

A look at my phone shows Tristan's no more than five minutes away. Time to put the finishing touches on the celebratory early lunch I made for use. Which mainly means the metal mixing bowls over both our plates. I wanted to use official hotel cloches, but no matter how much I was willing to pay, they couldn't get that to me in the two hours Tristan was out of the house, so I improvised.

It's just the two of us. Emile stepped into the kitchen barely awake, saw me cooking, and as soon as I told him it was a celebratory meal, he turned around. Ten minutes later he walk by, fully dressed with a "I'm off to hang out at Sophie's!".

I don't remember him mentioning her before, but we have the tracker in his phone if we need to get him in a hurry.

Which we won't.

This marks the end of us running around pissing off giant criminal groups with cloning facilities. I mean, come on, with the number of goons we killed, they have to have invented human cloning to keep from running out.

Except that if they have cloning, why bother with the human trafficking? Just grow the woman and boys and train them to like the abuse you'll put them through. It's still going to piss me off when I find out you do it, a kid's a kid, but how likely am I going to learn about it when you aren't making people vanish?

Scratch that. You'd still be dealing with idiots like the senator who took pictures of himself having sex with a boy young enough to be his great grandson and storing it in the cloud where I came across it, so we'd still be where we are now.

Well, I'd still be here. That girl wouldn't have been kidnapped, so Tristan wouldn't have gotten involved and... you know what? Let's forget about the cloning. I truly am sorry for the innocents who suffered because of it, but nothing that results in him out of my life deserves to exist.

The garage door rolls up and I'm out of the kitchen. Tristan steps out of the car as the door rolls down and I kiss him. He stiffens, but I keep going. He'll get over the surprise, run through the possible reasons this is happening and—

He grabs my ass, turns and shoves me against the side of the car. Then his tongue shoves its way in my mouth and I moan. Somewhere in the distance, the roll door clangs as it touches the floor.

I wrap my arms around his neck and pull myself up, and my legs are around his waist. I grind against his erection and curse that I didn't get him out of his pants first. If I let go to pull his cock out, I'm falling back, and he'd not moving a hand off my ass, which means...

I groan and break the kiss. "You're going to torture me, aren't you?"

"I'm not the one who created this situation. You are your own torturer."

"You don't have to go along with it." I hump.

He grins. "And take away your fun?"

"Now I almost regret spending all this time getting your surprise ready."

His only response is to raise an eyebrow.

I sign and untangle myself from him. The food's going to grow cold, anyway.

"Come with me." I take his hand and pull him to the kitchen. I have to stop inside

since he does that as soon as he steps in, so I wave toward the table with both our covered plates, along with silverware neatly arranged on each side, the champaign flutes, with champaign and orange juice bottles, and lit candles. Those would be more effective without the sun shining in, but I wasn't waiting until tonight for this.

"I cooked," I tell him.

"I can tell," he replies flatly, looking toward the counter.

"I'll clean up after."

"You shouldn't have."

"I wanted to." I pull him and this time he moves. I lead him to his place and pull the chair. "Please," I say, not plead, when he doesn't immediately sit. I smile when he searches my face, then he sits. "You're going to love this." I reach for the upside-down bowl.

"Alex," he says as I struggle to grab the edge, "you know I don't—"

"Ta-da!" I exclaim, finally lifting it and revealing the dish I prepared for him. "I present to you, Pemmican Juliene at la Alex."

Okay, so it looks more like I dumped all the French cut pemmican on the plate than arranged it into anything deserving of a French title, but I did slice three bars to make that mound, so cut me some slack here.

He stares at the plate, unmoving.

I wait him out. He'll react in a fraction of a second to anything that might be a danger; this will take those boxes of his a few seconds to work through.

When he looks at me, it's with one of those rare, unrehearsed smiles me and Emile are the only ones to see. "Thank you."

I sit. "I figured today deserves a celebration." I fill his flute with orange juice and ignore mine in favor of the cup of still steaming coffee.

"It's early to celebrate." He takes the cover off my plate. He just puts his hand on it, tightens it and lifts, revealing the steak, mixed vegetables, and French Fries.

I roll my eyes. "We're basically giving them free rein to do anything they want short of human trafficking. No one's stupid enough to say no to that after we decimated what's got to be a third of their network." I pop a fry in my mouth as he takes the fork. "And Emile at one of his friends, so we have the house to ourselves." I reach over and squeeze his thigh. Try to squeeze it; he's basically made of concrete.

