

Alex walked through the alleys, away from the music. Like many of his plans today, joining the party hadn't gone as he'd hoped. First had been his altercation with Rig'Irik, where he'd promised himself he would make sure the Samalian knew there was nothing to wait on between them. That had been interrupted by the attack.

His plan to go around the fight to take control of the hover encountered reality when there were enough attackers, spread wider, and he'd had to fight his way through a number of them.

Alex still made it to the hover, only to find it empty. He'd expected—hoped for a few mercenaries to be there, for a fight in close quarters to let out his frustration. He took it out on the hover's system, too easily locking it out of the network, then considered going back to the fight, only to hear the cheers. Making sure none of the mercs could call for reinforcements had cost him a chance to get any of it out of his system. Still, there would be the party, and now that he knew about them having sex during it, he could make sure to avoid that and still enjoy it. The Samalians didn't mind him being there.

Jacoby was headed his way, and Alex met him halfway.

"If you want to dispose of the bodies," the man said, "it's going to be just the two of us. Everyone else is busy getting ready for some party." Jacoby shook his head in annoyance.

Alex couldn't tell if he was annoyed at not having gotten into enough fights—his clothing only had a few scuffs on them—or if it was that no one was hurrying to bury the mercs. Or that he didn't think celebrating a victory was appropriate. Jacoby didn't seem to know how to have fun and let loose.

"What are you doing with that poor excuse for a hover?" Jacoby asked.

Alex shrugged. "It's yours. Feel free to take it apart and use it for upgrades."

Jacoby looked over Alex's shoulder. "We're talking about downgrades if I use anything from that. What were those amateurs doing flying that thing here?"

"They went for cargo space over quality?" Alex asked. "I only got to fight a few on my way here."

"I can tell; you barely have any cuts on you. Shouldn't you see to them?" Jacoby indicated Alex's chest.

"There were Heals in the hover. I took some. Why is a corporation like LeisureTek going for bottom-rung mercs like these? I get the first two, but now they have to realize there's an organized defense. They should send better mercs."

"To be fair to them," Jacoby replied, "they weren't bottom-rung. Just not the best either."

Alex looked at the man. "You called them amateurs."

"Okay, they weren't very good, but this isn't one of the core worlds. There aren't mercs milling about, waiting for jobs. It hasn't even been a month since the last attack. That's nowhere near enough time for LeisureTek to get serious mercs here, and this isn't important enough for them to put their own security forces on it. It's one town in the middle of nowhere. No matter what they have planned for it, they can't want to spend that much money on this place. My guess is that there's a desk jockey assigned this project, trying to figure out how to make it happen within the budget they've been allocated."

Alex nodded to himself. "Makes sense."

"I'm surprised you didn't figure that out yourself. You did work for a corporation before all this."

Alex eyed the man.

Jacoby rolled his eyes. "I told you, I research anyone living among us." Alex decided to ignore the implications. He'd kept Tristan's secrets, so he would keep his. If not, Alex could kill him later.

"So, it's your professional assessment is we aren't going to get a sudden spike in the

quality of the mercs trying to take over this place?”

“Not unless someone goes and tells them we’re the people who blew up that building. This place is no more than a line in someone’s report.” Jacoby indicated the hover. “As for that, I doubt I can get anything useful out of it other than the supplies. The best use for it would be to pile the bodies in it and send it into space.”

“Sure, if you can do that.”

Jacoby rolled his eyes. “It’s a hover, Alex, not a shuttle. It needs something below it to work. This old thing probably can’t go above fifty feet.”

“Then lose it in the forest, I don’t care.” Alex started walking towards the town.

“Aren’t you going to help out?” Jacoby asked.

“I’m sure you can manage. I have a party to join.”

“So, if I decide to go with you, you’re going to be happy leaving that hover sitting there for any satellite to see?”

Alex turned and grinned as he walked backward. “If I thought you had any interest in the party, I’d tell that thing to go lose itself, but I know you aren’t coming; you don’t socialize with the locals, remember? And this is going to keep you from getting bored.”

“Fuck you!” Jacoby called after him as Alex turned back.

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His plan to join in and enjoy the party was prevented by, of all people, Tristan. He saw his Samalian, standing still, observing what happened around him. He hadn’t realized Tristan had joined in the fight, but it made sense. The hover had come from that direction, so Tristan had seen it and came to kill.

Alex saw the burn marks across his fur and took a step in his direction, stopping when the woman with the bowl approached Tristan. Alex knew what the gesture meant, when she offered it to him. When she offered herself to him.

