

Alex had picked this alley because it was close enough, but no one used it; the stores lining each side were boarded up, and the sensor he'd hidden hadn't detected any movement larger than a small pet in the eight days since it had been in place.

At times he'd found himself thinking that Bramolian Six looked to be a place he and Jack might enjoy visiting when they were together again. And then he remembered what he was planning, and doubted he'd ever come back after today.

He checked the chronometer he'd bought the day after he'd arrived. One of the newer models, expensive, but fully programmable with more features than he knew what to do with. The time function told him his hired hands were late.

The vehicle turned into the alley, an unassuming gray hover car with darkened windows that let him see there were two occupants, but not who they were. It moved slowly, to avoid scraping the buildings, as the alley wasn't much larger than it.

It stopped a dozen feet away, and Alex waited, hand on the blaster at his hip. The door opened partially and almost hit the wall. A young man in a pink shirt, red pants, and slicked-back green hair squeezed out.

"Hey, Boss," he said. "Sorry for being late. They closed the Ulserson Bridge, and I didn't want to attract attention by flying over it."

Alex nodded. "Flint." He indicated the other occupant. "How about she gets out too."

"Don't you trust us? You're paying us, after all."

Alex smiled. "I'd like to make sure I'm still paying the same people I hired. Changes in the middle of a job tend to forecast trouble."

The young man leaned in the vehicle. "Come on, Liz, the boss wants to see your pretty face."

The other door opened, bouncing on the permacrete wall, making Flint wince. A woman close to his age stood, thin-framed but not skinny, and bright red hair Alex thought might be dyed. Her shirt was iridescent black and tight, making her breasts more pronounced.

"Is it in place?" Alex asked.

"Yep. When we get the signal, half the city'll go dark," Flint answered. "But I have to say this. I'd prefer you pay us the rest of the money now, because you're not coming back. The Law here doesn't kid about, not like it does in space."

"I wouldn't worry about it. Just be here when I get back, and you'll get another ten-thousand each."

"Buddy," Liz said. "How do we even know you're going to pay us? For all we know, you're going to leave us for the Law to catch."

"That isn't how I work."

"So you say," she replied. "We don't know you."

"But you took my money, so you agreed to work for me until the job's over."

Alex hadn't wanted to hire anyone for the job, especially locals he didn't know, but he didn't have the contacts needed to get what had been needed. He hadn't been at this long enough to build a database of people.

"Liz," Flint said. "Don't worry about it, we already got ten each. That's plenty for what we did. Even with him dead, we're still ahead."

She ignored him. "You at least have the rest of the money? I don't intend on getting scammed."

Alex patted his left pocket. "Right here."

"Show me."

Alex rolled his eyes and pulled out the two cred sticks. "Happy?"

"Can I make sure they're filled?"

"No, we've wasted enough time already." He pocketed them. "You two sit here. Trigger the bomb when you get the signal, and you can do anything you want with the sticks when I get back." He turned to leave, but stopped. He took off the belt with the gun and handed that to Flint. "I can't really show up to a Law station armed. Take care of this for me." He took out the one at the small of his back, a smaller model, eyed Flint's filled hands, then tossed it to Liz. "Hopefully this won't be too long. Sit tight."

He hoped they wouldn't cause him any troubles. They'd come well recommended by the few mercs he'd talked with. Resourceful and dependable, when there was enough money involved. Of course, a love of money could bring its own set of problems, but hopefully Alex had paid them enough to ensure they wouldn't try to double-cross him. If they did, he'd deal with that too.

The Law station was an unassuming building three blocks away, with marked cars coming and going from the roof parking. Like he'd done for the previous eight days, he put on the glasses before entering and went to the reception desk.

"Yes, what's your complaint?" the harried man behind the counter asked.

Alex smiled. "No complaints. I'm Harold Stingsky. I have an appointment with Inspector Victor Barstone." The previous days he'd gone directly to the waiting area and sat.

"I'll let him know you're here. Just grab a seat."

