

Alex exchanged a look with Will, who shrugged. Apparently he didn't know what this was about either. The men had short black hair on top of hard faces. They were broad-shouldered, and their muscles stretched the dirty shirts they wore. They weren't armed, but Alex didn't think they needed weapons to hurt them—they were used to violence.

When Will started walking, Alex followed him. The men escorted them to a small shuttle and they squeezed in, having barely any space left to breathe. They flew out of town and across a rough countryside for close to an hour. They passed many remnants of towns, next to large and deep pits.

Someone had mentioned this was a mining world, and Alex wondered what they mined. He understood now why every building was made of the same simple material: they constantly had to move the towns when they exhausted the ore.

They didn't land in another port, but in the street, by a low and wide building. They got out and Alex had to stifle a curse; he recognized the place. He hid his trembling hand in his pocket, and prayed to the universe the weight of the case would keep his other one still.

He looked at the gray door, and only moved when a large hand pushed him forward. This wasn't good. How had they known where to find him? Or that he had been involved? He and Milo hadn't come in with the others. He wished he could think of something to do, but his mind seemed locked in a recursive function.

As soon as the door opened, the sounds of talking and drinking escaped the building. The men led Will and him past the bar, down a hall to a room in the back. Alex suspected that was where Anders and the others had gone.

"We found him," one of the men said as he pushed them in the room. Will glared back at him, but Alex only stared at the man seated behind the table which, by the datapad and papers on it, served as a desk.

He was fat, but his beige shirt hung loosely on him. His bald head was pale brown, and he sported a white goatee. The man indicated two simple wooden chairs opposite him. Alex didn't immediately react, and Will had to get his attention and point to the chair next to the one he'd sat in.

Alex placed the case between his legs and locked his fingers together to keep from fidgeting.

"What's this?" Will asked.

"Excuse me?"

Will sighed and spoke in measured tones. "What is this about?"

"Ahhh." The man smiled and fixed his gaze on Alex. "This is about theft."

Alex's mind went blank, or rather it was such a fear-induced jumble he couldn't latch onto anything in it. He'd been caught.

Will glanced at him, then shrugged. "Can't help. Just got down."

The man stared at Will, eyes narrowed as he seemed to try to figure out what he'd meant. "I see," he finally said. "The information I received tells me this man is one of those who robbed me."

Will glanced at Alex again, and when he looked back to the man, his expression was baffled. "How? Ship-bound all day. Down for shopping."

The man sneered. "Really? Then why does he look like he's about to piss himself?"

The expression reminded Alex of another time he's sat opposite an accuser. He hadn't done anything that time, but the similarity kindled his anger, and it burned away some of the fog clouding his thoughts.

“Tourist. Never been out. Never been roughed up.”

“A tourist?” The man snorted. Oustalo, that was his name. “Tourist ships don’t come here. There’s nothing anyone would want to see here.”

“Merchant. Take tourist. Cheap for him, money for us. Went shopping for exotic.”

“Merchant? Please, I know what you are.” He motioned, and before Alex could react, one of the men grabbed the case and put it on the table. Oustalo took the statue out of it.

“Careful!”

The man raised a thin white eyebrow at him. “What is it?”

“It’s a Samalian statue.”

“Is it valuable?” he asked, gaze still on Alex.

“Some hundred,” Will said before Alex could get his mouth working and say that it was.

“It’s, err...a reproduction.”

“Then why the near panic when I picked it up?” Oustalo’s tone wasn’t accusatory, merely curious.

“It’s from—” Alex paused to reign in his mouth. He had to be careful what he said. “It’s for a friend. He likes statues like that. I bought it for him, so please be careful with it.”

Oustalo looked it over, then ran a finger inside the case before putting it back there. “A friend, huh?” he said, the end of his lips quirking up, and Alex blushed at the suggestive implication.

“How much?” Will asked, which earned him a questioning look. “Stolen, how much?”

“Sixty-five thousand.”

Alex gasped. That wasn’t what Anders had said.

The man fixed his gaze on him and Alex forced his mouth shut. “That’s—that’s a lot of money.” How did a place like this, a bar, make even the kind of money Anders had told him they’d taken?

“It is.”

Will took a cred stick and handed it over. “Ten-thousand.”

Oustalo looked at it, then Will. “I thought you said you weren’t the ones who robbed me.”

“Not us. This shakedown. Been there before. Got ship waiting. Don’t give, miss it. Give, let loose.”

Oustalo shook his head. “What the hell did he say?”

“I think,” Alex began, then swallowed. “I think he said that this is a shakedown, and that it’s happened to him before. That if we give you some money you’ll let us go, otherwise we’ll miss our ship.”

