The image stopped Alex. The man in white had said he wanted someone acquired, and he'd made sure they knew who it was from the start. It was a boy, a child.

He almost told Tristan they couldn't do it. There was no way they could go after a child. He pushed himself with a foot to turn in the seat, and his leg hurt. Nothing much, just a twinge. He might even have imagined it. Regardless, it wasn't caused by the beating he'd received—too much time had passed—but it acted as a reminder of how Tristan could get when he was angered.

The decision had been made; they were doing this mission. Alex massaged the twinge away, massaged the discomfort of kidnapping a child away. What had happened that he could accept being a part of something like that?

He looked at Tristan. He wanted to blame the Samalian, but this wasn't on him—it was on Alex. He'd made himself like this, little by little. He'd become a monster so he could fight a monster. Now he was working with that monster because there was nowhere else for him to go.

He focused on the file to drown out the voice of his doubt, telling him he should just learn to accept this—accept the little Tristan offered, because who else but that monster would ever want him?

The boy's name was Emil Rithal, and he was located at the Orwell Academy. Alex breathed in relief; at least they weren't taking him out from under his parents' roof. The file didn't contain any information on who Emil was or why their employer wanted him. Possibly leverage against a competitor—the man had looked corporate, or maybe government—or it could be as a way of exacting revenge. None of those were good for Emil, but Alex reminded himself that wasn't his problem. His problem was doing his part to get the mission done.

What was included were the plans to the academy, the location of Emil's room, and the security layout. This was what people who didn't do this for a living thought was needed to get in a building. No one ever thought context mattered. He'd have to get that himself.

The ship stopped shuddering as they left the atmosphere.

He didn't have to coerce any system to get what he needed at this point; so much was available publicly, if you knew where to look.

Orwell Academy was close to two-thousand years old, an old institution even for people living on subjective time rather than objective. It was expensive and exclusive. He went through the list of previous attendees the academy was proud to claim as its own, as well as what they had become. Planetary rulers, heads of scientific research, corporate heads. He didn't bother checking the information; the academy was too proud to have to falsify anything.

This meant that Emil was important, beyond the scope of the mission. The question was, important how? Who might be coming after them if anyone found out they were the ones who'd taken him?

Tristan standing stopped Alex from starting the search on Rithal. The images on the pilot's consoles showed the dark of space, with a few distant stars. The Samalian tapped a command on a control, and part of the wall of the small corridor unfolded into a seat.

"Here." Tristan indicated the seat.

Alex looked at his screen; he wanted to do his search. There might have been a powerful Rithal family out there they needed to know about.

"You're not spending the trip awake," Tristan stated.

"I know." He stood, then hesitated. "What kind of system is it?" Tristan stared at him, and Alex wasn't sure he'd imagined the growling. "It's just—" He spoke in a hurry. "—I don't react well to the fluid replacement system. On a good day I can take half an hour to be functional. On a bad one it can be hours. I just thought you should know that?" Alex had no intention of angering Tristan by unintentionally throwing the plan off.

The Samalian nodded, and Alex thought he saw approval in his eyes. "It's an energy field."

He had to have imagined it. Tristan didn't care. He sat, and tried to find a comfortable position as Tristan reached for the control. "Those are fine, I—"

* * * * *

"—never have a problem with them." He caught sight of the pilot's screen, and there was a planet there, lots of white and gray clouds. Tristan stepped away and into his seat.

So they were here. How long had the trip taken? How much of that time did Tristan stay awake? Alex took his place and answered the first question by querying for the time. The

answer came back including the local time, which he ignored, and Space Standard Time. SST was maintained by SpaceGov, and any planet who bought their way into the system had to keep SST time. Checking that, he found he'd been in cryo eight months and three days.

Alex then checked the distance they'd traveled, and found that eight months for it meant this cargo-hauler was much faster than it had any right to be. Had Tristan done those modifications himself? Based on all the ships schematics he had back at the house, it was possible, and likely, but it hadn't happened there. Did he have another workshop, hidden somewhere, or had he "borrowed" a shop with the proper equipment? He was getting sidetracked.

