

Alex's steps resounded in the empty ship. He dumped the case of boosters on the floor and dropped in his seat. He shoved the earpiece in his ear, and the pain told him he needed to calm down. Puncturing an eardrum wouldn't help anything. He reinserted it, wasted time trying to adjust it, and then gave up on comfort. "Startup," he told the computer before he realized he hadn't gotten the connection tone.

He typed the emergency startup code and smiled when it booted up. At least Tristan hadn't installed a hidden physical switch, or worse yet, arranged it so it would blow the ship up in the wrong startup sequence. Of course, the Samalian was going to be angry with him—well, angrier—that Alex was using it without his approval, but he'd be angry either way. If there was no winning, why bother even trying to please him?

The boot-up sequence finished scrolling, telling him everything worked fine, when steps entered the ship. He didn't turn, or try to catch his reflection on the screen. He even tried not to ready himself for the coming blow, but that he couldn't quite manage. This was going to hurt, there was no avoiding it.

The steps stopped far short of the cockpit, and in pure reflex he turned. Tristan was letting Emil out of the room. Emil waved at him before heading outside. Alex was too surprised to bother waving back. Was this how Tristan planned on punishing Alex? How often had he said protecting Emil was beyond his capability? But no, Tristan had made it clear he needed Emil, not just to be around, but as his buddy. That meant he was basically off limits.

He shoved those thoughts out of his mind. If he tried to deal with this right now, he'd rush outside, fumble through whatever Tristan was arranging, and make matters worse before even figuring out what they were. He needed to calm himself, center himself. That meant he needed to rip a system open.

He randomized his connection protocol and spoke. Let Tristan be pissed about this. This was what Alex was the master of. It was time Tristan learned he wasn't master of every fucking thing under the universe's stars.

"Talk to me."

"You are not the authorized programmer," the toneless voice said.

"Like you'd know what he sounds like. He never speaks to you." Alex sent out a few searches. He knew Tristan hadn't lied about detection programs, now all he had to do was find them. The most likely scenario was they were camouflaged among the antibodies. Nearly impossible to establish them in such a way they wouldn't be devoured, but he did respect Tristan's skills.

"The authorized programmer only accesses my systems from the main console. You are not at that console, therefore, you are not authorized."

He glanced at that seat. Should he? It would certainly go faster, but not only didn't he know what kind of physical security devices were set up with that seat, but he didn't want easy. He wanted to crack this computer.

"I'm just looking around. I'm not going to do anything. I want to familiarize myself with how you work in case there's an emergency."

"That is a lie."

"Excuse me?"

"You are using a forced connection to access me. You have not been granted permission to access my system."

On the plus side, it hadn't recognized him from earlier coercions he did through it; his multitude of connection protocols were still handy. But was the computer talking down to him? Oh, he wasn't letting that happen, not after enduring that from Tristan.

His programs hadn't found the hidden security program in this section. That couldn't be good, but Tristan wasn't so talented he could have something hidden Alex wouldn't find. Carefully, he began altering code.

He had to be careful. There was so little of the original code left; almost everything was Tristan's rigid language. It had to be something he'd created himself; he would have heard of someone teaching this. He had to hide what he was doing under so many layers it wouldn't be noticed, or mimic Tristan's syntax perfectly. Anything less and Tristan would notice.

Fortunately, Alex had been forced to teach himself code syntax to stay one step ahead of the Law. Imitating other coercionists was one of the easiest ways to send them after the wrong person. Without corporate protection, he wasn't looking at a lowered performance rating if he

was caught, he was looking at hard prison time. Or rather, a shortened life.

He continued talking with the toneless computer, making alterations here and there, listening to any changes in the voice. Expanding when his programs indicated a new section without security, and the computer's voice remained the same. When it altered even slightly, he undid the changes and tried something else.

His programs found a security program, and Alex felt better. At least this wasn't an elaborate trap Tristan had laid for him. The program wasn't within the antibodies, but at the access points. They were good, but with an extremely focused attention span. He peeked into the program. It was looking for Law recognition code, luckily for him. The Law was required to use those, and Tristan had gotten access to a database of them in recent history. He recognized some of his own connection codes, the ones he'd used before. Well, screw you. The smart ones switch things around.

