

"That..." By the sound of it, Miranda had trouble working out what she wanted to say. "There's no way that's a ship."

Alex had brought The Proud, her ship, to a stop five miles away, just outside what the Prian's World considered their inner perimeter. They'd be considered just another object in space until they crossed it.

"It is," Victor said. "A Valkyrie-class ship."

"You know about them?" she sounded awed and suspicious.

"The academy has classes on them, remember? You can't talk about the sovereigns and not address their ships. These things are menaces when they show up in your solar system. Last time one came even close, there was a panic all the way to the planetary governor."

Alex fiddled with the earpiece. "They cause a lot of trouble?" When had those things gotten so uncomfortable?

"Not directly. I've never come across reports of them showing up and breaking laws, if you don't count the navigational ones. They refuse to talk to other ships, not just the pilot, but the ship itself, which means the only way to know where they are is to run scans all the time, visually look for them."

"How do you miss that?" Miranda asked, pointing at the screen.

"By relying on your ship's anti-collision programs," Victor replied.

Alex checked his again, which told him they were alone in space. He added the nodes of the people he knew lived on the ship to how it located it, and that gave him an approximation of the distance separating them.

"From what you describe, they sound just like corporations," Miranda said.

"Corporations are worse," Alex said. "Those think they own you. The sovereigns just want to be left alone. The chaos they cause is as a consequence of that, not maliciousness." He watched her reflection. She was well-behaved now, but he'd had to break up two arguments between her and Victor since being out of cryo.

"And there's a lot more corporations than sovereign families," Victor said. "If there were more than twelve of them, they might be more of a problem."

"There's twelve ships like that?"

"A couple are bigger, I think," Victor replied. She stared at him and looked smug. Miranda hadn't started both arguments. Alex was starting to feel like he was dealing with two teenagers strutting around trying to prove which was the coolest.

"How is it that I've never heard of them before now? You'd think there would be warnings everywhere about them."

"I'm going to guess you've never bothered looking at who puts up all those bounties you go after," Victor said dryly, and Alex glared at his reflection. Victor mouthed "sorry". At least he acknowledged he wasn't helping thing.

"Unlike you Law types, I trust the people who run the boards. They make sure everything's in order," she said.

Alex had planned on reminding her of her problems with those peoples before starting the extraction, just to make sure she remembered she needed him, but with her current volatility, he held off. Still, he couldn't believe she was so naïve as to think bounty hunter boards were any less corrupt than anything else in this vast universe. Who was it that said that "corruption is the only constant"?

"Victor," Alex said, "take a seat. They're about to ask what we want."

"This is such a bad idea," the man replied, sitting at the communication board. "The moment they contact the department, they're going to find out I'm nothing more than a glorified sorting program."

"I thought you were a detective," Miranda said. Now she was the smug one and Victor glared at her.

*Kids*, Alex thought. "Don't worry about that. It's covered." The indicator blinked, and

he nodded to Victor and accepted the contact.

“Unidentified ship, please identify yourself and state your business immediately. Be advised that you are within the officially recognized zone of Prian’s World, which is a Sovereign Family ship.”

Miranda patted Victor on the shoulder. “You’re up, Lawman.”

Alex tuned out Victor’s conversation. He slipped into the ship through the open connection cloaked in the sheath he’d coded to imitate theirs. No talking, he reminded himself. He wasn’t here to take over, although it would make things so much easier. Taking control of Miranda’s ship and Mobius hadn’t been much of a challenge.

He made his way to the communication processor. He’d mapped everything ahead of time, taking small trips through this system on their way here, and laying the groundwork for the mission. Any attempt to contact Victor’s precinct would redirect to an almost exact copy of it he’d set up, with Victor’s information adjusted to reflect his official position as detective. He also had a program there, ready to field any questions someone might have. During the months in transit, he’d gotten the program to mimic the behavior of those at Victor’s precinct. It wouldn’t be perfect, but it would get the job done.

