

Alex searched through the rubble of what had been their house. He probably shouldn't have thought of it as *theirs*; it was Tristan's house, but over the last year, whenever Tristan had talked about returning here, it had been *we*, not *I*, and even if Alex was sure he had been included as a possession, not a person, it had still meant something.

Now the house was destroyed. It didn't mean anything, even if it had remained standing. He didn't think he and Tristan would have stayed here, but still, he didn't like thinking of it.

He hadn't wanted to come back here, but he needed something that had been left among the rubble. If he'd been conscious, he would have told them to grab it. There was something about leaving it out here, exposed to the elements, that felt wrong.

He found where he'd been dug out, and wasn't surprised that for all the rubble that had been disturbed, a section remained intact. He got in the hole and lay down. Images of the weight on top of him caused him to shudder. He looked ahead, and in the section that had miraculously not been crushed by the fallen house or the rescuers, the Defender looked back at him.

He thought it smirked, all safe under the two pieces that had somehow lodged against each other and kept it protected. He reached in and the statue was deeper in than he'd expected.

"Of course," Alex grumbled, "you're going to make me work for that too." He stretched, his shoulder pressing against the rubble forming the tunnel and causing it to shift. "I swear, those stories have to be lying. You're supposed to make things easy, not hard."

He stopped reaching as dust fell around his arm and shoulder.

"And don't give me this 'nothing worthwhile is easy' crap." He could just feel the stone with the tip of his fingers. "With what I've gone through, you should be blessing me with a dozen Tristans, not taking the one I had away."

He hooked a finger around a leg as he heard the rubble creek and pulled it to himself, turning on his back and holding it against his chest. He coughed on the dust the small cave had thrown up, and when he thought it had settled, he looked up at the sky.

"I wish," he whispered. "I wish I knew this was part of your plan. Fuck, I wish I just knew there was a plan. This wouldn't be so tough then. Because if you caused this, if you took Tristan away from me the moment I realized how to fix this, I'd like to know why."

And here he was, talking to a piece of stone, again. If anyone heard him, they'd think he was insane. And who knew? Maybe they'd be right. Maybe he lost his mind, but it hadn't happened now. He'd lost it a long time ago, when Tristan had given him a chance to walk away from all this, and Alex had stayed. No, even earlier. The day Tristan had abandoned him; left him sick on the floor of his apartment. That was the day Alex's sanity snapped.

No sane man would have done everything he did, only to end up here, on his back in the rubble of a house he'd barely been allowed to live in, talking to a statue.

He stood and dusted himself off. He looked at the Defender. "This is your plan," he told it before starting to make his way over the rubble. "It has to be, even if I don't understand why you need to make it so complicated, because the alternative is that I'm cursed, and I refuse to accept that."

There was a reason. There had to be. Something had caused Tristan to act so out of character. Not the virus, but something else, something bigger, more powerful. The Defender was causing it, and Alex had to believe that it was so they'd go back to Samalia, bring the Defender back where he belonged, and Tristan would be cured, or fixed. He'd go back to being himself. The alternative was... He wouldn't think of it.

Belief gave power, and he refused to believe in *that* possibility.

"You know," he told the statue as he walked away from the house, "you could just have said you needed to go back to Samalia. We'd have taken you there. Well, I would have. All this manipulating, it's all so... Well it's something Tristan would do, that's for sure."

The ship was fixed.

Twenty-three of the twenty-six cryo chairs were working. The three others were chairs, but there hadn't been any components left locally to fix the cryo system.

He was alone in the ship; even Jacoby had left to make sure the man who would take over for him as portmaster and lawman was up to speed on whatever it was he needed to know. He'd be done with the call before Jacoby came back, then they'd be off.

He verified that the security programs he'd set up around the communication node were intact, then connected to it. It was a merc node, so it should be secure. But Alex no longer left anything to other people's measures.

Will was the first one to join in, his connection accompanied by a flutter of programs, which told him Asyr was there, doing her own checks.

"How are the preparations coming along?" he asked, not bothering Asyr.

"Done. No crew."

Alex nodded, then spoke since it was voice only, and he made himself sound disappointed. "We'll still make it work. Muscle's easy to find."

"Not—" Will stopped.

Alex waited.

"Not worried."

"Good."

"Do you have any idea how much some people would pay to know how to access this place?" a new voice asked.

"You'd be dead long before you could spend that money, Victor. Mercs don't like one of their own talking to the Law."

"I'm not a merc," he replied. "I'm just helping you out. Who else is here?"

Will stayed silent, and the programs around him were forming a lattice. Asyr was listening in, and she was getting ready to pull him out if this turned bad. He sent her a message letting her know who Victor was and how he was invested in this. He couldn't have her paranoia ruin this meeting.

"So," another voice started, a woman this time. "Who's this merry crew you put together?" Miranda sounded annoyed, but then she'd sounded the same when he'd first talked to her. The universe hadn't been kind to her recently, and she was taking it out on everyone. And she wondered why no one would hire her.