As he walked to one of the chairs, there was a flash of light. No one reacted to it, because unless they wore the same types of glasses he did, they hadn't seen it. Seconds began rolling forward in the top left of his vision. The flash had been one of the random scans the station ran, looking for complex programs.

Security was understandably high at a Law station. The primary way they ensured no one could access or compromise their records was that access to the open net was minimal, and none of the archives had a direct connection. The scan helped ensure that no one came in armed with programs to coerce the system into giving it what he wanted.

He'd spent the previous eight days sitting here, observing how they worked, but mainly tracking the scan. It wasn't quite random, or rather it was, but it always waited at least five minutes before running again.

The light flashed. The timer stopped, and another one began running. The delay added itself to the long list on the right side. Seven minutes, twelve seconds. This had been a short one. The average was fourteen minutes, nineteen seconds.

Two officers entered the waiting area and headed toward Alex. He didn't react, but he placed a hand inside his sleeve. Had they sold him out after all? It wasn't like they'd know he had a price on his head. He'd dyed his hair blond, darkened his skin, and gave himself green eyes. Not even close to the only description of him to have a price on his head.

As far as he could tell, the trap ship had never regained its memory, but plenty of the guards on that ship had seen him among the crew and they'd compiled a description. So, there was someone who looked like him currently worth five-thousand.

Inexplicably, he felt some pride at having a price on his head.

The officers walked past him to stop before a woman in a business suit. "Ma'am?" one of them began. "Please stand."

She did, a look of confusion on her face.

The other officer scanned her, then opened her jacket and pulled a datapad out of the inside pocket.

“Data devices are prohibited within the station, ma’am. You can get this back from the reception desk when you leave.”

“But I need it for my meeting; the description of everything that was stolen is on there.”

“It isn’t the only thing on there, is it?”

“Well, no, it contains everything I need for my work and home.”

“We’ll make sure the information pertinent to your case is available for the inspector you’ll be talking with.”

“Alright...” she didn’t sound sure of herself. “I guess you’ll need me to unlock it for you?”

The officer gave her a smile that Alex thought was meant to be friendly, but came across as creepy instead. “No, ma’am. You don’t need to do that.” Then they left.

Another flash. Five minutes, forty-six seconds.

Alex had to wait almost ten more minutes before Inspector Barstone came to get him. During that time he kept his hands together, tapping a finger on his wrist, next to the chronometer.

“Mister Stingsky?” the man asked.

Alex stood and shook his hand.

Victor was a man who looked to be in his fifties, fit, but with some mass around the middle. His hair was black, and thinning. It could be an affectation; cosmetic changes were fairly inexpensive, but Alex didn’t get that sense from the man. From everything he’d read on him, Victor Barstone was someone who didn’t bother with appearances.

He’d been climbing the echelons within the Law quickly, until he was implicated in a large data theft. He’d claimed his innocence, but the crime had been traced back to someone he knew, intimately. The description matched Tristan, but the name Victor gave was Simon. He’d fallen back to the bottom of the ladder, and he’d never been able to regain the momentum he’d had before.

Victor led Alex to a room containing only a desk and two chairs. It wasn’t his office, just a room they used for interviews. It was shielded, an added security measure against coercionists who managed to make it this deep within the station, not that he was close to anything of value. The archive was on the other side of the building. To have any chance of accessing it, he’d have to make it into the part of the building where only officers were allowed, then to a terminal. Once there, it would be easy for him to gain access.

But getting there was impossible.

Victor sat, and indicated the other chair. “You said you wanted to talk to me, Mister Stingsky, but you never made it clear in regards to what.”

Alex smiled. “Please, call me Harold. I didn’t specify because I was worried you wouldn’t agree to meet with me if I had.” He placed his hand on the desk and began tapping a finger on his wrist, by the chronometer. “I’m a writer, and I’m here on a part-vacation and part-research trip. I’m working on a story involving an inspector who needs to hunt down a criminal across multiple systems, but when I read the news archive I came across a mention that you’d done something like that. You’ll have to forgive me if I don’t remember the details; I had all that on my datapad, and I left it in my hotel. I knew I wouldn’t be allowed to bring it in.”

