

Alex stayed far from the hover as he circled it, hoping the pilot would stay focused on what was happening in town. This hover was larger, but as with the previous attack, it was plain, the kind of thing vacationers rented to fly around from city to city, to take in the sights. The sensor array on those was set to look out for other vehicles, not approaching people.

He made out the woman in the seat through the large, curved windshield, talking on a hand-comm unit, looking ahead, agitated. He had to get to her before the fighting in town turned so bad for her people she'd decide to call her boss. He wanted them to think this was just a bunch of lucky natives for as long as possible.

He made it far enough for the windowless back of the hover to hide him, and he ran. Silently, he made his way to the open side, a knife in each hand. He heard the indistinct voices on the comm; they sounded annoyed, but not in distress. Good, they still thought they could win.

A quick peek showed her, tense, comm to her ear. Her clothing had the extra bulk of armor, but she didn't wear a helmet. Alex was inside, his weight making the hover shift, and she turned, drawing a bulky gun. She got off one shot before she was lined up with him. He felt the heat of the blast, then his mono-edge knife sliced her throat open.

Someone gasped behind him, and something clattered to the hover's floor. Alex spun and threw his bloody knife. A man cursed as the knife embedded itself in his chest. The woman next to him had her gun out, and Alex threw himself down and felt the blast over his back.

He heard electronics spark as he rolled to his feet. The close quarters gave him the advantage. She didn't have time to adjust, but one hit and he'd be dead. He grinned. One hit, that was all it took for her to end this. For Alex to be done with all this. He sliced up, the vibro-blade cutting through the gun. One hit she didn't get to make.

She wrenched the rifle before the knife was through the polycarbon material and it was pulled out of his hand. He grabbed the one at her belt and it was slicing her throat—no, sliding over her armored skin. He dropped it in disgust. What kind of merc had a plain polycarbon knife as her main one?

He dodged the bludgeoning blow from what was left of her gun and pulled a mono-edge from his harness, only to throw it at the downed, but not dead, man who was pulling his gun out. He pulled another one from the harness as the man died, pommel sticking out of his throat.

The glow of this knife cast her pale skin in an orange tint. She took a step back as he slashed at her arms. Burned lines appeared on the armor, but her flesh didn't show signs it had cut her. She smiled as she realized she was protected.

Alex dropped the knife pulled one that buzzed lightly as it activated. Her smile vanished; there was still no armor that could stop a vibro-blade.

She looked around for a way out, but she'd backed herself in a corner. By the time she decided she had to go through him to escape, he had the knife cutting through her chest, worn armor, armored flesh, bones, lungs, and heart. She slumped against the wall, her eyes growing dull as she slid down.

He turned and pulled the dead pilot out of her chair, with her letting out a last gurgle as she hit the floor. Alex listened to the network through the hover's system; it was broadcasting. He brought up the command display and traced it. If there was someone at the other end listening to this live, things would become complicated.

It ended at a communication node which showed no other connections. He breathed easier. His reflex was to implode it, but he controlled it. Doing that would tell those behind the attacks coercion was involved. Something no native should know how to do.

He went through the contents, not looking at what it was, but when it had arrived. Intermittent connection over days, indications they'd been accessed. Updates as they traveled. The only live connection began just before they were spotted. He erased it,

removed all trace it had been made, then backed out, erasing his own presence. Now when their employer connected, all he'd see was that there were no updates yet.

Alex shut down the comm system, then wiped its buffer, in case there was a program hiding there he didn't have the time to go looking for.

He looked at the damage the blast had caused. The hole in the panel under the control board was still sparking. The comm system hadn't been hit, and neither was the command one, since he'd used both. He pulled the panel off and looked in. The parts that were important to a functional hover, the only parts he recognized, were intact. Power relays had been destroyed, but Tristan would have to look at them to tell what they affected.

He found the tag in there, pulled it out, disconnected it, and considered what to do with it. They already knew where the hover was. The tag's location would be buried within the corporation's system, along with every other tag on the planet. He couldn't get in there to remove it, not with this system as support.

The hover might not be functional, and if it was, did he want to send it away? Did he want to cut himself from the net? If he didn't destroy it they'd be able to tell the hover didn't move, they'd know the team had failed. Same if he destroyed it, though at least then they might not work as hard at hiding their communications on the network.

