

Premise-1

Alex slipped between the lines of code, careful not to disturb them. There were few times when he didn't announce his presence in some way as soon as he entered a computer, but this had to be one of them. He was only one coercionist, while the Baragur Paramilitia Conglom had an army of them at its disposal to protect its system.

It wasn't a corporation. If it were, SpaceGov would impose limits on what it was allowed to do. It wasn't even, officially, a company. Again, those had regulations ensuring they didn't cross nebulous ethical and moral boundaries.

What BPC was, if someone were to assign it a definition, was a box containing all the little projects military centric corporations didn't want SpaceGov paying attention to. Research, entirely theoretical, anyone managing a part of it would be quick to state when the ethicality of studying the effect of programs on implants was questioned. Never something they would do, but shouldn't they know what can be done? So they could recognize the result should one of the many, and large criminal organizations within the universe decide to unleash such a thing?

Of course, there were stories floating through the network. This coercionist, who had gone poking where she shouldn't have, and was found, three days later, half her head burned from the inside out. Or this thief, who'd claimed the score on which to retire, only for the report of his death of 'unknown' causes to then surface. Something claiming to be the report of the body stated it had been dismantled atom by atom.

Something impossible, of course.

Unless, like Alex and anyone dealing with side of the universe that didn't have scruples, you understood how vast said universe was, and that most people on their side of it were limited by access to funds and resources.

If someone took one of them and promised them whatever they needed, in exchange for shedding the few scruples they had left?

Well, Alex had had the result of such a deal rummage through his memories, years ago. And that scientist had only been funded by a corporation that abided by SpaceGov's rules. Luminex hadn't been able to promise him 'whatever the scientist needed'.

So Alex wasn't taking any chances with being noticed while he looked through this subdivision of a BPC research station's system. He wasn't even planning on taking anything. All he needed was a location within the outside world where the detail of a specific 'theoretical' research project was kept.

Alex much preferred dealing with the guards such a place would have, instead of whatever had to be floating within that kind of BPC vault.

He tightened the stealth sheath around himself as a buzz of programs floated by. They followed lines of code, with 'zaps' of instruction hitting them occasionally. Alex couldn't see the result without drawing attention to himself, but the sense he was left with was that of antibodies that had been injected with death programs.

Something else that shouldn't exist. And probably didn't, he told himself. That thief

had stolen something physical, not been exposed to a program.

Probably?

The sheer possibilities of what could be attempted once scruples were removed had to be the best deterrent against someone doing what Alex was in the process of doing.

Once they were past, he was on the move.

When he found where the information was contained, the security there made him check if he hadn't ended up elsewhere. What he was looking for wasn't that unethical. In fact, it was barely the engineering of something had occurred naturally. Something Alex dealt with currently.

Soldiers trained to the point where killing became normal couldn't be reintegrated within society because that normality didn't apply outside of the battlefield.

Alex wasn't interested in the suspected project where a BPC division had found a way to cause it in people without the years of overexposure to violence, death, and being forced to inflict both on people who might not always deserve it. What Alex was interested in was that the information he'd acquired indicated they had also created a way to undo the process. That was the part he needed.

If it was real.

Alex had lost track of how many promising leads about research within the mindset of killers and soldiers, and ways to bring them under control had turned out to be failures. He couldn't believe there wasn't someone out there who hadn't researched the subject to the point where it could be used practically. He couldn't afford to believe that. His future with Tristan depended on it.

After the failure of the sanctuary's methods, Alex had given up on the less than scientific approaches they'd looking into. He'd leave those to Tristan. He was focusing on methods that had a body of research behind them.

Which were turning out to be rather rare.

But if someone out there had looked into it, it was BPC. And even if the security in the section Alex was looking out reminded him more of the vault holding the records of a corporate president's sexual deviations than one holding military research that could help many, this was where his research said the information was contained.

He set to build the programs he'd need to extract the information, while also preparing the computer to receive it.

He was happy that for all his love of antique things, Carter Hart had top of the line computers within his ship. The Kadary Ralion was fully modular, capable of being physically cut from other Ralion while not losing any processing capability for a short period of time.

It meant that on a ship like theirs, any catastrophic damage to one section did not immediately ensure the death of everyone on board.

For Alex's immediate purpose, it meant that when the security protocols he was looking at caught up to the ship's computer, he would be able to contain the damage while the programs he had waiting for it would break them down until they were harmless.

Hopefully.

The worse scenario Alex was looking at was replacing this section's processor boards before allowing it to reconnect to the rest of the ship.

