

*I love you.*

The words resounded in Alex's mind, not because they had been said; Tristan said it often now. But because they came after Alex had planted a knife in the Samalian's chest.

He didn't understand how it had happened; how it could have happened. He had never been able to hurt Tristan in the entire time he had been at his side. There were the scratches he scored during their training, but those didn't count. Neither did the time on Baran's ship. Tristan hadn't been himself then.

Now, for Alex to have done this meant... He didn't know what it meant. Only that it couldn't have happened.

"Alex?"

His head snapped up. "What?" he demanded. The woman had said his name a few times, but he'd dismissed it as transmission static. He had more important thing to think about.

"How are you feeling?"

What kind of question was that? He looked at the room. The desk she sat behind, with a Celaran to the side, something scrolling on the screen Alex couldn't make out and wasn't interested listening to. It would be medical.

He was in a hospital, although he had no idea how he'd ended up in this room, this office, with her sitting across from him.

There had been Tristan, saying he loved him, after Alex had stabbed him. He hadn't intended that. Alex didn't remember details of his combat fugue, but it was a woman he'd been bringing the knife down on. Then the blur and it was Tristan looking down at him, not wearing his mask.

*I love you.*

There had been motion. A chaos of it around him as he caught Tristan; his weight bringing him down with him. There had been voices, authoritative; orders given.

Tristan moved.

If he hadn't been so lost in the impossibility of what he'd done, he would have killed them for touching his Samalian. When he looked up, he was already on the medical gurney, the cryo-field active, being carried toward the form of a ship. He ran after them. He would not let them take him again. Never again would he lose Tristan.

"Are you with him?" the man had asked as Alex reached the large rescue shuttle. The unexpectedness of it kept Alex from answering, from doing anything. "I can't let you on unless you're with him," the man added.

They weren't stealing him.

"I am."

They were rescuing Tristan.

The flight had been short and mostly silent. There had been questions, but Alex couldn't answer them, his thoughts in a loop.

*I love you.* The knife planting in. The loving expression as Tristan crumbled.

Chaos had restarted with him being jostled out of the way as they carried the gurney out of the shuttle. Voices, loud, giving information, calling for people. People arriving, taking Tristan away from him. A hand on his chest. What was said didn't register, only the denial. They wouldn't let him through, they wouldn't let him be with his Samalian.

He had been ready to kill him, them, everyone who got in his way, but a woman had said something, taken his arm and...

"Alex, are you back with me?"

Here he was.

He glared at her. She'd coerced him, the way he coerced computers. Said things that had hacked his code. Used his love for Tristan, promises of answers, to get him to come with her, here.

"Where is he?"

"Right now, the man—"

"Samalian."

"I was referring to gender," she said neutrally. "He is being operated on. I don't have the details, as I'm not his therapist, but I expect saving his life will not be simple. What I saw tells me that once they

turn off the cryo, they will have seconds to ensure that knife isn't fatal. What is he to you?"

"Everything," Alex replied without thoughts. Without Tristan, he was nothing.

*I love you.*

"I see. How would you describe your relationship with him?"

"Perfect." Again, no hesitation, only...

"Really? That isn't something I hear often." She glanced at the screen. "Usually there are complaints after so many years spent together."

He hadn't wanted a changed Tristan. He'd wanted the monster back. He'd wanted to be at his mercy. Alex hadn't asked for this change. He hadn't wanted it.

Now he might lose it.

"He's who is he." Who he wanted. "Wishing differently isn't going to change anything."

*I love you.*

He'd gotten when he'd wanted. What he'd accepted he'd never have.

"So he is the only one who matters."

"Yes." There was no one like Tristan. No one who could hold Alex the way he did, with force, violence and love.

"And he does whatever he wants with you."

His confirmation was nearly out before the implication registered. He glared at her, hand closing on the pommel of the knife at his belt. Laser, by the activation switch under his thumb. He would cut her for it. For saying Tristan didn't care about Alex. Tristan had changed himself for Alex. How was that not a show of love?

