

Jacoby had Termy in-hand the instant he realized the birds were quiet. He didn't aim at the approaching steps through the trees, but Termy was powered up and his finger was on the trigger.

He recognized the shapes through the trees, Samalian and human, but only relaxed once he made out details—Alex resting his head against Tech's shoulder, the Samalian's arm around his waist.

At least the tension in the hover was done with; this hadn't been the waste of time he'd worried it was. He shouldered Termy and smiled at them.

"It's about time you two got back. I was about to track you down, stun you, and drag you back."

Tech's ears did the weird twitching Jacoby had seen in the town.

Alex simply scowled. "I would have liked to see you try it."

"So, you done freaking out anytime Tech looks at you?"

Alex's scowl deepened.

"We should get going," Tech said. He walked by Jacoby and into the hover.

"Did you try to have a bath or something?" Jacoby wrinkled his nose.

"In the river," Alex said, following Tristan inside.

"You stink, Tech. Couldn't you have dried off?"

"My father didn't believe in technology, so there were no dryers installed. Did you prefer we return reeking of sex?"

"Excuse me?"

Tech sat in the pilot's chair and powered the hover up. "What did you think we were going to do here? Have a long philosophical discussion about the meaning of loneliness?"

Jacoby watched him work, ready to intervene the instant he missed a check, but Tech was precise again. No sloppiness.

"Fine, in that case this is better, but why don't you let me take over so you can go dry out properly? My hover does have a dryer."

"My hover," Tech corrected. He glanced at Alex and they grinned at each other.

Jacoby sighed as Tech stood. "At least turn the sound-dampening on; I don't need to be reminded of what I won't get until I'm back home."

"You could have gotten some," Alex said, before following Tech.

"Not that desperate," Jacoby grumbled. He took off and had them heading to the city, pushing the hover as hard as the upgrades and fine-tuning allowed. Almost immediately, the gravity generator registered a rhythmic shift in the weight distribution. Just how hard were those two going at it for the system to notice?

When they left the room, they sat on a couch and snuggled. Their hands were all over each other's bodies, as if they couldn't wait to do it again. This was going to be a long trip, Jacoby realized.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jacoby popped dried meat in his mouth—something local he'd bought. It was tasty, a little gamy, but also sweet. "So, we need to reach the thirty-second floor without being noticed?" He looked Tech up and down. "You going to put a suit on or something?"

The building didn't stand out in any way. Just another giant glass, metal, and permacrete structure among a bunch of others. Humans came in and out of them, as they did the others.

"We need to get into the chief of operation's office on the eighth floor first," Alex said.

"Why there?"

"I have to access the system directly. Corporations have always been careful about access, but LeisureTek has increased it over the last objective decade in response to attacks."

“Let me guess,” Jacoby said. “They were all you.”

Alex shook his head. “I’d never even heard of LeisureTek before we landed here. I might be the best coercionist out there, but I’m not the only one. LeisureTek pissed off someone else.”

“Probably over this place. I get the sense the local Samalian resistance has support from outside.” Jacoby finished the packet. “I still say you doing this over the net is the safest way.”

“I thought you were in a hurry to go home,” Tech said. He was watching the comings and goings.

“Yes, but I’ll take a delay over getting captured. Taking on a corporation is a suicide job.”

“Not hardly,” Tech replied, and Alex grinned.

“Fine, maybe you can do it,” Jacoby admitted, “but you might have missed that only humans have been going in there. It’s going to be me and Alex. I have no doubt he’s good at pulling off jobs—” Alex snorted. “—but it’s going to be corporate security in there, not a ship full of mercs.”

“I’m going in too,” Tech said, still looking at the entrance.

“How? I was joking about you wearing a suit. It doesn’t matter what you do; even shaved, you’re going to look like a Samalian.”

“You should pay more attention to who goes in there.”

Jacoby motioned to the sea of humans. “I am looking.”

“But you’re not seeing.” Tech pointed and Jacoby looked there, searching, and was about to let out his exasperation when he noticed the ears above the heads. Now that he saw them, he realized there was a Samalian between two humans. He, or she—they had pants on—was slouched, medium-brown fur with white stripes. Even with the little he managed to catch, Jacoby got the sense there was something missing, a lack of vitality. He watched them enter the building.

Having seen one, now he noticed another, also escorted by humans—copper fur, black swirls. They, too, entered the building.

“Okay, but you still stand out. You don’t look half-dead.” Jacoby turned to get Tech’s explanation for how he was going to overcome that, and found himself looking at an expressionless Samalian, eyes glazed over. He could swear Tech’s fur had lost some of its luster, and that he was smaller.

