

“What am I supposed to do with all of that?” Alex asked himself as he looked at the amount displayed.

“Problem?” Will asked, glancing up from his datapad.

“Yeah. Have you seen how much money I’m getting?”

Will grinned. “Lots.”

A lot was right. Alex hadn’t asked to see his cut. Even now, with only a jump left before reaching Samalia, he hadn’t thought about money, but Lea had sent him a message asking him how he wanted his pay once he left the crew.

“I have no idea how to deal with this kind of money.” There was so much that he was set for the rest of his life. Once he got Jack back, they’d be able to get a place on a quiet planet and just enjoy each other’s company.

“How do you deal with it?” he asked Will.

His friend reached in a pocket and pulled out a cred stick.

Alex shook his head. “I’m not putting all that on a stick. I’d lose everything if it was stolen.”

Will shrugged. “Many?”

Alex chuckled. “Do you have any idea how many sticks I’d need? Even if I was willing to put a thousand on each, I’m looking at a few thousand sticks. I’d need a truck to carry that around.”

“Need bank.”

Alex thought about it, then sighed. “I can’t put that in my account. The Law’s going to have programs monitoring it. There’s still a warrant for my arrest from Luminex. Where do you keep yours? It can’t all be on a stick.”

Will tapped the wall. “In ship.”

“Right.” That made sense. He didn’t have to worry about the Law looking into the deposits. “Unfortunately, that isn’t going to work for me.”

Will tapped his ear. “Coerce, hide it.”

Alex laughed. “I’m not that good. The bank will notice such a large infusion of money. I don’t know how many accounts I’d need to split the deposits enough they’d slip below the threshold, but they’d notice it if I created all of them.”

Will was thoughtful. “I create some, give them over. Jen too. Ana, everyone.”

Alex smiled. “I appreciate the thought, but that would make the Law notice you.”

Will canted his head, grinning.

“More than it already does, I mean,” Alex added, then he paused. “But you’re giving me an idea. Thanks.” He headed out.

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Asyr was seated at the main console when Alex entered.

She looked up. “I’m just practicing.” She pushed away. “I’ll let you have it.”

“It’s okay. One of the secondaries will do for what I’m checking.” He sat, put his earpiece in and, after greeting and doing a quick check of the ship’s systems, he contacted his bank. He didn’t go to his account, but made his way through the code until he was below the user interface.

It only took a few seconds to know he wouldn’t be able to do it, but he still tried for five

minutes, to no avail. This wasn't like what he'd done for that criminal. Siphoning a little money from a lot of accounts was one thing, but now he wanted to create one location where he could put all the money he'd made. It wasn't just the security that was the problem, or the bank's coercionists, it was the number of redundancies in place to make sure each and every account was authentic. He could write programs to affect all of them, but there would be delays from the time he made the changes to that information reaching the programs. If only one redundancy was faster, it would fail.

He backed out, erasing any evidence he'd peeked in. "Well, that isn't going to happen," he grumbled.

"What are you trying to do?" Asyr asked.

"I was thinking of creating user IDs within my bank system to distribute the money I've made. I can't put it into my account. I just looked at the security and it's too complex to let me do that."

"Then get it elsewhere."

Alex chuckled. "I can't just 'get' an ID. I have to create it, as well as all the backing information, census reports, life history, medical... There's probably a lot more to it."

"It's not that complicated."

"How do you know?" Alex asked.

"I have six IDs."

"Really? How did you get them?"

"I bought them from a girl I know. Everyone on the ship has more than one. We have to. We're all wanted by the Law for something. We couldn't leave the ship without them."

Alex hadn't noticed that, but then, how would he? His ID card had his name on it, but he didn't flash it all the time. Most places read it without him having to pull it out. And the card wasn't really where the information was; it just held the addresses where that information was contained. It would be simple enough for him to create a program that would change the address. He could even use multiple addresses, have them rotate.

He shook his head. "But I'd still have to create the IDs, and I'd have to get in pretty deep inside multiple systems, not all of which are governmental."

"You don't create it, you take it. There are tons of IDs stored that no one's using. Governments have repositories full of them."

"Then they'll be protected."

"Not according to my friend."

Alex couldn't believe that. Sure, governments were notoriously easy to get into, but within that they had high-security areas. Such a repository would have to be there.

Still, he didn't have anything to lose by taking a look. He found a government on the open net, a small one, out of the way, and slipped in. He looked around, found a handful of higher security zones within that system then, far too easily as far as he was concerned, the space where IDs resided.

A lot of them were blank IDs, waiting to be assigned to a newborn, but a lot more than he'd expected had a history to them. He double checked for any kind of security and didn't see any, so he pulled one up, a man who had died fifty-eight objective years before. His name had been Harold Stingsky, and the whole of his life was there.

He took the ID out of the repository, removed the death from it, and inserted it into the census. No alarms went up. Not even one sniffer program came to investigate what had

happened.

This had been far too easy.

He found another government system, one slightly larger, closer to the core, where everything was more monitored. This one had sniffers, but they didn't notice him under his cloak. He found the repository in a similarly unprotected area and he was able to bring another person back from the dead, a Rosita Harmond. The sniffers looked at it, but then went away.

Alex tried it again, with a larger system, again closer to the core, with the same results. On his fifth test, this one within a core government computer, he was stopped the moment he entered. The security program detected his cloak and proceeded to start dismantling it. He tried to disconnect, but that had been frozen by the system.

