

“Stop fidgeting,” Tristan said, adjusting Alex’s collar.

“This isn’t going to work,” Alex replied. He pulled on the jacket’s sleeve and looked around the alley.

“It will.” He took Alex’s hand and held it still. “Humans pay more attention to the way things look than anything else. You look enough like the man you are pretending to be that even if she has met him, she will not notice.” Alex didn’t look reassured. “It’s unlikely he has been in this office recently. They handle personnel issues, and you saw his file—it’s been years since he’s had a reprimand.”

“Yeah, but won’t they—”

“She. The person working at this hour is a woman.”

“Fine. Won’t she wonder why he—I,” Alex caught himself before Tristan could correct him, “am asking for a new ID?”

“No, people lose things all the time.”

“People? Not humans?” Alex asked, smiling.

“Aliens also lose things.”

“Do you?”

Tristan held back a growl. He knew what Alex was doing; he’d used the tactic himself often enough. “This isn’t a bonding moment, Alex. You need to focus.”

He nodded. “Go ahead.”

“Do not act apologetic when you talk to her. You’ve worked for this company for years. Your record is as impeccable as such things can be. You are secured in your job and your position. Act embarrassed; losing your company identification is something recruits do, not a veteran like yourself. You have an hour to reach the office, ample time. Arrive on the hour—that is when she will be looking to leave. You will have ten minutes before her replacement arrives; he is being delayed. She will be distracted already by this, but engage her in conversation. Ask about her family—she has two daughters and a small animal they keep as a pet. Do not ask about the children’s father. Once she has given you the identification, remain until her replacement arrives, and offer to escort her home. She will refuse.”

Alex looked at him, stunned. “You expect me to remember all that?”

“Yes,” Tristan answered flatly.

Alex sighed. “How the fuck do I act embarrassed?”

Tristan smiled. He’d expected that question. “Just remember that time Jack felt you up in your apartment’s lift.” He’d been remembering more of his time as Jack since Alex had entered his life. Small snippets of their life together.

Alex looked momentarily confused, then blushed. Anger flashed in the human’s eyes. “Do not ever bring him up again.”

Tristan ignored the anger. “When you have the badge, land in the bar’s lot; we won’t need to use this vehicle again. By the time it’s noticed, we will be off-planet. Wait in it until I exit with the mark.”

“What if you’re done with him before I’m back?”

“If you take more than two-and-a-half hours, it means you have been caught and I’ll proceed with my alternate plan.”

“You have a way to get Emil without me?”

“I do.” He had brought enough edible explosives to feed the mark, as well as half the people in the bar. After a demonstration, they’d do what he told them.

Alex considered him. He looked at the bar beyond and shook his head. Tristan expected Alex had no problem imagining the body count that would be left behind if he had to use that plan. Alex got back in the hover and headed out.

The lighting and music were soft as Tristan entered. This was a place where professionals in their field came to relax after—or before—work, not a place of partying. The wide room had tables at which small groups of well-dressed humans enjoyed drinks and food. Couches lined the walls and people relaxed on them, alone or in pairs. He counted three aliens: a Daraxy, a—

“Excuse me,” a man said, snapping Tristan’s head forward. He’d remained in the doorway to be noticed, but he hadn’t seen anyone heading this way. “You’re kind of in the way.”

Tristan studied the man, and those green eyes studied him back. Something about him

wasn't... Tristan couldn't work out what it was. His scent wasn't...

The man chuckled. "I don't want to just push you aside—you look like you could give Thor a workout—but I do need to leave. I have work to do."

Tristan stepped aside. The man had on a shirt and pants that matched those worn by the other professionals in the room, but the long coat he wore over it smelled of heat and long-encrusted sand.

He looked over his shoulder once the man was behind him, and those green eyes looked him up and down with an appreciative smile before the door closed and he vanished from view.

