

## Chapter 05

Alex looked up from the knife he was reassembling, that he'd been working on since coming out of cryo. The screen and sensor told him there was nothing here. They were in the void of space. He closed up the handle on the vibro-knife and turned it on. The vibration was barely perceptible in this hand. He turned it off and slid it in the sheath on his harness. Of those he'd acquired at the prison, this was the best one.

Something became visible on the screen—a dot in the distance. Tristan adjusted their course to head for it. Alex watched as it became clearer, elongated, halfway between a cylinder and an ellipsoid with a bulge where the cockpit was—well, bridge in this case. The proportion told him it was a larger ship. The glow of the engines formed an aura around it.

He glanced at the sensor and saw how far they were. He looked at the camera, was it on maximum zoom? No, it was normal resolution. How could he see this amount of details at this distance? He ran a program to get the size of the ship, and the numbers were so large they were meaningless to him.

“What is that?”

“That is Prian's Pride. A Valkirye-class ship, from Kilsco.”

Alex stared at Tristan. He couldn't have said that seriously. “That isn't a ship. It's larger than any space station.” He checked the numbers. “Tristan, that thing is larger than that moon where you took us after The Argan Raid. Who needs this?”

“People who don't like to stay in one place.”

“You don't need something like that. You get yourself a good-sized yacht.”

“Some people like bringing the comforts of home with them.”

“Comforts of home? That thing can fit more people than Delaron Four's capital city.”

Tristan didn't reply.

Alex watched the ship. The “top” was clear, and he could see buildings there. “And our client lives there?” He couldn't hide his disbelief.

“She owns the ship.”

Alex didn't know what to say to that. He knew there were rich people in the universe, but to him rich meant someone who could walk into a pleasure cruiser vendor and not worry about the price of the ships available. This was... It was beyond anything he could imagine.

He zoomed in until the side of the ship filled the screen, and it was just a pale gray wall. He had to zoom again to see forms in it. Doors, which were large enough, according to the reading, for ten ships like theirs to fit in side by side.

He found something smaller and zoomed on that. A long window let him look into a corridor, or a lounge, where men and women walked, talked, sat.

“Alex.”

The tone was sharp enough to pull Alex out of his amazement and see that they were being contacted. "Unknown ship," the digitized voice said, once Alex accepted the communication. "Identify yourself."

Alex activated his implant and slipped in as he sent the tag Tristan had prepared. The system was vast, beyond vast. It wasn't the largest system Alex had been into, but it certainly was the biggest ship system he'd ever seen. And this was one computer, not a series of computers programmed to work as one.

"Identity accepted," the voice said both through Alex's implant and the ship's communication system. Alex followed the voice back to the section of the computer that dealt with incoming ships. "Please prepare for system takeover. I will guide you to your assigned hangar."

"That isn't going to happen," Alex said just as Tristan shook his head. He easily blocked the computer's attempt to access their ship. The computer didn't try hard; it wasn't used to anyone going against its instructions.

"Procedures require that you be guided in," the computer stated.

"If you want procedures to be respected, you don't hire mercs. You certainly don't hire us. We do things our way." And that way certainly never let an unknown computer inside their ship, unless it was part of the role they were playing. This was work, not a role.

And since the computer was taking its time to do what it should, Alex bypassed it and sent a program to a message node to get someone living talking to him. The program didn't reach the port. It was intercepted and carefully dissected. Alex left that part of the computer before anything could be targeted at him.

"This is an illegal action and you can be prosecuted for coercing this system." The voice was digitized. On the surface it sounded exactly like the computer, but it had a quality to it that told Alex this was someone breathing.

"Don't get your code all screwed up. I didn't do anything, just got your attention. We're here. We need someone to tell us where to land."

"Our system will guide you in."

"That isn't going to happen. Give us directions and we'll find our way."

"Sir, we have procedures. Every ship needs to be guided in. The danger of—"

"Yeah, yeah. If we hit something it'll be costly. Looks to me like that's one worry you guys don't need to have."

"Sir, procedures have to be followed. This isn't some end-of-the-universe station where you mercs get to do whatever you want. We have rules and regulations, and you will follow them."

Programs flew at the communication node Alex was using. He walled it off and activated his jump program, switching to a new node. "I guess your rules against coercing someone else don't apply to you. Don't bother trying, you are not getting in our system. Look, if you don't want to tell me, I can just go deeper into your computer and find the information myself."

