

In the process of getting through the ship's security to land it, Alex had found the merc's name: Munetsi Pocock, and his access to the mercenary boards. It made finding the job simpler, but didn't give him Hart's full name.

He ran a search on the side while he worked, in case the family was so visible he'd get a visual he'd recognize, but there were a lot of people in the universe, and even a minuscule number of wealthy families comparatively still made for a number so large that Hart came up multiple times. The few visuals weren't of the man who had showed up at the sanctuary.

So he went through the boards. The job had been posted through a broker, and using a coded identification, instead of the person's, but Alex had compiled the list of names matched to them a long time ago, and it changed so little that he rarely needed to scrap the boards to update it.

The broker was Sharim Denon. A name he'd come across before, but hadn't dealt with directly in his work prior to being with Tristan. Sharim's system was well defended and Alex was as gentle with it as he could be, both because Sharim was only an intermediary, and because he didn't want him to know Alex now had access to the system.

That only gave him the account where his fee had come from, but that led Alex to a banking system, then it was about bouncing around through it until he came to the account of a Maurice Riley. A man with an utterly normal life, and therefore, no reason to hire a mercenary.

A cover identity.

Alex had a number of them to deal with just about every situation he might find himself in. And if this one had been a better match for the job placed on the board, Alex might have been fooled.

But only until he looked at the man's financial life and noticed how regular all the shifts in money were. It reminded him of his early days, before that had destroyed half his identities and taught him to program randomness into their lives.

Tracing where the moving money came from led Alex to the offices of the fraud department of the bank holding the account. Searching through the systems confirmed this was where the identity had originated from.

It was something of a first for him. While the financial systems were far from the most secure, he'd never come across evidence of corruption within it until now. He filed the name of the person responsible along with the evidence for a day he needed in person work done within this bank and moved on to finding out which in the accounts the initial amount had come from.

It had been a stupid thing to do, transferring the funds. What Carter Hart should have

done was transfer it to a cred-chip, then have a hacker change the embedded provenance or just erase it. That would normally be a red flag to any financial group processing it further down the line, but Carter was already dealing with the fraud department for this.

But he wasn't surprised this was how it had happened. Carter had lacked the sleaziness of the wealthy, willing to do anything to get what they wanted. In his circles, the man probably passed as one of the good ones. Taking what he wanted, but paying fairly for it. Maybe he wasn't above some subterfuge, but Alex expected this had been the first time the man had had to hire mercs to get him what he was after.

It was the rare place or people in the universe that didn't run on money, after all.

The transfer was how Alex made his way into Carter Hart's account, and through them, his life and the business of Galactic Hart. He had no interest in their business; all he wanted was to deal with the man.

He went with the method he knew best.

Alex erased the man from existence. It was easy. Easy enough, it always amazed Alex entire planet's worth of population wasn't vanishing every day.

It was easy enough that minutes after Alex was done, Carter Hart's identity was back in place as if he hadn't done anything. So the man had backups; at least he wasn't an idiot.

Alex erased that one, but another resurfaced, and as he worked on erasing it, he noticed programs gathering. He stopped and removed his presence.

Maybe that wasn't something Carter had arranged. Again, he lacked the deviousness to think that way, so it was something arranged by his family. Maybe they all had such redundant identities, set to activate when one disappeared. And, if the gathering programs had been any indication, to alert the family's security force of what had happened.

Alex was confident he could still do what he wanted, but the time he'd have to invest in locating the backups, as well as any programs setup to create further one, and deal with the security coercion in the process wasn't worth the end result.

What alternatives did he have? Sending him a message telling him to back off? The wealthy didn't listen to those not within their circles. Alex had identities with that level of wealth, but they'd have no credible reason to intervene, which would just expose whichever he used.

And... did he have to do anything?

What was his goal here? Who was paying him?

He'd been so wrapped up in lashing out at the person who'd broken into the place he currently lived he hadn't stopped to think about if it was his job to intervene.

So, what did he want?

To continue his training, however horrible it felt. He needed to change, and this was the best option he had. He didn't have to fight Carter for this to happen. All he really had to do was sit back and let the next team get in, find what they were after, and leave. That would put an end to the assaults.

The flaw with that reasoning was that for that to be so easy, the next team had to be a small infiltration force, determined not to hurt anyone. What were the odds there was another one of those within the systems close by? Mercs weren't known for the gentle approach. The first team was more typical than the lone infiltrator.

Okay, so did he care if any of the locals got hurt or killed in the process?

He didn't. But he knew that he should. That at one time, he would. As much as he might be tempted, he couldn't blame Tristan for that one. Alex had done most of the work in cutting that part of himself out in the process of becoming a merc capable of finding and taking on the Samalian.

And what a delusion the second part had been.

Would that resolve itself once he got his murderous instinct under control? All Tristan had done was accept he loved Alex, and that had changed him well beyond the two of them.

But Alex wasn't there yet.

So what were the options now?

Leave, which he wasn't doing unless forced to.

Convince Teklile to relinquish the painting Carter was after. Maybe Tristan could make that happen, not Alex. Teklile was unbending in his convictions.

Which left protecting them until Carter grew bored of sending money out and not getting results. If the man was corporate, Alex would be more confident this was a possible outcome. Corporations expected returns on investment.

They also sent forces of appropriate size to ensure they didn't have to send in a second team. Carter would have taken Alex in, noticed the merc ships he'd landed next to and would have sent a hundred troupes to take control of the sanctuary, get the item and leave. How much damage was done would depend on the level of resistance anyone put up.

He reluctantly disconnected and focused on his surroundings. Tristan was a better person to decide on what their next step should be. The only evidence of his Samalian was the blinking message light.

"I'm heading to the sanctuary to have a talk with your prisoner. I'll stay there until you return, to make sure we don't miss each other in the jungle. As entertaining as stalking you might be, that is something we can do once the situation is resolved."

The shiver that ran down Alex's spine at the thought of Tristan in the jungle hunting him went right to his crotch.

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Tristan's fan waited for Alex outside the sanctuary. "You need to get him out of here." Alex kept walking. "I don't need to do anything."

The man grabbed his arm. "Do you have any idea what he did to the prisoner?"

"He did what he needed to get the answers to his questions."

The man snorted. "He gets off on hurting people, don't you—"

"I know him better than you. Tristan doesn't care enough about you or him, or anyone that gets in his way to enjoy hurting them. He does what he has to, to get the result he's after." He looked at the hand. "I, on the other hand, will quite enjoy hurting you if you don't let go."

"Neither of you belongs here." The man let go of Alex.

"That's not your decision to make."

"You can't be so heartless you want the people who live here to be exposed to the violence you and him bring."

"You're forgetting we didn't bring it. We aren't why the attacks are happening. You want them to stop, convince Teklile to sell the painting. If you can't, then you should be

happy there's someone like me and Tristan here to keep the damage the mercenary teams will cause down. Unless you plan on taking up the defense on their account?"

Alex didn't care about the conflicted expression. He headed for the entrance.

He stopped a few paces away and considered that maybe he should care. "Look. I don't have a problem with you not wanting to fight. With wanting to walk away from the life. Fuck, I think I might like that myself at some point. But I'm not there. And since I'm here, I'm going to use what I know to keep this place as safe as I can."

"And what happens when you lose control?"

"I don't want to lose control."

"I get that. But that's not what I asked. I watched you fight. I saw how much you like it. That's why I'm walking away. I like it too much. I didn't see someone who wants to be in control fighting in the library. I saw a man barely in control."

"I'm working on it." Alex headed inside to the man's muttering.

"I fucking hope you work on it faster."