

“I hate you.”

The words echoed around Alex. Tristan’s voice, but he couldn’t see the Samalian; the light was too bright. Where did it come from? Then it wasn’t, and he was in a corridor, running as fast as he could. Tristan needed his help.

“I hate you.”

Somewhere ahead of him. He didn’t care about the words; he belonged to Tristan. He’d passed on every chance Tristan had given him to walk away, and he would do so again now. *Anything* would be preferable to going back to that.

He passed an opened door and a golden-furred Samalian stood in it, shaking his head sadly. That wasn’t Tristan, so he kept going.

“Consequences, Alex,” came from behind him.

He turned a corner and flew back from the force of the punch. “Don’t touch me!”

He was on the floor, against a wall. His arm was broken, as was his face and his leg. Tristan was vanishing out the door after beating him. Why, why had he beaten him? Tristan only did so with good reason.

“Jack.” The name was whispered on the air.

Alex stood, and his broken bone healed. He ran after Tristan, and the pain vanished. He was whole again. He had to reach Tristan before it was too late. Something bad was about to happen.

He held a case. It had something to do with why he needed to reach Tristan, but Alex couldn’t remember what—or what was going to happen. He ran through a medical bay. A woman was working on a strange contraption in the middle of it. She noticed him.

“It’s going to kill you,” she said.

He wanted to ask what she meant, but he couldn’t stop running. The case was gone, and he held a vial in its place. This was it. This was why he needed to reach Tristan, he was sure of it.

Code was all around him. “Just what kind of idiot are you?”

He needed to coerce the system, needed it to obey him so he could save Tristan.

“Oh, you’re going to abuse me to save your abuser? Any idea how fucked up that it? Hey, that tickles, don’t you think?”

He spun, put his hand to his neck where the sting had come.

“Why?” he asked the emptiness. “It was for you! It’s okay if I die. You have to live!”

The vial was on the floor, empty. A golden light shone around him, through him. The light that wasn’t for him.

He ran, but the light stayed with him. He held a case, and the light flowed into it.

“That’s it! I know how to save you!”

Tristan stood at the end of the corridor before a door.

“No! Don’t open it!” He was running out of time.

“I hate you.” Tristan’s voice again, but sounding so much further than where he was standing.

“I don’t care! I love you. Do you hear me!”

Tristan was much closer now. He would make it.

“I don’t want to ever see you again.”

He reached for Tristan, just as the Samalian exploded into dark light.

“No!”

He fell. He tried to grab on to something, anything, but Tristan wasn’t there. There was nothing else he could hold on to. Without him, Alex would fall forever.

“Tristan.” The voice was distant, distorted by electronics. “Run, you have to run. They’re coming for you. Do you hear me? I don’t know where they came from, but they’re after you. Run.”

He hit bottom, but he didn’t feel pain; he felt despair. Tristan was still in danger. He’d let Tristan down. Alex hadn’t been able to keep up like he’d promised he would.

He was looking at the golden light in the case.

“We were supposed to be happy. This wasn’t what I wanted.”

The golden light winked at him, and then grew brighter than he could stand. There should be pain, he thought. After such a fall he should be broken. He deserved it for failing Tristan.

He felt cold. But he also felt heat, and he wanted to reach for the heat. He wanted to feel something, anything.

“Choices have consequences, Alex.” The voice seemed to be coming from the golden light.

He grabbed the heat, and pain erupted in him. He welcomed it as he screamed. That was the punishment he deserved.

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Beeping sounds, hands on him, pain. He fought. He wouldn’t be caught; he needed to escape and go save Tristan.

“Someone hold him down! He’s making his injuries worse.”

His hand touched something hard, cold, familiar. He swung out, and someone else screamed along with him.

“How did he get that?”

“How the fuck should I know. Jacoby, you need to see to him. I’m too busy trying to save Alex’s life. Somebody get me a sedative! Do I look like I care? If we don’t, he’s going to die.”

Something pricked his neck.

No! It wasn’t for him, it was for Tristan. He could die, it was fine if he died. Tristan had to live!

He fought harder to escape, and the hands receded, the voices went away. Even the pain vanished.

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“No!” He bolted up. “It’s for you!” Pain sent him crashing back.

