

Alex still wasn't great at wearing a mask, Tristan thought as he sat next to him at the table. Alex stood, acting like he hadn't noticed Tristan, but he'd tensed. He went to the front of the hover, spoke with Jacoby, who looked back at Tristan before shrugging, and ceded the seat.

Tristan didn't understand Alex's behavior, or the wary glances he gave when he thought Tristan wouldn't notice. This was what Alex had wanted from the instant Tristan had abandoned him on Delaron Four.

He touched the scar on his breastbone and he remembered screaming at Alex, yelling that he meant nothing, never wanted to see him again. The anger he'd directed at Alex made him sick. But Alex had stayed, like always. He knew Tristan had been sick, out of control, and he had to see that wasn't still the case.

Tristan understood now. He understood that he wanted Alex, he wanted to give himself to his human. But Alex shied away from him, always made sure they weren't alone in any section of the hover. Jacoby sat opposite Tristan at the table, pulled his datapad, and read.

That night, when Jacoby relieved Tristan at the controls, he tried to enter his and Alex's room again, but the door was locked. This was the fourth night like this. Anger made him want to rip the lock off the door and force his way in, but with all the understanding he'd gained about himself, he knew this was because, on some level, he'd expected Alex to forget everything he'd put him through and jump into his arms, say yes to everything he wanted, as Tristan had made sure he would.

If they could talk, Tristan could explain, make things right. But he wasn't having this conversation with an audience, and Alex was unwilling to be alone with him.

He stretched on the floor before the couch, studied his emotions for a few minutes, then slept.

When he woke, sunlight filled the hover. Jacoby was still at the controls, Alex at the table eating something he'd printed. Tristan fought the urge to sit with him, instead sitting on the couch and looking out at the canopy going on as far as he could see.

Maybe he should've told Jacoby to land, take Alex aside where he wouldn't feel trapped, and explain things to him. Jacoby wouldn't like the idea, but Tristan didn't care what that human wanted. Would that even help?

Absently he counted the holes in the trees—clearings, some large enough to house small cities.

Before his talk with the Defender, it would have been simple to get Alex at his side. Build the mask of who he'd been, say the things he'd used to say. Alex's reactions were programmed deeply enough he'd do what he was told, but Tristan knew that wasn't what Alex wanted, not under all that.

Throughout the manipulations, the hot and cold attitude he gave Alex—keeping him unsure was the easiest way to keep him loyal, to force the need to prove himself constantly—Tristan had caught the looks Alex gave him when he was being ignored, when Tristan didn't wear a mask, because Alex hadn't needed one by then.

Alex knew him. Knew him in a way no one had before, not even his father, who'd been too busy molding Tristan into a reflection of himself to notice who he had become. Alex knew him at his core, knew him as the monster he truly was—and he'd stayed.

He looked at Alex with yearning. It meant something, didn't it?

Silently he cursed the Defender. Couldn't he have at least made that part easy? Tristan didn't mind hard work, but Alex had waited so long for this. It shouldn't be stuck behind a lock, the mechanism of which Tristan wasn't sure he understood.

He watched six clearings fly by, in an almost perfect hexagon, and went back to his musing, then straightened as the sense of recognition set in. He went to the back and looked at them again. Where had he seen those before? On the way to the town? No, he'd been too busy feeling miserable, angry, manic—out of control, to bother with looking outside.

Then when? Where were they?

He took his datapad and called up maps of the area, and they became available. He remembered doing this before, in his youth. Having made his way out of the forest and to a town after days, if not weeks of walking, he'd gotten a sense the world was bigger than he'd imagined, and he'd wanted to know just how big it was.

Tristan hadn't been able to find enough maps to work that out until he'd made his way to the city, where he'd bought and stolen what he needed. He hadn't been able to see the world through the maps, but he'd recreated his travels on those maps that looked so real it was like looking at the canopy now.

He entered the coordinates and points lit up miles away from here, but closer than he'd expected.

While he didn't remember why he'd carefully worked out the coordinates to his father's cabin, he remembered doing the work, getting more precise maps of the area until he thought he could see the cage through the trees. He hadn't wanted to go back—couldn't have wanted that, not after killing his father. The only thing left there had been Justin, and their animosity was such that even then Tristan wanted nothing to do with him anymore. Maybe his plan had been to destroy the cage? Erase it from existence, so what it meant to him could cease to be?

He stood. Alex looked up from his datapad—fear, quickly covered up with indifference. Tristan's plan faltered. He should explain things here, now. But this was a cage of sort. Tristan had always taken advantage of times Alex was in a box he couldn't escape. Had made sure to impress on him Tristan was in charge.

No, Alex wouldn't be able to listen locked in this box.

"I'm taking over," he told Jacoby as he stood next to the pilot's seat.

"I'm good," the man answered, checking the readings. "You can take over in a few hours."

Emotions flowed through him, and Tristan used the act of studying them to keep from acting on what they demanded. Annoyance demanded this insignificant person be squashed. Anger demanded that he be reminded Tristan did not take orders. Worry wanted him to go check on Alex, talk to him, and it reminded him that every minute that passed meant Alex was growing ever-distant from him.

The emotions settled, and he looked at the man. At Jacoby, who considered himself a friend. He deserved a chance to correct his mistake.

"Get out of the chair, Jake," Tristan said softly, "or I'm going to throw you out of it and the hover."

Jacoby looked at him, then hurried out of the chair. "Fine, man. No need for threats."

