

“This...” Alex looked through the windshield at the squat structure visible across the large lawn of purplish-green grass while he tried to figure out how to explain what he felt in a way that wouldn’t get him killed. “Why are we doing it this way?” He turned to face Tristan to find the Samalian’s gaze fixed on him. “It’d be a lot easier for me to go in their system and have it send Emil out to wait for us.”

“This isn’t how the academy functions. Pickups happen inside, by the parents or a properly appointed security agency.” His tone was so casual it did nothing to comfort Alex.

“Having me try to convince anyone in there is putting the mission at risk.”

“You were able to convince the woman in the office.”

Alex felt for the ID in his pocket. “Sure, but she was barely paying attention to me. This guy is going to be looking for exactly what we’re doing.”

Tristan nodded and the end of his lips curled up, showing the tip of his teeth. It wasn’t a reassuring smile. “That is his job. In fact, we are doing it this way in part because the guard at the desk has the most reported call-ins about attempts to—”

“And you’re sending me to try and fool him?”

The glare had him try to back away. He opened his mouth to apologize, but shut it. He wasn’t doing that. He wasn’t apologizing for being concerned about his life. He hadn’t stayed alive all these years by taking stupid risks.

“Can I continue?” The smile was still there, but the tone was harsh. Alex nodded. “Each time he has called in, it was a false alert. He currently holds the record for the most frivolous calls into the local Law. We could send in the Weeber man, and even with as drunk as he is, the guard wouldn’t risk calling it in.”

“The order isn’t even in the system. That can push him over the edge of his fear of ridicule. I should at least put that in.”

“I don’t want any evidence remaining behind that this is anything other than a pickup.”

Alex could point out that a normal pickup would have the order in the system, but the glare kept him from doing that. “You saw how easily I took control of Weeber’s system. I’ve been in this one, I can easily make it forget everything.”

“You could miss something.”

Alex ground his teeth. He wasn’t some rookie working on his first system. He didn’t miss anything. Those glaring eyes kept him from saying it.

“The target’s parents are rich. Wealthier than you can comprehend. People like that do things their way. Procedures are for other people, those who can’t afford to pay to send their children to the Orwell Academy. His parents told you to go pick their son up. It is what you are doing. If someone along the chain forgot to tell the academy, that isn’t your problem. Have the guard contact the target’s parents if he gives you any trouble.”

“You want him to... Is this so you can find out who his parents are? Are you looking for them so you can warn them or something?” Hope flared that maybe Tristan wasn’t such a bad person after all, and died almost immediately. “To extort money from them?”

“The job is to bring the target to our employer. I do the job as I’m hired to do it.”

“Then why have him call his parents?”

“Because he won’t do it,” Tristan replied with an edge to his voice. “Someone like a common guard doesn’t get to talk to people as important as the target’s parents. At best, the contact he has works for the parents. More likely it’s to an agency tasked with fielding any incoming calls. But the only thing he will consider is what it could mean to his career if this is yet another false alarm. So you will insist he call whoever he needs to call to assuage his suspicion.”

Alex didn’t like this. Subterfuge wasn’t his thing. When it came to being on the frontline, he was a gun and knife kind of guy. At least he had—

“Give me your earpiece.” Tristan had his hand out, waiting.

“Wh— Why?”

“Alex, I will remind you that you are mine,” Tristan replied with a hint of exasperation in his voice. “You don’t get to question what I say, you do it.”

“What if something goes wrong? I might need it to pull off the mission.”

“Everything will be fine.” Tristan smiled, showing all his teeth. “But if it isn’t, you don’t need to worry; I’ll still pull off the job. My contingency plan is still in effect. And maybe knowing that the death toll will be in the dozens if I need to resort to it will motivate you to put as much

effort as you can into doing this.”

Alex hesitated. He was defenseless without it. Tristan was setting him up to be killed; that was what this was about. Well fuck this. He slammed his earpiece in the Samalian’s hand. He wasn’t dying here. He didn’t care about whatever his contingency plan was or how many people would die. Alex wasn’t going to give Tristan the satisfaction, it was that simple.

“I’ll be waiting here,” Tristan said jovially as Alex got out of the hover. He fought the impulse to slam the door. And kept on trying to calm himself as he walked across the landing lot and to the entry gate.

