

How?

Alex looked through the window next to the door, which should have showed him the waiting area for the target's office. Instead, he looked out onto the black of space, with a shrinking dot that would be the office ejected from the station.

The frustrating part was that his implant heard every system that composed the office as if they were still before him, instead of getting away from them.

"Tell me what the fuck is going on," he told the notification panel and he got under the overlay.

"I'm afraid I don't understand the query," the station replied in its ever calm tone.

"Where the fuck is Magory Teritan."

"The lady Teritan is currently in her office. A scan shows you are standing next to it."

"And there's nothing there." He wanted to tear down the code, but notification panels didn't come with much in the way of active processing. It was a good thing he had control of the station still. Which reminded him.

A query to the programs he had floating confirmed that as many people had been contacted through the local comms, no one had thought to tell the coercionist to look over the system.

"I'm afraid you need to have a medical specialist run a diagnostic of your ocular sensors. The closest one to your location is—"

"Quiet," he ordered. He couldn't tear down code, but he could look through them and get the answer for himself.

Only, this wasn't the system lying to him. Every monitoring program that had a connection to the office behaved as if they were receiving data. Some could be broadcasted, and he'd need to analyze what the program said to determine that, but others, such as the power consumption, should have ceased as soon as the office had been launched. He was familiar enough to tell what he was looking at wasn't a looped data feed mimicking the results. Every system believed the office was still connected to the station.

In fact, he saw nothing that indicated it could be launched.

That meant it was a purely physical system. The clamped would be controlled from inside the office, then either single use detonation had pushed it out, to wait for pickup, or, more likely, considering the position within Karliak she occupied. A fully operational thruster system so she could pilot the office to safety. Either would explain the shaking he'd felt on the way, and meant there was no getting to her.

An angry palm against the panel didn't result in a cracked display.

"She's gone," he snarled, turning and joining in the firing most of the others engaged in against the guards who had made it to their locations. "How come you didn't tell us her office had been designed as an escape pod?" he demanded. "This wasn't the right set up if she always had the option of just ditching the station."

Not that she'd have known they were coming if Kaleb had kept his mouth shut like he'd been instructed to. Alex hated working with amateurs. Especially when they thought they were in charge. If not for Tristan's need to maintain an illusion of working with and for the rebels, Alex would happily slice Kaleb's throat open right now, and anyone's who had a problem with it.

"I didn't know okay," the businessman replied from where he was curled up behind the section of wall the thug who was watching over him had pulled as their part of the barricade. "It's not like I was in charge of getting the information. Blame Bernie for this."

Only Kaleb had been the one to tell them he had everything ready when he offered the schematics of the station, including the alteration that had been made to this part when the Karliak representative had taken residency. Tristan had looked them over, and if there had been a hint of the escape pod, he would have told Alex. That meant Kaleb had never verified the information. If this had been a real job, Alex would have gone over Bernie's work, but the need to maintain the urgency and the fact capturing the representative wasn't the job meant he hadn't bothered. And it meant—

"This isn't important, Alex," Tristan stated. Firing to keep the guards down.

"You're fucking right. It's not important anymore," Kaleb snapped. "If you've screwed up the mission, you need to get me out of here."

Alex looked at Tristan, whose ears twitch in the negative.

"Fine," he grumbled. Considering the mess this had turned into, one of the guard was bound to get

a shot in and take out Kaleb for them. “Tristan, you studied the station. Get us back to the hangar.” This was the best way to shift the authority to the one who should be in charge.

“We can’t go the way we came,” Tristan said. “Form around me and Kaleb. You stay behind me. Alex, time frame?”

“Their coercionist wasn’t in the system as of my last check. The antibodies are still over an hour before they’ll undo enough of my work, we’ll be in trouble.”

“Take the rear. There’s a maintenance hatch three intersection that way. It’s our target.”

Tristan moved, with Kaleb keeping his thug between him and the Samalian and ordering three of the rebels close to him. And stray shot would have to go through them to kill Kaleb.

“I really hate that guy,” Alex grumbled, firing at the guards, who poked around their protective corner as he followed the group.

“You and me both,” someone replied in an angry mutter behind him.

They backed enough the guard couldn’t easily fire, so Alex turned and hurried to rejoin the others, one of the rebels at his side.

“What are our chances we’re making out of this alive?” the man asked.

“They’d be a lot higher without him mixed in.” He grabbed the man and pulled him aside, shooting the person who stepped out of a doorway in the cross corridor.

“Was that a guard?”

“It was an enemy,” Alex replied.

Tristan had the hatch opened.

“I’m not going in there!” Kaleb protested as the rebels entered. “It’s cramped.”

If Tristan was going in, considering how he felt about small spaces, Alex was going to make sure that man went in to, even it meant cutting him in pieces and throwing them inside the hatch.

“Whine, whine, whine,” Alex’s companion whispered. “It’s like he thought this was going to be like sitting behind his desk and drinking all day.”

“Be such a shame if a guy like that had an accident,” Alex said, chuckling and keeping guard. “He always that bitchy?”

“Only when someone isn’t doing exactly what he wants. I don’t care that we’re living in the resort he was building, or that it’s because of his ashans we were able to get our hands on what we have. That doesn’t make him the boss of everyone there.”

“Ashans,” Alex said, gunning down a guard. “Those are credits, right?” Why couldn’t SpaceGov enforce calling them that, the way they enforced just about everything else?

“Alex,” Tristan called, and a glance showed Kaleb’s back being pushed into the hatch.

“Go, I have your back. Do see to it our esteem employer doesn’t break his neck going down the ladder.”