He threw the tag out the door and picked up the pilot's gun. He shot the tag until the gun was out of power. There was a hole a couple of feet deep where the tag had been, and small pieces around it.

He looked toward the town and saw an occasional flash of gunfire. The fighting had to be winding down. Running there wouldn't do any good, so he searched the hover and its dead occupants.

Two rifles, a few knives—which he clipped to his belt. They had two cases of emergency medical kits; they'd expected to get hurt. A case of nutrient bars, for the fifteen of them, which was a month's worth. Either they liked to plan for the long term, or they'd intended to add a vacation to this trip.

What he didn't find was a datapad.

Who, in this day and age, didn't use a datapad? What were the odds that fifteen people all didn't like them? Maybe whoever had hired the previous group realized one had gone missing? Alex had no way of knowing what the crash had looked like and what had survived. He didn't know what they thought natives could do with them; even if someone here was familiar with datapads, they didn't have a connection to the net.

Voices made him look up. Jacoby, Rig'Irik, Janden, and Torbim were approaching. The Samalians looked happy, their fur splattered with blood. Jacoby looked serious, but not worried.

"I figured this is where I'd find you when I realized you weren't fighting with us." Jacoby looked at the bodies. "Had your own problems, I see."

"How did the fight go?" Alex asked.

"We won!" Rig'Irik answered.

"We lost two of ours, but killed all of theirs," Jacoby added. "It's a fair trade in my tally."

"Good. One of the bolts damaged some relays; you'll have to take a look to see how functional it is."

"So you're sending it away?" Jacoby sounded disappointed.

"No point. They know this team reached their destination. I shut down the comms, so it's off the net, and I destroyed the tag. Their best guess will be that somehow the hover was destroyed in the attack. If we're lucky, they'll wait awhile to give any survivors time to reach a town and contact them to give a report. What we want to do is move this somewhere a satellite won't see it. For that, I need it to work."

Jacoby lay on his back and pulled himself under the boards. "Won't having this within reach make it tough for you to resist the temptation to get on the net?"

"I'm going to reconfigure this system's protocols. By the time it gets back to the network, no one will recognize it." He nodded to the Samalian and spoke in their language. "Bodies, rear." Then he had to search for how to tell them to take them out and bury them.

Torbim grinned, her sharp teeth stained with blood and spoke quickly, indicating Alex.

Janden commented, all too fast for Alex to make out.

Rig'Irik chuckled. "Rear?" he said in standard, slapping his ass, "or back?" He said the word, which sounded close to what Alex had said.

"They're in the back." Alex gave up on Samalian. "Take the dead and bury them. We don't want them found by satellite, or should someone come looking for them."

The three of them entered the hover, each grabbing a body. Jacoby was looking at Alex from under the board, displeased.

"The fighting's over. You want to start butting prides again?" Alex asked.

Jacoby shook his head. "Just be careful, Alex. You get too close to them, you start thinking of them before the real job, and things are going to get messy for everyone."

"I'm not getting close to them, Jacoby. I don't get close to anyone anymore."

Jacoby didn't look convinced. "I'll need my tools, but I can have this mobile within a couple of hours."

Alex looked at the sky. "Hopefully this is low priority enough no one has a satellite pointed at us."

"I doubt losing a team is all that noteworthy for a corporation. I expect we have a few weeks before anyone notices they haven't checked in."

"Someone checks the communication node at least once a day, based on what I saw there. But that doesn't mean he expects anything there, so you're probably right. Hopefully, that's going to be enough for us to mourn the dead."

"Us?" Jacoby asked.

"Them," Alex indicated the Samalians heading for the treeline. "They just lost two of their friends. It's going to affect them."

"Affect them. Right."

Jacoby was studying him. Alex sighed. "This isn't about me. I don't care about any of them dying. All I care about is that we're going to be ready for the next attack, and if they're distraught, that's not going to help us."

"Right, because you need Tech to—"

"Tristan."

"Right, you need him to finish that stupid wall."

Alex ignored the sarcasm. "And that can't happen if the House is destroyed, or the corporation has taken over the town. I doubt they're going to let me explain what Tristan is doing and why. You think they're going to care?"

