

Alex's arm hurt. Tristan had barely given him time to bandage it before setting them both to bring everything inside. The painkillers hadn't kicked in yet, but the Samalian didn't let him slack off. He growled anytime Alex slowed to take a breath, or resettle the bandage.

He wanted to complain at the unfair treatment, but noticed Tristan's own injuries. They received better treatment, but they were more extensive—recently sealed cuts covered his chest, some of the sealant covering the metal diamond, as well as his sides, back, and arms. What exactly had happened in his absence? Was that animal on the sled the result of a hunt? Had it come close to the camp and Tristan had needed to protect Emil?

The idea Tristan had protected Emil did something to Alex, something he didn't like, because it hinted that Tristan had a caring side, and his own feelings about the Samalian were messed up enough already. He didn't need that on top of everything else. He told himself that instead, it had been some elaborate plan. Getting injured had been his way of getting closer to Emil. That was more like him than actually caring.

When the only indications someone had been here were the cargo hover and the animal's corpse, they headed back in. Alex had sprayed the inside of the hover, removing any indications he'd been in it, and unless someone worked out the image paneling on the outside, this could just be someone's hunting hover. Let the Law try to figure out what had happened here. If they even bothered looking.

Alex expected Tristan to blast through the atmosphere to get them in space; he didn't think an angry Tristan would care about being careful. Based on the last time, he seemed to want an adrenaline hit to calm himself down. But when they'd found out about Masters's betrayal, Tristan had been calm in his anger.

Maybe it was true. Maybe it was all an act, all a mask, and Alex was just driving himself insane trying to make sense of how Tristan acted.

The ship carefully traveled from one dead spot in the sensor grid to another, zigging and zagging as they shifted. Alex listened to the ship watcher's node. One of them had noticed them, and now they were busy theorizing who they'd really been, since there had been no invasion from the Law.

He searched for Katherine, but there was no mention of her, neither on gossip nodes nor the Law. Somehow she'd managed to not get implicated in the attack. How had she managed that? Even if she'd shot her way out and escaped, she would have been mentioned. She'd come in, caused him trouble, and then left no evidence of her presence.

No, she'd left something else. She'd informed the mercs he was working with Tristan. Masters hadn't mentioned it. Alex had only been in the periphery of Tristan, and with the Samalian being a loner, no one had linked his presence to anything more than a bystander.

Not only had she told them, but they'd believed her. Just what kind of influence did she have that she could make mercs and Law listen to her?

The sky on the screen turned black, and the ship accelerated. Tristan was busy searching through what looked like lists of planets. Alex took his pack from the hold and swallowed a couple of immune-boosters and Heal Alls, and applied a proper layer of sealant over the injury Tristan had given him. Another scar to remind himself of his stay with the Samalian.

When he returned to his seat Tristan glanced at him, then his arm, before going back to his search. The expression had been cold. If he'd expected Alex to endure the discomfort of an unsealed wound, he could glare all he wanted.

A file appeared on his screen.

"Leak that to the merc boards," Tristan said. "Don't let them track it back to you."

Alex glared at the Samalian. Did he really think he'd do a sloppy job? He pushed it down. Tristan was angry, and responding in anger wouldn't help either.

The file was a message from Tristan to Masters. Short on pleasantries, strong on angry language. This sounded as though it was coming from a man who'd been run ragged and was reaching the end of his rope. He wanted to unload the kid, and then disappear to lick his wounds. Those weren't the words used, but it was the sentiment that came through.

The planet included was Artus One. A quick check told him it was abandoned, one of the multitudes of mining planets that had been drained. It was close to their location, only a few objective months away. He had no idea if that was a good place for the meeting or if it was a feint, and at this point he was done asking.

He put in the earpiece and located twenty mercenary communication nodes. He inserted the message in them, set them on triggers with various delays, and exited, removing all traces of his presence.

He was in the process of taking out his earpiece when he noticed the intensity with which Tristan was typing. Alex looked through the ship's code. His own code was still there, hidden between layers and commands, which meant he had some control. If he mirrored what Tristan was doing, he wouldn't notice. He wrapped the mirror point under five layers of code and then added two to be on the safe side.

It took Alex a few seconds to work out where Tristan was. A government database, not on one of the core worlds—not enough security—somewhere further away. They'd bought their way into SpaceGov, but didn't have enough money invested there yet to have much influence.

