

Alex pushed himself to his feet, only for the world to start spinning. Someone caught him before he fell, and he reached for a knife, but saw the human hand offering him Heals.

“Some of them escaped,” Jacoby said, looking in the direction the hover vanished.

Alex dry-swallowed the two pills. “It was bound to happen eventually.” His head hurt too much for snark. “I wish it had happened later. After we’d left.”

“I thought you wanted to protect these people. Now you want to abandon them to be wiped out?”

Alex pushed himself away, and slapped Jacoby’s hand when the man tried to hold him. He wobbled, the world threatening to flip on him, but he forced it to remain still, and himself standing.

“The only thing I want is Tristan fixed. That can’t happen if he’s constantly fighting.” He turned around to look at Jacoby. “And if this place is destroyed before that, what happens then?”

Jacoby shrugged. “We go home.” He nodded toward the town. “And he looks fine to me.”

Alex spun and almost fell again.

Tristan was standing at the edge of the town, his fur matted down with blood. His eyes were closed, and he was standing still. Of course him looking peaceful would seem right to Jacoby; he was still thinking of Tristan as Tech. Tech was a normal being to him. Someone behaving according to the normal Jacoby knew, at least.

Tristan’s eyes should’ve been open, alert for threats. Looking at the sky, calculating, making plans to go after them. If the attack had been directed at him instead of the town, he’d be collecting weapons, datapads for information.

He wouldn’t stand there, looking like everything was right with the universe.

“Okay, everyone’s heading back to town,” Jacoby said. “That’s my cue to head back to the hover before she finds me again and decides to convince me we’re right for each other by punching me.”

“You do understand she isn’t interested in fighting you, right?”

“Oh, I’m very well aware of what she wants. Even if I was interested, she’s got a strange way of showing it. I’m not into violence like you are.”

Alex laughed. “I didn’t think you were deluded. You love this as much as I do. And she isn’t interested in violence; she just doesn’t have the words to tell you.”

“So she tries to pound my head in instead?”

Alex sighed. “You are dense. Samalians admire strength, the ability and willingness to take on your enemy. She keeps trying to fight you because it’s her way of saying she admires your skills.”

“Well, she can go admire those of someone with fur.”

“I’m sure she will once we’re gone.”

“That can’t be soon enough for me.” Jacoby left, going around the town instead of through it. Alex couldn’t blame him for reacting that way to the unwanted attention.

He turned to watch the Samalians picking up the dead. Close to a dozen had been caught in the explosion, and of those, five were dead. The men and woman carrying them were somber, but proud. The dead had fought to protect them, had fought well. They would be remembered.

Five here. How many dead in the town? How many dead the next time, or when LeisureTek became tired of this and launched a full assault? That would happen soon now that someone could report on how well-prepared people here were.

He forced a slow breath out. Focus on what you can do, Alex, not what the universe is planning. All he could do was get them ready for the next attack, and hope Tristan would be done before someone decided to just drop a rock on this place.

His walk to the town was slow; his balance was mostly back, but he still ached. Tristan was no longer visible at the edge. He would have gone back to the House.

Samalians were carrying human bodies out of the town, to be dumped in the forest for animals to eat. The Samalian dead were being laid on one side of the town's center. Eight already. The number would only increase with each fight.

At what point should he tell them to leave? How many of them could he allow to die before he decided this wasn't a fight that could be won? Well, he already knew it couldn't be won. There was no winning against the corporations.

Then he should tell them to leave now.

He watched the tables, where people placed food. The musicians were setting up, the children play-fighting. The people knelt by the dead, quietly mourning.

He was angry.

Not his usual destructive anger, this was quieter. This was the anger at watching the innocents slowly being destroyed. He'd promised to protect them, and he knew he couldn't do it. He knew he wouldn't even stick around for the final fight if Tristan worked fast enough.

Tristan.

He almost missed his Samalian, seated on a bench, a man and woman washing him with cloth. Alex's first thought was that this was simply someone else; everyone tall and muscular would look the same covered in blood. But he knew Tristan, knew him intimately, and this was him, letting two strangers touch him.

Alex's gaze went to the man's crotch—limp. If this had been sexual for any of them, he'd have killed them. If Alex couldn't touch Tristan in that manner, he wouldn't let anyone else do it. Even now, it was almost more than he could stand.

A young woman approached him, a bucket in a hand, cloths in the other. "Honored Defender, may I wash the battle from your fur?" She frowned. "From your skin?"

Alex forced himself to look away from Tristan, first to her. Golden fur with silver streaks, a gentle smile. Then around the open space. Tristan wasn't the only one being washed. The warriors who weren't busy were seated, being tended to. The act looked ritualistic.

