

The ship shook hard enough Alex held onto the comm board. Another gravity assisted planetary entry. That meant all power off to avoid registering as anything other than a rock heating as it traveled through the atmosphere to the few sensors that had a chance of noticing them.

He still believed such an entry wasn't required. It wasn't like Calipsan had had a population center in over five objective centuries. A solar shift and the planet had turned into a burned husk, only good for mining or for holding prisoners, and planets with mineable resources were not so rare a corporation had to bother with worries on how to house their executives so they would maintain the comfort they'd grown accustomed to on their previous assignment.

As a prison, on the other hand, it came with an added security measure, free of charge. In the daytime, a body could be roasted in a few hours. At night, someone could freeze to death without good insulation, and the atmosphere wasn't pleasant at either time. Just thick enough to qualify as such, with barely enough O2 to make standing still something that would strain someone.

Escapees wouldn't have the breath to make it far enough for a ship to pick them up before they collapsed from the low O2. Then either freeze or bake if they weren't considered valuable to warrant being retrieved.

And the prison access was three quarters of the way from the other side. They had no reason to pay attention to the sensor that SpaceGov had required be placed so the entire planet was covered. SpaceGov didn't believe in something like too much security.

Possibly because someone there had seen how often prisoners escaped from supposedly escape proof places. Even a place like the Sayatoga, with its stellar reputation, hadn't been immune, not that they had let the public know that. Even now, under new management, it still reported business as usual, with every prisoner, including those released under the previous owner, securely in their cryo pod.

Alex didn't know what Will would ultimately turn his ship into, but he doubted the pirate locksmith, now ship captain, would care to hunt people down even for the generous sums SpaceGov paid to hold them.

A jerk nearly threw him out of the seat.

He wanted to tell Tristan to power the ship, get the compensator going, at least. But the answer would be no, and the distraction might cause him to lose track of how far from the ground they were.

That would be a problem Alex didn't want to have to deal with.

If at least they'd been aimed at the ocean, he would have known that a miscalculation wouldn't kill them. As hard as water was at their velocity, the ship's design and their nose

first approach meant it would slice its way under it, instead of splattering into nothingness.

But that would have put them too close to their target, had been the objection.

Alex had wanted to point out there were other oceans to throw themselves into, but they were already in free fall by then.

He glared at the back of the Samalian's head, knowing that even if the ears were up and forward, indicating he was attentive to something. His muzzle would be split with an adrenaline fueled, teeth showing grin.

His boyfriend had a problem, that was for certain. Maybe once they were done with this fool's errand that was curing him of his need to kill, they could work on curing Tristan of his real need to needless complication just for an adrenaline high.

The Samalian quickly tapped a sequence on his control board, and the ship stopped shaking as it activated. The first thing to be fully on was the forward screen, showing they were much too close to the ground for the speed they were going. Again, Tristan's motions were quick, then the view shifted as the ship leveled. The inertial compensator kept Alex from being thrown about by the violent maneuver, but it couldn't keep the ship from straining, or the loud scraping under them.

"How was that?" Tristan asked, grinning at him.

"Not needed?" Alex replied. "Something scratched the underside. Are we going to take on water?" He could check the ship's report himself, but the quickest way to get Tristan out of his junkie mode was to give him something analytical to focus on.

The Samalian called up reports while Alex listened to the local traffic. It was nearly silent, other than the ever-present network that encompassed the universe. Their target wasn't registering on the open network, and the prison had no one local to speak to, certainly not their target, since they weren't supposed to be here.

"It won't reach the inside before we're exited," Tristan said.

"Meaning we're going to need to acquire a different ship to leave."

"The target is going to have one."

Which would be secured, Alex thought, specifically not paying attention to the excitement that caused. Guards, fighting.

It wasn't a need, just what the job called for.

The outside light was replaced by darkness as the ship plunged into the ocean.

Alex paid closer attention to what he heard. The closed net couldn't be heard this way, even with his implant, but it could affect how the open net behaved, letting the skill coercionist know communications were taking place.

