

“Protect Alex,” Tristan ordered, stepping out of the shuttle as guards entered the hangar. Alex and one of the rebels had exited, him dressed corporate, and the other as close to an assistant as they could make her. Unfortunately, barely after Alex reached the hangar’s computer, someone from the maintenance crew decided something was wrong, and call in security.

He fired and the neck of a gray and blue clad guards exploded. They weren’t wearing heavy armor, as Tristan had expected. Complacency made them think just controlling the station protected them from attacks, or made flimsy armor more resistant.

“No alarms,” Alex yelled without looking away from the computer.

Tristan rushed the largest of the guard as shots flew from behind him and missed nearly all the guards. It kept them pinned, so Tristan decided it was enough. When his target moved out from behind his cover to shoot, Tristan grabbed his arm and slammed it on the crate. The gun fell. The knife’s edge glowed and burned when it cut Tristan. Then he had that wrist in his other hand and twisted. Bones snapped, the knife fell, the edge darkening before clattering to the floor. Shots got too close, so he pushed the guard behind the crate, surprising the two others there. Before they reacted, Tristan broke his target’s neck, then shot the other two in the opened visors, increased the power on his Azeru, and shot a third in the back of the head before they realized anything had happened. The loss of a helmet would be a lesser issue.

A check told him the fighting was over. Two of the rebels were bent over, retching. The maintenance crew was unharmed, as far as he could tell, but he decided it didn’t matter as they were being restrained. Four of the guards were dead, the four he killed, the others were injured. Killing them would be the efficient thing to do, but—

“Was that really necessary?” Kaleb demanded.

—it would cause trouble.

“Unlike the crew, if they were given the chance, they would have sounded the alarm.”

“Isn’t that what he’s there to keep from happening?” He pointed to Alex.

“It is, but while he can tell the station not to answer any request, he can’t keep guards from calling reinforcement. It also takes time for him to have enough control to ensure the system obeys him completely.”

“You’re hurt.” Kaleb took a step back, his face taking on a sickly hue.

“It’s a shallow cut from a laser edge blade. It’s cauterized, and the Heals I took before we left will endure it doesn’t get worse. It’s why Alex advised everyone to be injected. It won’t save you from a lethal injury, but it can help ensure you survive most anything else.” He walked away from the man to check on how the crew and guards were restrained.

Hard lock manacles taken from the guard had them with their arms at their back. The maintenance crew were tied with a filament from a spool and welded together. A pile of datapad and communicators was out of reach.

Someone had an inkling of what they were doing, at least.

“What are we doing with them?” one of the rebel asked.

“In that shuttle.” Tristan indicated the one they had been working on.

“Is that really the best use of our time?” Kaleb demanded. “We should go out there and capture the representative.”

“We can’t exit until Alex has control.” Tristan stopped the man who was about to grab a guard. “Any of them with undamaged armor go in undressed.”

“Why?”

“We aren’t here to play dress like Karliak,” Kaleb stated.

“Actually, we are. Alex can’t control people the way he controls computer, so we need to manipulate them into believing we belong.”

Kaleb snorted. “Like they’ll buy someone like would ever be hired by a corporation.”

“Corporations are more opportunistic than you are. If they need a skill-set and a non-human is the most qualified, they will get them, that they are interested in the position or not. The bodies go in with the prisoners,” he told the closest rebel. “Take them out of the armors first. They’ll be undamaged except for one helmet.” He headed for the guard he’d taken down and stripped him.

“How long is he going to take?” Kaleb demanded while Tristan worked. The helmet would be

useless, fortunately he was muscular and that would take precedence to his muzzle and ears within the context of being a Karliak guard.

“As long as he needs to ensure we don’t have to worry about the automated system.”

Someone at the other end of the crates threw up.

Tristan didn’t know Karliak’s policy on using Alien, but he wasn’t aware of one corporation who turned away the opportunity to have the best, and Tristan looked like the best guard they could acquire. “Whoever is the best fit for the armor, put it on.” He undressed. He wouldn’t be able to fit into his with his pants on.

Kaleb cursed; there were gasps, and someone whistled.

Tristan dressed. As usual when wearing human designed garbs, it was too tight. Even the largest human wore something that wouldn’t fit him properly, if only because human clothing, especially armor, never took into account his fur. There was only so much it could compact. Testing the limits showed moving at a leisurely pace was possible, but running, sudden motion and trying to pick up something from the floor would rip even the reinforced seams of the armor.

“Isn’t that squeezing...” Kaleb pointed to his groin.

“Yes.” He looked over those putting the armor on.

“What about us?” Nine were still dressed in the clothing Tristan had instructed they wear before leaving.

“You’re employees of the station. Karliak doesn’t have enough personnel to operate it without bringing people from ground side. You are here as part of Kaleb’s entourage. We will be his guards. Alex his assistant.” They were the only two dressed in anything that could pass for corporate, although if anyone looked at Kaleb too closely, the want-to-be of his clothing would become obvious. He turned to the man. “If anyone addresses you, you’re too important to bother with them. Your assistant will deal with it.”

