

The panel next to the hangar door was flashing yellow, which couldn't be a good sign considering how things had gone from the moment they'd arrived, but Alex was too drained to listen in on the system. He'd find out what needed fixing soon enough.

When he stood before it, the display above the flashing light read "recompression in progress". Who had decompressed the hangar and why just didn't matter right now. He looked at Tristan, standing there, hunched, eyes glazed over. Mary shook her head. There hadn't been any changes in him while they walked. He should have had at least one mood swing in the time it took them to cross the ship.

With a sigh, he connected to the terminal. Whoever caused the decompression could have laid other traps for them. He removed the message and looked at the code, the voice of the system not calming him as it normally did.

"Hey, Crimson," a digitized voice said, and he went on alert, sending probes. "Good to see you in here."

He noticed the open communication ports as he readied attack programs. "Asyr?"

"Who else would still be functional?"

He almost told her about Golly, but he couldn't risk it. Asyr was a nice enough person, but she was a pirate. She'd look for ways of making use of what Golly could now do.

"How's Nat?" he asked, giving his programs instructions.

"Really? You're going to play that game? Her name is Pat, and you know me well enough to recognize my syntax."

"It's been a long time, Asyr. It evolved, and I'm too tired to wade through it to find your base syntax."

"Yeah, it has been that kind of day for you."

Alex nodded. "How are you? Anders said he shut down the Golly's comms. That's back up, I see."

"That's the least he arranged. Most of his people are in the brig at the moment. I expect that with him dead, they'll be dropped off at the next port."

"I'm glad you're okay. What happened to the hangar? How long until we can go in?"

"Just a few minutes, but your ship isn't there. Anders voided it to kill the previous captain. He shut down the gravity, and the system was set up to throw the ships out or something. I haven't really looked into that yet. Way more important things to deal with right now. By the way, your ship might have been damaged; I tried contacting it and it isn't responding. The scans tell me everyone's alive, but *it's* mostly dead."

"That feels like something Anders would do; overkill always seemed to be his method. The ship's fine. I only left life-support running for Jacoby and the men Anders left in there. I'll reactivate it. How sure are you that the previous captain's dead?"

"Well, your ship is the only one registering life signs, so unless he's some lifeform that can't be detected, he's dead."

Alex looked at Tristan. He couldn't tell if he'd made the connection from "captain" to "Justin". He hadn't reacted at all. How would he take learning his brother was dead? When he was better, he'd probably be pissed someone else had killed him.

"I need a communication port to contact my ship."

One flashed. "Go ahead. I'm off to continue cleaning this system. It's a mess. Whoever this captain was, he was determined that no one get this ship once he was gone."

"I get the sense he was a sore loser. Did Zephyr reach the bridge okay? He wasn't in the best of shape."

"Yeah, he's fine. Karl's looking after his injuries. Your friend, on the other hand, he's a mess. I don't think he's cut out for this."

"He isn't my friend, and that's too bad, because he made the choice. If he tries to get out after this, it's going to take a lot of work."

"You could help him, you know."

"There isn't anything in it for me." The ship responded, and he sent the codes to start it

up. “Jacoby, how are you holding up?”

“A little banged up.” The reply came after a slight delay. “But I’m okay.”

“Banged up? Did the gravitics fail?” he asked as he checked the diagnostics.

“No, the people in here got restless, and I needed to put them in their place. Shove them, really.”

“You can tell them Anders is dead—actually, don’t. That isn’t going to make them cooperative. Anyway, Will controls the ship, so things are safe in here.”

“I’ll be there in a few seconds.”

The yellow light switched to green, and the door opened.

“We’ll be waiting.”

Tristan didn’t react to his touch, and only started moving when Alex pulled on his arm. He watched the ship land, and was halfway there when the ramp lowered. A handful of Anders’s men walked out, hands tied behind their backs, face and clothing bloodied.

Jacoby had a few fading bruises.

“You weren’t kidding when you said you shoved them. Any dents in the walls I’ll have to get fixed?”

“None of them have skulls that are all that thick, just no common sense. They think because I’m three or four times older than they are that I’m going to be a pushover. Kids these days.”

Alex nodded. “Get the ship ready. Once Mary has Tristan settled in, we’re leaving.”

Jacoby glanced at Tristan, then studied him, concern on his face. “What about the rest? Vic and that bounty hunter? Will and his woman?”

“Will has the Sayatoga, so he’ll arrange for them to get where they want to go. Mary too.”

