

Alex forced himself to move but he barely blocked the punch, and the pain it caused to his arm only added to what he was already feeling. A night's sleep and a Heal All hadn't done as much good as he'd hoped, but he fought through the pain and Tristan avoided his strike easily.

Two more punches on Tristan's part and Alex was back on the floor, spread across his sleeping mat. He wanted to say something, explain he wasn't healed from the beating Tristan had given him yesterday, but he couldn't get his mouth to work, not even open so he could try to speak.

Tristan looked down at him, impartial as usual. Whatever calculations were going through the Samalian's mind, Alex couldn't see them as he searched in his eyes for any trace of Jack.

"Fifteen minutes." Tristan turned and left.

Alex got to his feet in spite of the pain. Nothing was broken. He didn't have to check; Tristan wasn't hitting him hard enough to do that. He just wished he could tell if it was Tristan not wanting to have to explain his injuries, or because Jack was getting more powerful and holding him back.

It had been Jack, the previous day. Tristan had been ready to kill Alex, but Jack stopped him; Alex had seen him there in Tristan's eyes. He'd felt Jack being there, doing what he could to save Alex.

"Thank you," he whispered. He was on the right track. His very presence, their fights, where he became stronger, helped Jack.

He dry-swallowed two Heal Alls and stretched.

On time, he was running behind Tristan as they did the circuit around his property. Keeping up was hard. He wished he'd taken painkillers, but he knew those wouldn't have helped. Masking the pain wasn't a solution; he had to learn to endure more of it. Whatever Tristan wanted to inflict, he needed to endure it. For Jack.

The back he followed was hard, pure muscle. Alex dreamed of the day he'd run his hand through the short, dark-brown fur again. He wanted to count the white stars through it. He wanted to hold Jack in his arms. His gaze moved down to that ass, and he smiled. He didn't know when, but he would grab that ass again.

When they got home, Alex headed for the shower. The cold water didn't keep him from taking care of how the daydreams he'd had while running had left him. If Tristan had noticed, Alex didn't care.

Relieved, clean, and dry, he dropped his dirty clothes in the cleaner, which he'd found at the back of a room, behind more boxes. It was an integral part of the house, filled with more storage, but it was the large sink that had clued him in that this room might have been planned to serve a different purpose.

By the time lunch came around, there were no visible signs left of the beating. And while the soreness was still there, Alex barely noticed it as they walked to the tavern; lunch was the same as the previous one. Joanifer came and talked with them, blushed when she looked at Tristan. Alex considered asking what it was about, but didn't care enough. It was about Tristan, not Jack.

Once lunch was over, Tristan headed to one of the stores instead of directly home. Alex didn't accompany him inside; he had no desire to watch Tristan be Tech. On the other side of the store, between that building and the farm product seller, he found someone working on a hover.

Most of the side panels had been taken off, revealing the electronics and hardware that made it run, but the shape was distinctive enough Alex recognized it. "That's a Tachini, isn't it?"

The man turned his head, and Alex recognized Jacoby. "You a hover fan?"

Alex shook his head. "My dad owned a series of them. As far as he was concerned, Tachini was the only hover worth owning."

Jacoby smiled and stood, wiping his hand on a rag. "A man of good taste. A series of them? Which one?"

"The VGD series, but just one at a time. He wasn't that rich."

"That's the family line."

"I have two brothers and three sisters. Something like this wouldn't fit all of them."

Jacoby leaned against the side. "I expect not. He got a sportier model when you all moved out?"

Alex shrugged, walking around the hover, trying to work out what he was feeling about it. “We had a falling out when I was fifteen. Never saw him after that.”

“I’m sorry, must have been hard.”

“My grandparents took me in.” Alex smiled. “I think of them as my parents more than my mother and father.” Alex noticed the gun on the seat of the hover, and that Jacoby kept a hand on the hover’s side, within easy reach.

“How did they take it when you entered the life?”

“It wasn’t really a choice I made, to enter it. More circumstances.”

“But you chose not to leave it.”

“I will, once I’ve done what I have to.” Alex indicated the gun. “I didn’t think a place like this needed you to be armed.”

Jacoby picked it up and turned it in his hands, smiling fondly. “Termy and me go way back. He’s saved my life more than once. He hasn’t left my side since the Battle of Weltern.”

“Should I know the name?”