And he was going to lose him.

His hand slipped off the knife.

"He does whatever he wants *for* me."

She focused on him. "I'm afraid I don't follow."

Alex snorted. Like she had any hopes of understanding them.

"How did you meet?"

*He turned, bumping into someone, a drink spilled on his shirt. An apology, a smile, deep caring brown eyes.*

"By chance." By careful planning. By learning all there was to know about who Alex Crimson was. His fascination with aliens. By manipulation.

"What was your childhood like?"

"Fine."

A hand raised to strike. The pain of disappointing his father. Being thrown out of the house.

"You were raised by your grandparents, correct?"

Bring taken in, loved trying to cover up the pain of betrayal.

Alex shook himself, listened to the systems around him. "Shut it down," he ordered. "Or I'm going to do it for you."

Taps on the desk, and the subsonic emitters turned off.

"What do you want?" Alex asked, now that his thoughts cleared.

"To understand why you did what you did."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

More taps and an image came up, a vid of a fight in a stand storm. He could make himself out, fighting Karliak security. The image wasn't centered on him, but Alex couldn't shake the feeling it had been selected before it offered the best view of his actions.

"That's you, isn't it?"

"No."

"I'm not with the law. I'm a healer."

"I'm fine, and there are sensors in here that the law can use to come after me. No, that isn't me."

She nodded, tapped again. The vid blinked and Alex was the only one standing in the storm until a shape approached and he turned. The sensor was further away so he couldn't make her out well on the

vid, but he made out curves, confirmed it was a woman. He thought there was motioned further back, but it was difficult to be sure with the storm raging.

He raised his arm, knife in hand. Intent on—the form came from the out of the sensor’s view. Moving through the storm, indistinct other than dark, tall, massive.

Tristan stopped before Alex as he brought the knife down.

*I love you.*

“If he means so much, why did you stab him?”

“I didn’t mean to!” Alex was up. He needed to... he needed out, to...

“What did you mean to do to him?” She asked.

“Nothing!”

“Then why did you—”

“He did that! I didn’t know he was there. I’d lost track of him in the fight!” He was saying too much. He was aware of that. Like a computer was aware Alex coerced them, but unable to prevent it. He’d go through the system later. Remove everything. “There was a threat, and I had to eliminate it.”

“So you see him as a threat.”

“He means everything to me!” He was before her, hands on the desk. She had no business redefining how he felt. Make guesses.

“Then why did you—”

“He put himself between me and her!”

“But you...”

Her voice faded away as what he said registered.

Tristan had put himself between Alex and his target.

Tristan had never kept him from killing before. He’d never cared who Alex killed. At worse, it was at it happening in public he didn’t like, but that had been a battlefield with only enemies on it. Anyone there was a valid target.

So why?

“Get out of the chair,” Alex said, causing her to stop talking.

“Alex, why don’t you sit down and we—”

He pulled the laser edged knife, not reacting to it not turning on. He was in a hospital. Of course, they’d have an anti-weapons field active. Still, he could plant it into her and it could cause a lot of pain.

“Get out of the chair. I need your system to verify something.”

“If you’ll tell me what—”

“Get the fuck out before I hurt you.”

She stood. She’d already locked it. Alex could tell that from its sound, but he didn’t care. That wouldn’t keep him out for long.

He sat down and typed. Celeran’s were a common system, reliable, affordable and based on the same core, so the same basic personality that Alex had learned to coerce all the way back in school. A few words, a few added slips of code, and he had free access. He’d use that later. For now, what he wanted was in a different system.

He wasn’t careful entering it. He blasted the communication node open, ready for a response, but found a battlefield similar to the one he’d left behind among the security. The only difference was that here, the antibodies were slowly rebuilding the system.

Alex didn’t know how Bernie had done in, since the Asharan had admitted not being good at offense, but he’d certainly caused damage.