"Which one?" he forks the pemmican.

"Sophie. He didn't say her last name."

"Gilabert," he says after considering for a second. "She's in his Spanish class." Then he's chewing.

"You don't sound too concerned that your boy is with a girl, unsupervised." I cut my steak and the juices flow out as if I'd just sliced the animal's throat open.

"She had a girlfriend."

"So he's with two girls, unsupervised." I grin.

"Two lesbians."

"They could be bi." I waggle my eyebrows at him.

"Nothing in my research showed either of them have interests in men."

"I don't know how reliable research in teenagers can be."

"With how much time they spend online?"

“Okay, I’ll grant you they aren’t the mystery you and I had to be—”

“I wasn’t a mystery.”

I roll my eyes. “You are the definition of mysterious. Do you have any idea how lucky I consider myself to be that I get to see what you’re hiding under all that? That when I look at you, it’s the monster that looks back at me? Not one of the masks you put on for anyone else?”

The smile he gives me is laced with maliciousness. “No one deserves that part of me quite like you do.”

I swallow, then have trouble swallowing the meat. He keeps looking at me as he bites into a pemmican fry and chews it. He can eat me up, will eat me up one day, the look says and fuck, I’m hard.

I want him to grab me, throw me on the concrete floor, rip his clothes off and then—

I see stars when my head hit the floor, and he’s over me, looming. He growls and bares his teeth. Goose bumps race along my body, and it’s not because the floor’s cold. He sniffs my shoulders, moving to my neck, and I shiver. He licks, then I feel the teeth against my flesh and I whine from need. I want—

The banging on the door freezes him, teeth barely pressing in. I shudder. I need—

The banging comes again, more forcefully.

“Fuck them,” I say as Tristan pulls away and sits on his hunches, taking out his phone. I hate him, and his ability to just switch this off. If I’m going to be left with my cock throbbing, the least he could do is suffer, too.

He turns the phone to show me the person banging on our door. I groan. I don’t know him, but I recognize the colors. The fact he’s alone probably just means there are others watching him. Are we going to be some sort of initiation new members get put through? Piss off the monsters and if you survive, you’re part of our gang?

Tristan stands, then offers me his hand.

“We are picking this up where we’re leaving off,” I warn him. “Don’t you dare use this as a ‘the mood’s fucking broken’ excuse.”

He slams me against the wall. “I will decide what happens after this, Alex. Remember who gave himself over to whom. You can tease and attempt to manipulate me into hurting you, but do not believe you get to order me around.”

He kisses me hard to yet more banging.

I have trouble staying up when he leaves for the door. Fuck, I love him so much. Then I’m after him. I am not letting him deal with whatever that’s going to be alone. I’m there as he pulls the door open as the fist comes down and lands on his chest.

There’s a moment of pure terror on the guy’s face—he can’t be more than nineteen—then it’s covered up by bravado so false there might be an Emmy in it for him.

“It’s time you guys paid for the peace we’ve been granting you,” he states, and there’s barely a tremble in his voice. Then he notices me, that I’m naked and hard, and hurries to look away.

“Yeah,” I reply. “That’s what you just interrupted, so you fucked better have a good reason, or I’m going to mess you up.”

“I’m not scared of you.”

Sure, and that treble in your voice is desire. Fucking tell me another one, will you?

Tristan leans forward. “Then maybe no one has told you what we did the last time members of your gang bothered one of us.”

“We own the blocks,” he says, puffing his chest out.

“Only because I let you,” Tristan growls back.

The kid’s about to crack. He’s out of steam.

“You owe us,” he still tries. “So you’re going to do a job for me.”

The kid doesn’t pick up on Tristan’s reaction, but even I notice that this is no longer about the gang.

Tristan lets the kid see a hint of the monster with the growl that carries his words. “I do not work for you or your gang. Press me, and all I’ll leave of them are their bones.”

Okay, I’m fucking impressed that the kid’s still standing there. He’s shaking like a leaf, but I’d expect him to run off screaming and confronted when even that much of the real Tristan. What is the gang holding over him that scared him more than—

“Please,” the kid pleads, “my baby-brother needs help.”