A blinking light distracted him. Calling the information, he ground his teeth at what he read.

"I thought you said we'd be fine."

Tristan grinned. "I'll make it there before anything important fails."

Looking over the damage hadn't been enough. "And how are you going to find a lab we can't scan for?" The area his coercion had given him within the ocean was large enough it could take hours with active scans to find. Hours they wouldn't have. They certainly didn't have the time for a visual search.

A tap on the control board and a screeching sounded through the ship that had Alex searching for what part of it was being torn apart. "Local wildlife," Tristan said.

“I don’t see how something screaming its head off is going to help!” Alex replied, raising his voice over it.

“Echolocation.” Tristan turned the sound off. “Organic version of active scanning. And like passive scans can use another ship’s active scan to get a sense of what’s around.” He tapped commands, and the screen changed so that the watery darkness on its other side had shapes throughout it. “Definition isn’t great,” Tristan said, tapping and reading information. “But it’s good enough to pull this out of the sea scape.” A section enlarged and among a chaos of irregular shape, the hexagon stood out.

Tristan grinned. “One ex-Luminex researcher specializing in accessing the mind.”

Flash of the chair passed through Alex’s mind, being strapped to it, forced to relive moments of his life while Katherine search for proof he was Tristan’s accomplice in her husband’s murder.

He shook the memories away. The terror he’d felt was barely an echo now. It belonged to the old him. The cubicle slave too scared of everything to dare go after what he wanted. Alex hadn’t been him since well before he’d found Tristan.

He had a pirate crew to thank for forcing him to change.

“It’s too back on the ex part,” Tristan said. “With the pull the two of us have with Luminex, it would have been easy to get them to hand him over to us.”

“The pull you have,” Alex said, focusing on listening. Now that he had a location, picking up indication of the closed net would be easier, if it was in use. “I burned mine when I picked going after you over what the boss was offering me.” Information scrolled. “How long? More systems are getting compromised”

“Not long. We’ll be fine.”

Alex sighed. “Does that take into account you cutting through that hull and me coercing the system into not yelling our arrival to everyone in there?”

“We won’t be moving then,” Tristan replied.

“We’ll still need life support. Opening the hatch isn’t going to give us O2 here anymore than doing that in space.”

The Samalian checked a screen. “It will last. And if not, we have bottled O2.”

“A Limited amount of it.”

On the screen, the hexagon had enlarged until it was no longer identifiable as such. Only a flat surface with two walls going down to the ocean floor.

“We’re about to—”

The ship bounced off something with a sound that Alex was sure could be heard all the way to the other side of the planet. The ship went dark.

“The computer had to wrong interpolation for the echolocation,” Tristan said.

“What are the odds they didn’t hear that?”

“They heard it. The best scenario is they dismiss it was one of the local wildlife ramming them.”

“Is that something that happens often?”

“I don’t know. I never had a need to research oceanic wildlife.”

“And you remember we are taking on water?”

“Not fast.”

“But it’s compromising systems. We need to be attached before we can’t move

anymore.”

“We just need to give them time to confirm nothing is out of the ordinary.”

“Other than a ship next to them.”

“Shutdown, we’ll register as an irregular metal form against a backdrop of more of them. They might note the concentration is higher, but nothing else. They don’t have a reason to have a scanner that will look deeper than the outer surface.”

“And how long are you giving them?”

“Not long.” He tapped commands, and the ship lit up. More and they were moving.

On Alex’s screen, more warnings were lighting up. One, particularly worrisome.

“Tristan, two of the six capacitors have shutdown.”

“Standard procedure to prevent damage to them from causing an explosion,” he replied calmly.

“And how many do we need to for the ship to be functional?”

“None. The generator is sufficient to run the systems. The capacitor as there for—”

“I’m aware. But without them, if the generator is compromised—” the sound wasn’t as loud, but distinct.

