

The discussion had gone better than he'd expected. Of everyone he'd planned to involve in this mission, Victor had been the one true gamble. Yes, Alex knew the man was physically fit. He'd looked at the work he'd had done, and considering his finances, Victor had chosen wisely. But had that been in preparation for changing careers, or because he was getting ready for a hunt of his own?

He was also the one person with whom he couldn't count on their previous interactions to get him to agree, or hire him. The two of them had not been friends; Victor probably saw him as a rival for Tristan's affection. The man was still deluded that there was something real under that fur, but that interest had made him say yes, which was good, because as a Lawman, if Alex had even mentioned paying for his help, Victor would have said no outright, out of principle.

And Alex needed someone who could act like a Lawman. Alex could create the identity, but he wasn't Tristan, he couldn't act the part. Victor wouldn't have to act.

So Victor made two, including Jacoby, and using the information Victor had obtained for him, he sent a message to number three, Miranda Sunstar. Not only was she on record for capturing Tristan once, but she'd taken him to the Sayatoga prison ship. She knew how they operated.

Only, while she hadn't exactly vanished from the universe over the last few years, her visibility had fallen down. She'd had some sort of falling out with the major mercenary boards. He hadn't been able to get the details, but by the look of things, she'd talked to the Law and had gotten a lot of mercs in trouble.

Money would be how he got her to work for him, but the same could convince her to betray him, so he'd have to add his own brand of safeties. It wouldn't take much to get her in; after all these years without missions from the boards, she had to be low on funds—even if she'd gotten some private work, and was as frugal as he and Tristan were.

He'd never understood the mindset most mercs had—to party it up after each mission. He got enough excitement out of missions; neither he nor Tristan needed to go party afterward.

This way, they'd individually accumulated enough money to buy a continent to retire to—well he could buy a continent. Tristan could buy a good-sized planet and have enough left over for a long, uneventful life. If that was something a man like him could even want.

But even if Tristan did retire, it wouldn't be here. It would be to a different base. Alex figured he had six or seven already setup for such a situation.

He could confirm the number, could find out how many and where, if he wanted to, but it wasn't his place to know that.

If things were bad enough, if Tristan couldn't tell him what he needed, then he'd go and find the next safe place the Samalian had set up. Otherwise, Alex would wait to be told.

He hadn't been able to locate the Sayatoga on the net—it was running dark at the moment—but someone hadn't thought to tell the manufacturers to erase the corporation's purchase history. And with it, their shuttles' tags.

One of the tags the Sayatoga bought showed up one system over, where Jacoby's projected trail led, and it had been picked up by the systems there, as well as other ships, as their avoidance system registered it. If they'd been any smart they would have swapped the tag, but like any overconfident criminal, they thought they'd gotten away clean.

Using those contacts, he'd been able to rebuild their most probable trajectory and confirmed they'd been here. Using the same method, over the weeks he was stuck waiting, he'd build a probable trajectory to where they were going—the trajectory along which the Sayatoga could meet with them. The advantage of a prison ship was that it could move. While it was running dark now, it would have to open up to the net eventually, and when it did, his programs would be there.

A crash broke his thoughts and he was up, knife in hand, before he realized it. A woman in her early twenties was on her knees, putting tools back in a box. The others repairing the cryo chairs threw a few verbal jabs at her, and she replied before getting back to work. He sat down and rubbed his leg.

“How’s the leg?” Jacoby asked, standing in the doorway.

“Aches.”

“You have no idea how lucky you are she didn’t just tie you down until she was certain everything was in working order.”

“I thought she’d used gravitic generators.” The casing had been gone for a week now, but he still felt like there was something off with his leg.

“You are way past the generators; she uses that on patients she likes. You ran off on her. That means ropes.”

“I had work to do, and she knows it. That’s why I’m still here and not tied up in her clinic.”

Jacoby chuckled. “Shows what you know.”

“Trust me, she wouldn’t have taken me back there.”

“You really don’t know her at all, do you?”

Alex eyed Jacoby. It wasn’t what he’d meant, and if the ex-merc wasn’t so stubbornly set on this “we’re all friends here” thing, he’d have realized it.

Of course, Cornelius knew better. When she barged into the ship demanding Alex go back to the clinic, he explained to her what he’d do if she laid a hand on him. What he’d do to anyone who tried to keep him from finishing his work. She’d shown up to remove the casing, told him to rest, and hadn’t returned since.

