Alex woke with a gasp, his heart racing. He looked for the threat, palming the scalpel Jacoby had slipped him. The room was empty, the only sound the steady beeping of the screens monitoring his condition. An even sound that didn't match his heartbeat.

He might have overdone the stimulant to counteract Cornelius's sedative, but at least his coercing of the medical bed had stuck. He double checked the readouts to give himself time to calm. According to the monitor, his brain was in a sleep stage, his heart nice and calm, his blood pressure right in the middle of the average.

He tucked the scalpel in the elastic he'd snagged and put around his forearm. It had taken less convincing to get Jacoby to bring him that than to have Cornelius give him access to a decent computer. The ex-merc knew how important being armed was.

Cornelius, being a medic, only seemed to think that rest was important. Jacoby had managed to convince her to bring the computer because Alex didn't have to act at being a wreck with nothing to do, and that didn't help with his recovery.

Of course, what she'd given him was nothing like what he needed to coerce his way into the right systems; her definition of power didn't match his. Still, he'd managed to control his anger and instead of throwing the terminal across the room, he'd set to using it to coerce what systems he could so he could reach a better computer.

Cornelius would be angry when she found out what he'd done to the clinic's system, but he didn't care. She wasn't willing to help him, so he was helping himself.

The system's protection was so subpar, he'd barely needed any training to get into the core processor.

He blamed SpaceGov for the lack of security on the average person's systems. Not that he wanted everyone to know that coercionists did go bad, since that would make his job tougher but, for whatever reason, SpaceGov worked hard at keeping that from becoming known. They went so far as to not allow them depicted that way in vids. The only coercionists allowed in them were the "good" coercionists, the hero taking down the bad guys, the one toeing the corporate line.

He'd seen the message enforcing that view when he'd coerced his way into a broadcasting corporation for a job.

The door to his room opened and a hover chair glided next to his bed. Finding out those had been connected to the clinic's system had been a boon, since otherwise he would have had to convince Jacoby to help him, and he was sure that was one thing the ex-merc wouldn't do. For some reason, he seemed to be overly careful around Cornelius. Not afraid of her, but respecting the power she seemed to have.

Alex told the chair to lock in place, and he proceeded to extricate himself from the bed and onto it, cursing the casing on his leg. He'd tried to convince her he didn't need it anymore, but she'd glared at him and asked to see his medical credentials.

If her computer had been more powerful, he would have been able to do that.

He bit back a yell as the casing dropped off the bed and hit the side of the chair. Settled in, he had the chair raise the leg support until he no longer felt the casing's weight, then had it raise off the floor. It canted to one side, not being able to handle the extra weight, and nothing Alex did evened it out, but it was off the floor and able to move.

He glided out of the room; the doors opening as he approached. He hadn't been able to tell the sensors to ignore him—he needed them to see him so they'd do things like open doors—but getting them to keep that information to themselves, instead of warning Cornelius, had been easy.

Outside the clinic, he directed the chair to the low bed-hover parked on the side. Being the only medic in town, on the planet, Cornelius also dealt with sick animals.

The chair slid up the back, but couldn't reach the hover's cockpit. A wall divided the two, but the top half was lowered so, with a lot of loud cursing, Alex climbed through it. Why couldn't Cornelius keep the damned thing on standby mode like everyone else? Was she afraid someone would come and steal it? He would have been able to coerce it

from the back if she had, instead of banging his legs on every hard surface.

He needed a rest. Getting in the seat had taken too much out of him, but he cursed himself for even thinking of delaying the rescue. He had no way of knowing what Tristan was being put through, but it couldn't be good. No one went through everything it took to find him just to thank him for existing.

At least Cornelius hadn't gone Tristan's route and physically disconnected the power. He entered the activation code he'd found within the system and the hover came to life. It was happy to obey when he told it to go to the port.

<p align="center">* * * * *</p>

Alex cursed loudly as he climbed over the divider and into the back of the hover, then onto the chair. The damned thing hadn't wanted to go into the ship's hangar, no matter how insistent he'd been, and he didn't have the time to fully bend it to his will.

At least the chair had no such restriction. As soon as he was out of the hover, it moved away to go back to the clinic. He didn't want Cornelius to find out he'd gotten out any sooner than needed.

He hesitated at the closed ramp. Tristan's locks weren't tamper-proof, they were destructive, and he'd never told Alex how to deactivate them. Then he remembered that Tristan hadn't converted this ship yet; it was still how Katherine had left it, and that Jacoby had gotten in without blowing it up, so the lock would be simpler to bypass.

