

There was pain; lying still filled Alex with it. He needed to move, assess the situation he was in, but when he tried, the pain spiked and he cursed. He forced his eyes open, and even that hurt. He was looking at a metal ceiling.

There was motion in the corner of his eye, and he gritted his teeth through the pain as he forced a hand to his chest to take a knife out of the harness. His harness wasn't there.

Emil came next to the bed. "Tristan said to take these when you woke up." He had two pills in a hand and a bottle of water.

With more effort than it should have taken, Alex managed to get himself seated, biting back more curses. "Sorry for the bad words."

Emil shrugged and offered the pills.

Alex took the pills and swallowed them with long gulps of water. He needed to carry painkillers in injectors—those worked instantaneously, but he'd had bad luck with them, finding the vials broken when he needed them. Even crushed, pills worked. He just had to have the patience to let them kick in.

"How long was I out?" Alex asked, noticing Emil had backed away from him.

"Three days. Tristan tried to put you on the medical bed, but it got broken in the landing. He said you'd be okay without it."

Alex nodded. He was down to shorts and a shirt, his body covered in sealed cuts and a few burns. The fight was a blur, as they always were when he reached that state, and he was happy about that.

He'd remember it in his dream. He'd remember how much fun he'd had killing all those people. He shuddered. He wasn't looking forward to the coming nights.

"I helped patch you up." Emil's smile was tentative.

"Thank you." Alex tried to smile back, but his face hurt too. He touched it—no cuts there, but soreness in places. Punches. Not Tristan. He looked at his hand, in a regenerative cast. *He'd* crushed his hand.

And then he'd tended to his wounds. Had Emil been there while Tristan undressed him? Probably. The Samalian didn't care for the niceties of not exposing a child to nudity. He'd probably made it a course on human anatomy.

He shivered, and couldn't tell if it was because he was cold or because of the memories seeping through. He looked for something to wear. His jacket and pack were on a chair. He got up and almost fell down; the painkillers hadn't taken effect yet.

Emil moved to him, and quickly away. Alex caught the flash of fear in his eyes. What had Tristan told him for him to be afraid?

Emil looked away. "I saw you fight. You were scary."

Alex sighed. And here he'd been afraid Tristan would be the one to traumatize him. "I'm sorry, I don't like reaching that point. How's Tristan?"

"He's okay. I helped with his wounds too. The guy who attacked him got in a few good cuts, but he won't hurt anyone anymore." Emil took the pack and brought it to Alex, then stepped away.

"I didn't—" Wait. "Who attacked him?" He took pants and socks from the pack.

"Don't you remember? It's when he helped you. He sent me here because he didn't want me to see any more violence. He told me what happened when he carried you in."

Alex focused on getting dressed. Why had Tristan hidden the fact Alex had been the one to attack him? Why continue the charade that they were partners? The job was done, wasn't it? Tristan had said he'd kill him. With his pants on, Alex looked for his earpiece and found it in one of the pack's pockets. He put it in his pants pocket.

"Maybe it happened while you were unconscious?"

Alex forced a smile and changed his shirt. "Must have been. I'm sorry I scared you. I try not to lose control like that, but sometimes..."

"I know you won't hurt me." Emil smiled nervously. "It's just that it was a lot of people. I've never seen anyone fight so many people, not even in vids. They didn't let me watch vids with too much violence in them at the academy."

Alex nodded and watched Emil. "You're right, I won't hurt you. I won't let anyone hurt you." Not even Tristan.

Emil had gone through enough. He'd been betrayed by his own father. He'd seen more

violence than any child should. What he deserved now was a normal life, a long one. Alex was going to see to it Emil got that.

He wished it would be as easy as fighting Tristan for it, but now he knew he couldn't best the Samalian in a fight. No one had ever won a fight against Alex when he was lost in it, until now.

Zephyr had told him, a long time ago, that whoever wanted to live the most would win the fight. Tristan had shown he was the one who wanted it the most. When he'd mentioned that the universe wanted him dead, Alex had thought he was being figurative; plenty of people accused the universe of wanting them dead.

Now... Now he wasn't sure. Someone needed to be extremely determined to win against Alex in such a fight.

Emil eyed him strangely. Alex shook his head, and immediately regretted it. The pain wasn't strong, but it still took a few seconds for everything to settle back in place.

"Sorry, got lost in my head. Where are we?"

"In space. As soon as he put you in bed we took off. I tried to help, but I don't know anything about flying a ship. We stayed close to the ground for a while, and he told me to keep looking at a bunch of dots on a screen, to tell him if they followed us. They didn't follow us. After awhile we went up, and then he stopped the ship. That's when he let me help patch him up. We looked after you next."

"So we're space-worthy, that's good." It made sense. Tristan would have seen to that first.

"He went into space a few times since. He said we're not ready for a long journey yet."

Alex nodded. He got off the bed and stretched. The pain was there, but it was muffled behind a wall of cotton. "I think it's time I give you back your room. Do you mind staying in it for awhile? I need to talk with Tristan." He headed for the door without waiting for an answer. He could lock him in if it came to it.