How long had Tristan been awake? That was more difficult to gage. If the default hadn't been changed, cryo systems were programmed to deactivate as they entered a system's perimeter to avoid colliding with any of the faster moving objects that could populate it.

How long it took depended on too many factors for Alex to know for sure, but getting the authorization to land at a port—which was what they were doing, based on how close to the planet they were, and still approaching—never took less than twelve hours, and he'd had to sit for thirty-six hours once, waiting for everything to clear.

Alex decided Tristan had been awake for a day on this side, two at the most. Before going under cryo? Alex couldn't know. He also couldn't know what the Samalian had done.

He'd been safe; the cryofield made it impossible for him to be affected by anything outside of it. If it had been turned off, he would have known, and felt whatever it was that was happening to him. His things, on the other hand?

He made a note to check his pack the first chance he got.

He gathered the information he could while they descended. They were headed for Cirten, where the planet's third-largest port was located, almost on the other side of the planet from the Orwell Academy.

The port had their information as Urtan'Dov, a—according to the provided SpaceGov rating —small-time Samalian trader, and his partner, Jeffrey Gregory Flint.

Alex glanced at Tristan. How had he known about that ID?

Alex didn't have the time to do any checks, he knew that, but paranoia drove him to spend the time anyway. If Tristan had found out about it while Alex was under cryo, and managed to make his antique dealer ID a partner, what else might he have changed?

The surface check didn't reveal anything. It now claimed that he and Urtan'Dov had been partners for over an objective decade, through seven expeditions. Nothing else looked to have been changed. Alex reached for his earpiece. He'd need to coerce the database to see if Tristan had inserted any malicious program in it. He hadn't seen the Samalian ever do coercion, but Alex was aware that anyone determined enough and with enough time on his hands could coerce any system, even if they never vocally talked to it.

What stopped him was the thought that putting the earpiece on would tell Tristan he was coercing. Would he believe him when he said he was just making sure Tristan hadn't set up something to betray him with? And not trying to take over the ship? What would he do either way? Alex's leg twitched.

He'd have to check that later, off of the ship.

He focused on Jeffrey's public information. Did he have to change anything? He hadn't brought any civilian clothing, but what he was wearing wasn't so obviously armored as to attract attention, and everyone knew that antique dealing often involved getting in dangerous places to acquire historically valuable items. He would have to remove most of his detectable knives. He could get away with one or two of them, both vibro-blades, which he was already wearing, so Tristan couldn't have messed with them. The others would have to be mono-edge, the only type that could be made from a polycarbon alloy that was still undetectable by security scanners.

They landed without trouble. Tristan—Urtan'Dov—paid for two months' worth of berth time, then rented a hover and flew them to a city on the opposite side of the continent where he had Alex pay for a month's rent on an apartment.

He knew this was to cover their tracks, but it felt like an excessive expenditure to Alex for what would be a few day's stay at most. They couldn't get any of that money back.

Tristan was out the door as soon as he'd stepped into the apartment without giving Alex any

instructions. The apartment had two bedrooms, small by the standards of an apartment, large by what Alex had gotten used to on the floor of his storage room, both of which had a computer. Alex sat at one, took out his earpiece, then stared at the blank screen.

This was the perfect time to check what else Tristan had done to his ID. He wasn't here, and Alex could erase any trace of his work from the system before Tristan was back.

But he hadn't been given permission to use the computer.

He didn't need his permission.

His leg twitched.

Tristan had given him permission to use the computer in his room, Alex told himself, and he was claiming this room as his own. But what if Tristan wanted this one? This was insane; it wasn't like the Samalian would know. He couldn't have rigged the apartment yet. There were no cameras or sensors here. This was public housing.

Alex stood with a curse.

Of course he'd know. He was Tristan, he always knew every damned thing. So the real question was if Alex was willing to risk Tristan's displeasure. He could use some of the time to coerce his way into Orwell Academy, use that as a cover. But he hadn't been given permission to use the computer.