How had he missed this before? Because you've been stuck in your head, idiot. Too busy making plans to appreciate the moment.

He shook his head at the woman. "I'm fine, thank you."

There were more important things to do. He didn't want to see them destroyed. He looked at Tristan, wishing he was the one washing the battle out of his fur, then looked away.

He found Sartas sitting by the musicians. Their group was incomplete, but the music was lively.

She smiled at him. "Honored Defender," she greeted him.

"You have to tell them to stop."

Her ears twitched. "This is the time to celebrate our victory, your victory."

One of the musicians yelled, "Victory!" in Samalian, and the call was picked up throughout the town's center.

Alex closed his eyes and kept his anger under control. This wasn't their fault, he reminded himself. They were the victims.

"Sartas, this wasn't a victory," he said once the cries died out. "Some of the mercs escaped to report on what's going on here. You guys need to leave."

Her ears twitched a negative again. "This is our home. To abandon it is to allow the enemy to take what they want."

"Sartas." Alex had trouble keeping the anger out of his voice. "You've worked with them, you know how corporations think."

She waved the comment aside, a gesture so human Alex could only stare as she spoke. "All they want are profits. Now they will know there is no profits to be had here, only death."

This wasn't posturing on her part. It was pride. Even working for them like she had, she hadn't understood corporations, how they'd never let something go. Maybe if he

could get a message to SpaceGov they'd intervene, but it wouldn't be in time to save these people.

She patted his hand, another human gesture. "Do not worry. You can defend us again tomorrow. Today is a celebration. Go sit by your mate, let one of us wash the battle off you." She indicated Tristan.

"He isn't my mate," Alex replied, wishing that word could ever apply to what he and Tristan had.

She canted her head. "He looks at you with heat, want."

Anger and hate were what she interpreted as desire. Alex wouldn't have what she imagined. Not from Tristan, not from anyone. He didn't deserve to be desired, not a killer like him. He didn't want love, he wanted Tristan—as painful as that was.

But maybe she was right. Alex needed to get out of his head. It wasn't like he could do anything about the corporation tonight, and it was clear they weren't in the right mindset to contemplate leaving. He could convince them of that tomorrow.

Right now, he could enjoy the celebration.

He looked at Tristan.

At least he could try to.

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The priestess stood, her back to the thirteen burning pyres. The dead from the battle.

Alex had forced himself to attend, even if part of him said it wasn't his place. He wasn't Samalian. He hadn't come before, so why bother now?

But they were dead in part because of him. He'd convinced them to learn how to fight, to take up protecting the town. And because of that there were only thirteen dead, instead of the whole of the town, so he should honor their sacrifice.

Hea'Las spoke of the Source, of how it brought everything into being, of how it took the dead back into itself. She spoke of each of the dead's deeds, not only in the battle, but of their lives. When she was done, the musicians played. Not the jovial music of the previous day and night, but not the somber music Alex remembered from the few funerals he'd attended since becoming a merc. This was calm. It said this was a time to rest, that the fighting was over for them. Now they were at peace.

Samalian spoke amongst each other in quiet voices. Alex understood enough to know they were talking about the dead. Recounting stories like Hea'Las had done, but more personal ones. The children in attendance wanted to burst out—he could see it in how they were fidgeting—and the adults had to keep hold of them.

Not all the adults were at their best. A lot of drinking happened during the celebration, a lot of other things too, and not everyone here had gotten a lot of sleep, Alex figured.

He hadn't looked for it, but he'd noticed the pattern: the fighters never lacked for partners. And he expected they always accepted the offers. After facing death, they needed to remind themselves they were alive.

He looked around and wondered what he was doing here. There was nothing he could contribute; he didn't know the dead, had no stories he could tell about them, and anytime someone thank him for defending them, Alex felt like he was going to be sick. He wasn't protecting them. There was nothing altruistic in his actions. He wanted to scream that to them, that they were all dead already. That none of them mattered.

So he left. As true as it was, he had no business ruining their memorial.

The soft conversations faded away within a handful of alleys. And Alex felt better, able to believe it was only him and Tristan, as usual. That they would finish this job and move on to the next one. That once he got back to the House, Tristan would snarl at him for wasting time with the locals instead of focusing on the work they needed to do.

He heard the steps too late to draw his knives. Caught sight of blonde and copper fur as Rig'Irik collided with him, shoving Alex against the wall hard enough he saw stars.

“You like it painful?” the Samalian growled. The smell of alcohol was heavy on his breath. “I can make it painful.” He dug his claws in Alex’s arm.

