

The street had changed. Many of the houses Alex remembered were gone. There had been a housing building at the end of the street, which had been growing vacant. That was gone now, leaving a lot where trees were growing. He remembered running through the building with other kids, playing at being mercs on missions.

Playing at being mercs.

If he'd known what life had in store for him, he would have stayed away from that game.

The lot might be a park, but it didn't look well-maintained. At least his grandfather didn't have to take a shuttle when he felt like taking a nature walk. Nature was right there.

The street was a reminder that change was everywhere in the universe.

The houses looked smaller, and families worked around them. Most of them had been occupied by older folks, either those who could afford rejuvenation—like his grandparents—and decided to take some time off from work, or people who had grown too old to work and were enjoying the life the corporation they'd worked for gave them. Then many houses had only looked occupied as the computer kept the illusion going while the people were taking trips. If that was the case now, Alex couldn't tell. He'd need his earpiece for that.

His hand went to his pocket. He knew it wasn't there, but he couldn't stop the reflex. He no longer had an earpiece, Tristan had seen to it. The last time he'd seen it, it had been in pieces with the Samalian poking at them. Then they were gone. He'd pleaded, he'd searched the ship, but he hadn't found any indication of it.

Which meant the disposal unit.

It hurt to know it was gone, not just because without it he could barely do any coercing, but because it had taken two years of planning, a crew of eight, and most of his money to acquire it. As uncomfortable as wearing had felt, it had been one of the best missions he'd done.

And now it was gone.

A man walked in their direction, younger than Alex expected and dressed in casual clothes, rather than the corporate look he remembered. His grandparents had been some of the rare people who didn't work for a corporation here.

Tristan ignored the stare, and when the man did a double take, Alex had to check that Tristan hadn't decided to do something, but it was Emil who'd taken Tristan's hand and moved closer in an attempt to move away from the man.

Emil was skittish around strangers now. He hadn't left Tristan's side since they'd stepped off the ship, and anytime someone stepped too close, he'd take Tristan's hand and pressed against him.

Tristan had been against landing at the station, but this was a farming world. The corporation here didn't care about security as they did in worlds that focused on research and manufacturing. Alex had shown him the lax security among the landing pads and throughout the station, and Tristan had decided they could land there.

Tristan had fabricated IDs for each of them, and they moved through the station with ease. They'd rented a planetary shuttle and had landed in a commercial lot at the edge of the neighborhood.

Alex stopped, facing his grandparents' property. Like all the houses, it was on a large lot. Farming planets didn't have a need to pack everything as tightly as they could. The house was large, still the same as when they'd raised his father and six siblings.

Like his parents still did, they'd run farms, then decided to do something more manual. His grandfather had opened a repair store in the city, while his grandmother had made pottery. The one thing they both still spent time doing was taking care of their yard.

The trees were trimmed, as was the hedge around the property. His grandmother knelt on the grass by the porch, working in a flowerbed covered in yellow and purple flowers.

"This is it."

If Tristan had an opinion about the property, he kept it to himself. "I'll wait here."

Alex offered his hand to Emil, but he clung to Tristan's leg.

"Why can't I stay with you?"

They'd explained it to him, and he had acted like he was okay with all of it, but now that they were here, it looked like Emil was going to make thing difficult.

Tristan went down to a knee. "Buddy, they're going to keep you safe. Alex explained about your new identity, about how you're a Crimson now. They'll look after you, and none of the bad

men will be able to find you.”

“You can keep me safe,” Emil insisted.

Tristan squeezed Emil’s shoulder. “Buddy, I’m a merc. There’s always danger around me. This job was about keeping you safe, but I won’t be able to do that on the next one. Whoever my employer is will have to come before you.”

“I can learn. I can help, like Alex does.”

Tristan smiled. “You’re a child. You deserve to live like a child. Remember how I told you I grew up in a forest?”

Emil nodded.

“I was always fighting to survive, to feed myself. That isn’t much of a childhood. If you stay with me, that’s the kind of childhood you’ll have. You deserve something better, and Alex found that for you. They can give you a chance to be a kid for a while longer.”

Emil hugged Tristan. “But I like you.”

“I know, Buddy, I know.” He placed an arm around Emil.

Alex was surprised Tristan sounded almost sorrowful. He’d expected satisfaction at having gotten Emil to care for him so much. Instead, it was like he regretted doing it.

He was imagining it. Tristan didn’t feel regret. He did what he had to, used who he needed, and didn’t care about what happened to them. He never cared.