Victor nodded. “Across multiple systems,” he said flatly. He didn’t seem happy about it, but he pulled out a datapad from his pocket and turned it on.

Alex kept his face interested, but no more. He now had his access to the archives.

“It isn’t a time I like to talk about,” Victor said, “but so long as you don’t ask about the details of my investigation, I’ll be happy to answer your questions.”

“That’s alright. I’m more interested in what’s involved in such a pursuit than who you were chasing.”

Alex had searched Victor’s home system for the list Jofdelbiro had mentioned, but it hadn’t been there. After a bit of research, he’d found out that Victor had been forced to store that in the station archive because it was considered an active investigation.

Victor was explaining how they used body recognition programs, linked with the camera systems across the city to track someone’s movements, when there was a flash of light. Alex did a double tap on the chronometer, then went back to tapping his wrist.

It would take eight seconds for the chronometer to assemble the simple assembly program. That one would take twelve to assemble the slightly more complex assembler, and that one twenty-two seconds for the next one. In all it would take a minute and thirty-three seconds before the program he needed would be built out of the random snippets of code that Alex had stored in the chronometer. That left it just under three and a half minutes to gain access to the archive through Victor’s datapad, and mine it for the information Alex needed.

Alex nodded as Victor talked of having to investigate every place a ship stopped to check if the quarry had left, because he couldn’t trust what the system said. It had been easy to make them lie, even back then. He talked about jurisdiction complications when the local Law didn’t want to cooperate. And how sometimes it required skirting the laws to be able to catch him.

The three and a half minutes passed by, and the program wasn’t done. Alex forced his breathing to stay steady, but he couldn’t do anything about his heartbeat. If there were any sort of scanners in the room keeping an ear to his bodily functions, they’d know something was off. But he wasn’t a suspect, so why would those be on?

Victor continued talking and Alex nodded at the appropriate times, but he had no idea what he was saying. He heard it, but was too preoccupied with the time—five minutes, nine seconds—to process it.

He reminded himself the average was in the range of ten minutes, closer to fifteen. The odds were on his side that the program would be fine.

Seven minutes, still going. Alex could feel sweat bead on his forehead. Victor said something, then paused. He looked concerned.

Seven minutes twenty-nine seconds. The chronometer buzzed, letting Alex know it had collected everything available. He slumped forward with a heavy sigh.

“Is everything alright?” Victor asked, worry in his tone.

Alex snapped his head up, about to come up with an explanation, but the flash of light stopped him. *Oh great*, he thought. There was no way the chronometer was done disassembling the programs.

An alarm sounded throughout the station.

Alex thought that was odd; there hadn’t been one with the woman in the waiting area.

Victor looked out the window at the commotion while Alex held still. All he had to do was wait for the power to go out. Victor looked at Alex.

Any moment now.

The officer glanced at the chronometer on Alex’s wrist.

*You guys better trigger the bomb, or we’re going to have a serious talk after this.*

Victor cursed. He began standing, but Alex grabbed his arm and pulled him down, putting a

knife to his throat, doing his best to hide it from those outside with his arm.

"Let's not do anything rash," Alex said.

The man gulped. "How?"

Alex smiled. "You'd be amazed at the number of composite material that can be sharpened to a decent edge."

Victor locked eyes with Alex. "I'm not letting you get out of here. This isn't happening to me a second time."

It took a moment for Alex to realize what he meant. "Right, you've been in a similar position before. But if it's any consolation, I only copied some of your files."

Someone knocked on the window.

Alex and Victor turned to look at the woman there. Her eyes grew wide when she noticed the blade.

"You're never getting out of here," Victor said. "You might as well surrender now."

Alex sighed. "I was really hoping to do this without having to hurt anyone." He stepped around the desk without moving the knife from the inspector's neck. Next to him, he took the gun out of the man's holster. "I'm afraid I have to borrow this."

