

Storyboard-15

Alex exited the system, making sure there were no indications he'd been there, not even hidden access he could use in the future. Tristan had asked him not to put any, because with Karliak on higher alert, there was no telling how thorough they'd be with any checks they ran on any systems on the planet. Alex had obeyed because that's what he did. He understood the way Tristan had explained things was him being better, but it irked Alex.

He'd screwed up. It was supposed to be a sparring match. Show these amateur what real fighting was. He hadn't intended on doing more than bruising them, maybe breaking a few bones if they were too stubborn to understand how outmatched they were. Then she'd pulled out a knife, and Alex had stopped thinking. She'd raised the threat level, and he was going to end it, and her, the way he always ended threats.

If Tristan hadn't interposed himself, Alex would have killed her. And that clearly wasn't part of the plan. In fact, the plan seemed to be to go along with whatever they wanted, since their employer had basically handed their services to these rebels.

He pulled the datachip and handed it to the woman. One of the three, well, four now, leaders of this rebellion. "A clean identity. She's going to want to stay on the planet for at least a year, objective. With Karliak monitoring all access points, I couldn't do the usual SpaceGov changes to ensure her identity would be accepted elsewhere. I had to leave programs to slip through the monitoring and insert that over time."

"SpaceGov?" She sounded dubious. "I don't mean to doubt your capabilities."

"But you will," Alex finished for her in a flat tone. "Yes, SpaceGov can be coerced. Not on a level that can change anything significant, but people don't matter to it. We're just data in servers. It only notices when things don't match." Or when an internal problem was brought to light.

"Alex is that good," Tristan said, as she looked about to question his explanation. "He said she'll be safe anywhere on this planet, so she will be. That includes the hospital that can treat her."

"Industrial accident," Alex added, "is the explanation. The documentation is on the chip."

"Not taking the credit?" she asked sarcastically.

"Do you really want the law looking in this direction?" Alex replied. "If the official story is that she was attacked, the level of injury she suffered will require a full department's response. That is a lot of trained investigators looking at everything connected to her. Which will include the people who take her to the hospital. Only her new identity is clean. I can't do anything about those people."

"And they weren't part of Alex's penance," Tristan added.

Was that what this had been? The systems on the planet weren't that difficult to coerce. Even Karliak hadn't given him trouble. Their system was opinionated, with outdated views on what was and wasn't acceptable for a coercionist, but other than talking his way around those, the hardest part had been to place his programs so they would activate without attracting attention and move on to the rest of the net when Karliak wasn't looking.

"You have to trust him," the other leader said, the businessman one. "They are working for us now, and whatever he gave is going to be better than what she had before after years of crime."

"I suppose we will find out, won't we?" she replied, unconvinced. "Since you'll be here, I'll have Nate set you up with quarters. That ways you—"

"If you don't mind," their employer said, "I'd rather make my own arrangements. There is a city only an hour's flight from here."

"I don't think it's wise for you to just leave. We can't protect you out there on your own," she said.

"I won't be on my own. They're going to guard me." He motioned to Tristan and him.

"We're going to need them here," the businessman said in a tone that spoke of someone used to getting his way.

"Alex injured a lot of people," Tristan said. "You don't want us here until they've cooled off. They'll start other fights, and I might not be around to keep Alex from defending himself to the extent he'll

need.”

“Let them go,” she said. “I’d rather not have either here until we have actual need of them.” She left the computer room.

“If you aren’t here to contribute to the discussion,” businessman told their employer, “you aren’t going to have a say in the decision we make.”

“In the end, we all want the same thing. I’m sure that you’ll chose the best option to get us that.”

“You can be certain of that.” The smile businessman wore spoke of satisfaction greater than just being allowed to choose for their employer. Tristan didn’t look worried, so Alex put it out of his mind.

“We’ll need a new shuttle,” Tristan said as they walked to the hangar. “Alex can wipe this one’s memory, but there’s no telling the kind of scanners Karliak is employing as part of their terraforming work.”

“I can arrange something,” their employers said. “I’m sure someone I know knows someone where we’ll be staying.”