"Alex," Tristan growled.

Alex muted his side and ignored the litany of rules the other coercionist was stating at him. "Do you want them in our system?"

"No, but I didn't tell you to coerce theirs."

"I'm not coercing it. I'm just poking at them. I won't do anything unless you tell me." He grinned. "But they don't know that."

Tristan shook his head in a mix of annoyance and amusement Alex had grown to recognize.

He unmuted his comm. "Look, we're here because we have a package to deliver. A package you ordered."

Alex rolled his eyes at the protestation. Whoever was on the other side of the communication certainly sounded scared someone would hear this. He thought about asking permission to go deeper, just to see what they were hiding, but Tristan wouldn't let him do that while they were on a job.

"Relax, not you personally. You as in whoever's in charge of this monstrosity you call a ship. Now, you can argue as long as you want about how things are to be done, but I have a functioning cryo system. Just tell me how long you're going to be and I'll come out when you're done, and you can tell me where you want us to go. Or you can save yourself the aggravation and tell me that right now."

Silence.

Alex used the time to probe the system's defenses. Programs had been brought online, security tightened. Of course he was already in, so that wouldn't keep him from doing damage if that was what he wanted. He amused himself by slipping between the programs. They had blind spots large enough he could code their ship through them. Didn't they ever encounter a serious coercionist? Hadn't one of their coercionists looked at this poor defense setup?

"You're going to hangar eighty-eight, pad twenty-three."

"Thank you," Alex said as he cut the communication. "See?" he added since he couldn't be heard. "That wasn't so difficult, was it?"

Tristan raised an eyebrow at him.

Alex shrugged. "You didn't see what passes as security in there. You give me the word and I can take over this thing without any problem." He pulled up the blueprints and found the hangar in question. He sent the information to Tristan and, because he felt he needed to make a point to the ship's coercionist, he slipped back in, navigated around the security programs, and continued deep into the computer until he reached the ship's registry. It took some convincing, but he was able to get a copy of it. He exited the computer, not leaving any trace, and filed it away in his personal node.

"Alex." Tristan's voice had the hint of a threat in it. "I heard you mumbling. What did you do?"

"I didn't coerce anything. I just went in and copied something."

He heard the claw tap on the board. "It isn't your job to point out the flaws in their security system, Alex."

"If I don't do it, who will?"

Tristan shook his head in that way Alex liked to see. "I swear, if this comes back to cause me problems, I will kill you."

"I know." Alex smiled. Tristan had stopped putting any threat in his voice when he said that.

It took a long time for Tristan to take them around the other ship to the right hangar, and Alex used the time to compose the security report pointing out the flaws in their system, some simple ways around it. And an offer to come back and test their improved security if they wanted him to.

The door opened only a fraction, and that was enough for the ship to enter without any risk of touching something. The forcefield keeping the air in shimmered around their ship as Tristan took it in. The landing pad was easy to find by the large numbers painted in the middle of each platform. There was on the other side, and they flew over other immaculate ships. Alex couldn't tell if they'd just come off from the construction yard.

As Tristan landed them, Alex cycled through the cameras to get a sense of what was around them. Ships, technicians, workers, and one man who, by his posture and uniform, was military, arguing with a woman in a simple white dress who didn't seem to have one care in the universe.

A door opened and let a squad of six guards in, who took position behind the man and woman. Alex sent the feed to Tristan. The military man pointed at their ship, unhappy. Alex couldn't read lips, but he didn't need to. The gist of what the man said would be, "*They're criminals who can't even follow simple procedures. We can't allow people like that on our beautiful ship. We have to arrest them immediately and throw them in a cell.*"

The woman didn't look perturbed by the words; she didn't look like she was listening to him. She watched the ship. She said a few words, and the man's face turned crimson before he performed a salute and joined the guards. They didn't leave.

He zoomed on the woman. She was clearly in charge, so the client. The robe wasn't white, but a silvery material that could be metal. Her face was smooth, unlined. He didn't think she had any makeup on. She looked in her thirties, but with the kind of money she had to have, it meant nothing. She could have been taking rejuvenation treatment for over a million years, for all he knew. Her hair was dark blond, straight, and to her shoulders. It looked perfect, just like everything about her. He wondered how many hours it took her to achieve this appearance, or if she'd had work done so she always looked like that.

