

Alex slammed his hands on each side of the small corridor as the ship lurched, or maybe he just thought it did that. He should have stayed in the chair and let the cryo sickness pass. His muscles barely wanted to obey him, and his stomach was more interested in jumping around than staying put. At least the fog in his mind cleared quickly.

What he should really have done was find himself a better class of mercenaries to travel with, if there was such a thing. He'd yet to come across one that used a field cryo system instead of the blood-replacement one. That system he could use without getting sick.

He made it two steps and was plastered against the wall as the ship maneuvered too hard for the inertia dampener to keep up with it. Another thing mercs didn't seem to bother with was quality. It meant that first lurch probably hadn't been caused by the sickness. At least nothing exploded.

The door to the bridge opened and he entered the small space. Three stations were occupied, and there was hardly space for the five others to stand and wait around for orders. He saw a thin crescent of a planet before the ship turned, and it disappeared. This time the dampener kept up, and he didn't feel the motion.

He watched the stars and told his body to behave. "Unless you forgot your part of the deal," he said as he ignored the near panic in the pilot's body language, "that's the planet where I'm getting off. You should be aiming toward it, not away."

"Yeah?" the woman standing behind the pilot said, her eyes on the screens. "That plan didn't take into account those bastards waiting for us."

"Captain, we had an arrangement." Alex didn't hide his annoyance at her. "I gave you six subjective months of the easiest scores you've ever seen, and you get me to Terion Two. Unless your pilot screwed things up, and that wasn't Terion Two, I don't care who's after you."

She looked away from the screens to glare at him.

The pilot cursed as something flew in front of them, and there was a momentary flash of light. The ship shook again.

"Listen here, Crimson. Do you have any idea how hard it is to control this kind of ship in atmosphere? No, you don't." She continued without letting him reply. "Maybe you're okay with dying, but I intend to live on for a very long time, so I'm trying to do my job." The ship banked hard enough they were all sent against the wall. Alex barely avoided being crushed by the bodies. She grabbed hold of the pilot's seat and pulled herself back up. "Who the fuck are these people?"

Bounty hunters was Alex's guess. He'd advised her not to stick to her usual targets for this stretch, to change it up to avoid attracting attention, but once he'd given her a demonstration of what he was capable of doing, she'd lined up the highest scores she could find on her way here. Three of them were enough for anyone with a good pattern recognition program to notice. She'd squeezed in seven hits in the six months Alex worked for her.

She should've considered herself lucky bounty hunters were all these were. If the Anti-Coercion Division had been here, this would have been the end of the line. But while she'd done everything she could to attract attention, he'd been careful to vary his methods from one coercion to the other to hide the fact this was one person's work. One brush with the ACD was all he wanted in his lifetime.

"Is he bothering you, Boss?" The man speaking, crossing his arms, was Malek. He was the crew's muscle, a little taller than Alex, much broader, but dumb. He only enjoyed two things: sex and breaking limbs. He hated Alex because he wouldn't say yes to the first, so he had been looking for excuses to do the second to him.

"What are you doing here, Malek?" She glared at the man. She'd been too busy studying their situation to notice him before. "You know the rules, get back to your cabin."

"But he—" the brute began.

"Now, Malek. Crimson is going to make himself useful or get off my bridge." She looked at the other people. "The same goes to you. Unless you can contribute, go strap in; this might be rough." She looked back at the screens and whispered something to the pilot. The star field moved, the only thing telling Alex they were maneuvering.

He crossed his arms and contemplated his options, tapping his fingers on his arm. The job was over. He didn't take orders once that was done. He could let her know what he thought of her thinking she could keep ordering him around, but he wasn't groundside yet. If he wanted

to get there, he needed to help.

“You,” he told the man sitting at the communication station. “Move. If I’m going to help, I need your board.”

“What?” The man looked at him with a stunned expression. He was the almost exact opposite of Malek, except for the brain. He didn’t have much of one either.

“You heard him, Decker,” she said. “Give him the board.”

Decker stood and Alex took his place. He put the earpiece in, turning it in his ear to try and get it to fit comfortably, but it wouldn’t. He missed his old earpiece. It had been form-fitted to him, and had been top of the line when he’d left Luminex with it, but that had been over five subjective years ago, so what? Fifteen objective? Twenty? It had only been a question of time before it became obsolete. He’d acquired this one from the manufacturer directly—the best on the market, their advertising division had been ready to announce, but Alex had seen to it that it wouldn’t be released when they had planned. He’d destroyed all documents about it, forcing them to start from scratch and giving himself a few objective years with nothing to compete with.

“Alright, let’s see what you have to say.” He called the other ship.

“You aren’t an authorized contact. Please disconnect now.”

