

## Chapter 25

The room felt cramped, even if it was only Alex and Victor in it. Tristan had left them as soon as Victor had returned with the information, and whispered a reminder to Alex that if he so much as touched Victor, Tristan was going to have words with him. The warning did nothing to calm Alex's desire to do the Lawman in. Tristan didn't protect people from Alex, he pointed at them for him to kill.

It wasn't like Alex had expected to see the Lawman again, even if he'd agreed to help. Of course, he hadn't expected Tristan to agree to Victor's request to start with.

"I need to go to the precinct," Victor had said, holding the data chip Alex had been forced to give him with the recording of the fabricator's theft.

"Vic, this is—"

Victor had glared at Tristan. "You know I can't access the database from here; the two of you have seen to that. If you want me to get you answers, I have to go there."

Tristan had seemed unsure, and for an instant Alex thought Victor was actually, somehow putting him off balance, but then he'd noticed the eyes and settled down. Tristan was still in control; this was a mask.

He put both hands on Victor's shoulders. "Can I trust you? We have issues, I know that, but this is bigger than us. When it's over, I swear I'll let you take me in. I'll answer for what I've done, but once everyone is safe."

Alex had been amazed that Victor bought it. In one phrase, Tristan had reminded him of what was at stake, and offered him his redemption, and the Lawman had brightened.

Victor had to know it was an act—he'd been at the receiving end of Tristan's acting before—but as far as Alex could tell, he'd been pulled in.

Tristan wouldn't turn himself in, and Victor would be left knowing he'd betrayed the Law, yet again. He'd have lost not only his chance at redemption, but any chances he'd had to rebuild his career. Maybe this time Tristan would do the right thing and have Alex kill the Lawman.

Victor had left and Alex had felt better, just the two of them, which was why he'd said something stupid. "He's still alive."

"Don't."

"I think I'm entitled to it, for once, considering the number of times you've gotten on my case about leaving anyone alive. There's no way you can convince me you didn't know he wasn't going to come back and bite you in the ass." Alex paused and smiled. "Well, more like he'll want you to bite him in the ass."

"He didn't matter, Alex. That's all."

"No. *I* didn't matter. I was a cubicle jockey, a corporate lackey. He's Law. You can't tell me he didn't matter, that guy worked out an extensive list of your hideouts."

"He never acted on it."

“Oh, like you knew he was going to give up.” He stepped up to Tristan. “Since you don’t want to admit it, I’m going to tell you why you let him live. There’s actually a heart somewhere under that neutron exterior of yours.” He’d made to tap the Samalian’s chest, and his hand was slapped away hard enough the pain shot up his arm.

“Do not presume to know me, Alex. I haven’t given you that right. I had my reasons to let him live, and they are none of your concern. Just like I have my reasons to let you live. Do not ever forget that. You live because I have a use for you, and no other reason.” Tristan had thrown Alex on the bed and proceeded to prove his point by using him.

He went at it for longer than usual, and he wasn’t gentle about it. Alex hadn’t minded. Rough was how he was used to it by now, and he suspected that if Tristan was ever gentle with him, he wouldn’t know how to handle it.

When he was done, Tristan had left him there—naked, sweaty, and basking in the afterglow. Alex could have stayed like that for the rest of his life, but Tristan had exited the shower and told him to wash up. Alex obeyed.

When Victor returned, alone, he had a few names; and places where they could be found. Tristan had thanked him, hugged him, and whispered to Alex, “If you hurt him, I will hurt you,” and left.

Alex had distracted himself by looking into those people. Victor’s information was superficial, at best. Alex built a complete history on them: the moment they were born; the kind of illnesses they’d gotten; where, when, and what they had studied, and how good they had been; how many lovers they’d had, if they’d gotten any of them pregnant, or had gotten pregnant; how extensive their families were; and how many accounts they had, with the amount of money they contained and where they existed.

That had taken the whole of an hour to accomplish. He’d put the information in a secure node he and Tristan used for this purpose, and had found himself with nothing to do to distract from the fact that Victor was seated nearly opposite him, and that he was studying Alex.

His presence reminded Alex that Tristan had shared something with the Lawman. Had shared his bed. Hurting Victor was the least of what he had to keep himself from doing. At least the man was silent. Alex connected to the computer to go coerce something.

“Was it worth it?” Victor asked.

Alex glared, as much for the interruption as for triggering the flood of emotion that question stirred. He almost crossed the little space separating them, with the intention of burying each and every dagger he had on him, as well as in his pack, in the Lawman’s body. How dare he ask that question?

Tristan’s threat forced him to exert control over his emotions, and for once he was happy for all the “training” Tristan had put him through in that regard. When he was in control, he stood and approached the Lawman. His control might not have been as total as Alex thought, because Victor shrunk back in the seat as Alex placed his hands on the armrest and leaned in.