The ship touched down with barely a shudder. He shut down the communication system and stood with Tristan. "Weapons?"

"We're not here to start trouble," Tristan replied. "Just a gun. Leave your harness here." He went into the second bedroom.

Alex went into his bedroom, took off the harness, and put his gun belt on. To it he clipped his new knife, then he clipped a mono-edge knife to each calve, pommel down, so they'd be easier to get to under his pant leg. He had two laser blades at his back, added two regular polycarbon knives in his sleeves, and two under his arms. With them on he didn't quite feel fully dressed, but at least he didn't feel naked.

When he exited his room, Tristan was taking a hoverboard from a cabinet. All he'd added was his gun belt with an Azeru in the holster. They entered the room where the old man was resting. Alex took the board and set it next to the bed, adjusting the power so it was level with it. Tristan deactivated the cryofield, and they put the old man on the board. Alex adjusted the length, and they carried him out of the ship.

For the number of ships and workers, the hangar was surprisingly quiet. Dampeners? It had to be, but

why someone would go through the expense of dampening the sounds in a space this large was beyond Alex. What was the point?

The military man was back next to the woman, pointing at them. This time she frowned, then nodded at his words. Triumphant, the man strode toward them.

“Weapons aren’t permitted on Lady Dalia’s ship.” He set his jaw, defying them to argue.

Alex watched Tristan consider the man, waiting for instructions. When Tristan undid his belt, Alex did the same, handing it over to the man, but kept his knife.

“Every weapon.” The man indicated the knife Alex was reclipping to his pants, and the one at Tristan’s belt.

Tristan looked back at the man but didn’t move.

The man motioned, and two of the guards approached.

Tristan glanced at the woman and made a show of looking at his claws. “They get any closer and they die.”

“That’s enough, General.” She took slow and measured steps, but the look in her eyes gave Alex the impression she wanted to hurry. Her gaze kept flicking to the old man on the hoverboard, like she was worried something would happen to him.

“Lady, the laws are clear. Only guards are allowed weapons of any kind.”

She smiled at the general and put herself between him and the old man. Tristan placed a hand on the board and pulled it away from her a few inches. She frowned, but focused on the general.

“Hubert, you’ve already taken their firearms, be happy with that. And what are you going to do about his claws? Require that he cut them?”

The general eyed Tristan’s hands, and Alex thought he would request exactly that.

“If you need a reason to leave them be, I am designating them my grandfather’s guards. Now they are allowed their knives.” She tapped something on her wrist, under the robe’s sleeve, and Alex went on guard.

The door opened, and six doctors entered pushing a hover bed—no, a medical bed, Alex realized when he saw the monitors set around it. They went around the woman and general, stopping next to the hoverboard. Two of them ran scanners over the old man, then nodded, and in unison they moved him to the bed.

The screens lit up with all sorts of readings about his health. The few Alex could read told him the old man was in bad shape. They began pushing the bed away, but Tristan grabbed the end. The doctors didn’t protest; they looked from Tristan to the woman.

“Lady Prian,” Tristan said. “I believe there is still something to be done.”

She took a credit chip from her sleeve and handed it to Tristan. “The second half of your payment.”

He let go of the bed and pocketed the chip.

She raised a delicate eyebrow. “You’re not going to verify it’s all there?”

Tristan looked at her. When he spoke, his tone was completely casual. “I don’t have to. You know who I am, how dangerous I am. You know that even if one—what do you call them here? Murans? If even one Muran is missing, I’m going to be back, and all this,” he motioned to the ship, the general, the guards, “isn’t going to prevent me from making you understand just how much of a mistake it was to screw me over.”

Muran? Really? Why couldn’t they just call them credits and be done with it? Alex understood how planets that had developed their own society independent of SpaceGov would come up with their own currencies, but these people were clearly part of SpaceGov, or at least traveled within its zone of influence. They should adopt the standard system.

The general tensed, and in response so did the guards, one of them putting a hand on the butt of his gun. Alex fixed his gaze on her, and placed a hand on the pommel of the knife at his belt. He saw the surprise and indecision. Should she take this as an escalation? Were knives any kind of threat?

Then Lady Prian laughed, breaking the tension between Alex and the guards. It was a light, airy sound. The laughter of young girls playing in the field, although Alex had no idea where that image had come from. It wasn’t like this woman had ever seen a field.

