

“Hold up,” Alex told Miranda, who’d taken the lead. He put the earpiece in before heading to the terminal. He should’ve left it in at this point, but the damned thing was so uncomfortable. He looked through the code and confirmed the security system was ignoring them. He pulled the knife from the forearm sheath and rounded on Zephyr, forcing him against the wall.

“Crimson!” Miranda called.

“Keep looking forward, Miranda. We’re not registering on the system, but anyone could come walking down the hall.”

“Can’t this wait until we’re in a more secure place?”

“Nowhere will be secured until we have this conversation.”

Miranda let out a series of curses, but took Mary with her. Aliana took a step back and crossed her arms. This was the best he was getting from her, but he expected she wouldn’t interfere, no matter how this went.

“Talk. What did Anders tell you to do?”

“You know what.”

“Don’t obfuscate the code, Zeph, I haven’t gained any patience in the years we’ve been apart. I thought I could trust both you and Tim, at least a little.”

“Don’t trust Tim.”

“Why not? He saved my life.”

“He didn’t. You moved.”

Alex closed his eyes. He shouldn’t be surprised. “And you? You volunteered. I’m always wary of people who want to be on my side.”

The man motioned to the knife. “Is this going to be a conversation, or an execution?”

Alex thought about it before stepping back and sheathing his knife. He wasn’t afraid of this man, not anymore. But Zephyr also wasn’t afraid of him.

“I volunteered so you wouldn’t kill Tim.”

“Really? It isn’t so you could stab me in the back?”

“The front. I never stab in the back; there’s no honor in that. If one of us is going to die at the hand of the other, it will be in a real fight.”

Alex shook his head. “No, it won’t. I’m not going to give you that chance.”

Zephyr smiled, but it was nervous. He raised his arm and indicated a thin scar on it. “Do you remember when you gave me this? What I said afterward?”

Alex looked at it. He vaguely recalled fighting him, fighting hard. And they’d talked afterward, but of what? “It’s been a long time for me, how about you refresh my memory?”

“You asked me if Anders had paired you with me so I’d get you killed.”

“Right, you said that because I was still alive, the reasons didn’t matter.”

“I also said that if Anders ever ordered you dead, I wouldn’t be the one doing it.”

Alex remembered more details now. “But that was then, when I controlled Golly. You were afraid it would take its revenge. I haven’t controlled it in a long time, certainly not now. Asyr works with it.”

Zephyr gave him a smile that made it clear he thought Alex was missing something. Maybe Zephyr knew how powerful Golly had gotten. If there was one person other than Asyr he’d believe could work that out, it was him.

“You have no reason not to do what Anders wants, so why should I believe you?”

“Because I see death in your eyes.”

Alex rolled his eyes. “Try again. We’ve both killed, so don’t try to make me out as more of a killer than you.”

The man shook his head. “It isn’t the people you killed. It’s how you look at me. You don’t see me; you see my corpse. I’m already dead in your eyes. You’ve already killed me. I’ve known men like you—where I’m from, you’d be revered—but I’m no longer there.”

“You’re going back. You have someone waiting for you.”

“You’re not the only one for whom things have changed during these years.”

Alex didn’t believe he saw Zephyr as a corpse; the man was alive in front of him. But he had planned how to kill him. Not the neck, Zephyr would expect that. He’d go low, the Femoral artery, make it as quick and as painless as he could.

“You have my word, Crimson, that I will only take my knives up against you if you attack me.”

“Good. I don’t plan on making a move against you. I owe you. What you taught me allowed me to survive to find Tristan.”

“And was that a kindness?” Zephyr whispered as Alex rejoined Miranda.

“Can we trust him?” she whispered.

Alex raised an eyebrow. “As much as I can trust you,” he said.

“What does that mean?”

“It means that him I can trust to tell me upfront when he tries to kill me, not stab me in the back.” He listened to the terminal ahead of them and got confirmation the corridor was clear.

“I don’t understand why you brought them along. We could have left while they were out shopping,” Miranda said.

“I’m with Jacoby on this. I thought you and Anders were getting close.” Alex made contact with the terminal ahead of them.

“Not that close. I work for you. You paid me enough.”

“Fine, but if I had left them on Mobius, Anders would have found a way to follow us, and he would have showed up at the worse possible moment. This way I get to control some of what he does.”

