

The human was at the computer, so intent on what he was doing he hadn't looked up when Tristan entered. Tristan watched him talk to the computer, preparing himself for what he would do next by making fists.

He wasn't angry. This had been coming; he'd actually expected it to happen sooner, leaving the door unlocked and Alex alone for short periods, then observing from a distance. He remembered the human having willpower, and Alex had demonstrated that again. But this time it had been too much for him.

That Alex picked the one time Tech was needed didn't matter. Possibly he'd figured out the other times had been tests, possibly he hadn't, and simply hadn't felt the need to enter Tristan's workroom strongly enough.

He'd told the artist he'd forgotten a tool when his datapad informed him of the intrusion. He hadn't hurried back. He'd wanted Alex to do what he planned, think he'd gotten away with it, then confront him with the evidence of his intrusion. That he was still there meant this was a long project, or that he hadn't gone directly for the computer as the sensors reported.

He studied the room. His tools were where they should be, his current projects as he'd left them. None of the locks signaled they'd been tampered with. This was fortunate. The punishment for touching his things was much more severe, potentially deadly for a human.

Tristan crossed the room, watching Alex's body language as he walked around the table. The computer had all his attention. He stopped a few feet behind Alex and waited for him to react.

His gaze didn't flicker away from the screen. Tristan watched the reflected motion. He was reading the code and talking to the AI. Tristan noted how quickly Alex worked as he took a step forward. How close could he get before Alex noticed?

He was next to Alex when the human reached for the earpiece and became aware of Tristan. He reacted instantly, which meant that Tristan's blow struck before he could reach for whatever weapon he intended.

The chair tipped over and Alex was on the floor, rolling to get away from the coming foot. Tristan saw the motion coming, and it would have been easy to adjust his attack, make his foot crush his neck instead of landing just next to it. That would have gotten Alex out of his life, but ignoring the trouble the explaining he'd have to do, that wasn't the purpose of this...exercise.

Alex was on his feet before Tristan attacked again. He dodged the punch, leaving his neck unprotected. Tristan grabbed him, considered squeezing the life out of him, but instead threw him toward the door.

Alex's slide came to a stop before the opened door, and he got to a crouch before Tristan reached him. A hard kick to the stomach sent the human through the doorway to land on the ground.

Alex was up, unsteady on his feet. He swung when Tristan was within reach, but his punch was wide. Alex blinked; he'd expected to connect.

Three quick jabs from Tristan—face, chest, and stomach—had Alex stagger back. He straightened, and Tristan could see what Alex expected to happen. He was getting ready to protect his stomach from a coming kick. Tristan had favored that move in similar situations during their training. If this was one of those, he would give Alex the time needed to do more than react. He'd let him study the situation. That had allowed Alex to improve.

This wasn't training.

Alex didn't even react to the approaching punch, still expecting the kick. His face snapped to the side, blood flying as he staggered again. A punch in the stomach lifted him off the ground. One to the chest stole most of his breath away.

"I'm sorry," he wheezed. Another to the face and he almost fell. "I won't do it again." Two quick punches had his head snap left, then right. Alex could barely stand, and yet he forced himself to. "Please," he pleaded, "stop."

Tristan paused, his arm stretched back, ready to deliver one last blow. He watched Alex. He hadn't even tried to raise his arms to protect his face. He was focused on staying up and pleading.

Pleading was a waste of time. Just for that he should have knocked him unconscious, but if he did that, Tristan couldn't be sure Alex had learned the lesson. "You entered my workroom without permission."

Alex's eyes flicked to the raised, bloody fist and back to Tristan's eyes. "It wasn't locked." He

closed his eyes and flinched.

Tristan took the time he gave Alex to get over his fear to decide his next action. The lesson had sunk in, or it hadn't. Hitting him again at this point wouldn't serve anything but his own satisfaction over inflicting pain to this troublesome human. He lowered his arm. This wasn't about his satisfaction; it was about making sure the human knew his place.

Tristan made his face severe, but not angry. When Alex opened an eye, he noted the lowered, unclenched hand, and relaxed slightly, only to tense back up.

"You live here because I let you, Alex. Don't think that just because your death would cause me trouble, I won't resort to that if you push me. Do you understand?"

After some confusion on Alex's part, he nodded.

"If you want this...arrangement to continue, you will stop assuming you have the right to move freely about my house. You are not my guest. You forced your presence on me. You are not wanted here, is that clear?"

Again, some confusion, then a nod.

"I have two rules: you go where I allow, you do what I tell you. I will not repeat them. If you break them, I will break you. Is that clear?"

Instead of the fear Tristan expected to see, Alex's gaze was searching. He would have preferred the human scared, but maybe this was better. His memory wouldn't be clouded, and he couldn't claim he'd misunderstood.

He pointed toward the town. "The tavern has rooms. You can stay there until you've arranged for someone to come get you. You can tell them we had a falling out. I don't care what you tell them, other than I am not—"

"I'm staying." The searching was gone from Alex's gaze, replaced by determination.

Tristan was...perplexed. He hadn't beaten him with the goal of chasing him away—that had been solely a lesson regarding invading his privacy—but he had expected the danger to have finally sunk in.

And a part of him felt admiration at the amount of resilience Alex showed. He'd never met a human so determined in getting what he wanted before. "Alex, I will not offer you a way out again. What you just endured isn't close to the level of pain that I can, that I will, inflict when you break a rule again."

"I won't do—"

"You will. You are human, you can't help yourself."

Alex gritted his teeth. "I will not break your rules."

Tristan wanted to shake his head in confusion, but that would shatter the atmosphere he'd created. Didn't Alex have any self-preservation? "If you stay, Alex, you are mine to do with as I please."