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The hotel looked mid-class from the inside. From the outside, it was a block of permacrete sandblasted bare. Alex felt like he’d lost layers of skin from what the wind shoved under his clothing. He’d expected all business on this planet to have covered landing zones, or at least forcefields to let people move from there to the building without needing breathing masks and sealed suits. Sand had even dropped off Tristan when he’d taken off the coveralls inside the hotel; from his fur.

“Soundproof,” Tristan told their employer before the man headed for the counter.

Alex scanned the lobby, but they were the only ones there. The computers all sounded at minimal activity, and even the sensor were on standby, by the sound of them.

“I wouldn’t have killed them,” Alex whispered. “There was no need to reduce us to bodyguards.”

“That isn’t what this is about.”

“Isn’t it? I went against what you want, so I’m being punished. I preferred the beating. At least then—”

“That isn’t what this is, Alex.” The tone was casual, but Alex understood a ‘drop this’ order when Tristan gave it.

“This new you is confusing.” There were no uncertainties before. Punishments were clearly that, and killing some amateur who was part of an outside group wouldn’t have been deserving of one. She shouldn’t have mattered. None of them should. It was him and Tristan against the universe.

It had been.

“We’re set,” their employer said. “Family suite with all the amenities.”

The room was on the tenth floor.

“Guard him,” Tristan said, once the door was open, and he stepped in.

From what? Alex wanted to ask. They might be the only ones in the hotel, from what he heard from the systems.

“It’s safe,” Tristan said.

Their employer whistled as he looked around the large entryway, with a lounge on the right and eating area on the left. Alex tapped the control panel by the door and slipped under the interface. “Okay, what are you like?”

“Welcome to Amedan Lodging,” the computer greeted him. “You are not supposed to be within this part of my system. Did you get lost?”

Alex smiled. This was not a secured computer. “If I did, what would you do?” a data map of the system appeared with a route from where he was to the communication node he was using.

“I would guide you back.”

Just how open was this system? “If I ask for a favor, will you grant it?”

“Amedan Lodging aims to serve, so if it is within my capability, I shall.”

“I’d like you to reactivate all sensors in the lobby. Set them for full armament scan, count mechanical body modifications under armament. And inform me through an auditory signal from this room’s system anytime a customer enters who is armed.”

“That is a rather indepth request.”

“Are you saying you can’t fulfill it?”

“Of course not, Amedan Lodging aims to please, and security sensors are within my purview, I will—”

“What do you think you’re doing?” a new voice asked. One with a definite organic slant to it. There you are, Alex thought, setting a program to trace their access point.

“I am assisting a customer, as is—”

“Not you. I know very well what you’re doing. You’re about to hand over security of the hotel to some strange coercionist.”

“He asked for assistance,” the system replied, sounding mildly offended. “Amedan Lodging aims to—”

“Go away.” With the command, the system fell silent. “Now, about you.”

Alex was torn between pointing out he should treat the computer with more respect and understanding the hotel’s coercionist’s frustration. This couldn’t be the first time someone had basically taken over just by asking the system to accommodate him.

“I’m setting about ensuring my client’s safety. Your security was on standby, and that needs to change while we’ll be staying here.”

“Do you have any idea where you are? No one’s going to come here and cause this Eastyn Dhassu trouble.”

“I preferred dealing with the system. At least it was understanding. I’m not in a mood to argue. I’m not supposed to cause you trouble right now, since we’re staying, but I want to make it clear it’s within my skill set to set the sensors back on myself. I’d really appreciate if you didn’t force me to show it and simply set them on yourself, as they should be at all times, regardless of how peaceful you think the area is.” He readied a program to disconnect the other coercionist.

“You’re not joking, are you?”

“I’m not.”

“Alright, I’ll see to it they’re active during your stay.”

“Thank you,” Alex said, after getting over the surprise. Opposing coercionists were rarely this understanding. Not entirely sure what else to do, he erase his traces and exited the system. “Security is now active,” he told the room, before realizing Tristan wasn’t present.

“Good to know,” their employer said, preparing food. “Your partner said he’d been in your room once you were done.” He pointed to a door.

It opened as Alex stepped up to it, and he entered a large room with a large bed, storage, entertainment system, and naked Samalian looking at him needfully.

