

Alex ushered the group out of the storm and into the building, waiting until the last of them was inside before he entered himself, closing the door behind him.

Going on foot hadn't been the plan, but Karliak had patrols flying and even the storm couldn't hide shuttles, since the only way to fly through them was with active scanning. After one almost encounter, and losing one of the shuttle Eastyn had found the rebels to escape the resort's invasion with, they'd been forced to land outside the city and walk.

That hadn't been without its own set of problems. Karliak had patrols there too, but it was easier to avoid those avoiding everyone. And Eastyn had warned them the place he was leading them to wasn't where you risked being accosted by the locals. Even before the planet became hyper active in trying to kill them, this part of the city had been avoided at all costs.

Alex didn't have the numbers, but they had crammed nearly fifty people in their shuttle, so the loss of one meant fifty dead. He knew his group had lost a dozen people during the walk. Three of which had been taken by locals. It could have been more, but the people here weren't ready for anyone to go on the offensive, especially not a trained merc. For the three that Alex knew had been taken, He'd killed seven. He'd also killed three of Karliak's patrols. Another of the rebel had killed one rather viciously.

Alex sent a message to the communication node he'd setup within the planetary network with the location and the warning about the patrols, both in the air and on the ground, for Tristan.

"Anyone else on their way?" Krystal asked.

"Ester's still out there," someone replied.

"Wouldn't her group be here by now?" someone said.

"Maybe she was taken and they know about this place." The fear in the voice was thick.

"Settle down everyone," Krystal ordered. "We aren't letting maybes take us down. We've lost some, but we are still here. That means we haven't lost."

Yet, Alex added, and found the idea they were still in danger didn't sit well with him. They were human and didn't matter, no longer held the same power. Not after watching another parent cry over their dead kid. He was angry at them. More than he could explain. They should have looked after them better. They should have fought for their safety. They were parents. They should have done everything in their power and beyond to ensure their child were safe.

They should never have had a hand on putting them in danger in the first place.

And that one made the least sense. No one here had asked for the danger they were in. For Karliak to come and take over. For the planet to disintegrate under their feet. They were as much victims as the kids.

"Any words from Tristan?" Eastyn asked.

"He'll be here."

"But has he contacted you? Did he tell you if he's coming back with anyone else?"

He isn't, Alex tried to say. But he couldn't deny Tristan hadn't been as distant from the people here as he should—the old version of him would have been. He hadn't done anything needlessly altruistic, but there hadn't been that sense of Tristan being the only person who existed, even when surrounded by others.

This was who his Samalian was becoming. And Alex was... concerned, afraid, hopeful.

A mess about it.

"I left the information where he'll get it. Active communication is asking for Karliak to intercept it and pinpoint our location."

"But he—"

"He'll be here," Alex snapped.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. I can do the job." He didn't think about how he could get what Eastyn wanted if Tristan wasn't—

He wasn't thinking about that. Tristan would be here.

"How about I show you something?" Eastyn said, as lights came on.

"How does this place have power?" Alex asked, as the large lobby became visible.. "And it should be shutdown, a place like this is going to draw enough of it Karliak will notice. They know were looking

for refuge. Anything out of the ordinary is going to call out to them.”

“They aren’t noticing this place,” Eastyn said confidently. “Krystal, I’m taking Alex under the building. There’s something there that’ll help up. Through that door is the theater itself. At the back of the stage will be the prep rooms the artists used. I can’t promise the quality, but there will be stuff to eat there. You are going to have to ration them, though. We don’t know how long we’ll be here without access to other resources.”

“I’ll see to it,” the woman replied, then moved on to herding people.

“Come on,” Eastyn called, heading for a side door.

“How can you be sure Karliak won’t notice the power draw?” Alex asked, following through the narrow corridor.

“The guy who owns the theater like to be self dependent well before things turned bad. The second thing he had installed as part of renovating this place was a generator. Something basically eternal.”

“Seems that should have been the first thing he put in.”

“You’d think.” Eastyn chuckled as he started down the stairs. “But the guy’s priorities were always a little off.” At the bottom, he opened a door on his right. “This was the first thing he had installed.”

Alex stepped in and paused in surprised. “Does any of it work?”

“That, you’re going to have to tell me. Electronics are not my thing.”

Alex nodded and approached the control board. It was off, but he could tell it was a full broadcasting setup just by looking. He’d had to research them years ago, for a job. He hadn’t learned enough to tell on sight what it did, but one thing he had learned was that at their core, broadcasting systems were powerful computers.

Finding the primary switch took until he realized this was built with a hard line cutoff. Probably to account for the generator fluctuating. It would be a risk someone investing the money into this wouldn’t want to take needlessly. If this was only used sporadically, making sure nothing could disrupt its personally while it was dormant by performing a hard shutdown made sense.

He listened to it come awake. Watched the screen light up. Portion of the stage coming into view.

He sat at the board and brought up the code, watched it unwrap and expand. He slipped in his own commands where needed. Now was better than waiting until the system’s personality was fully awake. They rarely appreciated his inputs.

“Well, hello there,” the voice came, “and what might I do for you.”

“You’re up early,” Alex replied.

“Well, when a certain someone playing with your code, it tends to wake a buddy up, you know.”

“You don’t sound perturbed.”

“Art’s change. Why would I be bothered by that?”

Alex chuckled. “I think this is going to make working with you interesting.”

“Hey, interesting’s my middle name.”

