

As they got close to the door, Alex had to disentangle himself from Tristan, who'd kept trying to get him out of his pants. He took out the earpiece, but Tristan caught his hand before he put it in.

"Alex, why do you have this?"

Alex kept himself from reacting, and hoped the others would attribute this to Tristan's state of mind. "I need it to unlock the door."

"No, you don't." Tristan's hand began shaking as it held his. His eyes searched Alex's.

"I do."

"You do?" He looked at the earpiece. When he looked back up, some of the life in his eyes had gone away. "You do."

Alex wanted to scream, because he was causing this, making him doubt things, but he had to keep the mask on. He couldn't risk exposing his plan, not to people he couldn't trust. Tristan let go of his hand, his arm falling at his side, lifeless.

He put it on, subvocalized the command, and didn't get a response. He wondered what was going on, but he had other things to deal with. He took his datapad out and prepared to access the lock, when he noticed it was already green. No one had locked it when they'd rushed out. If he'd paid attention to it, instead of Tristan, he would have seen that and not needed to take the earpiece out.

He wanted to hit his head against the wall until his skull broke. He'd hurt Tristan for nothing. He opened the door and ushered the others in.

He grabbed Aliana's arm. "Put Miranda in the cryotube."

"Shouldn't we just let her wake up?"

"We can't risk what Tristan'll do if he sees her awake again. I might not like her much, but I don't want her dead," he said, eyes never leaving Tristan.

Mary seated his Samalian on a chair as Aliana grabbed Zephyr and carried Miranda to the tube. Tristan didn't look up from the floor. Mary was studying the band.

"Definitely an injection system." She used a tool, and something that looked thinner than a leaf came out. Using small pincers, she removed an even thinner sheet from it. A light was flashing red next to where she'd extracted it. She turned the thing over. "Definitely a custom job. A pretty impressive one, too."

"What have they been giving him?"

"I won't know until I've—"

The band began beeping and the red light was now solid. She handed him the pincers before pulling out her datapad and a scanning wand. Her face went pale on reading what came up. She dropped the pad, grabbed the pincers, and put what it held back in the band. The light flashed red, then yellow and green, before turning solid green.

"Why did you put that back in? It's making him crazy."

She ran the wand over him and read the result. "It's also keeping him alive—well, for the moment anyway."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm going to have to analyze his blood to get the details, but I can tell you that's a nasty concoction. The moment I took it out, his system started crashing."

"I didn't notice anything."

"That's because this thing is designed to warn us if the cartridge is out too long. I saw the precursors to a crash. There must be a powerful stimulant in there."

"Mary, I need to know the bottom line."

"Alex, the bottom line is that he's dead. In fact, if the stimulant is as powerful as I think it is, it's a miracle he's still alive."

"No," Alex stated.

"For him to react that quickly to not receiving it means he's completely dependent on it, but that can't last. The cartridge is going to run out, and then he'll die."

"He isn't going to die. You're not going to let him. I didn't break you out of Prian's

World just so you could sit here and not do anything.”

“No, you broke me out of the place your abusive boyfriend threw me in so I could patch up wounds, help him over cryo sickness. I don’t have the knowledge to deal with something like this. Holies, I don’t even know what kind of equipment I’d need.”

“Use detox.”

She looked at him. “This isn’t a case of detoxifying his blood. Yes, it would probably deal with the rest of what’s been given to him, but if I just remove everything— Well, I pulled the cartridge and he started dying.”

He opened his mouth.

“Shut up,” she said. “I need to think. D.S.P. Diagnose, Subdivide, Prioritize.” She searched through her bag. “I’m going to take blood. The starting point is finding out what actual drugs are in his system, then figure out what needs to be addressed first and get that happening.” She took out an injector and put in an empty vial in it. And looked at Tristan’s arm.

Alex took it out of her hand, found the vein inside his elbow by feel among the fur. He made sure the injector was in reverse and applied it. He handed it back.

She took the vial and attached it to something and read off her datapad. “Whoever did this is utterly insane,” she whispered.

“Mary.”

“Nothing in his system is cataloged.”

“What does that mean?” Alex asked, impatiently.