Alex wasn’t surprised by the change; in fact, he looked extremely pleased.

Jacoby searched Tech’s face. “That’s... That’s impressive. You think it’s going to be enough to get you through security?”

“With both of you at my side, yes.” Tech’s voice coming out of that brain-dead face was disconcerting.

Jacoby looked at the crowd again and spotted another Samalian, golden fur with copper spots. “What are they doing to them in there?”

“I don’t know,” Alex answered. “Whatever it is, they’re keeping it off the net, so it can’t be good. But that isn’t why we’re here. Our only concern is crashing the whole of LeisureTek’s database.” Alex was looking at him like he was issuing a warning.

Jacoby almost pointed out he wasn’t the one who’d almost gone native. Instead, he pointed to how they were dressed. “How are we getting in? We don’t exactly look corporate. I don’t think they let mercs in that building.” Alex didn’t scream “merc”—his clothing was light armor—but Jacoby would have to be down to his skivvies to no longer look like one.

Tech handed Jacoby a bundle. Clothes. A black suit.

“You have to be kidding me.”

“It isn’t the level of armor you’re used to,” Tech said, “but it is armored. It’s the same cut as the corporate jockeys coming in and out.”

Alex held one too—light brown—as he shook his head. “I haven’t worn something

like this since my time at Luminex. I doubt I remember how to move like one of them.”

Tech kissed his temple. “Just remember what I taught you. You’ll be fine.”

“Fine, so this makes us look like them, but how do we get past the guards? If this building is as important as you imply, I doubt they’ll be satisfied with us wearing the right clothes.”

Alex produced two IDs. “Fully valid, linked to two employees who aren’t in a position to come into work today, but haven’t called in to let anyone know. I added a few things to them so we can get through any checkpoint.

Jacoby took the ID Alex handed him. “The previous owners, dead?”

“Just sick. I couldn’t risk LeisureTek having a system in place that registers an end of life. Their apartment sensors are registering everything as being fine, and they think they advised their supervisor they wouldn’t be coming in. Nice thing about a planet where humans haven’t taken over everything is that it’s actually credible to catch something they don’t have a cure for yet.”

“So, we can get in.” Jacoby still didn’t like this. “I know Alex’s deadly with knives, so he can get those through security, but I’m more of a gun guy. I don’t think I can sneak Termy in there.”

Tech handed Jacoby a small package. “Fully-shielded holster. Latest tech, completely undetectable. It’s going to take a few years before anyone finds a way around it. Termy is going to fit in it, and the cut of the jacket will hide it. So long as you don’t pull Termy out, no one will question it. This is a savage world, after all.”

Jacoby looked at the holster, the suit, and the IDs. “When did you get all this? I mean, we got in last night.”

“What do you think we did all night?” Alex asked.

“Sex,” Jacoby answered, replacing his holster with the new one. “I know, because you two forgot to turn the dampener in your apartment on and you,” he pointed to Tech, “are loud.”

Tech smiled. “Only when deserving. Alex is very—”

“I don’t want to know. Your sex life is your own, but now I get why you live so far from the rest of us. Any closer and none of us would get any sleep.”

“And you must have fallen asleep before we were done,” Alex said, “because after that, we went out and took care of this.”

“Where did you get this?” Jacoby tapped the holster at his hip. “That Jof fellow?”

“No, he’s compromised. LeisureTek has them under heavy surveillance. They know Jofdelbiro has links to the resistance.”

“It’s his daughter, not him,” Jacoby said. “I guess my last visit didn’t help matters for them.”

“If you mean that LeisureTek now thinks you’re the mastermind behind the attacks,” Tech said, “and that they’re your contact here, you’re right. It didn’t help at all.”

“I had to deal with some of them to get the weapons Alex wanted.”

“But you left one of them alive,” Tech replied, his tone too severe for the situation.

Jacoby shrugged. “I didn’t think he’d gotten a look at my face.”

“You should have killed him anyway,” Alex said. He was naked, looking at the suit. “How do these even go on?”

“One leg at a time,” Jacoby answered. He looked Tech over. All he had on were new pants. “What are you doing for weapons?”

Tech extended claws. Jacoby kept forgetting about them; they looked bigger than he remembered. “These will be enough.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Jacoby fought the urge to pull at the pants. They were his size, but they didn’t have the weight he was used to. How did anyone stand feeling like they weren’t wearing anything?

Tech was next to him, with Alex on the other side. Tech was slouched, looking

brain-dead again, and barely as tall as Alex. He'd seen Tech hunch himself in, bend his legs a little, but he still couldn't believe it.

