

Tristan was on the fifth test of the rifle when he noticed the banging had stopped. He could check the recording, see when Alex had decided he'd had enough and left.

Instead, he headed for the kitchen. Tristan had been working for hours now and could use some water. He ignored that he had bottles of them in the workroom so he wouldn't have to leave it, and decided it was a coincidence the kitchen window happened to give him a view of the door.

He found he wasn't surprised to see Alex seated on the ground, leaning against the door, the case with the Samalian statue on one side and his pack on the other.

He drank the water and headed back to his work.

\* \* \* \* \*

He was thirsty again, and Alex was still seated there, against the door.

\* \* \* \* \*

This time he detoured by the kitchen on his way to the bathroom, which he needed to use from all the water he'd drank. Alex was still there.

\* \* \* \* \*

When he went back to the kitchen, it was for the exclusive purpose of checking in on Alex. He hated that he'd lied to himself the previous times. Tristan didn't fabricate reasons, he did what he wanted. He knew himself and acted accordingly.

Now, he wanted to know if the human was still stubbornly waiting for something that would never happen.

Alex wasn't there.

The lack of the human made him pause. This quickly? No, Alex couldn't have.

He went to the door and stepped outside. His first thought was that Alex had noticed him at the window and moved to make him think he had left, but no, there was no sign of him, not even by the workshop's door.

Alex had given up?

Tristan had expected more from Alex, from someone who had gone through the extensive work needed to track him all the way here. Tristan had covered his tracks well, so he'd thought this meant Alex was resilient.

Tristan didn't eat by the clock, the way humans did, he ate when he was hungry. But with taking his lunch at the Tavern, the walk back, and then his constant work, it did mean he tended to get hungry around the same time the humans in the town ate. Normally he'd wait, since he would be in the middle of his work, but he was already away, so he grabbed a meal-sized nutrient bar and ate it with a glass of water.

A stray thought surfaced.

Tristan had made stew. Alanian stew, at Alex's apartment. It hadn't been exact, since he couldn't get all the ingredients for it, but the approximation had been reasonable. Why had he done it? He wasn't sure. It would have been something about the mask he wore at the time. Tristan didn't make stew, it was a waste of time. The few times he thought about it, it was in relation to his father. That was a time better left dead and gone.

He went back to work.

With every component replaced, he still hadn't been able to reach the yield the manufacturer's report claimed it could, so he'd connected the rifle directly to the power generator and redlined each component and reached the yield, just as the capacitor threatened to explode.

Now he knew how the manufacturer had gotten such impressive results and convinced the military to buy their rifle. Once they'd installed the cheapest component, all they'd guaranteed was that if any soldiers tried to crank this rifle to its maximum, they would commit suicide. If the military bothered replacing the weak components, that explosion would also take out anyone within a radius of two feet.

If he wanted the rifle to reach that maximum yield, he would have to upgrade the capacitor, as well as every energy conduit. If he did that—he did a few calculations—he could turn the rifle into a bomb that would take out anyone within a radius of ten feet.

He smiled. That was certainly worth the investment of time.

\* \* \* \* \*

This time, when he went to the kitchen, he was thirsty. He'd lost track of time and he was on

his way there before he realized he could simply grab one of the bottles in the workroom.

He saw the form seated by the door in the darkness and had gone to open it before he'd thought about it. Alex was in the process of standing when Tristan slammed it shut. He'd gotten over his surprise and wanted nothing to do with the human, but the action had let him catch the scents around Alex, and they had explained where he'd gone.

Meats, vegetables, alcohol, something sweet. He'd gone to the tavern, had their cooking. Alex hadn't given up, he'd had to feed himself.

Tristan was torn. He did want the human gone, but seeing this resolve in him pleased him, though only a little.

\* \* \* \* \*

The next morning Alex was there, sleeping curled up against the door when Tristan left for his run. The human slept too soundly. Tristan could have killed the human before he'd known what had happened, if he had been so inclined.

He put Alex out of his mind and ran along the property line, in sight of the tavern owner's house. He saw the tavern owner's wife in the window, and as usual, acted as if he wasn't aware of her presence.

Alex was still asleep when he returned to the house. This could get the human killed. Hadn't he learned to always sleep lightly? Tristan approached him silently and crouched. He could get rid of him. He could break his neck before Alex had time to wake up. Drop him in the forest for the predators there to dispose of the body.

