

The hangar was deserted when he and Alex reached it, accompanied by William and his woman.

“I figured it’s be safer to have the place deserted,” she said in a flat tone, “in case you go off the deep end again and try to kill more of us.”

“He wouldn’t try,” Tristan stated, holding back his irritation at her clear dislike.

“I don’t know if you noticed what he made of—”

“Aliana,” William said, and she closed her mouth, settling for glaring at them. “Wish you’d stay,” he told Alex. And Tristan nearly broke eye contact in surprised. William had been the one to order them to leave.

“I understand,” Alex said. His first words since he and Will had found Tristan, being supervised by Aliana. “You can’t let someone who nearly killed one of your crew simply walk around. It would send the wrong message.”

“Morale.”

Alex nodded.

“Come back.” William said.

“It’s probably not a good idea.”

“Order.”

“Will,” Aliana said.

The captain raised a hand. “Crew.”

“If one of the crew had done what he did, you wouldn’t be sending them away. They’d be in the bring. If you suspected it had been intentional, they’d be in one of those tubes. I get you two have a history, but so did he and Zephyr. The crew’s already not going to be happy with you just sending him off.”

“It’s going to be years anyway, objective,” Alex said. “And I won’t be back if I can’t fix what’s wrong with me. I won’t be a danger to anyone here again. You have my word. Tristan, can you go unlock the ship? I’ll be there shortly.”

The ship was far enough he wouldn’t be able to hear the rest of the discussion. He’d also be too far to immediately act if this turned ugly. William wouldn’t start anything, but his woman wasn’t entirely rational at the moment. Either of them dying as Alex defended himself would result in complications Tristan didn’t think they wanted.

But he had to trust Alex, just like asked for trust.

He left them to the start of the discussion.

“About what you said,” Alex said. “I know you mean it, and I believe you’re right.” He paused. By the time he started again, Tristan was too far to make out the words. Alex know how good his hearing was.

He took his time deactivating the trigger, then took extra time setting the wires back

in place as he closed the panel. Finishing only once he heard Alex's steps approaching. He lowered the ramp and turned to watch his human. His expression was thoughtful, inward. He focused once he noticed Tristan, waiting for him to ask.

"How problematic do you expect departure to be?" he asked instead. Alex would tell him what they'd talked about if he felt like sharing or it became relevant.

Alex searched his face before accepting the question for what it meant. "It won't be. Don't take Will's smaller size to mean he can't keep his crew in its place. If tells them to let us go, they will or they're going to find out was a pissed Will looks like...if they haven't already. Knowing what people think of smaller men, he's probably had to kick a few of them in the balls to remind them who was in charge."

As effective in causing pain as it was, it felt like an odd method to Tristan.

The comm light was flashing as Tristan sat in his seat.

"I think they're going for eager to be rid of us," Alex said, taking his.

"Sayatoga Control," Alex said. "This is Red Claw, acknowledging comm request."

"Red Claw, this is Sayatoga Control. Please provide timeframe for departure. You're holding up others."

"Sure we are," Alex whispered. "Sayatoga Control, if we're that much of trouble, just unclamp us and void the hangar, we'll take it from there. We're sealed, and I don't see anyone else in here."

"You—what?"

"Just unclamp us and we'll leave."

"Red Claw," the voice said after a stretching silence. "Departure has been authorized." The indicator they were magnetically anchored to the hangar floor went off, and Tristan eased them out.

"Thank you Sayatoga Control. Good travels."

They didn't respond.

Tristan accelerated until the Sayatoga no longer registered on their scanner. Then he programmed a course to the edge of the universe through the most direct route he could calculate. He added instructions that would change direction as soon as active scans registered, then let the computer take control.

Once he knew where they needed to go, he'd redo the calculations.

Alex was looking at his screen, but Tristan doubted he was seeing what was displayed. He was lost in thoughts.

He knew how to help that.

"Alex." He squeezed his shoulder. "How about we go to bed?"

"There's something I need to deal with."

"Are you okay?" It was well out of character for Alex to turn down sex.

The laugh was short and bitter. "No, I can't say that I am. I have a problem, Tristan. You were right."

"I know you understand that now, Alex. It was never about me being right."

"I know." Alex sighed. "I just... I need to think about what it means."

"It means that I will find a way for you to gain control of yourself."

Alex stopped himself from responding, then he nodded. "You can work on that while I'm going through this." He smiled at him. "We can enjoy ourselves afterward."

Tristan kissed him lightly, then went to his office. He put the books he'd been looking over back in their cabinets, then sat at the desk, considering his next step.

With the triggering event taking place before Alex had joined Luminex, it meant while he was studying, or was a child.

The type of events needed to break someone in such a way they gained a killing instinct involved violence. How easy to hide it would depend on its level, but Tristan couldn't imagine something turning Alex into the killer that he was being easy to hide. All Tristan had found was one hospital record from when Alex was a child, which even among humans had to be standard. The lack of details in the report would support that it was common enough not to bother detailing them.

