

Tristan took a breath as he approached the clinic's door, and made Tech's entrance tentative.

On cue, the medic raised her head from the datapad. "There you are." Her tone was concerned, with an edge of annoyance. "I expected you to be here last night. Alex was expecting you."

The reprimand made Tech's ears fold back and mumble an apology. He squared his shoulders and put more confidence in his voice. "I didn't think— Is he okay? Does he really want to see me again?"

She came to him and took Tech's hand. "It wasn't your fault; you two got carried away. You'll know better for next time. Now, he's resting. I took the regeneration chambers off his arm and leg this morning. If you want to see him, you can."

Tech nodded, and she led him to Alex's room. She entered and headed to look over the readouts. Tech stayed by the door as it closed, and squirmed under Alex's surprised gaze.

"Hey." Tech gave a shy wave. "How are you doing?"

Alex glanced at the medic. He probably thought he was discreet, but it was fortunate she was focused on anything but him. The motion of the eye had been blatant. Alex smoothed his face over, and he looked tired again. It was probably his actual state.

"I'm better." There was an edge to his voice.

"He's much better," the medic commented. She hadn't noticed it. "His bones should be fully hardened by the end of the day, but I'm keeping him overnight." She winked at Alex. "It wouldn't do for the two of you to get carried away again this soon. I definitely don't want to see you in here for that kind of injury ever again."

Alex looked away, his face red. She'd think he was blushing, but Tristan noticed how his jaw tightened.

She looked at Tech, who'd folded his ears back. "He'll be ready to go home tomorrow morning."

"That's good," Tech said, and Tristan found he didn't have to work at smiling. "It hasn't been the same without you there."

Alex watched him, face still relaxed, but eyes intent. Whatever he'd been looking for wasn't there, and he wasn't able to hide all of his disappointment. The medic didn't notice that either.

She finished with the needless checks. "I'm going to leave you two alone." She patted Tech's shoulder as she left. Tech pulled a chair once the door closed and sat next to the bed. He moved to place a hand on Alex's, but the human moved it away.

"I'm sorry I didn't come yesterday. I figured you were angry with me, and before I could work up the courage to face you, Terry needed me to fix his pump. He lives ten miles away. He didn't know you'd gotten hurt, and I couldn't ignore that. The pump is the only source of water for his animals."

In the following silence, he focused on the door. The medic hadn't moved away from the closed door. Maybe she was worried they'd fight. Or possibly she wanted to get a better sense of their relationship.

Alex opened his mouth, but Tristan silenced him with a raised hand. He listened as she moved away, and he lowered it.

"Why?" Alex glared at him.

Tech canted his head. "Why what?"

Tristan watched as Alex worked through the anger. Jaw clenching and unclenching as he kept himself from screaming. After a few seconds and deep breaths, he relaxed. "The repair, why not replace it?"

That hadn't been what Alex had wanted to know. Tristan wondered if he should drop the mask, force Alex to say what he meant, but he was curious to see how far Alex would follow his lead.

"Terry's father built it when they settled here. It has sentimental value. So long as I can rebuild the parts, or find a way to replace it, he's going to hang on to it. This time it was just one of the pulley gears that broke. It's a standard part, so I was able to scrounge a replacement." Was this too much? Was he just encouraging Alex's delusion? He pushed his concern aside and put more emotion in his voice. "How are you doing? Really?"

Anger flashed in Alex's eyes. His entire face hardened and Tristan thought he'd broken through Alex's control, but he closed his eyes, breathed slowly, and when he answered, his

voice was almost calm.

"I'm okay." His face could fool anyone here. Tristan was impressed; Alex should be trying to strangle him, but even the readout had just jumped with the initial spike. Was he doing this to keep the medic from worrying? "I don't think I'll be able to run tomorrow. I know the doc said it'll be okay, but I've gotten enough broken bones to know they don't always heal as fast as they're supposed to."

Tristan's eyebrow rose, his ears snapping forward. Did he intend on returning? Why? How could he consider that after what Tristan had done to him?

"Don't worry," Tech said, "it's just running. We can get back to it once we're sure you're fully healed."

