

The cacophony around Alex quieted as Miranda closed the hold's hatch, until it vanished entirely with the sucking sound of it sealing shut.

"Quiet at last," Miranda sighed as she joined him and Jacoby, dropping in the copilot's chair. "How certain are we the smuggler's hold is undetectable?"

"I checked it while I had nothing else to do on Mobius," Jacoby answered. "It's top of the line. Whoever this Katherine was, she didn't skimp on it. There's even a stealth field embedded in it that lets me control what the sensors will see inside, instead of just showing up as empty. I have it set to register as a bunch of random crap."

"How's that different from what's actually in there?" Miranda asked, looking over the board, but not touching anything.

"The crap I have it show up as won't get us blown out of the void the moment the Sayatoga scans us." Jacoby smirked. "And you're calling Anders crap? I thought you two were hitting it off."

Miranda shrugged. "He's nice enough, not as stupid as Crimson likes to hint. He maintains control of his team, so he's competent. But it isn't like I've had time to check the rest of his assets."

"Ah, right," Jacoby said, "the ever-important performance in bed that every merc has to go through if he's to work with the great Miranda Sunstar."

"Smirk all you like, old man, but when it's just the two of you on a ship for years, you'd better be compatible in that way, otherwise the tension is going to blow the ship apart. Just ask Crimson."

"Leave me out of your sex life, Miranda," Alex replied, keeping his eyes on the sensors, but thinking back on how her and Anders had been huddled over the lounge table, whispering seriously until she'd noticed him approaching.

"Oh, trust me, you do not feature in anything of that type when it comes to me and my bed."

"My bed," Alex said.

"Don't remind me. I hate fluid-replacement systems, and those chairs are not comfortable."

Jacoby chuckled. "You should have seen them before they were fixed up."

Alex pushed the scanner as far as it would go. Officially they were still hours away from the meeting, but that was only if he trusted Miranda's information. Having the Sayatoga drop on them unexpectedly and disable the ship would be a perfect way for her to hand him over for real.

He knew she hadn't contacted anyone from the ship, or Mobius, but Anders and his people had their own communication devices, and not all of them routed through the closest node. He knew she was going to betray him at some point, same with Anders, and he was ready for it, but he still had to plan for other eventualities. How did Tristan do it? Managing to always out think his opponents, while not dropping from exhaustion?

"Crimson," Miranda said, sharp enough he knew it wasn't the first time she'd called his name. "Do you think having Anders cover you when we go out is a good idea, considering how pissed he is at being down there with the rabble?"

Anders had wanted to be up here, with them. He'd pointed out that he was a team leader, so had no business being crammed in the hold. Alex had pointed out Miranda only worked with one partner, so if there was more than three people visible when the ship was scanned, the Sayatoga would know something was up. He'd expected her to side with Anders, but she'd stayed out of it.

Anders had pointed out that Jacoby could go down instead. Alex had ended the discussion by telling Anders it was the hold or being dropped off here, and that they'd pick him up on the way back.

"Anders is always pissed, so this is no different. And I can't control who he decides is going to cover me from the ship, not unless I kill him, and then kill anyone who objects to what I did. He's a grown man, he'll deal with it."

“If you say so. He came across as more of a grown boy. Took one look at me and could only think of one thing.”

Jacoby smirked.

“Yeah,” Alex said, “how to control you. Use you up and throw you away.”

“Hey,” Jacoby said, “that’s just what you do, girl. That makes you perfect for one another.”

“Screw you, old man.”

“Not in your lifetime.”

“They’re early,” Alex said, checking the detectors. If they were within the Sayatoga’s range at this distance, he had to hope they had just as much resolution as he did. They were a small dot at the edge of the range. He looked at Miranda.

“What? Course-planning isn’t an exact science. They could have gotten a call to hurry wherever they’re going. You should just count yourself lucky they weren’t already past us by the time we got here.” She stood and headed for the pack she’d taken out of the hold. “I guess that means it’s time for you to get in character.” She pulled out something from it and Alex stared.

“What’s that?” The two bracelets were metal, not very thick, and connected by a chain.

“Those are your restrains.”

“Where’s the stun capability? Magnetic lock? They look like I can break them just by sneezing hard.”

“Trust me, they won’t break. As for the rest: those need processors to run, a processor that a coercionist can take control of.”

“I’m not going to have my earpiece.”

She rolled her eyes. “Give me some credit, you’re not the first coercionist I’ve caught. Those earpieces can be pre-programmed. Which reminds me, hand it over.”