"You're angry at each other, aren't you?"

Alex froze. He turned. "What do you mean?"

"Tristan is better at hiding it than you, but I saw it while we were covering your wounds. You've been angry with him longer. Almost as long as I've been here."

Alex just stared. That Emil had picked up on the tension baffled him. He'd never been that observant when he was a kid. Finally, he sighed. "We... Yeah, we have problems."

Emil wrapped his arms around himself and seemed to shrink in. "Because of me?"

Alex went to him and crouched, ignoring his body's protest. He hugged him. "No, Emil, not because of you. Our problems predate you meeting us. They're mostly my fault. I forced this partnership on—" He shook his head and regretted it again. "It's complicated, but we're working through it." Tristan hadn't killed him in his sleep, so that had to mean something, right?

Emil brightened and hugged Alex back. "I hope you fix it. I like you both." Alex held on to him, finding he needed the comfort of the hug. Emil wouldn't die, he promised himself. He would find a way to convince Tristan. There had to be a way, something he could say.

Alex let Emil go. "So you're going to stay in the room?"

Emil nodded.

"It shouldn't take long." And hopefully if this went sideways, Tristan would kill Alex first so he wouldn't have to see what happened next. But he didn't think he'd be that lucky.

"Take your time." Emil took his datapad from the desk. "I have plenty of reading material."

Alex watched him climb on the bed and cross his legs. As Emil began reading, the craziest thought crossed his mind. Why not keep him? He was smart, observant, worked hard, loved Tristan. Maybe he could convince the Samalian to... To what? Convince Tristan to keep a mask on for his entire life? As good as he was, he couldn't do that. And Tristan didn't actually like Emil. It had just been a ruse so he could accomplish a goal.

Alex left the room, trying to come up with an argument that would save Emil's life. He closed the door and leaned back against it. Tristan had his back to him, working inside the wall.

Tristan turned and wiped his hands on a dirty rag. He leaned against that wall and watched Alex with his cold eyes. He waited. He had to know what was coming.

Alex wasn't going to grovel, he promised himself that. He was entitled to some respect, wasn't he? Tristan had won that fight, but Alex had injured him, not simply a cut here and there. He'd actually hurt the Samalian.

"I told Emil to stay in the room. He's reading. Unless you yell at me, he shouldn't hear us."

The smile Tristan gave him wasn't pleasant. Yeah, if someone was going to scream, it wouldn't be him. It would be Alex, in pain.

"This doesn't have to be worse than talking," Alex said, gritting his teeth. He tried to convince himself of that. He was already dead, he knew that. If he saved Emil's life, it would happen the instant he was off the ship.

Tristan nodded, and took the few steps that had him stand in front of Alex. "First thing." He extended his hand. "Give me your earpiece."

Alex covered the pocket with his hand. "I can't, I need—"

"Don't make me take it, Alex," Tristan said, his tone more sad than angry. "You can imagine what else I'll do if I have to."

Alex took it out, his hand closed over it. "Why didn't you take it while I was unconscious? You're the one who put it in my pack."

"Because if I'd taken it then, I would have stolen it from you. You'd have been angry at the injustice." He nodded to his open hand. "Now, you are the one handing it over to me. You are the one who has to decide what kind of punishment you want." His gaze softened. "Alex, did you really think I wouldn't notice what you did? Did you think I wouldn't go and look? Especially after you made that comment about having the computer commit suicide?"

"I wouldn't have."

Tristan's voice lowered, all caring was gone from it. "You gave yourself administrative access that superseded mine. You could have locked me out of my own computer, you could have told it to die. Now decide what your punishment is going to be and remember that the boy is behind that door. He will hear you scream."

"I'm sorry. Please," Alex pleaded, "I need it. I didn't do it to take the computer away from you. I was angry, and I needed to exert control over something. Computers are my thing. I swear I would never have—"

Tristan leaned forward and growled.

With a shaking hand, he placed the earpiece in his hand and looked away.

"I've killed people for lesser things than trying to usurp control of my computer. How come you didn't try to take control of the computer in my workshop?"

"I wasn't angry then, and it's just a souped-up house computer. It can't do all that much." Alex indicated the space around them. "The computer here controls our lives. Controlling that has saved my life more often than I care to remember."

Tristan studied him. "I can understand the need to have an edge over others, Alex. I respect that. But if you ever do this to one of my computers again, you will die. No warning, no chance to fight back or explain. I will simply snap that fragile neck of yours. Is that clear enough for you?"

Alex nodded, and looked at Tristan's closed fist.

"You're not getting it back. I don't trust you."

"I understand." What did Tristan expect him to do without it? Maybe he'd just hand it over when he needed him to do something?

"Good. Second thing. I never want to see you holding back when we fight."

"When we fight?" He lowered his voice. "You said you were going to kill me."

"I said I'd make my decision based on the rest of the job." He opened his fist. "This did place you staying alive in question for a moment, but it was also instrumental in the job reaching its conclusion, so no, Alex, I'm not going to kill you. We're going to continue as things are, except that you will not hold back."

