

Alex fell too slowly to be in full gravity.

He understood that, but he didn't understand how he'd gotten where he was. Low gravity should mean a specialized room on a ship, or in space if this was just his ejection momentum carrying him...

He wasn't in a room or in space, and he was falling. He didn't know it could be, but he felt the pull of gravity dragging him ever deeper in this...

Where was he? How had he gotten here?

He had a flash of brown eyes, distorted by water.

I love you.

His inability to breathe.

He reached the bottom and settled on it gently as understanding sank into him.

So it had happened.

He'd known it would, deep down. He'd simply hoped he would have longer with his Samalian.

Of course, this wasn't what he expected death to be like.

He sat. The ground was hard. More like stone than earth, and flat. The air was—he took a breath—there? The sky was a paler version of the ground.

He stood and looked around at this unending plane.

This was death? He'd expected nothingness. A system shut down with a blank screen. The mind was a computer, after all.

And if this was being dead, where was everyone else.

"Like you think anyone would want to be around you," someone said, tone filled with hate.

He turned to face them in time for the punch to send him to the ground. He had a sense of a man, short brown hair, a white shirt on a wide frame, and black pants. The whole screamed 'desk jockey'. But no jockey hit as hard as this one had.

"Look," He rubbed his jab. "I don't know what your problem is." He got to his feet. "But you don't want to do this."

The man before him wasn't wide, he was pudgy.

The smirk was familiar. "Oh really? You ruin my life and you expect me to just go away?"

Alex searched the gray eyes, the pudgy face. Then he was on his back again, pain flaring in his face, chasing the sense of familiarity.

"You took everything from me!"

"Look," Alex growled, shoving the pain away. "Whatever I did to you, trust me, it wasn't personal." He pushed himself to his feet. "But you try this again, and I'm going to make it really personal."

The man looked at him in disbelief. "Not...not personal? You dismantled my life one little piece at a time, and you say it wasn't personal?"

No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't place the man. Something screamed he should. The look was so familiar that his name was right there, among the code. He could even see it, but it didn't register as something that made any sense.

"And for what?" the man demanded. fists shaking with rage. "For an illusion?"

"Don't fucking say that."

“Or what? You’re going to cut more of me away? He wasn’t real and you know it.”

“I loved him!”

“He was a lie! He fucking told you that, but you are so fucking self centered that you didn’t believe it. Oh no, Alexander Bartholomew Crimson can’t have been conned, lied to, used? No, it’s the universe that’s wrong. You are so pathetic.”

Alex was across the space, his fist in the man’s stomach, lifting him, then punching him down. “Don’t ever say something like that to me.”

The man spit blood and looked at him. “Why not? You’re so pathetic nothing human wants anything to do with you. You have to resort to jerking off to the idea of aliens, because you’re also too pathetic to put the move on one of them.”

Alex kicked, but his foot caught in something. The man lifted and sent Alex back. He hurried to his feet, but the man was already standing, wiping the blood off his face.

“You think Alphalar would have let you in if he knew the places you imagined his tentacles going? How about that Sorturan and those mandibles nibbling at your balls? What do you think they’d have done to you if they knew how you used them?”

“I never used them,” Alex snarled, while trying to understand how that man knew those details. He’d never told anyone. They had been his private shames.

“You think any of them would have said yes?” The man’s laugh was nasty. “And the one time one of them is finally there, what do you do? You manipulate him.”

“I never manipulated Jack!”

“No? So you offered him to stay without ulterior motives?”

Alex couldn’t reply to the accusation. “I didn’t act on it!” He was on his back again, his chest hurting. How was the man so fast?

“And what was that jerk off session in the bathroom, with him one room over? Were you dreaming of Alphalar? Or one of your toys from Alien Nation? No, it was Jack you thought about as you stoked it.”

“Shut up!”

“And just to prove how pathetic you are, there was no Jack. All there was, was a monster who knew you’d debase yourself for a cock up your ass. The instant he gave you an excuse, you were in bed with him. You let him use you.”

“He wasn’t...” Alex swallowed. No one could know so much about what had happened. What had gone through his mind in the days after. How hard he’d fought the memories. He’d loved Jack and Jack had loved him.

“Except, there was no Jack, was there.”

Alex looked into gray eyes he’d looked into so often. “That’s impossible.”

His younger self smirked. “Oh, that’s rich, coming from you. Unless you missed the code string, you’re dead. I think impossible was deleted when that thing you called your lover murdered you in cold blood.”

Alex swung, punched, kicked, and swung again, but never connected.

“You think getting your way is all that matters, don’t you?”

He was on his back again, his head screaming from the punch. “You can’t be that good.”

“I can be whatever the fuck I want. I’d have been so fucking much if you hadn’t taken me apart, hidden all the things that made me. You wouldn’t have been so pathetic; if you

hadn't ripped me out!"

Alex barely rolled out of the way of the kick in time. He swiped the legs out from under his older self, then hurried to his feet.

"You were nothing," Alex snarled. "You wouldn't have survived five minutes with Tristan. I had to become who I am!"

