

Alex swept left and right as he walked forward, finger pressing the trigger so hard he was losing sensation in it. The burned Samalian threw himself down with a scream, but the two mercs pulled their guns instead of going for cover. The first one went down before he fired, his armor glowing under the rapid barrage, then failing.

Heat flared in Alex's left leg before the near-continuous beam found the other merc. The man turned to flee at the last moment, exposing his flank, and the shot caught him in the hip, below the chest-armor. He fell, and Alex kept the beam on him until it stopped.

The Samalian got to his feet and dusted himself off. "You?" He looked at Tristan. "You actually let him live? You weren't lying?" He glared at Alex. "Why aren't you dead? One of those mercs should have been able to kill you."

Alex pressed the trigger again, and again, snarling when nothing happened.

"Never mind, I'm going to take care of—" The threat turned into a shriek as Alex ran for the Samalian, wielding the rifle as a club. The Samalian was quick, stepping back as Alex advanced and swung wildly.

He didn't know the details of what had happened here, but Tristan couldn't move, this Samalian could, therefore, he was responsible and Alex was going to kill him. He was going to cave in his head, then hurt him until there was nothing left of him.

The Samalian stopped his retreat, blocked, deflected the next blow, and slashed at Alex's arm while he was off balance. He felt the heat in his flesh, but not the pain. He was high on enough painkillers to throw himself off a building and walk away. The stim-high had made him consider throwing himself out of the hover when he flew over the group, but he'd flown past before getting out of the chair.

The Samalian smirked. "You thought I was powerless, didn't you? A weak and defenseless Samalian for you to take advantage of. You humans are all the—" Alex hit the Samalian on the side of the head with the rifle, making him stagger sideways.

"Shut up," Alex snarled as he hit him again, but missed the head and hit the shoulder.

"Stop hitting me!" Another swing the Samalian blocked. "Will you stop!" Again, this time on the head. He fell to all fours. "Please, stop." One more and he was sprawled on the ground, silent. Alex raised the rifle over his head. Unconsciousness wasn't enough; he was going to destroy that head for what he'd done.

"Alex, stop!"

He froze. It was the voice that had to be obeyed, but he hated the order. Fuck it. He would take the punishment; with the painkillers he could take anything. He glared at the still Samalian and raised the rifle higher.

"Alex, no!"

He spun. "Why not?" he yelled. "He hurt you, didn't he? He has to die for that. Why the fuck would you want him to live?" Part of him screamed he couldn't yell at Tristan, but he didn't care. He was past caring about a lot of things. If he couldn't unleash how he felt at one Samalian, the other one had better be ready to take it.

"It's Justin," Tristan answered, then was panting. Alex saw the pain— something else he didn't care about at the moment.

"What do I care what his name is?" The name bounced in his head, each time saying it was familiar. "He hurt you. That's the only thing that matters. No one gets to do that and live! If you weren't so hurt, you'd be the one..." The name bounced in its proper place. "Wait, you can't mean Justin, your brother?"

Tristan nodded.

"That can't be him, he's dead. Thrown out of the Sayatoga when Anders had the hangar voided."

Tristan closed his eyes and smiled. "He survived. We're good at that. He either had a contingency for it, or he got lucky. Both are just as likely. Look at him, that's frostbite, so however he did it couldn't have been pleasant."

"Fine, then I'm ending this once and for all right now." Alex turned and raised the rifle.

"Alex, please don't." No order this time, just a plea.

"This isn't right! He's going to cause you trouble. That's what they all do, They cause you

trouble. We should just end it all now, get rid of all of them.”

Tristan opened an eye, studied him. “Are you okay?”

“I’m high. I overdid the painkillers, probably took too much stims—I get why you took them! This is pretty nice.” Justin groaned, put a hand under himself. Alex hit the back of his head with the butt of the rifle. “He’s still alive,” he said in annoyance. “Are you sure I can’t kill him? Just a little? You can kill him too afterward. No, that doesn’t work, does it?”

Tristan looked at him, no judgment in his eyes, no accusation. Only joy, and pain.

“Shit, you’re hurt! How bad is it?”

Tristan let out a bark of laughter, then groaned.

“That didn’t sound good.” Alex bit his lip, then walked around Tristan. “Whoever did this to you was strong; that branch went right into the tree.” He felt along the branch. “I can cut it down, then we can go back to the ship.” He unsheathed a knife, looked at it, shook it. “Come on, turn on.”

Tristan placed a hand on his and Alex smiled. “I’m going to have you out of there as soon as this knife turns on.”

“It’s polycarbon,” Tristan said, “but I need you to check something for me first.”

Alex brought the knife to his face. “Oh, it is. Why do I have one of these on me?” He flung it away and patted himself down.