Tristan was adding information, creating an identity. Alex was impressed. He wasn't co-opting an existing one, which was how most were made, he was doing it from scratch. He kept the antibodies and security programs at bay with an array of programs around him. Each a solid program.

Alex watched as a security program got close, was latched on and new code injected, rendering it dormant.

What made all this even more impressive was that Tristan wasn't hearing the computer. He wasn't using an earpiece. He had nothing to judge the state of the computer, the effect his changes were having, other than a visual inspection of the code. How long had it taken him to learn to do this? How had he learned? There were no schools that taught deaf coding. He only knew of one other coercionist who could code deaf, and she had a natural talent so strong she'd taught herself how to code.

Until he'd seen Asyr work, he hadn't thought he was possible to coerce a system deaf. Mute, sure, plenty of coercionists did that to remove a way to be identified, but they all still listened to the system.

And now, here was another who coded deaf.

He watched Tristan add line after line of information, mixing command code in it. He was building a history for the identity. He did something to one of his programs and it vanished in the distance. Alex had to restrain himself. He wanted to chase it, dissect it to see how Tristan had built it, and how it differed from what Asyr did. Her code now looked a lot like his because of the year he spent teaching her, but the code in the ship looked like nothing he'd seen before, indicating Tristan had taught himself fully. Where had he found the programs to teach himself?

He wanted to continue watching, but the longer he stayed, the greater the chances Tristan would be done and notice the mirror point. Alex removed it and made sure to smooth any indication it had been there.

He glanced at Tristan's screen. All he could see was rapidly scrolling code. Too fast to work out what it was, too fast for Alex to do anything without his earpiece. If he couldn't listen to the system as he worked, he'd be crippled.

After a few minutes, Tristan was done. He backed out of the database. Alex couldn't see him do it, but he had to remove the traces he'd been there. Without doing that, all the work he'd done would be for nothing. The system would detect the intrusion and send antibodies to compare everything to a copy from a time before that.

How did he know what to change back? Alex could tell because of how the system sounded. Asyr had tried to explain how she did it, but for her it was instinct, she just knew. He didn't think Tristan worked that way. His code wouldn't be so structured if it was instinct, which meant he had to have an impressive visual memory to remember where everything had been before he came in.

Which meant he could tell at a glance how code had been changed. Alex fought the urge to put the earpiece in and go back and undo all the changes he'd done. Tristan would know the moment he looked at them.

"Is it done?" Tristan asked as he stretched.

Alex looked at him and then couldn't answer, watching the muscle ripple under the fur. "Yes." He shook his head. He didn't need that sight. "Over the next two objective weeks it's going to appear throughout merc communication nodes. They won't be able to figure out where it's

from.”

“Good.” Tristan stood, and Alex followed him out of the cockpit.

Tristan stopped by the cryo chairs, spun, and before Alex could react, had a hand around his neck. Alex didn't move or try to fight back. He knew how futile that was.

“Let's make something clear, Alex. Your screwup cost me an important piece of equipment for the job. You claim that I don't need it, that it's just a computer. But we both know you're not entirely certain my computer is going to be enough to get the job done.”

“I can do it,” Alex spoke before he thought better of it.

“Do not lie to me Alex.”

“You're one to speak.”

Tristan smiled. “Tell me, Alex. Is this bravery because you know what awaits you at the end of this job? You've decided you have nothing to lose.” Tristan leaned in and lowered his voice. “What if I told you I haven't made up my mind yet? You are impressive, Alex. And I find myself thinking that throwing you away could be a waste of potential.”

“Don't do this, please.” Alex couldn't handle the back and forth, the uncertainty. Tristan had told him he was as good as dead. Now?

“Can you do this? Can you turn my computer into something that will broadcast the mark's deceit for the whole of the universe to see?”

“I can do it.” He put all the confidence he felt. He ignored that he knew nothing about how such a rig worked, and he believed that he'd be able to do it.

“You could be a great liar, Alex.” Tristan let go of him. “This coming test is what your life will be judged on. I won't hold any of my previous threats against you. None of your multiple betrayals and planned betrayals. The moment you come out of cryo, you'll start working on the computer, turning it into a broadcasting rig. Do anything you need to it, so long as it doesn't affect my ability to fly the ship.” Tristan indicated the seat and Alex nodded. He'd gotten a chance at life, if he believed the Samalian.

Which he didn't.