

Alex put the earpiece in, pulled it out, and put it back, trying to find a comfortable position for it and let that distract him from thinking about what Tristan might do to Emil. He'd considered staying by the door and listening in, but what would that accomplish? If he heard violence, all he'd be able to do about it was suffer along with Emil.

He forced his stomach to settle by breathing. He'd thought he'd put all that queasiness behind him after all the horrors he'd seen and done. It seemed there was one last thing he hadn't become inured to. It was true what he'd been told. There's always something new the universe can throw at you.

A kid.

Fuck, children shouldn't be dragged into this, never. And his own son? What kind of man was Masters that he'd do this to his own son? Alex clenched his teeth. He wanted to scream. He didn't know where that anger came from, but he was determined to find something, anything, to make a man who treated his son that way pay.

He looked at the door. Tristan might be hurting Emil, but Masters was the one who'd arranged this. He hated the man even more for going through a proxy. He should have had the guts to do this himself.

The earpiece beeped to let him know it had synced with the ship's computer. It gave him something other than his anger to focus on. He needed to be thinking clearly to do this. "Talk to me." Tristan had told him to continue searching. That meant talking to the ship; the authorization had been implied.

He had to hope Tristan saw it that way.

"Hello," came the cold, dispassionate, digitized voice, and Alex froze. It wasn't Tristan. The fact that it sounded like him was just in Alex's imagination. Computers didn't sound like their owners. That was a myth, a trick of psychology.

"Do you mind if we talk?" He bypassed the interface and looked through the code. He had to do this. If Tristan caught him, he'd tell him that he needed to know what he had to work with so he could better make use of it when coercing other systems. He wouldn't touch the code; making changes would be suicidal. Tristan would know. He always knew.

"I do not," the computer replied.

"I'm wondering if we can be friends." The code was perfect. Not simply in that the right wording had been used, but every line was straight, and stayed in place over and under the other lines. There was no flow, no interaction. There was no space left for the computer to build a personality. He'd never seen code like this. Even the other coercionist he'd come across who didn't use earpieces still coded with flow, along the computer's personality. Tristan had forced it to be exactly the way he wanted it to be.

"I do not have a reference. What is 'friend'?"

How was he supposed to explain what a friend was? He didn't have the time to even start on the subject. "I'll have to explain later." He moved through the rigid structure of the code, each line fixed in place. The thought came unbidden: *how did you coerce a system that didn't have any chaos for you to use?* He couldn't. Just by the structure, any changes he made would stand out.

Unless...

He had millions of lines of code, each one written by Tristan. He could teach himself how to code like him. Match his syntax, the structure.

He was insane. Tristan would know.

Alex smiled. Not if he was very careful. There! This deep in the code, he could practice on that line. It wouldn't change anything to how the computer behaved, and it would be hidden under so many other layers. It was the perfect place to test his skill against Tristan's and find out if he would ever notice.

His leg twitched, and he winced in remembered pain.

What was he thinking? If? There was no if. Tristan would know. And Tristan wasn't the target. This possibly near impossible to coerce computer wasn't the target. It was his platform. He'd looked at the code. He knew what the computer could do; that was all he needed right now.

He had to focus on the real target: Masters.

"Okay, let's get to work."

He collected the new information his programs had gathered. Another bank had been identified, a bunch of possible identities he'd have to look through manually. Banks first. He had eight of them now.

He went through all their public nodes, collecting what he could without actual coercing. "You know," he told the ship's computer, "I might have exaggerated when I told Tristan I could get through this with your help." He didn't get a reply. None of the indignation any self-respecting system would feel at being told it wasn't enough. "That isn't a slight on you; it's a comment on these banks. I'm not sure I could get through them even with Luminex's system."

He talked too much, he knew that. It was his "thing". Teachers always warned students that they'd develop a "thing", a habit, a pattern, that if they weren't careful would give them away. Alex hadn't scoffed. He'd taken his teacher seriously, and worked hard at not getting a "thing". And then, decades later, he'd been almost caught, a system designed specifically for how he worked. He'd barely gotten out of it without them shutting him down.

When he'd investigated how they'd known, he'd found data-banks of his speech patterns. Thousands of recognition programs slaved to them, looking for him. Not by name, but by voice. He'd obliterated it, but he was certain there were others around.

