

The eggs on Alex's plate were mostly burned. The meat was greasy, not cooked all the way through, and the local equivalent of potatoes weren't exactly fried. Emil beamed as he handed Alex the plate, so he began eating under Tristan's watchful gaze.

The Samalian handed Emil half the food he'd prepared and began eating the rest out of the frying pan. Alex didn't make a show of eating. This had to be part of Tristan becoming Emil's buddy, and he didn't want to cause problems. And the food was fine, much better than eating a nutrient bar.

He finished, washed his plate, and headed back inside. To be on the safe side, he took an immune-booster from his pack. Tristan wouldn't care that Emil's food would be responsible if Alex got sick.

He went over the work he'd done on Georges Pantor. The man had been in the vid industry for a few subjective decades. His company had all the proper permits to hire actors and staff, and obtain equipment. Alex had been amazed at the number of permits needed to make a vid. He'd been tempted to just coerce the local systems into believing he had the permits, but with having to fabricate a history, he needed something real to anchor it around.

He'd attached Georges's company, "In the Dark Productions", to a handful of movies that had been reasonably successful very far from Liadon. He gave Georges the kind of background work so many people were hired for, he wouldn't be noticed. The final step to Alex becoming Georges was giving himself a quick course in vid production, enough to understand the language used and explain what Georges was planning on making.

The cameras and audio recorders were waiting for him to pick up. He'd found the best station to get the broadcast authorization codes from, and had found where he could get a broadcasting rig more recent than what Tristan wanted.

In his hurry to find out where Alex could steal what he wanted, Tristan had overlooked that along with the vid companies, the planet had a thriving research industry, and that one of those companies developed state-of-the-art equipment for vid production and broadcast.

The downside was that research companies had better security than their distributors. He coerced his way into their system. The computer was friendly enough and their coercionists were attentive, but not on his level. That didn't help as much as he liked.

He could get through the multi-level encryption and take control of the system, but because they were paranoid about their competitors getting their hands on what they'd made and either copying them—or worse, sabotaging their research—anything relating to the distribution was compartmentalized and randomized.

He could get into the system deciding which of the internal hover plates would be used to carry the equipment, and control to which hover it went to be sent out, but then those hovers had hundreds of possible routes they could use, and the system that picked the one used was closed. The only input it accepted was the final destination, which had to be entered manually.

If he wanted to intercept the hover, he'd have to hire enough people to cover every possible route. Not only was that impractical, but with those numbers, someone was going to talk. Or he could follow one from the facility and hope there would be a location that would let him board it and coerce its system.

The fact that this felt like something Tristan would do made him set it aside. There had to be an easier way to handle this. He spent two hours going through the ways he could infiltrate the facility, and any feasible plan required a dozen people, perfect coordination, and would be a high adrenaline situation.

When the best plan he'd come up with sounded to him like a script to an action vid, he gave up on the research facility and focused on their customers. In theory he couldn't know which hover went where, but by gaining access to the destination, intermediary steps no longer mattered. The number of possible routes dropped quickly the closer to the destination the hover got.

That meant a smaller team, but they'd be operating within a city. The Law's response time was faster there. If they showed up, he was back to the action vid scenario.

So, let the broadcast rig be delivered to the station and go from there. One location and nowhere near as paranoid. Security would still be high, but as a producer, Georges Pantor had the right credentials to go on site, maybe discuss making a vid for them. Alex would have to research why a producer would go to a station.

From inside the station he'd have access to their systems. Depending on the layout, he could misfile where the rig was stored and have the station send it out. He'd figure out the how, once he knew the where.

He went back to the research facility and spent hours coercing his way through the systems. The system made him work for it, to the point that if not for the subjective year of delay between the moment the order was placed and the product was shipped, he'd have done that route. They needed to expand to keep up with the demand.

He couldn't even backdate the order. The facility was so paranoid the orders were held on five different servers, each doing its own integrity checks at random intervals, with a sixth copy, physical, held on site to be used as a last verification before the order went out.

This was definitely a situation that Tristan would enjoy. The two of them working together could actually get this done from the research facility. Tristan would handle the people and physical side of breaking in while Alex could deal with the system.

Looking at it now, he wished they could try it.

He cracked one of the servers holding the orders and stuck to read-only while there. He found a handful of orders delivering locally, the earliest being nine days away, at a broadcasting station halfway across the planet. It would give him the time needed to ensure Georges had a reason to be there.

He stood and stretched. Emil's laughter reached him, and he headed out to see what the child was up to. Alex froze on the ramp, his stomach knotting. Emil was holding onto a branch with a hand, Tristan holding him up, extended, looking like he might lose his balance. Emil studied a leaf as a small animal further down the branch chattered at him. Emil laughed again, pulled himself to reach for the animal, which fled, and Tristan tittered.

Alex rushed down the ramp as Emil shrieked and Tristan laughed, steadying himself. He deposited Emil down and waved at Alex.

Alex stopped. Had this been a show for his benefit? To scare him? To remind him he wasn't in control of anything?

Tristan smiled at him. "How is it coming along?"

Alex headed for the cooler and grabbed a handful of fruits. He looked up—the sun was disappearing behind the canopy. "Things are lining up." He checked the food in the cooler. When he looked up, Tristan and Emil had almost reached him. "I'm going to do a supply run tomorrow."

