

The following days became routine: Jack saw Alex off to work, promising him that he would keep busy. As soon as Alex was out of sight, Tristan would start working on his computer, spending the day there. Half an hour before Alex got home, he'd hide his work, find Glagomel-related documents on the Network, and Jack would be ready to welcome his lover back with a session of love-making.

Alex's computer was a Tomika a few years old. It had come out while Tristan was in cryosleep, but its functionality hadn't changed much, and it was still a good brand, so it let him do what he needed. He still had to fight the urge to take it apart and see what had been changed.

Using the information his program gathered while Alex worked from home, he logged into Luminex's mainframe. He had thirty minutes before Alex reached his work. If he was still in the system when the human swiped in, security would see him in two places and raise the alarm. The following investigation would undo Tristan's work.

The first few visits were only for exploration, to learn how the mainframe thought. Like all large corporations, Luminex built their own hardware and software, giving their system its own personality. It could range from something that thought like a 'normal' person to something that was so alien as to be incomprehensible.

In this case, Tristan expected it to be closer to the 'normal' range. It couldn't be too eccentric since people had to interact with it regularly.

He was able to get a feel for the system's personality on the first intrusion. That allowed him to start building the structure of the programs he would need. Then, on the following days, he gleaned extra information, new details that let him tailor the programs until they were completed.

The first program he finished was the one that would let him enter the building; it took him three days. He decided to celebrate by making a dish his father had called Alanian stew. He'd never revealed who or what Alanian was, and Tristan had never cared.

Tristan didn't generally crave food from his youth, but something about living here, with the human, had made him want to recall one of the few good memories he had from when he was young. He remembered his father, stirring the stew over a fire, the scent of the burning wood and spices in the air. The satisfaction of having caught the animal the meat came from.

He smiled, realized he was smiling, and shoved the memory away. Why had he wanted to remember good times? They hadn't served any purpose. The hard times were when he had learned the lessons needed for his survival.

He thought about not making the stew, not if it meant wasting time

with nostalgia. Still, it was nutritious, and he could use it to get the human more attached to Jack.

He hid all evidence of his work before leaving the apartment. It wouldn't do for Alex to come home unexpectedly and discover what Tristan was up to.

He used the money chip Alex left for Jack, for emergencies or if he wanted to go out during the day. He had to approximate many of the spices and the meat. For a moment he was disappointed, but he pushed that to the back of his mind. He would make the stew work.

Memories kept surfacing as he prepared the ingredients. This was getting annoying; they didn't usually bother him this much. What was it about being here with the human that stirred them? He pushed them away yet again and focused on his task.

The door opened as he threw the last pieces in the pot. Finally, he'd have something to distract him.

"Something smells good," Alex said, closing the door.

"We're having Alanian stew," Jack replied.

Moments later Alex stepped into the kitchen. "I don't think I've ever heard of that."

Jack tenderly took hold of Alex's face and kissed him. "It's something my father created when I was a child."

"Your father was a cook?"

Jack chuckled. "No, we would go into the forest with only spices and a pot. We would spend days surviving from what we could kill."

Alex pulled back. "You killed?"

"Only animals," Jack said, caressing his cheek with the back of a hand to soothe him. "My world isn't as advanced as yours. You'd probably consider it savage. The largest cities are making progress, catching up to the rest of the universe, but we still have vast expanses of wild land. My father believed in being able to survive, no matter where you were."

Alex closed his eyes and pressed against the hand. "Have you talked with him since you left?"

"No," Jack replied, his tone quiet. "He died before I left."

Alex looked at him. "I'm so sorry." He wrapped his arms around Jack and pulled him against himself.

Jack returned the hug. "Thanks." He picked him up and left the kitchen.

Alex yelped in surprise. "I thought you were working on dinner?"

"You just got home, and this is a tradition. It still has to simmer for an hour before it'll be ready. Unlike your steak, it won't be a problem if we're a little late."

“That was your fault,” Alex stated.

Jack didn't deny it. He deposited Alex on the bed and climbed on top of him.

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On the sixth day after Tristan was infected, Alex had a day off and decided to show Jack the city.

They started early in the morning and quickly found themselves in Ilomare Square Market. Alex loved going there, and Tristan saw that, as Mitch had said, they sold everything.

Alex explained that he rarely bought anything, but he enjoyed looking at the exotic items, learning about them, and sometimes just making up a history for what he saw. It reminded him there were strange and extraordinary things in the universe. Jack smiled as Alex pointed to this or that while looking around in case something peaked his interest.

At noon, they stopped at a restaurant. Alex started pulling Jack inside, but he bucked. “Alex, I've been inside too much, let's stay outside. Let's not go inside any buildings until we go home.”

“You're silly,” Alex said, then kissed him. They found a restaurant with a terrace and sat at one of the tables. Alex lifted his head to the sun with an air of intense concentration.

With a laugh, Jack sat, facing him. He tapped the tabletop, and the menu appeared. “Do you mind if I shop on my own after we've eaten?” he asked, reading the available items.

Alex looked at him. “Why? I can show you where all the best places are.”

