

The woman had a mean face—short brown hair, hard brown eyes, mouth set like she spent most of her time snarling. She was a few inches shorter than Alex, thin, and wore dark gray armored clothing bought at various military depots. The seven men with her were mercs—big, tough, and, put together they might give a pet schnauzer a run for its intelligence.

“Ma’am,” the guard called standing behind his desk.

“Relax and go back to watching a vid. We’re not armed. I just want to have a talk with my old friend there.”

“Me?”

She gave him a crooked smile, which did nothing to make her appear nicer. “Who else do you think I mean?”

*Play the part until you know what this is about.* He shrugged and offered his hand. “I’m Georges Pantor, owner of In the Dark Production.”

She looked at the hand and the snarl was back. “You’re really going to play that game? Suit yourself.” She motioned, and the mercs spread out to block the exit. “Well, Mister Pantor, you are in the unfortunate position of matching Alexander Crimson down to the... Well, you’re not fat, I’ll give you that. I’ve been waiting too long to catch up to him again, so if it turns out you are some innocent mark he managed to put the tag on, well. I’m truly sorry for what’s coming.”

Who was she? What tag was she talking about? He studied her, looking for anything familiar in the face or body language. “Maybe you should call the Law,” Alex told the facility’s guard.

“Don’t,” one of the mercs said, taking a step forward. He was compact with a gravelly voice. He wasn’t pleased when his hand closed on where his gun should have been. She’d really disarmed her man?

“It’s not working,” the guard hissed.

Alex sighed. Of course it wasn’t working. He hadn’t wanted the Law to show up in the middle of his attack, so he’d disrupted the communication nodes. Now, the only way the Law would show up was if someone outside the building had noticed things were wrong and contacted them on a personal comm.

The woman smiled. “Well, that’s just for the best. I’m a bounty hunter, and this man is a thief, a pirate, and the accomplice to a killer. I’m here to collect the price on his head, after he’s told me where Tristan is.”

Alex stiffened. The hate when she said Tristan’s name, he’d heard it before, somewhere. It had to be Luminex. It’s the last place he’d been overweight. Tristan had attacked the corporation, used him to do it, and the head of security had interrogated him.

“Oh good,” she cooed, “you remember. So, where is Tristan? He still owes me a death.”

Alex shrugged. “No idea. I never found him. Gave up on that.”

“Ahh, really, Crimson? Is that why there are recordings of you fighting alongside him on Derelict? Tell me, did he give you what you wanted? Was it all you felt you deserved? The pain? The humiliation? Do you finally feel like you’ve been sufficiently punished for being human? Or is he going to give you more of the same when you return to him?”

He didn’t react to the memory of the beatings, to the pain as the Samalian moved in him. The hospital, his coming death. She was wrong about who Alex was. His father laughed at him and he remembered more pain. He’d been hurt, but he hadn’t gone looking for any of it. It was just a consequence of what had happened.

“Looks like I hit a nerve. He’s kept you around, so what are you? His pet? His cock war—”

Alex took a step forward. “Watch your mouth.”

The compact merc moved between Alex and the woman. “She wants you alive for the bounty,” he said, his voice raw. “But no one cares if you’re missing pieces.”

“These mercenaries are among the worst of the worst. I figured I’d need creatures as vile as Tristan to go after him.”

Alex raised his hands and backed to the counter. “Those are nothing like Tristan.” Tristan was a monster, he wasn’t vile. Alex would have walked away from that. Vile he’d worked with often enough not to want to have anything to do with it. There was a structure to Tristan, a dignity. A sense of purity in who he was. When he laid down the mask, he didn’t lie about who he was, no matter what he might claim.

He took the mug and made a show of looking beyond the mercs, through the glass doors. “I hope you’ve brought a lot more mercs. This little group here isn’t going to last very long. I kind

of remember hearing that he went through that corporation's security force easily."

"I haven't forgotten Luminex," she snarled. "I'll never be able to forget what he did there. Now, put your hands behind your head. I'm moving you to a more appropriate place for an interrogation."

Alex lobbed the mug to the compact merc. The cover kept the contents from spilling. If he'd been Tristan, he would have added some sort of explosive in there as a way of taking out some of them and cause a distraction. But he was just Alex, so he'd need to do something else.

He moved his hands behind his head, inside the sleeves and palm on the handles of the knives there as he waited. She motioned, and the ones at each end of the line walked to him. One man's jacket was closed all the way to his neck, collar up. The other had it open, the shirt underneath looked lightly armored.

"Lady, do you know anything about me?" he asked as the men came within reach.

"I know everything about you," she replied confidently.

Alex looked from one man to the other. "No, you don't." He centered himself. "If you did, you would never have told these two to come this close to me." The hands pulled out of the sleeves, the knives cutting the fabric. Only polycarbon knives, nothing special except they were undetectable, but a good edge was still a good edge.

One went across the unprotected throat, dug deep. The other went in the stomach, between the jacket and pants. He jumped the counter and crouched by the guard who'd been smart and taken himself out of the fight.

"Don't kill him!"