Tristan grabbed a fruit and handed it to Emil. He took a slab of meat for himself.

"I'll need to stay in town for a few days working on things." Alex watched Emil take a careful bite of the fruit. "I'll make sure you have enough to last until I come back."

"Are you getting my father?"

Alex tried to figure out what to say, but Tristan took away the need.

"No, this is something else Alex needs to take care of while he's here. Don't worry, we're still trying to contact your father, but you need to remember that once we do, it's going to take him a few months to get here."

Emil looked at his fruit, nodded, then walked away. When he was in the middle of the clearing, Tristan fixed his gaze on Alex.

"Eight days, possibly nine. You'll have everything on your list by then." Alex kept his voice low, watching Emil sit down and look at the grass. "I need to have Pantor be visible, and it isn't worth coming back here every day. He's a vid producer, so I need to have him do producing stuff."

Tristan's lips quirked. "You're going to wear a mask?"

"No," Alex stated. "I'm just using the name. It's still me."

"Really?" It was a full smile now.

"I told you I can't do that. I can't play with people's emotions the way you do."

"I don't use masks to play with your emotions."

Alex glared at him.

Tristan grew serious. "A mask is to become that person. Do you think that Alex Crimson can convince anyone he's that Pantor person? Vid maker?"

"Yes."

Tristan considered him. Alex readied himself for the verbal abuse. Tristan knew so fucking much better than him.

“What movie are you making?”

“Huh?” Alex tried to understand what this was about.

“You’ve just been found out. At the very least you’re being escorted off the property. You need to change your plans. You aren’t going to get me my equipment in the time frame you promised me.”

“Look—”

“What made you realize you were going to spend your life and money running around the universe recording people faking it?”

“I—”

“They know you’re a fraud. Depending on how deep in you are, the Law’s probably called in. That means a firefight. The odds are I need to pick up the pieces and do the rest of this alone.”

“You’re—”

“What’s the camera you’ll be using?”

“RFE-321.” He didn’t even think, he already had it on the mind.

“Good. What’s the vid about?”

Alex glared at him. “It’s the story of this merc who goes around using people. He ends up rich, but dies alone.”

Tristan grinned. “Why are you making the vid?”

“To piss you off.”

Tristan raised an eyebrow.

“Because tragedies sell,” he amended. Was that even true?

“Good. Believe what you’re saying. It’s the most important thing you need for a mask to fit. While you’re wearing it, you are that person. Forget Alex Crimson. Be Pantor, believe it to the core. Believe it, even if he’s completely different from you.”

“You believed...” That couldn’t be true. There was no way Jack had been more than an act for him. He stayed standing by pure force of will. He looked at Tristan, at that monster. He couldn’t have believed he loved Alex. You couldn’t do that. You loved someone, or you didn’t. It had been an act.

“Alex?” The concern in Tristan’s voice cut him. That was an act too. It was all an act. Tristan has said so. He was always acting. “Alex, are you—”

“Leave me alone.” He didn’t snap; he didn’t have the strength to deal with this right now, didn’t have the time for it. He headed for the hover. He needed to get it ready while he still had daylight.

He took the roll of clear film out. It was backdrop material; it was used to show any stills the vid needed. It was based on the technology that made screens possible, but without the processing power to have moving images.

He had to finish the work by lamplight, adhering the film to the sides of the hover. It would have gone faster with help, but he didn’t want the Samalian anywhere near him, and Tristan obliged him.

Once the film was in place, Alex interfaced it with his datapad. He ran some of the images included in the film. The side of the hover became the back of a clothing store, a restaurant kitchen, a hotel room. Every image was crisp, clear. Even this close he couldn’t tell he wasn’t looking at the real thing. He sent an image to it from his pad. The side became the black of the night sky, with stars close together forming the words, “In the Dark”.

He turned it off and leaned against the hover’s side. Inside another pool of light Emil was at a cooker, following Tristan’s instructions. Emil was frying something, Tristan talking, both of them smiling and laughing.

What did Tristan have in mind that required this? This becoming Emil’s friend. This would be much simpler if Emil had stayed under cryo. Stayed under until it was all done. Alex couldn’t see one good reason justifying Emil becoming comfortable around Tristan.

And did Tristan actually believe he was Emil’s friend? He’d been playing with him, again. This belief thing had just been to rattle Alex. Make him think there was something deeper to the Samalian. But no, it had been an act. This was an act. Tristan didn’t believe one thing he

said.

Emil should learn that now, because the way things were going, he was going to be scarred for the rest of his life. It was what happened to anyone who got mixed up in Tristan's schemes.

But if Alex wasn't careful, that scarring could happen much sooner. Under all the charm and smiles, there was the vicious temper he'd experienced, and he had no doubt Tristan would unleash it on Emil to teach Alex a lesson.

And Alex was considering leaving Emil alone with Tristan for days.

Alex cursed softly. The mission was against Masters, not Emil. Alex always made sure to minimize the collateral damage. Masters should be the only one to suffer in this.

*Stop bitching*, the voice that sounded like his father said. *You wanted this. Now take it like you took that thing.*

Alex shuddered. It was right, he couldn't do anything. He couldn't stop Tristan. Nothing could.