Or not even need to be bypassed.

The ship was unlocked.

How could Jacoby leave Tristan's ship unlocked? He was going to—

Alex shook his head. He had more important things to do than tell the portmaster how to do things.

As soon as the ramp lowered he guided the chair up it, and then over the debris strewed over the floor. He still didn't know what had happened here, but only two of the twenty or so chairs remained intact.

Since it had only been him and Tristan in the ship, the most likely explanation was that the Samalian had caused it, but Alex couldn't understand why. This kind of rampant destruction wasn't like him.

He remembered the state of Tristan's workroom when he'd looked in. It was his sanctuary, and yet Tristan had destroyed it. If he'd been able to do that to that sacred space, tearing apart the inside of this ship wasn't much of a stretch.

But it didn't tell him what had caused his Samalian to lose all restraint like that.

He was able to get the chair to make it into the cockpit, but no more. Alex was still trying to find a place to clip the sheathed knives he'd picked up through the ship as the chair spun around. The medical gown had nothing stiff enough.

The medical chair bumped against the chairs for the pilot and comms stations. Alex slapped the three knives on the board and pushed himself up. He dragged his encased leg to the comm board, dropping into the chair, panting hard. He should be tougher than that. Tristan had trained him better.

The ship was still in standby; at least one thing he could be happy for. He had no idea if he'd be able to deal with a full shutdown. As the computer woke up, it went through its checks. Those came up green, but Alex didn't trust the results. He did his own. Only when he confirmed his code was unaltered did he start working.

Jacoby's data chip went in, and he wrote a quick program to take all the images and combine them into a digital mock-up of the ship that had taken Tristan.

Tristan wouldn't have needed that. He'd have looked at the recording and known the model, who had manufactured it, designed it, and pointed out where it had been

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modified. If he'd paid attention to what Tristan had tried to teach him, he'd have been able to do that instead of wasting time coercing systems to figure out the same thing.

By the time he had a mostly complete model, he'd made his way through all the larger ships' databases and, using a comparison program, he found out it was a Striker Model DSK-435 from Effigan. They were a military contractor who only dealt with SpaceGov and a few corporations approved by them.

The list was longer than he'd expected. Whilem, Progam, Quorel, Sayatoga, Brotch, and Derkiom were at the top, with two dozen more. Half of them were prisons with their own retrieval and capture teams, the other half corporations so close to SpaceGov they were allowed military-level equipment. Not that the others didn't also get that, but when SpaceGov called someone a friend, it brought down the prices.

So one of them, or someone they'd "lent" a striker ship to, had kidnapped Tristan. He set programs to collate their communications, and find any official contracts they had where the Striker came into play. He'd have to figure out some list of priorities, based on the kind of jobs Tristan took, then hope he'd guessed right and found a link sooner rather than later.

He was lining up the programs to send to the next prison, Sayatoga, and he paused, looking at the name. He knew that name from somewhere. A quick search told him it was a one-prison corporation, a rare thing since most of the times prisons were something corporations got into as a way of diversifying their assets and to easily raise the profit margin.

After a little more research, he saw that they'd claimed to be holding Tristan while he was tearing through Luminex. From what he was reading, Sayatoga implied Tristan had never escaped.

Could it be them?

After profits, image was the most important thing to a corporation. How would they react to him escaping? Well they'd lie about it, obviously, but they would do what they could to recapture him. That would explain the occasional bounty hunter Alex had needed to kill. He hadn't questioned it, since they'd always been there and Tristan took them for granted, but this would be a reason.

What he needed to do was eliminate every other possibility.

"You know—"

Alex had a knife in hand and was turning in the chair to throw it when his leg pulled and the pain almost made him drop it.

"—she's going to kill you when she finds out you snuck out." Jacoby was leaning against the cockpit's door frame.

Alex gritted his teeth and repositioned himself so his leg stopped hurting. "She'll get over it. What are you doing here? It's still night."

Jacoby quirked a smile. "Clearly you've never been on her bad side. That woman is deadly with an injector. And I'm the one who should be asking what you're doing here. You're supposed to be healing."

"This fucking thing works fine here too. And I couldn't do anything with that thing she called a computer. I'm here because I need something with real power. Go back to bed." He pulled up his programs, started modifying one.

"Alex, what are you doing?"