"Miranda, glad you could join us," Alex said.

"Like I have anything else to do. Let's just do this so I can get paid."

"Okay, you each know the mission, but I want us to talk it over as a group to work out whatever kinks there are. This is a rescue. Tristan has been kidnapped by the Sayatoga—"

"He's their prisoner," Victor said, "so it isn't really a kidnapping."

"Vic," Alex warned, "you'd better get on the same file here. If you think I was nasty the last time we met, you have no idea what I'm capable of."

"Oh, I have a good idea; I read the list of the dead. But I get your point. Your job, your language. Tristan was kidnapped."

"Miranda is getting us in. She has had dealings with the prison ship before. She's familiar with their methods and knows how to contact them through proper channels."

"She's going to need a criminal to justify contacting them," Victor said.

"That's me. Crimson is a known partner of Tristan, and just for that, I'm wanted. But I also have my own list of crimes: murder, extortions, even kidnapping a child."

"Wasn't that wiped when it was revealed that SpaceGov official was behind it?" Miranda asked.

"They removed Tristan, since he was in prison then, but they kept me on it. Actually,

I'm surprised you weren't part of that, considering the bounty on our heads at the time."

"Oh, I would have been, but I was in transit. By the time I woke up I was too far to get involved, for which you should count yourself lucky. The bounty I was chasing paid well enough, so I didn't hurt too much for missing out, and since there was nothing there ultimately, I was better off."

"This brings up a question for me," Victor said. "How is it that you're an accomplice to Tristan? Doesn't the entirety of your career at his side take place while he's officially incarcerated?"

"Don't ask me how it is; SpaceGov Law makes no sense. You're the one with the first-hand experience."

"Okay, then how is it all those crimes are on the boards? You're a coercionist. Shouldn't you have cleaned up your record?"

"The stuff I don't want anyone to know about has been removed. The rest is there because I'm a merc, and if you ever find one without a record, it's because he hasn't done his first job yet. Any more questions?"

Silence.

"Good. Victor knows the Law. On top of being one of our muscles, he'll make sure everything is in order for my capture to be legit. Unlike Tristan, I'm not quite valuable enough they'll just let Miranda land and hand me off."

"I wouldn't normally even bother with someone like him," Miranda said. "Not enough money in it to justify the energy."

"You've gone after a lot of high-value criminals?" Victor asked.

"Yes."

"Like who?"

"Victor, we don't have time for—"

"Tristan."

"Excuse me?"

Alex sighed and spoke before Miranda could. He didn't feel like listening to her recount that capture. "As far as I know, Miranda's the only bounty hunter who's managed to capture Tristan by herself."

"I had a partner, but he was just a decoy."

"Victor," Alex said, "if you want to know more about her career, just read her files on the merc boards. You'll have an easy enough time accessing them after this mission. Or exchange comm nodes and pursue this in private. Right now, I want to finish the introductions so we can work out details. The last one here is Will. He's our locksmith. He's going to be opening the doors for us on the Sayatoga."

"Hi."

"How good of a locksmith are you?" Miranda asked.

"Good."

"Can you be a little clearer on that?" she asked, annoyed. "How about telling us the best lock you broke?"

"Never looked."

She gave a sigh of exasperation. "Alex, that's—"

"Miranda," he cut her off. "I'm among the best coercionists alive. Check my Luminex employment if you want proof. Will has opened locks I told to stay locked. I don't care how good a lock is or isn't. If I tell it to stay shut, nothing short of going in and exchanging the processor is going to open it. He had it open under thirty seconds."

Will chuckled.

"Oh, you can laugh now, but I was ready to space you that day. I wanted to be left alone."

"I know."

"I'm going to admit, this isn't something I've done before," Victor said, "but the four of

us seem like a small group to take on one of the most secure prison in the universe.”

“There’s two more: our pilot and medic.”

“Bring woman,” Will said. “Muscle.”

“That makes three, then,” Alex said.

“Where are those two?” Miranda asked.

“He’s handling business before we leave,” Alex answered. “She doesn’t currently have access to a comm.”

“Seven still seems like a low number,” Victor said, sounding worried.

“This is an infiltration, not an assault, but I understand your concern. To be honest, I was hoping Will would be able to bring his entire crew with him.”

“Captain said no,” Will said.

“So we’re going to have to hire some muscle before the job. As it is, we have time, so I’ll put feelers out. So we go in, find Tristan, rescue him, and we leave. No sightseeing, no shopping, and as little casualties as possible. I don’t want to give the Sayatoga an excuse to chase us any harder than they already will be.”

“They have striker and tracker ships,” Miranda said. “Can you handle them?”

“I’ve run the specs of Tr—my ship against them. So long as we get out before they launch, they won’t be able to keep up. And by then I’ll be able to play in their systems to add to their troubles.”

“What condition can we expect Tristan to be in?” Victor asked.

