

“Welcome to one of Mobius’s much-vaunted game rooms,” Alex said as he entered it. “Where people come from all over the universe to experience the best in immersive reality. Mobius has the best in gaming and entertainment. Come live the life of a merc, hunting down aliens and killing any who stand in your way. Live the quiet life of a farmer on a primitive world. You can even experience what it’s like to be an alien. All from the safety and comfort of this room.”

Miranda snorted. “The extent people will go to make believe they have a life.”

“Alex, I know we have time to kill,” Victor said cautiously, “but shouldn’t we be using that time to get ready?”

“Oh, we are.” Alex smiled, indicating the surrounding space, the terminals around the walls, the chair. “One thing Mobius doesn’t mention about its gaming rooms is the kind of processing power required to run all the immersive reality technology. To create the kind of vistas the scenarios call for, to control the hard-light matrices so you can touch what is part of them.”

“I know,” Victor replied. “It’s what makes this kind of thing something only the rich can own in their own home. It’s so expensive, common folk like me have to come to a place like this or one of the entertainment centers back home, and even then if I want more than ten minutes, I’d have to put in for a loan. It’s still just a game.”

Alex beamed. “Ah, but what if instead of running that game, you take all that processing power and use it to back you up while coercing a system? Or to run evaluation programs? To parse data? There’s enough processors here a single person can perform every part of building a solid mission plan, which is what we’re going to do.”

“So all this gaming stuff, it’s just to hide what mercs can do here?”

“Hardly,” Alex replied.

Miranda sat and stretched her arms. “This is one of the main reasons people come to Mobius, other than the view. Half the profits on this place come from the exorbitant costs of the vacation packages, and the attraction is that access to gaming rooms like this are included in them.”

Alex looked at her. “How do you know that?”

She rolled her eyes. “I researched the place. Unlike you, I don’t spend my money carelessly. I wanted to be sure working out of here was worth the investment. Ended up planning maybe half the tracking on my jobs from here.”

“Okay, so this can double as a command center,” Victor said.

“No, you can’t run a job from here,” Miranda said. “Even using the immersive reality, you don’t get enough of a sense for what’s going on. You need your life to be in danger to really understand the decisions you have to make.” She smiled. “Also, they aren’t cheap, even if mercs get a break on the price. I have no idea where Crimson’s finding the credits to pay for all the time, but a couple of hours is all I’ve allowed myself. All I’ve really needed. Like he said, it’s powerful stuff.”

Alex kept from smiling. Paying? For using this room? He’d had to rebuild his control of the system after being away for months, but it wasn’t like the antibodies or local coercionists had managed to find everything he’d hidden within this station.

“Fine, but that wasn’t where I was going. I was wondering why I’m here.” He indicated the earpiece Alex held. “I’m guessing you’re going to do your thing. I don’t remember you needing an audience for that.”

Alex put it in his ear, trying to get the motion to feel natural again. “I don’t, but what I’m going to need from you is your knowledge of Law operations, and by extension, security. I’m going to coerce my way into the Sayatoga and pull every bit of information on their schedule, personnel, and movement. Basically anything I can find without being noticed.”

“Why not just take control of it?” Miranda asked bitterly. “That’s what you do, right? Have them come to us and avoid all this hassle.”

“Because, while I can take control of it, maintaining it is another thing. The moment

they realize it—which won't take long, if I change their course—they'll get every coercionist on getting control back. As you saw with Prian, as good as I am, I can't fight off multiple attacks. Other than the coercing I need to do to get access to the information, I'm not adding anything to their system, and I'm removing it all before I leave it. I am not risking Tristan's safety."

She shrugged. "You're the boss." She wasn't as abrasive now that they were on the station, but she still clearly resented the ease with which he'd taken control of her ship.

"Okay, so you'll gather data. That still doesn't tell me what you need me for."

"I'll be sending everything I find to whichever terminal you pick, and you are going to break it all down so you can build the best image of what resistance to expect if things go wrong."

Victor raised an eyebrow. "You want me to run analytics on the data?"

Alex thought about it. "Yeah, basically."

Victor burst out laughing.

Alex looked at Miranda, who shrugged.

"Care to let us in on the joke?" she asked, sounding amused.

Alex had expected her to be even more bad-tempered when he'd said they'd be working even before they'd docked, but something about being on Mobius put Miranda in a good mood, or at least in one that wasn't as nasty as it had been when she got out of cryo.

"Sure," Victor said, down to just chuckling. "I joined the force when I was nineteen. That's more than sixty years ago, and do you know how often I've been asked to run analytics in the last forty of those years?" He looked at them and Alex shook his head. "Once, just now. You just told me to do what I signed up to do when I became a Law officer, and we're nowhere near a Law office. That's the joke."

"If it helps," Miranda said, "there's an office on deck twelve. No idea how good they are, but officially they are Law."

Alex stared at her again.

"I told you, I researched this place. You think I just looked at the money aspect?"

"Well, yes."

"How do you run jobs?" She sounded exasperated. "No, never mind, I saw that on Prian's World. If it was supposed to impress me, it didn't. Anyway, since you have him on analytics, I'm on—"

The door opened and Jacoby entered. "Got your message." He looked at the room. "Work or rest?"

