

## Chapter 14

Tristan's claws clicked on the board as he tapped his fingers. He was looking at the screen, but he wasn't seeing any of the planetary scans that were scrolling. What he was seeing was Alex's face as he moved against him, only minutes ago, as far as his body was concerned. He was feeling his hands on the smooth skin, smelling his excitement.

He closed his eyes and rubbed his face. Too much time in close quarters, that was the cause of the cravings he felt. He was growing used to having Alex nearby, within easy reach. It was causing him to indulge too often.

Why was that so wrong? Alex was willing, vocally so in the moment. Why shouldn't Tristan enjoy himself? It wasn't like he was getting attached doing that. Alex was the one who'd grown attached.

He growled quietly and forced himself to see the screen, instead of the fresh memory. Indulgences were a distraction. He glanced up. No, this wasn't going to cause him to miss something.

Bramolian Six was a corporate world, which meant that almost every corporation in the universe had an office here. That technically made it one of SpaceGov's core worlds, except that the security was so much higher.

The sensor net around the planet was six layers deep, each one tighter than the other. The last time he'd been here, it had taken him six weeks of observation before he'd worked out the pattern that allowed him to come in undetected.

Of course, then he hadn't been in a hurry. His quarry had thought him dead, and he'd wanted him complacent. This time there was an adversary after the same thing he wanted, with unknown equipment and an unknown team. Tristan couldn't believe that his quarry hadn't hired himself a group of mercenaries. Sovereigns weren't known for getting their hands dirty.

He didn't have six weeks.

He glanced at Alex's reflection on his screen. Six weeks in the ship with him, out of cryo. He had a vision of all the things they could get up to and chased it away. What he needed was time alone, and soon.

Since evading the sensor net was out of the question, they'd have to land at the port. That meant using one of his identities. Which one? He liked being someone with power when he landed on a planet. Power meant guards were less likely to bother him, even if he wasn't human.

He had multiple such identities, linked to existing companies, with large enough accounts to impress any functionary. The problems here were two-fold. On a world like Bramolian Six, a powerful alien might not be bothered, but he would be noticed. It increased the chances someone would dig deep enough to notice something, and Tristan would have to destroy the identity. He could do that if needed, but those took a long time to properly establish.

The second problem was Alex. If Tristan was the power, the human would have to be subservient.

Tristan didn't have a problem with that, but it was something else humans would notice, and maybe question. Humans could be annoyingly curious, getting stuck on one little detail, like how had a human come to be subservient to a Samalian, and digging until they found an answer.

Tristan survived mostly by not being noticed.

In such a power dynamic, Alex would have to be the person with influence, and Tristan subservient. The problem here was that Alex had no identities who could have that kind of power. He'd taken the route of anonymity in all his identities, and they didn't have the time to set up anything that would survive scrutiny.

Friends then, traveling together, here to see the sights, enjoy what Bramolian Six had to offer. An image of him and Alex moving together in a dark alley. He shook his head to clear it. He found a lawyer among Alex's identities, and picked an accountant for himself. He reworked their past so they worked for the same company, and included previous trips taken together, all ordinary trips, then created a transaction history to match.

Anyone digging this deep into them might suspect they were more than friends, but people who did those kinds of investigations didn't have the inclination, or the time, to care about who slept with whom.

With their identities secured, he altered the ship's tag. He made his ship a rental, found a medium-class provider, and put it in their inventory, adding a purchase, maintenance, and rental history.

Altering a ship's tag should be impossible; it was what SpaceGov used to keep track of all the ship flying in the vastness of space. It wasn't easy. Tristan had rendered half a dozen ships unusable in his initial attempts to do it, but he'd worked it out. He'd coded his way through its security, then took it apart so he could add an access point. Alex had helped with this one, but most of the work was physical.

Most mercs and criminals who needed multiple ship tags used multiple physical transponders, but then they were locked into who they could be, and had to hide the unused transponders, shielded so they couldn't be detected. One flaw in the container and they would be revealed.

He preferred the safety and versatility his method gave him, in spite of the added work up front.

The station contacted the ship, exchanged information, confirmed it was what it claimed to be, then requested control of the ship.

Reluctantly, Tristan gave it.

He didn't spend the forty-three minutes it took for his ship to get through the atmosphere and enter the gigantic groundside spaceport, move among the other ship, and land at the designated berth, nervous.

Tristan didn't get nervous. He was on high alert, keeping an eye on every scanner the ship was equipped with, looking for anything amiss. Any ships that moved out of their assigned lanes could be a Law ship maneuvering to intercept him, and not a ship simply being relocated by the management system. A stray signal could be an attempt to infiltrate his computer, past what the automated system was allowed, rather than an improperly shielded communication array.

