

Tristan's house was far from the town so he could enjoy the peace and quiet. He had built the house, because it was what had been expected. Humans needed their habitations to be divided into many rooms each with its own function. He needed none of that, but that would have set him apart too much, so he'd built the house and attached his workshop to it.

He'd built it by the forest to lower the chances of anyone approaching from that direction without alerting him. His property had multiple large predators living on it, and he'd had to teach them he wasn't food for them. He hadn't killed any of them because they made for an aggressive security net.

The medic, the tavern owner's wife, as well as a few of the farmers tried to convince Tech he needed to remove them for his own safety, but Tech was just too gentle of a man. He couldn't imagine hurting even dangerous animals. Relocating them had been suggested, but how would that disrupt the local ecology? In the end, he'd agreed to install a deterrent field between his house and the tree line to keep the animals from wandering too close.

He stopped before the house and turned, expecting to see Alex in the distance. Not seeing him, Tristan waited, to give him time to come into view. Alex didn't show. He'd already given up? Good. He thought that odd, considering Alex had persevered all these years, but it was for the best.

He went to the door of the attached building. The only times he opened the door to the house were when one of the townsfolk buzzed it, and it only happened when one of them felt like Tech had been alone for too long.

None of them seem to comprehend that Tech didn't need to socialize, that his time at the tavern was more than enough to satisfy what little need he had for company. Tech still welcomed them in and talked with them for a few minutes before having to get back to his work.

His workroom was one large space with a counter along the back wall with cabinets over and under it. In the space between them, all of Tristan's powered tools hung. In the cabinets under the counter he kept those tools too large to be kept on it. The cabinets above the counter held a variety of components he needed to do repairs or modifications.

The far wall on his right held his collection of guns, fifty-eight of them, each the most recent design from the twelve top-of-the-line manufacturers. Each one of them were in working order and fine-tuned to work better than the manufacturer's schematics indicated they should.

On the wall connected to the house, the cabinets were filled with datachips. The documentation on everything he'd taken apart, any associated reports regarding the tests the manufacturers had put these items through, as well as any reports independent testers had filed.

The only set of datachips there that didn't have an accompanying item somewhere in his workshop were the ship schematics. He'd yet to find a way to store a ship in his workroom, so he contented himself with those and took smaller ships apart when he was off-planet, so the portmaster wouldn't be too aware of how knowledgeable Tech was.

The cabinets along this wall held a variety of locks, security systems, and sensors. Like the weapons, he had taken each apart and rebuilt them. He knew each's flaws and exploits.

The center of the room held his workspace—three long tables welded together to form one continuous surface, secured to the floor so it couldn't move when he put his weight on it in the process of taking something stubborn apart.

Currently he had four projects on it, but only the RJ-23 rifle was active. The Titanus lock was a flawed model, so he couldn't do anything with it until he either repaired it, or obtained a new one. The Arfron motor was done, but he was waiting a few more days before letting the galbeet farmer know. It wouldn't do for them to think Tech could fix such a complicated device in under two days. It had actually taken him half a day. The Tomika PIFD computer was the medic's, which he'd get to closer to when she expected it back; all it needed was a full parts upgrade.

He stood before the disassembled RJ-23. Taking it apart had been simple; like all military weapons, ease of repair meant every component had to be easy to remove and replace on-site with a minimum of tools, by soldiers who might not know anything about the weapon they were using.

The power supply was connected to a tester. He'd had it run while he was eating, and now

the result told him that the default pack that came with the rifle suffered from trickle leak, as well as a gradual capping to the amount of power it took. The scanner estimated that after three-hundred recharges, the pack would be useless.

Tristan made a note of the pack's ID number in his computer and had it start a search for any other reports. The manufacturer's test result hadn't mentioned this cap, so he wanted to know if it had occurred in anyone else who did their own tests. Did he have a defective part? Or was this a design flaw?

He set it aside. Someone in town would be able to make use of the less than optimal power pack, so he pulled one out of a cabinet. Fortunately, even if this one was a new design, to go along with the new rifle, it still had to be the same shape as the other packs.

The military hated having to deal with figuring out if they had the right pack for the right rifle. Any power pack designed for them had to be able to fit each and every weapon it was classified for.

He connected the new pack to the fast charger and reassembled the rifle. With a properly working power pack, his next step was to test the maximum yield capacity of the beam. The documentation said the yield was of eighteen points thirty-eight K-Iftron, which meant it could burn a hole through two feet of reinforced plating.

The problem Tristan had noticed was that the components between the pack and the beam generator couldn't take that kind of power. The first thing to go would be the capacitors; they'd explode and take the soldier with it.

He took out the plating from a cabinet and secured it at one end of the workroom. He placed eight six-inch plates, to ensure he didn't make a hole in the wall. Repairing walls had been amusing the first few times, but now he saw that as a failure of preparation on his part. The beam probably wouldn't go through even half of this, but it was possible that he could improve on the manufacturer's design.

He'd locked the rifle down and connected it to the computer so he could activate it remotely when a window opened on the screen, showing him the house's doorway, with Alex standing in it.

So, he hadn't given up. Had he decided to fortify himself with alcohol? Taken the time to eat? More likely the tavern's patrons had questioned him, delaying him. He looked at the rifle, then the screen, deciding which one was more important. He shut the window down and took the pack out of the charger.

The first test revealed that the standard power pack for this rifle couldn't even provide the energy needed to reach the maximum beam strength. The rifle's components were subpar, each draining some of the energy away into heat. That was what the military got for trying to save money. He was going to have to change every one of them to run his test properly.

He shut down the window showing Alex at his door again. This was the fifth time Alex had buzzed the door. Tristan appreciated his perseverance.

He'd taken the components he needed to replace from the cabinets when the knock came. It was faint, but for it to even reach him, that had been determined banging. He brought up the window and watched as Alex slammed his fist on the door four times, matching the sounds he heard.

He could let him bang on it until he tired himself out, but as another set of banging happened, Tristan realized that Alex might not tire himself out. He remembered him having a good level of endurance when he had been pudgy, but now? It would be an interesting test of his limits, but how long would it take for the man to decide to try his workroom's door? He locked the workroom as he exited into the house, and put on his mask as he headed for the door.

Tech smiled at the glowering human.

"We're not done," Alex stated.

Tech looked around, confirming that no one had stood outside of the camera's field, while Tristan decided how to proceed. He decided he didn't want to play any games.

His face lost all expression, which seemed to please Alex. "We are."

"No. You made me a promise."

"I did no such thing."

"Jack said that—"

“Jack was a mask. A fabrication. A tool I used to manipulate you. I had him say whatever was needed to keep you under my control.”

Alex ground his teeth. “You promised that you’d love me for—”

“I did not.”

“You promised it on the Defender!” Alex said that like it should mean something to Tristan.

He canted his head, studying the human. This was losing the amusement factor. He could kill Alex, there was no one here to see. It would be simple to destroy the body; he had some organic dissolver stored away.

Except the portmaster knew about their interaction, about Alex’s interest in Tech. If he just vanished, it would lead to questions.

“Go away.” Tristan slammed the door and headed to his workroom.