“Alex,” a woman called. “Calm down, you’re okay.” A woman’s voice, first far, now close.

“Where is he?” his throat hurt, as did his head.

“Alex, you need to focus on you. What do you remember?”

He fought through the pain and grabbed her collar, pulling her close. “Where the fuck is he?”

“I—” she started

“He’s gone,” a man said.

No. Alex’s hand dropped, and he barely felt the pain. He couldn’t be gone. He started feeling cold.

“Jacoby, what are you doing here?”

He was so cold. He didn’t want to feel cold. Anything but cold. He reached for the heat and everything came flaring back

“No,” he growled over their argument. “He can’t be gone, do you hear me? It was supposed to be me. I was supposed to die. Not him!”

Hands on him again, and he punched. A woman cursed.

“He isn’t dead,” the man said. “Tech was kidnapped. He’s alive, just not here. Do you hear me?”

He's still alive. Some of the heat receded, only to come back. "How? How was he taken? Who? I'm going to kill them."

"I don't know who, but I'm pretty sure they destroyed the house to cover their tracks. We found a body where the workshop used to be."

"No!" Alex grabbed the man's neck "You said—"

"It's not him," the woman said. "I did a DNA check."

"They probably weren't expecting us to want anything to do with him since he lived far outside the town. The body was in such a bad shape, DNA was the only way anyone could tell who was in there."

"Why didn't I die?" Alex asked, his hand falling, the pain distant. What he meant was, why hadn't they taken him instead? Why hadn't Tristan thrown him at them to escape? That was why he was there—to be used to protect Tristan.

He grabbed onto the heat and held it close. He was going to make them pay. He was going to track them down and rip every bone out of them, one by one.

"You got lucky," the woman said, but her voice sounded different. Like she had a cold.

"You were far enough that you only caught the blowback."

"And then the house fell on you," the woman said. "I have no idea how you survived that, let alone the operation; you seemed determined to kill yourself and take some of us along."

"Why didn't either of you answer me?" Jacoby asked.

Data collated. If he was Jacoby, the portmaster, then the woman was Cornelius, the town's medic.

"Alex, why?"

"I didn't hear it until after the explosion. He must have shut the system down. He didn't want to have anything to do with anyone."

"He let you in," Cornelius said. "I thought—"

"I let myself in. He wouldn't talk to me."

"Why did you let the others think—"

"Because it's none of their fucking business! I don't need anyone's help to fix this. Now help me up; I have work to do." He tried to move, and the beeping became strident.

She put a hand on his chest and pushed him down. Alex stared at her. She couldn't be that strong.

"You need to rest. I fixed you up, but you're not done healing. If you do anything strenuous, you could reinjure yourself."

"I'm fine," he snapped.

"No, you're not. Alex, if you're not going to calm down and rest of your own volition, I'm going to sedate you."

"Don't you dare! I have to go rescue him. I don't have the time for sleep, I need to figure out who they are. Every minute that passes is going to—"

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He opened his eyes slowly. The pain was a hum in the background, and for an instant he was afraid he'd also feel cold, but the heat was close to his heart.

"Welcome back," Cornelius said. "How are you feeling?"

"You had no right," he replied angrily. "I'm going to kill you for that."

She patted his shoulder. "Get in line behind every other patient I have. You know, I think Tech's the only one who's never threatened to kill me."

"That's because if he said it, he'd do it."

"Not Tech. He wouldn't hurt anyone, not even Rackun, and if there's one person in town that deserves to be hit, it's her. Now, how are you feeling?"

He glared at her.

“Alex, you can be angry all you want, but I need to know so I can make sure you’re on the right track. You do want to get out of here to rescue Tech, don’t you?”

“Don’t you ever use him to get me to do something, do you hear me?”

She backed away. “Alright, I get you’re serious, but so am I. How are you doing?”

Alex sighed. “I ache everywhere. Feels like someone parked a hover on top of me.”

“A house, actually.”

“Right. Any chance you can turn the pain down?”

“Unfortunately, that’s as low as local inhibitors get. You got yourself an implant since the last time I treated you, and I couldn’t find any information on it. Without knowing what kind of changes to your brain chemistry it produces, I wasn’t going to risk a general system.