These were reasons why he hated going through proper channels to get groundside. There were just so many ways someone could try to get to him.

The ship landed with a soft clang, and Tristan scanned the system. Alex was already in it, doing his own scans, much faster. He could let him do those alone, but this wasn't about making sure Alex did as expected. It was about Tristan reassuring himself everything was still his. Alex exited with a nod, and Tristan shut the system down.

While Alex changed, he physically disconnected the computer from the communication array. Overkill, he knew, but corporate worlds were the kind of places where they had coercionists better than Alex, and a lack of scruples in using them.

He sent Alex to get them a hover while he finished securing the ship. As with the computer, he took extra precautions. He disconnected every power coupling, except those part of his security system, and those he'd rebuild so there was no way to reroute any of their reserve power elsewhere.

Being this thorough meant they wouldn't leave in a hurry, but really, if it came to that, there were thousands of other ships here he could steal.

He wished he could disconnect the outside couplings, but that would attract attention. Ports like this didn't permit owners to work on their ships on landing pads.

He changed into a cleaner set of pants and prepared their packs, removing every weapon, but keeping their medical kits. Tristan put a tool kit in his. Another problem with landing at a port; security was such that he couldn't bring his own weapons. Still, where there were corporations and government, there were criminals.

Alex returned, took three undetectable knives, and put them in his pack, and they exited the ship. Tristan opened the ramp's control panel and made some changes inside, closed it, and entered the lock code,

which should be enough to discourage most thieves. And if they weren't enough, they also weren't the only security he had on his ship.

Alex rubbed the bridge of his nose. "I swear, we've been to so many ports on so many planets that they're all beginning to look the same."

He glanced at Alex. Was this more than just travel exhaustion? Yes, after this they were going home, back to his workshop and his research. Alex could take care of the house, since Tristan recalled him enjoying doing that. It would keep them apart, it would let Tristan get Alex off his mind.

The hover was a small touristic one, large enough for a family. There was a pilot's seat with modular spaces in the back, which could make five seats and a table, or sleeping space for four. It lacked a food printer or prep area.

He indicated for Alex to fly them and he made a seat for himself, facing forward. He was looking forward to this. In and out, quick and easy. Nothing like the last time he'd been here, chasing that would-be assassin.

That man had been the closest Tristan came to dying. Somehow he'd managed to plant explosives on his ship without Tristan finding out. The only reason he'd survived the initial explosion was that he'd had to do repairs. The ship had been old, Tristan much younger, not quite as careful in maintaining his ships.

The compartment had been away from the explosion, and when vacuum hit the inside of the ship, the life-preservation measures had gone off, sealing him in. Luck. That was what he could attribute his survival to that day. The idea of what could have happened because he hadn't been properly prepared was why he was so careful now.

He floated in space for two days before he was able to get a signal out, and three more before a ship answered his call. He'd still been in the system, so it was only a few hours after that. Of course, the first thing the miners did after extricating him to safety was try to extort money from him as payment for the rescue. He'd killed them and flown back to Valgar Station to get access to every security record.

The hover banked hard, and Alex let out a string of curses. If the hover had been armed, that other one would be vapors now. Tristan looked outside, surprised to note he recognized some of the landmarks from the maps he'd studied. He'd been lost in his memories longer than he'd thought.

Yes, he needed time away from everything.

He moved his seat closer to Alex and studied the area. They were over Hasteed, but they were too high to make out details and locate the Telrize Complex.

"How far are we?"

Alex brought up a map on the screen. "Ten miles. I'll take the next descent window into the city's travel lanes."

Tristan zoomed into the map of the complex and tapped the lane that went around it. "Get on that one. I want to take a look before landing."

Alex told the hover to route them there.

As they approached the complex, one building stood out, large at their distance when every other building was minuscule.

Alex whistled. "We need to find one machine in that building? I really hope I can narrow down where it can be, otherwise we're going to be at this for months."

"You said you'd be able to."

"I can. Trust me, I can. I have no intention of searching every inch of that place." He tapped the building on the screen and information came up. "It's more than a mile wide, and one and a half long. Twelve floors. Is that the only warehouse for the whole planet?"

Tristan didn't reply. He was trying to match the location of the building where the mainframe was located on the map to what he was seeing outside, but it was too deep within the complex for him to see it.

Alex glanced at him. "If you need another look, I'd say for a place like this, with the kind of traffic the lane has, we're good for three, maybe four circuits before a system flags us."

Tristan shook his head. He'd seen what he could from here. The next time they came here, they would be on the ground.

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