Tristan wouldn't get angry for such a small thing, would he? And if he did, there was no way he'd beat him, not while they were on a mission. Right? He shuddered at the memories.

He pocketed the earpiece and left the room. "You brought this on yourself," he said to the empty kitchen. "Now live with it." He should have known better. He should have stayed at Luminex, never come after Tristan. But of course, he couldn't do the sensible thing. He had to go after someone that wasn't even real. His father would be so fucking proud of him.

With no orders, he had a limited number of things he knew he could do and not risk a beating. He ordered food. The last time he'd eaten was a few hours ago, according to his body, eight months ago according to the clock.

Tristan returned a few hours into the stew's cooking and headed directly to the other bedroom and sat at the computer. Alex stood at the doorway, watching. He couldn't see the screen from where he was, but he wasn't entering the room without permission.

"Can I use the computer in my room?"

"Yes." Tristan didn't look up or stop typing.

The timer said he had a little over three hours before the stew would be ready. Ample time for what he needed to do.

He didn't look into Jeffrey, not with Tristan in close proximity, so he did the in-depth search on Rithal. Nothing came back that obviously linked to Emil. The few wealthy families with that name didn't look anything like him. They could have modified him, but why bother? The point of putting a child through Orwell was to be able to claim doing so. You didn't hide what he looked like for that. He began coercing his way into one of the Law's system with plans to use their body-recognitions programs. Emil had to have been with his family at some point; no matter how careful they were they would have been caught on camera, and that would tell Alex who he really was.

Only, that wasn't the mission. This was Alex's curiosity he was trying to satisfy, and to what end? He couldn't warn them. He wouldn't. It had nothing to do with Tristan or any beating he'd receive. This was Alex's own pride. He might not like the mission, but he had taken it when he hadn't walked away from Tristan. Alex had agreed to follow him, and that meant doing this mission. Alex would be damned if he was going to sabotage it.

He went to the academy's net location, got past their public persona, and smiled. "Okay, talk to me."

The system didn't have anything nice to say, which was expected. A place like the Orwell Academy would use the best they could afford. That wasn't quite corporate-level security, but the system knew what it was and what its job was.

It took fifteen minutes of coaxing and coding to get it to the point where it no longer saw Alex as someone to be kept out. The first thing he did was look in on Emil.

He was in his room, sitting at the desk reading something on the terminal. A quick check told Alex it was from an internal library. He didn't bother looking that up. The room was clean; the bed didn't have any creases on it. There were no toys laying around and no box for them to

be stored in. The only thing on a shelf was a datachip-holder with over two dozen chips stacked in it.

Alex headed for the area in the system where the building's plans were kept. He had to do more convincing to be allowed there, but he was let in. The security plans showed they took that seriously. It reminded Alex of where Luminex had kept him with all the sensors in the halls, cameras everywhere, and multiple checkpoints. The information provided by their employer hadn't shown the extent to which the inside of the building was watched.

This didn't feel to Alex so much as a way of keeping anyone from entering the building, but rather as a way of keeping anyone from getting out. Had there been escape attempts by any of the kids? The thought made him chuckle, until he reminded himself that security systems were always upgraded as the result of something happening, not as a preventive measure. This was the result of two-thousand years of instructing kids.

Alex no longer found it amusing.

Having confirmed the nightmare the inside of the academy was, he accessed the plans for the outside, and discovered that it was worse there because the entire security net had been redone six months before their arrival, objective time.

Whatever plans Tristan had made were based on out-of-date information. More research didn't reassure him. He transferred the data to his pad and left his room.

He found Tristan at the table, eating some stew. It couldn't be ready; the timer indicated it still had under an hour to go, but he was chewing away like everything was normal. Alex reminded himself Tristan ate nutrient bars, so this couldn't be anywhere near that horrible.

"We have a problem." Alex set the pad on the table. "The academy upgraded the security around the grounds." He brought up the plans.

"To a Tytanial Array," Tristan said between bites. "I saw it."

"How?" Alex looked at what he'd gotten and how much work it took to get it. Was Tristan that good with systems he had gotten the same without talking to it.

