Alex heard Anders's voice as he ran to the room, in the middle of a discussion involving datapads. He couldn't believe no one had told him about this job. It sounded like he'd missed most of the briefing. All the seats were taken, so Alex leaned against the wall, on the other side of Zephyr.

"Remember, those things are easier to break than what we usually go after, so tell your teams to handle them with care." Anders looked at the ceiling. "Ship, distribute the relevant data package to those in this room."

Alex's pad beeped. He looked at it, and was surprised to see that instead of the ship's layout, his packet contained the ship's registry ID, its manufacturer, date it was built, computer model, and list of personnel.

He glanced at Zephyr's. His did contain the layout, with indications of security rally points and other notable zones.

He moved away from the door to let the others leave.

"What are you doing here, Crimson?" Anders asked.

"Err...meeting? You made it pretty clear you wanted me present at all of them."

"You're on the bridge for this one; that's why I didn't send anyone to tell you. The captain said you liked to do some research on your target system. I was going to send that to Asyr's lab."

Alex thought it would have been better to let him know he wasn't needed, but then he wouldn't have panicked when the sensor told him about the large number of people in this room.

"I'll start on that, then." It was three days before the ship arrived; that was plenty of time to gather the information. It was sort of early for Anders to give a briefing. The two previous ones he attended had only been a day before the job. Alex was sure the man was messing with him.

Back in the lab, he started his search. He couldn't use the ID for his search without alerting the ship of it, and a direct search would alert someone, but there was plenty of information he could gather indirectly.

The manufacturer let him determine if this ship was a standard design for them, or a special order—it was standard. The computer model and time let him find out what sort of core personality he could expect, and then he accidentally found a use for the ID, when he came across it in the list of that model of ship the manufacturer had sold.

Since he hadn't asked for that information, no one would be advised. Knowing who had bought the ship allowed him to find their maintenance and upgrade records. Those were chronological, so doing a visual search for the ID was simple. With that he'd be able to refine the ship's personality and better target his attacks.

Looking through the crew was easier. He did a comparative search between them and the schools with the best coercion classes. Two dozen went there, so he narrowed his search to who had attended the classes. Almost half of them had, so he narrowed further to those who'd had scores that would get them snatched up by corporations. He had three possible experts on the ship. Another visual search through the school's records let him get a sense of how good they were, and using their teachers, he worked out their possible method of attack and defenses.

He got the hour warning and headed to the bridge.

* * * * *

Alex was still searching through the open net for the ship.

"How much longer, Mister Crimson?" the captain asked.

They were currently dark, drifting along with only the computer and minimal life support working. The job should have started five minutes ago, but it couldn't begin until Alex had taken control of it.

Where was it?

He could see it was there, physically, a few hundred-thousand miles away—passive sensors confirmed that—but he couldn't find the corresponding connections on the net. And this wasn't a case of no one being on their computer; even when everyone was in cryo, the ship itself still had to talk to the rest of the universe.

The only way it could disappear from the net was if someone purposefully deactivated all communication ports. But why would anyone want to fly silent like that?

"Captain, is there any chance they're carrying something other than datapads?"

"Not that I'm aware of. My contact would have informed me if she'd found something unusual in the manifest."

"There has to be something. They cut all contact with the net, and the only reason I can think of to do that is to hide from discovery. I can't see them doing that for a few crates of datapads."

"What does that mean for the operation?"

"If I can't get in their system, I can't hide our approach."

The captain nodded. "Murray, get ready for our standard approach."

"Yes, sir," the pilot answered, "but we're not set up for that right now. I have to wait until they've passed us, and use their propulsion to hide us."

"How long?"

"My best guess is twelve hours."

The captain activated his comm. "Anders, you can have everyone stand down. We're looking at a twelve-hour delay." He terminated the call without waiting for a reply. "Mister Crimson, what does this mean for the operation? The profit margin on this is dependent on a minimal amount of the cargo being damaged."

Alex grinned. "It just means I need to be on board to take control. I'll be with Anders."