What Alex wanted also wasn’t here. But the connection to the security company that held the sensor records started here. And then he was within their system, taking the data he wanted and bring it back.

He projected the scene over the doctor’s desk. A different angle on him, knife in Tristan’s chest.

*I love you.*

He turned the image to reveal the woman behind the Samalian.

The doctor had only had access to the publicly available sense records, but security companies

took all the records and stored them as one recreated file for the whole incident. It took less space than the individual records and when the law came calling; it was more helpful to them. And everyone wanted to be helpful to the law, didn't they?

He couldn't make out more of her like this. The storm was still in the way, but with a swipe of the hand and a mental command, he removed layers after layers until all he had her.

Her subjective age looked around forty. The mask and rescue uniform made precision difficult. There was probably a sub layer with that information, built from the rest of the biological data the sensor had recorded, but he didn't have the time to locate it, or need to. The uniform had a name, Kelmer, and an identity number.

He was inside Immerter's local system. A ship docked at the station. It resisted, but Alex got in, trying to be gentle, since they rescued people, but not taking no for an answer. Then he had a personnel file.

The face matched that visible through the mask, the wrinkles at the edge of her lips and at the eyes made him raise her age slightly. There was a sense of familiarity to her he dismissed as having seen so many people in his career they blended together.

The name, Marjoline Kelmer, struck another familiar cord, and this one couldn't be dismissed as easily. He didn't bother with names, so had no reason to know this one. Worked for Immerter for seventy objective years. The company didn't keep track of rejets, and he'd have to go back to find out how long she'd spent in cryo while traveling, but that wasn't important.

Who the fuck could she be that Tristan would keep him from killing her?

It wasn't because she was a rescue worker. Even this new Tristan accepted bystanders got killed in battle. There was nothing in this file to explain it.

He'd have to go elsewhere for more information, and that might be—

The connection to the rest of the universe was unguarded. Alex double checked it wasn't a trap, then connected to SpaceGov's citizen database. What he wanted would be impossible under normal circumstances; there were just too many people in the universe, but with each detail he had about the information he wanted, he narrowed the field. And with Marjoline's file, he had so much information that he got access to SpaceGov's history on her.

A glance at it showed nothing of interest.

Nothing to justify Tristan's actions, and Alex worried this had been another aspect of the new Tristan. That he'd become someone who would risk his life for strangers.

He went over the information deeper. Tristan did nothing without reason.

Normal childhood, education in finance, interrupted. Records of giving birth. No activity for a couple of decades, then hired by Immerter.

Nothing.

She was no one.

Fear crept in as Alex looked over the information again. A layer deeper. There had to be something there.

Born on Fernos, family of six, father and mother in local finances. Marks in school until she left were average. No reason noted for her leaving. No recorded complaints by her parents or other figures. A year later, she gave birth. A boy, Emil Kelmer.

He smiled at the name, remembering Emil, wondering how he was. How old he was now. It had been years subjective since the last time he'd checked in on him and his grandparents. Objective it could be decades.

The father was Donald Steringer and—

Alex force, recognizing the face. He was much younger, but the blue eyes had that same coldness in them Tomas Masters's had had.

If Donald Steringer was Emil Kermel's father. Did that make the Emil he and Tristan had protected from Masters this Emil? Marjoline's son?

Her son's DNA was attached to her file, and Alex had a copy of Emil's official record from when he'd built his new identity. Accessing it and running a comparative program only took seconds, then he stared at the confirmation.

“What is it?” the doctor asked.

He’d been right. There was a reason.

Only, it made no sense. Tristan hadn’t cared about Emil beyond using him against Masters.

Hadn’t he?

A buzz and the door opened. A young man peered in. “You said you wanted to know when the Alien was conscious.”

Alex was out of the office before she could answer and ignored the man’s complaints as he took himself off the floor.

He accessed the first panel he found and got the room number simply by doing a search for Samalian. Then he was running again.

