

The silence wasn't absolute. There was Tristan's breathing, loud in his helmet. He could hear the ship, the vibrations traveling through the sole of his boots as he stood on the hull.

He looked up into the darkness and felt the universe stare back at him. Felt its cold hatred for him.

"I win," he told it. He'd deactivated the comm to ensure he would enjoy the quiet. "You used SpaceGov to try to get to me. You sent the whole of the mercs to kill me, and I'm still here. You're worse than Justin. You don't learn. I'll always win. I am not afraid of you."

He reached the panel where the repairs were needed and knelt.

"And do you think I don't know what you're planning with him?" He hadn't meant to look at the front of the ship; his gaze had simply traveled to where he'd last seen Alex. He focused on the panel, removing it. "I'll admit, he's the closest you've come to undoing me. But it's over now. I know him. I know what he can do, what he wants. He isn't yours anymore, he's mine. I'm going to use him to help ensure I survive whatever you send at me next."

The universe didn't respond, but he knew what it thought. It was laughing at him. It was laughing at this little Samalian who thought he could beat it. Even after all these years, it thought it had a chance against him.

It had sent Alex to weaken him, to worm his way inside his life. It had failed, and he'd grown stronger. Just like with everyone else who tried to kill him, he emerged victorious. The only difference between them and the universe was that it was secure in the knowledge Tristan couldn't come after it. Couldn't take his revenge for everything it inflicted on him. The only victories he could take against it were in surviving.

He removed the panel and focused on what needed to be done. He'd said his piece to the universe, now he needed to do the work to ensure he would survive what it might throw at him while he was under cryo. His warning programs could only do their jobs if they saw properly.

He'd fixed long-range sensors and reinforced the hull where still needed. Working in silence, except for the sound of his tools traveling through the suit.

A light flashed in his helmet. Someone trying to talk to him. "Yes?"

"Tristan?" the boy asked. "Are you coming in to eat?"

"In a while, Buddy. Are you cooking?"

"There isn't much to use; the good food is all gone. Alex says he can make something decent."

Alex. He still had to work out how he would mold the human to his liking. "If you're hungry, go ahead. If there's nothing left, I'll eat a nutrient bar."

"I wanted us to eat together." The boy's tone was full of disappointment.

Tristan felt his annoyance rise, but he controlled it. Was it worth continuing with this mask? He could throw the boy in cryo and be done with it until he reached his destination, not that he'd decided where that was yet.

He frowned. What was the harm in indulging him a while longer? Eating now wouldn't delay the repairs all that much. Once they'd eaten, the boy would go to bed. He could activate the cryo field then.

"Contact me when it's ready, and I'll come in."

"Thanks!"

Tristan shut down the comm, amused at how easy it was to please the boy. He looked up. "Don't think I can't see what you're trying to do with him. It won't work. He was just another tool—his usefulness is over." He went back to work, ignoring the laughter he could imagine from the universe.

An hour later, he was seated at a table Alex had pulled from the wall with the two of them. The food was tasteful; Alex had a knack for making food taste good. Tristan didn't care for flavors. All he needed was the energy the food provided.

He knew about flavors—his father had seen to it as part of teaching him to cook his food. And as a boy he'd gone along with it, but as he'd grown up he'd ceased to see the point. Flavor added nothing to his survival. So he'd stopped bothering, much to his father's annoyance.

The meal was quiet, consisting mainly of the boy looking at him expectantly or glancing at Alex, who shook his head. Tristan wondered what conversation he'd missed while outside.

When they were done eating, the boy went back to his room, Alex to his seat, and Tristan to his. He'd decided to look into Alex; the repairs could wait. He had done a cursory search

already, but that had been mainly to confirm his identity. Now he wanted to know him better, so he could decide how to proceed.

It was slow going. Alex's skill at coercion made it easy for him to hide his movement, or misdirect them, Tristan decided as Alex kept popping up in places within time frames that made that impossible.

