

“How good of an idea is it to stay here for this?” Zephyr asked.

“We can’t move until Tristan’s better,” Alex replied, focusing on listening and transcribing the code to his datapad. He caught the look Mary gave him, but he ignored that.

“Do we have that kind of time? Anders’s distraction isn’t going to keep guards from investigating what’s happening here. We took a tube out; it’s got to have registered somewhere.”

“That was hidden,” Alex said. Who had written this code? Half of it didn’t seem to even do anything. It was clumsy, chaotic. It worked, he couldn’t argue with that, but there were more efficient ways to get those results.

“How about when we put Miranda in? You were busy with Tristan, not covering what we were doing.”

Alex rubbed his face and suppressed his annoyance. The system had been silent, which meant Zephyr was right. Activating the tube when they put Miranda in would have alerted someone.

He looked up from the datapad. “Look, we can’t move him until he’s done making what Mary needs him to. Unless you and Aliana want to carry all this stuff for Tristan as we head elsewhere? Just... Just listen into their comms, okay? If it looks like they’re sending people this way, we’ll deal with it.”

Zephyr wasn’t happy, but he headed to the terminal. He exchanged words with Aliana, and she took position by the door.

“How is it coming?” Mary asked before he could go back to transcribing the code, and he glared at her.

“Not that well, considering the interruptions.”

She looked at the datapad, then nodded, returning to supervise Tristan.

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Alex rubbed his eyes and looked up. Things were blurry, and he had to blink before they came into focus. How long had this taken? Too long. He stood, stretched, and looked at the components littering the floor. Some across the room.

Mary caught him looking. “He’s been having trouble keeping a lid on his anger. He growled that too many people were disturbing him. Imaginary,” she added. “He spiked into full-on rage once, according to my scans, but that was the only result.” She indicated crumpled stuff around them. “Those weren’t what he was working on. He wrung them out instead of this. If he wasn’t deadly, I’d bring him to a professor of mine; he’d love to study his tolerance to the drugs.”

Alex handed her the datapad. “As best as I was able to make out, these are the instructions the armband has. There’s something of a schedule in there, but the code is custom stuff in parts, so I’m not certain if it makes sense. How is the work coming along?”

She looked at Tristan and shook his head. “I don’t know. I don’t have the technical knowledge to tell what it is, so I’m trusting your judgment that he’s good enough to make it. And to that,” she indicated the crumpled components, “to tell me he’s in enough control to actually do it. If he breaks it, Alex, I don’t know that we’ll be in a position to let him work on a second one.”

“He won’t break it.” He nodded to her pack. “Any food in there? I’m surprised you didn’t shock me to get me to eat something.”

She handed him a nutrient bar. “I was busy. And I’m going to be busy again.”

Alex left her to the datapad and walked to Zephyr, who tensed when Alex was a dozen paces away. He looked over his shoulder, saw Alex wasn’t armed, and went back to

paying attention to the terminal.

“How are we doing?” Alex asked, leaning against the counter.

“Lucky,” Zephyr replied. “Anders is taking most of their attention.”

“That was part of the plan.”

“And how far ahead was that plan formed?”

Alex smiled. “Far enough. So no one’s heading here?”

“No.” Zephyr wasn’t happy about it. “There are patrols on this deck, but they’re minimal. It’s like they don’t know we’re here.”

“Like you said, Anders is keeping them busy.”

“He’s keeping the guards busy, not whoever’s in charge. He’s making slow progress toward the bridge. He’s lost people, but I don’t know how many. You’re not surprised he’s heading there.”

“No. I’m not stupid, Zeph. This was never about helping me for him. I figured he was just looking for a chance to kill me, but he does love being in charge, so trying to take over a ship isn’t much of a surprise.”

Zephyr nodded. “That was always his first plan. Will and Aliana were the only ones who didn’t know.”

“I doubt he’d have gone along with Anders coming if he had,” Alex said. “Will knows him better than I do, and I know Anders is going to make a mess of this ship once he’s in charge of it. He’s like me—okay to run a small team, but something this big? We don’t have the thought process for it.”

Alex straightened as he watched Mary put a clunky armband on Tristan’s other arm. “I think we might be moving soon.” He rejoined them.

“It’s done?”

“He said it is, and there’s a command interface. It isn’t pretty, but I was able to program it to match the schedule in the other one. If the sensor he incorporated in it works like it should, I have it set to balance the mood-altering drugs, and ever so slowly wean him off the stimulants. I’m not making promises, but the combination should keep him from going to any extreme.”

