

The repository where the Baragur Paramilitia Conglom kept the information Alex was after was located on a planet that mostly produced agricultural products with a side of manufacturing relating to agricultural equipment. It was the type of planets retirees received advertizing for as the perfect place to spend their next hundred years, now that they'd satisfied their corporate quotas. Sun, pleasant weather, friendly neighbors, all the things one could want to relax with.

The one for this planet would have to forgo mentioning the military level security that covered part of the planet. BPC clearly didn't care if their neighbors knew something was up. After all, when a planet could claim to be the safest in the universe, did those living there really mind how that happened? All they needed to do was not visit certain parts of the planet, certain sections of the city they lived in, or question why so many armored guards were needed around a simply data repository.

It was what was needed when someone didn't want their dirty little secrets to be pillaged and flung out for anyone on the network to see.

The clever part from PBC was that none of that was noticeable until one set foot on the planet, such as Frederik Baumfyr, specialist in data security, who Alex was passing himself off as.

When he'd studied this planet, the claim of security came with counters from reputable sources showing it was no better than any other planet. The guards weren't to be found anywhere from the network. The only thing he'd note was that their public security forces were twenty-one percent higher than SpaceGov's reported average for planets of this time. It played well with the claim it was so secure.

Even once he'd landed, there hadn't been any indications until he'd reached the Bakamesh District, where data handling for the farms was centered.

The first security check had been what he'd expected. Full body scan and indepth search of his identity. He'd had to disclose his implant, which he claimed was only for data storage, and that was scanned, but he had compartmentalized it so what they'd see supported his claim. His identity was solid. Baumfyr was someone he'd created early in his career as a merc because data experts could often get in place, others couldn't, and with Tristan's help, he had fine tuned it to a level he might as well be real.

Finding a company for Baumfyr to work for, that would justify his him coming here to check in on data security had taken work, but since Bakamesh did handle the farms' data, BPC had to have official oversite for them.

The second level of security had been more thorough. They weren't satisfied with body scans. They had him strip and an expert of their own searched his body for hidden and shielded cavity. He didn't have those, so that wasn't a problem, and being naked while a man clinically manhandled him didn't bother him. He'd had to leave all his knives behind, so he'd felt naked the moment he exited the ship.

He'd had to give them access to his implant for a deep scan, which meant they saw the partitions the previous level missed. Not that they found anything incriminating there. Alex had fractured every one of his programs into component code, as well as the communication algorithm other than the standard ones, so he could move data on and off his implant. They wouldn't be able to identify anything unless they copied the partition and found the correct recompiler to piece them back together. It would be an impressive feat

since Alex had coded his own for this.

Of course, a security expert needed programs to do his job, but BPC didn't chance even an approved stranger bringing in unsanctioned programs. They'd provide him with the best they had for him to do the work.

Fortunately for Alex, this wasn't a coercing job. It was simple theft.

That should make it a job for Tristan, but as a Samalian, his Samalian stood out. Normally, that didn't matter. People were adept at not noticing an alien's alienness. Even corporations fell victim to it. There were just enough aliens within any one work force another could slip in and expect not to draw attention.

BPC wasn't a corporation. If something registered as out of the ordinary, they investigated it completely. And Tristan was distinctive enough, even among other Samalians, that short of erasing him completely from the network, BPC would eventually trace the image to the person; the merc.

They'd still considered it. It would take time for them to go through all the locks and gates Alex could put in their way. But there was a certainty it would happen. Tristan could fight his way out of whatever BPC sent at him to keep him from escaping with their price, but they had the resources to then keep making their lives difficult.

They were doing this so they could settle down and be in control of how exciting their future would be. Not so they'd spend it dealing with military level assault teams each time they landed on a planet or visited a station.

Frederik Baumfyr, on the other hand, was so real and distinct from Alex that once they'd arranged for him to die, it would be credible enough to appease BPC. He'd even let them retrieve the stack, as intact as Alex could leave it, since he had no use for the information it held once he'd been cured.

The agent handed him his clothing. "Once you are ready, you will be escorted to your office so you can start working. Lockout is at seven, local time. Make sure you are synced with planetary time. If you are on the property after lockout, you will be considered an intruder and handled accordingly."

"I'm on local, thank you. How do I arrange for the escort to leave?"

"Call to have your door unlocked. When it opens, your escort will be there."

That hadn't been in the information he'd found.

"And if I have to visit a stack room directly, it's the same process?"

The agent fixed his daze on him. "There was no mention of you needed access to more than your office."

"I don't plan on leaving it, but I am here to make sure the client's data is properly secured. That means I may see something that requires confirmation at the stack level. I'd rather know what procedures are required ahead of time."

The man closed his eyes, and Alex had the sense he was communicating with someone. He saw no evidence of implants, but with the resources BPC had, the man could have his entire brain replaced with a computer and there would be no trace of it.

"Yes," the man said, opening his eyes. "If you require to circulate within the facility, request for a door unlock and your escort will be there."