He couldn't stop talking. It was more than just a "thing", it was how coercion happened. It wasn't just coding, it was computer psychology, but now he was careful when working around any system that could be watched. And he limited his talking to the platform.

Tristan was proof it could be done without saying a word, and Alex envied him a little for that.

With a minimum of talking to the bank's computer, he made it past the interface, and through the first layer of security. Here he had access to the names of the clients, as well as transaction flow, but no details about them.

A datapad clattered before him. "Vertex Industries" was written on it.

Tristan was sitting in the pilot's chair. Alex looked over his shoulder at the door. He'd gotten that information from Emil. What state had he left him in? Was he even a— No. He refused to believe that Tristan could kill a child in cold blood. He couldn't car— Tristan couldn't be that much of a monster. And they didn't have Masters, so Emil was still valuable.

Alex stood, and stopped as Tristan looked at him. There was no expression on the Samalian's face, but Alex felt his leg twitch and he sat. He needed to find a way to stop that; he didn't need the constant reminder of what Tristan was capable of doing to him.

Vertex Industries was a mining company, one of more than could be counted. Mining, along with farming, were the most widespread industries in the universe. Everyone needed material and food.

It owned a little over a hundred mines, which made it a fairly small player in that industry. Its revenue was in line with other companies in that bracket. So, why had Tristan told him to look into them? What was the link between them and this, Emil, and Masters?

He got into Vertex's system with ease. Mining might have been widespread, but it was considered minor, and only the larger companies bothered with good security. Inside he wrote a tracking program, incorporated a replicating function, and set it loose to go after everything that left this system. Something would eventually come back that would tell him what the link was.

While it worked, he went back to one of the banks. Since his programs had already identified how Masters communicated with them, it was easy for Alex to find one of those links, and piggyback on in to reach the account or, as it turned out, accounts.

Masters had six accounts within this bank, or rather, he'd communicated with six of them using this link. If he had another method, his programs hadn't found it yet. There could be more. Six accounts wasn't unusual; he worked for SpaceGov, and maintaining a position there took a lot of money. He'd want that to be safe. The best way to do so was to spread his fortune over multiple accounts. Not linking them would be smarter, which told Alex that Masters had other accounts here. The man was smart.

He could look, but not touch, not without first doing major coercion to give himself the access he needed, and a bank this secure would be watched by all the organizations looking for Alex. He copied his tracking program and let it loose on the transactions originating from these accounts, but adjusted the replicating function. Too many of them and the antibodies would

notice. This system was that sensitive about security. He set it to only replicate at forks in the transaction line. That meant only one tracking program per line.

It meant many of his searches would be ended by automated monitoring systems, but that was better than someone taking an active interest in what he was doing.

He did the same with each bank, and all he had to do was wait. Which meant he had the time to look into Masters directly.

“Who are you, Mister Masters?”

Infiltrating SpaceGov was out of the question. He was one of the best coercionists out there, but if he was THE best, SpaceGov would have plucked him out of school, not Luminex. He'd need Luminex's system to even contemplate trying. And the entire research department. And even then, the odds of getting through SpaceGov's security and its cadre of coercionists was minimal.

But Masters dealt with people from outside SpaceGov. He traveled, and that ship had been distinctive, a custom job. He was able to find it, its manufacturer, and noted that Masters had used his name, and it hadn't been the first ship he'd bought from them.

His first purchase went back sixty-three objective years. He compiled the list of everywhere his ships had gone. Alex loved the mandatory ship tag system, it made it easy to track people. Considering most trips were short, and the use of cryo, he approximated that Masters had been with SpaceGov for a subjective fifteen to twenty years.

How old was Masters? There was no indication of age in anything he could get access to. Government wasn't a young man's game, so he assumed older. Okay, then what did he do before that?

An open search brought back too many people with the name Tomas Masters than he could keep track of; the universe was a big place. But the Masters that Alex wanted had been nice enough to provide a picture for him to use as a filter. It removed all but six options, because programs always erred on the side of giving you more choices. Alex was able to find the one that mattered. But it only dated to two years previous to the first ship purchase.

Alex leaned back in his chair. Masters had changed his appearance, almost certainly his name too. If Alex had to guess, Tomas Masters hadn't existed until the man decided he was going to join SpaceGov. Then who had he been before that?