But would they? They had attacked him because he'd invaded their territory, but would they eat human meat? It wasn't a particularly appealing meat, not when compared with the abundance of prey animals in the forest.

Maybe he could throw him down the escarpment on the other side of his property. No one would be able to know it wasn't where Alex's neck had been broken. Except Alex was a mercenary. Those didn't survive by being stupid.

The portmaster was a good judge of people. Tristan couldn't know the kind of conversation between him and Alex, but each would have taken the other's measure. So he would wonder why Alex had gone there, why Alex had taken whatever risk had led him to fall and break his neck. Which would make the portmaster look into Tech.

This mask survived because no one looked at it too closely. The tavern owner might like to prod Tech about what he did, but that was a game they played. Even if he had the skills needed, he wouldn't bother researching Tech. He wouldn't even think of it. Tech was simply another resident here, their token alien.

And that was the only way Tech could continue staying here.

\* \* \* \* \*

Alex was awake when Tristan checked on him, through the camera this time. He kept the window open throughout the morning as he worked. He was doing research, looking for a capacitor schematic that would meet his requirements. Looking for what other components he could build himself to allow the rifle to accept more power. He needed a power pack with a denser energy capacity. Those didn't exist for this rifle, and it wasn't something he could make in his workshop.

Throughout the morning, each time he looked at Alex, he seemed about to nod off. Hadn't he had a full night's sleep? Mercs learned to sleep anywhere, anytime. Tristan had learned that before heading to space—his father had seen to it—but anyone dealing with combat situations had to learn it to stay alive.

Had Alex stayed awake all night waiting for him to open the door? It would explain why he'd slept so soundly in the morning.

When lunchtime arrived, Tristan found himself with a new problem. How could he go to the tavern and leave Alex here unsupervised? The human might get it into his head to attempt to gain access to the house and trigger his security measures. Tristan wasn't ready to lose everything he'd accumulated to a nosy human who thought he knew how to bypass locks.

He locked the workshop and exited it through the house. He looked down at Alex when he opened the outside door. He looked pitiful, but his eyes hardened as they met.

"You're going to have lunch at the tavern," Tristan said.

"I'm not leaving." Alex repositioned himself, leaning against the door frame. Tristan grabbed

him by the jacket's collar and pulled him until his feet left the ground. Alex didn't fight, only locked eyes with him again.

"You will leave," Tristan said casually. "You will abandon this idea I am someone I am not, and you will go live your life elsewhere. Start accepting this now, it will be easier on you. You should leave now, but you will not, so you will go to the tavern and eat lunch. You can return after that, if you are so inclined, but that is where you are going now." He let the human down and crossed his arms over his chest.

Alex took a moment to gather himself, then picked up the pack and case and headed toward the town. He waited until he couldn't see the human anymore, then headed for the town himself.

He had lunch as usual, but instead of flirting with him, the owner's wife asked about Alex. Tech kept up the act of not knowing him, which seemed to disappoint her. He didn't read her interest in Alex as being sexual, so he didn't worry about what she might find out. Tech could always claim Alex was mistaken, regardless of what claims the human made.

As he left, well before Alex, he saw the portmaster at a table. The man raised an eyebrow at Tech and nodded toward Alex. Tech gave a shrug and headed back to his home to continue his work.

\* \* \* \* \*

The next day it was raining when Tristan left for his run. Alex was awake, curled up in the doorway, watching him heatedly. It was a cold rain, enough that it seeped in through his fur, and while Tristan liked the cold water, humans preferred it hot. He remembered the negotiating he'd had to do with Alex so they could share a shower. Too hot for Tristan, too cool for Alex. Tristan had endured it for the purpose of the job, Alex because he wanted to please Jack.

Alex was still there when he returned, shivering so badly Tristan heard his teeth chattering before he became visible. The man looked up, but there was no anger in his gaze, or even lust—just misery.

The rain lasted all day, but as it tended to do at this time of the year, it warmed up enough that by lunchtime, Alex was only soaked, no longer miserable.

Maybe Tristan could drown Alex? The bottom of the escarpment became muddy after a day's rain, and it had sinkholes more likely to give out when wet. Would anyone believe a visiting human might decide to go explore and fall into one? Only to reappear days later when the water drained out?

No, they wouldn't. Not even the medic would believe that, and like Tristan, she firmly believed humans capable of all sorts of stupid things.

At least he hadn't had to tell Alex to go eat. He'd left on his own before Tristan had been ready.

