

Alex held onto the board to avoid being thrown out of his chair. The quick lefts and rights Tristan put the ship through, as well as the ups and downs, over the last hour, were hard enough the inertial dampener had trouble keeping up with them. Tristan's gaze was fixed on his screen, and whatever scrolled on them was too fast for Alex to make out, but the Samalian's lips were slightly curled up.

His stomach was protesting being shaken like this, and Alex was happy he hadn't eaten anything since they'd returned to the ship. If he wasn't worried about sliding all over the floor or having one of the crates fall on him, he'd lie down in the hold.

He'd tried to keep an eye on the sensors, but the way Tristan had them flying too close to any obstacle in their way before veering off terrified him. Instead he listened in on the broadcasts, waiting for someone to sound the alarm about the insane flier.

When the pitch of the engine changed, Alex looked at the sensors, then the cameras. Dark outside. Not the dark of a city, with enough lights to travel, but the complete dark of space. Alex rechecked the sensors. They were still groundside, but moving slowly over a canopy of trees.

Now that he didn't have to worry about being thrown to the floor, he felt the exhaustion. Over two hours of this, no wonder he was tired. He shut down his board, surprised that throughout all that not one person had reported this ship over the ground. He went down to the hold, lay down, and was immediately asleep.

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The impact woke him. He waited to hear the accompanying explosions, then remembered the crazy flight groundside. Landing then. Checking the chrono told him he'd slept for three hours.

The ramp was already down when he climbed out of the hold. The air here was cool and humid. Above the quiet sounds of the ship's settling, he heard the cries of distant birds. He peered into the darkness and made out the shape of trees in the light spilling out of the ship.

He heard Tristan in the cockpit and headed there.

"This is the plan for procuring the equipment." The Samalian handed him a datachip. "You're going to have to get them yourself. I'm too visible at the moment."

"Are we leaving Emil in cryo?"

"Until sunrise. We're going to be here awhile, so it'll do him good to get out and stretch his legs. We're in the middle of a forest, so he won't be able to cause us any problem."

"You're letting him out because it's good for him?" Alex tried to figure out what Tristan was playing at.

"Yes, it is. He needs some experience with what's real, not just what he learns from a datapad." He paused. "And I want to do a complete shutdown of the ship to avoid an errant satellite noticing the energy signature. I can't do that and have the cryo system running." He stood. "Sunrise is in four hours. I'm sleeping until then. If you need more sleep, now is the time to get it."

"I'm good. I'll use the time to go over the plan." Alex pulled a cup from a cabinet and found a dusty box of instant coffee at the back of another. He'd need to get proper supplies for the ship at some point. He sat down with the cup and put the chip in his datapad.

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Alex listened to Tristan climb out of the hold, and turned to face the cockpit's entrance. He took a breath; this wasn't going to be pleasant. When Tristan looked in on him, Alex raised the datapad.

"I can't do this."

Tristan became still, except for his hands, closing and opening. If he wasn't careful, Alex was in for another beating. Emil was still in cryo, Tristan wouldn't have to worry about screams.

"You have me climbing up the side of a building, bypassing a dozen locks, some of which you note are purely physical, and the count of the guards you estimate I'll encounter is more than double that."

"I thought you'd made yourself like me."

"Yes, I can kill and maim as well as you do. But locks? I've never done those. I've always hired locksmiths when I had to go through them."

Tristan glared at him, taking the three steps that placed him in front of Alex. His hands

weren't closing and opening anymore. They stayed fisted. "I need that equipment," Tristan growled.

Alex wanted to break eye-contact, look away from that anger, but he knew that if he did that he wouldn't get to explain, he'd be in too much pain.

"I can get the equipment."

The growl almost made the one word incomprehensible. "How?"

Alex's hand trembled as he reached for the earpiece. Pain wasn't all he had to worry about. He could very well die if he screwed this up—and he couldn't believe how excited it made him feel. Tristan was that angry with him, and it was a turn on? There was something definitely wrong with him, Alex thought.

Focus.

"This is my strength. As good as you are with locks, with this ship, I am with computers. In under an hour I can be in every system on the planet. I can have them deliver the equipment here, if you want." *Reign this in, Alex. Don't oversell yourself; he might actually ask you to do it, and then what?* "Look. Realistically, I can't tell you how long my way will take. I've never seen you on this kind of job, so I can't compare. What I can tell you is that I can pull this off my way. If I try it yours, I can't promise it."