Alex tensed. He wasn't getting ready to strike, but he wanted to do *something*. Again he displayed an amount of self-control Tristan hadn't often seen in humans. "I'm tired," he finally said. "If you don't mind, I'm going to sleep some more."

"Of course not." Tristan stood. "I'll leave. If you need anything, contact me and I'll come, okay?"

Alex nodded.

Before he could stop himself, Tristan reached for Alex. He ignored how the human flinched and closed his eyes, as he moved a lock of hair that had fallen over Alex's eye back in place.

He looked at his hand as he headed for the door. What had that been about? He stopped before entering the door's sensor field. "Alex," he said without turning. "I'm sor—" He snapped his mouth shut. Apologizing? Had he really been about to apologize? What did he have to apologize about? Alex had brought this on himself.

He wiped the anger off his face and put the Tech mask back on before leaving the room. "He's tired," he told the approaching medic.

"Healing takes a lot out of people." She placed a hand on his arm. "Tech, look, whatever you two talked about, don't worry about it. His emotions are all over the place right now because he's tired. Once he's fully rested, that'll be the time for you two to talk about things."

Alex hadn't been fast enough to keep the machines from registering his reactions, but the medic had justified them away. She saw the two of them as lovers, so she couldn't think Alex would have a valid reason to be angry, therefore it was his tired state that caused it.

"It's okay," Tech said. "I did deserve some of it."

"No, I'm sure you didn't," she replied, exactly as he knew she would. Taking some of the blame seemed to be the best way to get the medic to think he was innocent. She smiled. "He's just tired. But I was serious, you need to wait before engaging in intimate activities."

Tech's ears folded back. "Yeah, we'll wait."

She patted his arm and went back to her desk by the door.

The walk back to his workroom wasn't relaxing. He was unable to figure out what had prompted him to act the way he had. Tech might apologize, but moving the hair like that? That was a gesture of caring he'd never engaged in as Tech.

Once he reached the town center, everyone came to ask about Alex's condition. His reflex was to tell them to leave him alone, he had things to think about, but Tech wouldn't behave that way, so he boxed his annoyance at them and answered their questions.

Alex was well. He would come home tomorrow. He was sleeping. Yes, they had talked. No, he wouldn't be up to visitors immediately.

Everyone's happiness grated on his nerves. The constant touching made him want to lash out. And then came the comments about how they were so happy he finally had someone in his life.

He almost lost it then. How had they ever gotten this idea Alex was "in his life"? Hadn't he been careful to only act as if they were friends? Humans had sex with friends, they didn't have to love one another, so why did he have to love Alex? What had he missed?

He forced his smiles to be genuine and thank them for their concern until he was far enough on the other side that they couldn't mob him anymore. When the last of them left him alone and couldn't see him anymore, his shoulders sagged a little in relief.

Once he was in his workshop, he put Alex and the town out of his mind and finished taking apart the Juriken lock. It was as well-made as they advertised, but it suffered from the same basic flaw every high-grade lock had: it needed to be maintained. Juriken hadn't advertised

that. Had in fact removed any mention of it from any reports except the internal ones, which were the ones Tristan had gotten his hands on. Juriken had even managed to edit the “how-to-survive” files that always ended up floating on the net when a new security product reached the market.

A call came from one of the farmers. Her extractor had jammed, and she needed Tech to take a look. It only took half an hour to unjam it, and then it was time for lunch, where he had to endure more well-wishes from everyone. The tavern owner’s wife was particularly attentive to his needs.

He cut his lunch early and went back to the lock. Away from everyone.

He found the override frequency embedded in the lock’s processing core. This was how the technicians would bypass all the biometric sides of the security. It was on a complex permutating formula, but that only required time for his computer to work it out. Once he had that he could bypass the locks, or even change the processor to one he’d programmed himself, if he expected he’d need regular access.

The mechanical part of the lock was a tumbler system. Ancient by the standards of most corporate worlds, where everything had moved on to electronics a long time ago, but Tristan’s father hadn’t had electronics on the cage, so he’d become adept at bypassing tumbler locks, even if he was now out of practice.

He set a search program to look for any ancient locks available on the net.

The work kept Alex from intruding on his thoughts until he grew hungry. He went to the kitchen and realized there was no meal waiting for him. It annoyed him that he’d grown accustomed to the human preparing meals. That he’d grown to appreciate the taste of the food.