Alex gave it to her, eyeing the restrains. She wasn’t wrong, and he hated that she’d planned for it. “How are you going to unlock them when it’s time?”

She pulled out a piece of metal. “I have the key.”

“Where did you get something that ancient?” Jacoby asked.

“An old market, the kind you get your clothes at.”

“At least what I wear qualifies as clothes, and not applied coloring.”

“We’d better go with something more recent,” Alex said. “I’m going to have to fight for my life out there, as well as yours. If they pull you away from me before you take these off, we’re screwed.”

“Alex, I use the right equipment for the right criminal. If I show up with you in something a coercionist could control, they are going to know something’s wrong.”

“They don’t know I’m a coercionist. I’m a pirate.”

“They aren’t stupid. I knew Crimson was a coercionist when I looked at his warrants. You took on too big a ship for the size of the crew you had.” She lobbed them at him.

Two halves connected by a hinge and a mechanical lock with a foot of chain. Once he put them on, he’d be severely limited in his range of motion.

“Guys,” Jacoby called, “you need to get in place, because they’re going to be able to get a resolution on the inside soon.”

He snapped them on, not liking this. Instead of sitting him in a chair, she patted him down. “What are you doing?” He couldn’t hide his irritation as she found the sheath inside his boot and took the knife out.

“What I’d do with any other criminal.”

“They’re polycarbon, they can’t be detected.”

“Your average scanner doesn’t bother looking for polycarbon,” she said, forcing him to lift his foot and finding the blade in the sole. “There is nothing average about the Sayatoga. Their scanners will detect polycarbon, and then will run algorithms on the shape to determine what it is.” She found the one in his buckle and in the collar of his

jacket.

“How am I supposed to fight?” Nothing. She wasn’t leaving him anything. He felt like he had to cover himself up as she looked him over again.

“You have fists. And your job is to get to a terminal and secure us in, right?” She pushed him in the closest seat and restrained him to it.

“You’re liking this way too much,” he grumbled.

“I always like doing my job.” She patted him on the shoulder. “Jake, take us in.”

“Don’t call me that. My name is Jacoby.”

“No one I’d work with would ever admit to bearing that name. You’re Jake Mercy for the duration of this job.”

Jacoby looked at Alex, who shrugged. “I’d go with her on this. If there’s mix-ups on comms and it’s caught, it isn’t going to help us.” He raised his bound hands. “You don’t get these off me fast enough, and odds are we both die. Try to remember that as you’re plotting to betray me.”

She looked offended. “Crimson, you’re paying me for this.”

“Are you saying Anders hasn’t offered you anything?”

She smiled. “Of course, he’s offered me plenty, but the only thing that matters is nowhere near large enough.” She grinned as she looked him up and down lustfully. “Nowhere near as large as what you’ve offered, anyway. You have nothing to worry about.”

“We’re being scanned,” Jacoby called.

“How certain are you that they won’t scan the ship again once we’re inside?” He asked her.

“They never did before. There’s no reason they would now.”

Unless you’d told them to. The Sayatoga could offer her something much larger than he had, if she played her cards right. He had to hope she hadn’t thought of *that*.

“Jacoby, the moment you land, unlock the hold. If there’s any way you can do so, try to angle the ship so they can’t easily see in through the open ramp. I wish they had docking rings instead of a hangar. Once we’re started down it, open the hold and let them out.”

“Oh, Jake,” Miranda said, “none of my partners call me ‘girl’, it’s ‘hun’, ‘dear’, or sometimes they even use my name. Had one call me ‘lover’ once, but he didn’t last long.”

“Trust me, girl, that’s one thing I’ll never call you. I’ll be happy to use ‘bitch’, if you want.”

“Do that, old man, and I’ll have to see about castrating you before this is all over.”

Alex forced their banter out of his mind and focused on the restraints. How was he going to get out of them if she was betraying him? He cursed. Why hadn’t he planned for something like this? Tristan would have.

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“Sayatoga, this is Miranda Sunstar, on approach with the package.”

Alex snapped awake. When had he fallen asleep?

“Miss Sunstar,” a woman replied, “it’s a pleasure to hear from you again. How was the trip?”

“Boring, just as I like them.”

“The scan shows you and two others, neither of whom match the scans of your partner.”

Alex studied her face. The concern there was genuine as far as he could tell.

“Sayatoga, I wasn’t aware I was supposed to update you every time one of them leaves. I must be on the sixth or seventh model since the last time I was here. I picked this one up with the package and my new ship.”