"The alarm's still out?" Alex asked. The guard nodded, staring at him.

"Cover the exits!" she yelled. "I don't want him escaping."

"Sorry about that," Alex told the guard. She was splitting her force, good. "If any of them had snuck in a gun, you'd know about it, right?" He took the knife out of his boot sheath. Alex snapped his fingers in front of the man's face. "Focus, I need info. Guns, would you know?"

"Yes, the scanners. Anything with electronics in them." The guard eyed Alex. "Who are you?"

That explained how his mono-edge had gone undetected. "Do you happen to have a gun of your own?"

The guard shook his head. "Just this." He touched the end of his baton.

"Stunner?"

"Just a stick. We don't get stuff like that here." He motioned above him.

"You'll know better now. The days things go well are when the universe is still in the planning process to make your life difficult. I'm going to deal with them, draw them away. You keep trying to contact the Law, get outside if you can, get your pad to connect to an outside network."

Alex grabbed the baton. "I need to borrow that." Alex swung hard above the thick calves that were coming around the counter. Armor was all well and good, it would take blasters and deflect knives, but because people still had to move in it, it had to be flexible, which meant a solid kinetic blow on the knee still caused a lot of damage.

With a scream, the man fell. Alex silenced him with three blows to the face. The guard was looking at him, inching away.

"First husband was military," Alex said, trying to comfort him with Pantor's fictitious past. "He..." What was he doing? He gave the guard a sheepish grin. "Just forget what I said. I'm a killer. This is what I do."

He unclipped the two sheaths on the man's belt and clipped them to his. He felt better; now he had options. He stood and threw the baton at the first person he saw, a compact merc. He dodged it and ran at Alex. The others were spread close to the outside doors, except for one, who'd gone for the door leading deeper inside. She was serious about keeping him in this room.

The compact merc swung at him. Alex blocked, tried to stab him, but the man sidestepped. Alex plunged his other knife in the side, the tip slipping on a plate until it lodged between two and sunk in. The man dropped to a knee. Alex sheathed a knife as he turned the other one to keep the man from trying anything. He transferred a sheath from the man's belt to his, then let him go.

He looked at the woman, their leader, his interrogator, and for some stupid reason Will, his friend from the Golly's Yacht, came to him. Had he ever asked the cook out? He kept appraised

of what the ship did, but other than Asyr, he didn't look in on the people. They were in his past. He didn't want to be weighed down by their memories or accidentally bring them trouble. Maybe he should make an exception and send Will a message, catch up.

Two of them came at him. One had a long knife with a raised hilt and a slight shimmer on the edge, indications it was vibro. It was a beautiful knife. The man lunged at Alex, who dropped the two he was holding, grabbed the arm with a hand, twisted, and sunk the knife into the other man's stomach. Shock registered on the man's face. Alex pulled the knife out of the merc's hand, then out of his stomach and cut the throat.

He slashed at the motion at the edge of his vision, but his hand hit something hard, more than armor—polycarbon all the way through. She grinned at him over the arm that had blocked his hand. In one motion she pushed him away and sent his new vibro-knife flying.

"I've got to say, the knife play didn't make it to the files I've read."

He pulled two knives and slashed at her.

She sidestepped around his attacks. "They have you as more of a straight up thief, and insane if you did actually take on a Law office. That takes guts, I'll give you that."

She struck him with her right arm, the one she'd blocked with, and there was more strength behind that blow than a normal arm had. Her arm was artificial. He regained his footing and considered his options.

"Do you like it?" She flexed her artificial arm. "I got it trying to get to you when you were with the Brogarian slavers. They didn't care when I explained I was only after you, not them. I had to leave my arm behind to escape them. Replacing it was expensive, but it was worth it to see the surprise on your face just now."

"That wasn't surprise." Alex rubbed his chest. "That was pain." He took a knife out of a sheath and cursed. He was back down to two. How did he keep losing his knives?

"You must be wondering why I'd leave Luminex. Abandon all that comfort just for revenge."

"Lady, I don't care." Only two left, plus her. Three were dead, but one sat by the outside door and one at the one leading deeper in. What was the best direction?

"I have you to thank," she continued. "You showed me I couldn't get what I wanted by working within the system. Luminex would never give me my revenge. They didn't care about my husband." She paused, sounded pained when she continued. "He was just another casualty of doing business."

Outside gave him options. He could run in any direction, but there was no real cover. And if their hover was close, they could grab guns. And there might be more mercs outside.

"It wasn't until you broke into the Law office I found you again. Of course, by the time I got there you were gone, and no one could tell me what you were after, but it told me you were alive."

Inside were all corridors, tight spaces and other people. Not ideal, but it provided him with something else outside didn't: control.

"How about we make a deal, Alex?"

He snapped his head at her. "It's Crimson." She didn't get to call him anything else.

She raised an eyebrow.

"Alex was the scared guy you tortured. You're never going to be dealing with him again. I'm Crimson, and you're not going to be dealing with me for much longer either."

