

Alex dried himself while Tristan reconnected the ship. “You know we could move it to their landing pad,” he said. “Teklile even invited you to do so, now that you’re spending most of your time there.”

On some level, it was amusing. Tristan had initially refused to live at the sanctuary because he didn’t feel he would mesh well with the locals, while Alex hadn’t minded them. And now, Tristan was at ease there, and Alex had moment when blowing up the place was tempting.

The lights came on, then the generator kicked in and the floor vibrated.

“You would take refuge here, keep away from all of them.”

“You just want me to keep roughing it on their cots.”

Tristan gave him a toothy smile. “At least, I don’t have you sleeping on the floor.”

“Our house will have a bed,” Alex countered, heading to the cockpit. “An actual bed with a mattress. And you will sleep on it.”

Tristan grabbed his arm and pulled against his wet fur, muzzle to his ear, and whispered. “I will do something with you in that bed, and if you want me to sleep there too, you will have to make sure I am too exhausted to move.”

Alex shivered. “I’m going to hold you to that.”

His Samalian nipped his neck, then released him, and Alex needed time before he was able to get his legs working. Then he made it to his console and ran through the checks, ensuring no one had inserted malicious programs while the ship was powered down.

That done, he established a series of nodes for the communication. Some fully masked, others wrapped with redirection sheaths. It was impossible to make communications through the network completely untraceable, but he made sure anyone attempting to trace him would be visiting the furthest place in the universe before they made it here.

He didn’t contact the Sayatoga.

He couldn’t, not without endangering those living there. While officially the Sayatoga was a private corporation, and as such, left alone by SpaceGov, unless they misbehaved. The Sayatoga was in an odd position of also being exclusively a prison. SpaceGov had this thing about keeping track of what happened around places where prisoners were kept. The more dangerous the prisoner? The more watchful SpaceGov was. And the Sayatoga held The Most Dangerous criminals in the universe.

It held Tristan, after all.

It didn’t mean the supervision was active. In fact, the probability it was would be so small it could be considered not to be under watch. But Alex wouldn’t put the one person

he was able to call a friend and meant it in danger by being needlessly careless.

The communication node he finally reached was for a meet-up group, survivors of early childhood trauma. The group was real. Alex had three identities who were members, each with their own trauma, one of who was fabricated, because that person wasn't quite right and got off on listening to people who had it worse than him.

He couldn't remember why he'd given that one this kind of mental condition, but she was part of an active network of transfers, so he couldn't simply take her out of circulations.

And it wasn't like he ever pretended to be her. She and the others were there so he could monitor what took place and know it was still safe to use it to contact Will.

The group was intended for people to meet as, well, a group, but it was also possible to have private meetings, and with the additions Alex had made to the node, they were very private indeed.

As soon as Alex connected to the node, the identity he'd created for Will to use it was notified. He created a private room and went over securing it while he waited.

William appeared quicker than he expected, and Alex released security programs to double check no one was listening in, and only when he received the all clear did he address the young man represented by the wizened elder lounging in the leather chair.

"Hey Will."

"This secured?"

"My side is, I trust your coercionists know their business?"

"They do. Why call?"

Alex leaned back in his seat. "Well, I took your advice and while it wasn't easy, we eventually found a place that teaches self control, and were willing to take me on."

"Good. Training center?"

"Of a sort..." He hesitated. While the idea was Will's, he clearly had envisioned something different.

"How 'sort of'?"

"It's a sanctuary."

"Don't understand."

"You've seen vids with them. You know. Those far away places where people go to learn to be 'at one with themselves'. Turns out there's at least one that's—"

The old man's snickering turned into all out laughter. He teetered to the side, then froze in place with an image crackle that told Alex Will had moved out of the sensor field he'd been sitting in. The Sayatoga had surprisingly advanced entertainment technology, for a prison ship.

The laughter slowly subdued, and the old man made a series of jagged motions that made Alex think Will wasn't succeeding in getting back into the field.

"Please tell me you didn't fall out of a chair from laughing so hard at me?"

"Won't tell." The falling snickers intensified again.

"Should I threaten him?" Tristan said, placing a hand on his shoulder.

"Go a head, but he won't believe you."

"I can be extremely convincing if I need to, William. Bear that in mind when laughing at my human."

“Believe you.” Will started laughing again.

“You want me to code you an avatar in the node?”

“We lack the sensors for it to have any use. I shall simply have to manufacture a reason to visit the Sayatoga. Maybe capture the feared criminal Crimson and get paid handsomely for it.”

“Are you threatening me or him?”

“You are his friend. It would hurt him dearly to have to put you under cryo.” He leaned in and whispered. “Don’t worry, I would rescue you.”

“I give job,” Will replied. “Not stupid. Make best coercionist work.” The image jumped, then the old man was reclining again.