“It means the drugs are as custom as that injection system.” She kept reading. “There’s definitely stimulants in there. I’m seeing chains I’d put in mood-enhancers, some I’d use to make downers—that one I have no idea what it could do. How is that all staying in balance?”

She shook her head. “I need a medical bed. Top of the line, something able to keep the dead alive.”

“I doubt we can get one of those,” Zephyr said. Alex looked and Aliana was still at the tube’s terminal. “She’s trying to make sure it’s working properly. Cryo isn’t our thing, but she knows more about tech than I do. I’ve been listening in on the comm system. They might not have sounded the alert, but they’re on it. After the armory was blown up, anything that can help their enemy is locked down tight, guarded and with orders to shoot anyone on sight.”

“Anders blew it up?” Of course he had. He didn’t need Zephyr’s incredulous look to know that. “Where’s the closest medical bay?”

Zephyr shrugged. “Miranda is the one with the map. You’re the one who gets computers to talk to him. I just throw knives. But I’m going to guess that the ones with what she needs are going to be better guarded than most.”

“Are any guards on their way here?”

“Again, your area, not mine.”

Alex nodded. “Mary, a bed’s off the table. How else can we do this?”

“Alex, there is no ‘how else’. I need something to take over the regulation of his system so I can gradually remove the drugs from it while trying to avoid having him crash on us.”

Alex crouched and avoided looking at Tristan. Seeing him still like this was angering enough as it was. He didn’t need to see any other details. “Mary. Mercs never have what they need, we learn to work with what’s there. What do you need to control his system, to get the drugs out?”

He couldn’t tell if she was going to laugh or cry, then her eyes flicked to the band. “Can you take control of that?”

Alex listened. “It’s got a processor, so yes.”

“Can it talk to anything else?”

Alex took his datapad, connected them. Did a quick search through the code. “No

communication ports.”

“So they didn’t do direct monitoring. I can use that to control the drugs he gets. I have the chemical strings, so I can recreate what he’s getting, wean him off them slowly enough, but it doesn’t monitor the blood. Without that, I have no way of knowing if I’ve disrupted the balance and killed him.”

“What does that?”

“A medical bed.”

“We don’t have that, Mary. Something else.”

“I don’t know! I’m not a doctor, Alex. I don’t know what kind of machine does what. I only did one year!”

“Would a cryotube do that?” Aliana asked.

Mary shook her head. “That’s all biological. We’d have to dunk him in it and leave him there for however long it took for his system to clean up.” Before Alex could shake his head, she added, “I doubt Alex is good with that.”

“How about a fluid-replacement system?” Zephyr asked. “Those things have to keep the blood healthy for the entire time you’re in cryo. That means sensors and a way to put nutrients in, right?”

“Sure,” Mary replied, “but where are we going to find one of those?”

“Right over there.” Zephyr pointed to six chairs against the back wall. “What? You live on a ship, you get in the habit of looking for the emergency cryo chairs. Those are fluid-replacement ones.”

Mary looked at where Zephyr had indicated. “Yes, that should have the components to make something, but does any one of you know how to make one out of those? I don’t.”

Alex smiled. “If you still have the pack I told you to bring, it won’t be a problem. You’re standing next to the best tech you’ll ever meet. All he needs are the parts and be told what it’ll have to make.”

“In his state?” She looked at Tristan, dubious.

“Tristan can build anything, even in his sleep. This isn’t going to be a problem.” Alex put all his hope into what he was saying. He had to. If Tristan couldn’t do this, he wasn’t sure how he’d take it. “Zeph, Aliana, can you two take apart the chairs and bring that here?”

“Can we get some tools?” she asked. “These hands aren’t made to take things apart if you want them to still work.”

“Help yourself.”

“A functional blood-cleaner isn’t going to help until we have control of the injection system.”

“Can’t we use the system Tristan will build to do both? Like Zeph said, it has to add nutrient to the blood to keep it healthy. Can’t you change what it gives? Put in the drugs that are going to help him instead of plain nutrients?”

She considered it. “I guess so, but I’d still need a way to control that... Maybe not. I should have enough in the portable medical fabricator for at least one dose of what she created, set up whatever’s built with that, shut down this injector, and let the other one take over. But I’m going to need to know the kind of schedule this one’s on.”