The exchange had attracted glances. Not the unobtrusive entrance he had been aiming for, but everyone went back to their socializing. An alien here was noticeable, but the planet was important enough in the scheme of SpaceGov and the corporation they weren't talked about on the news each time one was seen.

He did a circuit of the room, locating the mark seated by himself. The human was known here; he spoke with some of the people passing him, laughed at something one of them said. But he didn't come here to socialize. He was waiting for his client to be done with whatever too-rich men did—in this case his client was entertaining women, many of them. More than he had expected. Tristan had seen to it.

Tristan found the server he'd already contacted and flashed the credit chip to get her attention. A common gesture in a bar. Under the pretense of ordering a drink, he passed her the chip as well as the package of explosives, with instructions to add a small amount to the food of every human she served.

She didn't know what this was about or for, but the amount on the chip ensured she wouldn't ask questions. She confirmed it. Tristan had already converted them from credits to barix—the local currency—to avoid confusion and complications.

When she returned with his drink—water colored to look like one of the popular alcoholic mixes—he did another circuit of the room before sitting on the couch next to his mark. The man glanced at him, then went back to bobbing his head to the music. He took a long swallow of his drink and leaned back with a satisfied sigh. His mark's drink didn't contain alcohol; he was too much of a professional to impair his senses when he might be needed at a moment's notice.

Tristan was prepared for that.

"Excuse me." Tristan made himself sound younger, in the way humans sounded young, by raising the pitch of his voice. "You work for Weeber, right?" The man raised an eyebrow, and Tristan gestured to the way he was dressed. "The suit is pretty distinctive." It was black, currently slightly reflective, but it could harden with a simple touch of the control at the sleeve's cuff and able to stop up to medium blaster fire, but that wasn't commonly known.

"I do," the man finally said, his tone bordering on bored.

Tristan nodded, sat back, and sipped his drink. He leaned toward his mark again. "Any tips you can give me about getting a job with them?"

The man raised an eyebrow.

Tristan shrugged. "No one wants to hire a big dumb alien for anything I'm actually qualified to do, so I figure I might as well get a job doing the only thing people think I'm good for."

"You've done that before?" The man finished his drink and motioned for a refill.

Tristan shook his head.

"You have any combat experience?"

The server who took his mark's drink was the one Tristan had already paid. She looked at him as she straightened, and he gave a slight nod.

"I know how to fight, if that's what you mean." Tristan sipped his drink. "Growing up one of the rare aliens on Eftigan, I've been in my share of fights."

The man shook his head. "I'm not familiar with that one."

"Mining planet, pretty far from here. My parents went there because hard labor is about all people consider us good for." He motioned to himself. "Big, strong, and dumb."

"What's your name?"

"Brian."

"Brian? Really?"

"Yeah. My father felt I'd have more opportunities if I had a name that fitted in with most of

the people in the universe. He never considered that kids would think I'm trying to pass myself off as human. Most of the fights were about that."

His mark offered his hand. "I'm Aaron. I'm sorry about the trouble it caused you, but he was probably right. I, for one, am more comfortable if I don't have to worry about mangling someone's exotic name. So, you—"

Tristan stood as the server returned, on his side of the small table. He took the glass and paid for it. He dropped the low-level intoxicant pill in it as he placed it on the table. His mark eyed him and the glass cautiously.

"I'm sorry," Tristan said, putting confusion in his voice. "Have I done something wrong? My father raised me to always offer some form of payment in exchange for any help I receive."

"I haven't helped. How do you know I will?"

"You haven't told me to leave you alone. I figured it meant you plan to."

The man smiled. "Very observant, a useful skill in this job." He sipped his drink, then nodded to the one before Tristan. "What are you drinking?"

Tristan shrugged. "I don't know. I asked for something popular that wasn't too sweet. Most human drinks are much too sweet."

"Alcoholic?"

Tristan nodded.

"My first advice is to avoid drinking those around security people. Intoxication isn't a good look on someone looking to work with us. And never ever drink when you're active."