With a turn, Alex walked away to lose himself in the alleys. He should have gone, grabbed the bowl to offer to Tristan himself, and chased her off. But he didn’t want to deal with being turned away. Or worse, if this broken Tristan accepted him. Could he deal with Tristan remaining broken, if it meant being touched by him?

Alex shuddered. He’d have to be the one remaining in charge of everything if that was the case. He’d have to tell Tristan what to do; he’d be the one in control.

That’s not what he wanted.

He stopped and leaned against a home, looking to the sky and trying to decide what he wanted. What was he willing to settle for, to fulfill some of his needs?

He wasn’t willing to settle for anything. He’d never settled. If he hadn’t settled for lovers when he was looking for Jack, nor let anyone else fulfill his needs when he’d fallen in love with Tristan, he wouldn’t settle for a broken one now.

What he wanted was to hear that woman scream in horror and pain. He wanted Tristan to beat her for presuming she could replace Alex. He wanted Tristan to stalk him, slam him against this wall, growl at him, rake his claws through his chest as punishment for even thinking of someone else’s touch. Then, he wanted Tristan to take him. To pleasure himself, to use him and leave.

It was how things should be.

The footsteps sent hope through him—one person, confident, walking toward him. Had Tristan seen him, was he coming to claim him?

He looked at the man, Rig’Irik, and was disappointed. The Samalian held a wooden bowl in a hand as he approached. Alex almost groaned. He so didn’t need that right now.

“It was a good fight,” Rig’Irik said. His fur was matted with blood, and he had burn scars on his legs and arms. His claws were still red.

Alex wondered what it would be like to feel those claws dig into his flesh. Mark him. Part of him wanted to feel them. He should tell Rig’Irik to leave him alone.

“Yes, it was.”

Rig’Irik stopped before Alex. “I like fights, good fights.” He was muscular, not to

Tristan's level, but Rig'Irik was still young. Still malleable, moldable.

The Samalian offered him the bowl. "I am strong, Alex."

Alex rested his head against the wall. "That isn't what this is about."

"I am strong," Rig'Irik insisted, offering the bowl again.

Alex looked at the bowl. "I'm taken. I belong to Tristan."

Rig'Irik canted his head. "He is not here."

Alex's bark of laughter turned in a snort as he almost sobbed. No, Tristan wasn't here. He was with that woman. What the fuck was wrong with him that he was refusing Rig'Irik's offer when Tristan had no problem accepting someone else's? And a woman's on top of that.

He looked at the bowl again. Rig'Irik would touch him. The Samalian would be rough with him, if Alex told him to—would sink his claws in his flesh. He looked into the Samalian's eyes. He could see it there, the willingness to do what Alex asked of him.

He could have something of what he wanted. Not everything, but part of it. It could be enough, couldn't it? Enough for him to forget some of the pain in his heart? Find some comfort, feel fur against his flesh.

Alex could settle for that, couldn't he? After everything he'd endured, he had the right to settle for that, didn't he?

He reached to push the bowl away, but the sound of something clattering against the hard ground made him look up. Tristan stood at one end of the short alley, an expression of shock on his face. The confusion became anger. The anger became rage, and Tristan ran at them, claws out.

Alex shoved Rig'Irik out of the way without thinking, stepping forward, ready to accept the claws. Tristan came to a stop before him, hand raised.

"Move, Alex," Tristan growled.

"No."

"I will kill him." Tristan looked beyond Alex. "He his mine!" he snarled. "No one but me touches him."

"Alex belongs to Alex," Rig'Irik said.

"Get out of here," Alex told Rig'Irik, then looked to Tristan. "If you're going to hit someone, hit me. We both know I'm the one you really want to hit. I'm the one who hurts you. So fucking hit me already."

The shove that pushed him to the side was so unexpected that Alex didn't immediately react.

"No one hits Alex," Rig'Irik growled.

Alex saw the triumph in Tristan's eyes, the hand move down. Alex planted a foot down and pushed against Rig'Irik as hard as he could. Rig'Irik wasn't prepared for that and staggered to the side, and Alex took his place, too late for Tristan to stop.

He felt the claws dig in his chest, the heat and burning as they traveled across it. Alex felt himself get hard at the pain, at Tristan finally taking what was his, but his arousal only lasted the instant before Alex looked into Tristan's eyes and saw the terror there.

The motion was done. Alex staggered back, keeping his footing, and looked at Tristan, silently pleading for him to continue, for him to take this where it should go. To either remove him from his path like the obstacle he was, or— Tristan stepped away.