“That I can give you,” Alex said, starting to listen to the band’s processor. “You’re going to want to have your datapad ready.”

She eyed him suspiciously.

“Mary, I don’t care what you have hidden in there. Although if it’s that important, it should be in your memory implant; it’s more secure. But I’m going to need someplace to put the information once I’ve compiled it, and I’m certainly not giving you access to my datapad.”

“One-way transfer?”

Alex rolled his eyes. “Sure. If that’s going to make you feel more secure.”

“Not the way you’re saying it.”

“Just have it ready.”

He took his datapad and connected to it, then looked for any code that dealt with scheduling and transferred it. If the processor was smarter he could give it instructions, possibly make the alterations Mary needed, even now. If he knew more about how it worked he might be able to, but he wasn’t risking it. Not with Tristan’s life in the balance.

“Alex,” Tristan said, his voice not quite as listless as before. “It’s wrong.”

“It’s fine,” he replied, trying to decipher what he heard before it was visible on his datapad. Code in its environment was always more useful than out of it. There had to be a hardwired port somewhere in there.

“No.” Tristan’s voice was firmer, had some growl to it. “You’re wrong. You don’t need the earpiece.”

“I do.” He looked at him, at his face, and saw anger in his eyes. Not cold and calculating, as it should be, but hot, burning.

Mary grabbed him and pulled him away just as Tristan stood with a roar.

“It’s all wrong!” Tristan looked around. “Come out! I know you’re hiding here. You can’t fool me. Do you hear me, Justin? I’m not playing anymore. You made a mistake!” Tristan’s gaze glided over Alex and the rage in his eyes made him wince, but it wasn’t directed at him, or anyone, as far as he could see.

“Let go of me, I have to help him.”

“You’re going to want to do that from a distance.”

“Mary, I have to go to him.”

“Alex, look at him! He’s out of control.”

Tristan was fighting someone, claws out, slashing at the air. It wasn’t training, like Tristan might do when waiting for Alex to be ready. This was full-on fighting, and killing, except there was no one there.

“What’s going on?”

“The drugs have moved on to a different cycle. Anger, I’m guessing, although I’m not sure that’s just the drug. What I see here is a mood-manipulator. I think it’s pushing him to anger, but he’s feeding it himself.”

“So if I can calm him, it won’t be as bad?” Alex tried to look away. Seeing Tristan this out of control was too much of a reminder of the destroyed workroom. The tool and tables broken. Tristan’s weapon collection torn to pieces.

“I don’t think you can do that. He was looking right at you when he got angry. I’m also not sure he’ll see you and not whatever the drugs are causing him to see.”

“Causing him to see?”

“There’s a hallucinogenic in there.”

“Then why was he docile when we got here?” Zephyr asked, watching Tristan with fascination, carrying an armload of parts.

“A lot of drugs,” Mary said in exasperation, “interacting together in a carefully regulated manner. Any change in his mood can tip the balance.”

“So something made him go from hornball to depressed,” Zephyr said, “and now to murder machine?” He pulled his gaze from Tristan and looked for a place to put what he was carrying down.

“The drugs are pushing him in varying directions at varying times, but yes, his mood and outside influences will enhance the result.”

“How long is he going to be like that?” Alex asked. “He can’t build what you need that way; he’s just going to break those in ever smaller pieces. Can you sedate him?”

“Alex, didn’t you listen to anything I said? Delicate balance. I blindly add anything to it and your boyfriend will die.”

Tristan screamed, and Alex recognized it. Tristan was surrounded by bodies and he

was daring anyone else to take him on. No one did, because by then whoever was left was too hurt to do anything. Except now, Tristan had to see more opponents coming at him, because his body language said he was readying himself for more fighting.

Alex looked at the cryotube Miranda was in. “Mary, how long do you think he’s going to be like this? Right now he’s attacking imaginary people, but if he sets his sight on the equipment here, he’s going to do a lot of damage to it.”

Mary looked at the closest platform to Tristan, the same one Alex had looked at. “I honestly don’t know. Did you get enough to work out the scheduling?”

Alex shook his head.

“Then maybe he should be restrained?” she offered.

“I’m not getting close to him,” Zephyr said.

