

“Good morning,” their employer greeted them as Tristan exited the bedroom, Alex ahead of him. The man paused in cooking to look at them. “Rough night?” He didn’t react to either’s nudity, but Alex’s newly applied sealant on the fresh cuts their love-making had given him.

“Fun night,” Alex replied, “And morning. And last evening.”

The man whistled in appreciation. “Where can I find myself a woman who can manage that?” He placed food on the counter separating the food preparation area from the rest of the room. “Not sure what you prefer, but it’s my understanding Mercs will eat just about anything put before them.”

“You watch too many vids,” Alex said, taking a seat. “And people like him are only found on Samalia.”

“We eat what we can find,” Tristan said, taking the plate offered to him, “because there’s no telling when the next meal will be when in the middle of job.”

“It’s the next time we make it to our ship and get nutrient bars,” Alex said between bites. “This is pretty good.”

“I bet you’d say that if I cooked you a storm gruel, after eating those nutrient things.”

“If it has anything to do with the storms out there,” Alex said, “I’ll pass.”

The food was edible and filling. Tristan expected it was nutritious as well. SpaceGov had standards when it came to what people should eat, and it took work to get food that didn’t meet them through the systems in place to ensure the standards were respected. Food had to be obtained or manufactured on the planet to do it easily, and Arjolis’ current condition didn’t lend itself to that.

“We need to discuss how we’ll proceed,” Tristan said, putting the empty plate down.

“I expect that we’ll proceed in such a way I get what I’m paying you to get me,” their employer said without hesitating or glancing at Alex. The man impressed Tristan with his ability to hold a mask each time he did it.

“That will require you being more involved.”

That made the man pause. “I hired you to do the work.”

“Situation changed,” Alex said. “Setting this part of isn’t something we can arrange. Not as easily,” he added, and their employer looked at Tristan.

“The power dynamic within the rebel is unstable,” Tristan said. He barely had to exaggerate to build the scenario. “But the one danger is Kaleb.”

“I’d have thought it was Roman,” their employer said, and Tristan raised an eyebrow. “The man’s all plans and no follow through. He has big ideas and expects everyone else to figure out how to make them happen. If you want my guess, he was management before Karliak showed up.”

“Engineer,” Tristan corrected. “His main flaw is that he expects everyone to know as much as he does. So his plans are built with the idea he’s surrounded by the qualified people he needs to make them happen, instead of a group of people who barely scratched their way to them. His ideas are founded on good principle, just not realistic with what he had to work with. Kaleb, on the other hand, is greedy. He isn’t going to be satisfied until he had everything, which includes what you hired us to get.”

“But you’re good enough to get it, anyway.” The uncertainty in the tone could have been because the man couldn’t follow where Tristan was going, or as part of the mask. Since Alex wasn’t looking for deception at this stage, it didn’t matter.

“And this is how we do it,” Tristan said. “They will decide to go with Kaleb’s plan. I seeded enough doubt as to how feasible Ramon’s idea is and any investigation they do in going after the secrets will confirm what I told them. That only leaves going after the Karliak representative for their access codes.”

“Okay, so you want them to pick that one. I got that much from what you said during the meeting. How does me being involved more than convincing them to take me on as one of the leaders change that?”

“We need Kaleb to come to the station with us,” Alex said.

“I’m not going to ask why,” their employer said, and Alex raised an eyebrow. “I know merc can be messy in getting jobs done. That doesn’t mean I want the details,” he explained. “I don’t see how I can make that happen. He won’t go if I tell him to.”

“But he will if you volunteer to come with us.”

“Wait, what?” The man looked at Alex, then hurriedly to Tristan, establishing the limits of how far he could stretch his mask before cracks showed. “I didn’t—I mean, I’m not paying you to put me in a dangerous situation like that.”

“Aren’t you willing to do whatever it takes to get what you’re after?”

“Listen,” the man said, facing Alex. “That isn’t what—”

“Enough,” Tristan said, and they both stilled. “This isn’t about you coming with us. It’s about making Kaleb afraid someone else will get the power he’s after. Access codes need to be transferred. Currently, he’s under the correct impression that we will have to bring the person who had them back to accomplish that. But if someone else with ambitions he can’t be certain of comes with us, he has to consider they might do it on the station.”

“And what if he decides it isn’t worth risking his life?”

Tristan’s ears twitch as he shook his head, and Alex smiled. “His ambitions won’t allow that.” He’d address what that was about later.

“Okay, but while I’ve lent your services to them, you work for me. There’s no way he’s going to believe you’d go against what I want.”

Alex snorted. “He’s business people believe anything can be purchased. And everyone knows mercs can be bought, for the right price.”

“And you’re sure he’s going to buy you away from me?” he asked Tristan.

“He’ll do it through Alex,” Tristan replied. “Kaleb is bigoted in a way that lets him use aliens, but he’ll seek alternatives first. While I did all the talking without Alex being present, he envisions it as him leaving behind a representative because what is taking place is beneath him.”

“The meeting was pretty important,” their employer said.

“He means dealing with you,” Alex said. “The way Tristan explained it, Kaleb sees the dynamic as me being in charge, but can’t be bothered to deal with the person who hired us directly. In his mind, it’s a power move that I have forced you to interact with an alien.”

