

“No one panic,” Alex muttered as he and six of the best rebel thugs stood in the port’s employee antechamber, being scanned. Like the others, he wore dirty maintenance overalls. Unlike them, he didn’t fidget as the information the scanners compiled was compared with what the port’s employee database had. But unlike them, he knew the work that he and Bernie had put in to insert their fabricated identities within the roster so they could enter and move about almost as they wanted. The men and women with him only had his and Bernie’s words that it had gone well. They didn’t know him, and seemed to share the general belief that aliens weren’t that good at anything they did. So they worried and fidgeted.

Alex had wanted to do this with only him and Tristan. The two of them could get in, neutralize whoever guarded the shuttle they were after, and then they could pickup anyone needed for the job. Unfortunately, this was a situation where Tristan’s unique appearance meant anyone would notice him. Outside, that meant little. He was just one of the rare aliens on the planet, noticed, but quickly dismissed. At the spaceport, anyone seeing him as part of the maintenance crew would question how it was they’d never seen him before.

Alex could insert an entire history of Tristan having been part of the port’s crew. What he couldn’t do was have people remember working with him. Even claiming he was new hire didn’t work this time with Karliak’s hold on who came and went. All it would take was one person speaking with those who handled the hiring, and Tristan’s claim would be torn apart.

It was one of the problem with planets on the outskirts of SpaceGov. Not enough of anything to get lost in. It could serve their purpose, or, as with now, work against them.

With a buzz, the door opened and let them in. An officer on the other side stood in their way. “Permit?”

Alex produced a data chip. It contained the information, and the woman would check it against what they had on file, which Alex had added himself there the day before. Nothing about it pointed to their target, since the Karliak shuttle didn’t get worked on by crews not approved by the corporation, and getting into those systems would need the kind of time that the rebels didn’t have.

Or at least, that was what he’d told Kaleb and the other leaders when he and Tristan laid down the plan they’d agreed to. Their employer had been appropriately pissed at finding out Kaleb had out-paid him for their services and was being locked out of the job. He’d stormed out, with Krystal hurrying after him, promising Kaleb they were going to talk as soon as she was back from making sure he hadn’t made them all a new enemy.

Whatever that conversation had been, Kaleb had started this job on a pleased foot, going with Tristan and the rest of the crew to hunker down just outside the city.

“All looks in order.” Had that been someone sighing in relief? If it was, fortunately, she hadn’t noticed. “You know where you’re going?”

“Hangar Kilo Epsilon 34,” he replied in a bored tone, taking the chip back. “Other side of the port, passed the crew eatery and recreation, then it’s—”

“Okay, you know the layout.” She stepped out of their way

He should, he’d spent the previous evening memorizing it and, with Tristan’s help, getting used to using local idioms for the markers on the way there. Their actual target was the berth next to it.

Alex listened to the system for any indication something was off. The port system’s voice was bored, as it had been when Alex and Bernie had coerced it. It wasn’t used to intrusion and its antibodies were negligible. But that didn’t mean someone doing a check might not notice something and undo enough of the work to cause his team problems.

They reached their berth, and the door opened. The crew working on the shuttle looked up. “What do you need?” the crew chief asked without stopping the work he was doing.

“Subdue them,” Alex ordered, rushing to the closest computer. “No killing.”

Why there was a crew working here would be human error, since the system had him and his crew as the only one working it today. He slipped in and used the authority he gave himself to ensure the sensors in the berth registered nothing out of the ordinary while the fighting was quickly over. Then he checked the logs. The hangar’s access was noted. The lack of authorization request meant they were pre-approved.

“I thought you said there wouldn’t be anyone here.” Defiance in his voice. While they’d accepted

Alex would work with them, and lead this part of the job, few had forgiven him for defending himself when challenged.

“And there isn’t, as far as the system logged. They either own or work for the owner and arranged to have access whenever they want. Learn to adapt, because nothing is going to go according to plan. It never does.”

“I have the part of the wall your partner said to use,” a woman called.

