

The stage shimmered as projectors come active.

“So to start with,” Alex said, and an overview of Dadelus formed over him. The fidelity was good enough I recognized the building that housed Simahess Hospital from my research. Only a few sections of the projection weren’t as well defined, areas with damaged or otherwise inoperative projectors. Ships flew over the city. “This is live; from atmospheric monitoring satellites. Art’s removed the storm so we can see what’s there. As you can see, Karliak’s done pretending Arjolis is an independent world. They have attack ships like this over every large population center.”

“They can’t do that!” someone yelled as he reached for one of the ship.

“You’re right,” Alex replied. “SpaceGov has rules in place as to what corporations can and can’t do. Claim authority over a planet is firmly in the ‘do not do’ section.” He grabbed the nose and tail of the ship and pulled, enlarging it until enough details were visible I could identify it. “What are we dealing with?”

“A Fredoni hunter,” I replied. “The design marks it as at least a century, objective, old. They stopped putting those extensions then. It could be as old as five centuries. But it’s still a threat,” I added as people talked as if this meant they could be ignored. “They lasted that long without a significant redesign because Elotris had come up with an effective one. Unless Karliak didn’t bother maintaining them, one of those can track one specific person within a crowd and take them out with ease.”

“Why use something that’s made to track and kill one person?” Eastyn asked. “Wouldn’t they do better with something that can wipeout a whole city?”

“It’s ability to target one person doesn’t mean it isn’t capable of bringing a building down. And in this environment, the scanning system needed for that level of precision might give it an advantage in piecing the particulate storm.”

“Might?” Alex asked with a chuckle as he shrunk the ship to its initial size.

“I never considered running tests against such an environment,” I replied. “I also can’t know the exact system they’re using from that projection. Over its entire existence, the design went through seven different scanning arrays, not counting special orders for specific jobs.”

Krystal and Eastyn, along with many in the group, were looking at me with surprise and worry.

“And they aren’t the only ships they have flying,” Alex said.

“Where were they keeping them?” Krystal asked.

“That I can’t tell you. The two likely possibilities are somewhere outside the atmosphere, or in one of the oceans.”

“You said they aren’t allowed to do this,” someone called. “Then how come SpaceGov isn’t stopping them?”

“Because they don’t know what’s happening,” Alex moves the projection to a different part of the city. “Corporations have been defying SpaceGov for just about as long as they’ve had to deal with it. SpaceGov knows that, and they have processes in place to find those instances, but there are a lot more corporations than there is SpaceGov, so it doesn’t happen fast unless someone comes screaming about the injustice. You might have noticed Karliak took control of the net connections. That’s why. They’ll let you do anything, short of something that will alert SpaceGov.”

“You could tell them!” another yelled as Alex settled over a familiar area. A building with a wide open space before it.

“Not what I was hired for,” he replied, zooming in until Zefimor Data Center was clear, then tilts so we saw the front. “And that wasn’t my big news. I just thought you’d like to know how screwed you all are.” He tapped the building, and it expanded to be the only thing with him on the stage.

“That’s where we met,” Ester exclaimed.

“Yep. The place where someone set off an alarm and rendered the it’s usefulness to us absolutely void.” Dots appeared throughout the building.

Some shifting in shape and colors until Tristan worked out they represent the data stacks in rooms. Others were moving. They are all gray, but something about their motions demanded they be divided into two groups. One orderly, the other chaotic. Security and the center’s employees.

“Then, in an attempt to draw Karliak’s attention away from this place, we went to kidnap one of their executive from the station. We failed, but it resulted in something interesting.” He placed a finger

before the building, then slid it to the left.

The gray dots moved in hurried speed, blurring together until he stopped and there were nowhere near as many.

“This is the day after our failed attack on the data center. Security has been increased. You can see the cluster at all access point, others at what would be considered the more vital stacks for the company’s survival. Have value clients and stuff like that.”

“That isn’t as much as when you started,” Ester said. “Which I’m guessing was now?”

“Close enough to count,” he replied. He dragged his finger to the right and another blurring of gray dots happened. When he stopped locations had changes, but the distribution remained the same. “This is an hour before we reached the station.” He tapped the building and this time the change was instant. The numbers of gray dots had doubled. “That’s three hours after the target surprised us by escaping in an emergency pod.”

“I don’t see the relevance,” Krystal said.

“One of their executive was just attacked,” Ester replied.

“And she escaped,” Krystal said.

“Six hours isn’t enough for Karliak to know,” Tristan said. “We were in an abandoned area. There’s no telling where the target landed. Without knowing the specifics of the pod she had access to, knowing how it fared once it entered atmosphere is impossible, but it would need a complete redesign to be able to land at a designated location. It could be aimed at it, but the storm would make maneuvering there impossible.”

“Can’t one of Karliak’s ship have picked her up?” Eastyn asked.

Tristan thought back to the readings on the way to the station and back. “Possible, but unlikely. Arjolis doesn’t currently have much traffic around the station. The few ships I picked up were transiting away from the emergency pod’s start point, and I didn’t pickup the expected emergency tag from it when we left. Someone would have to have seen the ejection burst to know where to head to, then have a sense of its trajectory to intercept.”