* * * * *

Alex didn't have to ask for where Terrence was. With a job about to happen, there was only one place he could be. Alex pushed his way through the people leaving the breach room until he cleared the door, then ran to the front, where Anders and twenty people were relaxing. The rest might go off to do something else for twelve hours, but Anders would stay right here in case something happened. Alex had to respect the man's dedication.

"Terry, I need your datapad," Alex said, taking it out of the man's pocket.

"What are you doing here?" Anders asked. "I'd expect you to go rest before you need to work."

Alex didn't look up. "Damn it, Terry, when's the last time you cleaned up your index? How do you find anything in here?" He handed the datapad back. "Get me the ship's layout." He turned

to Anders. "They're not connected to the net; that's the delay. Murray's waiting for them to pass."

Anders handed him his datapad. "The layout's already up. Why do you need it?"

"I need to figure out where I'll take control of the ship." Alex zoomed in on their entry point and looked around. He couldn't see any terminals, not even in the airlock. That was odd; they should be marked on the map. He zoomed out further and confirmed there were some on the level above. He didn't have time to dwell on the weird setup.

"I found the computer lab," Terrence said, pointing to his own pad.

Alex glanced over, then found it, two levels above, far on the aft side. Was it worth being that close to the ship's processor to have to go so far from his exit? Did he really want to put himself in a room that could be locked? He shuddered as he remembered his fight to get life support back under his control. No, he wasn't going there.

"Care to explain why you need to go in to take control?" Anders asked.

Alex almost snapped, but caught himself. He had time. He couldn't do anything until he was inside. "I can't talk to the ship from the outside. I don't know why, but they deafened themselves. So, I need to be inside to take control of the ship and back you up."

He looked at the map. He wished there was a closer terminal, but this one was going to have to do. Still, it was pretty far. How did they manage with so few terminals? "I'm going to need someone to cover me while I work."

Anders crossed his arms over his chest and glared at Alex.

"I'll do it," Zephyr said before Alex could reply to the glare.

"Me too," Terrence added.

"I need you patrolling the halls," Anders stated.

"No, you don't," Zephyr replied, and Anders shifted his glaring to him, but the man didn't react. "You already have almost thirty people doing that; you won't even notice our absence. And with Crimson in control, they'll be able to focus on moving the cargo instead. Isn't that the point of having him around?"

Anders ground his teeth and looked at Alex. "So that's it? You're poaching my people now?"

Alex sighed. "Anders, I'm not stealing anyone. I still work for you, remember? I'm just doing the job the captain assigned me, to the best of my abilities." Alex smiled. "And think of it this way: with them watching me, you can tell everyone you were telling me what to do. But if you're certain you don't want them to help me, I'll be happy to go find someone else. I'm sure Ana and Jen would be more than happy to—"

"Fine, you two are with him." Anders stormed out of the room.

"You certainly have a way with Anders," Terrence said as he watched the man leave.

"It's all in his head." He glared at Zephyr. "I don't care what you said. I didn't do one damn thing to antagonize him, not one. And in this case, if he's so pissed, he can take it up with the captain." Alex looked at the datapad. Anders's pad, he thought in amusement.

"Okay, this is the route we're going to take."

* * * * *

The explosion that opened the airlock was still ringing in Alex's ears as he rushed in with

Anders and his people, but he turned left, away from the hold, followed by Terrence and Zephyr, and ran down that corridor, gun in hand.

"How long do we have?" Alex asked.

"Depends on where the closest security team is," Terrence answered. "Blowing the airlock was a loud indication of our arrival, but they still have to get here."

As he finished talking, a woman in a red and gold uniform rounded the far corner. Before she'd taken her gun out, Terrence shot her.

"What is it with bright colors?" Alex asked as they ran past her body. "Seems like every security force wears almost garish colors."

"They do it so they're easy to recognize," Zephyr answered, stopping and pulling a panel off the wall. "Less chances of shooting their own people."

"Then why don't we do the same?" Alex covered the hall while Terrence looked up and down the ladder.

"None of us gets too heartbroken if they accidentally shoot a crewmate." Terrence put his gun away and climbed up.

"And with security in bright colors, us wearing drab ones means it's also easy for us to tell who to shoot." Zephyr covered as Terrence ascended the ladder.

