

## Epilogue

Tacertom, the capital of Pefvola, was not where Alex had expected them to land. He hadn't known of the planet until exiting cryo and Tristan informing him. They were deeper within what was considered SpaceGov than he'd ever been. There had been no reason for him to need to come here, back in his cubicle-slave days, and it took a special kind of merc to accept a job so far within the systems that controlled the empty space that filled the universe.

Pefvola had nothing that made it special, other than where it was located. Its population approached its first trillion. The average lifespan of its citizens was well over five hundred subjective years, and the average wealth would make his father cry in shame; and the Crimson family was considered rather wealthy back there.

The last time he'd checked in on Emil, a little less than four subjective years before, he'd just had his thirteenth birthday, and had dreams of becoming the planet's governor. Objectively, that was nearly forty years ago, but he didn't expect him to have aged that much. His grandparents were frequent travelers, and they would have taken him along.

"Thanks for dealing with this," Tristan said, nuzzling his neck and leaving Alex before the woman in on the cryo bed.

"You're a bastard," he called after the retreating Samalian, who'd be preparing the ship for a full shutdown. Alex didn't remember agreeing, but he hadn't needed to see the recording of him screaming yes while Tristan had his way with him to know he would have agreed to anything asked of him in that moment.

He readied the injector, deactivated the field, and injected her. Her fist in his face surprised him, but he'd been hit hard. She made it three steps away before the tranquilizer kicked in, then Alex caught and sat her down.

"What did you do to me?" she asked.

"You mean beyond kidnapping you?"

The glare didn't quite form.

"It's just a light tranquilizer. I didn't feel like fighting you."

"You shouldn't have kidnapped me, then."

"I wasn't consulted." He offered her water. "When's the last time you ate? Subjective," he added, and she closed her mouth.

"A few hours ago."

He took a nutrient bar from the cabinet and handed it to her.

"You're joking, right?"

"Only thing edible on the ship. I think this used to be a mercs ship."

"You don't know who you got it from?"

"My partner acquired it. He didn't care about the previous owner, just that the ship met his needs."

"Tall, muscular, back skin?"

"Fur," Alex said, and she was surprised.

"So he didn't care who he stole this from, just like he didn't care I'd protest when he kidnapped me." She made a face as she unwrapped the bar, then looked disgusted as she bit into it. "Why?" she asked. "No one's going to care enough that I'm gone to pay whatever you think I'm worth. Immeter has a strict not dealing with kidnappers policy."

Alex leaned against the cryobed. "That might change once this is done. The no one caring part, I mean," he added at her dubious expression.

"You think there's rich someone out there you can con into believing I'm some long-lost relative? How do you plan on pulling that off? Tweak my DNA to match theirs?"

"You're rather cynical."

She snorted. "I'm an employee of a corporation who spent most of her life helping the desperate. Do you have any idea what the desperate are capable of?" she motioned around them. "This isn't a first for me."

Alex nodded. "Gaberon, you were taken for eight days. The man released you after all his demands to your employer were ignored. He was arrested, processed and sent to a rehabilitation center." He smiled at her surprise. "I like to know who I'll be dealing with."

"Then you know this is a waste of time."

"I wouldn't have done this," Alex said. "But now that we're here, I don't think it's going to be a waste of time. Do you need to wash? Arjolis wasn't particularly pleasant. Your suit seems to have kept the sand out, but I don't know how long you've been in it."

She studied him. "I could use a shower."

Alex escorted her to the washroom, then headed to see where Tristan was at.

"Well," the Samalian asked, putting one of the ship's power transformer back into place. "What did she have to say?"

Alex snorted. "You told me to deal with the situation, not explain it to her. She's grabbing a shower. It's going to be simpler to explain when she sees him. Right now, she'd just say it was impossible, that Masters would have made sure Emil is no longer around when he vanished. If she even realized Steringer and Masters were the same person."

Tristan nodded, securing the transformer. "We'll be ready to go in an hour. You should go clean up."

"Not going to join me?"

"I'd like to be out of the ship in an hour," Tristan replied.

Alex smirked. "You're just scared I'll have you screaming yes, and then you'll have to explain everything to her."

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Pefvola's daytime was blindingly bright. Even with the visor Tristan had handed them before they exited the spaceport, he was squinting as they walked among the people.

There were also a lot of them. More than Alex had been among in...ever. Anyone with ambitions wanted to be as close to the core of power as they could afford to get, and in a place the size of the universe, that made for a lot of people. And a surprisingly large number of non-humans walking among them without attracting attention.

After his time among the Samalian wilderness, and the small community, this felt stifling. He'd had to leave most of his knives on the ship and it was his good thing. He had to fight the urge to cut space around him.

Fortunately, it was a short walk, and then they were onto a larger plaza where the age of the people went down along with the density. This was the Belgane Academy, where they would find their target, according to the information Alex had coerced out of the system. A glance at his datapad, and he angled them onto a path lined with grass and trees.

Emil was twenty-three now, subjective, and excelling in his field of studies; Social Architecturing, with a specialization toward creating environments, lending itself better to children's learning. Alex wasn't surprised he was at the top of his class. Emil had already been smart and inquisitive as a boy. His grandparents would have nurtured that.

"He's among that group," Alex said, indicating six people seated at a table, talking over a projection. One of the women noticed him pointing and said something, then they were all looking. Emil was up, grinning and hurrying, and Alex was surprised at how lanky the boy he'd known for a few subjective weeks had grown. He'd read the information, but they had only been numbers.