“I can take him on,” Aliana said, putting down what she was carrying.

“No, you can’t,” Zephyr said, before Alex did. The man glanced at Alex. “It isn’t just the drugs, is it?”

“No. He’d kill any of us if that’s what he decided to do.”

“In this state he wouldn’t feel pain, probably wouldn’t even realize if limbs went missing.” Mary shuddered. “Who in their right minds wants to make someone like him deadlier?”

“They did have him behind bars,” Aliana said.

“Would those really hold him?” Zephyr asked.

Alex shook his head. “Nothing holds him. It’s just a question of time before he finds a way out. If they were serious, they’d have had a forcefield.”

“Those things on his arms and legs,” Aliana said. “They could be part of how they kept him in.”

Zephyr looked at Tristan, and Alex saw him thinking. “Then he’d have to use the power fluctuations, but those lasted only a few seconds.” Worry showed on his face.

“That’s all he’d need,” Alex said. “Once he decides something needs to happen, seconds are all that it takes for him to make it happen. Consider that if you think of taking him on.”

“Alex?” Mary’s tone made him look at her. She was studying her datapad, glancing at Tristan.

“What?” he prompted her.

She bit her lower lip. “I think you need to prepare yourself.” She paused. Looked at him, worried.

“Mary, what are you talking about?”

She slumped a little. “Look, it’s clear he’s lost contact with reality.”

“It’s the drugs.”

“Alex, this level of drugs can do permanent damage. In all likelihood, even after his system’s clean, he will never be who he was before.”

“No!”

Mary winced and backed from him. “Alex.”

“No!” He pointed to Tristan. “You don’t know him. He doesn’t break, he’s the one who breaks people. The universe is going to break before he—”

A scream of despair made him turn. Tristan was leaning against the wall, looking in anguish at something only he could see. He dug his claws in his chest and raked them from left to right, biting back the scream until the pain became too much.

Alex ran to him and pulled the arm away. “Stop!” Tristan raked his chest with his other hand. “Aliana, help me hold him!”

“I thought you said we’d be stupid to try to stop him,” she said as she grabbed his arm and held it against the wall.

“I’m not letting him hurt himself.” Alex was surprised Tristan wasn’t fighting any harder against them, then realized he was crying, silently mumbling something. “Mary, why is

he doing this to himself?"

"How should I know?" She was next to them.

"You know the drugs in his system, know what they do."

"Drugs don't tell someone 'hurt yourself', they cause alterations in his mood. He's doing that because he thinks he has to, or deserves to be hurt."

"Tristan, no, you haven't done anything wrong. I'm here, we'll help you."

"I doubt he can hear you," she said.

"Then stop standing there and do something!"

"Ali— Zephyr, bring me my bag." She took the scanner from it.

"What are you doing?"

"The only thing I can at the moment," she snapped back. "Checking his vitals to determine what's coming next." She read her datapad, grumbling. "I really wish people would stop thinking I can just do anything they tell me. I'm a fucking biochemist, not the Sainted Mother." She let a breath out. "Okay, the good news is that his system is calming."

"How is that good?"

"It means he probably won't be flying off in rage. That means, I hope, that we can work around him without fearing for our lives."

"I think we should always be afraid for our lives around him," Zephyr said.

"Alex, you said you can get the code. I'm going to need that if I have any chance to help him. That blood-cleanser, how sure are you he can make it?"

"Certain," Alex answered, putting all the confidence he wasn't feeling anymore in his tone. Tristan was sobbing.

"I miss you," Tristan said, and Alex felt hope crash with his own despair. Was Tristan seeing him? Or was this just another delusion?

"I'm here. I'm right here."

"I wish you were." Tristan began sagging down and they couldn't hold him up. "But it's okay. We're going to be together again soon."

"No," Alex snapped, "don't you dare give up. Do you hear me? You're Tristan, you don't ever give up."

Tristan chuckled and looked up, resting his head against the wall. "You win. You found a way to kill me. Just hurry up and do it. Do it! Stop torturing me!"

"No, the universe hasn't won. Do you hear me? You fight what it wants. You always fight back, and you win!"

"Why, Alex?" Tristan asked, looking at him. "What's the point in fighting it if you're not there?"