Tristan sat and changed the destination. What had Jacoby so freaked? He'd smiled, spoken softly. There had been no obvious threat, had there? Maybe he should put the Tech mask on? Tech never caused that kind of reaction.

No, he was done with masks when he wasn't on a job. If he was going to allow people closer to him, they were going to have to get used to who he was. The real him.

Whoever that was.

Something else the Defender had neglected to explain.

He brought up the map of the area around the coordinates. He wasn't landing the hover at his father's cabin. For one thing, the canopy was dense enough it wouldn't pass through, but for another, he didn't want Jacoby around for this talk. He found the closest clearing and made that the destination.

Who was he becoming?

He knew who he was in relation to Alex—all that had taken was shedding his fears—but the change that decision had brought on was more complex. The simple thought of letting people close to him was new. Before, he would have positioned them around him in a way that provided support to the mask he needed. Like he'd done on Terion

Two.

And this overall course of action? He would never have engaged on it without being paid, and even then, he doubted anyone could offer something that would make it worth wasting his time like this. Instructing the townsfolk on what to do to survive the coming turmoil, his part in ensuring it was as short as possible.

The old him would be railing it was all a waste, although the idea of taking on a corporation again would appeal to his junky side.

But the old him wouldn't even be here to get involved in any of this. He'd promised himself he'd never set foot on this planet again. He'd never come back to the one place he'd been weak, powerless. After he'd fought his way out of this gravity well, he thought he would never allow himself to be reminded of who he'd been.

"That isn't the direction to the city," Jacoby said.

Tristan didn't study the annoyance caused by the comment; he'd already studied annoyance enough to know it wasn't a useful emotion. He let it flow, then settle. He ignored it, like he ignored the man.

Jacoby wasn't important, and emotions he caused could be ignored. He looked over his shoulder at Alex, and the emotions Alex stirred shouldn't be acted on while Jacoby was present.

"Did you hear—"

"I heard you." His reply was sharp, annoyance slipping in against his will. Exerting selective control over his emotions was more difficult than suppressing them all. "That isn't where I'm going," he said in a normal tone.

"I thought we were destroying the corporation. You changed your mind?" The derisive tone almost cost Jacoby his life. Tristan had a hand on the knife as he spun the chair, but that delay gave him the needed time to remind himself Jacoby didn't know Alex, couldn't know him, because he hadn't lived with him for years. Jacoby thought the plan was futile, but if there was one person other than Tristan who could accomplish the destruction of a corporation, it was Alex.

"I need to make a stop first."

"Another detour?" Jacoby asked in disbelief. "What is it about this place that keeps delaying us going home?"

"Sit the fuck down before I throw you out." The anger flared out of his control and threatened to get Jacoby killed, but it got the job done. Jacoby backed away, hands raised.

Alex looked at him, the yearning back, before he realized Tristan was looking back, and then it was covered up.

He turned back to face the controls, and studied the anger as he corrected the slight drift—not the anger itself, but the event that triggered it. It hadn't been the blinding rage that afflicted him while he fought how he felt for Alex. This had been focused, flaring at the word "home".

It wasn't the word itself, it was the tone Jacoby had used, the meaning he'd imbued in it. The implication that the place Jacoby considered home had to be the place Tristan would too. It was the idea that someone else sought to dictate where his home was that had made him angry. It was good to know that hadn't changed. He alone still decided what home was or wasn't.

The rest of the trip gave him time to consider Alex, and he realized the reason for his behavior: Alex didn't know how he'd changed. He'd expected things to go back to how they had been, and anything not matching that would make him doubt the success of the endeavor.

This would help.

He brought the hover down in the clearing, and discovered the trees were too close to allow him to slip the hover between them to hide from the satellites. He got as close to them as he could. The canopy wasn't as dense here, but it wasn't like the corporation

had a reason to be looking for them yet.

Alex was already standing when Tristan stood. He was hiding his uneasiness under a readiness to do anything Tristan told him. Tristan's emotions were conflicted. He was proud of that readiness, and afraid of the damage it represented. He was pleased Alex wanted to obey him, but he wanted resistance. He wanted to see Alex was more than the weapon Tristan had turned him into.

Tristan let those emotions settle.

Jacoby looked outside. "What's so important we need to stop in the middle of nowhere?"

Jacoby's tone was almost belligerent, which could present a problem. The easiest way to deal with him was to kill him. Alex shifted a hand closer to a knife; he was picking up on Tristan's thought process. All he had to do was nod, and Jacoby would die. Alex wouldn't know why, and he wouldn't care. He would do what he was told, what he'd been made for.

No, this was over. He wouldn't use Alex as his weapon anymore. Any killing that Tristan decided needed to be done, he would do himself.

The old him and the new one fought over the decision. He won. He always won. The old him was irrelevant now.

He smiled. "Alex and I haven't been together for a long time. I'm tired of waiting."

Jacoby looked from one to the other, and reached the conclusion Tristan wanted him to. "And that bedroom isn't sufficient?"

"No."

"Can't you just wait until we're at the city? You can get a room as big as you want, and I can arrange for the ship to—"

"Unlike what you think you know about me, Jacoby, I'm not a city person. And I'm not waiting."

Jacoby sighed. "Fine. I'll be here, waiting."

"We're not coming back until tomorrow." Tristan smiled. "Don't wait up." He opened the door. "Come on, Alex."

After a flash of fear, Alex moved.