"Clear," Terrence said, and Zephyr moved away to let Alex climb.

Two levels up, Alex exited next to Terrence and waited for Zephyr. "The terminal is this way." He began moving. "Hopefully we get lucky and they won't expect us to be here, and I'll be able to get started before you two get too busy."

"Only thing luck gets you, is dead," Zephyr offered. He took position behind Alex while Terrence led the way.

They made it to the terminal without encountering anyone, which made Alex nervous. In spite of what he'd said, he had expected someone to be around. Where were all the non-essential personnel rushing back to their rooms?

Alex took out his earpiece. "Get ready; it won't be long until someone comes for us." He put it in.

Terrence looked left and right, grumbling. "I hate being this exposed."

"Alright," Alex said, bringing up the menu. "Talk to me."

Silence.

"Playing coy isn't going to help. You know I'm here, start telling me how I'm not going to get away with this."

Still silence.

With a few commands, he made his way behind the menu display to the code, and paused at what he saw, or rather didn't see. There was hardly any code there.

"What are you playing at?" he asked.

No reply.

He studied the code. The only thing it did was maintain the display, and one more thing. The screen went blank.

With a curse, he grabbed his comm. "Anders, tell me the cargo's there!"

"Of course it is," the man replied over the sound of gunfire and explosions. "I can see the crates."

"Check that the datapads are there. This is a trap, Anders. There isn't any code for me to use. There's nothing for me to control."

Zephyr and Terrence glanced at Alex with worried expressions.

Alex heard Anders grunt, then something clattered to the floor. "The crates are full."

"Okay. Anders, get everyone to grab something and run. Don't hang around." Alex didn't wait for a reply. He ran.

"Where's all the security if this is a trap?" Zephyr asked.

"My guess, the computer lab." He didn't bother checking before clamoring down the ladder.

"How did they know you'd get on the ship?" Zephyr asked, right behind him.

"No idea." Had they become predictable? The captain had said he was picking his targets with Alex in mind. He didn't know, but one thing was sure: he had attracted someone's attention, because this trap was for him, not the crew.

He got out of the ladder well and shot two guards before they could react. He ran past them and rounded a corner, only to collide with another group. He fell to the floor on top of a woman. His gun clattered away. He rolled off and got to a crouch, only to look down the barrel of her gun. There was a flash of light and another guard fell on her, throwing her aim.

Alex stood and kicked her in the face. The other guard turned and raised his gun. Alex grabbed the hand and twisted until he felt bones break. Another kick to the head, and the man stopped moving too.

Alex pulled out a knife and turned, ready for whoever was next, but the four other guards were down, moaning. Terrence had a burn on his arm. Zephyr was fine, as usual.

"Do you have a forcefield or something?" Alex asked, running again. Zephyr didn't answer.

They shot their way through two other security teams before they made it to the hold, where crates had been pushed to form an improvised fort. The airlock was blocked by two-dozen guards. Alex fired at them as he ran for the cover of Anders's fort.

Datapads littered the floor, and Alex almost slipped on one. He made a straight line for an opening between two crates, not caring if Anders used this opportunity to shoot him down. He slipped in, grabbed a gun off a body, and stood, ready to fire. He saw Zephyr and Terrence make it in a moment later.

Then the guards stopped shooting.

Alex looked around, and everyone wore the same confused expression he had, except for Anders, who was glaring at him.

"My dear pirates." A woman's voice resounded throughout the hold. "Now that you're all in one place, I'd like to draw your attention to the top shelves."

Alex looked up. Large crates were lined there, touching the ceiling. As he watched, the front of the crates fell off, opening to reveal large guns that swiveled and pointed at him.

"We are so fucked," someone said.

"If anyone has any bright ideas, I'm all ears." Anders had addressed everyone, but he was still glaring at Alex.

"Don't look at me. I coerce computers, not people."

"And if you'd actually done your job, we wouldn't be in this situation."

Alex returned the glare. "We can discuss what is and isn't my fault with the captain, once we're back on our ship."

Anders looked ready to reply, but instead glanced over Alex's shoulder, lips tightening.