Tristan kept watching him. His eyes narrowed and a small smile formed. "Are you willing to wager your life on your plan?"

Was he serious? A shiver of excitement ran down Alex's spine. Of course Tristan was. "I will get you the equipment you need."

Tristan's nostrils flared. Fuck, could he smell how excited Alex was? "Use your plan. I'm going to do a check of our surroundings. Wake up the boy." Tristan turned and left the cockpit.

Alex slumped. He was panting like he'd just finished a run. No, not that. He looked down at his groin. He was fucking insane. No one could have this kind of reaction to having been threatened with death. Damn it, he'd wanted love, caring, tenderness. Not this.

He got up and headed to the room. Obsessing about how crazy he was wouldn't get things done. He deactivated the cryo unit and Emil opened his eyes.

"Is my father here?" There was such hope in the young boy's voice.

"Not yet." Alex shoved his own emotions away. "We've had complications, but we're in a safe place. Come on, let's go see."

Alex helped him off the bed, and Emil stopped by a cabinet to pull his suitcase out, and from it he took his datapad. He put the suitcase back in and latched the cabinet, then rejoined Alex.

Emil froze after stepping on the ramp. "Wow." He was looking around and sniffing the air.

Alex smiled. He had to admit the clearing, lit by the morning sun, was quite a sight. The trees were tall and the dew-covered leaves glittered in the light.

"I take it you haven't been in a forest before."

"Only saw them in vids." Emil sniffed the air again. "Where's Brian?"

Brian? Right, that had been the name Tristan had given. "He's around, making sure there aren't any surprises."

"There aren't any." Tristan stepped around the ship. "We have small animals, but that's about it." He ruffled Emil's hair. "Hey, Buddy, how are you liking our camping spot?"

Emil seemed to search for words. "It's pretty."

Tristan chuckled and sat on the ramp. "Well, go on, go enjoy it. It's safe." Emil hesitated, then stepped off the ramp. "Just stay where I can see you, okay?"

Alex watched Tristan, expecting him to lose the relaxed attitude the moment Emil was too far to see them clearly, but he didn't.

Alex sat down. "Camping?"

"We're going to be here a while, even once you get me the equipment. It's going to take his father a few months to get here. With the ship shut down, it doesn't make sense to stay in it." Tristan gave Alex a smile. "We might as well enjoy the fresh air, don't you think?"

"I hate it when you do that," Alex whispered, even if Emil was too far to hear.

"Relax, Alex. You wanted me to be gentle with the boy. That's what I'm doing."

"And then what?" Alex hissed. "Do you have any idea what it's going to do to him when you drop the facade?"

“This mask is going to stay on.”

Alex rolled his eyes.

“I’m serious, I can’t afford to traumatize him. Having him be my buddy is crucial to my plan, so stop stressing about this.”

“You’re going to get him killed.”

Tristan shrugged. “That isn’t part of my plan.”

Alex stood. “I still hate this.” He headed inside.

Tristan followed him. “I thought you’d like having me like this, all nice and relatable.”

Alex spun, and growled at seeing Tristan leaning against the wall, smiling. “No, I don’t.”

“Really?” Tristan reached for Alex’s face. “Then what do you like?”

Alex batted the hand away. “Don’t touch me.”

The anger in Tristan’s eyes was instantaneous, as was the hand around Alex’s neck. “I can kill you, Alex.”

“No, you can’t.” Alex replied through gritted teeth. “You need me to get the equipment.”

The hand tightened slightly. “Look me in the eyes, Alex, and tell me I don’t have the capacity to kill you and deal with the changes in my plan it’ll cause.” The hand tightened a little more. “Tell me that you are so secure in your safety that you are willing to mouth off to me again.”

There was no doubt in those cold eyes. Alex tried to swallow, but the hand was too tight. He couldn’t breathe. He didn’t panic, he wouldn’t let himself, but the fear was there, as Tristan leaned in close.

“Now,” he whispered, “tell me that having your life utterly in my hands isn’t turning you on.”