"Don't."

"You are a killer, Alex. I want that man when I train, not a shadow of him."

"I don't!" He closed his mouth and looked over his shoulder at the door. "I told you, that isn't who I want to be."

"I don't care what you want, Alex. You stayed, you chose to be mine. I'm going to use you as I see fit. I'm not going to have you die in the middle of a fight because you're afraid you might kill someone."

"I don't know if I can do that on command. I need to be pushed pretty far to reach that state."

Tristan grinned. "Don't worry, I'm going to push you far past your breaking point." Alex stared in dismay, and Tristan's smile broadened. "Now, go sit down and give me a rundown of what the information we spread caused."

Alex eyed the fist, but Tristan didn't offer the earpiece back. He didn't need it for this task; this was just information gathering. What Tristan wanted would be in the public nodes. Still, he liked having the sound of the net while he worked. And he'd never worked deaf before.

He worked slowly, feeling unsure of what he was doing, but Tristan didn't push him.

"SpaceGov opened an investigation into Tomas Masters for inappropriate use of government funds and resources. He's been removed from his position and there's a bounty on his head. It isn't much; they just want him back to put him on trial." He looked around and chuckled. "They're going to have to raise it if they want him alive. There's a dozen bounties on the boards put up by various merc teams, and all they're interested in is getting his head." More searching. "Any assets linked to Masters, or his aliases, have been confiscated. If he made it off-planet, that ship is about the only thing he owns, although technically he's stolen it now."

"He made it off." Tristan brought up the readout from the passive scans. Alex remembered watching all the merc ships heading off to chase someone. Tristan indicated the engine trail. "That's him, taking off while we were fighting the mercs groundside. He might have come in quietly, but he left as hard and as loudly as he could. I doubt any of his soldiers had the override codes to that ship."

"Those are some powerful engines. Unless one of the merc ships was close enough to damage it, it's going to outrun them all."

"Yes."

Alex eyed Tristan. He actually sounded please that Masters had gotten away. "Don't you want him dead?"

"He's going to die, eventually. If not at a mercs hand, I'll see to it myself, but I want him to suffer first. I want him to feel what it's like to be hunted to the edge of the universe. I want him to have to look over his shoulder until he misses something, and someone plants a knife in his back."

Alex thought back on Tristan's files. He'd read them so often he knew them by heart, and even back then he'd noticed a pattern that only now made sense.

"Retribution," Alex whispered.

"If someone comes after me, I go after them in kind." Tristan fixed his gaze on Alex's reflection. "The deaths I cause are necessary."

Alex didn't believe that, but he wasn't going to argue. "Why did you come after Luminex? I never found out about that one."

"The man who ran the company arranged for me to be caught and imprisoned. I was there for ten years before I escaped."

"The Sayatoga. The files claim that's where you were while you attacked Luminex."

"They don't like advertising when a prisoner escapes."

"So why did you leave the company standing? Normally you would have destroyed the building, at least."

"That was my plan, but I found out the company had been stolen from the previous owner. I figured returning it to him would be more painful to the man I was after than just destroying it."

"Emerill. That's who the company was stolen from? That explains why he took an interest in me."

Tristan raised an eyebrow, but Alex didn't feel like elaborating.

"I'm guessing you found a way to have the Sayatoga think they got you back, because they never took you off their manifest."

"A malicious program to rewrite my file to match that of the man the bounty hunter the Sayatoga paid to bring me back, returned in my stead. And since the Sayatoga keeps their prisoners in cryo, he can't explain how this is one huge mistake. Speaking of which, how is the bounty on the Samalian who dared kidnap a child?"

"It's gone. SpaceGov removed it at the start of the investigation. You are no longer worth a small planet to the enterprising merc who manages to capture you."

Tristan snorted at the implication that could ever happen. "They had no choice. The mark

used SpaceGov funds to cover the bounty. If they'd left it standing, it would have implicated them in the scheme. SpaceGov hates being linked to a failed operation."

"You'd think SpaceGov would want mercs removed, considering the amount of money they spend in trying to control us."

"They don't like us, but they need us. Dig deep enough, and you'll find the majority of jobs on the merc boards come from two places: corporations and SpaceGov, and more come from SpaceGov." Tristan headed toward the ramp, opening the locker before it and pulling out an EVA suit. "All in all, you did a good job, Alex. I'm heading outside to work on the hull. In a few days we should be good to leave this place and take care of the last piece of this job."

Alex watched him put it on, too stunned to think. When he had it on, Tristan went down to the hold and close that hatch. Alone he thought it over. The last piece. He could only mean Emil. He looked at the door.

Alex had planned on trying to convince Tristan not to kill Emil, but he'd gotten sidetracked with the mission wrap-up. And finding out he was going to live. Which meant that if he didn't want to watch Emil die, he needed to come up with something.

At least this gave him time to think about it, because he'd promised Emil he would protect him, and he intended on doing just that, no matter the cost.