

Epilogue

With a thought, the aborted message vanished from the computer. Another, angrier, and all proof it had ever existed disappeared as well.

Alex leaned back in the chair of his office and stared at the screen. Why was this so fucking hard? He knew what he wanted to say already.

A thought sent the system to record, and he straightened. "Hello father."

What was that?

The 'cancel recording' message appeared before he realized he'd had the thought. Then it ended and traces of its existence joined the previous one. Because he had nothing else to lash out against, he had the system destroy the previous half dozen attempts too, leaving the buffer entirely clear.

It wasn't like he was fabricating something. Covering not entirely legal or safe decisions he hasn't wanted his grandparents to know. This was a 'shove his actions and decisions in the face of someone who had him believe he wasn't worthy of a life' kind of message. Why would he even want to be respectful of someone like that?

The recording barely started in time to catch him speaking.

"This has got to be a surprise, right, old man?" Alex smirked. "When's the last time you heard about me? Back when I first turned 'bad'? The law questioned my grandparents, so I know they talked with you. Did you tell them good riddance? Did you give them everything you know about the deviant who'd ever dared be your son? Did you hope that when they caught me, they'd kill me instead of capturing me?"

He caught his breath, but the smile didn't leave his face.

"Got some bad news for you. They weren't interested in killing me. Coercionists who can do the stuff I can? They want us working for them. If they had caught me, they would have given me everything I'd want, as part of making sure I didn't slip their control. I want you to carefully imagine me in bed with all the aliens I could ever want. If you survive that conniption, I'm going to tell you about what happened, because that's going to hurt you even more. And make no mistake, this message is payback for nearly killing me, your own son. It's payback for turning me into a withdrawn shell of the man I should have been. For making me self destructive in a way I am so glad you couldn't have planned."

Alex smirked.

"Oh, don't bother trying to stop this from playing. You lost control of your system the moment you accepted this message. Of course, you didn't know it was from me. You'd never accept anything from someone like me. So I must have hidden it behind correspondence from one of your favorite clients. I can't believe you're still working after all these years. Did your other kids also not want to have anything to do with you so you have to keep things running or sell to some stranger? I can't blame them if that's the case. And yeah, I know you're alive to listen to this. You have no idea how scared I was that after years of thinking this over and finally being ready to tell you how I felt about you, I'd discover you went and let yourself get old and passed on."

He paused and composed himself.

"I'm happy. Despite what you did to me. Despite the man you turned me into, I'm happy. It wasn't easy, so maybe you'll take comfort in that, but after a lot of subjective

years, I am happy. I was miserable for a long time because of you. Put myself through the kind of pain no one should ever suffer, let alone seek, because of you. Found true happiness; that the man you turned me into nearly destroyed. So if you wonder why I'm making a mess of your accounts while you are listening to this, now you know. Don't worry. I'm not going to destroy anything. You're a horrible man, but the farms do feed trillions, and I'm not going to have them pay for your screwup. Took a long time, and doing something neither of us has an easy time doing, but we found a way to be happy together again. And before you ask, it's seeking help. That was probably the biggest hurdle we had to overcome. Like me, but for reasons of his own, he has a hard time letting other people help him. Once we were able to sit down with a friend with the training to help us, we worked through the stuff we put each other through and here we are."

Alex smiled.

"I was tempted to invite you, you know. Trick you into coming here among his people and watch us make it official the way his people do. No long contracts to sign. Just the two of us and a handful of friends. We don't need it. But we've been talking about it for a while, and it just feels right now. So yeah, I thought about torturing you like that. And just now, as I'm recording this, I'm realizing another way I can torture you is to attach a recording of the two of us fucking. Force you to watch us going at it hard, make it follow you on any screen you look at until you've seen all of it, until we're both on our back, spent and so fucking content. Since I don't know if I'll go through with it or not yet, have fun finding out."

He let out a breath.

"So yeah. You failed. Oh, you made my life hard, but I survived, I fought through and I emerged a better man. Well, better than you, anyway. I'll never claim to be a good person after all the stuff I did to get here. If you're ever curious, look for all the bounties on me. I've left enough floating out there you can get a hint of the kind of man I became to get what I was after. So you're going to want to reconsider anything you might be thinking of doing to punish your son for putting you through this. Anyway. It's nearly time. You have a good and extremely long life knowing that boy you tried to murder overcame that, found himself an alien to put all other to shame and found the kind of happiness I doubt a man like you ever came close to achieving."