“Then set the charge,” Alex replied, not keeping his annoyance out of his voice. They were supposed to know how the job went. They shouldn’t need him to tell them the way every line of code went.

There had been doubt about sneaking explosives through the security scans. Which was why they hadn’t. Tristan had taken portable maintenance welders and modified them so that they would unleash all their power as quickly as the components permitted once he altered the moderators. They’d register as normal to the scans, but once installed against the thinnest part of the wall separating the hangars and turned on...

The light was so bright that, even looking away, Alex was left with spots in his vision.

“It’s still—” the woman started to say, but the man who’d challenged Alex moved her out of the way and planted a foot, sending the wall into the other hangar, then he was through and Alex joined them. The fighting was less one sided. Corporations employed highly qualified people, and that often meant they weren’t as specialized as the crew in the other hangar.

Alex was on the computer. “Don’t argue with me,” he told it as the extra program Karliak had on every part of this hangar tried to tell the system something was going on. As with everything relating to the corporation, Alex hadn’t been able to coerce them ahead of time. The antibodies and corporate coercionists that monitored them would have undone his and Bernie’s work well before they were here. Fortunately, they were isolated programs, so they didn’t have backup, and no one would notice his work until the next check, in slightly over fourteen hours.

The programs appeased, Alex stepped away from the computer to look over the subdued crew. Two were still fighting, but looked about—

The flash of a gunshot and one of Alex’s crew fell, screaming in pain, clutching his side. Alex reach the armed tech before he could let out a second shot, had him disarmed, arm broken and on the ground before anyone else reacted.

“We don’t have the time,” Alex told his people as they started fussing over the injured man. “It’s a laser burn, so he’s not going to bleed out. You can see to him once you’ve secured these people.”

“It’s not going to take long to patch him up,” someone said.

“And you can do that after you’ve made sure no one else is armed and that they are secured,” he ordered. “Unless you want to make the job fail, you focus on that first and the rest when we have time. Whichever of you is the pilot. Come with me. You need to get familiar with the shuttle while I made sure the station isn’t going to shoot us down before we reach it.”

“If he’s so good,” someone muttered, “how come he couldn’t do that before we got here? Or just get them to accept any shuttle we’d take.”

Time had been the reason he’d given Kaleb, which had only been an exaggeration to keep the man from losing his nerve and bowing out of the job at the last moment. Given a day or two at the most, Alex could have gotten them a window large enough to fly to the station from anywhere on the planet, but he’d have to monitor the situation the entire time.

This meant their window would be stable.

“This looks standard,” the pilot said as she took her place.

Alex sat at the comm station. “Don’t take anything for granted. The life of the crew will depend on your abilities.” He established contact with the station.

“Can you be any more stress inducing?” she muttered.

“I want to survive the journey to picking up the rest of our people.” At which point Tristan would take over piloting duties and he wouldn’t have to worry about that part anymore. “Take to me,” he told the station’s computer.

The detail that made coercing the station from this shuttle was that as an official Karliak transport,

it had a constant, already encrypted with Karliak cyphers, connection. Which meant he'd already bypassed the best of the security it had to offer.

"Welcome," the station replied politely. "You are not a recognized operator. Please disconnect."

Alex smiled. "I don't think so."

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"Port," Alex said, "this is Alghany, awaiting approval for departure."

"Alghany," the reply came. "I haven't been informed you were scheduled to fly today."

And this was why Alex preferred fully automated system. No people to wonder what they were up to. "I can't speak to that, but the plan was filed three days ago." At least it was what he'd see when he checked the records.

"I wonder how I missed it," the man muttered. "Initiating departure checks, acknowledge the port has control of your shuttle."

The pilot gave a thumbs up.

"You do," Alex replied. Then the shuttle shuddered.

"Systems are engaging," the pilot commented in a tone that spoke of experience. "Port run checks show green. Which, you know, since we didn't actually look over the work that was being done, is a good thing."