“We’re attached.” Tristan was out of the pilot’s seat. Alex followed him to the hatch, which opened to reveal another, smaller one. Accesses for techs to come out and effect repairs or run visual checks.

The lights flickered and Alex grabbed a couple of bottled O2 while Tristan cut the casing off the access panel.

It was muted and deaf to prevent someone approaching undetected and getting in. Just opening it wouldn’t help. This wasn’t a case of changing how some of the wires were connected, adding a board from a different part to trick a lock into thinking nothing had changed. For the door to open, there needed to be a signal from the inside to activate the power, then the proper sequence needed to be provided. With how cut from the outside world, it was virtually impossible to force your way inside.

Unless you were them.

Tristan removed the casing and pulled wires out. He used a reader on them, then connected some to a junction without severing them.

On the fourth, Alex heard the lab’s system through the Celaran resting next to the hatch. He couldn’t make out the code yet; not enough of the signals made it to the computer.

It was impossible to fully disconnect something that depended on the system to operate. The best case was to quiet it so much it couldn’t be noticed or accessed. That was many accomplished by spreading the signals through more wires than could be accounted for.

At fifteen, the ship went dark. Fortunately, the Celaran had its own power. Alex sat. Seven more and the system came through clearly.

He set the breathing mask over his face, clipped the other to Tristan’s belt, and smiled.

“Okay, talk to me.”

* * * * *

Alex shivered as he regained awareness of his surrounding. Heating was gone. The

sole light was an emergency hand torch Tristan held.

“I have control. The guy’s in his lab on the other side, currently seeing a ‘patient’.”

The reason the scientist’s new parent corporation had hidden him away here, was that he and the others working at this location could continue their research through the prisoners that were shipped to in secretly.

Tristan opened the hatch, and they stepped in. Alex had it cycle; the other door opened and warmth rushed in. The corridors were wide, reminding him more of a tourist station than a research ship, and busier than they’d like. Everyone was human, as were the prisoners, so they had no way to play at belonging.

They had to rely on Tristan’s hearing more than Alex’s control of the system to evade detection since someone had gone around and manually rendered sensors inoperative and no one had bothered repairing them.

This got them halfway until it failed as a group of three in lab coats rounded a far corner, turning in their direction.

“Intruder!” one of them yelled, and Alex sent the signal to shut down the research station’s comms.

Tristan shot the one who yelled.

“Comms are—” that one died next, but the third had already retreated around the corner.

Alex followed Tristan, and they reached the intersection in time to see the woman point six guards in their direction.

They couldn’t sound the alarm, but the lack of comm would be enough of a signal something was wrong. All they would need was to have someone spread the word to those who couldn’t hear the fighting, and it looked like the woman had been elected as one of the guard took the shot Tristan had aimed at her.

Alex ran, trusting Tristan to cover him.

There was no cover in the hall, so all he needed to do was get on the other side of the guards and he could shoot her. Tristan fired around him, keeping the guards from shooting back, but their armor dissipated the blasts.

Alex cut the first one’s arm, making him drop the gun, then dodges and sliced at the other’s stomach. Then he was past the group, but the messenger was out of sight, two possible intersections close enough to be possibilities. No point he chasing anymore, and he had something closer to deal with.

He rounded on the rear most guard, who stepped out of the way of the slice, but not the knife Alex threw in his leg, then he planted one in each shoulder. A knife went in the side of the one still shooting at a running Tristan, then Alex ripped the helmet off and smashed it against the woman’s head and she dropped. He dodged the one attempting to club him with the butt of the rifle, then had a knife in the arm, and sliced the other hand off before grabbed the rifle out of their hands, point the muzzle at their face, then lower it and shoot both their legs.

He turned as Tristan twisted the last guard’s head a hundred eighty degrees. Two other dead bodies were at his feet.

“And who is it that can’t keep from killing?” Alex asked, indicating the three he’d down but were still breathing.

Tristan canted an ear. “This isn’t the problem, Alex. And you are quite aware of that. Kill them so we can continue before everyone is headed for this location.”