“Alex!”

“Just give me a minute, I know I have a vibro-blade on me.”

“Okay, I get why you were annoyed at me for being on stims. Alex, you need to focus.”

Alex looked at him, smiling. “I am focusing.”

“The branch can wait; it’s keeping me from bleeding out. Unless you brought a case full of sealant, I need you to find me something to plug the holes with.”

“The sealant’s in the ship. I’ll go get it—”

Tristan grabbed his arm. “You mean the hover you crashed?”

“Ah, right, I guess I’m out of it then.”

“It’s okay.” Tristan indicated a tree. “See the moss growing at the base? Tell me what it smells like.”

Alex narrowed his eyes. “Why do you want to know what moss smells like? If it’s something about being close to dying, I’m not helping. I am not going to help you die, is that clear?”

“I’m not dying, Alex, I promise.”

“You better.” Alex went to the tree, dropped to his knees, and put his nose in the moss, breathing in deeply. He found himself relaxing. The scent wasn’t good, but it was nice. He closed his eyes.

“Alex!”

His head snapped away. “I’m awake!”

“What does it smell like?”

“Pepper, with something sweet—not the good kind, like rotting meat.”

“Good, I thought it was—” Alex didn’t understand that word. “Grab as much of it as you can. There might be more at the base of the other trees. Get as much of the soil out.”

Alex took another knife out, shook it when it didn’t come on, then used it to dig out the moss. “What is it?”

Tristan said that word again. “It has antiseptic properties. When you take the branches out of me, you’re going to pack as much of that in the wound as you can. It’s going to keep me from bleeding out, and the wound from getting infected until we get to Justin’s ship.”

“Don’t you think it’s strange you know about that?” Alex pulled the patch out. “Did the Defender tell you about it?”

Tristan chuckled, then groaned. “I grew up here, remember? My father insisted I learn about all the plants and what they could do. Part of ensuring my survival, since he didn’t know anything about Heal-Alls and painkillers, or skin-sealant. Ideally we want to make a poultice out of it, with leaves from other plants, but I don’t see them, so it’s going to have

to do.”

Alex scraped the soil off the underside and joined Tristan. “So I can cut you down now?”

Tristan nodded.

Alex shook the knife again. “This could take awhile.”

Tristan tapped a knife at Alex’s hip. “*That’s* a vibro-blade. You’re holding another polycarbon one.”

“Why do I have so many of those?” He looked for a sheath and put it in it before taking the vibro-blade out. “Okay, get ready. I’m going to go slow, and tell you when I’m almost through so you can support yourself.”

Alex cut, and was two-thirds of the way through when the branch broke. Tristan slid down with a scream.

“No, no, no!” Alex was on his knees. “Are you okay? I’m sorry, I didn’t see it coming. Are you in a lot of pain?”

“Oh, yeah.”

Alex patted himself. “I think I have some painkillers left. You don’t look good, your fur’s all matted.”

“Alex, I’ve been worse.”

“No, you haven’t. Why didn’t I bring any painkillers?”

“Remember Arthar?”

Alex stopped his search. “The mountainside? You were in pretty bad shape after you and that bounty hunter hit bottom.”

Tristan nodded. “That hurt worse than this.”

“You didn’t show it.”

“I couldn’t let you see my pain. I couldn’t let you see me when I was weak.”

Alex smiled and cupped Tristan’s muzzle. “You’ll never seem weak to me.”

Tristan leaned into the hand. “I didn’t know that then. There was a lot I didn’t know.”

“And now?”

Tristan let out one bark of laughter, and almost doubled over. Alex caught him, panic clearing his head. He hated himself for not considering Tristan could be hurt.

“There’s a lot I still don’t know, but I don’t care if you see me like this anymore. So we’re going to have to make sure you can help me take care of my wounds when I make a mess of myself.” He caught his breath. “Now, don’t hesitate when you pull the branch out. Don’t let my screaming stop you. This is going to hurt, but you have to do it in one go. As soon as it’s out, pack the wound with the moss, as much as you can get in there. You don’t happen to have any Heals with you, do you?”

“All in the hover when it crashed. I wasn’t thinking particularly clearly by that point.”

“You sound better.”

Alex forced a smile. “Terror seems to burn through a high a lot faster than anything else. I’ll try to remember that for the next time you get yourself high on the stuff.”

“Then we’ll have to hope Justin has that stuff on his ship.” Tristan took another breath. “Do it.”

Alex grabbed the end of the branch and pulled as hard as he could. Tristan’s scream cut through him, almost making him stop. He’d heard many new sounds from Tristan, but this anguish hurt more than any of them. Alex added his own as the branch resisted.

Then it was out, and Alex threw it aside.