He confirmed he'd traveled with the Golly's Yacht, a merchant ship according to their registry, but looking into their history, Tristan suspected they had a hidden life. Life among pirates would explain some of what Alex could do.

He'd already confirmed Alex had been to Bramolian Six, and he could work out some of the other core worlds he'd gone to, based on reported crimes. There was always a lot of cutting involved when Alex was present.

But few deaths; Alex hadn't lied about that. As much as he enjoyed himself when he was lost in the moment, he didn't want to kill. He went out of his way not to kill.

There were three massacres the Law hadn't linked to him, but that—because Tristan has seen the result outside his ship—he recognized the signs of Alex's work. As far as the Law was concerned, they had been inter-gang fights. But gangs didn't kill only with knives; they liked to kill from a safe distance.

These people had been killed in close combat. Alex had gotten them to come to him and he'd slaughtered them. The few who had been killed at a distance had tried to run away, and ended up with a knife in their back.

Tristan looked at the information. He'd known Alex wasn't the cubicle jockey he'd seduced. He wasn't even just a hardened criminal who'd sacrificed his morals for a chance at getting an imaginary lover back. Alex was a weapon, not perfectly honed, but already deadly.

Only, where did that come from? One didn't develop that need to kill, it came from somewhere deep.

Tristan looked further back in Alex's life. His years at Luminex were unremarkable, except for the consequence of Tristan's attack on it. Before that he'd lived with his grandparents while studying.

That was unusual. His parents lived on the same planet, so why not stay with them? There was nothing apparent for the reason. At fourteen he lived with his parents, then he moved in with his grandparents. The only thing that happened between the two was a hospital stay. Injuries consistent with being in a fight. Possibly the grandparents lived in a safer area.

No, he remembered Alex mentioning his father had thrown him out because of something involving an alien and sex.

It didn't explain how Alex had gained that killer edge, but while it might have helped him, Tristan didn't need the information. Alex was a weapon—that was all he needed to know. He knew how to handle weapons, how to make them do what he needed.

He wouldn't take the safety off of Alex, he would take control of it. He already knew of a simple way to do that: make Alex fall in love with him again. He was already confused about how he felt, without Jack as a focus for his love. It would be simple to craft a mask Alex could love. He could even make him believe it had come about because of the work Alex did.

The problem was it would be a long-term mask; constantly wearing it around Alex would be exhausting. This wasn't about changing himself, but Alex. Still, he could make it happen. It would take longer, require finer work, but time was something Tristan had.

He took the earpiece out of his pocket. That was another way he could exert control over Alex if he chose. He should destroy it; he couldn't know what Alex would do with it the next time he used it. He could slip in an override and, before Tristan noticed, blow up the ship. He would have to go over the computer after each job, making sure Alex hadn't inserted extra code where he shouldn't.

He put the earpiece on the board. He didn't have to decide on that right now, and he shouldn't make that decision tired. He looked at Alex's empty seat—he'd gone to sleep a couple of hours before—then the earpiece. It would be a good first test.

He stood and went down the hold to sleep.

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When he woke, Alex wasn't on his bedroll. He took a handful of nutrient bars and ate them as he sat in the cockpit, looking at the earpiece, studying it, studying the strand of fur that had

stuck to it, looking for any indication it had been moved. It hadn't.

He did a thorough search of the computer, looking for any changes to it. When he confirmed it was as he'd left it, he pocketed the earpiece and headed outside to continue the repairs.

After eating, and as something to change his mind, he decided to take the earpiece apart. He didn't know what he would do with it, but it was one piece of technology he'd never bother studying before.

Alex had gasped on seeing the individual pieces on the cloth Tristan had laid on the board to work on. He'd almost laughed at the anguish on the human's face, but the boy had been present, looking at both of them, studying them, so Tristan had just gone back to work on it.

The boy didn't ask about it, or ask about how Alex and Tristan were doing. The boy had resigned himself that their relationship wouldn't be the caring one he'd at first believed they shared.

After four days, the shuttle was fully functional. He'd have to do a complete overhaul when he reached a repair yard, or acquire a new ship. He needed to figure out where to go first, and that was still proving difficult.

