

A sweet pastoral scent enveloped Alex. It brought him comfort, although he didn't understand why. It came to him: flowers. Not identical, but it still reminded him of his grandmother's garden, and more distantly, of the orchards.

"Are you okay?" a woman asked softly.

He placed the voice, the medic. Why did she ask that? He opened his eyes. She wore the same white smock as...yesterday? Earlier today? How long had he been asleep?

Her face showed concern, but not alarm. "Your heartbeat sped up slightly. Is the pain too much?"

He focused back on his body. Was there... Yes, there. "No, it's fine. Just like a low whine. The sound an AI makes when the code's not fully running."

She smiled. "First time I've heard it described that way. But the good news is it means you don't have nerve damage." She looked at her datapad. He noticed the powder blue dress in the open front. Had she been wearing that when he'd come in? He didn't think so, but his attention had been elsewhere.

Concern made her frown, and he forced himself to calm down again. "Shouldn't all this tell you what is and isn't damaged?" It probably wasn't much of a distraction, but he was working impaired right now.

Her brow smoothed. "When it comes to pain, there's no better sensor than the patient." She tucked the pad under her arm and smiled. "Do you want me to reduce it? I can take it away completely at this point."

He gave a small shake of the head. He could endure pain; years as a mercenary had taught him that, at least. It was surprising, he thought sarcastically, how many people didn't appreciate being robbed. How many of them liked to resort to violence in an attempt to stop him. People not used to pain thought it only took a little to make someone give up, but pain was just like everything in life—it was something to get used to. Something you could control. Anders had gotten him started on that lesson. Every other fight had been another step toward pain being almost a friend.

He let out his breath and turned his gaze to his body. He only had the fuzziest of memories as to what Tristan had done to him. His left arm and right leg were in a regeneration chamber, and as with every other time he'd had to use one of those, the moment he thought about it, the limb began itching.

It was in his mind, he reminded himself, not that it ever helped. The chamber controlled what he felt, and the doctor had said pain was all that she was letting through. Knowing that didn't keep his gaze from wandering, looking for anything he could stick in there and relieve the imaginary sensation.

"How's your other injury?"

Alex looked at his chest, all the fresh cuts from their training. Sealant had been reapplied.

"Those aren't what I meant, although I didn't know Tech knew how to fight."

If not that, then what could she mean? His face? She'd be a better judge of those wounds.

"Tech mentioned you two had sex by the escarpment," she said in a clinical voice. "He said he got a little rough."

Alex's face went hot with shame. He looked away and tried to keep his heart from racing as the sensations came back. It hadn't happened how it was supposed to. He'd been so looking forward to them being together like that again, but it had been all wrong. Why hadn't Jack stop

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Her hand squeezed his arm. "It's okay. There's nothing to be ashamed of. We've all gotten carried away a time or two, and he is rather large."

Alex's head snapped to her. How the fuck did she know that? Had she and him? How dare she? Tristan was his!

"Whoa, calm down. I didn't do anything with your man."

His man? What was she talking about? What had he? How could he even think that? Tristan had forced himself on him. Hurt him.

His man.

He wouldn't cry. He'd mourn his death when he was alone, not here.

Jack was dead.

He could avenge Jack. Tell her what Tristan had done to him. Tell everyone here. They

would...what? They couldn't do anything. No one was a match for Tristan. He'd kill everyone here if Alex forced the issue.

He looked at her. He'd missed what she'd said.

"I said, I'm the only doctor here. I've had to give him checkups over the years. You probably noticed he isn't body shy."

Alex nodded, and masked the relief he felt at the reasonable explanation for how she knew what he looked like. He had to hide the annoyance he felt. What did he care if she'd had sex with that monster? He didn't want *him*. Who he wanted was gone.

"I initiated it," he heard himself say. "I guess it was being outside, with him." Why was he covering for that monster? "He was enjoying himself so much, and it was just a bit of pain." He wasn't a great liar, but mercs had to know how to lie if they wanted to stay alive. "He was sorry afterward." He remembered the sensation on the back of his neck. He'd been so certain it had been a kiss. Jack kissing him, apologizing. He had been so sure.

She patted his shoulder. "There's no permanent damage, and I gave you a booster. It's a more powerful version than the heals you mercs like to use. You'll heal quickly, but you'll have to abstain for a few days." She read something on her datapad. "How long have you known Tech?"

"Five years," he answered before he could think about it. "Subjective. Maybe six." Why was he still lying? He didn't know Tech. Was he afraid of what Tristan would do to him if he blew his cover? No, whatever he felt, it wasn't fear. Then what?