Tristan released him as the shock hit Alex. The smile on the Samalian’s face was evil. He knew what he’d done, how Alex had reacted, and he’d enjoyed causing the reaction. Alex rubbed his neck.

“It seems, Alex, that you don’t know what you want, but let me clarify something. The anger you just saw is as much of a mask as the smile I put on for the boy. They are always only masks.” Tristan reached for Alex, and he found he couldn’t move. When the finger caressed his cheek, he couldn’t even breath. “I can be a friend, an acquaintance, even a lover, but it’s only a mask. Under the mask, the real me? He doesn’t care enough about you to feel any of that. Remember that when you think you are worth something to me.”

Alex knew that wasn’t completely true. The violence at the house, the way Tristan had purposely hurt him, that had come from real emotions, even if the Samalian didn’t want Alex to believe that. That meant the danger was even more real. He glanced at the ramp.

“No, Alex. You had your chance to leave. You decided to stay, to be mine. If you think I’ll let you leave now, you are mistaken.”

Alex snorted. “I was checking for Emil. This isn’t all about you.” He put as much bravado as he could in his voice. “I don’t think you want him walking in on this.”

Tristan’s smile broadened, looked genuine. “Good, put the mission first. It’s a good way to ensure you don’t get sentimental.” He patted Alex’s cheek and stepped back.

Alex closed his eyes and tried to settle his emotions. Fear he could deal with—it was the other one that was proving difficult. He hated Tristan, so why was he reacting to him, to his threats, like this? Tristan had used him, was still using him. Only this time it was solely on Alex’s head. He’d agreed to it. This was the life he’d made for himself, so he had to come to terms with it, and everything else it meant.

He sighed. That wasn’t helping, so he focused on the mission. “If we’re camping here, we’re going to need supplies. Food, if nothing else.”

“I have an analyzer. I can find edible plants and animals. Humans live here, so there has to be something you and the boy can eat. What you’ll need is a different vehicle. This one is too visible.”

“I’m going to have to use it at least once, to get myself a new one.”

“Wait until dark and stay on the night side. There are cities within a few hours of here.”

“You said you’ll shut down the ship, so you’ll need a power generator, as well as tents.”

Tristan considered it. “I suppose the boy will want protection from the elements.”

“I want it too. I’m fine with roughing it if I have to, but there’s no reason to make this harsher than it has to be.”

Tristan looked outside, then back at Alex. "This isn't roughing it."

"What if it starts raining? If there's a storm."

Tristan gave him a disbelieving look.

"I don't have fur. Once my clothing gets wet, it gets really uncomfortable."

"I thought you were a merc?"

"Does that mean I'm supposed to sleep on a bed of spikes? We end up in a frozen wasteland with just the clothes on our back, and you won't hear me complaining about it. I can go as rough as needed if I don't have a choice, but I'm not suffering just because you get a rise out of it."

Tristan watched him. "The tone you use makes me think you are looking to have my hand around your neck again. You are the one getting a rise out of this situation, not me." Tristan smiled. "But get what you think you and the boy will need. If you need this to be a pleasant experience, go ahead and make it so." He went outside.

Alex cursed quietly. Not only was Tristan right about him getting excited, but now he felt like he'd been called a weakling. He chuckled. Okay, to be fair, considering how Tristan seemed to like things, who wouldn't look like one compared to him?

He stepped outside and joined Tristan, who'd sat down again on the ramp and was watching Emil examining plants in the clearing. The child behaved so much like someone older. Alex sighed.

"What's wrong?"

Alex glared at Tristan.

"We're supposed to be friends," Tristan pointed out. "Friends talk."

Alex sighed. He wasn't Tristan, he couldn't just act. He actually felt things. "Look at him. What do you think Emil's doing?"

"Surveying his environment."

"Exactly. He's cataloging specimens. Me? At his age, if you dropped me in a place like this. I'd be running around, laughing and jumping. I'd take pictures. I'd be too busy having fun to document anything. He's supposed to be a kid, not a miniature adult." Alex glanced at Tristan. "What about you? What would you be doing in a situation like this, at his age?"

Tristan looked away from Emil to the trees, then up them to the canopy. For a moment Alex thought he saw something there, but Tristan shook himself, his face becoming a mask again.

"I'd be trying to catch my next meal."