The ceiling opened, revealing the inner port travel lane, which would take them to the departure bay. Alex had a sense this had been built around the designs of a space station. He'd been through more than one that automated the berthing of the ships in such a way.

"Alghany, be ready to assume control," the voice came as they entered an open bay, letting in the dust storm.

"How is anyone supposed to fly through that?" someone asked from behind.

"Scanners," the pilot replied. "I'm good for control."

"We're ready," Alex told the port. He couldn't tell when the ship was released, other than by how its computer sounded. Then they rose above the port and flew away at the lowest approved elevation arch. "Be ready," he told the pilot as they approached the rendez-vous point. "Now."

The ship shook hard, then stabilized, heading for the ground

"Port," Alex called. "This is Alghany. Be advised that something big impacted me and I have a handful of warnings. I'm putting down to make sure the hull hasn't been breached."

"I'm reading the warnings," a different voice replied, receiving what Alex's programs were sending them. "You aren't that far. I advise returning to the port for your check."

"I appreciate it, but dealing with your automated systems in and out will delay me too much. It'll just be a few minutes to do a visual check."

"It's your skin that's going to get sanded, Alghany. I'll monitor. Let me know if you need me to send a rescue."

"I'll keep that in mind. Alghany out."

"Approaching landing point," the pilot said.

"Get ready to open the hatch," Alex called to those in the back. "We have three minutes before the statistical system notice."

The landing was smoother than Alex expected under these conditions. Then sand and wind filled the shuttle, and he was coughing and his eyes stung even after closing them. Weren't these things equip with a force field to keep the storm out.

"Out," Tristan said after the wind died down, sounding angry, as something was put in Alex's hand. Goggles, by the feel. He put them on, then lights flashed and warmed spread, taking the stinging away. When the lights faded off, he risked opening his eyes, and all the sand that had flown in them was gone.

Tristan was in the pilot's seat, the hood of his overcoat down, and his fur with a dusty coating in spite of what was supposed to be a dust proof piece of clothing. Tristan glanced at him, the dark fur outlining where his mask had been worn.

"We're never coming back here," the Samalian stated. "I have particulates down to the root of my fur again."

"I'll help wash it off," Alex replied.

"Status?" Tristan said, looking over the screens.

"The station's system expects us. We've been scheduled to return the inspector after his visit to the latest seismic controller array. It's routine, so there shouldn't be any trouble."

"Every check your weapons," Tristan called as the sand and light thinned outside.

"He just said there won't be any trouble," Kaleb said. "So why the fuss?"

"So you can stay alive when security descends on us right after landing."

"You just said there won't be trouble," the man repeated in the tone of someone who didn't like to be contradicted.

"I said shouldn't, not won't. And the number of times thing didn't go as they should outweigh those that did. If you only plan for things to go well, first plan for what you want done with your dead body."

They were in the darkness of space, with the dot that was the station, growing quickly.

Tristan nodded.

"Station, this is Alghany returning, be advise we are ahead of schedule by two minutes."

"Acknowledged, Alghany," came a synthesized voice. "Bay two-eight-three is ready to receive you."

"Thank you, station." Alex disconnected and send the details to Tristan.

"That's on the opposite side of where we need to go," Kaleb commented once Tristan brought the schematic up. "Couldn't you get us something closer?"

"The inspector isn't some high ranking corporate officer. The more out of place he's able to dock, the more attention he's going to draw. Attention we never want."

"With him around, aren't you always getting attention?"

"I can blend in," Tristan said, which caused confused conversation from the back.

Fifteen people back there, for a job that would have been ideal with half that. All because Kaleb wanted them, and since he and Tristan 'worked' for him, couldn't protest past pointing out this had better chances of success through stealth rather than brute force. The man wanted to be certain this would succeed, so he'd wanted as many people as the shuttle would accommodate and his co-leader would approve. They'd approved fourteen, but Kaleb had paid for an extra, the biggest and toughest looking man the rebels had to offer, to act as his bodyguard throughout the mission.

But that would be Tristan's problem when the time came.