He had decided what to do with the earpiece, and the components were gone from the board. Alex had asked, pleaded to know what Tristan had done with it, but he'd just smiled and remained silent.

With the boy now under cryo for their departure, all that was left was for him to settle on a destination. The boy wasn't a factor in it, so it was only if he wanted to repair the ship or get a new one. A new one, a more recent one, meant the core worlds, which ultimately meant a longer trip back home.

He paused his search when he saw Alex's reflection on the screen. He looked beaten, but he also had a spark of determination in his eyes. Not a good combination in this human.

"Can we talk?"

Tristan turned and looked at him. "Feel free to talk."

"Please don't kill him."

Tristan raised an eyebrow. He hadn't expected it to be about the boy.

"He's just a child. He isn't a threat to you."

Tristan crossed his arms and didn't bother hiding his annoyance. "And what do you expect me to do? Adopt him?"

"No, this isn't a life for someone like him," Alex replied with an ease that told Tristan he'd actually thought about it. "He deserves better, an actual life. Can you see that at least? Tell me you see he isn't like you and me. He's had it rough, but he will get over it if the right people look after him. He'll never come back to haunt you, I swear."

Tristan bristled, of course he knew the boy wasn't like them. That didn't mean he wasn't going to be a problem in the future, when he realized all the lies he'd been told by everyone involved. But what Tristan focused on were the promises Alex made.

"You sound like you've already arranged everything."

Alex shook his head. "I just created a new identity for him."

Tristan leaned forward. Had he taken the earpiece without his knowing?

"It wasn't easy. It took me all this time to be sure it was perfect. I've never coerced anything deaf, like you do it." He forced a smile. "I could have done it in a couple of hours with the earpiece, but it's done. No one will find him, I promise. No one will be able to use him against you. No one will even know he's been in our company. And yes, I know people who can look after him. I haven't talked to them in a while, but they're good people, and they'll take him in."

Tristan considered the offer. It did offer solutions—the boy and Alex's mental state. "Your grandparents?"

Alex startled.

"I have researched you, Alex. Thoroughly."

He nodded. "They raised me after—well, you know."

"Do they know what you've become, for me?"

Alex winced. "Some of it. Every time the Law issues a new warrant for my capture, someone contacts them, trying to get them to admit they know where I am. I'm careful they never know."

I just send them the occasional message to let them know I'm okay. I've covered my tracks and they never reply to them. I haven't contacted them since I've found you." He let out a bitter chuckle. "I haven't known if I'm okay since then."

Tristan leaned back. How much of this should he use? How much should he play off Alex's belief the boy was in danger from him? The answer was easy: as much as he could.

"I need you to understand something. If I agree to this, if I let you take the boy to them, let them shelter him for you. I do this for you, for your conscience, not for me. Do you understand?"

Alex nodded.

"And there is a price for me to let you do that."

Alex closed his eyes. "What is it?"

Tristan got out of the seat and took Alex's chin in his hand, forcing it up. He waited for him to open his eyes. When he did, Tristan smiled warmly.

"You. The price is you, completely. No more arguing. No more believing you are your own person. For me to agree to this, you become mine. You do as I say when I say. You coerce for me, you kill for me. You want the boy to have his life? That's fine; he means nothing to me. But in return I want yours, in its entirety."

Alex closed his eyes, and Tristan waited. He didn't mind waiting, because he knew what the answer would be. Alex had been willing to die to save the boy's life, and all he was being asked to sacrifice was his identity, his will.

When Alex opened them, there were none of the emotions Tristan expected. No resignation, no fear, no doubt. Alex's eyes only contained cold steel.

"Fine. You give Emil his life, and I'm yours, body and soul. I'll steal and kill for you. I'll let you use me. I'll massacre anyone you want me to. I'll be the monster you want me to be."

Tristan smiled and caressed the scar on Alex's cheek. "Alex, you are already the monster I want. With some adjustment, you'll be the monster I can use."