

Alex looked out at yet another planet. They had to be on the eighth or ninth since that first one. Each one a lack of success. Some no longer existed, some had become something else, and unlike the first one, weren't lying about it; it was simply they weren't bothering propagating the information. Then they was Brogor, which had turned into a worse version of that first time.

Where the Children of Order could be described as a cult of personality hiding a corporation. Brogor had been nothing more than a group of people preying on the desperate to turn them into sexual playthings. It was the children that had been too much.

Those had been relocated before he and Tristan went back to their research, Tristan finding this.

At least, the planet was interesting to look at, if nothing else came of this. The equator was almost entirely barren. Scorched browns and grays in spite of the high humidity the sensors registered in the atmosphere. Nearly two third of the planet was one large ocean, which might account for it. Alex wasn't a planetary scientist, so he had no idea. There would be a file somewhere explaining it, possibly the other things that seemed anomalous to him, such as the band of jungles covering the upper and lower fifth of the planet, each reaching nearly completely to the poles.

Anyone of the two dozen research stations on the planet would have filed multiple reports.

"How did you find out about this place?" he asked Tristan. "It seems like an odd location to have a retreat."

Solitude, Tristan had said it was called, when he'd suggested it. The documents hadn't borne a name. Simply describing the people there as dedicating themselves to lives of quiet meditations, of seeking comfort of mind in solitude and the monotony of simple tasks. It had gone on about how lives there were structured around an artificial clock, since they were sufficiently close to the pole, and the planetary tilt was such that a day lasted months even by the slowest inhabited planet's rotation in the universe. Or so the report had said.

The wording had been sufficiently technical, Alex wouldn't be surprised one of the researcher had been the one to file it.

"A merc told me about it when it stopped at Archepelel."

"We stopped there to pickup a book on Samalia you had retrieved, not interrogate mercs." Alex had taken advantage of the medical wing to have a scan of his brain done so he could look into if his problem was physical. While he couldn't deny his combat fugue predated it, his loss of control hadn't started until after he'd gotten the implant.

"I stopped at one of the bars there while waiting for you to be done and struck up a

conversation with a group of mercs. The—”

“You struck up a conversation?” Alex asked in disbelief.

“I had nothing to do.”

“That book—”

“Wouldn’t arrive until after you were done, remember? They were exchanging stories, and eventually the conversation shifted to our latest job, so I mentioned looking for a place to get back some of the calm I had before the life got too hectic, and one of them mentioned this place. Said someone he’d worked with spent time here after especially tough jobs. That they were good to ‘get yourself back together’. He didn’t know anything else, so it took a lot of research to take the things he remember his comrade mentioning, and match them to enough data points to get this, but it lines up.”

Tristan tapped his controls, and a reticule appeared almost at the horizon to their left, and a third of the way from the pole. “It’s where they are.” More tapping and a new image appeared. An overhead view of a jungle with a reticule around a point that could as easily be a rocky outcropping as a building surrounded by trees. Tapping again and the image doubled in size, and now Alex could make out enough details to tell it was a structure, with a cleared area to the side with what were probably ships.

He checked his terminal. “I’m not registering a landing buoy there. The only ones are for the research stations.”

“They might not want to make it easy to locate them.”

“You think the stations are preventing them from installing one?”

A shudder of the ears accompanied the shrug. “There’s no reason for them to do so. Solitude doesn’t impact their research in any way.”

“What are they researching, anyway?”

“A variety of things,” Tristan replied. “Chief among them is the odd climate.”

“I thought this was the work of a corporation’s terraforming.”

“No, it’s natural, or if it’s been influenced, none of the research papers I skimmed hinted at it.”

When water started collecting on the front view, then turn into a hard enough rain Tristan switch to a sensor composite sight, Alex noted how low they were. “Are you trying to avoid someone’s sensors?”

“We’re reaching out landing.” A new reticule appeared, south and east, of the other one. Without a frame of reference, Alex couldn’t know how far, but he expected it would be under a day’s walk, taking into account the conditions.

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Alex listened, and tried to remember when was the last time he’d heard rain on a roof, or this time, on the hull. The last clear memory was of a shuttle in a forest, the sound doing little to calm his worry about what Tristan would do to Emil.

He shook the memory away. That was done, and the rain couldn’t sooth away his could problem. Tristan opened the ramp and hot air, thick with water, rushed into the ship. With it shut down, nothing turned on to combat it.

“You could have landed us closer,” Alex said at Tristan’s annoyed expression, and took off his jacket. He knew jungles were hot, and the rain had told him it would be humid, but he hadn’t realized just how much of both there would be.

Tristan, with his fur, and preference for cold water over warm couldn't be looking forward to the prospect of the walk.

"I'll be fine," the Samalian said, but Alex was now sufficiently familiar with his newly acquired body language to read the dislike in the positioning of the ears.