Now he saw fear. It didn't last nearly as long as he'd hoped before being replaced with determination. Alex nodded.

He'd tried. Now whatever happened was on Alex's head. Maybe he should just kill the human, since that seemed to be what he was looking for. "Go clean up, then hose the blood out of the grass. I can't have anyone wonder what I'm doing to you."

He turned and went into his workroom. He headed to the sink and washed the blood off his hands. He'd need a shower to remove what had splattered on the rest of his fur, but that would do for now.

He sat at his computer and noticed the earpiece on the floor. Alex had worked with computers, he remembered that. An earpiece meant coercion, that explained the talking he'd been doing. Tristan never saw a point in talking with a computer. He didn't need to talk to get it to do what he wanted, just like he didn't need to talk to get the rest of the universe to do what he wanted. He wiped the blood off it and set it on the table.

Alex had wiped the screen, but bringing up what he'd been working on was simple enough; he hadn't had the time to clear out the buffer. Instead of looking at the internal coding of the computer, the three windows that appeared showed identity files of three people: a writer, a virtual assistant, and a psychologist. A quick read through the files showed them to be unremarkable in every way.

No one was that unremarkable. He did more digging.

When Alex opened the house-side door, Tristan slowed his work, waiting. Alex didn't move.

Five minutes and still Alex didn't move. Either he had learned the lesson, or what he was planning required Tristan to think he had.

Tristan motioned for him to enter.

What had Alex thought about while he showered? Had he formulated a plan for his revenge? Was that why he'd insisted on staying? That was what Tristan would do, but he knew enough about humans to know they weren't that rational.

Tristan slowed his work even more as Alex approached. If he was going to attempt anything it would be now, while he thought Tristan's attention was taken by what was on the screen.

Alex reached for the earpiece, but stopped.

"Take it."

The earpiece vanished from the table. "There's blood on the floor."

Tristan nodded. He sensed Alex's desire to move, but stayed still. So this wasn't revenge. What was the human's plan? "Clean it, then leave."

He brought up the two financial accounts he'd been able to unlock, and was impressed by the amount of money in them. They showed the usual movement of funds in and out, except that they only did business with the same forty-two individuals.

Alex finished cleaning the floor and left without a word.

He located those individuals and studied their identities. Only twenty were solid enough to survive any kind of scrutiny; the others only served to hold funds for the transfers. Functional, but if any of them attracted the Law's attention, Alex's entire setup would crumble.

Still, he had to admire Alex's ingenuity. Objectively, this had been started less than twenty years ago. Considering all the traveling he'd done to track Tristan down, that was what? Six subjective years? If that? It had taken Tristan three times longer to come up with a way to hide his money that was anything like this, although it hadn't occurred to Tristan to use existing IDs from inactive people. He'd created his from scratch.

He activated a program he had hidden through all the major Law agencies he normally used to keep track of what they had on him, and had it search for Alex.

What came back was linked to Alex's last name only, a dozen warrants in relation to piracy, information theft, assault, and larceny. Common mercenary fares. The pictures linked with each warrant looked almost like Alex, which told Tristan someone had already gone in and made changes.

The first warrant was from Bramolian Six, not Deleron Four, and dated four objective years after Tristan had left Deleron Four. It was the first recorded information theft for the criminal identified only as Crimson.

Six objective years. That was all it had taken Alex to go from the lovesick human he'd abandoned, to someone capable of infiltrating a Law office without losing one of his identities.

Tristan ran a finger over the diamond on his collarbone. He had to admit that was impressive.

He left Alex's accounts alone. Tristan didn't need money, and the human had earned it. Tristan felt pride. He'd always known someone would track him down here, but at least, unlike Gargomilan, this hadn't been a hapless merc coming across him by accident and making a mess of that hideout.

Alex was a successful mercenary, one who had shown himself to be quite capable.

He did make notes on the flaws he found in Alex's setup before switching to his computer's code. Just because Alex had gone for banking didn't mean that he hadn't also compromised his computer.

None of the intrusion detectors reported any intrusion, but Tristan knew better than to just believe them. After all, Alex had gained access. He went through the command structure, looking for any changes. Then he scoured every line of code looking for hidden programs.

Nothing. Alex hadn't even looked at the code, as far as Tristan could tell, other than what was needed to be able to use the computer. He rewrote his security programs, plugging the holes Alex had used to get in.

When he was done, he acknowledged the message that had been waiting in his buffer for hours now. The artist, wondering what had happened. Tristan wrote a quick message where Tech apologized and explained that he'd come home to find his friend sick, and had been dealing with that.

Before shutting down the system, he considered Alex's situation. The use of his computer had been what could be considered normal. Keeping Alex from using it might serve to chase him away, or it would lead to a repeat of today.

Tristan needed to decide what he wanted. Alex was his to do as he pleased, so did he want to constantly test his resolve? What would he gain by doing that? The only eventual conclusion of that course would be a dead Alex, and him either having to come up with an explanation for the town or clean the area and move on to his next location.

He sent a message to the town's store for them to set aside a system to be delivered. He wasn't ready to sacrifice this place yet. Not on Alex's account, anyway.

He checked in on Alex. The bruises on his face were already turning from dark blue to a sickly yellow-green under the effect of the Heal Alls he'd taken. It reminded him to order human-formulated medication from the medic. Since it was clear Alex was staying, he couldn't risk him using Tristan's Heal Alls or immune-boosters when he ran out.

Satisfied the human was okay, Tristan showered, dried, and lay down in his room. He closed his eyes and was immediately asleep.