“I’ll still rescue him, William. And you know how destructive I can be.”

“Not laughing anymore,” Will said, needlessly. “How help?”

“Well,” Alex started, then faltered. He sighed. “So, this place doesn’t exactly have technology. We have our ship, but a certain someone I won’t name refuses to land it close enough to be of any use. Something about me using it to hide from the horrible things I’m forced to endure. They have me gardening, Will. I’m telling you, if I even encounter a garden after this, I’m dropping a ship on it. No wonder kids hate eating vegetable. All our misery had to leech into them.”

“That bad?”

“No,” Tristan said. “Alex also get to train some of the acolytes who decided they wanted to know how to defend themselves as a result of the first group of mercenary to attack the sanctuary.”

“We didn’t bring them,” Alex amended. “But they are the reason I need your help.”

“Can’t hunt them.”

“I know. And I’m not asking you to do it. I’d like you to put together a team for us to track down the person hiring the mercs and convince him to stop.”

“Why me?”

“Because, considering your ship, you’re in a better position to know who would work for a job like this. I’ve never hired merc to work independent of me, and Tristan’s history with them leans toward industrial espionage. Usually, if a job needs to get done, we handle it ourself.”

“Why not now?”

Again Alex hesitated. “Because I can’t leave. Even if Tristan wasn’t insisting, or looking toward his own enlightenment in this place. I have to see this through because of... of what I did to Zephyr.”

“All healed.”

“I’m glad, but it doesn’t change what I did. Or the fact he predicted it back when I was on the Golly. He said that if Anders ever wanted me dead, he wouldn’t be the one to do it. He could see death in my eyes all the way back then.”

“What’s needed?”

“The man’s name is Carter Hart. He isn’t corporate, but he’s wealthy. Galactic Hart is owned by his family.”

“Important?”

“I doubt it, other than to give you a sense of how far his wealth spreads. The sense I

got from chasing through his accounts is that he had free access to anything linked to the company. He could be in charge, or not. The team might need to work that out to figure out how to approach him.”

“The job?”

“Convince him to stop. I don’t think he’s that bad of a person, other than feeling he’s entitled to anything he wants. If they can convince him that something else will do in place of the item he wants from the sanctuary, we’ll pay them to retrieve it for him.” Alex paused. “I don’t want him dead, Will.”

“They’ll know. Location?”

“That I can’t provide. Like anyone with money and a reason not to be easily found, he had programs and people working to obfuscate where he is. I could find him, if I put the time into it, but if I had that time, me and Tristan would already be on our way to talk to him directly.”

“Tristan?” Will asked.

“You’ll want a small team. How small will depend on actual expertise in each of the required fields. Among the important ones will be a coercionist and a pilot. He will have a private security force, and they will get in the way. Whatever muscle they have needs to be able to show restraint. Not wanting Hart dead means his people should keep living, as well.”

“Medic?” Will asked, sounding surprised.

“Only if their ship doesn’t have a basic med table. If they need healing beyond heals while in the field, they have screwed up the job. I can see ways to accomplish it that don’t require having to fight any of them.”

“I don’t think we can expect them to be willing to have sex with every person they’ll need to convince along the way.”

“That is only one of the methods I have.”

“Share?” Will asked, sounding dubious.

“No,” Alex replied forcefully. While he didn’t think his friend had an interest in aliens, and he already had his woman. He wanted to make sure he didn’t try. “But we have an understanding as to what some jobs might require.”

“We haven’t taken jobs since we had this discussion,” Tristan continued, “so neither of our willingness to go along with it has been put to the test.”

“Oh, the willingness is all yours,” Alex said. “I just understand that some situations might call for it. I will not be happy if we have to go through with it.”

“I am not willing,” Tristan said. “But I am realistic and—”

“Job?”

“Yes,” Tristan said. “We should conclude this.”

“How much will it cost us?”

“Need team first. Ask, then tell.”

“I long will it talk you to have that information?” Tristan asks. “We can remain with the ship for a few hours, but we will have to return to the sanctuary, and contacting us after that will be difficult.”

“Three. Then have details and talk money.”

“I’ll be waiting for your arrival notification.” Alex terminated the connection. “Look,

I know you—”

Tristan had a finger on his lips. “Alex. I don’t want you to agree to what I suggest because I am the one suggesting it. If the idea of me having sex to achieve a goal isn’t something you can accept, I won’t do it. Sex is only the most efficient way to get what we need under certain circumstances, not the only one. There are always alternatives.”

“Then, I’d rather you didn’t.”

“Okay.” Tristan leaned in and kissed him. “Then forever more, you shall be my only victim.”

“Speaking of victim,” Alex said, after breaking the kiss. “We have three hours to kill, and it’s dark outside.” The thought alone gave him goose bumps. “You want to hunt me?”