“If you have that, why not simply take the drugs out from the other one?”

She produced the cartridge. “Before you ask, I’m not destroying it. Until I’ve had a chance to run a full scan of the drugs in there, I want it around.”

“So we don’t have to worry about him trying to kill us?” Aliana asked.

Mary nodded. “Or arguing with imaginary people. Or falling into crippling depression. Or trying to bang Alex with us around.”

“So we can let Miranda out?”

Alex shook his head. Tristan was sitting there, unmoving. “I’m not entirely certain his attempt at killing her was caused by the drugs. She’s responsible for his first incarceration here.” And with her in there, whatever double-cross she’d planned on wouldn’t happen.

Aliana looked at the tube. “I don’t know if I set that thing right. Can it kill her?”

They looked at Mary, who glared at them. “I’m a biochemist. What do I know about cryo? I know to sit down in the chair or bed and turn it on. You want to know more? Find yourself a fucking tech and ask them.”

“Wouldn’t that mean you know how the liquid works?” Aliana asked.

Mary took a breath. “Different branch. I create medicines. That’s living chemistry, enzymes and stuff like that, and it’s ancient tech.”

“Bottom line, is there a chance she might die?” Alex asked.

“I don’t know!”

Alex considered it. Anders knew they were here. The moment he took over the ship, he’d send people to eliminate them. “Leave her on the platform. There’s going to be someone here soon enough, and they can take her out of it.”

“What’s our plan?” Zephyr asked.

“Still no guards heading this way?”

The man nodded.

“We’re going back to the ship. I want Tristan on the medical table there.”

“What about Will?” Aliana asked before Alex could continue.

“Can you contact him? Tell us to join us there?” He listened to the system, but it was still quiet. He was starting to get worried.

“Not without Anders knowing. He’s going to be pissed if Will tries to leave.”

“Will won’t leave,” Zephyr said. “He won’t abandon any of the crew.”

“Will can’t stand any of them, except Tim,” Aliana replied.

“They’re still part of the crew.”

“No!” Tristan screamed, making them all back away.

“Tristan, what—”

“Will you shut up?” he yelled, using the wall to get to his feet.

Alex buried his confusion under anger. He was doing all this for him, to save him, to get him back to who he should be. He was going to get him to go along no—

“Oh, I disappoint you?” Tristan was looking to Alex’s left, ears back against his skull. “Are you expecting me to be surprised? What the fuck could I ever do that wasn’t going to disappoint you?” He stabbed the air, walking forward, by Alex. “I did everything you told me, the way you told me. I even got myself out of that cage, but did that please you? No, I took too long, you said. I damaged my claws. And now you’re pissed because someone’s helping me? Well, I have news for you. They aren’t real either. So stop pestering me and let me get on with killing everyone here.”

“I thought you said he was done talking to imaginary people,” Aliana said.

Mary raised her hand powerlessly. “It should. The system was cobbled up from cryo chair parts and is dealing with custom drugs. It might take a while for it to fully adjust. I don’t know.”

“You two,” Alex told Aliana and Mary, “keep an eye on him, I’m going to find us a route.” He headed to a terminal, listening for any help in the system. He cursed under his breath. What was going on? He wanted to go in, through the code and help if possible, but he needed to look after Tristan first. He pulled up the map and looked for the most efficient way to get back to the hangar.

“We can take those maintenance conduits.” Zephyr traced a route from close to them all the way to a few intersections from the hangar. It would let them bypass everyone that might be patrolling.

Alex looked at Tristan, who was in a shouting match with more than one person, as far as he could tell. “Not with the way he’s in. He doesn’t like cramped spaces, and if that sends him over the edge, he could hurt himself.”

“Or us?”

Alex nodded. Could they stay here until they were sure Tristan would be stabilized? Was that even going to happen? “We’re going to have to take our chances with the corridors.” He should have gone for an implant with a visual connection; he could just download the map and navigate that way. He traced the best route he could find and turned.

“Time to move.”

“No.” That Tristan was looking at him stopped him more than the lack of command to the word.

“We need to leave,” Alex said.

“No, we have to stay. This place is defensible, one way in, plenty of material for me to make weapons with.”

“I thought he wanted to go out and kill everyone?” Aliana mentioned.

Mary shrugged. “He’s been acting crazy long before the drugs, trust me.”

Tristan looked at them. “Who are you?” He pointed to Mary. “Her I know. I’ve killed

her a few times already. But you're new. Maybe I should kill you now, get it out of the way."

"Tristan," Mary said cautiously, "you can't kill anyone; it's the drugs making you think that."