"You think you can just shoot your way out of the station? Are you crazy?"

"Desperate is closer." He pointed the gun at the man's chest and back to the door. "Can I count on you to stay in here, where it's going to be safe?"

"I'm not letting you get out of here with that information."

"I was afraid of that." Alex switched the safety off and aimed at the man's head.

The lights went off.

Finally.

Alex bolted out of the room, his glasses letting him see. He had a little more than ten seconds to make it out before the emergency power came back on and the station went into lockdown.

He just barely made it, and he threw the gun away and kept on running. Barstone would be after him.

He took the first corner, heading away from Flint and Liz. He ducked into the first alley, went two blocks, then grabbed another alley and headed further away. He activated the command and his jacket turned brown. The name of the university where he'd bought it appeared on the back, with "Frank" over the left breast. He took a cap out of the inside pocket and put that over his head, tucking all his hair under it. The shoulders widened, giving him the look of a sports star. Another command and the pants turned blue, faded at the knees.

He stepped on the street, now confident the automated surveillance system wouldn't catch him, and ambled his way back to the car.

When he entered that alley, he was pleasantly surprised to see they were still there. Alex took off the jacket.

"Hey, Boss," Flint called, standing up and leaning on the open car door. "I'm really sorry about the delay." He gave Liz a look. "We had some technical difficulties on our side."

Alex waved that aside. "Don't worry about it. It happened, that's all I care about. Let's get out of here."

Liz stood and pointed her gun at Alex. "How about we don't."

"Liz, what are you doing?" Flint asked, his voice a mix of annoyance and fear.

"I'm thinking that with him busting a Law station, someone's going to be willing to pay a lot

of money to get their hands on him.”

“Liz, we talked about this. He’s paying us.”

She shrugged. “We’ll still get that money, but we’ll get a bonus on top of that.” She glared at him. “Get a backbone, will you?”

With a sigh, Flint took the gun out of the holster and pointed it at Alex.

Alex had let them come to their decision without interruption, and now he was looking at the muzzle of the guns he’d handed them himself. “So, I’m guessing you’re siding with her then?” he asked.

“Yeah. Sorry, Boss, but she’s the love of my life.”

Alex nodded. “I know something about the length we can go for love.”

Flint smiled. “I’m glad you understand. I really don’t want this to be awkward.”

“Is there anything I can say to convince you to put down the guns? No one has done anything we can’t laugh about yet. I can still pay you and we’ll go our separate ways.”

“Oh, you’ll pay us,” Liz said. “Right now. Then I’m calling the Law to find out what they’re willing to pay to get you back. Hand the sticks over.”

“Last chance for you to talk some sense into your girlfriend, Flint.”

He shook his head. “Just do as she says. It’s easier that way.”

“Okay. You can’t say I didn’t try.” Alex put a hand in his right pocket and closed it around the device there.

“Wait a minute,” Flint said. “The sticks are in—” The gun in his hand exploded in an intense flash of light. Before he could start screaming, Liz’s gun did the same.

Alex took the glasses off; they’d gone dark to protect his vision. Flint was on the ground, cradling his arm, the end of it burnt black. The explosion had been so hot it had cauterized the injury. Alex had made sure of that; he didn’t want them to bleed out.

He squeezed between the door and the wall, then pulled the man behind the car. He did the same with Liz, closing the door in the process. Through gasps of pain, she cursed him. He leaned against the back of the car, looking down at them.

“Two things,” he said. “First, don’t double-cross the guy who paid you for the job. I don’t care how much more money you think you can get out of it. It’s never a good policy. Second, if you are going to double-cross him, for the love of the universe, don’t use the guns he handed you himself.”

He walked around the car, got behind the wheel, and looked out to the back. “Oh, thanks for the ride. I’ll leave it at the spaceport for you to pick up.” He closed the door and carefully pulled out of the alley. Hopefully the driving simulation he’d put himself through would let him get to the port without damaging it too much.