"Was it on a job?"

"What do you mean?" He tried to parse how she'd asked the question. Had there been any judgment in it? Did she know more about Tech than Tristan thought? He seemed certain no one knew Tech was a fabrication.

"You're not the first mercenary I've treated." She indicated his body, and he realized she'd used the word before. "You have almost a dozen badly set broken bones, more mistreated injuries than I can count. I don't know anyone who can, other than mercs, just endure them instead of taking the time to find a decent doctor and getting them repaired." She was worried, Alex could tell now. "So, was he a job? Is he a job?"

Alex let one bark of laughter pass before catching the rest. The idea he could pull a job on Tristan was just too... Her worry had turned to something harder, and he sobered. He realized he hadn't interacted with Tech all that much. He certainly was friendlier than Tristan, but maybe there was more. Maybe he was more vulnerable?

"I'm sorry, it's just the idea of anyone going after Tech. No, it wasn't, and this isn't, a job. I wasn't in the life when I met him."

She relaxed, and Alex wondered what she might have done if he'd said that yes, he was pulling a job on Tech. It wasn't like she had his combat experience. But he was on her bed, and she could control everything in this room. He decided he'd done the right thing. She might not be an experienced fighter, but she could still make his life miserable.

"How about you? How long have you known him?"

"For the twenty years or so I've lived here. That's subjective, although in my case the difference isn't much. I only take short trips to Efgan every three to four years, when I need supplies I can't get delivered." She considered it, checked something on her pad. "Less than thirty, objective."

"Do you know him well?"

"As well as anyone knows Tech." She smiled. "He's a bit of a loner. Keeps to himself, but we all like him. He's always willing to help when we have problems. He's fixed most of what's in here at one time or another. I can't imagine how much money he's saved me. If I'd had to replace any of this, or even get a company-approved repair done, I'd have gone through all my savings."

The warmth in her voice surprised him a little. Looking back on it, he saw that Tristan might not interact with many of the people here, but when he did, the Tech persona was always friendly and caring.

"Why do you say he's a loner? It can't be because of how far away he lives. This place is just as far, if not further from the town."

"Yes, but I don't live here. My clinic is far because of the animals I also treat. Trust me, no one wants to have all of those anywhere close to town. No animal smells good when they're sick." She squeezed his arm. "We're all happy you're here."

“Why? And you avoided the question. Why do you say Tech is a loner? He gets along with everyone in town.”

“I guess he’s more open with you, so you don’t see that side of him, but he keeps to himself. Not just the distance, he doesn’t talk about himself. Where he’s from, what he does. Orfvil makes a game of it, but we all wonder what brings someone like him to a place like this.”

She consulted her datapad before putting it away. “And I was worried he’d be alone. He hasn’t shown any interest in anyone here. I mean he isn’t human so that wasn’t surprising, but then he and Joanifer began flirting, but she married Orfvil.” She smiled. “Not that it stopped her.”

Alex tried to see how her acting self-conscious when she and Tristan interacted could be interpreted as flirting.

“Now we know he has someone special in his life. And it explains why he didn’t do anything with anyone here. Let me tell you, I’ve never seen him fret over anyone like he does over you.”

She thought Tristan cared? He had them all fooled that much? Did he? Could he?

“So you don’t know what he does for a living?”

“Like I said, he keeps to himself. Maybe you could tell me?”

“If he hasn’t, I don’t think I should.” Like she’d believe him if he did.

She nodded. “I figure he’s a corporate researcher working on some really secret project. They’ve hidden him here because of how important his work is. And he has to fly off to give his reports because he can’t risk transmitting them.” She watched him as she spoke, and Alex had to keep from smiling.

Maybe it could be interesting to ask around and find out what kind of extravagant theories everyone had come up with to explain Tech’s mysterious comings and goings. He wondered how they’d react to finding out the kind of monster that lived among them.

He closed his eyes. “Can you turn down the pain? I’m going to try to sleep.”

“I can do that.” The pain lessened until he barely noticed it. “I’ll check in on you in a few hours. If you’re awake when Tech comes, I’ll send him in.”

He would have commented on that, but sleep took him before he could form the words.

When he woke up that evening, Tristan still hadn’t visited. Alex wasn’t surprised, but he did feel hurt. He tried to push it away. Didn’t he at least deserve a visit after what Tristan put him through? Couldn’t he at least give the illusion of being remorseful?

He fell asleep again, berating himself. What did he expect? Tristan wasn’t Jack. Tristan didn’t care. He wouldn’t come to comfort him. If he came, all he’d bring was more pain.