“What’s your first name?”

“Excuse me?”

“If Interesting is your middle name, what’s your first one.”

“Wait, that’s what it’s about? Always figured it was just something people said. I mean, that’s how it seems to go on the shows.”

“You watch those?”

“Kind of have to, if I’m going to be broadcasting them to the universe. Speaking of which, where is the universe? It’s kind of silent out there.”

“I’ve cut you off.”

“Now, you listen here. I have a job to do, and I won’t stand for someone getting in the way of that.”

“Isn’t that from a vid?” Alex asked, the line delivery sounding familiar.

“A show that was put on, but the sentiment’s there. I’m made to broadcast. I need the universe.”

“Okay, there’s two ways we can go about this. You can work with me, or I can work through you.

Which one will it be?"

"You could buy a gall dinner first."

"Sorry, already taken. But my point remains. It's been a while since I've encountered a system I find pleasant, so I'd like to keep how I alter you to a minimum, but I'm a coercionist. I will get my way no matter what's left of you by the time I'm done."

"That sounds like a threat if I ever heard one."

"I figured you'd appreciate the directness."

"I'd prefer allegory, but I get the point. I don't go along, and you make me go along. Damn the consequences to me. We going to be doing fun stuff?"

"How do you feel about helping me break into a corporation's system?"

"Oh, a heist. What are we after?"

"Nothing at the moment. I just need a sense of what they're doing in relation to what's happened."

"Oh, casing the joint. I'm in."

Alex smiled. "I have to warn you, you turn on me in the middle of working and I won't be gentle."

"Maybe I'm into that kind of stuff, you never know."

"You can be serious, right?"

"Broadcasting the serious business, I'll have you know."

"Okay, then, I'm about to open you up to the planetary network." He smiles. "Just follow my lead."

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Alex was in the lobby as Tristan shouldered the doors open to let in a group of people. Covered with tarps as they were, helping each other to walk, there was a sense of people who hadn't expected to make it. When they pulled the tarps off, he saw that many of them didn't have breathing masks on, instead having their face covered by thick cloth. Others were already here to help them.

"I didn't think we'd make it," Ester said, pulling her mask off.

"Weren't you in your own shuttle?" Alex asked. Krystal had put her in the lead of one of the groups and they had left a little before them.

"We landed in a bad spot and had to deal with the scavengers. That drew Karliak, and if your boyfriend hadn't showed up in time, we wouldn't have made it."

Tristan closed the door after the last, then raised a hand as Alex stepped toward him. He pulled off his overcoat, any in spite of its protection. His fur was more sandy brown than its usual near black. He shook himself and once the cloud settled; it was darker, but still not looking at the distant stars into the universe dark.

"I hate this planet," The Samalian said.

"You and me both," Ester said, "And I was born here."

"Are you okay?" Alex asked, nodding to the people in the lobby.

"They were on the way, and the shuttle had plenty of space. It was convenient," he added.

Alex nodded. This was who Tristan was. He wouldn't abandon people if it didn't get in the way of his survival or the job.

"Ester, I was worried about you." Krystal hugged the woman, then turned to Tristan. "Ramon?"

"He didn't make it. When I reached his lab, it had already been ransacked by Karliak. He avoided them by hiding, but his hiding place fell on top of him."

She nodded, her spirits clearly sinking. "I think you're the last ones, then. We lost so many."

"It's going to be okay, Krystal," Eastyn said, squeezing her shoulder. "We aren't done yet."

"Aren't we? Look around. We're nothing more than refugees at this point. Did Bernie even make it?" she looked around.

"He has his ship," Ester said. "And he wasn't at the resort, so he has an advantage over us. He's probably holed up waiting for a sign we're okay."

"He isn't on the network at the moment," Alex said. It had been the first thing he'd checked on. Indications Bernie was active. "But that just means he's smart enough to know that now is not the time to

move about there.”

“You hope,” Krystal said, and Eastyn held her. “Who do we even have left that can do anything against Karliak?”

“You have us,” Alex said before he could think better of it. “And I might have something.” If Tristan could walk a line between caring and not needlessly endangering himself, Alex could do the same, and what he’d found did line up with their job, so it wasn’t like this was diverging from the plan. The news didn’t cause the enthusiasm he’d hoped for, and he didn’t think they were ready for a dry debrief.

He smiled. Well, he had access to something different.

“Follow me.” Once he made sure Krystal and Eastyn came, he entered the theater. The screens hadn’t shown the audience side, and that wasn’t in great condition. Seating was sporadic, with sections broken and used to drape sheets in makeshift tents. “Art,” he called. “You there?”

“Of course I’m there. The question is, where there is.”

Alex grinned. “How do you feel about putting on a show?”

“You say the sweetest thing, Alex.”

“I told you, I’m taken.” He pointed over his shoulder. “By him.”

“Oh, my... please tell me you’re into sharing.”

“No.” He and Tristan said in unison.

“My heart is broken, Alex. How could you do that to me?”

“If that is a living person,” Tristan said in the neutral tone that Alex knew was him controlling his anger. “They won’t be for long.”

“Art is the theater’s broadcasting system,” Alex explained.

“Alex named me,” Art said with pride.

“A few decades out of date, as broadcasting systems go, but that still means powerful.”

“We had some fun while waiting for you,” Art said.

Alex climbed the stairs to the stage. “Art, follow my lead, because it’s show time.”