\* \* \* \* \*

The rain lasted two full days. Freezing through the night, warm during the day. Alex would get sick. He'd die of exposure, a simple solution to his problem. All he'd have to do was come up with a reason as to why Alex had insisted on sleeping outside. Or maybe he wouldn't have to. After all, Tech didn't know him, so how could he know what went through the human's mind?

\* \* \* \* \*

Alex didn't die. Tristan caught him injecting himself with what had to be an immune-booster, and swallowing a few pills that would be Heal Alls.

By the fifth day, Alex looked like he belonged in a vid about those idiots who dropped themselves on an uninhabitable land and tried to prove they could survive without help. Those who were true to their words were found years later, dead, and their recordings were edited to make a vid.

Tristan had no problem letting that happen to Alex, minus the vid. If the human wanted to be that stubborn and stupid, who was he to stop him? Unfortunately, Tristan hadn't counted on one of the farmers showing up with a tractor needing repairs.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tech was elbow-deep into the engine when the man broke the silence.

"Look, Tech. I don't mean to butt in on something that's none of my business."

Tech made a noncommittal sound as he connected the wrench on the bolt by feel and gave it

a twist.

“I heard he was a friend of yours, crossed who knows how many lightyears to join you. How come he looks like you’re having him sleep in the shed? And why is he sitting there? I mean, I know it’s none of my business, but is that really how you treat a friend?”

Tech made sounds of efforts while Tristan tried to think. Friends? They thought the two of them were friends? What had either one done to give that impression? Or had Alex told something to the portmaster? Something that would lead the man to think that? But Jacoby wouldn’t spread rumors; the portmaster wasn’t the talkative type.

Could he claim not to know? If this farmer thought they were friends, how many of the others thought so too? He weighed which one would be most disruptive: the denial, or the acceptance.

He buried his annoyance at having his hand forced, and made sure Tech’s mask was firmly on before taking his hands out, wrench in one and bolts in the other. He smiled. “It’s something of a dare. He kept going on about how tough he was, you know, because he’s in the life.”

The farmer gave him a blank look.

“The life, that’s what mercs call being a merc.” Tech shrugged. “I commented that no one was that tough, and he said he’d prove it.”

The man studied Tech. “And you let him?”

Tech hesitated.

“Look, Tech. Again, this is none of my business, but you don’t let a friend do something that stupid. Just tell him you believe him and move past whatever this is.”

Tech looked at the human seated by the door. “I guess we did get carried away.”

The farmer smiled. “You think?”

Tech patted the tractor. “The problem is the generator. Give me two days, Virden, and I’ll have it fixed.”

“Tech, there’s no need to rush. Don’t you have something more important to take care of?”

“Excuse me?”

The man gave him a smile. “Come on, you never have anyone over. We were starting to think you were some sort of hermit. Now you have a friend here, and the first thing he does is demonstrate how tough he is. I don’t know how this goes among Samalians.” The man leaned in and lowered his voice. “But among humans, that a clear sign he’s interested in...you know.”

Tech’s ears turned red as realization set in. “I— You— Are you sure?”

The man grinned. “Definitely.” He patted Tech on the arm. “I’ll call you in a week to see if you’ve had time to get to it. If not—” His smile broadened. “—just be sure the fun’s worth it.”

“Errr, don’t you think it’s strange?” Tech asked as the man disconnected the trailer from the hover.

“What is?”

“Well, I’m not human, so...”

The man shrugged. “Look, cross-species stuff isn’t for me, but I don’t think anyone should be alone. If the guy for you is a different species, how’s that my problem?”

“What about the others?”

The man sighed. “Tech, do you have any idea how many of us have been trying to figure out if someone here might be interested in you? It hurts us to see you alone all the time. I promise, no one here is going to be anything other than happy for you that you finally have someone to spend your nights with.” He grinned. “Well, Joan might be disappointed, but it isn’t like she’d considered her fantasies might ever come true.”

Tech gave the man a confused expression, and he burst out laughing.

“Oh Tech, don’t ever change.” He climbed on the hover and rode away.

Tristan waited until the man had ridden out of view before dropping the mask and glaring at Alex. Fun wasn’t going to happen, but it was now clear he couldn’t let things continue like this. That man would tell everyone what he’d seen, what advice he’d given. So the whole town would expect to see the change in their relationship.

Tristan silently cursed as he stomped to the house’s door. He opened it and motioned. “Get in.”

Alex looked at him, confused.

“Now!” Tristan ordered.