Alex nodded. He hated this. Healing always took so much out of him. “How long have I been out?” He had his implant run its diagnostic programs.

“Three days. Your arms and chest are mostly healed. I’ve repaired the internal damage. It’s a miracle you didn’t get your head crushed in, do you know that? Your right leg was crushed; it’s got a few more days to go.”

“Okay, and when are you going to take the casing off?”

“A few more days, Alex, like I said.”

He cursed. He’d thought she’d meant until he was good to walk.

“I need you to speed this up.”

“Alex, that’s not—”

“I don’t have the time, Doc,” he snapped. “They’re getting away with him. I have to go rescue him.” He couldn’t stay here and compound his failure. Tristan depended on him. He should have been at the door, protecting him, not in the house reading.

“Alex.” She placed a hand on his arm and he snarled.

“If you don’t take it off, I’m going to break it.”

Her hand vanished.

“I’m not one of them. I don’t need to be coddled; I need to be out of here.”

“Alex, I know you mercs are tough, that you can endure a lot of things. But if you don’t give your leg the time to heal, you could cause irreparable damage. Do you really want to go through a full rebuild?”

“If it let me rescue him sooner, yes.”

She sighed. “You’re not going to rescue anyone with a warped leg. You need to heal.”

“I can’t just lie in here not doing anything.” He let his head fall on the pillow. “Where’s Jacoby? Has he found out anything new?”

“I don’t know. I’ve been busy taking care of you, not keeping track of him.”

“Call him. I have to talk to him.”

“Alex, you need to rest.”

“If you trank me again, the moment I wake up, I’m going to shove the scalpel on that table into one of your eyes.”

“Alex!”

“Then stop fucking with me. If you won’t let me get out of this bed, let me do something. You claim to care so much about him, but all you’re doing is standing in my way.”

“Alright, I’ll tell him to come, but you need to promise me you’re not going to tire yourself out.”

“Fine.”

She left, and he closed his eyes. He instructed the implant to give him the reports, and he was pleased to find it hadn’t been damaged.

He tried to rest, but too many questions assaulted him. How had they found Tristan? There were only two other people who knew Tristan might be here, and he wasn’t sure

Victor knew. He hadn't had access to his list in years. And if he did, he wouldn't give away the information.

Which left Masters, still hiding somewhere in the universe. Could he have told someone? But if so, how? Not only was he hiding, but he no longer existed. Masters had been voided by SpaceGov, any and all identities linked to him had been erased, the wealth he'd hidden confiscated.

Alex was sure the man had more, probably even other identities, but he'd never be able to prove he'd been Masters, so who would trust any information he'd have for sale?

Could Tristan have slipped?

He didn't want to believe that, and until the last job, he'd have said it was impossible, but he'd acted erratically during it, and Alex could think of a handful of times prior to that he hadn't behaved as the cold, calculating Samalian Alex knew and loved.

Could there have been a tracker on Katherine's ship that Tristan had missed? Again, normally he wouldn't even consider that, but... Unless Tristan had programmed maneuvers to hide where they were going, it would be easy for anyone who could track them to extrapolate their destination. That would explain how they found them so quickly.

"How are you doing?" Jacoby asked.

Alex's eyes snapped open. He hadn't heard the man enter. He looked around the room, and it was only the two of them. "I need everything you have."

"You know the doc is going to have my head if—"

"Jacoby, I don't have the patience to—"

The man raised a hand. "I know. You have to find Tech. You can't think of anyone else. Believe it or not, I have been there. I just want you to appreciate the risk I'm taking in helping you."

Alex rolled his eyes.

"I don't have much. Their tag was turned off, so the buoy doesn't have any details. They came in too quickly for me to do anything more than send you the message, but I was able to set up and get scans of them leaving. They might have been careful on the way in, but on the way out they no longer cared. I have a trajectory, not that it means all that much."

"I want a copy of them, everything the scans picked up, even the stuff you think is worthless. Any communications while they were here?"

"No, but I know where they landed: in a field beyond Tech's place. I don't know if it's luck, or they knew about Tech's sensor field, but they were just outside of it."

Alex hadn't known about it, but it didn't surprise him.