“I still don’t understand the relevance to that.”

“Why didn’t Karliak pull the security out of there,” Ester said, “to reinforce what had been attacked? They’re working with a limited pool for their security. Unless they already have a shipment of them in route, it’s years before they can have reinforcement here.”

“They have more in route,” Alex said. “Corporation are acutely aware of how exhaustion causes their people to fail. They will have a rotation in place. But that can’t be altered. They will get here when they get here, regardless of how much sooner they are needed. So Ester’s question remains. Why did they not only not pull whatever personnel they had, but increase the security there?”

“Because the knew going after the executive was a distraction?” Eastyn said.

“Except it wasn’t,” Alex replied. “We had a goal of drawing their attention, but also of getting the code the target had.”

“And why consider a data center more important than one of their executive?” Ester asked.

“More important than seven of them,” Alex corrected, bringing the projection back to the present with a quick slide of the finger to the right. Nearly three times the people were within the building. Enough, even Alex would be pushed.

“What can be in there that’s more important than the people running this place?” Krystal asked.

“That I can’t tell you.”

Eastyn glanced at Tristan, who nodded to the door.

“Along with the increased security inside the center, they have shored up the accesses to the point I can’t listen in. Tristan returned while I was studying how I could go about it, and it sounded like you needed the information, so here it is.”

“And what do you expect us to do about it?” Krystal asked, her tone defeated. “Sacrifice more people? Have you looked around? We hardly have anyone left.”

Eastyn stood, squeezing her shoulder. “Tristan, you and I need to have a talk.” He headed for the door, Krystal hardly reacting to his departure.

“Private,” Tristan said once they were in the lobby. Eastyn led him up stairs into a disused office.

“As private as I can get us unless you have tech.”

“You need to get Krystal to go along with an attack on the data center.”

“I don’t know if—”

“It’s only you and her. There is no third party to break a stalemate, and after what she sees as two failed attempt I was involved in, and twice the barer of news one of her friend had died, she won’t listen to anything I have to bring to the discussion.”

“I don’t think they were—”

“They were friends. It may have been tenuous, but they have been working together against a common enemy for over a year under stressful conditions. If not for how she reacted at the news of both their deaths, I would have expected her to have built an intimate relationship with one of them.”

“Ramon’s gay,” Eastyn said. “Was gay. Kaleb was too much like the government people she used to deal with. All about the deal and the results and not enough about the costs of getting there.”

“The reasons why don’t matter, Eastyn. Only the situation we find ourselves in. The situation is as ideal as it will get. This is possibly the last opportunity I get. The plan has to happen.”

The door slammed open. “And what plan is that, exactly?” Krystal asked, pocketing something.

“Krystal,” Eastyn said, but Tristan already saw the futility in her features. “I was just explaining
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“Don’t bother trying to convince me your ‘employee’ here needed convincing.” She slammed the door shut. “You might think you’ve been discreet with your glances for signals from him, but I spent sixty years managing government leadership. I had to learn to read people or be torn apart.”

She’d also learned to build masks. Tristan had seen none of that anger in her defeated behavior. For her to have known the true relationship between him and Eastyn meant he couldn’t trust any of the reads he’d gotten from her. It was even possible she was playing on Eastyn’s emotions to gain control over him. The item she’d pocketed would be something to listen through the door.

That she had fooled Tristan this long made her a significant threat. He should remove her.

Only her death here would only make the rebels more unstable, and he needed them balanced if he was going to make use of them.

Was he justifying again?

No. Any way he studied the situation, he needed her alive, but siding with him. That meant...

It meant he couldn’t play her.

“I’ve been playing you,” Tristan said, “but not to bring about this destruction.”

“Did you kill Kaleb?”

“No.”

“Ramon?”

“No.”

“Is any of this about taking over? Making him the person in charge?”

“No. Our involvement with your group wasn’t planned, simply an opportunity I couldn’t ignore.”

“An opportunity to do what, exactly?”

“Help Alex.”

“And how the fuck does any of this help him?”

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“Listen up,” Krystal said, stepping into the theater. “We have a plan.” Tristan followed her in, watching for reactions, to see if anyone here had been aware of what she’d pulled. The surprise told him they were all taken aback by her shift in behavior. “Alex, you said you can get in there.”

Alex stepped off the stage, where children were playing with projections of oddly shaped characters. “I was testing the connections, but yes, I can get in.”

“Good, we need to know what’s in there Karliak considers more important than their executives. Without Bernie here, you get to find out for us.”

Alex glanced at Tristan, who nodded. Even with him warning her to expect the behavior, Krystal barely covered her annoyance in time so Alex wouldn’t see it.

Or, more likely, she’d allowed enough to slip through so Tristan would know she still wasn’t happy

about the fact she didn't have actual authority. Still, Tristan had given her a plan that satisfied her needs as well as his. So she was playing the part he needed her to play.

Now, it would just be a question of making sure everyone else did the same.