He couldn’t help the image that formed. He and Tristan with a smiling Emil between them. Them raising the boy, turning him into a terror among mercs. Tristan’s skills with machines and Alex’s with computers, all wrapped up in one person.

He shoved the imaged in the deepest part of himself, along with his broken heart. It was pure selfishness. Emil shouldn’t grow up in an environment of death and violence.

“When you’re older,” Tristan said, “if you still want to be a merc, come find me and we’ll do jobs together, okay?”

“Promise?”

Tristan smiled and squeezed his shoulder. “I promise.”

Emil released the Samalian and took Alex’s hand.

“It’s going to be okay,” Alex said as they crossed the street.

“I know. Tristan wouldn’t have brought me here if it wasn’t safe.”

They stepped onto the property and Alex was taken back to his childhood. Visiting with his family, running around with his brother and sisters. Moving here at fourteen.

Some of the stones on the path were loose and knocked together as he and Emil walked toward the house. He’d helped make the path—unfortunately neither he nor his grandfather had been very good, and the path had suffered.

His grandmother looked over her shoulder and stood. “Frank? We have company.” She moved to the steps, studying them, uncertainty on her face.

Alex stopped a dozen steps from her. He didn’t want to crowd her. Emil moved behind him. She studied him, frowning.

She took a step forward. “Alexander?”

“Hello, Gabrielle.” He couldn’t call her by anything else, no matter how much she insisted. His own mother had hated being called “Mom” or “Ma”, so she’d raised everyone to call people by their names.

His grandmother had changed since the last time he’d seen her, on a vid call. Her hair was turning gray now, and she had a few wrinkles around her eyes and mouth. She didn’t look old, but she was aging. It was odd, she’d always looked in her thirties before. She used to joke that if she saw her death coming, she’d just spend money to look like a teenager and die that way.

She had her arms around him. “It is you.” She pulled away, studied his face. “How are you? It’s been years since you left us a message, we were getting worried. There was nothing about you being arrested.”

What did it say of his life that his grandmother had to look for an arrest record to know he was still alive?

Before Alex could do more than hug her back, a man stepped out of the house. His grandfather looked sixty, had for as long as Alex could remember, but now he had a cane. Alex was surprised. They had money, they could afford to get any injuries treated, so why— And he

noticed the way his grandfather gripped it. It wasn't a walking aid, it was a weapon.

And the situation hit Alex.

How often had dangerous-looking men come to his grandparents' house? Looking for him, trying to get them to admit where he was hiding? He knew about the Law, but Alex had other enemies. Not all of them would be as nice about their questions.

"I'm sorry, Frank. I never meant for you to get caught in the middle of this."

"I know." The man's voice was colder, his eyes wary. He didn't loosen the grip on the cane. His grandfather was still trying to decide if Alex was friend or foe.

"Frank, please," his grandmother scolded him. "This is Alex. He's back, he's okay. He isn't here to cause trouble, are you?"

"How can you be sure?"

She spun. "Franklin Roosevelt Crimson, are you saying I don't know my own grandson?" Alex winced, along with his grandfather. He remembered too well having been at the receiving end of that tone.

"It's okay, Gabrielle. I have days when I'm not sure I'm your grandson, either." He'd hoped to make light of the situation, but her face darkened.

"Who's that?" His grandfather indicated Tristan with the cane.

Alex looked over his shoulder to give himself the time to force a neutral expression on his face. "I work with him. We finished a mission, and there was a complication." He moved Emil in front of him. "This is Emil. He doesn't have anywhere to go. We can't keep him with us, it's too dangerous for him. I was hoping you could look after him."

"I don't—" his grandfather began.

"Of course we will," his grandmother cut him off. She crouched. "Hello, Emil. I'm Gabrielle. This is my husband, Frank."

"Can't you take him back to his family?" Frank asked.

"It's too dangerous."

His grandfather gritted his teeth. "Why us? There are plenty of organizations out there who look after lost children."

"Frank!" Gabrielle chastised, but his grandfather didn't lose the stern expression.

"Because I don't trust any of them with him. You and Gabrielle are the best people I know. I know that you'll look after him regardless of his past. He needs good, stable people around him."

"You and Tristan are good people," Emil said.

His grandfather's raised eyebrow put that in question, and Alex couldn't argue. And even if he could, it wasn't a discussion to have in front of Emil.

"Our lives aren't stable, and they aren't safe. You know why you can't stay with us."

Emil nodded, tears falling.

"There, there..." His grandmother dried his tears with the corner of her sleeve. "There's no need to cry. Frank, why don't you take Emil inside? I'm sure he could use some pie."

Frank sighed and extended his hand. "Come on, let's go feed you some of Gabrielle's ashberry pies. You're going to like it."