The guard barely looked at his ID when Alex showed it, and he didn’t have to explain why he was here before the gate opened to let him onto the academy grounds. What kind of security was this? Shouldn’t that woman be more vigilant?

As he walked on the path leading to the building, he felt like he was being watched—which he was. The cameras and sensors were tracking him. By reflex he reached in his pocket, wanting the comfort of his earpiece.

*Tristan knows what he’s doing*, he told himself since the pocket was empty. *He wouldn’t set this all up just to kill me. He is ruthless, but me getting Emil is the easiest, cleanest way to do the job. All I have to do is stick to the plan. And hope everyone else sticks to it too.* He’d been a merc for too long to expect things to go smoothly. At least he had Aaron’s Weeber-provided gun if the plan wasn’t coded right.

Not that he was looking forward to having to explain to Tristan why he had to shoot his way out.

He’d managed to school his expression into one of boredom by the time he reached the building. Boredom was something he could do. It was the one emotion every mercenary had to master if they wanted to earn a living doing this. Eagerness led to being underpaid.

The lobby was large and uninviting—a square room the color of stone with only one door on the opposite side. He’d have to go around the guard’s desk in the middle of the room to rush it. He estimated the distance at thirty paces from the desk to that door. The stunners, he couldn’t see in the wall, but that had been noted on the building’s blueprints, would bring him down before he’d taken four of them.

Alex handed his ID to the man, who was already looking at him suspiciously behind glasses. Readout glasses, Alex thought. Someone working here had to be able to afford something as cheap as eyesight correction.

“I’m here to pick up Emil Rithal.”

The man scanned the card and looked to the side, at something Alex couldn’t see. Unless it was an act, it would be a screen, which meant the glasses didn’t have a display. His hand twitched as he fought the urge to grab the earpiece he didn’t have. He wanted to verify it.

“Nobody told me anything about one of our kids leaving today.”

Alex leaned on the counter, noticed his shaking hands before he crossed his arms to hide them. “That’s what I was told to do.”

The man handed the ID back. “Well, that’s too bad. No one leaves here without the proper form being filled out.” The suspicion in the man’s eyes went up a notch.

Alex sighed and hoped it didn’t sound as shaky as he thought it did. “Look, I’m just doing what I’m told. It probably got held up, and it’s going to get here any minute.”

“Then you wait. I told you. No form, no kid.”

Alex took out his pad, looked at it, and put it away. “I so don’t have the time for this. I’m supposed to be at the spaceport in an hour.”

“Not my—”

“Just call them, okay? They’ll clear this up.”

“Call who?”

“E— The kid’s parents, who else?” Alex silently cursed himself for almost using Emil’s name. There was no way some random security guy would do that. “You have their contact, right? Just have them authorize whatever they need to so I can do my job.”

The man looked at something to his other side that Alex couldn’t see. “That isn’t how things are done.”

Alex leaned in and lowered his voice. “Look, I know this is your job. I get that you’re looking out for the kids and you don’t want to get in trouble over this. For all you know, I’m here to

kidnap the kid.” Alex forced a chuckle. “But you know those people; they think the universe revolves around them. Just contact them, that’s going to put you in the clear. You’ll have done what you can to make sure this is proper.”

The guard twitched. Alex could see him wanting to reach for something, but instead he forced a chuckle of his own. “Yeah, you’re right, it’s probably just stuck in the aether or something.” He grumbled the rest under his breath, and only Alex’s proximity allowed him to hear. “If the rich assholes even bothered filling it out. You’d think one of them would follow procedures.”

He remembered Alex was there and looked at him, worried.

Alex shrugged. “I don’t work for them, so I don’t care how you feel. All I’m interested in is doing my job.”

The man typed something. “I guess you have to deal with that too. People like us don’t matter to them.” He read something. “Emil will be here in a minute.”

Alex nodded and walked around this side of the room. When he stepped closer to the wall, part of it became a screen showing happy children playing and learning. Over that it listed all the reasons Orwell Academy was the place to keep children safe and have them trained to become the best they could become.

After the third such advertisement, Alex snorted. He didn’t care how much money he accumulated, he would never bring a child of his to a place like this. Not that he saw himself as a father. He smiled as the image of him and Tristan raising a kid popped in his head. He shook it to chase it away.

He turned to face the door as it opened. A woman stepped into the room, accompanied by a child carrying a suitcase almost too large for him. The boy matched the image of Emil they’d been provided, but he was older now. Eight, Alex thought as he stepped around the desk but stopped even with it.