“Oh, you are so right. I do know those things.” She placed a hand on Tristan’s arm. “Which is why I hired you, isn’t it? And you did perform as I had hoped you would.” She squeezed the arm as she looked Tristan over.

Alex bristled. Was she checking him out? Hitting on him? Tristan was his, not hers. He clamped down on his jealousy. Tristan wasn’t his. Alex belonged to Tristan. Tristan could do whatever, and whoever, he wanted. Alex had no say in the matter.

Still, he couldn't help the relief when Tristan didn't react to the touch. "So, why are we here?"

The question took her by surprise. "What do you mean? You are here to return my grandfather to me and get paid."

"It would have been more expedient for you to send a shuttle to get him." Tristan nodded to the general. "I'm certain he advocated for it. You hired me through a proxy, so why insist we meet in person for the delivery? Why hand me the payment personally? You could have watched all this from the safety of your chambers. So, what's the other job you're hoping to convince me to take?"

Her smile was brighter now. "You are certainly as perceptive as I'd heard. I admire that in a man."

Alex's jealousy flared. There was no mistaking it, she was hitting on Tristan. But he still wasn't reacting to it. Alex would be happier if he pushed her away, but she was a former, and now potential client, so he had to treat her with a certain amount of respect.

"What's the job?"

She smiled at him and ran a finger up his arm. "You're very direct, has anyone ever told you that?"

"We're done." Tristan turned, and Alex followed him up the ramp.

"My brother is going to do something stupid," the woman sighed.

Tristan stopped and faced her. "Maybe you should lock him up before he does it."

Another sigh. "He's already left. Actually, he's been gone for some time now."

"You want me to stop him."

"Yes."

"What is he going to do?"

"That, I'm afraid, will have to wait."

Tristan turned and headed up the ramp.

Alex waited where he was. This wasn't the first time a potential client tried to string them along. She'd already admitted she wanted to hire them, anything else was just power games, something Tristan never had the time for, unless he was the one engaging in them. When Tristan called him to the ship, it would be too late for her.

"He's going after our grandfather's research," she said in exasperation.

"What is it?" Tristan sounded like he was in the doorway.

She hesitated. "I don't know, not for certain. Our grandfather told us stories when we were children, but that was a long time ago. It's why I needed you to rescue him. He'll be able to tell you exactly what it is."

"Alright, I'll talk with him when he's ready. Alex." Alex headed up the ramp where Tristan was waiting.

"You don't need to stay in your ship," she said. "Surely you'd prefer more comfortable accommodations? I'm sure it isn't often that you get to avail yourself of what a ship like this has to offer."

Tristan was looking at her, considering her offer.

What was there to consider? It wasn't like Tristan cared for comfort. Their ship had ample comfort that Tristan never bothered with.

"Alright."

Alex followed Tristan down the ramp, still trying to understand what he was doing. As the ramp closed, Alex saw the mechanic approaching. Tristan grabbed him before he could reach the panel that would give him access to the engine.

"I'm just going to perform some maintenance while your ship's here. It's procedure."

"You touch my ship," Tristan said casually, not looking at them, "and I kill you."

The mechanic looked at Alex who nodded. Even with that the mechanic didn't immediately understand, or accept, the reality of the situation. When he did, he hurried away. Alex rejoined Tristan as he closed the cover to the ramp's lock. As usual, he'd used his body to hide what he was doing from those who might be interested in getting in his ship.

Tristan turned. "That goes for anyone else. My ship doesn't need maintenance; I take care of that myself." He looked at the general. "And don't try to get in; you're not going to like the result."

"General," Lady Prian said, "the ship is off limits to everyone. They are my guests. I don't want them to come complaining to me about their property being invaded."

"I don't complain," Tristan said. "Those responsible will just die."

Her eyes flashed with anger, and then were neutral again. Alex had a feeling that if Tristan killed anyone—if Tristan told him to kill anyone, he corrected, it would get ugly in here.

"Now, I have a wonderful room for you at the top of the Prima tower. You get a view you will never forget, and I can promise you a night like none you've ever had before."

“Two rooms,” Tristan replied.

“Excuse me?”

“I need two rooms.”