Jacoby grinned. “Doubt it. Unless you’re one of those battle fanatics who demands to know every detail about every little battle that’s happened in the universe. It was probably a hundred years ago, objective, and Weltern is a small world of no importance to anyone but a handful of corporations. It’s where I found Termy, and the first of many times he saved my life.”

“Where does the name come from?” Alex had known many mercs who named their weapons, but he’d never quite understood why. He’d never become that attached to anything, weapon or otherwise.

“It’s a Dolfic Terminator. At the time it was the most powerful handgun Dolfic produced. It’s still among the top ten, as far as I know.” He put it back on the seat. “I put it on before my pants the morning, and he’s the last thing I take off before bed.”

Alex looked at the man’s gun-belt, large and leather with slots for extra power packs. “That must make dressing interesting.”

Jacoby smiled. “I’ve gotten used to it.” He nodded toward the distance, in Tristan’s direction. “So, you and Tech. Seems like you two resolved your issues.”

Alex tried not to stiffen. “What do you mean?”

“He wouldn’t acknowledge he knew you when you arrived. I heard about the thing you pulled. Sit by his doorstep for days. In the rain too, is my understanding. I’ll be honest, I didn’t think you were honest when you said he was a friend. I figured that I’d have to chase you off. I’m glad I was wrong.” Jacoby picked up one of the tools arrayed on a cloth on the ground.

“Why would I have lied?”

Jacoby gave Alex a rueful grin. “You’re a merc. When have we ever been known to be entirely honest?”

“I don’t lie,” Alex said in indignation. Then because that wasn’t entirely true, he found he had to add, “Not if I can help it.”

“And can you help it now?”

Alex clenched his teeth to avoid responding to the jab with one of his own. “What are you insinuating?” he asked, once he could trust his mouth to say what he told it.

Jacoby studied Alex. “We’re a tight-knit community here. We look out for each other. I won’t say we know everything about one another, but just about. You’re a merc, you’ve admitted you’re not done being one, which means Tech isn’t where you’re calling it done. I’m not saying he’s the job, but have you been honest with him about why you’re here?”

“What do you care?” Alex’s voice was harsh, but his face expressionless. He’d crewed with a team that loved to play cards, and they’d taught him how to stop giving away how he felt over the course of that mission. It had cost him close to a million credits in lost bets, but he’d considered it money well spent.

“I told you, we’re a close-knit community. Tech is something of a friend of mine. I’d hate to see him hurt, in any way.”

Alex could have sneered. The man was such a good friend with this Tech he didn’t even know one damned true thing about him. He opened his mouth to give the portmaster a piece of his mind about the Tech situation, but the Samalian came into view at the end of the alley.

“Alex? Jacoby? Is everything okay?”

Jacoby turned. "Hey, Tech. It's all good. Alex was admiring my baby."

The Samalian joined them. "The hover or the gun?" He looked at the side of the hover. "You know I can fix this thing for you."

"Nothing wrong with it. I'm just giving it a tune-up."

Tech chuckled. "You've been tuning it up for as long as I've known you."

Alex watched the Samalian, and found he wanted to be away from here. "I'm going to head to the house." He began walking.

"I should go too," Tristan said. "I have work waiting for me."

Alex walked fast, but it didn't keep Tristan from catching up to him, and the bastard hadn't even had to act like he was in a hurry to do so.

"What was that about?" Tristan asked once they were away from the town.

"What do you care?"

"If you're going to start a fight with the one person here, other than me, who can take you down, I want to know your reasoning."

Alex snorted. "He's an old-timer. Probably doesn't even—"

"Alex, do not make me repeat myself."

"He's worried I'm here to hurt you. As if anyone could ever do that."

"Good."

"Good?"

Tristan walked in silence for a few steps. "I crafted Tech so people would grow attached to him. He is a loner, but a nice person. He's willing to help when asked, but there's a quality to him that others have trouble identifying. It makes—"

"You're lonely."

"Excuse me?"

"Not you, him. Tech. That quality you think is hard to identify? It's loneliness. Why do you think they're so intent on seeing us together?"

Tristan didn't say anything until the house came into view. "Don't antagonize the portmaster."

"I wasn't antagonizing him. He just pissed me off."

"Then avoid him."

"Trust me, I don't intend on becoming his best friend."

"Of course not. You're too busy looking for Jack for that to happen."

Alex froze and watched the Samalian walk. Did Tristan know what he was doing? Was he aware of how Jack was affecting him?

Was it all an act for his benefit?

It couldn't be, could it?