“Ah, yes. Please be advised that there’s been a change in procedures. In the future, you’ll need to keep us apprised of any changes in your organizational structure. It’ll help avoid potential misunderstanding.”

“Copy that, Sayatoga.” She was worried.

“Please hand over control of your ship and we will take you in.”

Alex listened in on the system. He heard the connection establish itself and the programs swarm the ship. His fingers twitched with the need to get in there fully and stop them. He caught himself subvocalizing commands, then disconnected his implant. He’d give himself away if he didn’t.

He closed his eyes and waited. Though he couldn’t see the screens, and without listening to the system, couldn’t get any clues that way, he figured the approach had gone smoothly when the ship touched down with a shudder.

“Please exit your ship,” the woman said. “Your escort is waiting for you outside.”

“On my way.” Miranda undid the chair’s restraint.

“Miranda, hun?” Jacoby called in an almost derisive tone. “There’s four security officers waiting outside.”

She nodded as she pulled Alex to his feet. “Makes sense; Crimson has kills to his name, but mostly isn’t known for being violent.”

Jacoby looked over his shoulder. “They’re in full tactical gear, with rifles and sidearms. That seems excessive for someone like Crimson.”

She nodded. “I’ve dropped off people with more violence to them that didn’t get full tactical gear for their reception.”

“Do any of them have knives?” Alex asked.

“Of course they do, I said full tactical gear.”

“We stick with the plan.” He looked at Miranda. “You’d better get these off me in a hurry, because I’m going to need both hands to deal with them.”

“Don’t worry so much. As soon as I hand you over, I’ll have you out of them.” She showed him the key in her hand as she led him to the ramp.

“Maybe you should hand it to me now.”

“If they search you and find it, you’re screwed.”

“You have the earpiece?” Alex asked, only now remembering.

“Yes. Relax, this is going to be fine.”

“It isn’t looking that way,” Alex grumbled as four heads became visible past the lowering ramp, in helmets with visors down. “I swear, if this is you and Anders—”

“I wouldn’t do that, not with him.”

No, of course, not with him, but how did the Sayatoga know not to take any chances? He forced himself to take deep breaths. He was a hardened criminal, he reminded himself as he saw the way they were holding the rifles. They were ready to shoot them down. These guys were not taking any chances with him.

He glanced around. No one else. The hangar had been emptied for the exchange. Fewer chances of anyone getting hurt if the criminal managed to get free. There was a door a hundred feet behind the guards, and others along the wall. Where was the mechanic’s terminal that should have been by the landing pad?

He fought in Miranda’s grip, tried to make a run for it, but she held on to him. The guard’s rifles went up a few inches, and they spread out to intercept him should she not keep him in check. Between two of them he saw it, halfway between them and the door.

“Miss Sunstar.” A guard, male by the voice, stepped forward. “How is this coercionist kept from accessing any systems?”

She pulled out the earpiece. “He can’t do anything without this.”

“Very well.” He motioned, and two of the guards stepped around them.

“Kind of excessive, don’t you think?” she commented as the guards took position on each side of Alex and her.

“No, Miss. Security is something we take very seriously on the Sayatoga.”

“Must be a new thing. Last time I was here, it was a lot less stiff.”

“Yes, Miss,” the man said. “If you’ll please, I’ll take that.”

She pulled her hand as he reached for the earpiece. “Sorry, that’s a souvenir.” The one guard left covering them tightened his grip on the rifle.

“I’m afraid not. Regulations are that I’m to take possession of any tools the criminal might make use of.”

“Fine.” She flicked it in the air toward the man and reached for Alex’s wrist, only to have her hand caught by the guard on her right.

“Please don’t touch the prisoner,” the man said, catching the earpiece.

“I was just going to force him toward you.”

“I appreciate that, but we can handle it from here.”

The guard on Alex’s left put a hand on his shoulder. Miranda was sweating. Not a lot, but he could see it. This wasn’t going like she’d planned. If this was a double-cross, she was being screwed, too. He was over-complicating it. This was his plan going sideways; that’s why she was nervous.

“Actually, Miss,” the man said as the doors opened to let in another four guards just as heavily armored and armed. “If you’ll come with me, the captain has your payment.”

“The captain? He has my payment?” She glanced at him, and Alex saw the fear in her eyes. Yeah, this wasn’t anything she’d planned. “That isn’t procedure.”

“I’m afraid I can’t speak to that, Miss. I’m just following instructions.”

