

The smuggler's hold was on the large size, considering Victor was the only there, and for the moment, all he had for company were the packs Anders's people had dropped in it. He couldn't quite stand, but he didn't come down here to stand tall. He was on his back, doing crunches. And getting out of Anders's way.

The man had started complaining the moment he'd entered the ship. It was too small. He didn't have his own cabin. The kind of food available wasn't good enough. There weren't any drinks. Victor got the sense that even on his own ship, Anders liked to complain.

The rest of his people weren't quite as bad; there were just a lot of them, and it was already causing friction. One of them had gotten into an argument with Jacoby about being the pilot. He hadn't taken no for an answer until Anders had gotten involved.

One fight had erupted, but between two of Anders's guys about, of all things, which one had the right to get in bed with Miranda. That amused him—like either had a chance. She might put herself on display in a manner that made Victor uncomfortable, but it wasn't because she was desperate for company. And she already had her sights on someone, not that Victor approved of him either.

Most of the other arguments had been minor, and storage-related. A number of them had decided the hold wasn't where their packs would be stored, so they had tried taking over the cabinets. The already-packed cabinets. Some had gotten to screaming, but Anders had thrown all the packs down the hold and sent everyone out on a shopping spree for whatever they hadn't been able to bring along.

The delay hadn't made Alex happy, but he'd kept his anger mostly to himself.

So now the ship was silent.

He finished the set of crunches and did push-ups. That done, he took the bars out of his pack, increased the weight on each by five pounds, and did curls.

He'd expected to regret not spending the extra for self-maintaining muscles, but instead he'd found he enjoyed the exercise. With his new muscles he actually saw results, instead of the slow decline in obesity that had accompanied his exile within the precinct. Back then, he'd tried to stay in shape, but it never seemed to do anything.

Knowing he wouldn't be able to go to a gym, he bought good quality exercise bars with an internal gravity controller, so they were all he needed for the majority of his exercise.

Alex looked down from the hatch. "There you are. I thought you'd left with the others. What are you doing?"

"Exercising. I didn't have enough for top of the line muscles."

Alex dropped down. "You do now."

"Don't remind me," Victor replied. "What about you? What do you do for exercise?"

"Tristan is a fan of running. Every morning we ran around his property."

"He owns land?" He sat on the floor and hooked his knees in a lock-bar on the wall, reversed the gravity on his bars, and started on his pull-downs.

Alex sat next to him. "You worked out where he lived, you had to know he was by the town. Or did you think he hid in a cave?"

"That." He finished the set. "I didn't think he'd live near people. I thought it was a base of operations away from them, that the town was just so his coming and going wouldn't stand out. I didn't think he spent much time in any of those hideouts. Considering the carnage that follows him, I figured he spent his time flying around."

Alex shook his head. "He had a large house and workshop where he did his research. The property is away from the town, and it's large enough it ensures privacy. The town respects his desire to be alone, but I think the distance is also because he expects the town to grow and he wants to make sure it won't encroach."

"That town, it's where Jacoby's from, right?" He began another set. "He talks about bringing him home."

"Yeah, that's what he's expecting. The people there are fond of who Tristan pretends to

be. Jacoby is the only one who knows the truth.”

“What else do you do?” Victor asked once the set was done. He’d get the attachment to do his legs in a bit. “You’re in too good a shape for just running.”

“Me and Tristan spar, a lot. That’s the bulk of our exercise, when we’re not busy fighting.”

Victor looked at him, remembering the sparring sessions at the academy. “That can’t be it. There’s no way you get a real work out from sparring.”

Alex smiled and stood, taking off his jacket. “How about I show you?” He removed the sheath from his forearms, then the one at his back, and finally pulled one from behind his neck.

“How many of those do you have?”

“Not enough at the moment,” Alex replied.

“How did you slip all that through the detectors?”

“Too much stuff is made from polycarbon, which is all these are. I don’t carry the more advanced stuff on stations.” He pulled off his shirt and Victor gasped.

“What?” Alex looked around them.

Victor pointed at his chest. “What happened to you?” It was crisscrossed with scars. Blaster burns, large cuts, but most of them were thin and in sets of two or three. “Were you tortured?”

Alex looked down at himself and shrugged. “There’s some from missions I was on, but most of them are from sparring with Tristan. Heals have to be taken shortly after the injury if you want it to deal with scarring. Tristan doesn’t believe in stopping in the middle of a fight to tend to those.”