This was Emil.

The boy he'd given himself over to Tristan, body and soul, to keep safe.

Emil slowed, growing uncertain, careful. Wary.

"Is he back?" he asked Tristan, coming to a stop.

"No. He'll never threaten you again," the Samalian answered and Emil relaxed, smiled, and Alex thought he might hug Tristan.

"Neither of you has changed," Emil said in awe and Alex unexpectedly barked laughter.

"There has been some change," Tristan said, and smiled at Alex when he calmed himself.

"You two worked out what was wrong," Emil said, and looked happy.

“Some of it,” Alex said.

“We’re working on more of it,” Tristan added.

“It’s never just as simple as pulling off a rescue, is it?” Emil asked. “There always seems to be more under each layer.” He looked at Marjoline and smiled. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to ignore you, but I haven’t seen either of them since they save my life. I’m Emil.” He offered her his hand. “Emil Crimson.”

“Emil,” Alex said, working at making his words convey importance. “This is Marjoline Kelmer.”

It was clear Emil caught the tone, as Marjoline stared at him, but it only served to confuse him.

“She’s your mother,” Alex added.

“Oh, okay?” was the man’s response as he took her in. “Hi.”

Neither looked overjoyed to meet, and Alex wondered what might be wrong.

“I’m sorry,” Emil finally said. “But I’m not sure what you’re expecting.”

“Aren’t you happy to meet your mother?” Alex asked.

“No offense,” he told Marjoline in a polite tone, “but Grams who raised me.”

“None taken,” she replied with a chuckle. “You have his eyes, you know?”

The comment took Emil aback. “No, I don’t.”

She nodded. “The same caring and joy of life I saw in them when you were talking with them.”

“You clearly mean someone else,” Emil said, tone harsher.

“Before he’d gotten what he wanted out of me, Donald was always happy. He loved having fun. I know it was an act. There was nothing of that man when he took you from me. But I didn’t see enough of that one to forget the man I’d love, even if he was fake.”

“Marjoline,” Emil said, cautiously. “Whatever you saw, he had nothing to do with it. That man kept me locked in a school. When I was finally taken out, I was eight, and it was so he could use me in some personal bid for power. He had them kidnap me and then went on every screen, claiming they had taken me from him. Played the grieving and angry father.”

“You worked that out,” Alex said.

“It was hard not to, once I was old enough to look over the things he’d said, what I remembered happening. Worked out some of the problems you two had was over how to deal with me.”

“I’m sorr—”

“Don’t be,” Emil cut Alex short. “I don’t care how we met. What you were supposed to do with me. You’re mercs. You do what you’re paid to do.”

“Not that time,” Tristan said and Emil nodded.

“What matters to me,” Emil said, “is that your two saved my life.” He chuckled. “Made that time something of an adventure, instead of whatever horror show it could have been.” He looked at Marjoline.

“The first time met that man, who claimed to be my father. He ordered the mercs he’d brought with him to kill me along with Tristan. Whatever he was to you, real or not, he is nothing to me. If you’re here looking to recapture something of him, you’re going to be disappointed.”

She chuckled. “I’m here because they kidnapped me.”

“You what?” Emil demanded of Tristan.

Alex grinned as the Samalian’s ears folded back in embarrassment.

“It was easier than explaining things,” Tristan finally said, his ears straightening in what Alex recognize was an act of will.

“Kidnapping her was easier than saying ‘Hi, I know where you son is, do you want us to take you to him?’.”

The ears trembled. “She could have said no.”

Emil ran a hand over his face. “Really?” he looked at Alex. “And you just went along with it, didn’t you.”

“He didn’t run any of it by me,” Alex replied defensively. “She was already under cryo on our ship when I found out.”

“Would you have stopped him if he’d told you?” Emil asked in a tone that dare Alex to say he would have. Alex swallowed, the memory of the too old gaze in the eight year old boy returning to him. Tristan telling him he didn’t have to act, that Emil had worked out they weren’t the friends they pretended to be.

Marjoline laughed. “That is definitely nothing like him. Donald would never have been that blunt with men this clearly dangerous.”

“They’re not—” Emil stopped. “They wouldn’t hurt me.”

She nodded. “Just so there is no misunderstanding,” she told Alex. “I am not happy you kidnapped me. But I am happy I get to meet the man my son had become.” She looked at Emil. “If you’d like, I would like to talk. Get to know you.”

Emil smile. “I’d like that. I have two hours before my next class. Do you want to have lunch? There’s a few options around here.” He looked over his shoulder as they walked away. “You two better not just vanish again. I want to spend time with you two once my day’s done. You aren’t where I can find you, and I will track you down, understood?” He smiled at Marjoline before either replied.

“What is the likelihood he’ll make good on the threat?” Tristan asked.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Alex replied derisively. “You really want to put him to the test?”

The Samalian nodded. “Then how likely is it he could find us?”

“Let’s see. He’s studying social engineering, which it has got to have picked up from you.”

“Did you happen to see his programing scores?” Tristan asked.

“Yeah, I did. And don’t you even suggest I had something to do with that. I was too busy trying to come on with ways to keep you from hurting him to show him any of what I could do.”

Tristan nodded again. “Where do you want to go until he’s done with his classes?”

Alex looked around, taking in the people and the aliens casually moving among them. “How about we find a restaurant, and I get to have a proper meal with my boyfriend? You realize we’ve never done that, don’t you?”

Tristan offered Alex his hand. “Then let’s make this a memorable first.”