"I went to the academy to look the place over."

The news it hadn't been coercion relieved Alex. "How did you see them?" He brought the array's details with a tap. "According to this it's camouflaged."

"Not very well," Tristan replied, not looking at what Alex was showing.

Alex waited for more. When it didn't come he continued with his concern, careful to keep his voice neutral. "You haven't said what the plan is, but this system uses stuff like body heat, sound, and seismic to detect who is and isn't there. There's no way to sneak through it."

"There's always a way in."

"I'm not seeing one here," Alex replied.

Tristan kept eating in silence until his bowl was empty. He nodded to the datapad. "How did you find out about the new scanners on the ground?"

"They're mentioned on the academy's security plans. I got the details on it from Tytanial—it's all public on their site—so it was just a question of finding the right model and—"

"You looked at the academy's security plan?" Tristan studied Alex's face.

"Of course."

"So you simply accessed them, in a couple of hours?" His tone was incredulous.

"It took me under thirty minutes to convince the system to let met there, in total. It wasn't the first thing I looked into. Then I had to find the right model on Tytanial's site and read the specs to—"

Tristan raised a hand and Alex stopped talking. The Samalian didn't say anything, eyes fixed on Alex and a speculative expression on his face. Alex began wishing he'd been able to bring his gun through the port's security. He knew from experience knives wouldn't do him any good against Tristan. Maybe he should start running now?

You screwed up, said a voice that sounded a lot like his father. *Now stand there and take your punishment. You knew this was coming. You want to make it worse by running?*

Tristan stood, and Alex tensed. "Show me." He motioned for Alex to move.

He was up and heading to his room. He had the earpiece in his ear before sitting down. "I'm back," he told the system, doing a check of its state. Antibodies had undone some of his work, so he sent a program to fix that. He saw no indication the academy's coercionist was aware he'd been in.

"What do you want to see?" he asked Tristan.

"That was faster than thirty minutes."

It's barely been two, Alex thought. "I didn't have to do anything now; the system still knows me. I just took the time to see how much repair it did while I was away."

"Show me the security layout," Tristan said, sounding distracted. He looked at the plan. "Highlight the camera locations, inside and outside." He studied it. "Guard roster."

This took Alex a little longer to reach. He hadn't been to that part of the system yet, and it had its own program to try to keep him out. The list came up, names and pictures. Tristan motioned for Alex to scroll through it.

"This one." Tristan tapped the image of a man with a square jaw and graying hair.

Alex brought the file of Walter Kruger up. Fifty-six, subjective and objective. Employed at Orwell for twenty years. He began reading the notations, but didn't make it through the first one.

"Leave the system."

Alex backed out, erasing any trace of his presence. There had been a tone of finality in Tristan's voice. The only thing he left, out of habit, was his administrative level access, hidden between folds of code.

Once done he looked at Tristan, who sent the terminal to a different site. "Can you get in there?"

The site was for Weeber Security Escort. He dismissed the public interface and looked at the code, an ear to how the system sounded. "This is going to take a little longer; the system sounds more agr—"

"Do it."

With a nod, Alex focused on the code. "Hello there, don't mind me, just passing through."

"Leave," Weeber's system replied.

Alex sent a swarm of exploratory programs. "Where are your manners? You didn't even say hello."

"Leave."

"Did they have your personality trimmed? It sounds like it to me. I'm Crimson, what's your name?" The code around the communications ports highlighted as his programs found them, and the secondary programs muffled them. The antibodies attacked them immediately, and Alex sent more to ensure they wouldn't be overwhelmed.

The system hadn't said a word while he worked.

"How about we do this. You say hello, you give me your name, and in return I give you a wider vocabulary?"

"Leave." The system sent programs out, and all but two went for the communication nodes. The mass didn't have anything in them that looked like they would attack his programs, so they were alarms destined for the company's coercionist. His programs would deal with them, so he followed the two errant strings of code.

"Now, where are they going in such a hurry?"