Alex put his jacket on. "And they'll be like these two?" he indicated the two guards in gray body armor, with a pistol at their hip, a knife on the other side and a folded rifle

attached to their chest.

“Yes. If you are hoping for a lowered security once you are within the facility, I have to inform you that you will be disappointed.”

“No, I want this level of security,” Alex protested. He needed it, in fact. “I know how dangerous the universe is.”

“Then follow them to your office.”

Following them consisted of Alex walking with one on each side of him, with one motioning for the direction they were to go in when they reached an intersection.

Other than his guards, and the occasional one guarding a door, the building had the feel of just about any other data center he’d been in. Desk slaves moving about from one office to the other with so very important information on their pads or within implants.

They went up an elevator, but Alex noted the signs for the emergency exits. When he reached it, the door that opened onto the office, when his guard pressed a hand on the barely noticeable plate next to it, that he was to use, was like every other one along this hall. Like everyone one on every floor, Alex expected. Sameness was one thing that had stayed with him from his time working at Luminex, even after all these subjective years. Everything was just more of the same.

The door closed behind him and Alex settled at the desk, bringing up information and going over it, as if he was actually here to do data security work. It was one part maintaining his cover and one part working out how to reach the stack room he needed.

He knew which stack he needed from the data he’d stolen, but not where that was within the building. He also didn’t feel like asking to be escorted to it. It was irrational, but that felt too much like telling them exactly what he was here for.

And Tristan wouldn’t like it. Misdirection was the way he liked his theft to be done.

So Alex looked over data, calling up the location of their stacks, and bringing up a map only long enough he could explain. If asked, he was making sure the location tags hadn’t been modified.

It took him twenty-three minutes to find data held within the stack he wanted, and only one minute more to locate a previous data located in a stack in the room across the hall for his.

He spent another thirty minutes doing data check, then brought up the one from the decoy room, did extra checks on it, and a few more, just to give the impression he wanted to be sure of what he found, before requesting his door be unlocked.

When it opened, the two guards on the other side could be the same one as before, or not. They all looked the same.

“I need to do an onsite check of stack fifty-eight, seventy-three dash one-eighty-nine,” Alex said, studying the helmet and how it joined the neck guard. “I can give you the room it’s in, if it’s what you need.”

“That won’t be required,” one answered. “Come with us.”

Up a dozen floors, then along a hall that had fewer people. Data stacks only need the occasional maintenance, so an entire floor of them only required a handful of technician to keep running properly.

As expected, the door next to the barely visible plate looked exactly like the one to his office, or the others they’d passed on the way here. He couldn’t even confirm this was

the room the stack he told him about was in. But they had no reason to suspect his plan, so he proceeded ahead.

“Damn it,” he cursed as the door opened, patting himself.

“What?” The question had a sharpness to it that spoke of alertness, instead of bored annoyance.

“You’re not going to like it,” Alex said, letting out a sigh. “But I forgot something.”

“Which is?” This time, there was caution in the tone.

“My tools.”

Their heads barely turned in each other’s direction, the only indication they were confused. That their attention wasn’t entirely on him.

He had a knife in each hand before they realized it, and one was planted in a guard’s throat before they had reacted to the theft.

Despite of all of Tristan’s attempt at getting Alex to learn all the ways technology worked, all that ever stuck were generalities.

Because next had to move, the armor there was weaker. It didn’t mean a knife could go through, but unsealed armors meant not completely sealed joints because they made air flow movement simpler, and these were another element that weakened them. Add to that guard had no reason to bother with polycarbon knives since those were basically useless, and it meant that while the knife in his hands didn’t power up, or vibrate, it still pieced through the weaker part of their armor and the person within it was now gurgling.

Even if there had safeguards to stop the blood loss, he’d sliced open the trachea. Blood would pour into their lung even if the armor kept it from flowing out of it.

He pulled it out as he launched himself at the other guard as they raised the gun. They’d already sounded the alarm, even if he couldn’t hear it, but they were locking down the data in the wrong stack. He made it under the guard gun hand before the first shot was fired, then he had a knife sliding along the surface of the forearm until the point slipped into the joint and sunk in.

He hadn’t been sure of that one; limb joint didn’t need to be unsealed. Then he had the other knife in that guard’s throat also, but he didn’t let this one fall. He pulled him to the door he needed, placing the hand on the plate. He was confident that as soon as he died, that would stop working.

He dropped the body in the open doorway and hurried inside. That would be a clear sign to the guards who had to be rushing in stop him, but he wouldn’t be here long. He located the stack and, because modularity was so important for when thing failed, he had it pulled out, then the data-comb out of that and into the reinforced lining of his jacket.

Once they realized he’d taken something, their goal would be to destroy it.

Well, they’d be out to kill him, but unless they were stupid, they wouldn’t be counting on that. Destroying what he’d taken meant that even if he escaped, they’d one.