He ignored how still Tristan was, and focused on packing the wound, fighting the blood pouring out much faster than he felt it should. When the blood stopped flowing through the moss, he breathed easier. Only to go back to panicking when Tristan didn’t stir.

“No, no. Tristan?” Alex shook him, but didn’t even get a groan out of him. He felt his Samalian’s neck, cursing the bones there that protected the jugular vein, and made it so difficult to feel the pulse—but he found it, and breathed easier.

He crawled on Tristan’s lap, careful not to dislodge the moss plug. “Don’t die on me, okay? I haven’t had enough of this yet.” Alex leaned against his chest and rested his head

on Tristan's shoulder. "And I really don't want to have to hunt you down through whatever Samalian afterlife you go to." He closed his eyes, breathing in the mix of Tristan's scent and blood.

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He snapped awake to Tristan's coughing. Panic made him jump off his lap and start checking his Samalian for damage.

"I'm okay," Tristan said, not sounding it.

"How long was I out?"

"Not long; Justin's still unconscious. It was nice having you sleep against me like that. How are you feeling?"

"I have a headache," Alex said, realizing it was there. "That would be the stims; coming off them is a pain. And I hurt just about everywhere. I guess the painkillers are wearing out too. How are you, really?"

"I hurt too, but I don't think I'm dying. I'd rather not have you hunt me down."

"You heard?"

"It's sweet that you won't let death stop you from trying to kick my ass if I leave you."

"Trying?"

"I expect that in death, I won't have to deal with all these injuries."

Alex nodded. "How did you get impaled, anyway?"

"Justin had the area booby-trapped. I doubt there's as many as he claimed, but this one caught me. I'm lucky that's all that got me. That trunk there was supposed to crush me."

"You said something about Justin's ship. We should go find it and get you to a hospital. I don't think this is something we can handle with just Heals and sealant."

Tristan examined his wounds before offering his hand to Alex. Carefully, he stood and re-examined them. "I can't leave Justin lying there; the moment he wakes up, he's going to be nothing but trouble again."

"You should kill him," Alex said, looking at the unconscious Samalian.

"I know." Tristan almost toppled over reaching for Justin's leg. Alex caught him.

"Be careful. If you get that moss out, I don't know that I'm going to be able to get enough before you bleed out."

"Hand me his leg."

"Are you going to rip it off?" Alex grabbed it and handed it to Tristan.

"No." Tristan walked slowly, dragging Justin behind him. After a dozen steps he said, "I can't kill him."

"I didn't—"

"You were thinking it. I spent years pounding that rule into your head. Never leave anyone alive, especially not someone who's already caused the trouble Justin did."

The cage came into view, Tristan walking toward it. "Then why won't you kill him?"

"He's the only family I have left. It's why I never killed him before, not that I ever admitted that to myself. He wasn't important enough to bother, was my excuse; or this was a game between him and me; or I wanted to teach him a lesson, and you can't teach the dead anything. I always had an excuse as to why I wasn't going to kill him."

He leaned the leg against a bar and worked on the lock. "But the truth is that, in my own insane way, I love him. I'll put up with just about anything he does, because he's my brother. Don't misunderstand, I do wish he'd stop. That he'd be content living a quiet life where I'd never have to see him again, but I'd know he was alive. If it's between enduring his vendettas or killing him, I'll endure."

"I could do it for you," Alex said, not letting any of how he felt sound in his voice. This was Tristan's decision; he didn't even have to explain it. How angry Alex was at it didn't matter.

"I know," Tristan answered as the lock clicked. He looked at his claws—intact—and smiled.

"Did you just unlock that with a claw?" Alex asked, the surprise overtaking the anger.

Tristan pulled the door open. “They were the only tools I had when I was a kid. All I had to work with to get myself out of this cage.” He grabbed Justin and pushed him in, being careful not to re-open his own wound or hurt his brother as he folded him inside. When had the cage gotten so small?

He closed the door, the loud clang and the click of the lock sounding satisfying for the first time in his life. He turned and looked at Alex. “I’m not going to ask you to kill him.”

Justin groaned.

“Alright,” Alex said, the anger resurfacing. “I’m not going to push this, but is that cage going to hold him? You opened that lock, can’t he do the same?”

“Justin isn’t one for manual labor. Even back when we were kids, he got me to do it for him; he was better at manipulating me than than he is now. It’s going to hold him until I decide what to do.”

“Good.” It wasn’t good, but Alex had said he wouldn’t push this, so he redirected his anger. “We need to find his ship and get back to the city. You need a hospital, and I need to destroy a corporation. He turned, but Tristan caught his arm.

Alex turned to face him. Behind Tristan, Justin was repositioning himself to sit on the floor of the cage. Tristan’s uncertain expression worried Alex.