"I am here," he answered through gritted teeth.

Tristan cupped his cheek and Alex fought the impulse to lean into it. "You're dead, and I never appreciated what you gave me. When we're together again, I promise you, I will care for you like I always should have."

"No." Alex didn't want to go there. He didn't want to reinforce the delusion, but he had to get Tristan moving, and this mask was the only one he could think of. "You don't get to be with me."

"Alex, please. I'm sorry, I'll do better by you."

"Really?" He felt his heart twist at the disdain in his voice. "You'll do better? After you're dead? You think you get to be with me?"

"Please." The pain in Tristan's voice, in his eyes should send him running, but Alex used it to make himself angrier.

"I'm dead, Tristan."

"I know, and I'm sorr—"

"And they aren't."

Confusion mixed in with the pain.

“You don’t get to be with me while they’re still alive. I was yours, Tristan. You got to kill me, no one else, that was the deal. They took that away from me.”

“Alex, no, I didn’t want you—”

“Shut up!”

Tristan shook, like a child surprised at someone’s anger.

“No, you don’t get to be miserable, Tristan. You don’t get to die. You don’t get to be with me while they’re still alive.”

“Alex—”

“Don’t you dare plead with me. They took something precious from me, from you. You don’t get to be with me until you take the same from them.”

“Wh-what?”

“I want vengeance,” Alex growled. “You are going to avenge me.”

He heard the others step away.

“Alex, what are you doing?” Mary asked.

Tristan’s eyes never looked away from his. “Avenge you?”

If he wasn’t going to acknowledge her, neither was Alex. “Yes. They took my death at your hand away from me. So I want you to take their lives from them.”

“Alex, what’s the point? I just want to be with you again.”

Alex stood. “You die now, without doing this, and you’ll never be with me. I’m not going to be with someone who just gives up.” He turned and took a step away.

Tristan was holding his hand. “Don’t go! Please, don’t leave me!”

Alex turned. “Your choice, Tristan. Give up and be alone forever, or do this, do whatever it takes to avenge me, and when it’s over, we will be together again.”

Tristan hesitated and Alex pulled on his hand, surprised at how weak the Samalian’s grip was. “Promise me you’ll do it, or I’m leaving.”

“I promise!” The desperation in Tristan’s voice was like a knife in Alex’s heart. He’d hate himself later, but for now, he had to carry through with this.

He crouched next to him. “Good. The first step is for you to get better. Mary will tell you what you need to do for that. You are going to do what she tells you. Is that clear?”

“Who’s Mary? Is she someone I killed? Is she with you, is she here to punish me too?”

“Tristan! Focus! The universe wants you to give up, but I want you to avenge me. Who’s more important to you?”

“You are.” Pure conviction. If only this was the real Tristan.

“Then stop asking questions and do what you’re told.” Alex motioned for her to move closer. “This is Mary,” he said when she finally did.

Tristan looked at her and seemed surprised to see her.

“You are going to do what she tells you. She’s here to help you avenge me. You’re not going to ask questions, you’re just going to do it. Is that clear?”

Tristan nodded.

Alex nodded to Mary, and she smiled at Tristan. It was the smile of a kind woman looking at a lost child, and he was amazed she could do that after the fear Tristan had put into her on Baran’s ship.

“Hi, I’m Mary. Alex tells me you can make things.”

Tristan nodded.

“Good. Do you know what a blood-filter is?”

Tristan laughed—a weak, mocking thing. “Of course I do.”

“That’s good. I need you to make one.”

Tristan looked around. “Where are my tools?”

Aliana handed Alex the pack with tools in them. “Here. Everything you usually use.”

Zephyr was putting down the parts they’d brought and heading to the disassembled chairs for more.

Tristan took the components and looked them over. He opened one, took something

out, and set it aside. As he worked, more of the Tristan that Alex loved came to the surface. The focus, the determination.

“Alex!”

His head snapped up. Mary was glaring at him.

“I need that code.” She indicated the armband. “Without it I can’t get him to make a replacement system. Stop pining and start working.”

Alex glared at her.

“Good, now focus that killer stare and get me the code so I can save your boyfriend.” There was a tone in her voice that sounded like she was questioning her own sanity for doing that.