

Alex was inside before Tristan closed his mouth. He didn't know why the Samalian was angry—Alex hadn't been able to make out the conversation with the other man—but if this was getting him inside, he was taking it.

He hadn't planned on sitting here for this long, or at all. As much as he'd wanted this to go smoothly, he hadn't expected it to, especially not after the meeting in the tavern. He'd discussed renting a room from Orfvil, that first day, but he couldn't let go of the hope that maybe things might still go well enough to stay with Tristan.

He'd known it wouldn't happen almost as soon as the Samalian had opened the door; Tristan wouldn't have bothered with acting if he was going to take Alex seriously. But when Tristan had told him to leave, something in the tone had made Alex stiffen, and he hadn't moved as the door slammed in his face. Then the idea of leaving and giving Tristan this full victory galled him. Food had been the only concession he'd made, since he hadn't thought to bring nutrient packs.

The entryway was simple, a table with an artificial plant on it. A closet was partially opened and had a jacket in it. The walls were the gray of permacrete, or maybe the internal walls were also made of permacrete.

The living room had an uncomfortable-looking green couch and a table next to it with another artificial flower, identical to the one in the entryway. There was a screen facing the couch. He caught sight of a cleaning bot hovering back to its nook.

He tried to get a sense of the room, as well as the kitchen, which he could see from an open doorway. A table, four chairs, the counter with a few cooking tools on it. This didn't feel like Jack; Jack had been too fun-loving. Even with a bot, the place wouldn't be this clean.

What he'd read on Tristan created the image of someone who didn't bother with distractions. This didn't feel like that either. Staged, he realized. That was what it felt like.

Tristan opened the only other door, and Alex followed him through a hall with closed doors. After the first one there was a small corridor on his right that led back to the kitchen.

Tristan opened a door on the left but kept going—the bathroom. Large, it included all the amenities, up to a shower head on the ceiling toward the back, without an enclosure around that area. Water made sense, since they were groundside.

The Samalian took two bedrolls and a sheet from the closet a door down. He opened the next door and threw a bedroll and sheet in it. "You sleep here." He opened the facing door and threw the other bedroll there.

He turned and faced Alex, and this close, without being growled at, he saw Jack, even the glint of the diamond through his chest fur, and it took everything not to throw himself at him, until he met the Samalian's eyes. Any thought of Jack died a frosty death under the cold gaze.

"If anyone asks," Tristan said, his tone even, "we are friends, nothing more. The next time you go to the town, make arrangements for someone to come pick you up."

"I'm not leaving."

Tristan leaned in. "You will leave."

That tone again, the one that gave the sense Tristan knew something Alex didn't. It buried itself in him, and in response Alex straightened. "Not without Jack."

Tristan's glare hardened. Alex didn't tense, but he could feel the danger emanating from Tristan. He could die here, right now, if he pushed. So he remained still and waited.

The shift was subtle when it came, but Alex no longer felt in danger, or rather, not in as much danger. It had been in the eyes and nowhere else. Not warmth, but a diminishing of the coldness, and for just an instant he thought he saw Jack there, looking back at him.

Then Tristan walked around him and left.

Alex watched him leave, trying to decide if what he'd seen was real, or his imagination. He knew Jack was in there, but could he be that close to the surface? Alex wanted that more than anything, but there was danger in that. If he was careless, Tristan would kill him, of that he had no doubt. He would observe and look for Jack, draw him out ever so slowly until he had him back.

His new bedroom was...a storage room. Shelves with boxes of datachips, boxes on the floor, some stacked, but all in neat rows. He recognized some names: Celaran, Tomika, Kaldary, Elient, and others—computer manufacturers. The other names were unknown, although a few felt familiar. They were arranged in alphabetical order, and he made sure to keep that as he

moved them around the edge of the room and stacked them after confirming they were light enough.

He managed to clear a space roughly fifteen-feet by twenty that he could use for...what? What was he going to do now? Or while he tried to find Jack in that monster? He'd been so intent on denying Tristan the small victory of sending him away that he hadn't planned past that.