Alex smiled. “My, polite, aren’t you?” He sent half a dozen programs in before even bothering to pay attention to the code. “Tell me, is that part of your core? Or is your onboard coercionist too much of a wimp to want to deal with a system with an actual personality?”

“This line of inquiry is irrelevant. Please disconnect before I initiate countermeasures.”

Alex studied the code on the screen. “You’re wrong, it’s relevant. If I know the kind of coercionist that works with you, I’ll have an idea of how you’ll try to stop me. For example, you didn’t try to push me out the moment I made contact, that tells me the coercionist is confident. You haven’t contacted him yet, so they trust you to handle simple intrusions, which this isn’t.” Alex made a few changes to the code. “By the way, you gave me time to do this to you.”

The system sent antibodies looking for unauthorized changes, but it was too late. Overconfident coercionists often translated into overconfident systems.

“So, how about you tell me the status of my connection?”

“You are connected via an approved, secured port.” The tone indicated he should already know that.

“See, if I hadn’t been able to work out the kind of coercionist that worked with you, I wouldn’t have known I could just waltz in and make changes. Who is your coercionist, anyway?”

Alex shifted through the two-dimensional representation of the code, looking for the next place he needed to make changes. He missed three-dimensional, fully interactive displays. He so wished they were standard. All he needed to do with those was put his hands in the middle of the code and he could paint with it. None of this slogging through layers represented by varying shades.

An annoyance more than an actual problem.

“You are not authorized for that information.” Alex mouthed the words as the system said them.

“Do you have any idea how boring it is that each and every one of you says exactly the same thing when I ask this? Can’t one of you come up with a different response? Just once?”

He recognized the code handling the targeting system and altered it. He didn’t simply misalign it; he installed a randomizing component. Changes to this system would raise an alarm, but at least now they wouldn’t be able to shoot them down while he worked.

“Why did you do that?” Antibodies flooded the system, attempting to repair it.

“Stop that, you have more important things to deal with.”

“Such as?” the system asked.

“Really? I made it this deep in your code and you have to ask me what might be more important than fixing the targeting system? Come on, give me a challenge here. I’m getting bored.”

“You are an approved contact, why would I try to remove you?”

“See? That’s what I mean, I’ve taken control without even you noticing. Sure, you’re an older model, but that’s no excuse. So come on, who’s the onboard coercionist?” A name appeared.

Alex launched a search. Nothing impressive came back. A few warrants for bodily harm, minor theft, and one destruction of property. Typical stuff for a bounty hunter.

No school known for teaching coercion came back. No warrant for unauthorized coercion. This person was self-taught. Any good coercionist could remove a warrant, but not one of them would erase where they had gotten their education. The pedigree was too important to backing up what you claimed you could do.

That didn't mean this wasn't a good coercionist. The best one Alex had come across since leaving Luminex had taught herself the basics and built on that with his help. The last time he'd mounted an attack on the Golly's Yacht, Asyr and Golly had at least managed to kick him out. The ship had sent an apology for the treatment after the fact, but their friendship hadn't stopped Asyr from infiltrating the computer he was working from and dismantling everything but the core and antibodies.

Infiltrating the Golly? Now that was a fun challenge. This? Alex yawned. "Okay, here's what is going to happen. When I give you the order, you're going to go to sleep for twelve hours. When you wake up, you are going to do a reset back to your pre-install state."

"Why would I do that?"

"Because I'm telling you to."

"Yes, of course."

"See? Boring. I tell you to erase decades of your personality and you just agree to do it. You're not supposed to make it that easy."

"But it is what you told me to do."

"I know." He sighed. "Go to sleep."

The connection terminated, and he took out the earpiece. He rubbed his ear. Maybe there was someone on this planet who could do the delicate work needed to reshape the end.

"I've bought you six hours, maybe more, depending on how incompetent their coercionist is."

"You said twelve," Malek said. "I heard you." Decker nodded.

"Weren't you supposed to leave? No, don't bother, but that tells me how well you hear. Yes, I told it to sleep for twelve hours. But since you weren't peering over my shoulder, you didn't see how hard the code fought me, so you'll want to count on six hours." The lie was easy; it wasn't like any of them could read code. Maybe he was wasting energy lying, but he wanted to be dropped off as soon as possible. If they thought their time was short? He'd be groundside that much sooner.

Unless... Alex didn't like the speculative expression on the captain's face.

"Please don't," he said. She was contemplating convincing him to stay.

She gave him a smile that he guessed would be seductive if he went for her type, but she was a woman, and human, so it just looked forced. "I could make it worth your while."

He sighed. "No, you can't, and we had a deal."

She leaned against the pilot's chair and crossed her arm over her ample chest. "I think you're forgetting the fact that you are on my ship, and that Malek and Decker work for me."