He took a nutrient bar and ate it. That was all he needed. He let Alex cook because it gave the human something to do. Once he was gone, Tristan would go back to the way things had been. To the way things should be. To the way he wanted them.

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The hover was sluggish. Tristan should have taken the time to tune it up, he’d planned on it, but the tavern owner had been late bringing it, so there had been no time. He considered getting a hover of his own. He wouldn’t need it often, but for the times he did, it would ensure it would be in good working order. He’d have to add a building to store it.

He stopped the hover, and it glided a few feet forward. Maybe Tech should offer to tune it, tune every hover here, but that would take even more time away from his research.

The doors slid open on the medic talking with Alex. Tech hesitated on seeing him, then entered. Tech gave Alex a hug, keeping him from backing away. “I’m glad you’re coming home.”

Alex was tense in his arms, and his voice was unsteady when he replied. “Yeah. Me too.”

“Now,” the medic said, once Tech had released him, and oblivious to how forced Alex’s voice had been. “You need to remember to take it easy for the rest of the week. That means no runs, no fighting, and no sex. Tech, next time, be gentle. He’s only human. I don’t care if it wasn’t the first time, there’s a size difference you can’t forget about.”

Tech’s ears vanished against his skull, and he couldn’t look up from the floor.

“No need to worry, Doc,” Alex replied, his voice steady. “I learned my lesson. Slow and easy from now on.”

Tech was squirming now. “Can we—”

“Don’t be too hard on Tech,” she said. “No one should be punished for being enthusiastic. Now, you have a clean bill of health, go home and try not to come back. I hate repeat customers.”

“No worries, Doc. I’m not a fan of hospitals myself.” Alex headed for the door. “I usually take care of my own injuries.”

She snorted. “I could tell, but I’m here, so I’d rather deal with them. If you can’t make it here, call me. I do house calls.”

Tech placed a hand on Alex’s shoulder, and gripped him tight enough to keep him from flinching. “Don’t worry, Cornelius, I’ll take good care of him.” He followed Alex outside, keeping hold of him in case he decided to run. Now was not the time for that.

The hover was an old Garaty Cruise, without a top. It offered no protection whatsoever, but the tavern owner had been the only one who’d had a free hover to lend Tech. He helped Alex sit on the passenger side.

"Where to?" Tristan asked as he sat behind the controls. The hover slid to the left as Tristan set it in motion, and when he compensated it went too far to the right. Were there any tools in it? He could stop off the road and fix the problem now.

"Your house."

His head snapped to Alex. He couldn't have heard right.

"You should leave," Tristan stated. "Your things are in the storage compartment." He'd hadn't had time to take all the knives Alex had hidden over the house. Only his pack, that projector, the case, and the knives in the room he used. "I'll let you use my ship." It was worth it to be without a ship for a few months, even a year, to be rid of—

"That is so fucking generous of you. I guess you've worked it all out? So tell me, where the fuck am I supposed to go?"

"Go home."

"And where the fuck is that?"

"Anywhere that isn't here!" The hover almost went off the road as he glared at Alex. He hated those manual models. "Away from me. What you want doesn't exist. He never did."

"What? You think I haven't figured that out by now? After what you did to me? Do you really think that if there was anywhere I could go, I'd stay here after *that*?"

He looked at Alex out the corner of his eye. He couldn't be serious. "You have a family. Humans always have families."

"You think they want me? Do you even know what my dad did to me? Do you have any idea what it's like to be kicked out by your own family? To be disowned by your parents just because you had sex with an alien?"

"You have other family, the older ones."

"You really think my grandparents want me around them after the stuff I've done? Do you even know what I put myself through to get here? The horrible things I've done?"

When Alex grew silent, Tristan said, "I saw the warrants. With the money you have, you can make them disappear."

Alex looked at him, mouth open. It snapped shut. "Are you really stupid enough to think th—"

Tristan had a hand around the human's neck while fighting with the hover with the other. "Be very careful how you speak to me, Alex. You are insisting on staying here, even after I have encouraged you to leave. That means you belong to me. Show me the respect you have accepted I am due." He released him and added that hand to the controls. He was destroying this hover instead of returning it.

