

Alex smiled as he moved deeper within the system. Having Tristan touch him had been a dream come true, but with the tenderness, Alex worried Tristan had lost a part of himself—the monster, the killer. Seeing him kill without hesitation, without remorse, lifted his spirit. In time, he'd see what else remained.

Jacoby was fuming. He didn't understand how meaningful this was, but in the end, he didn't matter. One step out of line and he'd die.

The system pulled at his attention. Something was off with it. He looked at the code—it all looked fine—then realized it was the sound, something was missing. He quickly found what.

Alex cursed. "We have a problem." How did the plan need to be modified?

Tristan stepped behind him. "What am I looking at?" He placed a hand on Alex's shoulder.

He flinched, hated himself for it, hated himself more for the hand leaving his shoulder. It came back, and he forced himself not to react. He wanted to turn and apologize, but he needed to answer the question.

"You won't see it; it isn't in the local code. It's only noticeable in the voice."

"Voice?" Jacoby asked.

Alex glared at him for interrupting. "Yes, voice. Systems have voices, read up on it." He took a breath and looked at the screen. How could he explain this? "Okay, corporations are spread over multiple planets, multiple stars. A corporation isn't one building, or one planet even. It's the totality of everything. Do you follow?" Tristan nodded. Jacoby's nod was timid at best.

"When a user accesses the system here, he isn't just talking to this terminal, or even the mainframe housed somewhere on this planet, he's talking to every mainframe, in every building the corporation owns. That's why corporate systems are so powerful; you're fighting thousands of processors working together to one degree or another."

"You've made your way into the corporate system," Jacoby commented.

"I said powerful, not smart. Code is code. It only does what it's told, and people are rarely all that smart either."

"This corporate voice," Tristan said, "spread over multiple systems, how does it present itself? Does the distance separating them make it richer? Maybe gives it an echo?"

Alex smiled. "Exactly. There's a richness to a system's voice, because this almost-imperceptible echo makes it sound fuller. You work with enough corporate systems and you end up forgetting about that; it's just part of the background noise that'll leak in from the net. The voice in this system is flat."

"What does that mean?" Jacoby asked.

Alex opened his mouth to snap out a biting explanation, but Tristan spoke first.

"Samalia's been cut off from the rest of the corporation."

"Cut from the net?" Jacoby pulled out his datapad.

"No, not the net," Alex said. "You can't cut a planet from the net if you want it to survive for long."

"Then you can coerce your way into the rest of it, right? I mean, if talking to the rest of the corporation is the problem."

"It is, and I can't." He brought up schematics. It was for Tristan's benefit; Jacoby wouldn't get any of that. "Normally, corporations are like everyone else, always connected to the net, their data packet identified among all the others by specific markers. It's how a smart coercionist can eavesdrop on a corporation without being noticed, and why they add more layers of encryptions to their packets than the rest of the universe knows what to do with it."

Tristan leaned in, tracing part of the schematic. "They installed a dedicated comm line between Samalia and the rest of the corporation. None of this information is leaking into the net."

“And, as an added annoyance, they only open it twice a day for burst updates.”

“That doesn’t sound efficient,” Jacoby said.

“It isn’t,” Alex replied, “but they aren’t interested in efficiency here. They’re interested in hiding what they’re doing.”

“They can’t do that. Anyone can come here, document what’s going on, and send that to the news.”

Alex looked at Jacoby. “Really? And how does the news corroborate the information? Put someone in cryo for the almost a year it’d take to fly here from any of the core worlds? The corporation will have cleaned up everything by then. The way they corroborate anything is to listen in on corporate transmissions and look for details confirming what they were told.”

“Okay, but you can’t stop leakage; the net is open to anyone who knows how to access it. It’s why coercionists are in such demand. They can always find what you want; it’s just a question of time.”

“You know about the closed net, right? That part of the net the SpaceGov military uses?”

“Of course.”

“You ever tried listening in on it?”

Jacoby glared at him.

“Of course not.” Alex smiled. “If you had, you wouldn’t have heard anything. It’s the closed net because it’s closed off to anything and anyone who can’t get into it. This is the same technology, but on a smaller scale.”