"Alright, Crimson. I'm annoyed at you. I'll even admit I'm a little pissed." She motioned around them at the bodies moaning on the floor. "There's no way a cubicle jockey should have been able to make me chase him like you did, and then cause this. You're a coercionist, not a violent criminal. Thing is, you're not who I'm after. I'm sorry for goading you. I was trying to get you to reveal something. I know you're not a masochist looking to be punished. Your attraction to aliens has always been affective, not punitive. I won't claim to understand it, but I do understand wanting someone to love. Are you really going to get that with Tristan?"

Alex did his best not to react, but she nodded.

"Why are you protecting him? He's a monster. He kills and hurts everyone around him. Wouldn't the universe be better off if he wasn't in it?"

What she said was true. How often had Alex told himself exactly that? Even after realizing Jack had never existed, how often had he told himself Tristan didn't deserve to exist? And he'd believed it. Maybe he still did. But that didn't matter.

He smiled at her. “You want to know one interesting thing that happens when you work with Tristan for a while?” She eyed him curiously. “Your bullshit detector becomes really sharp, and you, lady, are full of it. I don’t care if the bullshit is that you do think I’m screwed up, or that you don’t plan on honoring any deal you make with me. I’m already on a job, and I don’t screw my partner over like that. If you can find me again once it’s done, we can talk.”

“You mean kidnapping children? You’re really lowering yourself to that level?”

“Lady, something tells me that you’ve done worse, so don’t bother playing the holier than thou card. You’re not someone nice, it’s on your face—the hate, the anger—it’s in the people you hang around with.”

“Okay, we’re done here. I tried to be nice about this, now I’m going to—”

The tone in the alarm changed. He and the woman looked at the guard whose look of surprise said he hadn’t expected the call to the Law to actually go through. It shouldn’t have, unless someone in the mainframe room had managed to undo the programs he’d used to isolate the building. It meant one thing.

Time to go.

He threw a knife at the merc by the outside door and ran at the one by the inside one. He punched him as hard as he could, and used Pantor’s ID to get through. The ID should have been deactivated days ago, after his last meeting here, but he was Crimson. Computers did what he told them, not what they were supposed to.

He almost closed the door which would have locked it, keeping her on that side of it, but the Law had been alerted to an attack, and it was looking at a merc. If he let her escape, she’d be on him the moment he was in his hover and getting out of here. Wouldn’t it be convenient if instead the Law happened to think she was behind the attack?

The merc he’d punched got to his feet and into the doorway, making sure it couldn’t close. Alex ran.

He put his earpiece in. He couldn’t do anything to the mainframe from outside the room, but he still had plenty of programs and access available. He hurried as he turned left and right, but not so much he couldn’t hear her behind him.

They were deep enough inside, so he sent a command to lock all outside doors. She wasn’t getting out of here before the Law had a talk with her. He put more distance between them and began locking the doors he crossed. He wanted her in the building, but not on his heels as he reached the open space of the warehouse.

He opened the last door with Pantor’s ID and closed it, removing any and all access to it. He ran through the warehouse, heading to his hover, only to stop with a curse halfway there. The loaders were still weren’t moving.

He pulled his datapad and began searching. Come on, where was it? He found the hover with the broadcasting rig, at the other end of the docks. He cursed and went to a loader. How did he get this thing working with the warehouse’s system down? Should he restart the warehouse? Was the loader smart enough to work without it? He had to hope so, because restarting the warehouse would take too long.

He’d just established contact with the loader when something exploded in the distance where he’d come from. She was blowing up the doors? Was she crazy? Maybe, but she was determined.

He cursed. He didn’t have the time to coerce anything. He had to get out of here. Explosives would make quick work of anything he’d done to keep her from reaching him. He took a step toward his hover, stopped, and looked in the direction of the one with the rig.

Which one?

What did Tristan need more? Cameras. He needed the recording equipment. The rig was just a computer, so he could get any computer to do what it did, but he had no way to know if they’d be able to get more cameras.

He ran for his hover.

He entered the instructions to leave, but the warehouse wouldn’t let him go. Its information was frozen with the waste still not loaded; it was programmed to keep it there until that was done. He was really getting tired of having to micromanage computers today.

He connected to the warehouse and began looking for a hover that was ready to go, just waiting for the signal. Once he found it, he switched that status to his and told the warehouse

he was leaving. Errors came up, manifests didn't match. Oh, come on. He went looking for it. He couldn't be here when the Law showed up. Pantor would pass all the checks, but the guard had seen him fight, and he'd stupidly said he was a killer. He should have kept his mouth shut. He talked too much.

He could probably talk his way through that, but there was only so much a producer could know about defending himself, no matter how harsh the universe was. And he'd be a distraction from the Law questioning *her*.

He wanted her busy, not him. What was her name anyway? He switched the manifests, and the warehouse finally let him go. He kept himself nice and slow, biting back every urge he had to just push the speed to its maximum. He reached the outside gate, and it let him out. A minute away he saw the lights of the Law approaching, so he pulled to the side to let them pass.

Once they were gone, he resumed his course at the approved speed limit. Now was not the time to attract attention.