"Are they going to care that you believe some sort of primitive religious magic is going to cure your boyfriend? Let me think on that. No, you're right, I can't see how they'll allow that to continue when they have access to doctors who can do the job a lot better."

"You don't get it."

Jacoby snorted. "You think I didn't spend years begging Randon to bring my dad back? My mom? What, you think those kinds of beliefs only exist on primitive worlds? It takes a lot more than SpaceGov or a corporation telling a world they aren't real to make people stop believing, but at some point, you wake up and realize that there's a reason they claim that. It's because it's true. Superstitions don't speak of a time when things were better, when enlightened beings or things guided us. They're about a time when we didn't understand shit."

"So you're with SpaceGov, and there's nothing unexplainable in the universe?"

"Yes."

“You’re telling me that with all the travel you did before going groundside you never saw anything that made you wonder if there isn’t something more?”

“Of course I did. But Alex, I didn’t go and hang all my hopes for a cure on that.” Jacoby stood. “I understand what you’re doing, hoping for here, but you need to realize that—”

“I’m done talking about it. I told you, if you have enough and want to leave, do that. You can even take this hover, just make sure it’s destroyed when you get to your destination.” Alex walked away from the hover.

“I told you, I’m not leaving,” Jacoby said in exasperation.

“Then get your tools and fix it so we can hide it.” Alex headed to the town, ignoring Jacoby’s grumbling.

“Good fight!” Parten yelled from the edge of town, pulling two of the bodies away. Most of the bodies were already removed, and the mood was cheerier than Alex expected.

Rig’Irik returned with Torbim. “Who died?” Alex asked.

“DopFaer and Certol’Dam,” he answered. “They fight well. Tomorrow we thank them.”

“Thank?”

“For fighting with us.” Rig’Irik searched for words, said something in Samalian, but Alex shook his head. His vocabulary wasn’t large enough to understand. Rig’Irik shrugged. “Don’t know how human say it.”

“It’s okay.” Alex looked around. “I don’t need to understand everything about your people.”

Rig’Irik canted his head. “Humans want to know everything. They come, they ask questions. They record and write. Sartas say they write it wrong, but they don’t fix it when she corrects. Then say what they write is true.”

Alex nodded. The more he spoke with Sartas, the more he realized how much of what he’d read was wrong. “I don’t know why they do that. But I’m not recording anything, so you don’t have to worry about me spreading lies. I just like to know enough so I can do my job properly.”

“Save Torpas,” Rig’Irik said.

“What’s that?”

The Samalian indicated around them. “Torpas.”

It took Alex a moment to work it out, and then he felt foolish. “The town?”

Rig’Irik’s ears said yes.

Alex closed his eyes. Of course the town had a name. Now that he thought back on it, he’d even heard the name before, just hadn’t tried to figure out what it meant.

And it made sense Rig’Irik thought he was here to protect them. Alex wasn’t sure what Tristan was doing registered with the Samalian. Could he have linked building the wall to stories of getting a boon?

He sighed. “Sure, why not?” Alex didn’t feel like explaining things to him, and it wasn’t going to alter anything if he did.

They turned a corner, and Alex saw someone standing in a larger alley, watching an area where blood had ended up on everything. With a curse, Alex ran.

As he got closer, Alex saw Tristan was standing in the middle of the blood, but he didn’t have any on him. He looked around, looked lost. His ears twitched, and he looked up, his confused face becoming a mask of anger.

“You kept this from me!”

Alex stopped well outside Tristan’s reach. “Settle down.” He kept his voice soft. No one was around and Rig’Irik hadn’t followed him, so this wouldn’t escalate into another bloodbath.

“No! I could have helped!” He motioned at the blood. “I could have done that, I could have killed them. I want to kill them. Why won’t you let me do that?” Tristan

shook from the rage, and Alex chose his words carefully.

“You can’t help,” he said derisively. “You can’t do anything right now. You can’t even build that damned wall.”

Tristan looked at him, stunned, then he strode toward Alex.

Alex didn’t move when Tristan got close enough to hit him. He kept looking him in the eyes, kept the sneer on his face. He wanted this to be it. He hoped he had finally pushed too far, that Tristan would break through whatever barrier kept him from striking him.

Tristan stared, shaking ever harder, and finally roared. When he was done, all Alex saw in his face was defeat. Tristan turned and sulked off.

