

Alex's ears rang. He rubbed his eyes to clear the spots. It had been so sudden, even his brain hurt. There was a hush on the bridge that made him look around. The close to a dozen people there were split between looking at him with a stunned expression, or watching the main screen. Alex looked at it, but before he could make out more than... What were those, asteroid? Someone clamped a hand on his shoulder.

Startled, he turned to look at the captain. "You know," the man said, "for someone who keeps saying he doesn't want to kill anyone, you're racking up quite the body count."

Alex stared at him. What was he saying? He knew the words, but his brain was so jumbled it couldn't seem to make sense of them.

"Vic, what's the crew on a ship like that?"

The slim man looked at the screen thoughtfully. "I'd say sixty."

"Five months with us and you already have sixty-two kills." The captain smiled. "I don't think anyone ever had that many so quickly. Not even—"

"It isn't like anyone's going to know he caused that," a voice said, and after a moment Alex recognized it as Anders.

"Shut up, Anders," someone said.

Alex forced himself to look at the screen. What the captain said didn't make any sense. He hadn't killed anyone. He'd been wrong. Those weren't asteroids, that was debris. Okay, that made sense; the metal content would hide the ship. But Alex didn't think there was enough to really do the job, and there were other things there, smaller and not metal. He tried to focus on them, but they wouldn't coalesce into something he recognized.

The one thing he could tell for certain was that the Law ship wasn't there, so it had worked.

"Hey, Crimson, what did you do?"

Alex turned away from the screen, but he couldn't find who'd spoken.

It took him a moment to get his mouth to work. Why was his mind so foggy? He'd been thrown out of systems before. "I had to stop them." He hesitated. He felt like the words were fighting him. "I found myself in the propulsion system, so I shut down everything there."

"Everything?" a woman asked. She'd been there anytime Alex had been on the bridge. He thought she was the captain's first officer.

Alex nodded.

She looked thoughtful. "That could have done it." She nodded to the screen. "If the safeties went down before the rest, you'd end up with bad stuff mixing together. It ignites, and the fuel reserves are next to go. We'd get something like what we saw."

There was an explosion? Alex hadn't seen any explosions. What was she talking about?

"Crimson," the captain said, drawing his attention away from the screen and all those things there. "You look like you need to lie down. Go to your quarters. You did a good job; you're done here for now."

Alex stared at him. How could he be done? Wasn't it just a question of time before the Law ship started after them again? The captain stared back at Alex, looking like he expected a response.

"I'll take him," someone said, and after a moment Alex thought it was Perry. "You won't need me here, considering..." He trailed off.

Perry placed a hand on Alex's shoulder and gently pushed him. Alex thought he should stay, but the captain had told him to leave, so he wasn't going to argue. They reached the lift without saying a word.

“Are you okay?” Perry asked once the doors closed.

Alex looked at him, unsure how to answer. Was he okay? He should be, but he had a sense that things weren't quite right. Maybe the disconnect had given him a concussion? No, that couldn't be. The sound had been loud, but he'd heard louder. He took out the earpiece and checked for blood. There wasn't any.

“I am,” he answered. He wasn't panicking, so he had to be okay, right?

Perry didn't look convinced, but he didn't say anything.

The doors opened at Alex's level, and they were almost to his quarters when Asyr came running.

“I did it! I did like you said. I looked for patterns in what he did, and I managed to get through his defenses and kick him off the ship!”

“That's good,” Alex said in reflex. It was only a moment later he worked out that someone from the Law ship had managed to slip by him while he was busy. Hadn't there been a second coercionist? Why was it so damned hard to think?

He forced a smile. “That's great, Asyr.”

She opened her mouth, but Perry shook his head. She remained behind while Perry guided Alex back to his room.

Will wasn't there, and that was a good thing. Alex could do with being alone for a while.

“Are you sure you're okay?” Perry asked.

Alex nodded. “I'm just going to lie down for a while.” Which he did.

He thought he might sleep, but now his mind decided it was time to work. It went over the last moment of the coercion. Alex had sent the command to shut everything down. The other coercionist hadn't liked that—no, that wasn't right. He'd sounded scared. Moments later the connection had cut with loud static.

Alex frowned. How had he been thrown out? He hadn't seen the attack. And disconnections didn't happen with noise, his view just went blank. Where had the static come from? The screams? Why had the system screamed? Had his opponent used an attack Alex had never seen before?

A shadow of a thought formed at the back of his mind, but Alex focused on something else.

The coercionist had been good, possibly better than Alex—younger too—but what had been the point of disorienting him so much? To keep him from reconnecting? But why? He had to have monitor programs on all the connections by then; how else had he found him so fast?

The shadow moved closer and Alex heard its voice. *What if the coercionist wasn't the one who'd caused the disconnection?* It reminded him of someone, but he blocked that memory.

But the questions made no sense. If it wasn't the other coercionist who had kicked him out, who had?

The image of the field of debris came to him again, the small things floating among them. What were those things? They weren't so small he couldn't see them, so why couldn't he make out what they were?

Where's the Law ship? The question popped up in his own voice, not that of the shadow.

*You did it,* the shadow said.

Did what? He'd been kicked out of their system, so he hadn't stopped them. Their ship, maybe, but why wasn't the coercionist inside this ship now? Without Alex to defend it, it would be simple to take control.

So why weren't they in already?

*They can't.*

The debris bothered him. What were those small things in it?

He tried to calm his racing heart, to slow his breathing and focus. He'd seen the screen. Everything had been sharp except those things, so the problem wasn't with what he'd seen, but with what he remembered.

Had they been metal? No, they didn't have the right look for that. No jagged edges or shine to them. He couldn't shake the sense they looked familiar. Colored central points with extremities in other colors.

The central portion was brightly-colored. Green and gold, while the extremities were muted. The colors varied from pale to dark, but nothing bright.

For a moment he thought they were star-shaped, but that didn't feel right. If he unfocused his eyes they might look like that, but when his vision cleared he could tell the extremities weren't all the same length, and they didn't originate from the middle point. Now that he thought about it, the center was elongated.

Alex cursed. What were they?

*You're almost there,* the shadow said.

Alex focused. He almost had it, he was sure. Almost worked it out. His stomach twisted.

No, damn it, he wasn't going to be sick now. He forced his stomach down. He was done being sick each time he—

*Go on...*

No... He couldn't have.

*Just a little more.*

Alex put a hand to his mouth. He'd killed them.

The events came in focus. The static had been the explosion disrupting the computer. The systems had screamed because they were dying. The sound of those screams had been what disoriented him. The screen had shown the result. Those small things? They had been bodies. The crew.

His victims.

He hadn't wanted to kill anyone.

*That doesn't seem to stop you.*

"Shut up."

He couldn't deny who the voice belonged to anymore. Cold and calculating, alien. He hadn't heard it for so long, but he'd never been able to forget it. Tristan's voice.

*Is that so bad? If you're going to take after me, shouldn't I be there to guide you?*

Alex curled up in a ball, trying to get the voice to shut up. He hadn't meant to kill anyone. He wasn't a killer.

*If you aren't,* the alien's voice whispered, *how do you ever think you'll beat me?*