“You said sparring, practice fights.”

“Yeah.”

Victor pointed to his chest. “He cut you.”

“He has claws. I have knives. He just happens to be a lot better than I am. And he has fur to cover his scars.”

That wasn’t practice anything; blood had been drawn. “Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why did you let him do that to you?”

Alex crossed his arms and looked at Victor angrily. “Just what do you think it’s like living with Tristan? What’s this story you’re telling yourself, Victor? That me and him, we’re happily ever after? We have a little house with a nice yard I take care of while he goes off to work so we can afford the things we like?”

Alex moved his arms away, and Victor noticed they didn’t have any claw scars. “Take a good look, because that’s what living with Tristan looks like. We’re not a family, I’m his partner. And he makes damned sure I’m at my best, at all times. If we’re not fighting? We’re either on a job or he’s researching the multitudes of ways to kill or escape capture while I take over more and more complex systems to stay in practice.”

“That isn’t a life.”

“Yes, it is,” Alex stated.

“No, it isn’t.”

“It’s the life I chose!”

Victor winced. He had to tread carefully here. If there was one person he hadn’t expected to be a victim, it was this man. “Alex, that isn’t—” He stopped. That wasn’t how to do this. Fuck, he wished he’d taken the refresher courses. “Alex, you’re being—”

“Just stow it, Victor,” Alex sounded tired. “I’ve had enough with Mary. I’m not going over this with you, not considering what you want. Do you want to spar or not?”

Victor looked at the scars on Alex’s chest. “I’m going to pass.”

Alex reattached the sheaths to his various parts. “Since you’re here, I’d like your professional opinion about Anders’s people.”

Victor let out a bark of laughter. “They want you dead, with one or two exceptions. That’s all I can tell you about the whole of them. There’s too many for me to have gotten much on all of them.”

“Who are the exceptions?”

“Timothy and Zephyr.”

Alex nodded. That wasn’t news to him. “Who caught your attention?”

“Anders, obviously. He hates you more than all the others. He’s working Miranda, and she’s going along with it.”

“You don’t sound happy about it.”

“He’s a thug. She can definitely do better than him.”

“I’m not seeing you trying to talk her out of it.”

Victor shrugged. “I had a talk with Jacoby about her, and his comment about how she chews up partners. I figure that whatever Anders has in mind, she’s going to deal with it and make him pay.”

“Before or after she betrays me?”

“After. But we’re not talking about her, we’re talking about—”

“Why do you think she’ll betray me?”

“You said it.”

“But you weren’t surprised.”

Victor sighed. “Because she knows you’re screwing with her somehow, if she hasn’t figured out it’s the board thing.” Victor rolled his eyes at Alex’s feigned surprise. “You know she was set up. You probably even know who, how, and why. If you told her, you wouldn’t have to worry about her betraying you.”

“I would. I do know the how, I don’t know the why, and the who is on the Sayatoga. I traced the coercionist who did it through a bunch of nodes back to it.”

“So you tell her, and she hands you over to get her life back.”

“More like she sells me and then gives the proof to the bounty hunters’ boards. She gets money and her life back. Miranda’s very much money-driven.”

“Okay, so you can’t tell her, even if you wanted to, which you don’t. Getting back to Anders. I kind of noticed there was no discussion of him getting paid.”

“He didn’t bring it up. I’m not going to volunteer it.”

“How come he’s still alive then? You said something about a merc who doesn’t ask for payment; that he should be killed before he plants a knife in your back.”

Alex shrugged. “I already know he’s going to betray me.”

“But you don’t know how, or when.”

“Knowing it’s going to happen is enough. I’m going to have contingencies in place. Who else jumped out?”

“The muscular woman with Anders, Barbara? She has a thing for him, but knows her place, and his approval is more important to her than her sexual satisfaction. I expect he gives her enough of that to keep her from wandering off. She isn’t worried about Miranda, which leads me to think whatever Anders has planned will be short term, probably no longer than the job. The other women haven’t slept with him, but the small one, the petite brunette?”

“I don’t know her. Barely know any of them, really.”

“She wants to, but she’s afraid of Barbara. Of the men, well, the light-skinned one with blond hair wants to. I think the larger of them is—”

“Wait, Murray wants to have sex with Anders?”