Oustalo glared at Will. “A shakedown?” He forced himself up, using the table for support, and leaned forward. “Are you accusing me of being a criminal?”

Will leaned back, and Alex saw worry on his face. His hands began shaking again and he put them in his pockets. There, one closed on his earpiece.

“Listen to me, kid,” Oustalo continued. “I’m a businessman. That’s all any of us are on this rock. I don’t go about grabbing random people off the street and trying to extract a penance from them. I conduct business, and your friend stole from me.”

Alex closed his eyes. Fuck, how had he let this happen? Now they’d never get back to the ship. He didn’t think the captain would wait all that long, or bother sending people after him. If he didn’t come up with something, he’d never get off this planet.

Will spoke slowly. “I apologize. No disrespect wanted. We’re not thieves.”

"I have information it was him."

"How much you pay for it?" Will asked.

Oustalo didn't reply.

"I think," Will continued, still speaking slowly, "someone sees us. Sees we're from off-planet. Knows you have trouble, been robbed. He sells us to you and vanishes." He nodded to Alex. "He looks like tourist. I look dumb. What we do? You grab us, we can't prove not us, and you..." Will trailed off with a shrug.

"You actually expect me to believe that you've been set up?"

"People like money. Easy money."

"Yes, they do. Like how easy they think it's going to be to steal from me and fly off, never to be seen again. I've been at this for a very long time, and I know a con man when I see one, kid."

"Not—"

"Enough," Alex said, his voice trembling.

"Crim—"

"It's my mess, Will. I'm going to fix it." He looked at Oustalo. "If I get you that money, you let us go."

"Just like that? You actually admit to robbing me?"

Alex ground his teeth. "No, but I want to get out of here. If I get you sixty-five thousand, you let us go."

"I don't think so. Even if you get me my money back, there's still the matter of making sure others don't get the idea they can steal from me and get away without repercussions."

"I'll double it."

Everyone stared at him.

"You have that kind of money?" Oustalo asked.

Alex snorted. "No, but if you get me the best computer you have, I'll get it for you."

"Is this some kind of trick?"

Alex chuckled. "Do I look like I can trick anyone? I'm just a guy who got used, and now I can't help feeling like I'm being thrown away. You want something I can give you, I want out of here. It's simple." Alex managed a small smile. "It's business."

"Boss?" one of the men said as the silence stretched.

Oustalo raised a hand to quiet him. "If you can do that, alright, I'll let both of you go." He wobbled around the table and led them to another room with only a chair, a table, and a computer on it. Alex was pushed into the chair and he turned the computer on. It was a Tomika, at least a decade old. Not something Alex would use if he had any other options, but he would make this work. He put his earpiece in, and under watchful eyes, went to work.

This wasn't difficult. He'd made his way into the banking systems often enough when at Luminex, but he'd never gone after that kind of money before, and not without protection. If he got caught now, it would just be a question of time before his life ended. The banks didn't rely on the Law to catch thieves, they paid mercenaries. They paid them well.

Alex was in half a dozen banks in under five minutes. He went after independent institutions since they had less influence and less money of their own, therefore couldn't afford the best to come after him if he screwed this up.

Among them he located the fifty accounts with the most money, and divided a hundred-thirty-thousand in transfers among them, each in amounts no larger than a few hundred. After a few trials, he even managed to backdate them over the previous year. He transferred them to a

dozen temporary accounts, then from them to a dozen more. He could see that he should do more transfers like that to camouflage where the money went, but he didn't have the time. Finally, he sent to money to a final account, and added a small program to it.

He typed in a bank and account number, as well as the passcode.

"Your money's there. Transfer it to whatever account is yours." Alex got up.

Oustalo sat and typed. His eyes went wide. "You actually did it?"

Alex shrugged.

"This is impressive," the man said as he typed. "I'm curious as to how much money you could make me."

"You agreed to let us go."

The man looked up from the screen. "I'm thinking that keeping you here would be a better investment."

"No, it wouldn't be."

The man grinned as he finished typing. "You could make me so much money I could—" He typed a few keys. "What just happened? Where's my money?"

Alex stretched. "I told you I was used; I don't plan on letting that happen again. You're locked out of your account. I figure you transferred all of it to your main account, so you don't have any money left."

Oustalo's face turned red. "Unlock it."

Alex laughed. "I'm not an idiot. I'll unlock it once we're back on the ship."

Oustalo pointed to one of the two other men. "You, make him unlock it."

Alex forced himself not to move as the beefy man with a vicious grin came for him. "You think he can torture me fast enough? How long can you keep going without liquidity? A business like yours probably can't ask for loans, so what, a week at most? I mean, how are you going to pay these two?"