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The man standing next to Tristan’s bed as Alex barged into the room looked in his seventies. He glanced at him and returned to Tristan.

“Yes, you were lucky,” the man said. “If the rescue team hadn’t arrived already expecting a situation involving dying people, they wouldn’t have had a cryo-board on hand when they found you. Those seconds are the reason I had the time to seal your pierce heart as quickly as I did when we turned the field off. That and my expertise with your species.” The man chuckled. “Did my dissertation on the similarities between yours and mine, as well as a genetic exploration of if we have a common ancestor. It was inconclusive, in case you are interested.”

“He isn’t,” Alex said. “Is he fine?”

“He needs rest. And I want to go over the steps he—”

“Does that have to happen right now?” Alex asked, his tone sharp. “Me and my...boyfriend, need to talk.” The word had almost caught. It was one thing to be together among his Samalians friends. They’d only known Alex and Tristan as being together. But humans had narrower views on relationships.

The man looked from Alex to Tristan and nodded. “I can come back in a couple of hours and I lay out your expected recovery.” The man left and Alex approached the bed.

“Just what the fuck were you thinking?”

“Hi,” Tristan replied, smiling.

“Don’t you even think of trying to charm you way out of this. I almost killed you! And why? Because of Emil’s mother? The doctor said it, it was pure luck they were there! That he didn’t waste time looking for your heart on the left side of your chest, and if I wasn’t so fucking angry I’d see it wasn’t luck at all, wouldn’t I?”

Tristan’s smile shifted from charm to cunning. “I’m not stupid Alex.”

“No, then—”

The door opened, and the therapist entered. “You aren’t trying to kill him. That’s good, I suppose.” She stepped to the bed and dropped a datachip in Tristan’s lap. “Here’s what you wanted. And let me tell you that you are an unquantifiable moron, to think there you can use trauma to counter such deep-seated trauma. If you hadn’t paid me so much, I’d report you for psychological torture.”

“It didn’t work?” There was a flatness to Tristan’s tone that made Alex search his face.

“It was never going to work,” she replied sharply. “If you’d told me what you were planning when you hired me, I’d have told you that. What you need is to sit him in front of a therapist.”

“I don’t think one exists with the training to survive Alex’s objection to being treated,” Tristan replied, amused.

“You both need to be examined,” she said in exasperation, then left.

“Okay,” Alex said, calmer. “What is any of this about?”

“How do you feel?”

“What do you think? I feel like killing someone, but I already nearly killed you, so you’re clearly off the hook. Just point me to someone.”

This time the disappointment was clear on Tristan’s face. “I’m sorry. I thought this would work.”

“And do what?”

“Make you realize that the killing urge you have, that yes, I fostered, isn’t good for you.”

“By making me think I’d killed you, when you took the knife meant for Marjoline Kelmer? Emil’s

mother?”

Tristan nodded. “I thought the shock would snap you out of it, bring you back to who you were before I made you like this.”

“I like being like this,” Alex snapped. “I don’t want to go back to that loser of a cubicle slave. I’m fine, Tristan.”

“You aren’t. I want you to have the control to choose when you kill.”

Alex took Tristan’s hand. “I kill when you tell me. That’s enough for me.”

Tristan pulled Alex closer. “I want you to realize it isn’t.” Their lips moved close. “I promised I would undo what I did to you, Alex. This didn’t work, so—”

“Sorry to interrupt this,” Eastyn said, stepping into the room. “But we need to talk, Tristan. There’s a complication and you still work for me so—”

“Work for you,” Alex said, mockingly. “Yeah, sure.” He looked at Tristan. “If you arranged this last part, you aren’t going to be able to convince me any of it wasn’t part of your plan.”

Eastyn looked unsure of what to say.

“It’s okay,” Tristan said. “He worked things out. And the rebels were never part of my plan, just something I had to work into it once we encountered them.”

“Alright,” Eastyn said. “Then, regarding those rebels. I need to know something, Tristan. How much will it cost me for you to help them?”