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The building looked older than Alex had expected and realized that his initial confusion between this being a building and an outcropping of stone could be because it seemed to be carved out of a small such outcropping. The area where the other ships were landed had been cleared down to earth, and a well-traveled path led from them to the building. Maybe some of the residents like going back to controlled environments when they were done with whatever they did here.

They headed to the large wooden door, shiny from being soaked through with water, Alex expected. Tristan's fur was matted to his body, his ears had vanished, folded against his skull, and he wondered how he was going to manage the mask of an eager pilgrim he had decided on before they started the trek.

Alex had simply removed layers until he wore shorts and nothing else. One of the few times skin was an advantage over fur.

The door opened and a tall man stood inside, almost too thin, to Alex and nearly as tall as Tristan. It wasn't often Alex encountered someone taller than he was.

"Welcome," the man said, nearly yelling to be heard over the rain. "Please come in where the rain doesn't reach."

"Thank you," Tristan replied, his body language suddenly all eagerness and pleasure. "This was a longer trek than I expected."

As soon as the rain stopped falling on him, Alex heard other sounds; people moving, impacts that sounded a lot like fist hitting flesh.

"Didn't the station tell you we have a landing space?"

"I didn't exactly tell them why we came. I didn't want to deal with scientists' prejudices toward those seeking a different kind of enlightenment. I'm—"

"Don't believe one thing he says," a man said, approaching. His voice was rough, like he'd been injured and his throat hadn't healed properly. And the three scars on the left side of his neck, going to the front, could be the reason. "He's a cold-blooded killer."

"I'm afraid you have me—"

"You gave me these, you son of a bitch."

"Maraco," the tall man said, interposing himself. "Please remember why you are here. And where you are."

"But he—"

"We welcomed you even with the past you carry. Are you less of a cold-blooded killer in that past than the one you believe him to be? Your anger is justified for what you suffered, but you came to us because you sought another way to resolve your conflicts. You must accept and someone else, someone even like the one who did this to you, might eventually seek change. If we refuse him, what shall we do with you?"

The man, Marago, was not happy. Alex could read the desire to kill in his eyes, but he remained in place. The shaking subsided. When he spoke again, his voice had none of the anger from before.

“Letting him in is a mistake,” he said. “But it isn’t my decision to make. I’m just warning you; whatever he tells you is a lie. If he’s here, he has a reason, and he never does anything that doesn’t benefit him, and only him.” The man turned and walked away.

“I really don’t know what he means,” Tristan said bashfully. “He must have me confused with another of my people. We are—”

“It’s okay, Tristan,” Alex said, and earned himself one of the Samalian’s rare stunned looks. “We’re here because I need help,” he told the man. “I’m dangerous. I’m out of control. I kill when I don’t want to, and I want that to stop. I want to make it clear that I’m not looking to become some sort of pacifist who goes around saying we all need to love one another. I’m a merc, I live a violent life and I expect that isn’t going to change. But I need to be able to control when I become violent. The way that man managed to do walk away from someone he left him at door’s death.”

“Then Marago was right in his belief?” the man asked Tristan.

The Samalian looked at Alex, then his demeanor changed. “He is.” Gone was the happy-go-lucky pilgrim. Back was the calculating master manipulator.

“What about his statement that you only do things which benefit you?”

“This benefits me,” he stated, then added, “I want Alex to get better.”

“He seemed to imply you don’t care about others.”

“Things have changed since... I did what I did to him.”

“And this is all you seek? To have your friend—”

“Lover,” Tristan said.

“To have your lover get better?” there was no hesitation in accepting the correction or even a change in the tone.

“It is.”

“Very well. As I told Marago, we accept all. But we have rules that must be respected. Everyone is here for their reasons. Those reasons are their own. Asking about them is acceptable, not accepting they will not answer you is not. As you said, you have issues with controlling your anger,” he told Alex, “you will be escorted until you have gained mastery over it. No one will stop you from moving within the sanctuary, but you will not do so alone.” He turned to Tristan. “As for you, considering what you admitted to you—”

“I’m not staying.”

The man raised an eyebrow.

“I’ll be a distraction for Alex, and I don’t want him to constantly resist his urges to be with me while also having to work on controlling his killing urge.”

“We aren’t that kind of retreat,” the man said with a chuckle. “We don’t enforce, or even promote, celibacy. That is something each person here decides on. If you want to be intimate, and is your decision and no one else’s.”

“Good, then I’ll be back every so often to make sure Alex doesn’t miss me too much. Until then, I’ll be out there.”

“If you decide your ship is too far, you’re welcome to land it with the others. No one will bother you in it.”

Tristan gave the man a closed-mouth smile. “If I decide that, I’ll fly it here.” He turned, stopped, faced Alex and kissed him, leaving while he was still panting and already missing his Samalian