“I know.” Jack kept looking at the menu, then sighed. He looked at Alex, uncertain. “I want to get you something special. Something I'll find on my own, a surprise for you.” He looked back at the menu and chose his meal without paying attention to what he ordered.

Alex brought up a menu for himself and spent a moment looking at the selection. “How about we do this: while you're shopping for me, I'll get something for you. That way we can surprise each other.”

“What if we run into each other while we shop? That could ruin the surprise.”

“We split the market down the middle. That way we won't see what the other gets. Also, we need to find something that has more sentimental than monetary value.”

“That won't be a problem for me,” Jack commented with a wry smile. “I don't exactly have much money left.”

Alex's mouth opened in silent surprise. "Are you sure you want to do this? I don't want you to spend what you have left on me."

"It's okay. You've been letting me stay at your place free of charge, and you've even paid for the meals I cooked, so I'm not completely broke yet. Do we meet back here once we've found our gift?"

Alex studied him for a moment, then nodded. "And we can't spend more than an hour in the market."

"How about two? You might be familiar enough to find something quickly, but it's my first time here, remember?"

"Okay, two hours," Alex said as their food arrived.

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"You sure this is the right target, Miri?" Cooper asked, watching the human and Samalian from the other side of the restaurant.

"Yes. You've seen the few recordings of him floating around on the Network. The fur pattern matches, and there isn't another Samalian on the planet," the reply came over his implant. "So it's got to be him."

"I still say that can't be him. He helped some old woman, and here he's just sitting there with the guy, eating. That doesn't really match what I read about him. God, now they're making eyes at each other." He ate so he wouldn't have to look at them for a moment. "Look, everything I read says he's a cold-blooded killer. That guy there? He's obviously in love."

"The file covers his crimes, not his personal life. For all I know, he's warm and gooey when he's not killing anyone. Is the fact he's in love going to be a problem for you?"

"Of course not. I just want to make sure we get the right target. I'd hate to drop some love-sick...whatever that is at the feet of the guys paying us."

"Even if there's another Samalian around here, there can't be that many of them with dark-brown fur, speckled with white. It's got to be him."

"What do I do about his boyfriend?"

"There's nothing in his files about having a partner, so try to avoid collateral damage."

"Okay, they're leaving, going in different directions. I like it when they make it easy for me. I'm going silent until it's done. I'll let you know where to pick us up."

"Okay, be careful. Remember, Tristan is deadly. Don't underestimate him just because he's in love."

"Don't worry. This isn't my first time taking down a big killer. I know

what I'm doing." Cooper terminated the communication, swiped his cred chip to pay for the half-eaten food, and fell in steps behind this target. He made sure to keep a few bodies between them. The Samalian wasn't difficult to follow, being a good head taller than most, not to say a lot darker.

He followed the alien through the maze-like market, watching him stop here and there to look at things. Cooper kept an eye out for quiet spots. If he was going to avoid collateral damage, he needed to take him down someplace with as few people as possible. Not exactly easy in this crowded market.

They wandered aimlessly for a time. Cooper kept track of his location on the map on his heads up; Miranda had linked him to one of the satellites so he could get an overhead view. His target turned into an alley, and his map showed it to be a dead end. He ran to the alley's mouth and looked in. Except for his target, it was deserted.

He loved the ones that made it easy.

Cooper covered half the distance separating them before his target stopped, looked around, and turned. His eyes went wide at seeing him. He took a step back and tripped over an old box. He grunted as he hit the ground.

"Hello, Tristan," Cooper said, pointing his gun at him.

The target's surprise was plain on his face. He looked around quickly, his mouth quivering. "My, my name's Jack."

"Is that what you told the other guy?" He moved the gun close to the alien's face.

The Samalian closed his eyes. "Please don't kill me," he begged. "My cred chip is in my pocket. Take it, just don't hurt me."

Miranda had to be wrong. There was no way that quivering mass of fur was a cold-blooded killer. "How much's on it?" Couldn't hurt to ask, not that he was going to need it. Cooper took a step away and lowered his gun.

An eye tentatively opened, looked up at him, then at the gun. "Fif... fifty, I think."

"Fifty thousand?" That was a lot of money. What was he doing with that kind of money?

The target shook his head. "Just fifty."

Cooper stared at him, then he laughed. He couldn't help it. "You thought I'd let you go for fifty credits? That's just insulting. Come on, get up." He motioned with his gun. "Do you have any idea how much the Sayatoga is offering to get you back?" How old was this guy? He had to be a kid.

The Samalian stood, his movements filled with hesitation, never

taking his fear-filled eyes off him.

Cooper took a step forward. “I have to say I was expecting a lot more from you. You’re supposed to be Tristan, this cold-blooded killer, not some scared kid.”

The Samalian swallowed hard. “Please, I don’t know who that is. My name’s Jack.” Fear was written all over his face.

“Look, kid, if this is a mistake, I’m sorry, but for now, I have to take you in. The Sayatoga can sort this out.”

Cooper took another step toward him, then something happened.

One moment the kid was afraid, the next one he was completely calm. “No,” the Samalian said. “No mistake.”

Before he could react, Cooper’s gun-hand was held at the wrist, and a hand was closing around his neck. The eyes that looked at him were cold and uncaring.