“Pissed,” Alex replied. “The odds are good we’ll be meeting up with a destroyed ship, and then the mission will be figuring out where he’s gone to. At which point you’ll all get paid and I’ll continue on my own.”

“Alex,” Victor started.

“The people who agreed to do this for pay will get it then. Calm down, Victor. I’m not going to force-feed you money if you don’t want it.”

“You’re not doing this for pay?” Miranda asked in disbelief.

“Private node, you two,” Alex said before Victor could go into his reasons. “Are there any concerns about the job? Are there any details we need to clean up?” When no one spoke, he continued. “The meeting point is Mobius Station. How are you for getting there?”

“I’ve been ready since that first time you talked to me,” Miranda snarled. “If you’d told me then where it was, I’d be there already.”

Which was why he hadn’t. He didn’t want to give the merc time to plan anything with the locals.

“I’m good to go,” Victor said. “I have enough vacation time accumulated I can be gone a subjective year, and the people at the precinct threw me a party like I was retiring. They’re hoping that whatever I’ll do during my vacation will interest me more than coming back. I do question meeting up on a tourist spot. There have to be better places. Like a merc station?”

“Why are you bringing him on again?” Miranda asked.

“Victor, I have my reasons for why there. You’ll see once we’re all together. You have transport?”

“Yes, I bought myself a small ship like you recommended.”

“Will?”

“Need time.”

“Don’t worry about that. I’m taking your issues into account in the plan.”

“I guess the only question is, how are we going to know each other?” Miranda asked. “I haven’t and won’t be exchanging 3Ds with anyone.”

“Look for ‘Katherine’s Folly’. That’ll be my ship.”

“Does the name have anything to do with the Katherine who was after you and Tristan?” Victor asked.

“How do you— Never mind, you can tell me once we’re at the meeting point. I’ll see you all there.” He watched them leave until it was only him and the programs still hanging about.

“Asyr,” he said, “how is—” Alex shut up. As much as he wanted, he couldn’t tell her about Golly. “Is everything on the ship going well?”

“As well as can be expected, considering some of the troublemakers we have.”

“You stay on top of things there and I’ll send Will back as soon as I can.”

“Can do. You be careful.”

“Not really my habit.” He withdrew from the node, made sure his programs were still in order, and found those Golly had corrupted. *Real subtle*, he thought. He dismantled those programs, making sure there was nothing left of the code before backtracking his own connection and erasing it.

He leaned back in the seat, rubbing his face. Other than this taking longer than he’d expected, it had gone well. Victor hadn’t complained about working with criminals. Now, all that was left was for him to hope everyone would play the roles he’d assigned them.

“So, I’m just the pilot?”

Alex looked over his shoulder. Jacoby was in the cockpit’s doorway. “Someone has to stay with the ship. We need it ready to go the moment we’re back.”

“One of them isn’t bringing his crew, so how are you compensating? You said something about Mobius—are you getting mercs there?”

“It’s the plan. Muscle’s easy to get.”

“You know, some of the kids in town could—”

“No.”

“Alex, they aren’t bad.”

Alex was on his feet. “Are you really telling me you want to drag kids into this? Kids who have a chance at a regular life? I didn’t think you were that vicious.”

“They wouldn’t be dragged in. They want to help, and before you say anything, they do know Tech. They weren’t raised on stories.”

“You say that like it means anything. ‘They know Tech.’ Well, they don’t know Tristan, and that’s who they’re going to meet there.”

“I don’t think you’re giving him enough credit, or them. They’re not going to care what he’s like out there. He’s their friend. You’ll see. Once he’s back here, he’ll go back to being the same guy he’s always been.”

There were so many wrong assumptions in there Alex didn’t know where to start. Coming back here? Going back to being his old self? He couldn’t believe just how thoroughly Tristan had them all fooled. Well, it wasn’t his job to disabuse them of that. Jacoby would find out soon enough, and he could pass the message along.

“I don’t care. They’re still not coming. I’m not going on the Sayatoga with a bunch of untrained kids. I’m not explaining to their families why they died.”

“How much muscle are you thinking of hiring?”

“I don’t know, but as few as I can. I want this to be a small team.”

Jacoby rolled his eyes. “It’s your job, you handle it the way you want, but if it was me going after someone I love, I’d bring so much firepower I’d leave nothing in my wake. Give the next corporation something to think about, should they consider trying it, too.” He turned and headed for the ramp.

“I know what I’m doing!” Alex yelled after him. He had his plan and it would work, so long as everyone played their part.

“I don’t doubt that,” Jacoby replied, grabbing the large pack he’d left by the ramp. “I’m ready to go.”

Alex touched his ear and realized he’d forgotten a detail. Fortunately, Jacoby didn’t know any coercing had been involved in the meeting; he’d just heard Alex talk. He was going to have to be careful until he reached Mobius and got himself a new earpiece.

He looked around. "Let's do a search for stowaways, then we'll get going."