“So we don’t need to drop anyone off on Mobius?” Jacoby asked, hopeful.

Alex nodded, and Jacoby brightened as he headed in.

“Asyr? Are you listening?”

“I am, but I’m a little busy keeping life-support alive, so I can’t help much.”

“Just let Will know he has the rest of Anders’s men waiting in the hangar. He’s going to want to send someone to get them before what’s left of the ship’s security does.”

“Will do.”

Alex led Tristan inside, and Mary hurried ahead. She had the medical bed out of the wall when he reached her. He had Tristan lie down on it and received no protestations.

He looked at his Samalian, and was so drained he couldn’t even muster the energy to feel the pain anymore. “I’ll be right back,” he told Mary. “If you’re done before that, don’t go anywhere.”

She eyed him warily, but nodded.

He climbed the ladder to his room and took the case from the cabinet. He opened it and looked at the Samalian statue in it. If he had more energy he’d be screaming, letting out his justified anger at all this. At everything he considered its fault.

Instead, he sat on the bed. “You can’t leave him like this,” he told the Defender. “I have no idea what kind of damage the drugs added to what—” He felt his eyes get wet and closed them. He fucking wasn’t going to cry. If he couldn’t muster the energy to be angry, he wasn’t going to have it to cry.

“I don’t know if this is your idea of a joke, or part of a greater plan. I don’t even know if I believe in any of this anymore, but you owe me. Owe us.” He looked at the hatch in the floor. “Owe him.”

He lifted the statue and took the chip that was under it. He put it back in the cabinet and took a chip out of his pocket. The chip contained Mary’s new ID, the imperfect one he’d built after the perfect one, when doubt about her trustworthiness assaulted him. When he’d envisioned all the little ways she could try to screw up the rescue, thinking he wouldn’t notice. After all, she hated Tristan; thought Alex needed to be rescued from

him.

He threw that chip in the disposal. She'd made a valid point that she had done everything in her power to help him, them. She didn't deserve to be double-crossed after that.

Back down the ladder, he watched as Mary made adjustments to the medical computer. The broken band that had fed him drugs had been replaced by one connected to the bed.

She noticed him. "He's sedated." she said as she looked at the readouts. "He's messed up, but he's alive, and now that he's on a proper bed, he has a chance." She tapped a screen, made an adjustment. "It has all the data on Samalians, I'm going to guess you saw to that, so I've set the computer to clean out everything that doesn't belong in there. Once that's done, it's going to put him under for the rest of the trip."

She leaned against the edge of the bed. "I'm going to repeat the warning I gave you: you need to prepare yourself for him being different. No one goes through what he went through and comes out the same. The drugs are only a part of it. I can't even imagine the kind of torture he had to endure, and I'm not looking for the records of it. A medical bed can deal with the withdrawal, it can fix his body, but a mind is something even the most advanced one can't handle. To be honest, I don't even think human doctors who claim to be able to rebuild a mind can do it."

Alex nodded. "He's going to be fine."

"Alex, you need to—"

"You don't know him." He cut her off, no real anger in his voice, but bitterness. He already knew what she was saying, but he had to hope, to believe.

He handed her the data chip.

"What's that?"

"The payment I promised you. A new identity."

She took it, looked the chip over. "Should I expect it to blow up in my face?"

He laughed. "I destroyed that one."

"Really? You had one that could explode?"

"Only code-wise. Tiny things, a small warrant on a world you never heard of, money owed to a handful of lending agencies. That kind of stuff. Nothing that would ruin your life, but they were hassles you'd have to deal with. This one is clean. No hidden surprises."

"The others? You've already paid them, right?"

Alex closed his eyes. "When I planned this job, only me and Tristan were going to leave this ship. It wasn't set up to get anyone killed outright, but... Well, only he matters."

He opened his eyes, and she was looking at him in shock.

"I'm a monster, Mary. I don't trust anyone except him. I know you're going to betray me at some point, because that's what I'd do to you."

She looked at Tristan and her face hardened.

"You can't blame him for that. I'd become like this before I met him. He just sharpened it to a mono-edge."

"And now?"

"Now we go our separate way."

She took out her datapad and inserted the chip. "Marybeth? Really?"

Alex shrugged. "I figured you didn't want to have to get used to a brand new name. This way you can just say you prefer Mary. I kept the background mostly like yours, minus the crimes. The only big thing you'll have to memorize is that you're now from Celirik."

"Where is that?"