“Okay, so what does that mean for the job?” Jacoby asked.

“It means that any coercion I do only happens here. By the time they do the burst update, the antibodies will have undone my work. And before you ask, no, I can’t stay here to make sure it remains intact. Someone’s going to notice my presence and stop me.”

“We can keep the security forces out of this room,” Jacoby said.

“You weren’t listening, were you? Any LeisureTek building on the planet can do the burst update. They are all the corporation. This building is only important because of the people in it. And if it comes to it, they will blow it rather than risk someone like me sending an infection to the rest of the corporation.”

“Then the job’s a bust.” Jacoby sounded nowhere near as disappointed by that as Alex felt he should. “So we get out of—”

“No!” Alex was on his feet. “They are not getting away with this. They are going to pay for trying to kill Tristan. I’m going to go to each and every office if I have to and dismantle them my—”

Tristan’s hand, back on his shoulder, stopped him. “Calm down, Alex. You’ve already worked out how to make this happen. What do we need to do?”

Alex took a breath, then smirked at Jacoby. See? This is what having someone know and trust you looks like. He sat and brought up the layout of a floor. “We go to the array controls.” He tapped a room. “Here, on the eighty-fourth floor. Only a handful of people have access to the controls. Fortunately for us, our dead chief was one of them. Her passcard will let us in and let us access the controls. It’s that way in case they need to send emergency information that can’t wait for the next burst. The controls to open the comm array are here.” He tapped the opposite side of the room. “The internal system access is there.”

“So this has to be a two-person job,” Tristan said.

“They both need to stay in place for the full duration of the burst. If one of them walks away, the array stops transmitting.”

Jacoby looked at the layout. “Doesn’t that mean there’s going to be someone at the other end of the transmission checking things?”

“We’re going to establish the link out of schedule. By the time someone notices it

and starts running the checks, I'm going to be done."

"Wouldn't they set this up so someone on the other end needs to accept the transmission?" Jacoby asked. "Doesn't seem all that secured otherwise."

Tristan shook his head. "Having to accept the transmission creates a delay that could be fatal in an emergency. That's what emergencies are, they require immediate updates. Most likely it's going to be a one-way setup, to prevent anyone from backtracking it to here, should a spy be on the other end. The corporations know SpaceGov doesn't trust them."

"And even if someone is watching," Alex added, "it isn't like they're going to see what I'm doing. I'm going to be working deeper in their system, reworking the processor there, so it will keep doing my work once I'm disconnected."

Tristan moved code around, eyes darting over it. He stopped it and pointed to a cluster. "Can you take over the security system? Have it ignore us?"

Alex shook his head. "Not with a corporate system. Even by itself, its personality is too paranoid. They know what a team can do if they can move undetected." Alex considered something. Searched through the code. He didn't know if he could do it, but he knew it could be done. He'd seen it. "Possibly if I can work from deeper, do a direct access to the processor, I might be able to get in it and alter its personality at its core."

"Is that even possible?" Tristan asked.

"Do you remember Baran's ship? Someone did that to it. The idea's been bouncing in my head since. A direct access to the processor is the only way I can think it would be done, but the problem is I have no idea where that would be."

Tristan smiled and scanned through map after map of the building. When he stopped, he tapped a room on the thirty-second floor. "There."

Alex studied it. "That's the mainframe stack room." The cooling, the layout. That's all it could be.

"They use a Carigon Mainframe," Tristan said, indicating the stacks as if it was evident. "They were part of the initial construction; it's the only way they can get the proper power balance going without a full rebuild of the space, and that would show in how they had to eat into the surrounding rooms. Carigon structures their layout in such a way that any of the stacks can house a processor, but because corporations hate having workers waste time looking for it when they need to work close to the processor, they place it in one of the central stacks." He indicated nine of them. "It's going to be in one of those."

Alex brought up patrol routes and overlaid them on the floor layout. "Okay, they don't want to draw attention to that room, so they only have one guard on it. I can take control of the cameras for the time it will take to switch guards, and then maintaining a loop of the inside of the room won't be difficult."