“Worth it? What do you want to hear, *Vic*?” Alex put as much of the hate he felt for the man in the name. “You want me to say you did the right thing by giving up the chase? You want to hear about all the horrors I endured because *I* didn’t stop? How Tristan tortured me? How he made my life miserable? How he broke my mind so I don’t know what to do without him anymore? Is that what you want to hear? How lucky you are to be sound and safe in your normal life? Going after bad people like me and him, making this little world safe?”

Alex could tell Victor wanted to break their staring. He wanted to say something, but Alex’s anger kept him silent. Alex saw something in those gray eyes, and he remembered something Tristan had said to Victor. He pushed himself away and leaned against the dresser.

“Maybe what you really want to hear about is all the opportunities you missed out on? How every day you could have been pushed past what you thought was your breaking point, only to find out there was something even harder underneath. All the sights you never knew existed. Committed atrocities you can only dream of in that most secret place in your mind. How you could be made to feel pleasure in ways you didn’t think should be possible?”

Victor looked away.

“Well? Which is it?”

Victor didn’t answer. Alex went to his pack, took out a nutrient bar, then a second one which he threw on Victor’s lap. He watched him eye the silver packaging with disgust. Alex felt better, calmer. He’d realized something by the time he finished his tirade.

Victor was broken, but in a different way than Alex had been—still was. Alex had been broken by what Tristan had done to him, by what Luminex had put him through, but he’d been remade. He’d remade himself,

had let Tristan remake him.

He was nowhere near whole. He doubted it was possible with all the cracks inside him, but he was as whole as something like him could be.

Victor never bothered picking up the pieces. He'd given up on chasing Tristan, but he hadn't done anything with his life. He'd stuck with a job that ostracized him, a place that had been compromised twice because of him.

And Alex understood that Victor wasn't doing any of this because he hoped for redemption. He knew he'd end up losing in some way by the time it was all said and done. He was helping, because in this moment, his life wasn't just shattered code. He could see structure, productivity. A possibility of moving forward. Alex could understand the hope that he could build on this momentum and make something of himself when Tristan was out of his life again.

And, Alex cursed himself for it, he thought the man deserved more than taunting. "The truth, Victor, is that I don't have an answer for you. I can't tell you which one of us has it better. All I can tell you is that this is my life, with all the horrible things I endured, all the amazing things I experienced, the pains and the pleasures. I chose it, and I accepted the consequences of that choice."

Victor looked at him with an intensity Alex wasn't prepared for, a yearning. Maybe he'd been wrong and Victor wasn't hoping to rebuild once Tristan was gone. Maybe he was hoping that Tristan would take him along when he left. Take him away from all this.

"Don't." The word didn't have any anger in it. Alex no longer hated this man. He finally saw he had nothing to fear from him. It finally sunk in that Tristan had picked Alex over anyone else. For whatever reason, Tristan had chosen him, and so long as Alex made sure to keep up with Tristan, he wouldn't be discarded.

Victor's jaw and hands clenched. The determination in his eyes mixed with the anger of someone who'd been denied far too often.

"Don't come after us, Victor. You have no idea how costly that's going to be."

"You think you—"

"Are you willing to lose everything?"

"You're not that—"

"I won't be the one doing it. It's going to happen long before you find us again." Alex noticed the unopened bar in his hand and put it on the dresser. "Come on Victor, think about it. You know what mercs are like. The life isn't for someone who spent his following the rules, no matter how much he wants to abandon all of that, deep down. You're telling yourself you won't be like them. You're better than that. *You* can continue living by the rules even as a merc. You're going to be different from the rest of them. Victor, the only different mercs are the dead ones."

Victor ripped the packaging off the bar and bit into it, glaring at Alex.

He sighed. "Trust me on this. You're going to bend those rules, then you're going to break them. You're going to start small. Theft, no one gets hurt with that, right? Then blackmail, just the people who deserve it. It's going to escalate until you're looking at a dead body at your feet, then two, three, a dozen. You'll have justifications, at first. It was him or you. You didn't have a choice there. But don't worry, you won't be justifying for long. Soon enough it won't matter the reason, and you won't care why you had to kill them."

Alex looked at his hands. "And if you're truly unlucky, you're going to start craving those fights. Those times when you can let loose and the bodies drop around you. You're going to relish those times." He closed his eyes and tried to catch his breath. Memories washed over him, so many faceless bodies he'd lost count of them, except for two. Samson, his first kill—the man who'd threatened to rape him. And the man in white, who'd threatened to turn him over to the Law.

"And that isn't even the worst of it." Alex opened his eyes and looked at Victor sadly. "The worst will be the other mercs, how you can never trust any of them. If you work long enough with the same ones, you'll start to think they're different, that these men and women you can trust. That's the knife in your back that will hurt the most, because you'll have forgotten that's always how it goes in the life. You get a knife in the back, unless you plant one in theirs first."

Victor's expression saddened. "Not always. You have—"

Alex laughed bitterly. "Tristan? You think what I have here is forever? Victor, I'm living on borrowed time. I'm only alive so long as I keep up with him. The day I can't, he's going to toss me aside. I'm going to get a knife in the back. Or more likely, considering this is Tristan, he's going to look me in the eyes as he takes a knife off my harness and plants that in my heart."

