

“So, she wants to just spread this over the net,” Eastyn said, “and I can’t see that ending well for...us.”

Alex snorted. “Oh yes, corporations just love it when their secrets get spilled.”

And this was the kind of secret that could destroy a corporation. They could justify many things to SpaceGov, when they were caught, but even an organization as impersonal and more interested in results than methods like SpaceGov had limits. Karliak would cease to be if this happened, but they would take those responsible down with him without care for who else was caught in it.

Krystal’s decision surprised Tristan. The read he’d gotten on her was someone more practical than idealistic. Ideals rarely survived working within a government.

“You’ve explained what she intends to do,” he said. “But not what you want to hire me for.”

Eastyn didn’t mask his disappointment fast enough. He’d hoped that Tristan’s involvement with the rebels would have made him sympathetic to their plight and offer his help. And Tristan was. Their problem was similar to that of his people. A corporation coming in and making decisions for them for the benefit of the bottom line, not of the people. But just like he had no interest in fighting LeisureTek beyond keeping his immediate friends safe from them. These people’s problems were his.

“I want you to talk sense into her. You can tell her the reality of what’s going to happen where she just dismissed my fears as unfounded. She’s certain SpaceGov will step in and keep everyone safe.”

“By the time SpaceGov does anything,” Alex said, “there isn’t going to be an Arjolis to protect. Doesn’t she realize what you guys have uncovered implies of what they can do with the technology here?”

“She’s an optimist,” Tristan said. Her pragmatism had been another mask she’d wore. Maybe so long she’d forgotten it was one until she was the only one left in control. No pressure to force the mask in place meant it cracked.

“As soon as Bernie makes contact, she’s going to have him find a way through Karliak’s net blocks and send everything out.”

Tristan looked at Alex, who shook his head.

“All I saw was the result of his assault on the data center. Considering he doesn’t seem build for aggressive actions, I think he might have gone to ground while he deals with the emotional turmoil. But she doesn’t need him. The block isn’t up.”

“What?” Eastyn stared at Alex. “How?”

“I don’t know. Could be something Bernie set up a reaction that echoed down the system to whichever was holding the block active. Maybe one of the coercionist who was tasked with protecting the secret you stop was the one maintaining the block and they are out of commission. Could be there are other rebels around who noticed the chaos and took advantage of it.”

Eastyn took out his datapad, then showed Alex the screen. “How come I’m not getting anything if the net’s back?”

“The network isn’t back. The block is gone. For it to not draw attention, Karliak had to create a sheath around it mimicking the traffic of Arjolis. That’s still up. It’s going to degrade over time. If no one addresses it. Then it’s going to register as something that doesn’t belong and the network’s antibodies will remove it. Until then, you have to actively reach beyond Arjolis.”

“Days,” Tristan said, answering Eastyn’s next question before he asked it. “If no one at Karliak resets the sheath and the block. That’s how long it will take for the network to notice the degrading sheath.”

“The more companies off planet dealt with Arjolis,” Alex said, “the faster it will happen. It won’t be able to adapt to the unexpected requests people will make. The company trying to find out why their shipment hasn’t arrived yet, even if it’s not scheduled to be there for months. People are unpredictable, and there needs to be someone organic handling that aspect for the sheath to remain unnoticed.”

“Then you need to help before that happens,” Eastyn said.

“I don’t need—” Tristan began, and stopped as he noticed the conflict on Alex’s face. He was ready to force Eastyn to pay him. To not give into the number of death Karliak’s retribution would cause. He wouldn’t demand much, no more than what the man could afford, which would possibly amount to everything Tristan had paid him to play the role of their employer. Alex would demand a reason for it

afterward. Tristan wasn't certain if he would have one that would satisfy him.

But the sigh indicated he might not need to.

He waited.

"How many people are on this planet?" Alex asked. "Three, four billions?"

"They aren't our responsibility," Tristan stated, and Alex's raised eyebrow carried all the mocking needed. He already knew the mental moves Tristan was performing to justify not leaving them to die. He'd seen enough of how he'd changed to know that much.

"But how much work is it going to take to prevent their death?" Alex said. "The stuff they have is the perfect ammunition to force a corporation to sit down with them and listen. Karliak doesn't want to be wiped anymore than Krystal is going to want them to retaliate. The hardest part of this is going to be finding someone with the authority to talk with, considering the executives all died."

"Not all of them," Eastyn said. "The one they came to the resort to rescue is alive. I figured you knew."

Alex snorted. "I have no interest in Karliak beyond what was needed for the job. It does mean the only issues left is convincing your boss to go along with a talk, and once that's done, getting her in front of that executive so she can tell them what she wants."

Eastyn looked at Tristan, who was still watching Alex. He'd laid out the situation, but there was still one thing to do.

"It's your decision, Alex."

The anger was brief. Alex had already told him he wanted to be led, not do the leading, but he has been the one to bring up the reasons to help them.

"Fuck it. We're already here. We might as well deal with this before we head home."

That would be addressed later. For now, Tristan needed to prepare.

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"I'm cycling the sensor in three," Alex said in Tristan's ear, "two, one, now."

Tristan opened the door and motioned for his companions to move with him. His movements were measured, since the amount of Heals and painkillers in his system meant he couldn't properly register what he touched. It meant the particulates that had to fill his fur didn't bother him, but it would make a fight precarious, at best.