'Recording ended' appeared on the screen, and he sent the file to storage. Once he'd written the programs to cause that man a small amount of the kind of chaos he deserved and decided on if he was adding that recording, then he'd send it.

"Don't humans have a tradition after the officiation of the uniting contract?" Tristan asked from the doorway. "Something about making it valid through a consummation of each other?"

"You remember I know less about human customs than you do, right? And even to my mind, a couple eating each other doesn't sound like something humans would do."

His Samalian grinned; a full show of teeth. "Only if you expect it to be literal. I have devoured you often enough and have yet to complain." He stepped into the office and placed a hand on Alex's shoulder. "It sounded like you finally have let it go."

Alex looked at him. "I couldn't go through today with him hanging over me. Neither of us deserves that."

“Tell me you’re good with this,” Tristan said. “It isn’t too late if you’d rather we don’t. What we have is for us, we don’t have to—”

Alex laughed. “I fucking want everyone to know about us. I know I haven’t always been comfortable with your beliefs, but I’d say that once I made my piece being the representation of the Defender, I was pretty much in. You know I’ll wear it.”

The smile Tristan gave him made Alex feel alive. Made everything he’d had to go through to get here worthwhile. A smile of happiness hadn’t been common on his Samalian, even once he’d had his own revelatory encounter, but one that held nothing back hadn’t come until after he and Alex had worked through what had taken place on that planet.

There had been a time when Alex hadn’t believed a psychologist with an army of mercs could do anything for either of them. In the end, all it had taken was a friend and a willingness on their part to open up to her.

He stood, and Tristan wrapped his arms around him. “You know you make me happy, right?”

Alex smiled. “It might have come up a time or two million over the last decade. I’m glad we were able to work through everything.” He nodded to the screen. “I’m glad we were able to probe that bastard wrong.”

“The offer is still on the table,” Tristan said. “One word from you, and I’m off to make him suffer like he isn’t capable of imaging he can.”

“I’ll take my own revenge on him. Slowly, little by little, he’s going to regret making me the monster that I am.”

Tristan nuzzled Alex’s neck, then licked and moved up to his ear, and his knees weakened.

“You keep going, and we aren’t going to be on time.”

Tristan exhaled in his ear, and Alex’s hair stood on end. “I’m just preparing you for the trip there.” He licked again. “The hours-long trip there.”

“Then you need to stop now, otherwise, we aren’t making it to the hover.”

Chuckling, Tristan pulled back. “The hover is equipped with a full sensor array. I can easily have it recording the inside, if you want to give that man the entire experience of what having you as a lover does to me.”

“Do it,” Alex said before he thought better of it. But didn’t take it back at Tristan’s quizzical tilt to his ear. He didn’t have to make use of it, but if he didn’t have it and decided to make his the man suffer that way, he’d have to arrange a recording session.

Which had an appeal of its own.

“How about we get moving before one of us loses the battle of will against taking the other right here, right now?”

Tristan smirked. “One of us?”

Alex narrowed his eyes. “You really want me to shove you against the wall and make you beg for more, don’t you?”

The finger’s touch along Alex’s cheek was gentle. “You do know how to make me beg.”

Alex shoved him out of the office, strengthening his willpower with a reminder they had hours of flight to occupy. Plenty of time for him to have his Samalian pleading for Alex to fuck him harder.

Stepping outside of the house still felt like stepping into a different world for Alex, even after all these years. The sheer amount of technology inside, versus the nearly pristine nature outside. The clearing was only large enough to accommodate the house, an area to entertain friends, and the path leading to the landing pad. The rest was the forest that had existed here long before them, and which would remain well after. Even the aspects, hidden among the trees, as they were among people's lives, wouldn't last that long.

Alex's work was rough and, even carved out of the hardest wood the planet had to offer, once he was no longer there to look after them, nature would claim them and, he smiled, return them to the source.

While not visible unless he searched for them, they passed the Defender and the Aggressor as they stepped on the path leading to the landing pad. He couldn't think of anyone better to guard the access to their home than those two. Although, he has stuck to the classical design for the Defender.

The hover was a large model Tristan had, of course, modified. It was large enough to have a small workshop among their living area, and should it prove necessary, it could reach and survive space, although Tristan had yet to fit long distance capabilities to it.

Tristan got them in the air while Alex prepared for the trip. When his Samalian stepped into the living area, Alex smiled at him. "Good. Now let's find out if we can destabilize the hover's compensator setting again." He grabbed his Samalian's hand and shoved him against the wall and set about making him beg.