Alex and Tristan looked at Jacoby.

"No," he stated. "I'm not getting sidelined again."

"We can't leave the door unguarded," Alex said, annoyed at having him continue to argue. "The system will notice."

"Then do your loop thing with that, too. I'm part of this job. I understood the need to have me stay in the ship while you rescued Tech. You're not leaving me on the outside for this one, too."

Alex opened his mouth, ready to lay into Jacoby for yet again calling Tristan "Tech", but a squeeze of the shoulder stopped him.

"Jacoby," Tristan said, "this isn't about sidelining you. Alex can't have too many things distracting him while he does something everyone claims is impossible. That means as little side programs to monitor as possible. If he slips, the system becomes aware of us and security falls on us like a dropship. We're going to be too far from any exits to have a chance to escape."

Jacoby looked dubious, and Alex knew Tristan was lying, but he nodded.

“I’d take the guard’s place, if I could, but I haven’t seen any Samalians wearing guard uniforms. Alex can’t do it since he’s the only one with the coercing skills required. That leaves you, which means that without you, this job can’t happen.”

Alex watched Jacoby go from angry, to unconvinced, to nodding in agreement. How Tristan could do this, convince someone that standing around not doing anything was a vital part of a job, amazed him. Tristan really could convince anyone to do anything.

Alex swallowed as he realized how hot watching Tristan twist someone made him feel. Oh, this could be such a problem, because they didn’t have the time for him to shove the Samalian against the wall and fuck him.

He had work to do. He removed the map and played in the code, looking for the cameras and their individual identifiers, then writing programs to ensure they would ignore the three of them. The system’s paranoia meant he couldn’t have too many of them ignore commands to notice everything, so he was going to have to monitor them continually. He really hated working within corporate buildings.

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Alex watched his datapad’s screen, reminding the cameras there was nothing to see in the stairwell. Especially not a dead guard being stripped so Jacoby could wear his armor.

Finding a guard of Jacoby’s size had been easy; the man was of typical size for security work. Convincing the guard to follow Alex into the stairwell was even easier. Having the cameras ignore Tristan snapping the man’s neck was the easiest of it all.

Jacoby had been the one who worried Alex. He’d been so unsettled with the ease Tristan had done it, he thought Jacoby would sound the alarm. Instead, he’d settled himself and begun stripping the guard.

“I’m good,” Jacoby said, adjusting the vest over his own holster. He looked like any of the other guards, if older. Alex hadn’t noticed until now, but everyone on the security force was on the young side—at least looked it.

“Remember, once me and Tristan leave you to go inside, you’re going to be visible again, so don’t go anywhere. The system notices one thing out of place and we have to fight our way out.”

Jacoby raised an eyebrow. “Let me remind you I have centuries of experience at this, rookie. I know how to do my job, even if it’s a pissy job. Just do yours so we can go home, okay?”

Alex looked at Tristan, who was studying Jacoby. Alex didn’t trust the man; he was too set on leaving. He wouldn’t be surprised if Jacoby planned to sabotage the job as an excuse for them to leave sooner.

Whatever Tristan thought didn’t show on his face, and that was more of a comfort than if he’d told him not to worry about any of this.

“Well?” Jacoby asked. “What are we waiting for?”

“A gap in the traffic,” Alex replied. “I’m keeping the system from seeing us, but I can’t hide Tristan from everyone here. We’re too deep within the building to justify his presence, so if even one of them thinks to query the system, we’re done.”

Alex had a program watch this floor and build a predictive algorithm.

When it signaled to him that a large enough gap was approaching, he motioned for the others to be ready.

They hurried, Jacoby in the lead, Alex watching to make sure they remained in the predicted gap. When the guard came into view, she didn’t react. Alex cursed—a woman. Would the difference be noticed? Too late to worry about that.

Even when Jacoby called to her, she didn’t react; her gaze fixed on the opposing wall. He picked up his speed, calling to her again. She finally turned to look in his direction, her gaze passing over him as her eyes went wide. She saw Tristan. She reached for her gun, ignoring Jacoby, who stopped next to her and punched her. Her head snapped

to the side, and she went down.