“But I don’t have a problem dealing with Tristan.”

“This isn’t about the reality of the situation,” Tristan said. “But how Kaleb sees it. Because he doesn’t like aliens, he sees anyone else who acts like they don’t mind us, as just that, an act. And we don’t have to do anything other than go along with it.”

The man leaned against the counter. “Just to make sure I have it right. I volunteer, Kaleb buys you away from me, and how am I supposed to react to that?”

“You don’t seem worried he’ll pay us enough that we’ll actually start working for him,” Alex said far too casually.

“What? You said this was—”

“Alex,” Tristan said, keeping his tone a warning, but on the line of an order. He hadn’t expected him to pick up on the subterfuge.

“No,” Alex replied, tone sharp. “I just told be any merc can be bought, and he’s acting like he can’t imagine how we wouldn’t be the exception. He’s up to something.”

“Alex, I have investigated him.”

“Then tell me how come he’s not worried. I get you’re trying to be better, but no one who doesn’t know you, knows how reliable you are. To the universe, all we are is a pair of successful mercs. There’s nothing—”

“I know,” their employer said, sounding angry, “because I fucking hired Tristan, not some merc off a random board.”

“You have no reason to—”

“You think I didn’t check him out?”

“You can’t—”

“I know people!” their employer yelled, shattering the plate he slammed on the counter. Tristan watched the act, growing more impressed. “It’s what I do here. Get the people I know in contact with people who need them. So don’t act so fucking surprised that no matter how hard you two hide who you’ve worked for, I was able to find some and get their opinions. They told me to not screw you over if I wanted to live, and to trust you completely.”

There were inconsistencies, as well as an outright contradiction to his previous behavior, but the outburst placated Alex. Alex had never gained an aptitude at reading people, since he had Tristan to depend on. Before, he would have seen that as a flaw to remedy. Now, it was simply a facet of their partnership. Tristan handled people, Alex computers.

Their employer turned his glare on Tristan. "I didn't hire you to have him question me, you'd better keep him in—"

"Be very careful," Tristan growled, and man retreated to against the other counter. The mask cracked enough Tristan saw the fear he'd engendered. Then the man was back to being someone with power in their dynamic, if a man reminded he didn't hold the physical power. "Alex's suspicions were valid since you never divulge how you came to know of me. I am on the boards, so it was a reasonable way you could have found me. If you are contacted in the future by someone asking for an opinion on hiring me. Add to the list of those you were told not to hold back information."

"I understand. And I'm sorry I never said. As I explained, I never hired mercs before and—"

"I do understand," Tristan said, before he could add enough Alex would grow suspicious again. "And unless this still needs to be addressed, we need to finish planning before we head back to the rebels."

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"Absolutely not!" Kaleb yelled.

"Seems reasonable to me," Roman commented in an amused tone. The man seemed to think going to the station would be a day excursion, and that Eastyn's comment about going with the team was just so he could chaperon and ensure no one cause undue troubles. Tristan adjusted his opinion of the man. He had probably never worked outside of a lab.

"Stay out of this!" Kaleb snapped. "This was my idea and you aren't going to..." He trailed off, the realization he was giving away more of his intention finally sinking in. Tristan didn't know if there had been more than the money he had that gave him a place at this table, but he was certain he had never let his true ambitions slip. He still hadn't, but Tristan was curious how the man would justify his outburst.

The businessman straightened his suit. "I mean, you don't know anything about the plan since you weren't here when we discussed it."

Their employer smiled. "I don't need to know it, since you're going to have to explain it to my mercenaries. Or are you expecting to pull this off without them?"

"You can't just show up and start demanding we go along with everything you want."

"They work for me," Eastyn said. "So long as you need their help, I can demand a whole lot of things."

With a frustrated cry, Kaleb stormed out of the room while Ramon chuckled.

Krystal simply looked at their employer, frowning. She hadn't said one word during the argument, only watched both men. Tristan didn't read maliciousness from her, but there was suspicion aplenty.

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"She worked within the planetary government," Alex said as they walked along the concourse. Tristan had only let him out of his sight while he coerced the information so he could get a sense of how the people Alex had beaten the previous day felt about it now that they'd had the time to cool down. "Officially, her position was called Attendant to the Minister, but from what I could piece together of the actual work she did, she seemed to interface between every office."

"Enabler?" Someone like that would make sense within a government. Putting the people in place to ensure the leader's plans happened the way they wanted. It would also explain how she was picking up

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"The sense I got was more peace keeper. She seemed to handle negotiations and conflict resolution. A lot of the government's serves are behind Karliak's security now, so getting more will take longer."

"It won't be needed. It's enough background to understand how she can be as perceptive as she is, and Kaleb is approaching."

The businessman rounded a corner, out of breath. "There you are." As expected, he directed the comment at Alex.

“Can I help you with something?” Alex replied.

“We need to talk.”

“Alright.”

“In private.” He gave Tristan a significant look.

“It’s okay,” Alex said. “If I need you, I’ll call.”

Tristan gave a nod of the head, and Alex smiled again. His ears. They were giving the Samalian equivalent without Tristan realizing it, and Alex found it amusing. Tristan didn’t mind, although he was surprised at how quickly they were coming back, considering how hard he’d trained himself to lose them once he’d left Samalia behind forever.