The man laughed. "You were so fucking more because of me." He pushed himself up. "If you hadn't hidden me away the second I acted to protect you, that Samalian would never have been able to con you. I'd have seen through him, and I'd have dealt with him."

There was a flash of a young Alex being pulled off a bloody older boy. Alex screaming about how he'd kill that boy.

Alex shook his head. "I'd never do that."

His other self rolled his eyes. "You did." He smirked. "Well, I did. And immediately you shoved me down. You wouldn't let me protect us. You let everyone and anyone walk over you. Every fucking time I manage to help, you shove me right down. And we both know why."

Alex was on his back again, only this time, there was a weight over him. "You don't deserve to live" the punch sent his head to the side. "How could you disgrace me like that!" the other punch sent his head in the other direction. "Do you have any idea what this is going to do to my family?" He hadn't done anything. He wanted to scream, but even his sobbing was barely audible anymore. "And in my house, with that thing!" He wasn't a thing. None of them were. He was his friend, and they had just been exploring.

The punches continued, the words strung into pure hate, and Alex didn't understand why this was happening. How this was happening to him. Darkness pulled him down.

Alex opened his eyes and caught the fist. He stared into eyes lightly greener than his, an older face he shared too much with.

"Don't you fucking hit me again, Father." He struck the man and stood. Where he'd been, the boy he'd been still lay on the bed, face broken to the point breathing had to be impossible. The image of his father, still striking him, was there, while the man got to his feet, the broken body of Alex's alien friend unmoving in the corner.

Alex didn't want to be here. He didn't want to remember this. He wanted to flee to the memory of his father simply kicking him out.

His other self stood in the doorway, watching without expression.

"You don't deserve to live," his father spat. "You're an abomination. I gave you everything, and that's how you repay me? You let one of those things fuck you?"

Alex stuck the man. Hit him again for not living to his responsibility.

"I was a fucking kid. I was exploring who I was." He struck him again. "You didn't like it? Fine, you're entitled to your prejudices. But you fucking tried to kill me!"

The man's snort sent blood flying. "Better a dead son than someone willing to debase himself into being things' fuck toy."

With a scream, Alex raised his fist and nearly brought it down on his father's head. He could see himself doing it, over and over until there was nothing more there than the mess of a face the boy on the bed wore.

"Do it," his other self whispered. "You know he doesn't deserve anything better. Kill him and it's over. He never bothers you again. You avenge your friend, your maybe lover.

Doesn't he deserve that?"

Alex looked over his shoulder, past his other self, at his father mercilessly beating the life out of his son for the act of being a curious child. He looked beyond them at a school bully who insulted Alex. The adults telling him how terrible what he'd done what. How much like his father he could be at time.

How terrified the idea made him.

He looked past that, at the fear he glimpsed in his grandparent's eyes, and his resolution to never, ever get let the anger out again. To hold it in, no matter the price. To never acknowledge what had been done to him, so he could ignore how angry it made him. To never accept those things that made him angry. To convince himself he had always had a normal, ordinary life.

Until he made it true.

He looked at his other self. "You aren't what I ripped out. You're what I buried."

The man snorted in disgust. "And what are you going to do about it?"

"I'm going to stop."

Alex dropped to his knees, his anger so strong he screamed. He wanted to kill everything and everyone. And they deserved it too. There would be nothing left of the universe by the time he was done.

Then he was on all fours, panting, and remembering there were good people out there. His grandparents. Emil and his mother, the Samalian he was friends with, Marie, Vic, Miranda, Will, Captain Meron, the crew of the Gully, on the Sayatoga. There were a lot of people who'd hurt him, but there were so many more who'd helped him.

Someone coughed, and he looked at his father's bloody face. Anger at what the man had done surge, and Alex punched him as hard as he could.

And then, that was enough.

The man was despicable for what he'd done. But he didn't deserve to be bloodied to a pulp. He might deserve more, but Alex was tired.

He knew the other was there before looking in his direction.

"I'm not one of you," he told the blond furred Samalian leaning against the wall.

"That's okay. I'm not one of them either."

Alex sat back. "I sort of remember you, from a dream."

"Consequences, Alex."

"Right, who I'd become."

"Who you made of yourself."

"So what is this? Some sort of challenge before where ever the dead go? There's a Samalian custom, isn't there? Something about cleansing the spirit before the next path? It's been a long time since I've read those stories."

The Samalian smiled. "Who said anything about you being dead, Alex?"

"He—" Alex turned to point to where his other self had been, and water rushed at him.

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His lungs screamed in pain, his head ran as if it had been pounded in a wall too often. He was dying.

He looked around, light below him.

If he didn't act, he would drown.  
He put his feet under him and pushed against the glowing floor.  
He wasn't dying.  
He broke the surface and pulled himself over the edge of the pool, then threw up water.  
He took a painful breath of air and erupted into coughing.  
Breathing hurt.  
He chucked. Pain meant he was alive.  
"I am so fucking killing you for this, Tristan." He looked up, and instead of his Samalian, the floor was littered with dead humans. In the distance, there was fighting.  
Alex pulled himself out of the pool.  
"Looks like I'm going to have to kill a whole lot more people before I get to you."