“I—” Tristan took a breath, wincing, but as he let it out his gaze became confident. “I don’t want you to go after them, Alex.”

“What?” His blood froze.

“Alex, listen—”

“No! You don’t let what they did to you go!” He stepped to Tristan, forcing him to back against the cage. “You are Tristan. You kill anyone or anything that even thinks of getting in your way. I gave you a pass with Jacoby, and with him, but—”

“Are the two of you having a lover’s spat?” Justin said sickeningly sweet, grinning like they were the evening’s entertainment.

“Alex,” Tristan said, quickly reaching between the bars, “they didn’t do anything to me.” He grabbed Justin’s neck, to his brother’s surprised screams. “It was the town they attacked.” He pulled hard, letting his brother go after his head hit the bars, making them resonate. “We just got caught in the middle of it.”

“They attacked you! They had a team after you! Don’t tell me we were just bystanders. You were lying on the ground, and they could have killed you.” Alex didn’t bother hiding his anguish. He could have lost Tristan then, and that thought hurt.

“They were obeying orders, Alex.”

“Exactly! They were doing what LeisureTek told them to do! They have to pay!”

Tristan’s expression softened. He placed a hand on the side of Alex’s face. “I’m not interested in revenge, Alex. I don’t want you to use this as a justification for your anger.”

Alex stared at Tristan, trying to find the words to express how wrong this was. Tristan had been attacked; his rage should’ve been so hot that this forest caught fire. What Alex felt should seem like the arctic compared to the kind of rage he knew Tristan capable of.

“You don’t want revenge?”

Tristan shook his head.

Alex batted the hand. “Then what the fuck do you want?”

Tristan cupped Alex’s face with both hands. “You, Alex. You are the only thing I want. If you’re with me, nothing else matters—not my research, not revenge, not even my life. With you, I have everything I could ever want.”

Alex opened his mouth to protest.

“I love you, Alexander Bartholomew Crimson.”

No words left Alex’s mouth.

“I’m sorry for not saying it sooner, for thinking that my actions were enough for you to know how I felt. I love you. All I want is to spend the rest of my days with you—as many or as few of them as I have left.” He smiled. “I was ready to die, Alex. For the first time in my life I saw death coming, and I didn’t feel the need to fight it because I’d gotten to spend a few days with you, a few days loving you.”

“Don’t say that. Please don’t say you could have died.” He tried to look away, but the intensity in Tristan’s eyes kept Alex in place.

“Alex, it’s the reality of the life. If we continue this way, one of us will die. If we go up against LeisureTek, we won’t be able to walk away. They will hunt us down. I’m ready for death now, but that doesn’t mean I want it to come take me. I want decades with you, Alex. I’m asking you to let this go, so we can have those decades. Let the anger go and just live with me.”

He tried to do what Tristan asked. He tried to let the anger go, but it didn’t obey. It screamed that they all had to pay for what they had done. LeisureTek needed to be destroyed, Justin had to die, Jacoby had to suffer. It screamed loudly, but Alex focused on Tristan’s brown eyes, looked at the calm in them, and tried to imitate them.

He rested his head on Tristan’s shoulder, the anger still screaming, but making a conscious decision not to listen to it. “Alright,” he whispered. “I’m going to let them live, for you.”

Tristan wrapped his arms around him. “Thank you.”

Alex closed his eyes, trying to ignore the feelings of being a coward for not giving into the anger. The fear that without its heat, he was going to grow so cold he would die. He reminded himself that Tristan was in charge. He made the decisions, and if he wanted someone to live, Alex had to obey.

When they came back—and they would, his anger assured him—Alex would be there to end them permanently.

Or maybe he could do something right now. Jacoby was out of play. The corporate security had captured him, and Alex didn’t see how the old man would get out of that. Maybe they’d kill him for Alex, but if not, he’d be thrown in a cell and never let out.

Alex’s rage wasn’t satisfied with that, but he didn’t care. It wasn’t in charge, he was.

Justin stirred, and Alex glared at him. He was a serious threat, one that Alex realized would never end, because Tristan wouldn’t allow him to die. He’d said it. He would rather endure the attacks than kill him.

Maybe he could come back while Tristan rested and finish the Samalian? No, he didn’t think Tristan would ever forgive him for that. There had to be another way. Something permanent, but not final.

“You said you’d be happy just knowing Justin was alive, and not causing trouble, right?” Alex asked Tristan, while Justin’s eyes focused.

“Yes.”

Alex grinned at Justin. “If I have an idea about how to make that happen, would you be willing to listen?”

“I’m always going to listen to what you have to offer.”

Alex winked at Justin.

“Then you are going to love this.” He leaned against Tristan’s ear and whispered his idea.