He found the communication history, zipped it open, and added all the official communications between Prian’s World and Bramolian Six regarding Mary Holiander. He zipped it closed and located the heuristic decision chains, finding the ones relating to the ship’s security, both internal and external. He nudged it to ignore any access of the files he added. *It was already taken care of*, he whispered to it, *no need to bother anyone if they were accessed again.*

He kept the connection, but now divided his attention between the system and the conversation Victor was engaged in, in case something came up he needed to adjust.

“I understand,” Victor was replying, “but it’s all been arranged and approved.”

“And what I’m telling you is that no one included a time for when you’d be here,” a woman replied. So they’d had to switch away from the automated reply to a living person. “We haven’t prepped the person you want for transport.”

Alex typed a quick message and sent it to Victor.

“The department couldn’t give you an ETA,” Victor said after glancing at it, “because you refused to provide us with your course.”

“Prian’s World is a sovereign ship and isn’t requi—”

“Required to provide any travel information, I know. I’m not saying you needed to provide it, just that you have to accept that without it, there was no way I could figure out when I’d reach you. As big as you are, you don’t exactly stand out against the vastness of the universe.”

“I see.”

“As for my prisoner...” Victor sounded tired. “I’ll be happy to provide the escort from her cell to my ship myself.”

“Alright, Pride, hand over control of your ship and I’ll have someone from security meet you in the hangar. You can figure out how to handle this there.” She sounded as tired as Victor looked.

“Thank you, Prian.” Victor terminated the communication and slouched back.

“Not bad, Lawman,” Miranda said, sounding impressed. “But next time, remind them the name of my ship is The Proud, not Pride.”

“Next time you can talk to them. Fuck, I never want to do this again.”

Alex kept an eye on the control program Prian sent to take them in. He made sure nothing else accompanied it and then relaxed a little, trusting his programs to tell him if it did anything it wasn’t supposed to.

“Miranda’s right,” Alex said. “You did well.”

“There’s still no way we’re pulling this off,” Victor replied.

“Not with that attitude we won’t,” Miranda said with a roll of the eyes.

“Miranda, time for you to change.”

She sighed. “I don’t see why; this is serviceable.”

“For a bounty hunter,” Victor said. “Not a representative of the Law.”

“I wish we could have gotten you an actual Bramolian Tactical Force uniform, but that was one thing Mobius didn’t have. Just put something less alluring and we’ll have to hope no one you’ll deal with knows what the uniform should be.”

“This isn’t alluring.”

Victor’s head snapped up. “Miranda, if you were on Bramolian Six, that would get you arrested for indecent exposure.”

“Is that place run by prudes?” She headed for the one room on the ship, at the back.

“If she can’t control her attitude,” Victor said, “this isn’t going to work.”

“Plenty of Law people have attitude!” Miranda replied from the room.

“You’re not Law!” Victor yelled back, then spoke normally. “I’m serious. Unless you’ve set up something in there, if she gives anyone a reason to look, this falls apart.”

He hadn’t thought about that. He contacted the node. It had already been accessed, and Prian hadn’t been content with looking for only Victor’s name. They’d accessed the whole of it, which meant that if he added Miranda, the discrepancy would be noted. He didn’t bother looking at the program he had acting as the precinct’s contact. It’s personality was set by now.

“For the amount of money I’m paying her, she’s going to keep the attitude under control.”

“You know!” Miranda yelled. “That attitude is what made me who I am!”

“She means on the outs with the bounty hunters?” Victor whispered and Alex glared at him. He was so getting tired of these two. “Don’t give me that look. You’re holding that over her like a well-placed meteorite.”

Miranda came out wearing loose gray pants with plating, a white shirt that didn’t reveal quite as much as the previous one, and a dark green jacket. “Is this sufficiently devoid of attitude for your liking?”

“That’s armored, isn’t it?” Victor asked.