Alex slumped. It hadn’t worked. And of course, now Tristan would take his anger out on the wall, and he was going to have to start all over again.

“Brave,” Rig’Irik said.

“Was it?” Alex asked.

“Strong, dangerous, Aggressor. Always brave to stand up to one.”

“Yes, he was.” Alex watched Tristan’s back vanish in the distance. He shook himself; moping wouldn’t help. “Come on, let’s go help with the cleanup.”

Rig’Irik canted his head and Alex indicated the blood on the ground, the damaged buildings.

The Samalian smiled. “Later. Time to give thanks first.”

“Thanks for what?” Alex asked, unsure what they had to be thankful for.

“For winning.” Rig’Irik led him to the town center, where people were setting up tables on one side, putting food on them. On the other side, a group of Samalians were making music, with instruments and their voices.

The Samalians with injuries were seated in comfortable-looking chairs and were being seen to, brought food, drink, their injuries tended. Samalians danced before the musicians, and those who had fought seemed to be the center of each dancing group.

Food and drinks were offered to Alex with reverence. He ate some, but only drank non-alcoholic drinks. He stayed at the outskirts of the celebration, watching them, trying to figure them out. They shouldn’t be partying, they should be getting ready for the next attack.

The celebrants didn’t seem to know what to do with Alex. They came to him, said a few words—gratitude, by the tone, if he didn’t always understand the words—and tried to get him to join in, confused by his refusal.

That’s when he noticed Orgur, one of the injured fighters, on his chair, a woman seated on his lap, undulating on it. Alex looked away, only to see Torbim against a wall, two men with her, kissing her, nipping at her neck. One of the men dropped to his knees and moved between her legs. Alex looked away from them, and Parten had a man pressed against a wall and they were grinding together.

Everywhere he looked there they were, in pairs or more, doing more than snuggling. Whatever usually made them seek privacy when engaging in those acts didn’t seem to be in effect now. Alex knew this wasn’t about him. He was rational enough to know it would have happened without him being present, but it still felt like they were rubbing his nose in what he couldn’t have.

Rig’Irik broke from a man and woman who’d been pressing against him and joined Alex. “You okay?”

Alex kept his eyes on Rig’Irik’s face. He caught a glimpse of his excitement, and that had been plenty. “I’m fine.”

Rig’Irik stepped closer and Alex became aware of how much heat he generated, was reminded of the few times he got to feel that kind of heat against him. “Don’t be alone. You fought. Come dance. Come celebrate.” He took Alex’s hand and pulled gently. Alex’s tan was now darker than his sandy fur.

Alex untangled his hand. “It’s okay.”

Rig'Irik studied him. "Then I stay with you." He ran a finger up Alex's arm, claw barely out.

Alex's breath caught, and he pulled his arm away.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing, it's not that." Alex ran a hand over his arm, remembering Tristan's claws on it, never breaking skin, but leaving trails. The memory was enough to make him shiver with need.

"Strong, brave." Rig'Irik's voice was soft, and Alex looked up into deep, coppery brown eyes. He'd avoided looking at him after that first time. He saw desire in them. Alex felt the hand on his cheek and found he was leaning into it.

He jerked away, fought every instinct that told him to throw himself at the Samalian, throw him to the ground and make use of that visible excitement. He placed both hands on Rig'Irik's chest, his fingers sinking in the short, but thick sandy fur, and pushed him away gently.

"I can't do this. I'm sorry."

"Not strong enough for you?" Rig'Irik's tone wasn't pleading. Alex felt he was asking what he could do to make Alex want him.

"That isn't it. It isn't about you." Alex stepped away. "It's about me. I'm not someone you should... I'm Tristan's. I'm sorry." Alex walked away from Rig'Irik, from the celebration, from the town.

It was full dark by the time he reached the House, and when he stopped, he could only barely make out Tristan in the distance. He was back at the start, working on the first row of stones.

"I need you," Alex whispered, and his chest tightened, making his words sound pained. He thought Tristan stiffened, but then he was back to placing stones down.

Alex headed for the hover, but walked past it. Jacoby was in there, and Alex didn't want to be around anyone if he couldn't be close to Tristan. He found a comfortable spot in the grass near the trees and stretched out, looking at the starry sky, and imagined it was Tristan's fur, over him, and about to lie on top of him.