"My job." He had to get the obvious out of the way. He told the program to look for mention of Tristan—by name or description—and he even linked the files to it, but that just stalled it. It wasn't smart enough. Fine, just the basics then.

"Right, your job." Jacoby reached for him and Alex glared at his reflection.

"Touch me, and you lose that hand."

"Then stop with the fucking bullshit and level with me."

Alex snorted. He sent the program through the information his other programs had collated.

"Alex, I'm not—" The hand almost landed on his shoulder and Alex was holding a knife, eyes fixed on Jacoby's face on the screen. It stopped. "I'm not your enemy."

Alex rolled his eyes.

"Damn it, Tech's my friend. I want him back, too."

"Like you know anything about him." What else could he use to figure out who had Tristan? Who owned that ship?

"Oh, you think I don't? Tech's lived here on and off for decades. He's one of us. He's a good guy, and he's in trouble. And I don't care about the rest. I want to help."

That derailed Alex's thoughts. A good guy? He laughed. He laughed so hard he almost fell out of the chair and kept laughing through the pain as the casing banged on the underside of the console. He cursed and straightened in the chair.

"A good guy, right," he managed to say as the laughter died. "Shows what you know."

Jacoby fixed his gaze on him. They stared at each other through the reflection. "Then tell me. No, you know what? Let me start. I know that you and him didn't leave to deal with his job. The rest bought it, but I know better. You think I haven't had a contract literally land on my doorstep either?"

Alex focused on the programs. Where was he at? Looking to figure out if Sayatoga was the only corporation with a reason... No, he'd already done that. Damn it, Jacoby was too much of a distraction.

"Alex—"

"Leave me the fuck alone!"

"No. You're hurting. I get that, but like it or not, you're part of our family now. We take care of each other. Even if Tech hadn't loved yo—"

Alex whirled and grimaced as his leg dragged, but this time, he didn't let it stop him. "Loved me? Are you fucking kidding me? He doesn't give a damned about me."

"Alex—"

"Don't you get it? It's all an act! There is no Tech. You want the truth? Fine, that guy you all look up to? That you consider your friend? He's a cold-blooded killer. A mass-murderer. Look up Tristan and get ready to lose your lunch."

Jacoby didn't react with the anger Alex expected. He had to know the name, and to have a friend of his accused of being a monster couldn't sit well with him, but the ex-merc relaxed.

"I'm not an idiot. I know who he is."

Alex had trouble finding his voice. "You know?"

"Come on, Alex, there aren't even a hundred Samalians working in space. How many do you think have that fur pattern? It only took me ten minutes to figure out which of them he was."

"And you, what? Figured, hey, how about we have a wanted merc who's lying about being a killer so many times over we're not even going to bother checking, be our next-door neighbor? Are you people insane?"

"I don't care who you were before you got here. None of us do. We also don't care what someone does when they're out there. You think Tech's the only one hiding who he is? You think Kline owned a tavern out there? You think I don't have a reason when I tell you Cornelius is deadly with an injector? Alex, the only people here who are who they say they are, are those who were born here. The rest of us, we all have a past, and it isn't a pleasant one. So Tech has one too. Big deal. He's considerate to everyone, helps out those who need it, so now I'm going to help him."

Alex almost missed that last part in trying to figure out if Jacoby was insane, or this whole place. "What do you mean, you're going to help him?"

"You really think you can go after the people who took Tech alone? I have no doubt you're deadly, but knowing what I know of Tech's past, I can imagine that anyone able to take him isn't going to be a pushover. You're going to need backup, Alex."

Alex wanted to scream at him that he didn't need any help, but that was the anger talking. The part of him screaming that all this was his fault, so he had to be the one to fix it, alone. The part of him that was looking to get him killed.

"*Hard truths*," someone had told him a long time ago. Alex had learned to stare them in the face. On some level, he wanted to be killed, as punishment for what had happened, but that wouldn't get Tristan back. Also, it wasn't his call if he died. He didn't have that right.

So he'd need help, Jacoby was right, but that didn't mean it was going to be him. There were plenty of qualified mercs out there, and he had enough money to hire the best.

But there was only so much money could buy, and loyalty wasn't one of those things. Jacoby was bringing loyalty amongst the rest of his skills. Tech was his friend. He would do what he could to protect him. That Tristan would kill him was irrelevant; that would be after he was rescued. Until then, he had one person who could help him keep the others in line if needed.

"Okay," Alex said. "Looks like you're in."