Jacoby took her place, standing straight and looking at the opposing wall. Tristan grabbed the woman by the collar as Alex instructed the door to open.

Alex opened his mouth once inside, but Tristan shook his head. They stepped further in, and he indicated another door. They entered the empty office and storage room. The desk had parts on it, and more were on shelves along the wall. Whoever was in charge of maintaining the mainframe stacks worked out of here.

Tristan snapped the woman's neck and dropped her. "The other door isn't made to block sound. Now isn't the time to throw in Jacoby's face the stupidity of leaving a guard alive."

"You say that like there's a point in trying to teach him that lesson."

Tristan smiled, his ears canting in a way Alex had seen often in the town, but was unnerving on him. "If he survives the job, we'll see. Are you ready?"

"Not yet." Alex pulled Tristan to him and kissed him hard. It took all his control not to run his other hand through the fur and down lower.

"Alex," Tristan said, breathing heavy, "we're working."

"I know," he panted, "but if I don't do this now, I might just lose control when we're busy and—"

"Alex." This time the tone was harsher.

"I'm joking—well, a little. But I had to let you know I am not afraid of you. That flinch, it wasn't because—"

Tristan placed a finger on Alex's lips. "I know. I told you I—" He stopped when Alex sucked the finger into his mouth. He raised an eyebrow, his lips curling up. "I don't expect you to trust my touch. It's going to take time until I've shown you that I will only touch you in a caring way from now on."

Alex nodded.

"Alex," Tristan warned.

Alex raised an eyebrow of his own, grinning around the finger.

"Let go of my finger."

"You are no fun, you know that, right?"

Tristan shoved him against a shelf, making memory chips clatter to the floor. He leaned in. "When this job is over, I'll let you test just how much fun I can be. For now, I need to know, are you are good to go?"

Alex wanted to laugh. Oh, he was good to go alright, but that wasn't what Tristan meant, so he nodded. "I'm good, but I need to warn you. You're going to want to be careful twisting people like you did Jacoby when I'm around. That was probably the hottest thing I've seen you do short of the massacre on Aleron."

Tristan smiled and ran a finger down the scar on Alex's cheek. "Good to know." He stepped away. "The cameras here?"

"All controlled. They're going to see a normal day for as long as I need them."

"Then let's go remove any obstructions so you can work in peace."

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Alex grinned broadly as he stepped over the body to open the stack's cover. Inside it, instead of the usual arrays of memory and all other things that composed mainframes, was the processor. He wiped the blood off his hands before pulling cables out of the nearby terminal and connecting them to the casing. This had to be the closest he'd ever been to a processor.

It didn't look impressive—a chip on a slate, with connectors stretching from it to the casing wall. From there, it was connected to the mainframe and the rest of the corporate system.

"Okay," he told the processor as he typed, "talk to me, and let's put to the test just how good I am, shall we?"

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Alex used the terminal to support him as he regained awareness of his surroundings. This hadn't gone the way he'd wanted. He hadn't been able to crack the processor. He'd gotten in—that had been easy—but the code there wasn't floating around. It was set in the material the processor was made out of. It couldn't be altered.

Except he knew someone had managed it. The only thing he was left considering was that this mystery person had gone in and physically altered the code. Exactly how he'd managed that was beyond Alex.

He'd still managed to accomplish the goal; this close to the processor, he'd been able to alter snippets of code around it. Nothing that would affect its personality in a way that could be noticed, but he'd been able to insert a blind spot in its paranoia linked to a signal emitted by his datapad. So long as the three of them stayed within ten feet of it, the system would ignore them.

He smiled. He had subtly twisted its will, just like Tristan did with Jacoby.

"It's done," he said, releasing a breath. He turned. "We're now entirely hid—"

Tristan's expression stopped him. He had the look he'd seen when he was considering something serious, dangerous. Alex's heart skipped a beat as it occurred to him that after everything, this was the moment. Tristan was going to kill him now; it had all been a lie.

He glanced at the door. Stop, he told himself. You don't know what this is. What he's planning. No matter what it is, he will explain. He had told himself that if Tristan decided to kill him, he would take it.