He ordered Asyr to shut down all communication, and just as trackers started on him, he was out. That was what he thought security should be like in a government system, but only a core government had used it.

There were a small number of core governments, compared to all of them in the universe, and if that was how the security was distributed, no wonder Asyr had implied it was easy.

He went back to that first system and looked in on Harold. He was still there; the census had even attached his health records from the medical database. Alex took a quick look at that and removed the death certificate. Again, no alarms went up.

Alex leaned back in his chair and couldn't believe how easy this was. He decided to leave Harold alive to see what happened over the next few days, and went through the other census to remove the people he'd brought back to life.

Over the next week he checked in regularly, while cataloging what the census looked for in its citizens. It didn't look for much. It required an address, it did a scan for a death certificate every local year, it checked that the taxes were paid, and...nothing else.

That was all it took to be alive?

When Harold was fine after the week, Alex set to work. He found a list of addresses that were defunct and picked one of those, making it active within the government system, but nowhere else. That way other than the census, no one should check it out. He made Harold a writer, then for safe measure he created a social life for him, something limited, indications he went to coffee shops, did some traveling. Small things that would do for casual inspections.

With that done as Harold, he contacted a bank and opened an account. He answered all the questions, and under five minutes Harold had his very own bank account. Alex transferred a few thousand in it, payment for some private work, and then covered his tracks. Now all he had to do was wait.

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"Hey, Lea," Alex called to her as she looked through a crate.

She smiled. "How do you like being on the front line?"

"Not as much as being on the bridge, but it's fun. How's this haul?"

"Not as good as when you're on the bridge, but decent. When I'm done appraising it, I'll give you your cut."

"Don't worry about it, that isn't why I'm here. Do you have a list of what each ship I coerced

carried?”

She pulled out her datapad. “Sure, why?”

“I’ve been trying to work out how the people behind that trap ship managed to target us. I’ve looked at everything else I could think of, so now I’m wondering if we might not have some sort of cargo profile.”

“You should ask the captain; he could tell you what he looked for.”

“He isn’t there to satisfy my curiosity.”

“He still would. I’m ready to send them to you.”

Alex took his pad and the files appeared on it. “If this doesn’t answer my questions, I’ll go see him.” He deleted the manifest from that first job; It hadn’t been picked with him in mind. The next two listed a lot of different things, but the one following that was a smaller shipment of crystals from Abony—small, fragile, but valuable. His mother had loved them. After that, artisan pottery from Uganew Two. So definitely fragile and small.

“Lea, was the cargo from the...Tiffany valuable?”

She looked it up. “Yes, the rich folks in the core are going crazy over that stuff. Something about them being the last ever made or something.”

Alex continued looking. Processor chips, components for hovers—luxury hovers he found out after checking—historical pieces from Barony Eight. He had a twinge of guilt over that one, but he pushed it down. As he continued looking, they all had a common thread: high-value, but easily damaged. Same as with the datapads that was the cargo the trap ship had carried.

The captain had become predictable.

Still, what were the odds he’d found the one ship that was a trap? Even if the cargo was exactly what he was looking for, it couldn’t be the only ship with something like that.

“Lea, you went to the trap ship, right?”

“I helped move the cargo after you had control of it, yeah.”

“What’s your opinion of it? How long do you think it would take to load something like that?”

“Depends on how much of a hurry they’re in. Give me the right loaders, and enough of them, and I can fill the hold in a few hours. Why?”

“I’m trying to figure out how they got to us.” Alex tapped his datapad. “We’ve been going after similar cargo, so that’s how they baited us, but how could they make sure the ship would be close enough the captain would go after it?”

“Maybe they have a fleet.”

“If that’s true, then I’m definitely not the first coercionist to go pirate. That’s the only way getting a fleet makes sense.”

“Okay, then if we’re only working with one ship, I’d figure out the most probable route. Put out a bunch of manifests, all of them seemingly unrelated, but with the kind of cargo my target wants, and I make sure that all the ships those manifests are linked to are actually the same, but with different tags and such.”

“Wouldn’t that mean the cargo might not match what’s in the hold?”

“Then I put out multiples of the same manifest, just changing the ship it’s attached to. The captain finds the first one he likes, stops looking, and he doesn’t realize that there’s more of them out there.”

Alex nodded. “Makes sense. Minimizes the expenses, maximizes the exposure, and because it’s fragile, it will attract only a certain type of pirates, ones with a coercionist on board. So even

if more than one takes the bait, they're still getting coercionist pirates out of circulation."

"That's if we don't do it for them," she said. "When two ships go after the same target, it tends to result in a firefight."

Alex nodded. "They seemed to want me alive, but I don't think they would have cared if I'd ended up dead. But what if pirates without a coercionist show up?"

She eyed him. "You did see the level or armament they had, right? They might have set this up to catch someone like you, but they could take down anyone who attacked them." She went back to looking in the crate. "Don't worry about it. It won't happen again. If it's really because we were predictable, the captain learns fast, but if you want you could tell him your theory."

"I doubt he'll listen to me. You tell him. You can even take the credit for it."

Lea shook her head. "Never give up credit, Crimson. In this job, it's about the only thing you have."

Alex considered it for a moment, then left Lea to go look for the captain.