The Vertex trace program brought him a possible answer. It had connected the company to Masters through a chain of seven people. Four men, three women. He put the names and the corresponding pictures on their own searches, but one name caught his attention: Gregory Rithal.

He checked through the mission brief, to make sure he remembered correctly. It was the last name they'd been given for Emil. He put the pictures side by side, and he saw the similarities. This could be his father. The man had been at Vertex for forty years before Masters joined Space Gov, but while the man's footprint Alex found on the net looked real, he'd set up too many of his own identities to be fooled. The transactions keeping him alive were too regular, the circle within which they took place too narrow. This was a fake identity set to reinforce Emil's own false identity. Had been one set up even before Masters existed. By whom?

So he went back to Masters and scrapped through every public access system for his image and name. As expected for a SpaceGov man, Masters made himself visible under controlled situations.

Tomas Masters wanted the spaceways to be safe—safer—and he had no qualms telling every news agency about it. He had a cold disdain for mercenaries, and hot anger for pirates and anyone who made their living swindling innocent travelers.

Through the news he was able to confirm Masters had bought his way into SpaceGov a few months before buying his first ship. The ceremony had been broadcasted, and all his work had been within the security division, going up through the ranks as one superior after another retired, transferred, or simply stopped showing up for work.

Alex had to smile. That rapid of a climb didn't happen naturally. Masters had no problem helping his superiors move on to other things. Again, smart. Just like coming in person to hire a well-known criminal to kidnap his own son, and then use the outrage to cement his position as a champion of the Law in space. There was nothing on the net to link Masters to Tristan. Like every good manipulator, his ship's tag hadn't registered as belonging to Masters, which cast

doubt on all the other records Alex had looked at.

Deal with that later.

Alex found the last sighting of Masters had been that interview. He'd left the planet, and hadn't reached any destinations where he used his official tag, or the one he'd used when he hired Tristan. If Alex knew the frequency of the beacon every official SpaceGov ship had, he could locate Masters's actual position, but SpaceGov guarded that information carefully.

Every linked identity to Vertex turned out to be false, and he couldn't link them directly to one of the banks he knew Masters dealt with. His programs were still going, but Alex figured they were just more places for him to hide money.

He took off the earpiece and stood, stretching before getting water and leaning against the wall, trying to order his thoughts.

When he opened his eyes, Tristan stood before him. How did he move so damned quietly? "Well?"

"I can give you a history of his time since he joined SpaceGov, but nothing before that. I have a record of his travels during that time, but I need to go through it again to see what's real and what's fabricated. I've located eight banks he does business with under seven identities he doesn't mind people knowing about, which means there's going to be a lot more. My programs are still looking. The last time I can confirm where he was is the interview he gave. Since then, nothing."

"What properties does he own?"

"Nothing under any of his known identities, as far as I can tell. If I can find a way to go deeper, I'll probably find something, but for now I can only confirm the ordinary, meaningless things he does with them."

"You said you'd be able to get in them from here." The voice didn't hold any emotions.

*Don't you fucking dare twitch*, he told his leg.

He looked at Tristan and spoke in a steady voice. "I thought I could. From the station's computer they looked like your standard banks, but once I got through the interface, I discovered they're actually vaults of the highest order. There are dozens of security programs on every communication line, and multiple coercionists ready to intervene."

He drained his glass. "To get through all that and be sure not to be caught, I'd want to be on the same planet, inside the building if I can manage it. Using their system means I don't have to worry about how powerful mine needs to be. From outside I'd need something more powerful than this. From what I found, Masters is hands-on, so I'm confident that somewhere in his accounts will be something you can use."

Alex threw the glass in the disposal. "The only other option is for me to go into SpaceGov's systems itself. From there I can get his beacon frequency. I'm going to guess you know just how impossible it is to get into that." He paused and realized something. "I know a ship that has a system I could use. I don't think I'd be able to get into SpaceGov with it, but I can definitely get into the banks. I can probably pay the captain enough to let me use it for that. But there's no way to tell how the bounty will affect the rest of the crew."

Alex knew without a doubt that for that kind of money, Anders would have no problem going mutineer. And he could probably drag along his entire band of not so merry men.

Alex smiled. It would certainly be a way to get rid of the man. Let him try to take on Tristan and see what was left of him when it was all done. Alex would enjoy watching that.