“Does he get sarcasm?” his companion asked. “Not being human and all that.”

“Oh, he that gets I’d rather see Kaleb dead than onto our escape shuttle.” He stepped back. “But he’s the one in charge, so things happen how he decides they do.”

“I thought he worked for you.” The man shot the guard twice, missing the first shot because of where he was aiming, and the second hitting the knee and taking him down. Alex shot him in the head as he raised it, along with his gun.

“That’s for Kaleb’s sensitive nature. Tristan’s in charge because he’s the master at pulling all kinds of jobs.”

“Kaleb might make getting out of here impossible.” He sounded and looked like he’d be sick, so Alex pushed him back toward the hatch.

“He can pull off those, too. Down you go. But I really think the universe should give us a hand and take him out of the equations. It kind of owes us too.”

“I’m in,” the man said. Alex gave him a few seconds to move further in, then backed in, closing the hatch and used the bar Tristan had left next to the door to weld it shut. It wouldn’t hold for long, but it only had to last until they were out.

What he heard from the system did not make him happen. It sounded like someone had finally placed a call to the coercionist. His programs were putting up a good fight, but he was losing contact with

them. They were designed to keep the antibodies at bay, not deal with human creativity. He needed to get in there if he wanted to keep control, but he didn't have the time.

Four levels down, and they were progressing.

"The hangar is above us, idiot!" Kaleb yelled. In a confined space, with access hatches within sight in both directions, and who knew who, close enough on the other side to hear. Surely this was enough to justify killing him and not have anyone complain? Other, maybe, then the thug who seemed to like the man? Were they lovers? There was no accounting for taste if they were.

"Someone's never work in these," Alex's companion said. "Did maintenance in factories processing sea water. It's a lot like this. Maintenance conduits go everywhere, which means they go under the hangar."

Alex was impressed. He'd expected none of them realized where they were.

"Tristan," he said in a casual tone between Kaleb's ranting. "The coercionist is in the system. I'm losing programs. We're down to minutes before the station is theirs again." Then he whispered, "We'll be fine," to his companion, who looked scared.

He and Tristan would be. Alex had no doubt of that, and considering the job's parameter, most of the rebels should be too. But that would depend on their capabilities.

But they'd mostly impressed Alex so far.

"I wish I could see the back of his head," his companion grumbled as Kaleb's complaining droned on.

"You don't want to do it here," Alex said, glancing over his shoulder to confirm no one was heading down yet. "Too many witnesses."

"I doubt any of them would complain."

Alex chuckled. "Big and ugly might. Those two fuck?"

The look of horror his companion gave him was answer enough.

"Figured that's what it'd take for anyone to see to Kaleb's safety this hard. And not be paid to do it, I mean," he added.

"Spence takes any job he's given seriously."

"That's good." Alex locked eyes with his companion. "Unless that means he'd going to be against you."

"We're all on the same side," his companion replied confidently.

For now. He looked ahead in and Tristan was looking at him, ears forward. He waited. He had no doubt he'd heard the exchange, probably enough of the rest to get a sense of the sentiments being expressed. The Samalian turned forward without even a flick of the ears.

"That didn't look promising," his companion said.

"It's fine. It's not like we're planning a mutiny, right?"

"Against him? I'd be scared he'd tear me apart before I'd reach for a gun."

"It's good for you to be aware of what your target is capable of."

"Yeah, well, I'm not one to make waves, anyway."

Keep telling yourself that.

He'd lost enough program by the time Tristan called a halt. He could hear the antibodies working.

"As soon as I open this, make a line for the ship," Tristan said, his voice only loud enough to carry to the back. "If you see a breathing mask, take it unless you are certain you have one on the ship."

"What are you talking about?" Kaleb demanded, his voice quieter than ever.

"Think of it as preparing for the unexpected," Tristan replied. "Always something you want to do on a job."

He couldn't be serious. There was only one reason to make sure everyone had their breather. Alex sighed. He shouldn't be surprised. This whole thing had gone well enough, all things considered. Tristan would still want some excitement. He shook his head at his companion's questioning look.

Tristan pushed the hatch above him open, and even before he was through, Alex heard the surprised voices, then gunshots.

Kaleb was still in the conduit when Alex and his companion reached the hatch, looking scare with thug at his size. Too bad. This would have been a great way to claim Kaleb had just run off in fright, never

to be seen again. Alex doubted his companion would object.

He pulled himself up and rolled to the side, taking out his gun. Three guards were down, the prisoners were cowering in a corner, the shuttle they'd been kept in now open. The rebels were running to their ship.

"We could tell him it's the end of the world up here," his companion said.

Tristan was looking at them.

"Too quiet for even him to believe it. It's secure," he called in, then grabbed his companion's arm before he ran off. "We're his protection detail. He'd be the employer. Are you going to need a breather?"

"It's hooked in the ship."

Alex looked around. "Get those two for Kaleb and Spence." Then the four of them headed for the ship.

"Strap in," Alex told everyone as he headed for the cockpit.

"The hangar doors?" Tristan asked.

Alex made contact with the station, staying hidden and looking at what was left of his code. "The commands I hid are still intact, but with their coercionist in the system and the antibodies to help him, the moment I open them, they'll be on it to close them."

Tristan grinned at him. "So it's going to be tight?"

"We're talking nano seconds."

"Good." The ship lurched forward hard enough Alex was pushed in his seat, looking at the closed door approaching, waiting for the right time, while Kaleb was screaming like they were about to splash against a wall.

If he didn't shut up, Alex might let that happen just for the silence that would follow