"Middle of nowhere. Mid-level planet, with an education system comparable to Bramolian Six, which reminds me. You can't ever go back there. You are too well known

by the Law, and I can't remove you from their database, not with how paranoid they are. You left school because of a death in your family. There's a bank account linked to the identity with enough money so you can go back to medical school, if that's what you want, or you can live off it for a few years. It's up to you."

She read some of the entries and looked at him in shock again. "You didn't have to do all that. I mean you promised me an identity, but you could have stuck to the minimum. A name and a few lines of background."

"I don't do anything halfway, Mary." He smiled and nodded to Tristan. "You can blame him for that, too. He taught me the value of a complete story when building an identity. And maybe I felt we needed to make amends for the part he played in putting you into a gilded cage. I don't know." He chuckled. "Oh, and don't worry. When my own brand of paranoia hits, my sabotages are just as thorough."

"That sounds like a threat."

Alex shrugged. "I'm tired. The filters are gone, code's just pouring out. I didn't intend it as one."

She looked at her pad, then put it away. "Thank you. Now I need to ask for one more favor."

He tensed. "Mary," he warned.

"Don't ever look for me again. Don't come asking for my help, don't come to my rescue if I'm in trouble, don't... Just don't. I never want to see either one of you again. You said you're a monster. Well with this, you are giving me a chance to get away from my personal monsters. I don't want to bring stuff like that back, and that includes you."

He nodded. "You'd better go."

She turned and left without looking back.

He closed the ramp and returned to Tristan. Even asleep, he looked wrong. Alex hadn't gotten many glimpses of a sleeping Tristan, but even then, he hadn't looked relaxed. Tristan never let his guard down, not even in sleep.

He wanted to climb on the bed and curl up next to him. To hold him, to do something that would make Tristan push him away. He needed to have the old patterns reestablished. Instead, he went in the cockpit and sat in the copilot's chair.

Jacoby grinned at him and the ship began moving. "I have the coordinates set in for home. In a few hours, subjectively, we'll be able to put all this behind us."

Alex entered a new set of coordinates.

Jacoby frowned at the change. "Where is that?"

"Where we're going."

"What are you talking about?" Jacoby entered commands and information came up. "The plan was to rescue Tech and go home."

Jacoby was lucky Alex was so tired. He felt the desire to plant a knife through the man's heart for bringing up that name, but he couldn't get his hand to move.

Didn't Jacoby understand there was no Tech? No, of course not, Tristan's masks were just that good. How long had he seen Jack? Even after the beatings? Victor still saw Simon. So he came up with a reason the man would accept, if not be happy with.

"Do you really want him there in his current state?"

"She said the drugs are going to be out of his system."

"Did you miss the part about his mind being broken?"

"You said he'd be okay."

"Really? Was he okay when you saw him with me?" Alex snapped. "That was before the drugs. The thing that's wrong with him predates them." He pointed to the planet with the information scrolling next to it. "That's where we're going to find the cure for him."

"What's on Samalia that Cornelius can't do?"

"Cornelius can't do anything for him."

“Alex, Samalia isn’t even a human world. What are they going to have? Huts? Mystic stuff? How is any of that going to help him?”

Alex glared at him, angry that his plan was being dismissed out of hand, even if Jacoby didn’t realize it was what he was doing. “That’s where the cure is. Now go under.”

“You’re not making any sense,” Jacoby grumbled. “But if that doesn’t work, we’re taking Tech home, where we can actually help him.”

“Sure,” Alex lied. “If this doesn’t work, it isn’t like I have anywhere else we can go.”

Jacoby nodded in a way that made Alex think the man thought he was in charge. He attached the band around his forearm and closed his eyes. The light on it went from red to yellow, then green.

“This will work,” he told the man as he stood. It had to.

What did Jacoby think anyone back on Terrian Two could do to help Tristan? Hire a psychologist so he could get in touch with his feelings? Alex smiled. Actually, that might be interesting to see. Time how long it took before Tristan ripped the man apart.

He took Tristan’s hand and kissed the back of it. “You’ll be okay. It doesn’t matter what I have to pay, I need you back.” He laid the hand down and climbed the ladder. The bed looked even bigger now that Tristan was in the ship, but not in it. Well, Tristan wouldn’t sleep in it, not even for cryo. He’d be in the pilot’s chair.

Alex lay down, then looked to the cabinet as the rods came up at the bed’s corners. “You better fix this, or I am going to make you pay,” he said just before the field activated.