He grabbed the gun off the guard in the doorway and fired at the walls and ceiling as he ran for the emergency exits.

“Come on,” he muttered. “High heat is a danger to the people working here. Get your sensors working and sound the fucking evacuation alarm.”

The doors to the elevator opened, and Alex backpedaled before he saw the four guards already in position. He slipped into the decoy room as they fired, and he felt the

heat of the blasts.

The evacuation alarm sounded.

“Now, all I have to do is get past them to reach the emergency stairs.” He eyed the dead guard.

He didn’t have Tristan’s strength, but he could still borrow some of his tricks.

He fired at the elevator while he pulled the body to him, then put its arms over his shoulders and stood, using an arm to hold it against him. He kept firing at the guards as he ran at them.

His arm hurt from the hit it took, but the wounds were cauterized. Then he let the armor continue at the open doors while he turned and ran for the now unlocked emergency door, firing behind him.

He made it in with a glancing shot at his shoulder, but the sting made him drop the gun. He ran down, shoving people out of his way. When one tried to grab him, Alex punched them in the throat.

The smart thing was to blend in with the crowd, but that only worked if he didn’t expect the guards to kill everyone here just to get him, and Alex had too much experience with corporations not to think it was a possibility.

What he needed to do was reach the ground floor, get out of the building, and reach the outer security gate.

The guards pushed into the crowd at different floors, but had no success reaching him with everyone now scared.

So they weren’t going to kill everyone, if only he’d known.

Alex made it out on the ground floor to a welcoming comity of guards ushering people to be scanned. He rushed them before they could tell him apart from the others. He was on the first one, pulled the pistol out of its holster, then behind them, firing at the other guards. What he needed to do was hurry to the exit before they overrode the evacuation alarm and locked them in.

He slipped under another of the guard’s attempt as grabbing him took their knife and planted that in the knee joint. If it worked for the elbow, there was no reason it wouldn’t for the other joints. The knife went in, and Alex grabbed the gun hand off the one facing him before they fired, pushing it aside, causing him to fire in the crowd. Alex wished it hadn’t happened like that, but otherwise felt nothing about the injuries and death he was causing.

His survival took precedence.

He pulled the rifle out of the harness and it unfolded. He thought he could make out the scared expression through the dark visor as he put the muzzle against the guard’s chest and fired. They dropped and Alex fired at the others, forcing them to scatter and he ran for the doors just as the alarm stopped.

The ‘thunk’ of the hard locks engaging sounded in the following silence, and Alex went over his options instead of letting the situation sink in fully. The hover was waiting for him in the lot on the other side of the outer security gate. He could see it from where he stood. Tristan was waiting in it, out of sight, ready to pilot—

Why was the window lowering?

And what was that—

Grinning, Alex threw himself to the floor.

The reinforced wall of clear poly-something or other shattered under the impact of the missile, and Alex was already running. He made it out of the building when the explosion triggered and lifted him off the ground. He rolled back to his feet in crashing and was running again.

The missile had had the extra advantage of destroying the two gates between him and his escape, and since the guards were in the process of turning toward whoever had fired the missile, Alex brought up the rifle and shot them in the back.

The back door of the hover opened as he reached it, and Alex threw himself in it.

“You are a maniac!” He laughed and Tristan piloted them away.

* * * * *

Useless.

Alex looked at the displayed data and the schematics. He didn’t need Tristan’s explanation to know this would never help him.

The information Alex had found had been correct. BPC had found a way to make people into remorseless killers and then turn that off when they didn’t need them. What it hadn’t said was how they’d done it.

Alex had had a fleeting thought about one of the agents that had checked he was who he claimed to be, about how he could have had his brain replaced with a computer and Alex wouldn’t have been able to know.

The thing was, it was impossible to replace someone’s brain with a computer. If you did that, you no longer had a person, you had a machine. Parts of the brain could be enhanced, but not the whole thing. And some part couldn’t even be touched without radically changing who a person was.

BPC’s process involved replacing nearly a quarter of the prefrontal cortex with circuitry, letting them control how much someone felt from killing.

“No wonder they don’t want anyone to find out about this,” Tristan said, studying what was there. “They aren’t making soldier with this.”

“They’re making automatons,” Alex finished. “Do you think they put it into production?”

“I doubt it. This isn’t something they could hide from SpaceGov. If it’d been deployed on a battlefield, they would have learned about it. At most, they buried the test subjects.” Tristan turned the screen off. “I’m sorry, Alex.”

“Do we have any other leads?”

“I…” he hesitate and Alex couldn’t understand why his Samalian seemed conflicted. “It’s another long shot, Alex.”

He chuckled. “Seems like those are all that’s left.”

“I don’t know how safe it is.”

“We can figure that part out once we’re there and if it actually exists.”

Tristan didn’t look relieved, even as his ears twitched an affirmative.

Alex squeezed his arm. “We have time. If this one doesn’t pan out, we will find something else. I have faith.”

“I… am trying,” Tristan replied.