

Something had happened to Tristan.

Alex didn't know what, and was unsure how, or even if, he should ask, but the way Tristan held on to him after they were done having sex, as well as how the sex had happened, was a clear indication his Samalian was dealing with something.

There had been an urgency Alex wasn't used to, and Tristan held him the entire time. Neither harshly nor tenderly, either of which could happen depending on the circumstances leading to it, but...desperately.

The next morning, Alex saw the effort Tristan needed to show neutrality. A mask, not on for Alex, or even for the others, he thought, but for Tristan himself.

The closest this reminded him of was that time when Tristan was broken and unable to deal with the crowd of the station in orbit around Samalia. Alex had ordered him to make a mask of someone able to deal with those conditions, and it had worked. For a little while.

He placed a hand on Tristan's arm. "I'm here if you want to talk about it." It wasn't like him not to rage against whatever the problem he had. His Samalian was an Aggressor, they didn't become meek when things went wrong.

There had been sadness in the smile. "I need to work through it first."

Alex kissed him and left their room to attend to his duties.

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As the sun took away more and more of the darkness, Tristan had first grown more frustrated, then resigned and finally told Alex that he couldn't get the source to answer his questions.

Alex didn't pass judgment. He was simply happy Tristan wouldn't have to resort to nearly dying to achieve whatever state let him have those encounters. He didn't even question if they were real. One such meeting had returned to him this Tristan. Still his monster, even if the threat of dying at his hand was no longer there.

Then came the attack, a raid more than an assault. The sleek ship reached the sanctuary before he and Tristan could react to the advance warning. They fired on the ships landed within the allocated space before landing, then two mercs exited.

They didn't reach the entrance. Tristan barreled into one and they vanished among the trees, while Alex disarmed the other with ease, leaving him alive, but in need of serious medical attention.

He found Tristan letting the rain wash the blood out of his fur.

"You okay?"

"I don't know."

The answer took Alex more by surprise than anything else his Samalian had done in the last weeks. Tristan wasn't someone who did not know. He might not know something,

currently, but that was ‘something in progress’.

There was the sound of finality in the tone. Tristan had search and not found an answer.

Alex held him. “Can I help?”

“You are.”

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The sense of aimlessness didn’t entirely leave his Samalian, but Tristan acquired an attitude of pushing through it as he worked with the retired mercs to repair the damaged ships. Even Tristan’s fan let him work on his ship.

Two more attacks happened as the night became nothing more than a hint of what had been. One dealt with in the jungle, the other right after they stepped out of the treeline.

By then the retired mercs’ ships were all repaired, Tristan’s collections grew, and the moments of melancholy he experienced became a rare thing.

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“I wonder what they want?” Alex’s companion asked as they watched the shuttle become visible through the rain.

“Aren’t they back to look over your garden?” he asked. The night was now nothing more than a memory. The sun never left, and the rain rarely abated.

“They’ve never shown an interest in our plans at this time of the year,” she replied, and Alex wiped the dirt off his hands. “They’ve only come to see the transitions. I guess they might have reached the point where they need data from other seasons. Alex?” she asked as he stood.

“I want to check on something.” While his opinion of doing the work as part of getting him to keep control hadn’t changed. He thought he was being tortured. The fact he hadn’t ‘lost it’ in any of the fights against the mercenaries was taken as a demonstration he was no longer a threat to the rest of the locals.

So, he was afforded the same liberties as them. He hadn’t had an escort since well before the sun was fully up, and he wasn’t tied to one duty until the time was over. He expected that if he stopped taking part, Teklile would sit him down, but he still worked the garden and taught the self defense course every other day.

Tristan met him, dripping wet, on the way to the entrance.

“They didn’t trip my alarms,” his Samalian said.

“It looked like the researcher’s shuttle,” Alex said. “But they only come in the fall and spring.” Tristan had encountered them, but beyond one of them wanting to study him while he was there, his Samalian hadn’t interacted with them.

Teklile joined them as the shuttle finished its approach.

“You should stay back until we’ve confirmed they aren’t a threat,” Alex said, earning himself a tilted ear from Tristan. He had to make the recommendation even known the answer.

“Nonsense,” the man replied. “They are always welcome to visit, as is anyone.”

“Do they always land this close?” Tristan asked.

The shuttled had maneuvered so its exit faced the sanctuary’s entrance. In this alignment, it didn’t fit in the space between two of the merc ship, forcing it to find another location.