“About the chairs,” Jacoby said. “Do you really need all of them fixed? How many people are you intending to bring?”

“None of *them*, if that’s what you’re worried about,” he replied, turning back to the terminal. No response from Miranda yet.

“I’m not. I’ve explained things, and I’m wondering why you’re getting them to fix all of them.”

“Because it keeps them out of my hair,” Alex snapped, wishing Jacoby would get the message. “Do you have any idea how many of them have said they want to come with me to rescue him? Kids that weren’t even born when we left talk about him like he’s some sort of hero. What kind of bullshit story are you feeding them?”

“We just tell them about who he was. They’ve all seen the empty house by the forest, and they wonder. We want them to know who he is for when he comes back, so yeah, they care about him.”

Alex snorted.

“Alex—”

“Don’t bother. Unlike you, I know him. The real him. He’d have no problem burning this whole place to the ground if it was the convenient thing to do.”

“Alex, you don’t—”

“I do.” He pointed to the people working in the other part of the ship and lowered his voice. “They want to believe we’re off to rescue this nice fluffy Samalian who’s all smiles and helpful hands? Fine. But you need to understand it was an act. If you don’t, it could get you killed before we’re done.”

Jacoby threw his hands up. “Fine, I’m dropping this.” He nodded to the work. “Still doesn’t explain why you need all of them. There’s twenty-six chairs.”

“I told you, I’m just keeping them busy. We have a dozen, so if we’re ready to go before they’re done, the work will stop.” Of course, he’d planned for things to take long enough they’d all be repaired. There was one variable he couldn’t account for, and that would affect how many people would be on the ship. “But it’s a bad idea to be on a ship with not enough cryo. Horror vids have been built around that concept.”

“Who do you have?”

Alex brought up Victor’s image. It was recent, so at least he looked like he would be an asset.

“He looks green,” Jacoby stated.

“He is. He was Law.”

“You’re bringing a Lawman on an attack on a prison ship?”

“He knows what we’re doing. He’s okay with it.”

“He’s okay with it, or he’s a plant?”

“He has a vested interest in us succeeding.”

Jacoby gave him a questioning look, but Alex didn’t elaborate. He’d made sure to carefully explain to Victor what would happen, and what he expected they’d have to do. He’d given the Lawman every out he could think of. He did need Victor, but he hadn’t wanted him to be able to come back and claim he’d been manipulated. Of course, he didn’t think Victor had paid attention. Alex had told him Tristan had been kidnapped, and nothing else had mattered.

Miranda was up next. It wasn’t recent, but she couldn’t have changed that much. If she had, it would be to look tougher. “Miranda Sunstar. She’s our way onto the Sayatoga. She has a history with the ship.”

“Merc. Can you trust her?”

“I can pay her.”

“Is she any good? She looks like she’s after my time.”

Alex wondered if there were any merc alive today that qualified as “before Jacoby’s time”.

“She’s good enough to have captured Tristan once.”

“Who else?”

“I have a locksmith in mind, and he comes with his own crew, so that should take care of muscle.”

“I thought you’d be the locksmith; you’re good with computers.”

“He’s better with locks than I am, and I’m the bait.”

“Alright, who do you have in mind as a medic?”

Alex just looked at him. That was one position he hadn’t considered. He and Tristan had always been able to handle each other’s injuries on their own, or with a medical bed at worst. Most of the time, painkillers and Heals were all they needed.

“Cornelius isn’t coming. I don’t trust her.”

Jacoby laughed. “She hasn’t offered. She’s seen what the life does to people, and she wants nothing to do with it.”

Jacoby kept hinting there was more to the doctor than Alex saw, that most of the people here were the same, and he wondered what she might have been through that had made her take refuge on a place like this.

He could see if the one doctor he knew well enough to trust was willing to come when he called the Golly, but even if she was willing, would Captain Meron agree? Asking for a handful of grunts was one thing. If not her, he’d have to check the boards for someone with proper training, but that would make two people driven by money, and that would be a complete unknown. There was no way he could find every vault in the time he had left.

But what if there was someone else? She wasn’t fully trained, but she’d demonstrated she could manage it. Finding her would be difficult. He had no idea where she would have gone after delivering Baran, but it wasn’t like her skillset lent itself to hiding someone. There would be a trail to follow.

“I have someone in mind,” he said as he began coding a program.