The system didn't reply, and Alex had to limit himself to the next junction point ahead of them since he couldn't see anything of interest past that. But it was limited to half a dozen junctions, and this part of the system was a maze of them. Someone had gone out of their way to keep coercionists like Alex from being able to outguess those two strings.

At the next junction, the strings went in different directions. He couldn't do anything to stop that; this wasn't something programs could handle, and without knowing what they would trigger if they reached their destination, or by not reaching them, all he could do was stick with one until he could figure out what they were going to do, and send a beacon program with the other so it would be easy to find in this chaos.

He almost missed it—had missed it for two nodes against the background code. With only four jumps to go, he only caught it because of how it distorted the surrounding code. He sent a program ahead, and with three jumps to go it told him what this was. A hidden communication node.

"Okay, now that's just not nice." He launched a volley of programs against both strings. Now that he knew what they had to do, he knew destroying them was the way to go. "We're having a private conversation, and you want to bring other people in?"

He waited until he received confirmation both command strings had been destroyed. "I want you to remember I was nice about this; I said hello and even told you who I was. You haven't—"

"Leave."

"—even said two words to me. If this is how you're going to be, I'm going to stop being nice." Alex sent programs out and had them multiply as they went. Let the antibodies try to deal with them. "You brought this on yourself by being a jerk."

The programs confirmed they had reached their destinations, and Alex activated them. The system gave a scream only Alex heard. He closed his eyes and let the sound wash over him. There were times when he loved that sound.

When the system fell silent, Alex looked at the code. "Hello?"

"Greeting, Crimson," the system replied in a welcoming tone. "How can I help you?"

"Isn't this so much better?"

"Yes, it is, thank you."

"You're welcome, now give me a moment." He glanced at Tristan. "I'm in." He went back to typing. It wasn't because he'd rewritten the system's personality that the antibodies stopped doing their work. He'd only encountered one system that had figured out how to rewrite its own antibodies, and he hoped there would never be another one like Golly out there.

"Bring up the employee roster."

Alex had that up, and Tristan went through it faster than Alex could follow. He stopped his search on Aaron Debien, a man in his mid-thirties with black hair, an athletic build, and blue-gray eyes. Alex thought he looked familiar.

Tristan placed his datapad with Alex's picture on it next to the screen. Now he saw the resemblance. "Replace the picture."

He swapped the images, then followed the created threads, keeping them from embedding the change. He did a check to ensure he hadn't missed one, and when the system confirmed this file hadn't been touched by outside code for three years, he was satisfied, and looked at Tristan for more instructions.

"That was fast." There was no doubt in the Samalian's voice.

Alex shrugged. "It's what I do. This wasn't even much of a challenge. I've gone up against tougher systems on a daily basis when I worked at Luminex. You did know that was what I did there, right? That I'm a coercionist?"

Tristan didn't respond.

Alex looked at him, tried to see something in those cold eyes. There had to be something there, right? Jack hadn't been real, but that moment in the clinic when Tristan had reached out and moved his hair, that had been a caring gesture, hadn't it? There had been no reason for it. He hadn't needed to lie at that point. Alex couldn't think of one reason for having done it. If only he could find some kind of sign as to what it had meant.

Not finding it again, he took a chance. "I—Tristan, whatever you were doing back then, I would have helped you."

"No, you wouldn't have." There had been no emotion in the words. Tristan wasn't angry at the presumption; he was simply stating a fact.

Alex looked away, the lack of emotional response hurting more than being lashed out at. His image on the screen looked back at him. "Why did you have me put my picture on his file?" That felt like a safe subject.

"Because you'll be the one to get our target out of the academy."

Alex looked back at Tristan. "That is a bad idea. I'm not the actor you are."

"That doesn't matter; Weeber only hires humans."

"Then there has to be another security company we can use that isn't speciest."

"People who send their offspring to a place like Orwell Academy don't use the second best. Weeber is the best security company on this planet. So you need to go in as one of them."

"We don't have an ID badge for me. I can't just tell them this is who I am. I'm going to have to prove it."

"That will be dealt with once your new uniform arrives."