“Right, that’s his name. Yeah, he wants to bed his boss. I can’t tell if Anders knows or n—”

“He knows. Anders might not be interested in guys, but he definitely knows. He’s good at picking up what he can use to control people. He might even have slept with him, just to give Murray a taste.”

“You just said he isn’t interested in guys.”

“It has nothing to do with interest. You heard him when I brought up seducing me. It’s about controlling someone.”

“But it didn’t work on you?”

Alex looked at him. “Would you have had sex with anyone other than Simon right after he vanished? When you thought you could still find him?”

“No, but... No, I wouldn’t have.”

“Same here. All I remember is that we were kissing, and then I noticed skin instead of fur. So Murray wants to be in his bed. Good to know. You were about say something about Karl.”

“The tall one is named Karl?”

“No, he’s from a planet where everyone has dozens of names. Anders never bothered with them, and just called him Karl.

“Karl wants Anders’s job. If he volunteered to come, then it’s because he’s hoping for a chance to kill him.”

Alex nodded. “There was bound to be someone Anders pushed too far.”

“The others don’t come across as anyone we have to worry about, unless Anders tells them to cause problems. I wouldn’t be surprised if their hate for you is more because Anders hates you than any personal animosity.”

“Don’t think they were even on the Golly when I was there, so I’m not surprised. What are your thoughts on Mary?”

Victor thought about it. “You want to know if you can trust her?”

“No, I already know that. I want your opinion of her.”

He considered his answer. He didn’t owe her anything, but they were both Sixers, and he did find that being from the same planet made him want to protect her. Right, like a woman like her needed protection.

“She’s angry at you. I don’t know if it’s justified, but I’m pretty sure it’s about her stay on Prian’s World. She’s also afraid of you. If you two reached an agreement over this job, don’t renege on it.”

“Why do you think I’d do that?”

*Because you’re so angry you might lash out at any one of us?* Instead he said, “I’m not saying you would, I’m just letting you know what I think. She isn’t someone who takes getting hurt lightly. People who do don’t survive among the Bramolian criminals.”

He closed his eyes and continued. “And since we’ve started on your crew, Jacoby is pissed at you. No idea why.”

“Because he had to stay behind when you rescued Mary. The reasons made sense, but he still isn’t happy about it.”

“Like you said, Miranda’s in this for the money, so long as she doesn’t find out about how she was set up. If she does, I’m not sure there’s anything you’ll be able to do to keep her from going after that. You already know she’s planning on betraying you at some point regardless, which tells me you’ve already planned for that.”

Alex smiled.

“Regardless, don’t be surprised if she comes chasing after you, after you’ve rescued Tristan. Bounty-hunting is her life.”

“You’re going to let her do that?” Alex asked.

Victor ignored him. “And finally, me. I’m here because as insane as I know it is, the idea of Tristan being locked up is driving me crazy. If you hadn’t asked for my help, and I’d found out he was captured, I’d probably have tried on my own and gotten myself killed. The problem is that I can’t figure out why you want me here.”

“I told you, your attachment to Tristan means I can trust you.”

“No, it doesn’t. You don’t trust me, or any of us. I’ve seen you around someone you trust, remember? I’ve seen how you are around Tristan, what you look like with your

guard down. And you haven't had that down since I've gotten here. I know you brought us here to rescue Tristan, but past that, I'm not sure I can trust one word you've said. And before you ask, William would die for you, so you better be careful with his girl, because there's nothing more dangerous than someone you personally betray."

Alex nodded.

Victor shook his head and let out a sad chuckle. "You're not even going to argue with me. You're not going to try to convince me I'm wrong, are you?"

"I don't care what you think about me, so no, I'm not going to bother. We have a job to do and so long as everyone behaves the way I want, what I want will happen."

"How many of us are you going to get killed?"

Alex thought it over. "My plan doesn't include any of us dying, but with Anders thrown in, I can't know what's going to happen."

Victor saw it then. Alex didn't know *exactly* what would happen, but he had an idea what it *could* be. He knew the guy, so that made sense. What didn't was that he wasn't telling Victor, or any of them. Warning them.

Hopefully, the reason Alex was keeping quiet was that except for William, who already knew Anders, none of them would be interacting with him once they were on the Sayatoga.

He had to hope that was it, otherwise it meant Alex was planning on betraying them all, and Victor had no idea what he could do about that.