"Work," Alex said.

"Why are you still old?" Miranda asked.

Jacoby glared at her. "What is that supposed to mean?"

She motioned up and down his body. "You've had nothing to do for what, three, four months? I'd have thought you'd have gone for a rejuv treatment in that time. So you could keep up with the rest of us." She smiled. "And I'm guessing you were quite the looker when you were younger."

"I still wouldn't get in your bed. And I wouldn't be any younger even if I looked it. If you don't like looking at older people, you better make sure to put a lot of money aside, because rejuv treatments don't get any cheaper the more of them you have."

She grinned. "And you know that how?"

Jacoby looked up and sighed. "I swear, kids these days can't even think."

"Who are you calling a kid?" Miranda asked, sounding hurt.

"Those who behave like one. Alex, why am I here? I hope it isn't to provide her with some entertainment, because I have better things to do. And where's your medic?"

"You're here because I wanted you to know where to find me and Victor for the next while. We'll be working out of here."

"You'll be working," Jacoby said, not sounding happy. "Which means you want me on supplies, with her."

Alex nodded.

Miranda smiled. "Hey, cheer up, old man. I'll make sure to walk slowly and carry the heaviest of the packages."

Jacoby looked at Alex. "You do realize I'm going to have to kill her, right?"

She snorted.

"Not until after the mission."

Jacoby sighed. "Well, there's a lingerie shop on deck three. I guess that's where you'll spend most of your time, kid."

"And how do you know where that store is?" she asked.

"Like you pointed out, I've been here with nothing to do for months. I've explored the station, mapped out the best escape routes, strategic points, and yes, cataloged the stores."

"Are you planning on taking over the place?" Victor asked.

Jacoby shrugged. "This place is boring. I had to find something to do to pass the time." He looked the man over. "Okay, so other than upgrading Victor's equipment, what do I need to get?"

"We," Miranda said.

"We're going to need Heals, a lot of them. Painkillers. Tristan is going to need some, so try to find someone who carries Samalian-strength ones." He tossed a chip to Jacoby. "Other stuff's on there. Tools, check with Mary for the kind of medical things she—"

"What do you mean 'upgrade my stuff'?" Victor asked.

Miranda smiled. "Are you really going to do the job in military hand-me-downs?"

"Hand-me-down? This was the best the supply stores had. I spent the last of my Rublon to get this."

"Didn't you tell him it was your job to equip him?" Jacoby asked.

Alex shook his head. "I had too much on my mind; I didn't think about it." He also wondered when Victor was going to realize he was no longer as broke as he thought.

"Don't worry about it, Vickie Boy," Miranda said. "I can find you the good stuff here. Make you look all tough guy, unless you want to go for a different look?"

"Miranda," Alex said, "stop it." He was realizing that her jovialness just covered up her bad attitude. "Get him good gear, like Jacoby said. I'm paying, so don't skimp."

"I take it you're good for weapons," Jacoby asked Alex, who nodded. "What do you have?" he asked Victor.

"A Kentric PDW. I couldn't bring my service weapon since I'm officially on leave. And a civilian arm was the only thing the store would sell me."

"Should have told them you were a merc," Miranda said. "Opens a lot of crates."

"I'm not a—"

"That's enough," Alex said. "You two get moving. Me and Victor have work to do."

"Where do we find the medic?" Jacoby asked.

"Oh, she's somewhere on the station," Miranda answered, getting up. "Crimson, in his immense wisdom, just let her go with a 'don't leave the station,' warning."

"I'm with Mirrie on that one," Victor said, which earned him a raised eyebrow from her. "You're pretty trusting. Considering who she is, I wouldn't let her out of my sight."

Alex shrugged. "After how she lived on Prian's World, she deserves some unsupervised time. And we have an understanding; she isn't going anywhere." Not that she could, even if she tried.

"Okay, so to be clear," Miranda said, "upgrades for Vic and general medical stuff—including for a Samalian. Should I include something pretty for everyone too?"

"You get something I don't want," Alex stated, "and you'll be paying for it."

"Sure thing, Boss." She headed out.

"I'll make sure she doesn't get anything extravagant," Jacoby said before following her out.

"I hope she mellows out," Victor said. "She's going to be unbearable if she keeps this up. Any idea what her problem is at this point?"

Not being able to get any real jobs, having bounty hunters hate her for something she didn't do, and being a bitch in general? "Nope. Never worked with her, so I couldn't tell you. The one time I ran into her she was basically as much of a bitch as she is now." He indicated the terminals as he sat at one. "Settle in, and I'll have data for you in no time."

"Before I do, can I ask you something?"

Alex shrugged. It wasn't like Will was going to be here within the hour.

"What's with the earpiece?"

He took it out and looked at it. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, you don't need it. I was in the room when you coerced your way through my city. You weren't using it then. I'm guessing you have an implant."

Alex watched Victor. He'd forgotten about that—something else Tristan wouldn't have missed. Were there any lies Victor would believe?