Tristan focused on him and surprised registered. "Alex, I'm not going to hurt you. I swore."

Alex nodded, his concern mostly vanishing. "Then what are you thinking about?"

"I wasn't entirely truthful. I had an ulterior motive to agreeing to coming here. To agreeing to your plan to destroy LeisureTek."

"Alright." Alex hadn't expected that, but it was Tristan's right. "What is it?"

Tristan steeled himself, and Alex couldn't keep the surprise from showing.

"I need you to erase them from LeisureTek's mainframe."

"Them? Who?"

Tristan hesitated. "The townsfolk, the town itself, the House. That entire area."

Alex frowned, trying to figure out what Tristan was asking, and why he was acting like he expected Alex to explode at him. "It's all gone. The town was destroyed when you blew up the dropship."

"You have to—" He stopped, took a breath. "Alex, I'd like you to erase any records of there ever having been something there. Any mention of the town, its people, the House. Everything."

Alex searched Tristan's surprisingly expressive face. "Why?"

Tristan tried to speak, tried again, sagged. "They need a chance to rebuild. The corporation was interested in that area for some reason. With everything destroyed, they won't have any problem moving in, rebuilding it to their liking, and continuing on with whatever they have planned."

"And?"

"The townsfolk...they aren't going to stay away. They made that clear. I barely convinced them to hide in the forest so I'd have a chance to do this. Even with destroying LeisureTek, some data will be scattered throughout the net. Another corporation could pick it up, work out what LeisureTek thought was valuable about it. For all we know there will be enough of LeisureTek left so they can rebuild. They won't survive the next attack, Alex."

"Why does that matter?"

Tristan closed his eyes, looked up. "It shouldn't." He rubbed his face. "I know that. I know that a few months ago I would have walked away and not even thought about what would happen to them, but... They took me in, Alex." Tristan's chuckle seemed to

surprise him as much as Alex. “Me. Not a fabricated personality, not a mask, me. I nearly killed a few of them when they were training. They know how dangerous I am, but they still accepted me. I’ve—” He wiped his eyes and looked at the wetness on his fingers. “I didn’t know I wanted that, too.”

Alex wanted to scream, to run away. What he did was step to his monster, took his hands in his. “How?” He tried to keep the anger out of his voice. “You have to explain this to me, because you don’t care about stuff like that. You only care about you.”

Tristan pulled a hand out of Alex’s and placed in on his cheek. Alex leaned into it. “I care about you. But I can’t care about one person and no one else. It doesn’t work that way. A number of the townsfolk affected me, and I ended up caring about them, too.”

“You should have told me from the start. You should have trusted me.”

“I know, but you were freaking out anytime I smiled at you.”

“Okay, fair point, but after our time at the cabin, you should have told me then.”

Tristan nodded. “I was afraid.”

“Of what?” Alex yelled, pulling his hand away.

“That you’d see this as a weakness. I’m a monster, your monster. You made it clear that’s one part of me you want. I was afraid you’d see that as a crack in the monster.”

“No mask, you promised me.”

“I didn’t put one on. I just avoided thinking about it. It was easy; we had other things to deal with. Until now. I’m sorry, Alex. I know I shouldn’t have sprung this on you, but...fear isn’t something I’m accustomed to dealing with.” Tristan searched his face and Alex didn’t know what he saw there, because he didn’t know how he felt. “If this means you don’t want to stay with me, I understand. I just asked that you save them before you leave.”

“You have got to be fucking kidding me.” Alex paced. “Leave? You trust me that little?”

“Alex—”

“Shut up!”

Tristan stiffened, but Alex didn’t care.

“Let me make something very clear, you stubborn bag of fur. I have endured more pain than anyone has any right to have visited on them for you. I’ve survived, I don’t know how many twists and turns you threw at me, because you wanted me so confused I’d think black holes spew out stuff. And don’t fucking correct me. I fucking know I’m wrong, I’m just too pissed to care.”

Tristan’s lips quirked up, but straightened in a thin line at Alex’s glare.