He got a ping that alerted him to potential trouble ahead. He didn’t say anything. Miranda was already on alert, in spite of his reassurance that he’d know if trouble came their way.

She looked around the next intersection and came back. “Three maintenance workers on an access.”

“We need to continue over there.” Aliana indicated further. “For our way down. Unless that one goes there too?”

The system gave him a negative.

“It doesn’t reach it.”

“They could see us anyway,” Aliana pointed out.

There was no way they’d pass as civilians. Mary, maybe, if she didn’t look scared already. “The system is ignoring us. Just shoot them, make it fast so they don’t have the time to call it in.”

“I thought you didn’t want any death,” Mary said.

“That was before Anders got involved. With him here, the body count is going to be high. All I want now is for the attention to remain on him.”

“Tell me,” Zephyr said, “is there anyone left alive on this ship?”

“For the time being,” Alex replied, paying more attention to the system than what he was saying.

Aliana and Miranda came back. “Done. We put their bodies in the conduit and closed it, so no one should come across them accidentally.”

They reached their conduit access without encountering anyone else.

“How come it’s so quiet?” Aliana asked, as she forced the hatch open.

“No idea,” Alex said. “We don’t have time to worry about that.” Though he wondered the same thing as he headed down the ladder, figuring the system would alert him to any issues. The others followed quietly.

“How do you know where we’re going?” Mary asked softly, although her voice echoed in the small tube.

“I copied Anders’s map,” Miranda replied.

“Oh, you have a memory upgrade too? I keep all my work on it.”

“It’s a bit more than that. I can’t do what Crimson does, but I can access the open network, view feeds if they don’t need too much interaction.”

“That’s impressive. Could it help me?”

“No idea. Depends on what you do.”

“Biochemist.”

“Playing medic, right? You’ll have to look at the expense and decide if it’s worth it. It is for my job.”

When he reached the right floor, Alex looked through a small window in the door at the terminal he was listening to. He used Mary and Miranda’s conversation to ensure his subvocalization wasn’t heard. He got an affirmative ping, but still wished he could check the code to confirm it.

He pushed the door open easily.

The others joined him and they headed in the direction Miranda started for. They only encountered a pair of guards, heading or returning from work. Alex expected that if they had been on their rounds, they would have been better equipped, unless stunners were standard equipment on the ship. He pocketed one since it was the first manageable weapon he’d come across.

The system told him that Anders was making himself known above them. At least he was sticking to his role, for now.

“This is it,” Miranda said. This was the first door they’d encountered since exiting the maintenance conduit.

Alex looked at the lock, took out his datapad, and typed on it. The lock turned green.

“That easy?” Aliana asked.

“Minimal lock,” Alex replied. “We’re already deep within the restricted part of the ship. No need to put something big. Only authorized personnel make it this far.” He opened the door.

“We’re not authorized,” Mary said, and Alex turned to say no one was expecting them, but Mary was tapping her ear.

Alex froze. He’d forgotten it again. He’d also forgotten she knew he didn’t need one. She hadn’t said anything about it until now, and it was only to remind him of his subterfuge. She walked inside without another comment, not looking smug, just concerned. He had to hope Miranda and Aliana hadn’t noticed.

He entered and locked the door. The room was wide enough to accommodate a platform by one wall, roughly six feet in diameter, space to transport something the size of a cryotube, and consoles along the opposing wall.

There were six of those setups going the length of it.

Next to each stair leading up to the platforms was a terminal.

“Do you know how it works?” Mary asked, following him as he went to the closest one.

“It’s a computer, I’ll just tell it what to do.”

This terminal wasn’t a full-access one, so he subvocalized a wait code. He put his earpiece in and looked at Mary who gave him an innocent smile, then took his datapad and began typing. Miranda was looking at a console along the wall, and Aliana stood by the door with Zephyr.

The terminal lit up, showing a hard-coded display with only a few fields to pick and the numbers zero through nine down one side, and the letters “a” through “z” down the other, in three columns. He gave the system the go ahead and “C10” appeared.

On the other side of the door sounds started—whirling and clicking. Alex could imagine being jostled about inside the container as it was picked up and carried over.

Miranda was next to him by the time the wall cracked open and a metal claw deposited a clear tube filled with green liquid on a platform. It retracted away, and the

wall closed.