She looked at Alex. “Oh, of course, he’ll have one too. It’s going to be a few floors lower. Not everyone can stay in—”

“Connected. Two connected rooms.”

“You do understand that I’m offering you—”

“Not what I need.”

She became cooler. “Very well.” She indicated one of the guards. “Find them what they need. I think the Orema district will have it.” She turned to Tristan and gave him a brittle smile. “Enjoy your night.”

She left after motioning for the general to fall in step. Their guard indicated for them to follow. They’d reached a lift before Alex saw an information display.

“I’m going to get my face fixed. I’ll join you when that’s done.”

Tristan nodded.

“The district is—” the guard began.

“I can find it on my own.” He left them to wait for the lift, heading for the display. He didn’t bother coercing the system; asking it for the closest fully-equipped medical clinic was faster.

When he returned to the lift, Tristan and the guard were gone. He took the next one and went up two floors, then down a busy corridor. No one paid him any attention, even if he was dressed in his usual gray and red military pants, and jacket over a gray shirt. He stood out among them. From what he could tell, they were technicians and mechanics with the occasional soldier. This was the underbelly of the ship, he decided.

He had to check another terminal to confirm he was heading in the right direction before finally reaching it. The clinic was one room with three medical beds. A doctor in the pale green medical uniform every doctor in the universe seemed to wear stood from behind a desk.

“Good afternoon. How can I help you?” she asked.

Afternoon? How did they tell? He took out a data chip. “I need you to reconstruct my face.”

The request surprised her, then she took the chip. “You want the face on here?”

“My original face, yes.”

She sat at the desk. “Name?”

“Why do you need it?”

“It’s policy to log every medical procedure undertaken by a Prian citizen.”

“I’m not a citizen, I’m visiting.” They had their own citizenship? SpaceGov recognized them?

“I still need to enter you into the system.”

Alex took another chip and put it on the desk. “Ten-thousand SpaceGov credits. It’s yours if you keep me out of the system.”

She looked at the chip like it was a rock. “Sir, this isn’t about paying me, it’s procedure.”

He sighed and pocketed the chip. “Fine. Brian Ferguson.”

She typed. “It isn’t in the system.”

“I told you, I’m visiting.”

“Then I’m going to need—”

Alex handed her his Ferguson ID. She did what she needed, and had him lie on a bed. He felt his face go numb as she began working and talking, offering him plenty of other modifications she could do for him. Some sounded extreme, but she spoke as if they were normal things she did.

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“All done,” she said as she handed him a mirror. “Are you sure you don’t want anything else? I can give you a larger p—”

“No, thank you. I’m quite happy with the body I have.” He looked at his face, moved the muscles. There was none of the stiffness that had been there before.

“Whoever constructed that face did a poor job.”

“I know; it was all I had access to.” He ran a finger against the scar.

“You know, I could have removed it. It would have been barely a minute.”

“No thanks.” When was the last time he’d had it refreshed? Maybe he should get it done now? Tristan hadn’t said anything, but the way he ran his finger down it told Alex he liked the scar.

“The scan shows you have an auditory implant, it would just be fifteen minutes for me to take it out and repair your ear.”

“Thanks, but I’m okay with it.” He got off the bed. “Is there a public terminal? I need to check something.

“You can use the one at my desk. I’ll just lock out the medical database.”

“Thanks.”

He sat once she was done and looked through the news feed, until she grew bored with looking over his shoulder and moved on to something else.

He thought the pattern that turned the implant on and smiled as he heard the ship’s voice.

“Alright, talk to me.” He kept his voice low. The implant allowed him to subvocalize, but he hadn’t gotten used to that. He navigated his way past the lock on the medical database and located his Ferguson ID, and the work that was done. He replaced it with someone from the city, an Esteban Gregor.

Ferguson wasn’t an identity he used often, but any chance it could be linked to him was a chance he wasn’t willing to take. With every trace of Ferguson removed, he looked for any mention of him or Tristan, but the Lady Prian knew better than to let the names of mercenaries make it into her system.

He looked up, and the doctor was still on the other side of the room, occupied with a device Alex didn’t know.

He spent ten minutes inserting code in the system. Not outright coercing, more nudging. It wouldn’t let him take over anything, but it would open doors and ignore his presence if he told it to.

Then he found the Orema district, the most recently assigned room, and with another thank you to the doctor, left to rejoin Tristan.

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