“I—”

“Unless you want this mission to fail, and find out what corporations do to people who sneak onto their property with intent of taking from them, you will keep your mouth shut.”

“Don’t you dare speak to me like that,” Kaleb said with an attempt at bravado.

“You barged your way onto this mission,” Tristan replied calmly. “My previous employer knew what role he was to play. If you weren’t willing to step into that role, you should have let him come as he wanted.”

“And take what’s mine?” Now the anger was real.

“Then play the part you took on to ensure our success.” He faced the others. “Weapons stay hidden unless they are needed.”

“How are we going to know when they’re needed?”

“I’ll have killed someone.”

They looked at one another.

“The mission is to reach the representative’s office and secure her. Once that is done, we will see to it Kaleb becomes the official representative, and he will be able to ensure our return groundside peacefully.”

“I have control,” Alex said, stepping away from the terminal. “Their coercionist didn’t notice what I was doing, and it doesn’t look like they’re all that focused on making sure the system’s clean, but the antibodies are forceful. That’s going to be the first thing that regains its full function. Then it’s a question of minutes before enough of my work is undone and it’ll be noticed.”

“How long?”

“If I’m not in a position to check in on it and strengthen my control of the antibodies, three hours at most. I can guarantee two. After that, it’s all on how attentive their coercionist is. Three hours is when the system will start screaming for someone to do something.”

“Communications systems?”

“I couldn’t do much more than set a kill switch without someone noticing a problem, but this is a station. Nearly everyone has a local node comms, and those will bypass the system if there are others like it in range.”

“Isn’t the range on this thing like two clicks?”

“If that’s local for much larger than this station,” Alex replied. “Then the answer is yes. Short of taking them away. We won’t be able to keep them from calling for help.”

“Then we make sure no one notices us,” Tristan told them. And already they looked nervous. The simplest thing to do would be to kill them, along with Kaleb, and return with a story of the job going horribly wrong. As the only two experienced Mercs, it would be credible only they made it back, especially if they were properly injured.

But that would create friction between them and the rest of the rebels. Potentially, to a point where he wouldn’t be able to use them as part of his plan. It was why Kaleb would die when they were attempting to capture the representative. She’d be guarded, and those guards would be sufficiently qualified to make the two of them work at taking them down if they weren’t encumbered by a group of amateur. So Kaleb being shot by a guard in the process would be simple to arrange.

But they had to make it to the office first. “You belong here.” He told them. “If Karliak picked you to work on the station, you have demonstrated you could be trusted. That means no one will look at you twice unless you force them to. You are employed as part of the inspector’s group, so you stay a step behind him. Those of us who are guards will be at the back and front, with... you in the lead.”

The woman looked at him, surprise. “Shouldn’t it be you?”

“Karliak will employ an alien, but they will never give us a position of authority. At best, I’m your second in command, and that is only if I’m charmed my way into your bed. Otherwise, I’m the first one you throw at problem with a strong hope it’ll get me killed.”

“I’d never—”

“You would. That is the person you are right now. You are all Karliak employee. What the corporation wants is what you want. If you had more selfish ambition, you would not have been allowed on board. Do not be arrogant, but know that you, out of all the groundsiders, were judge worthy of working for a corporation.”

They looked at one another before falling into place around Alex and Kaleb. He took position behind the leader and ignored the looks they gave him and each other. This was the best he could hope for. At least Alex was in a position to lead them.

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“Why aren’t we taking the life?” Kaleb demanded. “It would faster. I thought time was of the essence.” At least he’d waited until the hall was devoid of people this time. Tristan had attracted his share of looks, but he was behind the leader, so where he belonged. If anyone wondered why they hadn’t seen him before, the fact he was escorting groundsiders along with a corporate worker answered that. They’d kept him down there until they were out of option. He would be sent back down as soon as this was done.

“Lifts are death traps,” Alex replied.

“I thought you controlled this place.”

“I control the system. There are multiple ways to cut the power to the lifts without going through that. Without power, it’s a box in which you’re waiting for security to capture you, if that is what they intend to do.”

“Don’t worry,” Tristan added. “This design of station had ramps to go to the different levels. You won’t have to deal with going up a maintenance ladder.” And neither would he, for which Tristan was grateful.

They made it two level up, the one where the representative had her office without more than looks, then...

“What are you doing here?” a woman in a suit asked as she saw them.

“We—” Alex started.

“What do you mean? What are we doing here?” Kaleb demanded. And if that wasn’t bad enough, everyone except for Tristan and Alex looked at the man, then each other, and around as if someone there would have answers.

The woman had her comm out. “I need—”

Tristan shot her. Someone in the distance screamed. “Now is the time to take your weapons out,” he said.

“Running is probably a good idea too,” Alex added.