“Yes. Bolton left a bunch of stuff when we went our separate ways. It’s the only thing I could find that had a chance of making you happy. This isn’t how I like to dress. I’m also armed.” She opened the jacket to show the holster.

“What is it?” Victor asked.

“Nurri FND-32.”

“That’s kind of big,” Victor mused. “The department uses Kentrics. But,” he stopped her before she could snark whatever she was about to say, “if you have to pull it out, we’re going to be in too much shit already for it to matter.”

She posed for Alex. “Feel like adding your mark, Boss Man?” She eyed him defiantly.

Alex shrugged. “He’s Law. He knows what will and won’t work. As for once you’re out there, you follow his lead. I don’t want you going off because you think you know better than him.”

“I do know better than him. I’ve retrieved criminals before.”

“But not as a representative of the Law. You can’t go in, take hostages, and threaten them until your target gives up.”

“Wait,” Victor said, “did you actually do that?”

She shrugged. “The guy had a soft heart for his employees.”

“That’s—”

“Not relevant to this situation,” Alex cut him off. “I really wish you two had exchanged nodes and dealt with this before now. Victor leads, you follow, understood?”

“I do know how to follow orders,” Miranda grumbled.

Alex almost managed to keep from snorting. She was used to giving them. She was

always the boss in partnerships she formed. And he realized a way around their problem.

“Victor, Miranda needs the name of someone from your precinct,” he said as the ship shuddered from landing. “I can’t add her to the roster, but she can claim to be someone else. It’s easy to glitch the roster so she shows as there in one search and here on the other.”

“Becky Newland,” he provided without hesitation.

“She your girlfriend?” Miranda asked.

“She’s this prissy detective who bugged me recently. I figure you fit her role.”

“So you expect me to argue with you the entire time we’re out there?”

“Enough!” Alex snapped. “Both of you.”

“I’m joking. Get a sense of humor, Boss Man. I’ll behave.”

“Then go do it. There’s an officer waiting for you.”

Alex accessed the closest camera and watched them exit the ship. Victor handed the data chip that contained the transfer orders.

The officer inserted it in his datapad, but instead of simply reading it, he began typing. Alex cursed. What was he doing? He accessed the internal comm system and intercepted the message as it was entered.

He wanted the officer in charge of the transfer, the one Alex had put as officially in charge of it, to confirm it. *Come on, can’t you people just do what you’re told?*

Alex sent programs out to scour the system for that person’s communications. He needed a large enough sample to get his program to construct a convincing response.

He sent back a notification he’d received the message, that happened the moment the recipient read it. He fed the communications his programs gathered into the comparative one while he wrote a terse response.

How much time had passed? He brought up the feed. Victor looked calm, but Miranda was fidgeting. The officer glanced at the datapad, but didn’t look concerned.

His program told him it had enough information, so he fed it what he wrote to translate. He took what it produced, gave it the proper provenance, and sent it.

The officer glanced at his datapad, then read what was there.

Miranda tensed. Victor gave her a look.

The officer spent too long reading. Alex cursed. Had the program glitched? He should have read it before sending it. Maybe the sample had been skewed too much in one direction? He should have been ready for this. Tristan would have prepared for it; he’d have thought about everything.

He stopped. He forcefully stopped himself from doing anything before he devolved into panic. That wouldn’t help anything. He needed to be able to think; that was the secret to running a mission. Alex had forgotten that in the years he’d taken Tristan’s orders.

He couldn’t afford to think as if he was still taking orders; he needed to give them until Tristan was back.

The officer put the datapad away and spoke. Miranda relaxed, then she and Victor followed him out of the hangar.

Alex breathed easier. Now, so long as no one in authority specifically looked for her, her absence wouldn’t be noticed. Everyone else would be told she’d been transferred, and they wouldn’t be able to do anything about it.

He eyed Miranda. Yes, so long as everyone played their role.