Cooper started to raise his gun. His muscles were reinforced, just like his skin, so he was stronger than the Samalian, but not as much as he expected. His wrist twisted and he screamed in pain. The gun fell out and clattered to the ground. His skin was puncture— and blade-proof, but the torsion had almost dislocated his wrist.

“How did you find out I was here?”

Cooper had no doubt now, this was Tristan. “Your face’s been broadcasted all over the place,” he said flippantly. “Someone saw you and reported it.” He wrapped his free hand around the wrist at his throat and tried to twist it, but the damned fur wouldn’t let him get a proper grip.

“No,” Tristan replied, calmly. “If the Sayatoga had done that, you’d be fighting other mercs to get to me, and I would have heard about it. I checked the boards; this isn’t an open bounty. The Sayatoga doesn’t want other prisons to find out I’ve escaped, it’s bad publicity. They’re hoping you’ll bring me in quietly, so whoever betrayed me contacted you directly.”

“So what if someone did?”

Tristan looked at him, dispassionately. “Then I know who it is.”

Cooper felt the pressure on his neck increase. He was surprised, and a little scared, as he shouldn’t have been able to feel that. A moment later, the pressure stopped as his skin hardened to compensate.

Tristan frowned.

“Did I forget to mention,” Cooper said, “I have armored skin.” He punched Tristan in the stomach, lifting him off the ground. Should have done that first, he thought. “And reinforced muscles.”

Tristan fell to the ground, and Cooper tried to stomp on his neck, but he’d rolled out of the way. He stood, wincing, with a metal pipe in

hand.

Two-inch blades extended from Cooper's fingers and he slashed at Tristan, who backed away. "I'm full of surprises." He swung again. This time, Tristan used the pipe to block the blades. They sliced through the metal without any trouble. "I did say I was full of surprises." He smiled and wriggled his fingers. "Mono-edge blades. They can cut through anything." He swiped at the Samalian, but Tristan avoided them. "Afraid of being cut open?"

Cooper pressed him and slashed again, but instead of backing up, Tristan moved forward, making the attack miss. He stepped away, and Cooper looked down. His shirt had three cuts in it, from his stomach to his chest.

He noticed the Samalian's extended claws; he'd forgotten about those. Good thing he was armored. "Just give it up, you can't hurt me. I can do this all day, and it's just a question of time until I cut you or you run out of space."

He charged, his arm raised to strike and was shocked when Tristan caught his wrist. The Samalian looked him in the eyes. "You can be hurt."

Cooper screamed when his wrist was twisted to the point that the bones dislocated. Before he could wonder how that had happened, his arm was pulled, and he felt pain in his stomach. He looked down. There was a long cut across the skin, bleeding profusely.

Cooper's finger-blades were dripping with blood, and he watched as Tristan shoved them in the cut. The hand was pushed in deep. Cooper looked up into cold eyes as he felt pain in his heart.

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Tristan let the dead human fall to the ground. The human's hand was still buried in his stomach with the blades in his heart. He grabbed him by a leg and dragged him to the back of the alley. He wiped his hand on the human's clothes, then heaped garbage over it until no one could tell there was a body there. Once night fell, he'd deal with it.

He picked up the human's gun and turned it over in his hand. It was small, without any distinguishing marks. Was it something that had come out his is missing ten years? If it was, why no company marking? It could be a custom job, which meant this merc had deep pockets. He thought about taking it with him, but if Jack was caught with a gun, it would cause too many problems. He hid it with the body.

He looked himself over. Except for his hand, there was no blood, matted fur, or cuts. Good, nothing that would need explaining. He

found a washroom and almost decided against going in it as it stank so badly. He forced himself in, checked no one else was there, and closed the door so he could wash the blood off his hand without interruption.

Once that was done, there was nothing that would let Alex know about the fight. The little blood that had splattered on his chest wasn't noticeable in his dark fur, and he wouldn't be able to pick up the scent. He'd wash properly once back at the human's apartment.

It took him some time to make his way back to the booth that had interested him. He'd seen something, when the human had been showing Jack his preferred stalls, that he wanted to verify. It would be the gift Jack brought back, regardless of what he found out, but he was curious to see if it was what he thought it was.

He found the small statue where he'd remembered seeing it. It was a foot in height and, by the weight, it was solid stone. The being represented was clearly a Samalian, but his pelt was painted a soft brown, marking him as being from the plains. Tristan's dark fur indicated his people originated from the forest if his father was to be believed.

The paint was faded, chipped, and one ear was broken off. The statue was holding two curved swords, the length of its forearm, and it was crouched in a defensive position.

Tristan felt momentary anger that someone had desecrated one of the Houses and stolen this, but he shoved it aside. What did he care for the religious artifacts of his people? If they hadn't been careful with it and had lost it, it wasn't his problem.

There was probably one of his people, somewhere, looking for it, and they would praise Tristan for returning it. That wasn't going to happen.

The merchant looked at him warily; he could see the resemblance. He was probably worried Tristan would call the law to report it. Instead, Tristan asked for the price, paid it, and headed toward the restaurant.