"He wouldn't do that to you."

Alex sighed. "Don't do that to yourself, Victor. Don't make believe something good can come of this. I

spent years doing it, and it didn't help."

The determination in Victor's eyes intensified.

Alex threw his hands in the air. "Fine, have it your way. It's your life. I've already gone through it." He took the bar and unwrapped it. He pointed with it at Victor. "But let me give you some advice: make sure you're ready before you start chasing us. This," he indicated up and down Victor, "isn't going to cut it. Mercs are going to take one look at you and they won't even bother laughing as they cut you down. There was some sort of standard when you joined the Law, right? Some levels of health you were expected to meet? Get back to that."

He took a bite out of the bar and chewed. "Do as much prep work as you can. There aren't a lot of real doctors out there, and the real ones charge more money than you'll ever earn, so you don't want to deal with them anyway, not unless slavery appeals to you. The Law covers health treatment, right? Take advantage of that. Get everything done that will get you back to fighting form. If you're not opposed to them, get mechanical augments—good ones, not the back-alley stuff."

He took another bite and Victor joined him, this time not bothering hiding how much he hated them. "You're going to need every advantage you can get. I'd say learn to coerce, but that's not for everyone, so try to find a coercionist you can trust. Pay them well. Don't give them a reason to betray you. If you have any money left over after that, start hiding it. Get a new ID, get a lot of them; you can't imagine how fast you burn through them."

Alex smiled as he remembered Will and the crew of the Golly. "Get yourself a crew. Protect them, give them every incentive so they'll want to protect you, but prepare yourself for the realization that being respected and being feared are basically the same thing."

Alex took a breath. "Once you have that, then you can consider coming after us, but I want you to remember one other thing." Alex's eyes became cold. "I don't share. The only way you're getting Tristan is over my dead body, and I'm not going to just lie down for you. I am going to fight you. I am going to fight you as if my life depends on it. What we're sharing right now isn't going to make me go easy on you. You come after us, and I will kill you, Victor. I went through too much to just give him up."

Alex didn't find out what Victor had for a reply. The door opened and as Alex took out a knife, Tristan entered. He looked from one man to the other as the door closed.

"I found them. Pack up."

Alex nodded and put the already packed bags by the door.

Victor's pad buzzed, and he looked at it. He turned it to show them the wreckage of some ship, text scrolled by it. "Either of you know anything about this?"

Alex shook his head as he took out the DNA dissolver spray from his pack.

"Someone tried to break into my ship," Tristan replied, crossing to the shower room.

"So they blew it up?"

"It blew itself up. No one gets in my ship when it's locked."

"You set your ship to self-destruct?" Victor replied in dismay. "In a busy port?"

Tristan walked by him, took his pack, and exited the room.

"The explosion killed eight people!" the Lawman yelled at the Samalian's back.

Alex took his arm and led him outside. "Rules," he said softly, "bending and breaking." He went back in and sprayed everything with the dissolver.

When he closed the door on the room, Victor was looking at Tristan. His shoulders square, back straight. "This is it, isn't it? You got me to do what you wanted. Now you're going to disappear. I won't hear anything from you, other than to hear about whatever massacre you're involved in next." He sighed at Tristan's silence. "Is it at least true? The thing about the universe being in danger? Or is all of this just about getting back at someone who pissed you off?"

Alex snorted. "Like you can trust anything he says."

"Alex," Tristan warned.

"I wasn't talking to you," Victor snapped.

Alex smiled in spite of himself as he stepped around the Lawman. There was something likable about him when he showed he had a spine. Killing him was going to be a pity.

"You have no reason to trust me, but yes, it's true. I wouldn't put myself through this inconvenience for anything less."

Alex watched Victor over the open trunk as he searched Tristan's face. He finally shrugged and nodded.

"Can I ask you something else? About a job you did. The Orwell Academy. It has the hallmark of your

work—the number of dead, most of them dying by blade. The building blew up, but none of the students were harmed. I know it's you, but this can't be about erasing evidence. The kidnapping isn't even linked to you, just some random Samalian. So why?"

Tristan seemed to think about it. "Revenge." He handed his pack to Alex and got in the hover. Victor looked at him in confusion as he closed the trunk.

"Do yourself a favor: when you come after us, don't hurt kids." Alex got in the hover and Tristan took off. They merged into the traffic in silence.

"If you don't kill him, I'll have to," Alex said.

"You will not touch him."

"He won't give me a choice. He's going to come after you, not to arrest you. He was hoping you'd take him away from what his life turned into."

Tristan glared at him. "If you pushed him to it so you can kill him, I will make you suffer."

Alex snorted. "Like I need that kind of aggravation. I tried to talk him out of it. It didn't do any good. After all these years he still wants you, he still wants his Simon."

Tristan smiled as he looked forward. "Good."

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