Emil froze on seeing him.

“Emil,” the woman said in a stern tone, “keep moving.”

He tried to hide behind her, but she grabbed Emil’s shoulder and held him in place. “That man isn’t my father.”

“Emil.” Her tone was harsher. “Do what you’re told.”

The boy trembled, but shook his head.

“It’s okay,” Alex told him as he crouched. He took out his ID. “I’m Aaron. I’m with Weeber Security. See?” He indicated the logo. “The guard verified that I am who I claim to be.” Emil nodded, even if there was no way he could see anything on the ID card from where he was. There had been no mention of augments in him. “I’m here to take you to your father.” The lie made him want to throw up. This was just a kid.

“Why isn’t he here?” Emil asked, his voice trembling.

“He’s busy. He sent me to keep you safe while we go meet him.” He wanted out of here; children had no business getting drawn into these kinds of machinations.

Emil studied Alex without moving.

The woman let go of his shoulder.

“Don’t,” Alex snapped. Emil twitched, but Alex’s eyes were fixed on the woman. She was in the process of winding up for a shove. Alex stood. “Emil Rithal is my charge. You lay one hand on him and I will break it.” He had no problem meaning the threat.

She tried to glare Alex down, but she couldn’t match his anger. She stepped away.

Alex offered his hand to Emil who, after a long moment, dragged his suitcase across the room to take it.

“Do you want me to carry your case?”

Emil shook his head.

He let Emil dictate their speed, and the boy walked as fast as he could, burdened as he was. As the hover came into view, Tristan got out of it, and Emil froze.

Alex almost panicked; he should have known this would happen. It wasn’t like Emil would be used to aliens. But Emil didn’t bolt, he just stood there, worry on his face. Alex realized Emil was counting on him to keep him safe.

“Emil, this is my—” He looked for the right word. “—partner.”

Tristan stepped around the hover. He crouched before Emil and still managed to tower over him. "Hello, Emil, I'm Brian." There was something in his voice Alex hadn't expected: a softness to it he barely remembered from when he was with Jack. His heart tightened. Maybe? No, he reminded himself, this was another act.

"We're going to take you to your father," Alex said in the stretching silence.

Tristan glanced up at him, then nodded. "Your father asked us to keep you safe." He offered his hand to Emil.

Tentatively, Emil placed his minuscule hand in Tristan's. "Is my father here?" There was so much hope in that question.

"No," Tristan replied gently. "He's off-planet. We're going to take you to him."

Emil's face fell, but almost immediately it was back to a neutral expression. He nodded and stepped toward the hover, letting go of Alex's hand.

Tristan placed two fingers in the suitcase's handle, next to Emil's hand, and after a moment, Emil let go. He passed it to Alex who put it in the trunk, next to the still-sleeping man.

Tristan got in the back of the hover with Emil, so Alex piloted them to the spaceport. He hadn't gotten over the surprise of Tristan sitting with a child when they reached it. He couldn't think of the large Samalian wanting to be close to a child at any time.

As they reached the entrance to the port, Tristan handed Alex a chip which he gave the guard. The guard scanned it, pocketed it, and let them in. Alex took the hover to their private pad, landing a few steps away from the ship.

Tristan handed him a small pack. "You know how this works?"

Alex looked at the cans of biological decontaminant sprays. "Yes."

"Take care of the hover. I'll be back once Emil is settled in."

Alex put gloves on and proceeded spray every surface inside and outside the hover. Tristan returned just as he finished the last of the cans. He passed a scanner over the vehicle and nodded.

Alex did his best not to be annoyed at the lack of trust.

Tristan had Alex take Aaron out of the trunk and put him at the control of the hover. When he rejoined Tristan, the Samalian was finishing spraying the inside of the trunk. He closed it and they headed into the ship.

Tristan handed Alex the earpiece. "You have fifteen minutes to remove any indication you were in Weeber's and the academy's systems while I prepare for takeoff. And Alex, I do mean every indication. Even that code you hid to grant you access at a later time. I don't want to find anything of yours in there if I ever decide to check."

Alex nodded, wondering how Tristan had managed to tell that apart from all the other commands he'd typed into the systems. He only considered leaving those in anyway for a second before his leg twitched with imaginary pain.