Fortunately, this was entirely dependent on stealth. One death in the process of reaching the target room, possibly as little as one injury to Karliak personnel, would undermine the claims Krystal would make. Which was why he'd been relieved Alex hadn't protested his role as support coercionist. He could have set most of this up ahead of time, told the sensors to ignore him and anyone with him. Sent reminders as they moved through the building so they kept obeying him. This wasn't a Karliak building. Their system easily fell under Alex's control. But there had been the danger that he would snap, even after the massacre he'd caused, and keep this from succeeding.

Krystal had been surprisingly pragmatic after the burst of optimism that had Eastyn running to Tristan for help. She'd been skeptical, but listened as Tristan explained the reality of corporations. Then laid out the plan to get her what she wanted.

Her mask was simply, nearly the truth. She'd been the one within the rebels triumvirate trying to make the others see reason. Kaleb was a man using this money to amass more power, using the rebels to his own end, controlling them by threatening to take away his protection. Ramon, a stupidly naive engineer who was only supposed to be there to provide technical expertise, but then took it upon himself to kidnap the Karliak chief engineer on the project for reasons she didn't know.

The assault on the data center? She didn't know who had orchestrated it. In the chaos that followed Karliak's raid, she'd focussed exclusively on holding her people together. When she had a moment to breathe, she was told of someone on death's door demanded to speak to her. One of the many criminals the rebel had been forced to work with, who handed her the datachip with the damning information on it.

She didn't want to release the information. She wasn't after destroying Karliak. All she wanted out of the corporation was for them to do what they had promised when they arrived, but without all the strings they'd attached to the rescue.

“The sensors will return to the now,” Alex said, as Tristan opened the door and motioned the three others inside. “In three, two, one, now.”

The office was empty. It wasn't their target.

Alex had tracked down the executive to this office complex. One so unremarkable it would be the last place someone would look for a Karliak executive to be hiding out in while what was left of the corporation's local security scoured the planet for those responsible for so many deaths.

It had simplified their entry. The security posted around the building was sparse, in part to avoid drawing attention and because whatever personnel with expertise in taking down mercs were out there, searching.

“You're going to have a minute at most to reach the executive's office,” Alex said. “I adjusted the security's patrols in that part of the building as best as I can to give you the window, but anymore and even the neophytes they have in armor will realize something's off. Sensors are cycling in three.” Tristan motioned to the others. “Two.” He readied to open the door. “One, now.”

He opened and hurried, not pausing to check for patrols when it made the turn in the intersection. Trusting Alex to have cleared the way, as he'd said. He saw the armored back turning at the end of the hall as he made his turn, then he headed for the target office.

“We're here,” he announced in a neutral voice to inform those with him, along with Alex. The lock turned green as he stepped before the door, then he entered, Azeru in hand, pointed at the terrified man seated on the other side of the desk.

Krystal placed a hand on Tristan's arm and forced it down. “There's no need for this,” she told him in a firm tone. “We're here to talk. There won't be anymore violence.”

“Alarm intercepted,” Alex said. “She has a little under fifteen minutes to convince him before someone will be at his door.”

“What do you want?” the man asked. Voice almost steady. It might be drugs, neuro inhibitors, simply years of corporate life that allowed him to control his voice while looking scared, and after a successful kidnapping that resulted in the death of his colleagues.

“I've come into possession of something I think needs to be returned to you,” she said, taking a seat before the man.

“You could have just—”

“No, I couldn't.” She placed the datachip on the desk, keeping her finger on it. “You're in charge of engineering for the terraforming. So I expect you are aware of the prototypes that have been deployed.”

He shook his head. “Prototypes aren't deployed. They're tested within simulation until the problems have been resolved. Then they are used on dead worlds. We can't bring these back, of course, but it lets us stress test the technology under—”

“A dead world like Gekiner?”

“I don't know that one,” he said, frowning.

“That might be because it wasn't a dead world,” she said. “At least not until Karliak went there to help them deal with a cooling planetary core. They used something coded as the F-K-34-NK.”

“The Igniter, I'm aware of it. It was first used to save Pamilon a couple of centuries ago.”

“After it destroyed Gekiner.”

The man chuckled and shook his head. “No, Pamilon was its first deployment. I'm not aware of any use of a planetary body before that.”

“According to Milaine Vitro.” She tapped the chip. “It destroyed Gekiner. I believe she was a colleague of yours? She put together a thorough document on how that Igniter, as you called it, was used on Gekiner, and all the steps that were ignored by Karliak, the name of the people who ignored them. Those who warned about things not going according to plan. In short, she documented how Karliak killed a world with still nearly twenty billion people on it, then went to extreme lengths to hide it ever existed.” She tapped the chip again. “Milaine documented five such worlds that Karliak ended, instead of saved, then erased.”

“I had nothing to do with that.”

The smile Krystal gave the man was predatory. “I know. If your name had come up at any point

in any of these files, we wouldn't be talking.”

“What do you want?”

“I want to give you this chip. I want to let you do whatever your conscience then tells you to do with it.” She pulled it away as the man reached for it. “But there's a price.”

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Tristan activated the cryo field, and the woman stilled.

“I don't know about this,” Alex said.

“They deserve this.”

“You could have asked if she even wanted it.”

“I didn't want to deal with the argument.”

Alex chuckled. “You're dealing with her when we get there, not me.”

Tristan smiled. “What if I make it worth your while?”

“What could you even think to do that would—”

Tristan had Alex against their new ship's wall, kissing him hard and ripping the shirt off his back.