Alex looked at the tube, trying to understand why it only contained liquid, still sloshing at the top. "C10" was stamped on the front of it.

"This can't be right." Alex looked at the terminal. "It's got to be the wrong one. He isn't in it."

"It's the right one," Aliana said from the console. When Alex looked at her, she motioned to a display there. "This says Tristan is in C10."

Alex pointed to the empty tube. "Then where the fuck is he?"

"Hey, I'm trying to help. It isn't like I set this up."

The wall opened again and Alex turned. Miranda was at a panel there.

"Alex," Mary said tentatively, "is it possible they thought it was too much trouble? He did escape once. Maybe they—" She closed her mouth under Alex's murderous glare.

"Guys?" Miranda called. "You're going to want to see this."

Mary left him, fleeing for Miranda. Alex glared at the terminal, demanding that it tell him what had happened.

"Crimson, you'll want to see this too."

"I don't have the time!"

"Make it," Miranda ordered.

He glared at her, but went to the open wall. He looked at all the tubes stored there, going deeper than he could see and higher too.

"So?" he demanded.

"Look." She indicated the tubes before them.

Gritting his teeth, Alex looked at the tubes filled with the green liquid. One of them had a man floating in it. He glared at Miranda. "If this is because you want a cute guy as a partner, come back when—"

"Look." She motioned up and down.

Alex looked. More tubes filled with liquids. The row above this one had two occupants, the one above that maybe five. Below there were three, and then two.

"Miranda," he glowered at her. "I swear, if you don't—"

"Didn't Victor say they were at capacity?"

"So?"

She motioned to the tubes. "Does that look to be at capacity to you?"

Alex closed a fist. She'd taken him away for that? "I so fucking don't care about the Sayatoga lying about the prisoners they have. I'm just here for Tristan." He headed for the consoles before he planted a knife in her chest. She called after him.

"Alex!" she yelled as he was by the platform.

He spun. "What?"

She pointed at the consoles. "Every time a tube's accessed, there's a record. A lot of tubes have been accessed over the last few years."

"I don't ca—"

"That one hadn't been accessed in years." She indicated the tube on the platform. "Tristan was never put in the tube."

Alex looked at it. If he hadn't been put in it... "Then where is he?"

She gestured helplessly. Of course, that, she wouldn't know.

"He's here somewhere." He headed to the console and Aliana got out of his way. "He has to be. The ship that took him belonged to the Sayatoga. They got here, and they didn't stop on the way. Find him."

He coded his way below the interface and typed as he looked at the other screen. Sections of the ship were flipping on and off on them. This was for him, so he'd know work was happening, so he wouldn't grow impatient. It wasn't helping. He wanted to rip the code apart. He knew that would draw the ship's coercionists here, away from the other diversions, but he cared less and less about that. He needed to do something.

An alert appeared in the system. His presence had been detected. "I don't care." He continued with his search, not caring about the damage he was causing. "I'm not leaving until I know where he is."

He looked over his shoulder at the three women who were looking back at him as if he was insane. "Aliana, join Zeph at the door. We might have company heading this way. Miranda, you're on support fire. Mary, stay out of the way."

Tristan had escaped. It was the only thing that made sense. Miranda was wrong about the tube being accessed, or the Sayatoga had falsified those records, too. He was somewhere on the ship, heading...where?

The hangar, it was the only place that made sense. That's where the ships were. He accessed the security system and looked in the corridors. No, he wouldn't be walking in the open; he was too distinctive. How else could he reach it?

Maintenance conduits. How often had he and Tristan moved about a ship that way? He looked for the conduits' layout, but instead of finding them, he was thrown out of the system. His terminal showed a picture instead of code.

"I was working!"

He coded his way around it, but was immediately thrown back out to that same picture flashing. Realizing what that meant, he snarled, "Fine, what am I looking at?" He looked at the symbols. Power distribution, internal sensor grid, and one zone in the middle with nothing in it.

No camera, no security, no system access, but there was a lot of power going into it.

"What's there?"

He didn't get an answer.

"Miranda! You said you have Anders's map." He zoomed the map out to give her reference points.

She manipulated it further. "Two levels above us, port side, aft. That's storage."

"How old is the map, objective time?"

"A little over three years."

Alex was running for the door. "That's where he is." He ignored their questions and headed out of the room.