“Yes, I’m pissed. I’m confused, again. You tell me no more lies, and you spring that one on me. How the fuck do you expect me to react? But I am not leaving. I am never leaving. You couldn’t chase me away at your worst. You think your best will do it?”

“My best?” Tristan couldn’t stop the smile.

Alex sighed. “Your ‘better’, anyway.” He took a breath, smiled, surprised that he felt better now that he’d screamed his anger. “Just please don’t do this to me again. I won’t leave, but I don’t know if there’s enough of my sanity left to take too many surprises like that.”

Tristan nodded. “You do understand that there might be more surprises, right? I was serious when I said this is new territory. There’s little research done on people like me—”

“There’s more than one of you?”

Tristan chuckled. “I hope not, but I have nothing to fall back on. I promise, you now know everything that’s happened to me that I know. Any further surprises will be surprises for me, too.”

“Alright, so you want them removed. How much time do I have?”

“It’s three hours to shift change. We need to be done and out of the building before that. There is no hiding the bodies at that point.”

“Fortunately, from here it’s just going to be a few minute’s work.” He started typing. “See? This is why you should have told me earlier. I could have done it while I was hiding us, and I wouldn’t have to take the time to insert myself in the system twice.”

“Right,” Tristan said, the smile audible, “because either of us wanted to have this little blowup in front of Jacoby.”

Alex paused in his typing. “Good point.”

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“All done,” Alex said. “It doesn’t matter how much they scrape the system, they will never find anything about that location. We could leave now, and they would be safe.”

Tristan took his head in his hands and kissed him tenderly. “Thank you. For this, for understanding.”

Alex smiled, placing a hand on Tristan’s chest, feeling the scarred flesh there. “I have you. I can learn to share you with a town I’ll never see again.”

Tristan placed his hand over Alex’s shoulders and led him through the multitude of stacks. “How long are they going to stay hidden?”

“That’s up to them. I don’t know why LeisureTek was interested in them. Someone mentioned turning them into an attraction, but there was way too much effort put into getting rid of them for that to be the whole story. I didn’t look for the reason, didn’t have the time. I inputted the parameters in my programs and let them work. If they can keep whoever settles here, after this corporation is no more, from noticing them, they will never be bothered.”

“Can they notice the work you did? We’re leaving bodies; they’ll figure out something happened here.”

“I’ve hidden all traces of what happened. And they are going to be too busy imploding to care.”

Tristan nodded, kissed the top of Alex’s head, then they walked out the rest of the way out of the stacks in silence.

He stopped when the door came into view. When Tristan spoke it was haltingly, softly. As unsure of himself as Alex had ever heard him.

“Alex, we— I’m not leaving with Jacoby.”

“I expected as much. That place isn’t secure anymore, you said so.”

Tristan shook his head and again sounded unsure. “I… I want to stay here, on Samalia.” Alex raised an eyebrow. “I’m not sure how to explain it, but there’s the sense that I need to understand who they are, what that means for me. I can’t do that by reading other people’s research.”

Alex chuckled. “You wouldn’t learn anything useful from their research, trust me. I went through everything on Samalia I could find.”

“So you’re okay with this?”

“Tristan, I told you. I am sticking by you, no matter what.”

Tristan kissed him again. “Thank you. You are too good to me.”

“Bullshit.”

They chuckled and headed to the door again.

“So,” Alex said, “we’re staying. I’m thinking somewhere near the town would be good. We can help them rebuild, now that they’re safe.” The door opened as they approached. “It does mean I’m going to have to—” The fist in his face sent him reeling back.

“You son of a bitch!” The door closed behind Jacoby. “Stay here? I knew you’d gone native, with all the time you spent talking with them. We are going home!”

Alex was up, knife in-hand. Jacoby blocked him, but not the second slash; his armor did that. Jacoby punched back. He was fast and skilled, but Alex didn’t care about the pain. All he wanted, was to end this man. To remove someone who thought he had the right to dictate what he and Tristan did.

For all the centuries Jacoby had on him, he’d let himself grow old, and he slowed

before Alex was even winded. He saw the opening, the clear shot at Jacoby's throat. It would be quick and messy.

Tristan caught his hand. "Alex, stop."