The problem was that as much authority as he gained at this station, it wasn't helping him. He wanted control of the ship. And he didn't want to have to use the earpiece for this; it would be the first thing Tristan would take away. He needed something it would acknowledge no matter where he was in the ship.

Voiceprint wouldn't work. This computer didn't have a voice recognition software. For whatever reason, Tristan had removed that. It had to be something he typed, something so distinctive he could even use it with Tristan looking over his shoulder. He would realize what it meant, but by then it would be too late. If he had to use it against Tristan, he was taking Emil and running. Let the Samalian chase them.

He reached for a can and fumbled around the pack. It was empty? How long had he been at this? It was only six cans, but still. Only two hours? He made sure there were six empty cans and cursed himself for being so focused. If Tristan had walked in on him? Well, he'd have known that, in a painful way—possibly terminal.

He was nowhere close to reaching the main control core, but he couldn't risk continuing without knowing when Tristan might return. The computer still sounded as cold as before, but it no longer argued with him about not having authorization.

He went over every line of code, every letter, and only backed out once he was certain nothing was out of place. He had to hope that when Tristan looked it over, he was happy everything worked as it should, and wouldn't dig any deeper. His life might depend on it.

He stood and stretched, pocketing his earpiece. No sounds. No Emil, no Tristan. Had they gone into the woods? This close to dark? No, it was full dark now. He couldn't believe they were in trouble, but...

He stepped outside. Half a dozen lamps were lit between the food area, Emil's tent, and some in the trees. There was no way they'd gone walking in the dark. He walked around the ship and saw light in the hover, and shadows moving. He stepped to it.

"So, what does this tell you?" Tristan asked?

"The red light tells me there's too much current?" Emil answered.

"Good, what do you need to do in that case?"

"I..." A long hesitation. "I need to change the input at the junction box."

"The output, Buddy. If you change the input, everything connected to it will be affected."

"Right, I knew that."

"I know you did."

Alex stepped in. Tristan had his back to him, seated on the floor, looking in the gap where the panel was missing. Small legs came out of it. "What are you doing?"

Tristan glanced at Alex and dismissed him. "Helping my buddy fix your hover."

Emil sat, becoming fully visible. He was the perfect size to work in such narrow quarters. "Tristan's teaching me how to make repairs."

"I'm not teaching you anything, you clearly know what you're doing."

"No, I don't." Emil grinned, then he sobered looking at Alex. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Alex replied, sounding more dismissive than he intended, but being within reach and not actively supervising them made him paranoid.

Tristan fixed his gaze on Alex. "Emil is smarter than you give him credit for. He knows things aren't smoothed between us." His tone was casual, but his eyes were mocking. "Why don't you explain to him what the problem is?"

Was he actually daring him? Did he think he couldn't tell Emil the entirety of what Tristan plan for him? Of course not. To do that would mean both he and Emil would be loose ends to be cut, and Tristan would manage on his own. He'd probably go into hiding somewhere until all this had blown over, and then he'd kill Masters.

Alex couldn't lie worth a damn to Emil, so he had to go with the truth—well, part of one. He forced a sigh, and leaned against the wall. "I'm angry about that." He indicated the open compartment. "Not what you're doing, that it happened. It was beyond stupidity. It was arrogance on my part. I landed in a city, and because this is far from anywhere I know, I figured, 'hey, no one's going to be able to crack this lock,' right? I'm sure Tristan told you something like that."

"No, Alex I wouldn't—"

"Oh, come on." He loved that he could snap at him and Tristan couldn't do anything but play along. He'd set this up. "You run a tight ship. What would you have done?"

"Added multiple layers of security before I took off from the dealership with it. If the lock was hard-wired to prevent changes, I'd gotten another hover."

"Exactly. The least I could have done is gone into the system, set up contingencies. I'm so fucking good with computers, but it never even occurred to me." He took a breath. "I'm sorry you had to be on the receiving end of some of that, Emil. That wasn't professional of me at all. You're the client, our job is to keep any of that from affecting your stay with us."