Alex turned. More guards were joining those already there, forming a circle around the fort. There had to be a few hundred of them now. That, and the canons looking down on them meant they weren't going anywhere.

The woman spoke again. "I do hope I gave you long enough to realize the futility of resisting. As I speak, my coercionists are taking over your ship's computer. You have nowhere to go. Put down your weapons and surrender peacefully."

Alex looked at Anders. He needed to get back on the ship, but before he could say anything, Anders was giving orders.

"Keep your guns! No one is surrendering, do you hear me?"

"We're not going to survive this," someone said.

"I don't care. Some of us might die, but we're going to do it getting as many as possible back on our ship."

"What's the point?" someone else asked. "They're controlling it."

"Because Crimson can kick them out."

Alex nodded. He could do that and so much more now that there was a communication line between the ships.

"I'm with Anders," Barbara said.

"Me too," Rebecca added. "We're part of this crew because we refused to submit before. We're not doing it now."

Agreements sounded.

Anders looked the group over. "If any of you don't think we should fight our way out, stay here and don't get in our way. When we come back to get you—and I promise you that we will —you can explain to the captain why he wasted the energy taking you on as his crew." Anders turned and looked over the barricade.

Alex looked around and saw that those who had been silent before were now uncomfortably eyeing the others. They seemed to find their resolve and pulled out their guns.

Alex looked at Anders. The son of a bitch had managed to regroup his people. This was going to make it tougher for Alex not to respect the man. He reached to his belt for a knife, and found he didn't have one there, nor at his back. Or his sleeve. The only one he had left was at his boot. He eyed Zephyr's harness, covered with knives, and made a mental note to get one after this. The ease of access and extra knives made up for looking like a walking knife display.

"I am not seeing any of you put down your weapons," the woman said. There was a hint of disappointment in her tone. "I had hoped the realization you were outmatched would have knocked some sense into you."

Alex looked around at the guards, then up. The heavy guns seemed to shudder. This was going to be painful, he thought. But he'd get out of this. He had to reach Jack.

"I suggest you drop your weapons. I do intend on keeping some of you alive, but precision fire isn't what these guns are known for. This is your last chance to surrender."

Anders turned around, looked at his people, and gave a satisfied nod. "On my word, we rush them!"

The communication system let out a loud squeak, then the lights flickered. Anders looked at Alex.

"What? I'm here. That can't be me, it's got to be Asyr."

Anders pointed to the woman, bloody arm dangling at her side and gun in the other hand.

Alex shrugged. If she was here, then he was just as clueless as to how this was happening.

The big guns fired and everyone ducked, but with the screams coming from outside the makeshift fort, Anders stood.

"Now!" he yelled.

Alex looked around. The guns were firing randomly, hitting walls, floors, guards, and just now another gun. He didn't have the time to think about this. He jumped the crate after the others, fired at one guard, and threw his knife at another.

A guard pointed a gun at Alex, only to vanish in a flash of light, leaving a darkened spot on the floor. Alex ran through it as fast as he could.

Anders's insistence his team ran every day was paying off. He was among the first back on the ship, where he encountered and shot down guards. He'd known they'd be there, but they clearly hadn't expected any of the pirates to return, let alone be armed and shooting.

He shot down the ones in his way, and left the rest for the others. He ignored the lift; he wasn't putting himself in a locked box until he was certain who controlled the ship. The ladder was already exposed, and he heard the clanging of boots on the rungs. He looked in and up, saw bright colors, and fired. He let the bodies drop, and then began climbing.

At the sound of someone following him he aimed down, but it was Asyr and Jennifer.

"Who's at the lab?" he asked as he climbed.

"No one; I always lock it before boarding a ship."

"Then who is doing the coercion?"

She didn't answer, and four levels higher he exited the shaft and ran. He didn't encounter anyone this far into the ship. His crew had gone to the other ship and the guards hadn't made it this far in.

The door to the computer lab opened before he reached it, and he glanced around the empty room as he threw himself into the seat at the main console. Asyr took an auxiliary post and Jennifer stayed by the door.

Alex put the question of who the secret coercionist was out of his mind. He grinned as he put his earpiece in and activated the console. It was time to teach the invaders who was in charge here.