"There's nothing left of the house. I'm sorry. The folks here will have it rebuilt in no time, but I doubt anything can be done about the computers. If Tech doesn't have backups, his research is all lost."

Alex considered telling him not to bother rebuilding it. Tristan wasn't coming back here; this place was beyond compromised. The research? He didn't know. Even after all these years he hadn't been able to work out if it was something Tristan did to pass the time, or was serious about. He could go months without looking at anything, and then he'd spend weeks at the table in the workroom on the ship, fiddling with something they'd acquired.

But if it was important, Tristan would have protected the information.

"Alex?"

"Sorry, thinking."

"I need to know what happened. What really happened. We thought you'd dumped him, but I found you under cryo on his ship and it looked like there had been a fight in there. You've been gone for fourteen years, objective. How long was it for you?"

"Five, maybe six?"

“Alex, you realize that means you two spent most of your time traveling, right? When you left, you said it had to do with his job. That should have meant go there, do whatever, and come back. Corporates don’t send their researcher from one place to another.” The man was looking at Alex, looking for something.

“I did all that traveling, so yes, I happen to know what it means.” One job after the other from the moment they’d dropped Emil at his grandparents’ place. Each one forcing Alex to kill more people, even those Alex hadn’t believed he could kill. Innocent people, until Alex felt almost nothing but satisfaction as he planted his knives in the people Tristan told him to, or who threatened them.

Jacoby snapped his fingers in front of his face and Alex grabbed them, considered breaking them, before releasing them. “Don’t do that.”

“You went away again.”

“Thinking.”

“What did you do during that time?”

“Nothing you need to know about.”

Jacoby sighed. “Any chance the people who took him are involved in what you did?”

“No.”

“Damn it, Alex. You have to know something: the folks in town are worried sick about Tech. Any kind of information will help calm them.”

Alex raised an eyebrow. “Do I look like I give a fuck what they want? I’m not some news feeder they can plug into.”

“Then how about you help me?” Jacoby offered, throwing his hand up. “You accuse Cornelius of getting in your way, but when one of us actually wants to help, you give me the runaround, half truths, and whole lies. How about you make up your damned mind about what you want?”

Alex looked around the room for anything sharp. Jacoby had no business accusing him of not doing everything he could to rescue Tristan. Alex wasn’t staying in this bed of his own volition.

But the visual search gave him time to calm down. Jacoby wasn’t just some annoying bystander looking to get a thrill; he had information, had access to more, so Alex needed to keep the portmaster on his side.

“They can’t have come because of what we did, and as far as I know, he doesn’t have enemies.” He didn’t leave any of them alive, Masters was the exception, but if he’d gone anywhere mercs could be hired, Alex’s programs would have noticed him. Same for any bounty put on Tristan, or any variation of him.

“Alright, could he have enemies from before you two met? Someone after him for something he did then?”

Alex watched Jacoby. This sounded a lot like the man was trying to lead somewhere, but Alex couldn’t tell where. He did consider the question. Tristan didn’t speak about anything from before they met—or from after, for that matter—and Alex had stopped asking question after the Jack debacle. So he went with the truth.

“If he does, I don’t know about them.”

“Okay, how about forceful recruitment? I know some...corporations are into that.”

Again, the man was trying to lead somewhere. Alex had his implant listen for all the computers in the room. Nothing had been added, no recording devices were hiding. Why wasn’t he coming out and saying it?

“No, it can’t be. No one knows he lives here and he’s careful to keep it secret.”

“Not that secret if that guy was able to get Tech to leave. Are you going to tell me what that was about?”

“No, but it was resolved to his satisfaction.”

Jacoby sighed and shook his head. “You haven’t exactly given me much.” He took a chip out of a pocket and placed it on the table next to the bed. “But as a show of good

faith, this is everything I recorded, no omissions or alterations.”

Those implications were clear.

He took it, turned it over in his hand. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. I’m serious, everyone here wants to help, me more than most. But don’t even think of getting out of bed. The doc’s going to install gravitic inducers and pin you to it if you force her hand.”

He nodded. “Jacoby, I need you to convince her to let me use a computer. Not a supped up datapad like what she has in here, but a real computer. I’m going to need power if I’m going to get anything out of this.”