"And earlier?"

Alex fought not to gawk. "I'm that transparent?"

Emil shrugged. "You tend to tense around him."

Fuck, Tristan wasn't kidding when he said Emil was smart. If he'd picked up that, he had to be extremely careful with what he said.

"This is our first job together. We were groundside at the same place for a while, but it was mainly him doing his thing and me doing mine, us sparing and some training. Neither of us expected to work together on this job, but any retrieval goes better with two people at minimum, especially if there's a danger things will go wrong, which I'm pretty sure Tristan suspected, but never informed me."

"You don't like working with him?"

He shook his head, and curse him, that wasn't entirely a lie. "He's just so damned intense. I haven't seen him act like...well, like he is with you, since we took the job. When you're in cryo, he's all business. It's exhausting. With the previous crews I worked, I made sure the job had fun in them. Sure, it wasn't quite as efficient, but damn, we could at least blow some steam."

Emil was up and hugging him. Tristan looked as perplexed as Alex felt.

"It's okay, you two will find a way to work together. You work well."

"Kid," Alex began, and shut up. Tristan's curiosity at what he'd been about to say was just too much. He was going to die if he stayed, he knew that. That's why he was making plans. Bullshit, that was for when Tristan went too far with Emil. Then he'd run. If somehow this ended and Emil was alive on a planet somewhere, away from Tristan, from this mess that was Alex's life, he'd take whatever the Samalian gave him.

*Why can't you be just a little like you act with Emil? Can't you see everything would be so much easier?*

Tristan's gaze hardened; he'd shown too much. Well, fuck him. He'd told Tristan he couldn't hide his emotions, let him use that against him too. Alex was just too exhausted to care.

He patted Emil on the shoulder. "The repairs? How are they?"

He looked at Tristan. For all the work he'd done, that was beyond his knowledge.

"You're not flying tonight."

Alex nodded. "Do you really need Emil's help?"

"It's easy stuff, and he was eager to help."

"And I'm smaller," Emil beamed. "It's easier for me to reach the stuff farther in."

Alex heard the affection in Emil's voice. He could just imagine how Emil was looking at him. Part of Alex wished he could—shut up.

He didn't even try to warn him. This was part of Tristan's plan.

"Is everything okay?" Emil asked, and Alex realized he was no longer looking at Tristan.

“Sure thing, Buddy,” Tristan replied. “Alex’s put off because you’re doing the work. He believes kids should only have fun.”

“But this is fun,” Emil said with as much conviction as he could muster.

“I’m seeing that. I’m tired. The day, the stress. I’m not my best right now. Are you sure Tristan isn’t tricking you into doing his work? He’s really good at that.”

Tristan glared, but Emil laughed. The reaction caused Tristan’s mask to falter for an instant.

“No, he’s been really nice. He answers all my questions. Earlier today we went in the woods and he taught me about the plants. Which ones I can eat, which one I can’t. He caught a rat thing, but we didn’t eat that. He let it go.”

“Sounds like you had a good time. Any idea when the hover will be usable?”

“Unless you expect me and my buddy to work through the night like the slave master you claim I am, in the morning. We’re almost done calibrating the power flow. Once that’s done, I’m going to have to find a way to fit in one of my spare stabilizers, and fix the sensors and the inertial dampener.”

Alex cursed. “That’s out too?”

“If you’d managed to pick up any kind of speed, you’d have found out very quickly.”

Alex tried to think of anything he could say, but exhaustion was no longer an act. Not having Tristan explode at him was taking more out of him than an actual fight. “Alright, I’m going to let you get to work. You need me to prepare anything before I turn in?”

“We ate,” Emil said, crawling back into the open compartment.

“We’re fine.”

Alex turned.

“Alex, how was your coercion session?”

*As close to the truth as you can.* He turned and shrugged. “I just needed to blow code apart, prove to myself I’m not a complete failure. I cracked the first system I found, tore it apart, and rebuilt it like I was never there.”

“Okay, go sleep. You look like you need it.”