“About time.”

Before Alex to say anything, Tristan had his clothes off and had him under the shower, his back to him.

“Scrub,” Tristan ordered.

Not entirely over the surprise, Alex sank his fingers into his lover’s fur and shook them. The water turned darker at the amount of sand dislodged. Tristan had choice curses for the weather, as well as the quality of the protective clothing. It was all said in Grr’Ler’nin, in a measured tone that made Alex think Tristan was mixing practicing the language along with voicing his anger.

Before he thought better of it, Alex wrapped his arm around Tristan and hugged him.

“Alex?”

“Sorry.” He quickly let go and went back to running his fingers through the wet fur and massaging the muscles. As always, they were hard, but even. No knots of tension or strain. He didn’t know if it was Tristan’s ability to not be bothered and his training, or if it was a trait of Samalian physiognomy that their muscles were always smooth. One detail that had never been brought up in any of the medical text he’d read on Samalians.

“Don’t be. I liked it, you know that, right?”

Alex paused, then rested his head against the furred back. “I don’t know how to deal with this. It’s a job, but you’re not...you. The use I’m used to on a job. I know you said we’d be different. And I’m trying to accept it, but I’m scared that because you let yourself have feeling for me, you’re going to turn

into this...hero who needs to save everyone even if it's going to cost him his life. At least before, I knew I'd never have to live without you by my side."

Tristan turn and hugged Alex. "I will never allow some stranger to let me put my life at risk, Alex. I still intend on surviving anything that is thrown at me."

Alex pushed out of the embrace. "Then explain this. We're not rebels. We're merc. I get some merc renegotiated jobs partway, but not you. Now you're letting this guy hand our services over to a bunch of people who have no idea what they're doing. And no qualifications to do it, even if they knew what they were doing."

"It's still the job."

"How? He's working with them, and he told them we'd—"

"I convinced him this is the best route for him to get what he's after."

Alex searched Tristan's face looking for deceit that wasn't there, with the knowledge that if his Samalian didn't want him to see it, he wouldn't. "I'm listening."

"You know how corporations think. The failed job pointed to a weakness in their security. They are going to reinforce it."

"So we come at it harder."

"Or smarter." Tristan smiled the Samalian smile Alex loved.

"You have a plan."

"We have hundred of people willing to do anything for their freedom from Karliak, and ideas on how to accomplish that. It's not going to take a lot of convincing to push them to attempt one of them, and in the process distract Karliak's security."

"Okay, but wouldn't that have been easier to set up if we're stayed at their base, like they wanted us? You could have changed opinions in favor of that plan, and I would have been able to insert the kind of information to support it's the best one in their system. Bernie's good, but it isn't on my level."

"It would have, but I'm not sure it would be wise to plot the murder of one of their leader within their base."

"Which one?"

"Kaleb."

"Which one is that?"

"The businessman. While he's on board with freeing Arjolis from Karliak's control, he's envisioning that with him as the leader of whatever is built to replace it. The sense I get is that the ideal version of that ends with him controlling what's left behind by Karliak. And he's not going to be willing to let any of that go."

"But we aren't going to need the data if that leads to them being free of Karliak," Alex said, unable to keep the suspicion from his voice. He couldn't help hearing an element of justification in all this.

"Our employer might not be as selfless as he believed himself to be. He wants to be the one to force Karliak to leave. And for that, he needs those secrets. He agreed to go along with my plan if I guaranteed he'd end up with them."

"Does he know we'll have to kill Kaleb for that to happen?"

The smile turned nasty. "Somehow, I don't think a human like him has the fortitude needed to contemplate going that far. If needed, I'm sure we'll be able to come up with a believable story to explain how the accident that leads to his death couldn't be avoided."

Alex nodded and put his finger in the fur again. "Thanks for telling me. I know it isn't how you're used to work."

"I've never minded explaining myself to you, Alex, because your questions have always been valuable."

Alex nodded and started shaking the fur again. "I can go back to getting that sand out."

"We can get back to that large," Tristan growled. "I didn't tell Eastyn to get us soundproof rooms so we could plot." He grabbed Alex's ass in both hands. "I wanted that so we could be loud."