He pushed the bedroll with a foot and tried to remember the last time he'd slept on one, outside of in the middle of a mission. His first days on Deleron Four. His furniture hadn't arrived with him. He couldn't remember if it had been delayed or he'd miscalculated, but he'd had to sleep on the floor.

Tristan probably saw this as another way to convince him to leave. Make the human sleep on the floor while he enjoyed a comfortable bed. He had stepped out of the room before he realized that confronting Tristan about getting a bed was stupid. What could he say? *Jack wouldn't have me sleep on the floor? Why can't I sleep in the same bed as you?* Right, those would go over well.

He sighed. He could buy a thicker mattress, even a bed, if needed. If Tristan objected to that... He'd deal with that when it happened. He started turning to get back in the room, his room, and noticed the bedroll in the one facing it.

It was also a storage room, with boxes on the floor, the roll stuck between two of them. Why a second roll? Tristan didn't want him here, he couldn't be expecting someone else to show up. Which meant this was for Tristan. Why? He had a bedroom, so why sleep here, on a roll? To keep an eye on Alex? He couldn't be that afraid of him.

Alex snickered. No, Tristan wasn't afraid of anything. Worried then? Why sacrifice his comfort to act as a warden? Alex looked along the closed doors. He did have a bed, didn't he?

He checked the next door. Unlocked. He opened it. More storage. As was the one after that, and the next one. Every room except for the bathroom, the kitchen, living room, and entryway was used as storage.

Where did Tristan sleep?

He looked at the roll stuck between the two boxes.

It seemed that Tristan slept across from him.

This shattered the image he had of Tristan. He'd seen him as living large, always celebrating his victories over those trying to kill him. He'd imagined him going from one mission, to a party, and then another mission when he was out of money.

He had never considered such an austere life. What exactly did Tristan do?

He opened a few boxes at random. Datachips, all branded with the same names as on the boxes. He took his datapad and ran a search on the names. Manufacturers, all of them. Guns, security systems, starships, shuttles, hovers, computers. After confirming one chip didn't have any malicious programs, Alex had his datapad read it. Schematics, designs, reports.

It reminded Alex of the data packets he'd get on a target computer. As much information as could be obtained. He looked at all the boxes.

What could Tristan be planning that required him to do this kind of research? He put the chip back and closed the box.

He remembered a vid he'd seen a long time ago about people who lived simple lives, slept on the ground in rooms barely large enough for them to fit in. He didn't remember why they did it, but he recalled feeling both admiration and disgust for them. How could anyone willingly do that to themselves?

He looked at his own bedroll and sheet. He had a sheet, which Tristan didn't. He cursed—now he felt bad for having considered buying a bed. He still wanted it, but how could he justify sleeping on something more comfortable than what Tristan slept on?

Okay, so he didn't need a bed. What he did need was a pillow. He wasn't using his pack as one if he could avoid it. He found it in the closet Tristan had taken the rolls from. There were two more rolls, more sheets, and pillows. Somehow he had trouble seeing Tristan making sure he had those, not in a house he only used as storage. Was this also storage? Not to be used here, but a place to store them until needed for a mission? That sounded more likely.

It took him less than a minute to set up his bed.

Now what?

This was Tristan's house.

Alex took knives from his pack. He checked that each vibro-knife had a full charge and that the grip recognized his palm, activating as soon as he gripped them. He hid them among the boxes, under the shelves. Under his pillow he placed a basic knife. He didn't feel like slicing himself open if he had to reach for it half awake.

That done, he sat on the bed. He opened the case and looked at the Defender. "Are you going to do your part?" The statue didn't reply. Maybe he shouldn't be so disrespectful if he wanted its help. He lifted it and took the datachip hidden under it.

He took the projector from his pack and inserted the chip. Jack appeared before him. This was Tristan. Objectively, he knew it. He knew they were the same body, but there was a bashfulness in the Samalian he looked at that Tristan could never have. Warmth in those vibrant brown eyes, and a smile that reached all the way into Alex's heart.

How could anyone say this was the monster who lived in this house?

