

Alex looked over the rough shirt before getting dressed. He'd been studying them since his third day, when he realized the material wasn't showing signs of being affected by the high humidity. His initial thought was that he was given newer clothing to keep him from realizing... the understanding of how farfetched a need to hide that clothing would deteriorate faster in this environment put a stop to that, but didn't answer how it was.

Clothing was made on site from local fibers, so they weren't an artificial material a corporation made. There was plenty of clothing made that way. Anything that could give you a supple EVA suit could also give you a set of clothing able to resist whatever a planetary environment threw at it.

Clothing was replaced every day. Except for those who wore set they had made themselves, but then they were responsible for cleaning and repairing them. Alex found himself watching those for signs of mold and rot, but other than wear and the tears working outside, around plants and hand tools, they were in good condition.

It might be in the washing, they might be treated with specific chemicals to keep mold from forming. There were such cleaning agents, right? Alex couldn't confirm it without being able to access the net, and he'd always relied on the cleaned whatever ship Tristan had to take care of it.

"Teiro," he asked the man scrubbing the mold off the wall of the corridor leading to the garden. "Why does anyone wear these outside?"

The man took a few seconds to respond. They all seemed to do that, get lost in whatever they did, the way Alex lost track of what happened around him when he coerced. The difference being that coercing required that attention. Scrubbing a wall didn't require anything.

"I get it inside," he continued, giving the man time. "It's actually chilly deep enough, but out there, it's sweltering."

"What should we wear instead? Nothing?"

"That would make sure the clothing isn't exposed to so much humidity."

Teiro stared at Alex. "You're serious? You don't walk around naked among other people."

Now it was Alex's turn to stare. As far as he was concerned, it was one thing to follow the standard SpaceGov enforced when on a populated planet, and even then, only when among those population centers. This was a planet with no more than this sanctuary and a dozen research station. What was the big deal with being naked?

Maybe he'd spent too long around Tristan, or among Samalians. They certainly didn't care for who saw them naked. Well, those who were part of Hea'Las's community. Within the cities, Alex could count on one hand the number of Samalians he'd seen without pants,

and they had all been children. And in one case, the parents had gotten a talking to about not dressing their child.

“Then, how do you keep these from rotting off your back?” Alex asked, and Teiro laughed.

“Is that what it’s about? I’d have expected you to ask someone about it on your second day or something.”

“It gave me something to think about while...” he motioned to the wall and didn’t say while he was wasting his time. This wasn’t a quick process. Thirteen days pondering the question had lasted him?

“The point isn’t to fill your head with thoughts,” the man said. “It’s to let—”

“My focus be on what I am doing. To let my mind settle down.”

“So it’s been explained. Good.”

“Explained, elaborated, repeated, and it’s not making doing it any easier. I’m a coercionist, thinking is how I do what I do.”

“I thought you were a merc.”

“I am, but I have specialized skills. Coercing is one of them. We’re not just muscle bound brutes, you know.”

Teiro shrugged. “They’re what I’ve seen here.”

“Are you telling me you haven’t seen one vid about mercs and the Life? Those are like half what’s on any catalog.”

“I haven’t seen any vids.”

Alex stared at him again. “Where are you from?”

“Here.”

“You were born here?”

“Yes.”

“So sex happens.”

“Of course,” Teiro replied with some derision in the tone.

Teklile had mentioned that what took place in rooms was none of anyone else’s business, but Alex had expected that to mean recreational sex. Not the getting kids out of it kind.

“And you never left? Aren’t you curious about what’s out there?”

“Not enough to leave. When I have questions, one of those here because what’s out there was too much for them, can answer them. We also have books about the planets, SpaceGov, the corporations. There’s enough information there I’d rather stay here, where it’s peaceful.”

“And wet.”

“Not all the time. Once night falls, it doesn’t rain as often.”

“I don’t think that one less day of rain a month will make a difference.”

Teiro laughed. “It rains a lot less than that.”

“Alright, fine. About the clothing. How come it’s not rotting?”

“The leaves of the Fourax tree, when dried, make a fiber that’s highly resilient to mold. We also use an extract of Archmin sap in the laundry that adds to the protection.”

“That’s it? It’s just part of the local plants?”

“Everything here has evolved to deal with the high humidity. All we did, over the centuries, was breed the tree to have a denser foliage so we’ve have more leaves to use.”

With a chuckle, Alex returned to scrubbing the mold off the wall. That felt like such a simplistic answer to him. He didn’t think he’d have believed it if he’d come across the information on the net.

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Alex wanted the rain to stop. He wanted the heat to let out. And he especially wanted the weeds not to be tangled among the roots of the Gorbop plant. When Teiro had mentioned everything here had evolved to deal with the high humidity, Alex hadn’t realized that was why the plants had such dense and deep root balls. It was to combat the muddy soil. They were literally anchored in place. And those roots were perfect for weeds to grab on, and suck the life out of them.

Which meant weeding the garden was a daily job, and at the size of it, more like a small farm, a job that occupied nearly half the people at the sanctuary. And not a simple job at that. The weeds couldn’t be ripped out. They had to be untangled from the root ball. And while the roots were resistant as a ball, each one was brittle, so care needed to be taken or too many broke, and the plant was at risk of dying.

And doing that under the constant pelting of the rain and sweltering heat and humidity? How could anyone here just be there, on knees, all morning long, and not have gone insane yet? How was he going to survive doing this for a few hours? Let alone the weeks, the years, to come?

He really was wasting his time with this. And Tristan’s. How was this any better than just locking him up? At least with that, they could do it home. There was even a place for a cage there, although Tristan would have to build a new one. It had been the first thing he’d destroyed once they’d decided to build their home where Tristan had grown up.

And it wasn’t like Alex would have to spend all his time in it. When it was only him and Tristan, it would be safe. His Samalian knew how far it was safe to push him, and if Alex somehow went murderous without warning, Tristan could handle him. It was if they had visitors that he’d have to be caged, for their safety.

It was where a monster like him belonged, after all.

The raised voices pulled him out of his morbidly spiraling thoughts, and he looked up. He couldn’t see far in the rain or make out the words. He did make out the tone of surprise and fear, and once he made out the large, muscular shape, he understood. The visitor was certainly imposing enough and that equated danger to most people, certainly those here living peacefully.

Then the form moved close enough Alex made out detail and he smiled.

Alex took in his Samalian, as he stopped and looked down at him. “You have looked better,” he stated.