"No, I can kill anyone I like. I'll kill you again, right after her."

Alex stepped between Tristan and Aliana. "Stop."

"She has to die, Alex, they all do. I need to avenge you."

"She isn't one of them. She's here to help."

Tristan shook his head vehemently. "I don't need help. I don't need anyone's help. I can do this alone." He hesitated, looked to the side. "I'm supposed to do it alone. Always alone. That's how we make sure we survive."

"So you want me out of your life?"

"No!"

"Do you trust me?" Alex asked, terrified of the answer.

"Of course. You know that."

He wanted to laugh. He hadn't known, not for sure. And he still didn't. He never would. Tristan wouldn't share that much of himself, not when he was sane again.

"Then we need to go. You missed those doors." He indicated the large doors leading to the tube storage. "We need to find a defensible position as a base of operations. From there you can avenge me."

"Yes, we need a base of operations." Tristan headed for the door and Alex had to run to take the lead. In the corridor, Alex made a left, while Tristan headed right.

"This way," Alex called. Mary stopped in the doorway, watching them.

Tristan looked at Alex, then at the floor, where faint bloody footprints were visible. "Are you sure? I think we came from there."

Alex looked at the prints and tried to come up with a way to explain that led to his cell, not the hangar. "That direction's compromised. We need to go this way." In his state, explanations would be wasted.

"I can take them on," Tristan stated.

"We can't risk it."

"We can't?" His shoulder slumped. "Aren't I good enough?"

Alex went to him and took his hand. "You are, but—"

"I— I know I failed you, Alex. I'm more sorry than I'll ever be able to tell you, but you have to trust me. I'll never disappoint you again."

"I trust you. I always have, but right now, we're looking for a base of operations, right? The fighting will come after that."

"I can fight now, while we get it."

Alex hated him, this broken Tristan. He wanted the threats, not the plaintiveness. "No. We go this way. You have to trust me."

Tristan nodded, then winced, his ears going back. "Don't listen to him. He... He doesn't like you. He thinks you make me weak."

Who? he almost asked. Who could make Tristan wince like that with only words? But the answer wouldn't make sense, just like the rest of what Tristan said or did.

He pulled Tristan along and the others followed, setting a quick pace. He wanted them back in his ship in a hurry, and only after that would he figure out what to do about Will.

They were halfway to the conduits they'd have to take to go up to the right deck when a cylinder was thrown out of a door in their direction.

Tristan grabbed Alex and pushed him in the other corridor and down to the floor moments before the explosion.

"Homemade," Tristan said. "Well, ship-made." He chuckled.

"Sorry, folks," a deep voice said. "Hope no one's seriously hurt; just needed to get you

moving the right direction.”

“And who are you?” Zephyr asked. He was at the intersection, glancing toward the speaker.

Alex pushed Tristan off and stood.

“Oh, no one important. Just a former resident here and now employee.”

“If you don’t want to be a former employee, you should get out of our way.”

Alex caught Tristan’s arm as he hurried by. He shook his head, and the hurt expression in Tristan’s eyes pained him, too.

“Can’t do that. Sorry, got my instructions, and before you think of rushing me, I have a lot more where that one came from, and more powerful too. So you just keep going down the corridor I pointed you at, and everyone will be happy.”

Alex dragged Tristan to a terminal and checked the map. They could go around him. He motioned for the others to follow him.

“Who uses bombs inside a ship?” Aliana asked.

“A resident,” Tristan answered, looking over his shoulder, but no longer fighting Alex’s pull.

“Shouldn’t those know better than most how easy it is to expose the insides to vacuum?”

“Resident is prison slang for a prisoner,” Alex said. The intersection was coming into view.

“What’s a prisoner doing saying he’s an employee?” Zephyr asked. “And if he wants us to go in this direction, I’m thinking we don’t want to.”

“We make a right at this one and we go around him.”

He turned into it and came to an immediate stop. Down the corridors were heavy guns anchored to the floor and pointed in their direction.

“Oh,” Tristan said, gleefully. “Otarie heavy assault rifles. These things are going to turn us into atoms without any problem.”

Aliana stopped next to them, gun raised.

A woman on the other side of the rifles waved at them. “Just keep on going; it isn’t very far anymore. Take one step in my direction and you’ll all cease to exist.”

“I’m guessing you’re a resident too?” Aliana asked.

“Former, what gave it away?”

“Those kinds of guns are going to make holes from here to the vacuum. No one who lives on a ship would use them.”

