

Alex stood at the top of the sanctuary, along with most of the locals, as well as retired mercenaries, and those Alex hadn't realized were long-term residents, instead of locals; like the woman teaching Tristan to meditate.

His Samalian stood behind him, holding him, and like everyone else, he wasn't looking to the sky per-se, but the pink horizon.

For nearly a month now, the sun had teased them by turning the east lighter and lighter, before darkening it again, but today was the day, Teklile had said. And the weather was cooperating by pausing the rain and thinning the clouds.

The moment was fleeting, but its effect pronounced enough he felt it too. After months without seeing its light, the small crescent of brightness that forced him to raise his hand to shield his eyes, and was then gone, left him with his shoulders looser. His mood bubblier.

Tristan's hug tightened slightly, and he looked up to see something Alex rarely saw when they were among others. A genuine smile. Even his Samalian, for all his attitude about not caring about anything, had missed the sun's light.

And then rain fell, and everyone rained inside, laughing and talking about watching the next sunrise, and the one after that and, then, basking in the full sun for hours.

Alex chuckled at how, even while drenched, they had already forgotten that with spring came the return on the never ending rain. There would be no basking under the sun for anyone unless someone changed the planet's angle.

Alex wanted to celebrate the event with Tristan, but they both had duties that didn't care if this was a special day. His were enforced by why he was here. Like the retired mercenaries, Alex was here to solve a problem and that meant that while his was gaining control, the way there was to take away some of that control by assigning him the tasks. He might find it funny how he was back, on a light level, to when he had relinquished control over his life, if the consequences of not taking this seriously weren't so severe.

It didn't matter how he felt, on some level, like he was wasting his time. He had to push until he saw results.

Tristan, on the other hand, was more like the long-term residents. He was here to learn meditation. So his tasks were self imposed toward that learning.

So Alex returned to the rain and tending to the garden for the first hours of his day. Then he'd shower, and move on to dealing with his trainees.

And, somewhere in there, he'd worry about when the next attack would come. With Tristan there, it made the prospect of dealing with them easier, but it didn't lower the alertness needed to avoid being taken by surprised when it happened. Or how exhausting that was.

“Alex,” Teklile called to him. “If you have a moment, I think it would be good for us to talk.”

He stifled the sigh. It didn't do to have the person with the authority to end your attempt at no longer being a mindless killer think you felt his personal brand of involvement in attempting to help you improve was worthless even when next to what felt like the wasted exercise he was already being put through.

At least mind-docs had the training to claim to knowing what they were doing.

He plastered on a smile and turned. “Certainly. What do you want to talk about?”

“How do you feel?” the man motioned for them to walk. They'd end up at his office, Alex knew.

“Good. Glad to know the sun isn't just a figment of my imagination.”

“Yes, many of the new arrivals find their first ‘night’ here difficult. How are you finding the training?”

Alex snorted. “You want me to lie?”

“No.”

“If you even send them to try to hold back toddlers, you're going to have an infirmary filled with injured fighters and I'm not sure the toddlers will have noticed hurting them.”

The man smiled. “I meant more. How are you finding it is working for you?” he opened the door and motioned Alex inside.

He dropped into the chair and sighed. “I haven't killed any of them,” he said, then realized what he had said. “Not that I want to, or would. I haven't even sent one to the infirmary these last few days. And,” he added, because he knew where this was going. “I didn't even kill that last merc.”

That it was because he'd needed information from him, more than a desire not to kill him. Alex didn't think was something Teklile needed to know.

“Actually, have you figured out what you're going to do with him? I doubt you want to keep him in that cryo chair Tristan build to hold him for the rest of time.”

“I don't know. What I'd like to do is have the authorities deal with him, but we aren't a planet with a recognized population. That would normally mean we fall under the authority of SpaceGov, but...”

“With the research stations here, they'd just tell one of those corporations to deal with him, and unless an attack is directed at them, corporations are just as likely to let a merc go with a ‘don't do this in our sector again’ warning than to see to it they're prosecuted. If you want, when we leave, we can take him off your hands. I know a place that would be happy to take him and see to it he never bothers anyone again. Cryo holding,” he added, at the man's concerned expression.

“I shall keep that in mind. How are you feeling about the deaths you caused?”

Alex sighed. Civilians were all like that. Even those with training. They thought that because killing was something they considered horrendous, anyone of ‘was forced’ to do it was left scared and needed to feel something about it. Mercs who felt that way didn't survive in the life.

“I did what I had to.”

“Did you look forward to killing them?”

He hesitated. That wasn't where the questions usually went.

“This is about helping you, Alex. Being honest is more beneficial to you than something anyone here can use against you. Not that what you tell me will be heard outside this room.”

“It’s not that simple of an answer. When I realized they were there. I never had a moment of ‘good, I finally get to kill someone’. As soon as I understood there was a threat, I was thinking about how to end it as quickly and with as few risks to the others as I could. If I felt one thing,” he added, because if he was going to be honest, he should go for the ugly truth, “it was disappointment.”

“At having to kill them?”

Alex snorted again. “At how easy it was. I doubt they were real mercs. Or they were trying to prove themselves to the board or something. Calling them amateurs is an insult to people actually trying to be mercs.”

“Proving yourself to the boards. Is that how someone becomes a mercenary?”

“No, there’s not recruitment, or exam you have to pass to be a merc. All you have to do is find the boards, pick a job, and survive it. Then you’re a merc and it’s just about surviving the next job and the next, until you don’t survive one.”

“Is that where you see your life going?”

Alex tried to envision his future, and other than his one constant, it was darkness.

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “Things are changing with me and Tristan. I wouldn’t be here if they weren’t. And I don’t know what it means for us and the life. I don’t think we’d be building a home if we were through we’d take mission after mission, but I don’t know if leaving the life is something we can do either. Tristan has...needs that I don’t think he can fulfill with a home and man he loves and a quiet life. I certainly can’t have that if I’m going to cut someone’s throat just for raising his voice at me.”

“Do you want that quiet life you described?”

“I used to.” He remembered the dream. Him and an alien sharing an apartment. Returning from their work and celebrating another productive day. “That man died. I killed him when I deluded myself into thinking I could save Tristan. I’m not going there. However warped the path I took, it got me here and here. I’m happy.”