"Are you working? I mean, I can leave you alone."

The man smiled and checked his comm unit. "My client is going to be a few more hours, so don't worry about it. And you can't leave until I've actually helped you. You said you know how to fight, but can you learn proper combat technique? Would you be willing to join one of the military forces for a few years?"

"Yes." Tristan hesitated. "Do they pay well?"

His mark laughed. "They barely cover the cost of living, but the training is invaluable."

"So combat experience is how I get hired?"

The man nodded and took a sip. "Most security companies don't want to have to train new recruits in that; there's too much other stuff you have to learn. I spent fifteen years in the Partoch Army—other side of the planet," he said at Tristan's quizzical expression. "I fought in two wars, had to get half my body replaced over that time. Fortunately the army did cover that. They break it, they pay for it, is Partoch's motto."

"Would they replace part of me if I lost some in a fight?"

"They should. How else will they keep you fighting for them? Don't worry about not being human; it's all DNA-based replication. Unless you're some exotic species, they can recreate any part of you." He took another swallow. "So, how set are you on working for Weeber?"

"They're the best, right? My father always said that I should never settle for second best. Aim for the top."

His mark smiled. "Smart man—being, err...sorry, you didn't mention your species." He took another sip, then raised a hand to order another drink.

"Samalian."

"He's a smart Samalian."

"You said the army could replace parts I'd lose, but would they hire an alien?" The server returned with the drink and Tristan paid for it again, dropping another pill in it, a stronger one this time.

The man snorted. "They're the army, they'll take anyone willing." The man launched into a story of his time in the army. Tristan made up stories of fights on the imaginary mining world he'd grown up on to participate in the conversation, and both laughed at the antics young men could get up to, regardless of species.

Each time his mark ordered a replacement drink, Tristan insisted on paying for it, and dropped in another pill—in gently increasing strength—so that two hours later, when Tristan suggested they should get some fresh air, his mark was in no state to refuse, or even comment on how not drunk Tristan was.

Standing took five minutes, with the man laughing each time he lost his balance and falling

back on the couch. When he finally managed to stay vertical, he whooped and tipped forward. Tristan caught him and held on to him as they walked through the bar's crowd. Outside, the man pointed to his hover. Halfway there, Alex joined them.

"Hey, I dunno you came here too," the mark called to Alex, and almost pulled Tristan down when he tripped, trying to turn toward him. "This is..." he whispered conspiratorially to Alex. "What's your name again? I forgot, but I know I've seen you before." He indicated Tristan. "He wants to work for us." He snickered. "Like anyone'd ever hire someone like him."

Alex looked at Tristan, eyebrow raised. If he expected the Samalian to take offense, he'd have to wait a long time. Tristan didn't care what people thought of him, so long as it got the job done.

"There, there! There's my baby." The man ran a hand over the black hover. "Isn't she a beauty?" It was a Firdorel GH-21, one of the most popular models on the planet, which made it utterly indistinguishable from the others in the lot.

Tristan took the mark's hand and pressed it on the door. It opened, and Tristan sat him behind the control. "You need to start it."

"I do?" The man looked at the inside, as if he'd never seen it before. "This is a really nice hover."

"Yes, it is. Now, you need to go pick up your client, so you need to start the hover."

"Who?"

"Your client. He called, remember?"

"Nooo, I don't. And I'm drunk. Why am I drunk? I can't drive a hover if I'm drunk." He leaned his head back. "I'm going to sleep first."

Tristan shook him. "You have to start the hover first. Your friend here will pilot it while you sleep it off. That way no one will find out you got drunk."

The mark looked at Alex as if what he'd been told was a revelation. He focused on the controls, and it took three tries before the hover came to life. He had a pleased grin on his face when Tristan applied the hypodermic to his neck.

Tristan pulled the unconscious man out of the hover, looked around to confirm no one was looking their way, and dropped him in the trunk. He had Alex grab their packs from the other hover, and then they were on their way to the academy.