Fuck this.

Alex elbowed the guard on his left in the neck, between the bottom of the visor and top of the collar. He felt his hand go numb as the visor scraped the skin, but he connected and the guard staggered back, gasping for breath. Alex turned with him, grabbed the knife at the belt, and planted it in the guard’s neck. It went in easily and when he turned, the blade sliced through the cartilage and bone, coming out the side. Mono-edge.

He flipped the knife in his hand and cut the chain.

He saw the guard aim at him and threw himself to the side as the visor gained a hole and the man fell back. Alex landed on the ground, rolled, and saw Tim with a rifle in-hand at the top of the ship’s ramp follow him. Their eyes met, and Tim focused on the incoming guards.

“Crimson!” Miranda was grabbing the earpiece out of the dead man’s hand.

He stood and ran at it, grabbed it with his hand regaining sensation, and took the knife off her belt with the other. It began vibrating. He found the switch by feel and set it to keep active, then threw it into the chest of an approaching guard.

He made contact with the terminal before he had the earpiece in. And even before he reached it he knew this wasn’t going to go according to plan. The ship’s coercionists were already in there. He cursed. How had they known? He knew he hadn’t left any trace of his previous visits. Although now he was thinking he should have taken control of the ship then, and dealt with keeping it all this time.

His fingers touched the terminal, and he was typing. At least the coercionists didn’t know where he was. That gave him time until they found his programs and traced them back. He launched them at the hangar door controls while he went for a communication port.

Nothing there but the usual monitoring programs. This was not the direction attacks normally came from. He didn’t bother being subtle as he disabled the programs, jammed the port open, and sent the message to the agreed upon vault.

He went for the door controls. As expected, the coercionists were keeping his programs from taking control. Alex let them deal with that, and took control of the forcefield. He had to hope it would last long enough.

He disconnected and ran for the ship. Every guard was dead. Anders and his people were in position around the ramp, guns and rifles up, ready for anyone to show up. Alex was surprised when not one of them shot him.

“Will! The door!” he yelled before he reached the ramp. He glared at Anders as he ran along Will and Aliana. “We are going to have a talk after this.” Alex ran up the ramp. “We need to move, now! They knew we were coming.”

“How?” Miranda asked. She was putting on her gun belt.

“How do you think?” he replied, taking his harness out of a locker.

“I didn’t—”

“Not you. Anders.”

“Hey!” one of the men Alex hadn’t paid attention to said. Another stopped him. There were six of Anders’s men in the ship. Alex cursed. Of course Anders would leave his people in here.

“Jacoby, I know you don’t like it, but you have to stay.” He nodded to the six. “I can’t leave them without supervision. Not if we want a ship to leave on.”

Jacoby ground his teeth. “Alright.”

“Mary, grab your gear and the bag I prepared.” He turned to his pilot. “Jacoby, once we’re out, seal the ship. I locked the field, but they’re going to regain control of that, and their best course is to void the hangar.”

“They do that and we go flying; we’re not locked in place,” the man replied, sitting in the pilot’s seat.

“Can you get around that?”

“Not unless someone gives me control of this ship back.” He put on the harness. “Tie yourself down, people; this is probably going to get bumpy.”

When he had his jacket back on, he grabbed the knives Miranda handed him and re-secured those in place. As soon as Mary was out of the hold with her packs, Alex had them run for the door.

It was still closed. “Will?”

“Don’t rush him,” Aliana said.

“Numbers move,” Will said. He had the panel open and was working among the wires.

Alex looked to Aliana for a translation. He didn’t have the time.

“Someone’s changing the combination. He needs to work around it, find the root access.”

“Can he do it?”

“Of course he can do it,” Anders said. “He’s a genius at that stuff. What the fuck happened?”

“What do you think? The people you told are trying to kill us.” Alex pointed to the view of space. “All they need to do is drop the field and we go flying into the void without suits.”

“I didn’t tell anyone.”

“Right, because anyone else here had reasons to. It’s the easiest way you could think of to get me killed. You and your people are the only ones with communication equipment I couldn’t monitor. Are you telling me one of them arranged this?”

“Trust me, Crimson. When I kill you, it’s going to be in person. Not through some faceless corporation.”

Alex cursed. He believed him. Which meant he was back to not knowing who had betrayed him. He looked at Mary, and the terror in her eyes told him she wasn’t the one. She knew what he’d do to her, he’d made it clear, and right now she was terrified he suspected her.

Fuck.

The door opened and everyone rushed out of the hangar.