"I don't trust the others," he finally said, deciding to stick as close to the truth as he could. "I'm a coercionist, so this is my weak point. So long as they think they can neutralize me, they won't consider blowing off my head."

"Your telling me, does that mean you trust me?"

Alex eyed him. "I told you how mercs are. Never trust anyone. I don't trust you any more than I do the others, but I know you won't stab me in the back. It isn't in your nature yet."

"I wouldn't betray you, ever."

Alex shrugged. He wasn't here to shatter all the man's illusion. He turned to the terminal and began his infiltration of the Sayatoga.

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"Okay." Victor spun Alex's chair around, snapping his attention out of the Sayatoga. "What do you think you're playing at?" Alex was up and had a knife at the man's neck before his surroundings fully registered.

He looked at the blade pressed against the other man's throat. Victor was lucky that to preserve the illusion this station only catered to tourists, they didn't allow weapons. The only knives he'd snuck on were polycarbon. Any other and the man might have already lost his head.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing? Pulling me out like that?"

"What I'm doing? You're the one with the knife. I thought you couldn't bring those on the station."

Alex moved away and put the knife back in the forearm sheath. "The only people stupid enough to pull me out like that are those wanting to kill me. Just count yourself lucky you're alive. What do you want that couldn't wait for me to be done?" What had he been doing in the system? He'd only been in twenty minutes, according to his implant. He'd been gathering the data, so it wasn't like he'd left unfinished code floating around.

"I'd like you to explain to me how it is that there's six-million Rublons in my account."

Alex didn't understand why that warranted being pulled out. "It's an advance on the job."

"On what job?"

"This job, the one I hired you for. Standard is half up front."

"That wasn't there when I left Bramolian Six. It wasn't even there when I got here. It was put there a day ago, which means about the time you got out of cryo."

Alex sighed, his mind fully engaging with the real world. Right, he'd been expecting this problem. "I didn't pay you until now because one, I knew you'd be pissed. And two, until we were done with rescuing Mary, I wasn't entirely certain you'd be sticking around."

"I said I'd help."

Alex snorted and buried the pity he felt, stoking a little anger instead. "Right, because saying it and dealing with the reality of it is the same thing. If you'd told me you were leaving, that was your compensation—to help you deal with the consequences."

"Damn it, Alex, I said you don't need to bribe me into doing this. I'm here to help you get Tristan back."

Alex leaned back against the console next to his, and crossed his arms. Was the man really that dense? "Okay, time for a reality check, Victor. You're a merc now."

"No, I'm on sabbatical. I'm Law."

Alex rolled his eyes. "You really think you're going to have a job to go back to?"

Victor opened his mouth, and sagely closed it at Alex's raised eyebrow.

"You already broke the Law, Victor. Prian let us go, but you can be damned sure they identified us. It doesn't matter to me or Miranda—one more warrant isn't going to affect us, since by letting us go, they're just a formality. I doubt they're worth more than a couple thousand credits, but you?"

Alex smirked. "You said the people you worked with were looking for ways to get rid of you. This will let them do that. You need to accept it; you are a mercenary now. The moment you accepted the job, that's what you became. How did you think you were going to take on the Sayatoga and walk away from that without being wanted?"

Victor pulled a chair and sat. Alex should feel bad about shattering the man's reality, but he'd let it go on too long. No one survived in this job on dreams and false expectations.

"You are a merc, accept it. Mercs don't work for free. When I come across a merc willing to work for free, I shoot him because his agenda's going to get me killed. I didn't do that with you because you're still delusional. Take the credits, because you're going to need them to stay out of prison."

"I—"

"Trust me, you want to stay out of prison. It isn't like in the vids. And you won't get your chance to take my place if you're stuck in there."

That snapped the man out of his confusion. "Alex, I'm not trying to—"

Alex got in his face, smirking. "You dream of waking up to him, Victor. After all this time, after finally meeting Tristan, you still do. Not as often, but it still happens. You imagine what it'd be like to sit at the dinner table and talk about your day with him—well, with Simon. You still believe there is a Simon."

"I don't."

"I've been there, Victor, don't kid yourself. You're going to keep believing that a small part of Tristan had to be Simon for a long time past living with him, because really, how can he not? How can Tristan have acted like Simon if there is no Simon? And that's fine. I don't care what you believe. I promised you a fair chance at taking my place, and the payment is how I ensure you get it. Becoming a merc is how you make sure you get it."

Victor looked ashen again. His protest had given him back some color, but now he looked like Alex had told him to go and commit murder, which in a way was exactly what Alex had said. He waited, gave Victor time to collect his thoughts and add something to their conversation.

When he didn't, Alex straightened. "Now, can I get back to work without being interrupted? More importantly, is this when you decide this job isn't for you? I need to know if you can't hack this, Victor."

Victor looked at him, and Alex thought the man would break down. Instead, he collected himself, rubbed his face, and nodded, returning to the terminal he'd picked.

Alex waited until Victor was seated before sitting down, and he hoped Will would run late, because he had the feeling this wasn't going to be his only interruption, and he needed his wits about him for when Will arrived.