"Alex," his voice trembled. "I didn't—" He took another step back. "I'd never—" He turned and ran.

"Don't," Alex whispered, the pain in his heart eclipsing that of his chest. Tristan was supposed to be getting better; it was the point of coming here.

"Are you well?" Rig'Irik touched his arm.

Alex wrenched himself away. "I'm fine," he tried to snap, but the wince of pain on his chest took some of the strength out of the words.

"You are not."

Alex spun on Rig'Irik. "I am fine."

Rig'Irik looked at his chest and his ears twitched. Alex wanted to scream at him to shake his head like a normal person. "I would not hurt you." He reached for Alex's face.

Alex slapped the hand away. "What?"

"You are strong, Alex. Strength must be respected. I would—"

Alex shoved him away hard. "I'm with him. Can't you get that through that fucking thick skull of yours?"

"He does not respect you."

Alex threw his hands in the air. "What the fuck does respect have to do with anything? I love him, not you, him!"

"He does not love you. He does not care for you. I would."

Alex just looked at him. "Do I fucking look like I want someone to care for me? Would I be with a monster like him if what I was after was being cuddled? Leave me alone!" Alex turned to follow Tristan.

"Alex." Rig'Irik grabbed his arm and Alex spun, tripped him, and then was straddled over his chest, knife against the Samalian's throat.

"Don't touch me. Don't you get it? I don't want you. I don't want someone who cares about me. What the fuck would I do with that?" He pointed to his chest. "This is what I want. And I want it from him." He indicated where Tristan had vanished to. "Go find yourself someone else to care about. I'm not worth it." Alex stood and walked away.

He wanted to run, away from Rig'Irik, to Tristan, or just away, but each step made his chest hurt. The Heals he'd taken would take care of these cuts, probably leave him without any scars since he'd taken them before. The pain in his heart... Only one thing would take that away, and he was starting to wonder if Tristan would ever be able to treat him that way again.

The hover was gone. In the forest, or had Jacoby managed the impossible and hidden it in space? Alex didn't care. There hadn't been enough time for Jacoby to collect all the bodies, and he didn't care about that either. The Samalians could deal with it when they decided it was time. Bury them, or burn them. If Jacoby had a problem with how it was handled, he'd have to deal with that himself.

He reached the House and wasn't surprised to find the wall was rubble again, stones all over the place. Tristan sat on the ground, knees held to his chest, head resting against them.

"Go away," he whispered, a hitch in his voice.

Alex looked down on him, feeling his lips pull back in a snarl. "What the fuck is wrong with you?" Did he mean destroying the wall again? This wallowing? His fear at hurting Alex? He had no idea anymore. He just wanted this to be done and over with so Tristan could be back to—

Tristan chuckled, then laughed.

Alex watched in confusion. It didn't sound like drug-induced hysteria; this sounded genuine. Somehow Tristan found this funny. The idea that the Samalian found anything funny was confusing enough, but what in this could he—

Tristan looked at Alex. "What is wrong with me?" His eyes were wet, the fur under them matted with tears, but anger laced his words. "How the fuck can you even ask me that?" Tristan wasn't laughing. He stood. "You fucking well know what's wrong with me. My father's right. You're just playing your games with me. Well, I'm fucking done! You did this to me. You shoved your way into my life, threw everything I had in shambles, and I'm sure you find that funny. Why the fuck couldn't you leave when I told you to!"

"Why didn't you kill me?" Alex yelled back, his anger thick. "It's what you do, right? Use and kill. So why the fuck couldn't you just do that to me, instead of putting me through all this? You were laughing hard enough as you watched me pine over you, watched me beg you to touch me."

"I don't know! You think that question doesn't haunt me? You think I don't want to

go back and put you out of my misery so I don't have to feel this way? You think I don't know how much better things would be if you weren't in my life?" Tristan ran his hand through the fur on his head. "I'd be in my workshop right now! I'd be at peace with my weapons, my locks, my tools. Why the fuck can't you just leave me alone?"

"Fine!" Alex turned and walked away.

"Alex, don't go!"

"I'm not leaving," Alex replied, not stopping. "I'm never leaving. Once you've finished the wall, you can remove me from your life. It's the only way I'll ever be out of it."

He forced himself not to hurry as Tristan howled in misery. At how the pained sound broke his heart. He wanted this to be over, but there was only one way it could end, and Tristan was the only one allowed to do it.