“I don’t recall,” Teklile said, unconcerned.

Tristan’s ears folded back and Alex nodded. Too many things out of the ordinary to share the man’s attitude.

It settled down and the whine of the anti-gravs fell away until it was almost drowned out by the rain. Another anomaly. During the previous visits, they fully shutdown the system since they were here for most of the day. Alex listened to the computer, and it sounded fine. It was a shuttle, therefore on the simple side, but it also didn’t show signs of someone forcefully taking control. Which meant the proper codes had been used.

“Welcome back,” Teklile called as the door slide within the side.

Alex grabbed the man and shoved him deeper within the sanctuary as the shapes registered. Too bulky, too many accessories attached, the shape of the head was wrong.

Tristan had crossed half the distance before the first power armor clad mercenary had fully exited the shuttle. The reaction was hurried, and the shot missed; the bolt exploding inside the monastery. Alex chased his Samalian, again cursing they wouldn’t let him carry more than one knife. Or wouldn’t allow Tristan his weapons.

A second mercenary in power armor stepped out, then more in reinforced clothing spread around. Alex altered his course to intercept the closest. It meant some would make it inside, and he had to hope the locals would be smart enough to lock themselves in their rooms until this was over.

The blaster shots missed him, the poor visibility working in his favor as much as theirs. He threw his knife once he could make out the center of mass and sped up behind it.

The cry of pain caused the others to pause. Closest to the shuttle, servos strained. Alex threw himself at the closest body and they fell. His hand closed on the butt of a handgun instead of the expected knife, and he flicked the safety off. He pointed, fired, and nothing happened.

He slammed the gun into the grinned woman’s face. He hated bio-locked weapons. He grabbed a knife from his jacket and slice her wrist as she raised her other gun. Knives couldn’t be locked out. He rolled off her, but her companions didn’t fire.

They came across as too professional to still be stunned, so they were experienced enough not to fire at two bodies tangling together.

These were not of the same caliber as the previous mercs. He jumped up and slashed at another merc, then staggered back from the burn of the shot in his shoulder. He pushed forward again, jerking to the side and planted the knife in the pit of the man’s arm, grabbing it and aiming it at the other two, pressing the man’s finger on the trigger before they got over this surprise. He shot the other two already down, then turned and forced his weapon forward until he made out one power armor on the ground, a limb bent in four places.

The other was grappling with Tristan.

“I have a gun,” Alex called.

“You think—” a woman started, then was yanked until she was all Alex saw. He fired into her until the powerpack was drained. He didn’t expect it had been enough to kill her. Power armors were designed to take a good amount of punishment, but concentrated fire would tax the system under the protective layer, and those would control many of the armor’s functions.

Unable to do more to help Tristan, Alex let the body fall and took the dead man’s

three knives. The woman screamed, things broke, then she was silent.

“Three made it inside,” Tristan said, heading for the entrance. “They shouldn’t know where the painting is kept, which means they need to search the entire structure or find someone to direct them.”

“You think Teklile is smart enough to hide this time?”

“Hopefully, his belief that people will always see reason isn’t so blind as to let him be caught by people firing in his direction. How is your shoulder?”

“It hurts, but you’ve given me more painful injuries.”

Once inside, fighting sounded deeper in.

They paused by a larger room.

“Take care of this,” Tristan said, before running off.

Alex looked at the dead merc with the half missing face, and the local seated on the other side of the room, gun at his side, vomit next to that and a look of despair mixed in with terror.

“Jax,” he said as he approached.

The young man fumbled for the gun, pointed it at Alex, noticed what he held and threw it away with a terrified scream.

“It’s okay,” Alex said, crouching before him. “You did what you had to, so you’d survive.”

The young man looked at him in disgust.

“If you hadn’t taken care of him, he would have gone on to hurt a lot of other people. You don’t have to feel bad about what you did.”

Disbelief.

Deal with this.

What did he know about dealing with this? He was a cold-hearted killer. He never felt the remorse the kid did. This had been needed, and it was the end of it. Why wasn’t he seeing that?

Had he been like that the first time he killed? He vaguely remembered demanding to be incarcerated for it and someone, probably Will, explaining no one cared he’d killed to survive. It just made him one of the crew.

That wouldn’t help here.

Alex offered him his hand. “Come on, how about I take you to someone who is going to be able to help you.” There had to be someone among the retired mercs who had enough humanity left to help.