The man stopped as he reached for Alex. "Boss?" he asked.

"Don't be an idiot. Of course I have money."

Alex looked at the man and smiled. "I'm thinking he has people more important than you two he needs to pay first." He turned to Oustalo. "We can be back to the ship under an hour. That's how fast you can get your money back."

"And how do I know you're not just going to keep it to yourself if I let you go?"

Alex stepped to the table. "You're going to have to trust me."

"You can't last all that long under torture."

Alex kept the fear from showing, at least he hoped so. "Then try it. Test me. Let's find out if I can outlast your competitors."

Alex heard Oustalo ground his teeth. "If I don't have my money back in two hours, I'm coming for you. Don't think you can hide on that ship. If you force me, I will tear it apart."

"You'll get your money before that, I swear."

Oustalo snorted derisively. "Get out of here. And I better never see you again."

Will grabbed Alex's arm and pulled him out, and kept pulling until they were well away from the bar.

"I need to sit down," Alex said, feeling his legs weakening.

"No. In shuttle. We stop, he worries. He takes us and hurts us. Got real lucky."

Once at the port, Will ordered a shuttle and sat Alex down. He indicated where they'd come from. "Anders's job?"

Alex nervously looked around.

“No one around,” Will said.

Alex nodded.

“Who knew?”

“Me, Milo, Anders, Zephyr, and Barbara. I don’t know if any of them told anyone else.”

“Stupid. Passenger. Why go?”

“I didn’t know it was a job. Anders just said he wanted to take me off the ship so I could relax.”

“Don’t trust Anders.”

Alex didn’t reply. He’d wanted to believe Anders had gotten over whatever problems he’d had, but now he wasn’t sure. In fact, Alex had trouble getting rid of the feeling it had all been a ploy.

He spent the trip back to the station going over his interaction with the other man, bad and good, trying to find indications of what his intention had been, but nothing stood out. As far as Alex could tell, every interaction had been genuine.

By the time they reached the station, his leg hurt even when just sitting. He wanted another painkiller, but told himself this was deserved—for getting mixed up in this, for starting the fight, for getting hurt. And it would keep him from damaging it more than he probably had already.

Will matched his slow pace as they headed for the ship, but remained quiet. He hadn’t commented on their little adventure, other than give the warning Alex didn’t want to be true.

As the ship’s cargo doors came into view, Anders was there, directing the loading of crates, talking with a brilliantly red-headed woman Alex had noticed before. She said something and Anders laughed. She headed back in and turned to point in the station’s depth when someone pushing one of the rare outgoing crates asked him something.

Anders looked over Will and Alex, finished answering the question, then his head snapped back to Alex, his face a mask of shock.

Alex stopped. By the time he understood what it meant, the shock was replaced by a friendly smile, but it was too late. Fuck, it hurt. Alex had wanted them to be friends. He’d believed him when he said he wasn’t angry anymore. Damn it, why did he keep getting betrayed like that?

He started walking, and with each step he buried the pain under anger. The gall of the man to use him like that, to make him think they were friends.

“You son of a bitch,” Alex growled. “You told Oustalo I was down there.”

Anders’s smile intensified. “I don’t know—”

“Bullshit!” His yell made those pushing crates detour further away to get on the ship. “You set everything up. You got me down there, got me to start the fight. What were you going to do? Convince me to go down for another drink?”

Alex saw it in the man’s eyes, that moment he went from considering denying it to not giving a damn. Anders threw his hands up. “You know what? I was fed up with being nice to you anyway. I can’t believe I had to give you and Milo an even share of the job.” He glared at Alex. “I tried bringing you into line. I figured if I bedded you, you’d feel you had to work for me. Hell, maybe I could have gotten you to fall for me. If you weren’t so soft-hearted and pining for some guy you won’t feel for years, it might have worked too. I didn’t think you’d survive that bar fight; those guys aren’t known for going easy on people. I would have strangled you when I saw you and told the captain you’d been killed there, but Milo was there and him I can’t kill. So yeah, I was going to find a way to get you down there and get Oustalo to finish the job.” Anders took a

deep breath. "There, it's all out in the open." He smiled. "I actually feel better now."

Alex shook. His free hand was balled into a fist, and he could see himself smashing the case over the man's head over and over again. If he'd had a gun, Anders would have died, but a small part of his mind was lucid enough to remind him he couldn't take the man in a fair fight.

He shoved Anders out of his way as hard as he could, and limped up the ramp. He stopped at the first terminal and sent the command through the net to release Oustalo's money. When he moved away, he saw Will next to him. "Take me to Ana." Fine, Anders wanted them to be enemies? That's what they'd be. And Alex was going to make sure he was ready for the next time the man tried something.