The programs in place and the section cut from the rest of the ship, Alex activated it then willed himself out of this system, uncaring about attracting attention. The information being sent a fraction of a second behind him would sound enough alarm to render his discretion needless. He was counting on the deadliness of the response to prevent the coercionist from bothering to attempt to trace his path within the network.

He pushed away from the computer as soon as he cut it off from the network, fighting the forming headache, but alarm lights were already flashing as BPC's security measures fought his programs within this section of the ship's computer. It took a full minute for the alarm lights to cease flashing, as whatever was left of the battle wasn't virulent enough to cause it more problems than already caused.

He didn't risk talking to it, instead pulling the data chip that should contain the information he was after and nothing more. He inserted it into a datapad he'd prepared for this, filling it with more of his program, to take on anything that might have managed to slip through and lodged itself within it.

If that had happened, the resulting battle would most likely render the datapad, and anything connected to it, useless, but it would keep the ship safe.

While he waited for any sneaky delay in response, Alex killed the part of the computer he'd used. He'd let Tristan deal with resurrecting it and ensuring no security measures came along with that.

The datapad was still intact once he was done, so he brought the information the chip contained up, and smiled.

He had the location of the data stack repository where the research he was after was contained. He rewrote it within his datapad, not trusting this one, then threw the compromised one down the disposal. No program could survive the processor they were on being physically being destroyed.

He stretched and took Heals, then left the cockpit.

Over the last subjective...two, three years? He and Tristan had turned Hart's ship into their own, the lounge having been turned into a workshop, the sleep pods had been removed and that part of the ship turned into storage, since Tristan had turned the hold into his...

Alex was reluctant to call his research lab, since more of what Tristan did was read old book, then search the net for...confirmation, or more books to read. Nearly every job they'd undertaken as part of Tristan's research had been to the location of a city that either no longer existed, or didn't exist in the form Tristan's information said it would. Books had been acquired, cures...not so much.

He went down the ladder, and the smell of books assaulted him. The only word he could associate with it was 'old'. Books were still made, he'd discovered, but they were exclusively for enthusiasts. Reproduction of old tomes none of them were serious enough to go acquire themselves.

Most of them with errors, Tristan had pointed out. The older the books, the further away from SpaceGov Standard they were written in, and because Standard was the only language now in use, people who could translate them were rare. Alex figured that if Tristan ever decided to give up the life of a merc slash researcher slash killer, he could make a fortune as a translator now that he'd worked through so many of them.

If only what Tristan was researching was had a more ... plausible chance of working.

Alex couldn't blame his Samalian for going in that direction. In a way, it was his own fault. What Tristan was doing was nothing more than a much more elaborate and deep version of what he had done to cure Tristan. But forgetting a small, if crucial, detail.

Alex didn't believe in any of that stuff.

His actions had been predicated on believing that because he had been raised within the culture, Tristan would believe in the Source and the Aspects and all that came with them. And that he had been cured proved he did.

Alex believed in science, with some dose of mental delusion thrown in. It was why he'd gone along with the sanctuary, but hadn't been surprised it hadn't worked.

Tristan was now looking into...obscure things. Items that didn't quite obey the laws of the universe, as they were known. Processes that required calling on things resembling the Source.

He was tempted to ask him to stop, but they'd said they would look everywhere for the way to cure Alex. And that had to include places Alex didn't believe would ever work.

Tristan wasn't at the desk he's installed, but seated on the floor, three datapads and four open books before him, while he looked from the one in his hand to the datapad on his left.

Alex made it to three steps behind his Samalian before his ears swiveled back, speaking to how focused he'd been on his work. Dangerously so, Tristan would tell Alex, if he'd been the one this unaware of his surroundings.

He placed a hand on his Samalian's shoulder and squeezed, his fingers digging through the thick fur, so dark the brown seemed black with speckling of white like stars in the night's sky.

"We might need to physically replace part of the engineering monitoring board. I got the information I was after, but their security caught up before I disconnected. I was ready, and I killed that section, but enough alarms were flashing. There might have been physical damage."

"I found what I was after too." Tristan tapped the datapad, where a location was noted.

"Good, then how about a break?"

"I want to confirm—"

"Tristan, you need a break. Take it from someone who gets so focussed he loses track of what's going on around him. You also lose track of what your body needs."

"I'm not hungry."

Alex rolled his eyes. There was no way to know how true that was. Tristan was so controlled it wouldn't dare trigger hunger unless the Samalian allowed it. Still, Alex knew other ways to get his attention.

He knelt behind Tristan, wrapping his arms around the massive chest, and leaned close to an ear. He whispered. "That isn't the need I figured needs taking cared of." He blew against the inside of the pavilion while reaching down to grasp the already growing erection and smiled.

There was always one need Alex could depend on his Samalian needing to take care of.