The pain felt good. Alex soaked it in, shuddered, then fixed his gaze on Rig’Irik’s brown-red eyes. “I’m taken,” he said calmly. How could Rig’Irik be drunk at a time like this?

“I am better for you.” Rig’Irik raised his hand, claws out, to Alex’s face.

Alex’s elbow snapped up against the Samalian’s muzzle, making him stagger back. “I told you no. Rig’Irik, you need to go back, this isn’t the time. They are mourning the dead.”

Rig’Irik’s pained roar had nothing to do with the hit. He threw himself at Alex. Alex caught him, spun him, sent him to the ground. When he straightened, he had three new lines on his chest, the heat of them making Alex feel good.

He took out a knife as Rig’Irik stood. He didn’t warn the Samalian away. Rig’Irik wanted this, and Alex... Alex needed to make sure the drunk Samalian didn’t kill him.

Rig’Irik came at him. Alex moved out of the way and gave two shallow cuts, arm and chest. The Samalian came again, batted the knife out of Alex’s hand, dug his claws in Alex’s side, and reached for the neck with the other hand.

Alex grabbed the hand, twisted it until Rig’Irik howled, and then spun, kicking the Samalian’s legs out from under him. Alex saw his excitement as he straddled his chest, read the lust in his eyes. He put a knife to Rig’Irik’s throat, fighting his own lust. This wasn’t Tristan, he reminded himself. Who cares? a voice replied. This guy can hurt you too. Stop being picky and get laid already.

“I want you.” The need and pain in Rig’Irik’s voice brought echoes of Alex’s own, from a long time ago. He’d wanted Tristan so badly he’d allowed him to do anything. Alex looked at the knife, then sheathed it.

“I’m not someone you want to want, Rig’Irik. You deserve someone better, someone whole. You need to find yourself a guy, or a girl, who is worthy of the kind of person you are. That’s not me. The only thing I deserve is what I already have.”

“Alex, I don’t care.” Rig’Irik didn’t reach for Alex. He didn’t try to offer anything. He knew it wouldn’t do any good.

Alex sighed. The Samalian had already deciphered who Alex was, and the way Rig’Irik looked at Alex told him everything he needed to know.

He would let Alex do whatever he wanted. Rig’Irik would allow himself to be turned into whatever monster Alex wanted, and Alex knew it would be easy to break this caring man. To shatter him in a million pieces and reassemble him the way Alex wanted.

Was this why Tristan had kept him around? Had Alex made it that easy for him? Had he taken the joy Alex could feel at the idea of doing it? Did he get the thrill Alex felt right now at having someone in his power so entirely?

No, Tristan hadn’t taken pleasure in it, Alex was sure of that. It wasn’t in his nature. He’d done it because it had been expedient, because he’d had a use for Alex, and breaking him was the best way to ensure they worked well together. Alex was the one who’d taken a sick pleasure in being broken.

“Rig’Irik, you need to care. I can’t give you the life you want. I can’t give you any kind of life.” Alex pushed himself off. “I’m dead.”

“I could—”

“No, you can’t. I can’t be saved. I’d have to want that for it to be possible.” He picked up the knife off the ground and secured it to his pants. “I know you think that what you want is best for both of us. I’ve been there, but I’m going to be better. I’m not going to give you a choice.” Alex fixed his gaze on Rig’Irik. “Approach me like this again, make any advances on me, and I will kill you. I’d rather see you dead than be responsible for what I’d do to you if I gave in. I hope you believe me, Rig’Irik, because if you don’t, Sartas will have to mourn you.”

Alex left him there, excited and confused.

When he reached the House, Tristan was curled up in a ball against the polycarbonate wall. He looked peaceful. Nothing like the monster he was, the monster Alex wanted. The death he was waiting for.

If he thought lying next to Tristan would make the Samalian give him that, he'd do it. Rest his head against the furry chest for the first and last time. But he didn't want to see Tristan flee in fear again. He couldn't bear to see fear on his face.

Alex headed to the hover to go on the net, work out some of his frustrations on a system out there.

He paused by the door, looking at the handful of bowls on the ground

—water, the greenish unguent, dried meats. A cloudy liquid that came from the herd animal and which he couldn't stand the taste of.

"They put that there after you left for the town," Jacoby said, cleaning some component with a rag.

"Why?"

Jacoby snorted. "Don't ask me. I'm not the one making sure he understands them." Jacoby turned his back to him and went to the table with more components.

Alex shook his head. There were things the Samalians did he wasn't sure he wanted to understand.