Emil hesitated, and Alex gave him a light push. He took Alex's grandfather's hand and followed him inside.

Alex placed a datachip in his grandmother's hand. "All the information about his identity is in here. He's your nephew a few times removed. The son of Archie Cameron, from Esterim Three."

"Who?"

"He's one of your relatives. He died three objective years ago. He named you Emil's guardian. You changed his name to Crimson when you adopted him."

"I adopted him? Alex, you're not making any sense."

"I'm sorry, the chip will have all the details. There's someone after Emil, someone dangerous. I spent a lot of time crafting his ID and making sure it's flawless, but I couldn't contact you to let you know. Not with the Law monitoring your communications. You and Frank read it. There isn't much to memorize, just a bit of history between you and Archie."

She looked at the chip. "I'm not sure I understand this. Is it going to keep Emil safe?"

Alex nodded.

She pocketed the chip. "Then I'm going to read it and make sure I do everything right."

"Thanks." He turned to leave, but she grabbed his arm.

"Alex, is that him? The man you mentioned in your first message? The one who was taken from you?"

Alex tried to figure out how to answer that question without falling apart, or saying things that would make his grandmother worry needlessly.

"It didn't work out. He wasn't who I thought he was."

She hugged him. "Oh Alex. You sounded so hopeful. I am so sorry." She took his head in her hands. "You deserve someone to love. You deserve it so much."

Alex forced a smile. If only what he deserved was what he got.

She searched his face. "Stay, Alex. You're back, you don't have to leave. You can help with Emil."

He hugged her, and for an instant he considered it. Running away from everything, hiding in this house, raising Emil. Living a normal life.

But he couldn't do that. And it wasn't because of the damage Tristan might cause at this betrayal. It was because of who he was.

"I wish I could, but I made a promise. I have to keep it." He moved away from her. "And I don't want to bring trouble here. You and Frank deserve to have a good life. If I stay, that would be destroyed."

"Alex, we're not afraid of trouble. We can protect you."

"No, Gabrielle, you can't. This isn't just the Law, or the bounty hunters. The only way I have to keep you safe is to not be here." He hugged her again. "I love you, Gabrielle. I wish I could come back here one day."

"What do you mean? You can always come back. Alex, you're worrying me."

He should have kept his mouth shut. He knew better than to talk. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have."

"Alexander Bartholomew Crimson, you're going to explain what you mean to me this instant."

Alex cringed. "Something's coming for me." He shook his head. "Something's going to happen to me." He growled at himself. "Damn it. Look, it's best for everyone if you never see me again."

"Alex—"

He pulled himself out of her arms. "Tell Frank I love him too."

He wiped his eyes as he walked away from his grandmother. When he reached Tristan, he didn't stop walking. The Samalian fell in step with him.

"I know you don't care," Alex said, when he could trust himself to talk, "but they are going to take good care of him."

Tristan didn't say anything. He took Alex's hand and put his over it. When he removed it, Alex was holding his earpiece.

He swallowed. "I thought you had— I don't understand." He felt his eyes getting wet again.

"Tools and weapons need all their components to work properly. You can't do your part without it."

"You're trusting me with it? After what I did?"

Tristan laughed. "I don't trust you, not yet. But I trust that you want to live. You no longer have a reason to sacrifice your life. And you know what I can do to you if you ever do something like that again. Put it in."

Alex hesitated, wondering for a moment if Tristan had added some explosives in it—that would be like him—but it didn't matter. He'd been given an order, and he obeyed.

By reflex he started adjusting it, but for the first time, it was comfortable. He took it out and studied the tip.

"Form-adaptive polymer," Tristan said. "Fully breathable and sound permeable. You won't have to fiddle with it anymore."

Alex put it back in his ear and it felt right, comfortable. It beeped and clicked twice, letting him know it had established contact with a computer. He spoke a few words, just to hear the computer respond. It had no security.

Alex took out his datapad to have an interface, and connected to the computer through it. A house computer that someone had left completely open. He smiled and used it to navigate to the Law boards. It was always his first stop on a planet. It was good to know the kind of legal environment he'd have to work in.

He cursed. "Someone on the station recognized us. The Law's been informed." He looked around. "Just the local offices."

"Are they on their way?"

"No, but they have every landing pad under surveillance."

"Good. This is as good a place to begin fine-tuning you as any. You have your knives?"

Alex nodded. He wanted to protest. He didn't want to do this here, so close to his grandparents, but he'd given his word. He was Tristan's, body and soul. He would be his weapon, his monster, and he wouldn't protest.