coercionist. How come you haven’t gone in and erase it?”

“Miranda, care to explain it to her?”

“No.”

Jacoby sighed. “Kids. He doesn’t care about it because no one is going to believe he’s actually Crimson. Look at him. Does he look like a deadly monster who works with another monster?”

“Then how are you going to get the Sayatoga to take him?” Mary looked confused, but Alex no longer took the behavior for granted. She was too cunning.

“Greed,” Victor said. “The reason Crimson is worth so much is that SpaceGov will pay a correspondingly large amount to the prison that holds him. So long as no one starts committing crimes claiming to be Crimson, SpaceGov will be happy to pay the Sayatoga. It’s how Tristan has managed to stay free so long. For all that he isn’t human and therefore distinctive, he doesn’t sign his crimes. And with Alex scrubbing behind him, all you’re left with is that a Samalian committed a crime. It doesn’t help how people view aliens, but it keeps Tristan from being hunted all the time.” He looked at Alex. “What’s this piracy thing? I never came across it.”

“It was a one-time thing. Looking for Tristan wasn’t cheap, and with my skillset, taking control of a ship’s easy. I thought I’d erased all traces of Crimson on that one, but it came back to haunt me a few years later, and I also found out it was the foundation for much of my reputation as a merc, so I’ve left it alone.”

Miranda looked interested, but relaxed, which Alex didn’t like. She should be scheming for a way to get that bounty paid to her. He’d half expected it to happen while they’d been waiting, but she hadn’t tried to contact anyone, either from her ship, the Folly, or the station. He considered telling her about the program he included in the half she accepted upon taking the job, but decided he wanted to see what she’d try. It would be more satisfying to ruin the attempt rather than discourage her from trying.

“Victor, is there anything else?”

“Plenty, but really, what it all amounts to is that something isn’t as it should be on that ship. Which means we can’t effectively plan for anything.”

“Meaning?” Jacoby asked.

“Meaning that even with the projections I sent to your individual vaults, staying alert and ready to adapt to any changes is going to be how we’ll survive.”

“So just like any other merc job. Good to know.”

“Alex, how come our muscle’s not here?” Miranda asked.

“Still finalizing the selection. Don’t worry, it’s just a question of picking among those left. I’ll do that after Will’s here. Mary, were you able to find everything you’ll need? Will should be landing soon, and once he’s there and our muscle meets us at the Folly, we are leaving.”

“Let’s see,” Mary replied. “Do I have what I need to take care of a patient whose physiology I barely know, affected by who knows what, and whose mental state, the last time I saw him, was completely unstable? Sure, I’m ready,” she said with exasperation.

“Good. Jacoby, you—”

“I’m coming.”

“I—”

“Alex, if you tell me you need me to watch her ship, I swear I’m throwing you out an airlock and running the rescue myself.”

Alex glared at Jacoby and kept his hands on the table with an effort of will. “I was going to say that I need you to run the Folly through its checks so we can leave immediately, and if you ever threaten me, I’m going to cut you down before you can finish saying it. Am I clear?”

“You are,” Jacoby answered, but he didn’t look worried enough for Alex’s liking. He looked around and Mary had stepped away. She looked worried enough for the two of them. Victor was concerned, and Miranda far too bored for it to be real.

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The dock the system told him Will was arriving at was in the cargo section. It had felt like a strange place for him to arrive until he had the screen near the dock’s access show him the approaching ship.

“I thought the locksmith was only coming with his girlfriend,” Miranda asked, unable to hide the awe in her voice. The ship was a small commercial cargo hauler, easily three times larger than the Folly. “Just how much are you paying him that he can afford something like that?”

“I doubt he paid for it,” Alex replied. A cargo transporter and the cargo section would be the environment most comfortable for Will. This was where the Golly docked any time they were at a station. The ship came too close for the camera to see anything more than a small portion of the hull, so he shut it down.

The clang of the ship being locked in place came a few minutes later, then the whirl of the seals, and the light over the door turned green. Under a minute after that, he heard the grind of the inside door. The one on his side hissed as it opened.

Alex was moving before it was done, seeing the smaller form of his friend. Will ran to meet him. They hugged. “Will, I am so glad to see you. How was the trip?”

“Had better,” Will replied, sounding worried, but he didn’t say anything else. He turned and indicated the woman who was walking toward them “Aliana, my girl.”

Alex looked at him. “Girl? That woman’s a mountain.” She was massive. Taller than he was by a head. Tristan’s height. She had more muscle on her than anyone he’d ever seen, Tristan included.

“Will, exactly how did you meet her? I didn’t think they made them bigger than the Golly’s cook.”

“Just luck.” Will beamed.

“You must be Crimson,” she said, offering her hand. Her voice was surprisingly light for such a massive woman. “Will told me a lot about you. The entire crew knows you.”

Alex shook her hand. “I did my best to be helpful.”

“The way they talk about you, you did more than be helpful.”

“Oh yeah,” a man behind her said. “He definitely made an impression on everyone.”

Alex couldn’t see him, but he recognized the voice. There was no way he would ever forget that man. He glanced at Will who mouthed a “sorry”, and looked both afraid and worried.

Aliana stepped aside, scowling, and Alex’s attention went to the man there.

He’d changed clothes, but that was all that had changed about him. He still wore his sense of superiority like it was a comfortable shirt.

“Anders,” Alex growled. “What are you doing here?”