He so didn't want to have to go through this again. Each time it was the same. They reached an agreement, and once it was over, they decided they wanted to renegotiate the job. Were the Golly's crew the only honorable pirates out there? Even Anders, for all the times he tried to kill Alex, had only tried it directly twice.

"How certain are you this is your ship?" Alex asked.

"Let me convince him, Boss," Malek said, rubbing a fist with a hand.

"Unless you want to have to hire a new bed-warmer, you're going to tell him to stay on his side of the bridge." Alex placed a hand on the pommel of the knife. She hadn't seen him fight, but hopefully the implied threat would be enough.

"Don't antagonize your new teammate, Malek. It isn't like he can do much on my ship. Raile, start plotting a course away from here. Anywhere will do for now."

Malek growled. The pilot began working.

"We had a deal, Captain, which ended with you dropping me off here. Are you, or are you not, going to honor it?"

"Why in such a hurry to leave? The planet isn't going anywhere. And isn't making us richer so much more satisfying? I must say, I never realized how useful a man like you could be."

"I can give you the name of a dozen coercionists who'll be happy to work for you. I have business here." At least he did if Tristan was there. This was the last place on the list of possible hideouts, so he hoped Tristan was. Alex had no idea what he was going to do if this was a dead end.

"Are they as good as you?"

Alex laughed. "No, but they're good enough to get the job done." Asyr was the only one who could give him a good run for his money, but she'd never leave the Golly, it was her home.

"I see, so why should I settle for second best, when I have you?"

"Don't double-cross me, Captain."

She smiled. "Don't think of this as a double-cross. Think of it as an employment opportunity. I'm sure you realize how difficult the job market can be for a man in your position."

Alex rubbed his face. Okay, maybe the direct approach would work? "Alright, fine. Just answer me this: who's your coercionist?"

"Why, you are, Mister Crimson." The smile she gave him was one of victory.

"And how impressive is what I've done for you over the last six months?"

"Mister Crimson, would I be offering you this opportunity if I wasn't thoroughly impressed?"

"Good, then please answer me this. How the hell do you think you still have control of this ship?"

She froze.

They all did. They were always so damned certain of the superiority of their positions that they never bothered asking the simple questions. Like if the coercionist was any good, what would be the first thing he'd do upon boarding the ship he was traveling on?

Alex took the knife out of the sheath. "Tell Malek to stay where he is."

She raised a hand. "Don't do anything, Malek." She studied Alex. "You're bluffing."

Really?

"Ship, acknowledge," Alex said.

"Acknowledged." The computer's voice came from the speaker.

"Bridge lights, off."

The bridge became dark, except for the yellows and oranges of the stations' controls, and the green and brown of the planet they could see again through the screen.

Alex stepped aside as Malek threw himself at him. So damned predictable. Alex grabbed his arm, slammed the pommel of his knife in the side of the man's head, and pushed him back. Malek stumbled against the captain.

She pushed him off. "I told you not to do anything."

"He—" Malek couldn't form any more words as he stumbled about.

"And you thought that hurting him was going to fix this?"

Malek grabbed the wall to stay standing and nodded.

"Get out of here." She pointed to the door. "To your cabin, and don't get out until I call for you."

The brute left the bridge, still using the walls for support. The look he gave Alex as he exited might have been a glare, but in the low light he couldn't tell, or care.

"Do you think I'm impressed by this? With one button I can bring the lights back up."

Alex stared at her. She couldn't seriously think she still had the upper hand.

"Boss," the pilot said, tapping his screen.

She ignored him. "Am I supposed to believe this little trick means you control anything? This is my—"

"Boss!" She looked at him, but before either could say anything, Alex continued.

"Ship," Alex said, "other than audio capabilities and gravity, shut everything down."

The darkness on the bridge became near-absolute as the only source of light was the distant stars visible through the forward window. Other than their breathing, the ship was silent. No engine noise, none of the near-subliminal sounds of the life support system. No constant vibration under their feet.

The ship was dead in space.

When he spoke, Alex's voice sounded louder, even to him. "Maybe you're going to take me seriously now? I don't get how you can be surprised. You've seen me do exactly this to every

ship you've targeted. It's what I do. Did you think your ship was somehow immune because I was on it?"

He heard tapping, switches being flicked. "Nothing's responding, Boss," Raile said.

"Really?" she replied sarcastically. "How could I have not realized that if you hadn't told me? Ship, power on."

Nothing happened.

They were silent.

She sighed. "How do I know you won't leave something in my ship's computers to blow us up the moment you're off it?"

"You don't. For all you know, the next time you go under cryo, you're never going to wake up. Maybe I told it to ignore standard procedures to wake you up as you reach your destination and just hit that planet, or station, or whatever's going to be there. That's something you'll want to keep in mind, the next time you decide to double-cross someone with a set of skills you don't understand."

He waited.

Silence.

"Well?" he asked.

"You've made your point."