He brought up the file he'd compiled. Francis and Gabrielle Crimson. Alex's grandparents. Short of asking Alex's parents, and considering how they felt about Alex's xenophilia, he wouldn't be able to trust any answers he got. They were his best source of information. They had raised him in the years before he left to study. They knew him before and after the triggering event. Even if they didn't know what it was. They would help him pinpoint when it occurred. With that, he would be able to find out what it was, and with that knowledge, devise a method to counteract it.

Some research told him they had recently left for a trip. The return was ten years, objective. Not ideal, but he didn't think Alex would appreciate it if they intercepted them on Jamloer while they enjoyed the oceans there.

The simplest way would be to program a course that would take them to Alex's home planet in ten years and spend that time under cryo.

"Devised some cunning plan to teach me not to be a killer anymore?" Alex asked, leaning against the door frame.

"Looking into how to gather the data, I'll need to be able to formulate a plan."

"And you're going to tell me this one ahead of time, or is it also going to be a surprise?" This time, the bitterness was clear.

"I'm sorry for how I went about it, Alex. I expected that the—"

"Shock to my system on having almost killed you would, yeah, yeah. You explained it, and I'm sorry for the tone. I'm tired." He raised a hand as Tristan stood. "Not the kind that's helped with going to bed."

"I can ensure you are that kind of tired."

Alex chuckled. "Maybe after this. Will told me a few things, and I've been thinking about them. And I don't think getting whatever information is going to help."

"You know more information is always helpful."

"But only if you know how to make use of it."

Tristan realized he'd stiffen only after the fact. "I have studied human psychology, Alex. I know how—"

"Where in what you studied did it say you can unteach something by traumatizing them? What is it that woman in the hospital said? You can't cure trauma by adding trauma. You didn't study how we think as a way to learn how to help. You weaponized that knowledge, Tristan. You're still using it as a weapon."

"I'm trying to teach you control."

"I don't think you can."

“Alex, I know control. I exercise it all the time. I doubt there is anyone in the universe more skilled at it than I am. I can name one person who cracked it, and it’s you.”

“I’m not questioning how controlled you are. I’m questioning your ability to use what works on you on me.”

“I’m not giving up.”

Alex chuckled. “Do you even know how to give up? But that’s not what I’m talking about. I don’t want you to give up, because I don’t want to stay like this. I didn’t recognize you this time. I saw your fur. It registered as a starry sky, but it didn’t mean you. Just something else I had to kill. What happens if I lose it while we’re visiting the town? I want to fix this, Tristan. I just don’t think you can do it.”

“I learned to control myself, Alex, I can—”

“And how exactly did that come about? How much of that control is the result of trauma, the my lack of control is?”

Tristan had difficulty forming a reply. He acknowledged that he had gained control as a way to endure everything his father had put him through, and very little of that had been good. But he had already done his equivalent on Alex. He’d molded him into the weapon he’d wanted, only that hadn’t resulted in Alex gaining control. Only obeying Tristan.

“I can fix this,” he insisted. He had to be able to. He wanted Alex to be free of the trauma.

“But do you have to?”

Hadn’t he just? didn’t he? He stared at his human, tried to understand him.

Alex sighed. “Okay, I can’t believe I’m about to say this. I’m not an Aggressor.”

“I know,” Tristan replied defensively. “You’re a Defender.”

“I’m not—” He closed his mouth and took a breath. “Then why are you trying to fix me as if you’d fix an Aggressor?”

“I wasn’t—” was he? He felt for the sphere in his pocket. He knew he was dealing with the problem hard, directly, claws out. It was who he was. He tore things down, then rebuild them.

Was he really still trying to tear Alex down?

“I... I don’t know how else to do this, Alex.”

“I’m well aware.” He chuckled. “So maybe it shouldn’t be you. The universe is big. There has to be someone in it that would know something about teaching a guy like me how to gain control.” He straightened and Tristan readied himself for the further bad news. “Look. Will isn’t an expert either, but he’s traveled a lot, and unlike us. When he gets to a place, he goes out and talks to the people there.”

“I find that...”

“Okay, he doesn’t have deep conversations, but he listens and he learns. He couldn’t give details, but he’s heard of entire societies built around the idea of being in control. Not your kind of ‘I won’t feel anything until I plan on using it to hurt someone’ but the ‘I won’t let myself do something bad’ kind.”

“I’m not controlling myself that way anymore.”

“I know, but you understand what I mean, right?”

Tristan nodded. “You think that such a society would be better equipped to help you.” He didn’t like the idea of handing control of how Alex would be fixed to anyone else, but it

was the Aggressor in him speaking.

No, it was his father. It was his belief Tristan could and should be the only one to solve a problem. The Survivor mindset that had been pounded into him in his youth.

He rolled the sphere between his fingers. There was a fork before them, a fork on the path laid by the Source. The teachings said they were both correct, simply leading to a different destination, but Tristan wanted there to be a correct path. He wanted to know he was on it.

He needed information.

“Where do you think information on those societies will be kept?”