The door opened as they approached. Alex went in first, then Tech, and Jacoby followed. The Samalian was never allowed to be in another position than between his two guardians.

"Another one?" The guard took Alex's ID and swiped it. "What are they doing with them? Grinding them into paste?"

Alex took the ID back. "As if they tell me that stuff. They hand them to us, tell us where to take them, and to not ask questions." He took hold of Tech's arms as Jacoby handed over his ID.

"They have to be running out of space under the building, with the lot of them that have been coming in." The guard handed the ID back. "I'm telling you, this would've been a lot easier if we just wiped them all out instead of wasting time scrambling their brains and whatever else they do to them in here."

Jacoby made a fist and considered punching the guard. "Probably a good thing you aren't in charge then." Everyone had a right to live, not just humans.

The guard chuckled. "Yeah, probably."

Jacoby followed Alex and Tech to the lift and entered. There was still ample space, but no one else joined them. Since it was only them, Jacoby opened his mouth, but Alex shook his head, so he fumed in silence.

On the eighth floor, Alex led the way again.

"Hey!" a woman called. "What are you doing here?" They stopped, and Jacoby readied himself for a fight. She wore a security uniform, but lightly armored. "That thing goes to the basement, you know that."

Alex shrugged. "My instructions are to bring this one to Chief Richard."

"Another one?" the woman growled. "They aren't her personal toys. Someone was supposed to talk to her about this."

"So you want us to take him down? Are you going to tell her she isn't getting him?"

"Are you kidding me? Why do you think we all passed this along up the chain? No one here wants to deal with her tantrums." She sighed. "You go on. I'll send another message when I can." With a huff, she turned and walked away.

Jacoby glanced over his shoulder as they continued on their own way. "What was that about?"

"Chief Richard is a closet xenophile," Tech answered under his breath.

"How did you find that out?"

"I talked with some of the guards," Alex answered. "She isn't as discrete about it as she likes to think, as you can tell. Everyone knows she diverts the occasional Samalian to her office before they are processed."

"Did you get any sleep last night? Are you on stims?"

"Yes, I did." Alex stopped by a door and buzzed it. It opened, and they entered. The woman continued reading her datapad as Jacoby closed and locked the door.

She looked up. "What's this?"

The office was larger than he expected. More of a meeting room with everything but the desk removed, and three chairs before that.

Alex looked at Tech, then back to her. "We were told to bring him here. Something about him being the last one? They don't give me details."

Her face lit up. She walked around the desk, and then around Tech. "Has he been processed yet?" She looked him over, licking her lips.

"No more than what they do at the holding center."

"Very good." She moved to Tech and ran a hand through his fur. Moved it down to his stomach and kept going. Alex tensed, his hand inching toward the knife at his back. "You two can wait outside, I'll—" Her words were strangled by the hand Tech wrapped around her neck. He was looking at Alex, concerned.

“Are you okay?” Tech spun the woman and held her against his chest.

She fought, but stilled when Tech’s claws drew blood.

Alex nodded. “I am now. I’m just happy you stopped her before she reached—” He forced a breath.

“You know some jobs will require I get intimate with a mark, Alex. It’s happened before.”

Alex nodded, patting her down. “This is just too fresh. It’s going to take time for me to adjust.”

“Look at me.”

Alex looked up, pausing in his search.

“She doesn’t mean anything. None of them do. You understand that, right?”

Jacoby so wanted to be on the other side of the door right now. Or at least to tell them to wait until they were done here before having relationship talk.

“I know.” Alex snapped his mouth shut. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to snap. I’ll adjust, you know that. It’ll just take some time.” He went back to his search.

“What are you looking for?” Jacoby asked before this relationship stuff continued. He wasn’t a prude by any stretch of the imagination, but he drew the line at people talking about their sex life in front of him. Especially when it sounded like it was going to be something other than a monogamous relationship.

Samalians and their weird ways.

Alex pulled a card from her pocket. “This.”

“And what is that?”

“Her access card.” Alex sat behind the desk.

“I thought ‘access’ meant strings of numbers. You know, the stuff I have to enter to —”

The sound of bones breaking stopped him. Tech let go of the woman, his eyes closed. She crumpled at his feet.

“Did you just kill her?” Jacoby asked.

Tech didn’t answer, or move.

“All good?” Alex asked, typing.

Tech opened his eyes and smiled, baring his teeth. “All good.”

Jacoby looked at the body. “Did you have to kill her?” Had Tech just killed her in cold blood?

“No.” Tech’s smile broadened, which only made it more vicious. “I wanted to. I wanted to check if I was still a killer.”

Jacoby looked at Alex, who didn’t react at the admission.