“I know exactly what they can do. It’s why I use them. Sort of a hobby of mine, blowing up ships as they take off from groundside ports. Oh, and before you shoot me, these are linked to me. I die, and they fire.”

“I can reach her before they fire,” Tristan said. “Otaries have a one-point-three-second delay from activation to firing, and the angle they’re at means the beams will be at chest-level. I can jump over them.”

Alex almost wanted to believe him. If he hadn’t been pumped full of drugs, he would. Right now it could be the drugs, more than his knowledge of guns, speaking. He took his Samalian’s arm and backed away.

Glancing the way they’d come, he saw the man leaning against the wall by the other intersection. He was bouncing a metallic-looking ball. The man noticed him and pointed further along the corridor.

Alex considered rushing him, but the man looked to be wearing as many explosives on his person as Alex had knives. Something told him that if they killed him at a distance, the resulting explosion would force them in the direction he wanted them to go already.

Tristan looked eager to take him on—too eager for Alex’s pleasure.

“But...” Tristan protested as Alex pulled on his arm. “I can kill him.”

And die in the process, Alex thought. “Base of operations first,” he ordered.

The next intersection was a four-way. There was no one waiting for them, but the way before them, as well as on their left, had enough shaped charges set in them, connected to a variety of sensors, to blow half the ship apart.

In his right mind, these would be simple for Tristan to disable.

“Whoever it is that wants us there isn’t bothering being subtle about it.” Zephyr indicated the door at the end of the corridor.

“How did they know where we were?” Mary asked. “Weren’t you hiding us?”

The silence in the system could mean many things, none of which he could check on right now. “Must have been when you put Miranda in the tube. We were there long enough for this to be arranged.” With nowhere else to go, he headed toward the door.

“The question is, why?” Zephyr asked.

“We can go back and take a chance with the two others,” Aliana said.

“Let’s see what’s here first.” The door was unlocked.

“I’m with Aliana,” Mary said. “This feels like a trap. At least with the others we know what to expect, and he said he could take them on.”

Alex looked at Tristan. He didn’t seem aware they were talking. “He isn’t in any state to fight.”

“You mean you’re afraid he’ll get hurt,” she replied.

“Yes,” Alex snapped. “I didn’t rescue him just to watch him get blown up or vaporized. If we go that way and take them on, he’s staying at the back.”

“You think you can keep him there?”

Alex looked at him again. “Either that, or he’ll rush head-first and let them kill him.” He opened the door. “I have to keep him safe until the drugs are out of his system.” The area around the door was illuminated by a soft glow, but he had the impression there was much more of it in the darkness.

Zephyr looked in. “This is definitely a trap.”

Alex went to the intersection and accessed the terminal. He looked under the interface and the code was teeming with antibodies. There was some serious fighting going on in there, and that could explain the silence.

When they were safe, he’d do what he could to help. He found the local sensors, confirmed their party were still hidden from them, and accessed those for the large room on the other side of the door. Then he brought up a map and returned to the door.

“This room is gigantic, but there’s an exit facing this. The sensors show it’s empty.”

“You trust them?” Zephyr asked.

“There was no alterations made to them, so they aren’t lying. That isn’t to say people can’t be wearing stealth-suits. Personally, I prefer maneuvering space to a corridor.”

Zephyr nodded.

“Aliana, you stay here with Mary until we’ve confirmed the way’s safe and to make sure no one surprises us from this side.” He took two knives.

The golden-skinned man looked at him and took out a gun.

“Zephyr, we move in a straight line, listen for anything. Once at the other door, I unlock it and you come get them. If there’s anyone in there, don’t bother making sure they’re dead, we don’t have the time.”

Zephyr went in first. Alex had to push Tristan in after him. The Samalian resisted, and once the two of them were inside he turned, growling.

“Stop it,” Alex ordered, “I’m getting fed up with—”

The door closed behind them.

Alex spun and cursed. He’d left Aliana and Mary on the other side.

“Yes,” Zephyr said, “definitely a trap.”

Tristan was at the door, studying the area around it.

Alex banged on it. “Aliana! Can you hear me?” He couldn’t hear a response through the door.

“Ooh, they have it in hard-lock.”

“What does that even mean?” Alex asked impatiently.

“They closed it by cutting the power. There’s no way to open it until that’s back.”

Tristan traced his fingers along the wall. “We need to find an alternate conduit to use for power.”

Alex slammed a hand against the door with a curse and turned, only to freeze in place as a giant Samalian head looked down on them.

“Well, that took long enough. I was starting to think the people I sent to give you directions might have taken it upon themselves to kill you.”