Alex massaged his throat. "There are plenty of warrants on you on the net. Do they tell the whole story of who you are? What you've done? Do you really think those warrants tell mine? You know damned well there are plenty of things I've had to do they never found out."

Alex silently looked out the side as they crossed the town. When he spoke, on the other side, his voice was softer. "I killed people. I had to become a killer to make it here. I used Jack to justify becoming like you."

"You are nothing like me."

"I still became a monster, and for a lie. You really think there's anyone who's known me before who would want anything to do with this thing I've become?" He chuckled. "Even you don't want me around. What does that say about me?"

"It says you are a distraction. That is all. I don't want anyone around me."

"Really?" Alex indicated the buildings behind them. "What's all that then?"

"I told you. A facade, a mask. Nothing more. Something no one can associate with me." He glanced at Alex. "Almost no one."

"Then what about the lunches you take there every day? You don't have to do that, you have plenty of nutrient bars at the house. How can you even eat that stuff?"

"Tech lives here. He is expected to take part in the community. I do the strict minimum to avoid attracting attention." He grew silent. Why wouldn't the human understand? "Leave, Alex. I have no use for you."

Alex snorted. "You certainly had a use for me a few nights ago."

The hover wavered over the road as Tristan fought the anger as he remembered his complete

loss of control. The steering control creaked, and if he hadn't needed it to keep the hover from flying into the trees, he would have ripped it out.

"That is not who I am," he stated. He would never lose control like that again.

Alex turned in the seat to face him, pulling a leg on the cushion. "Okay, then I have a question for you. Why am I still alive? That's how it works, doesn't it? You use someone until you no longer need them and then you dispose of them. Right?"

Hadn't he asked himself a similar question, years ago, when he left Alex crying after him? "You were inconsequential." It was what he'd told himself then.

"What about now?"

"Your death would attract too much attention. It would disrupt this place. The portmaster might decide to bring in strangers to find out what happened. I will not have all the time I have invested in this place be wasted because of you."

Alex crossed his arms. "Fine. I'm staying."

"Very well. Then tell me why you are staying."

"I told you. I came here for you. I did unimaginable things so I'd be able to find you. I destroyed anything I might have had on my way here."

Tristan listened to the words, the hesitations, the pauses. He turned to face Alex. "Now tell me the truth."

"I did. All that was so I could find you."

"No, it was so you could find Jack. You have accepted he does not exist. You can go back to the life; they won't care what you have done, who you are." Alex opened his mouth. "Do not lie to me, Alex."

"I didn't lie."

"You did not tell me the whole truth."

Alex opened and closed his mouth. "I don't know, okay? I thought I saw—" He shut up. "I think—" He shrugged. "I don't know if my reason would even be the truth. But I don't want to go."

Tristan controlled his breathing. He looked up. This was clearly the work of the universe. "This is the last time I say this. Leave, Alex."

"No."

Tristan nodded. Fine, he would adjust. If the universe thought this human would be his downfall, it hadn't learned anything from its previous attempts. He would make use of the human until an opportunity presented itself to remove him. It was simply a question of time.

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Tristan kept the hover for two days, under the excuse of needing it since Alex couldn't exert himself. During that time he repaired it; destroying it would raise questions. He'd have to explain how it had happened. He would have to make sure the wreckage matched whatever he said. Repairing was easier to explain as Tech's way of thanking the tavern owner for lending it to him.

For the following two days, walking was their only exercise, then they ran. And the day after that they were training. Tristan pushed hard, expecting Alex to give up and leave. That was still the cleanest resolution to his problem, but even when Alex got angry, he took that anger and focused it on what they were doing, be it training or running.

Over the weeks, Tristan found he respected Alex's dedication. Not only did he do everything Tristan had set for him, the runs, and the training, but he kept with the appearance of enjoying Tech's company. Entertaining visitors instead of forcing Tech to meet with them.

Tristan watched Alex speak with the farmer and his wife as he did the repairs on the tractor. The repair was simple, but normally the two of them would pester him with questions, forcing him to pause to answer. Now he was left alone to work.

Maybe Alex could be of use after all.