"I made it, Jack. I found him—you—you know what I mean. I wish you could tell me how to draw you out. Or if that was even you earlier. You don't deserve to be imprisoned in that monster's mind. Please be patient. I am here, we will be together again."

He set the projector on the closest shelf, where Jack could watch over him. What if Tristan saw it? What would he think? What would he do? Alex shut it down, took the chip out, and put both back where they had been.

He did a full circuit of the house. Nothing had changed in any of the rooms. Off the kitchen he found a new door, a sealed one with a window in it. On the other side was a large workroom. Tristan was working on some sort of engine? The amount of grease on it made Alex think it was from the tractor the farmer had brought.

Further on the table, by what might have been a rifle—Alex couldn't be sure since it wasn't fully assembled—was a computer. Kaldary by the design. Alex smiled. At least Tristan liked his quality computers.

He reached for his earpiece, then stopped. It was out of range, and Tristan might notice something. Well, he couldn't contact that computer, but there was the house. He put the earpiece in, tried to adjust it so it would be comfortable, gave up on that, and waited.

Nothing.

How could that be? He walked through the house, waiting for any kind of contact. There had to be at least one computer controlling something. The only contact he received was from his datapad.

Was this something the community imposed? No, there had been computer-controlled food prep at the tavern. Could Tristan distrust computers? That made no sense; he'd broken into Luminex, and that couldn't be done without advanced computer knowledge. You didn't learn that much if you didn't at least find computers useful.

He went back to the kitchen, looked through the door, and noticed the datapad on the table by Tristan. Nothing came from it, which meant the workroom was shielded. Was Tristan worried someone from the town would eavesdrop on his work?

The cooktop was still set to factory settings. However long it had been here, it hadn't been used. The cabinets contained all that was needed to plate for four people, the standard number for tableware. He couldn't see any indication any of it had ever been used. If not for the cleaning bot, Alex figured there would be inches of dust on everything.

The cooler was empty and shut down. In the cabinets under the counter, instead of cookware, he found boxes of nutrient packs. The military kind. Three boxes were gone, indicating this wasn't an emergency supply. Tristan was eating this stuff. Alex shuddered. Surviving on them was one thing, but making them your mainstay? Your taste-buds were going to commit suicide. Alex had felt sick after eating one, and he'd been going hungry by then.

Jack had loved food. He'd loved playing with tastes, textures. And Tristan ate this? Alex wasn't eating those. This was where he drew the line. He powered on the cooler. He'd go to town and get what he needed to make a decent meal.

First, he needed to wash. He had days of grime on him.

He screamed as the water jet hit him. The water was freezing, but the readout told him this was what it had been set for, so he raised the temperature. He'd thought Jack liked his showers too cold, but they had been scalding compared to this. Maybe this was how Tristan could be so

cold and hard.

Washed and changed—how was he going to wash his clothing? He hadn't seen a cleaning unit—he headed for the door, hesitated, and was surprised to find it wasn't locked. Would it be locked when he came back? It was risking it, or eating nutrient packs.

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He returned to an unlocked door.

The trip had been eventful only in that people asked him how he and Tech were getting along. Someone commented on his clothes, and Alex realized news of his stay at Tristan's doorstep had already spread. Alex kept his answers noncommittal.

He made a meal of steak and local vegetables. He tried to inform Tristan food was ready, but the Samalian didn't acknowledge him, so Alex ate alone and put Tristan's large portion in the cooler. He cleaned, washed, found a place to put the new cookware, and with nothing else to do, he went to his room and lay down.

Sleep wouldn't come. It should have—sleeping on the doorstep hadn't been very restful—but the house was silent and still. It was strange; he'd never been in such complete silence.

Even before starting his hunt for Tristan, quiet on Deleron Six had meant the sound of hovers in the distance or people talking in the corridor. He realized he'd never understood what silence was before now. It was so quiet that if he strained, he could hear the rustling of leaves through the walls of the house.

Could he ever get used to this? Was it even possible to sleep without any background noise? Alex found that yes, it was possible, or that at least he was exhausted enough for it not to matter.