

The two guards aimed high caliber Pisterons at Tristan, ignoring Alex. They considered the Hashtan powered armor to be sufficient protection against anything he might do, while considering Tristan an active threat. This was a situation where they were wrong. Alex's knives would have an easier time finding the weak points in armor's joints and then any shots or claws.

"We're expected," Tristan said.

"We know," came the fully digitized voice out of the faceless helmet. "Strip."

"You serious?" Alex asked.

"We are."

"You looking to get jerk off material or something?"

"Sixteen-eight-twenty-three," one of them says, "a Samalian described as having black fur with white speckling is thoroughly searched before being allowed into a meeting with Orvan Peticot. Present in the room are three bodyguards described as elite assassins. For everyone's safety, no one has weapons."

"I don't think you told me about that one," Alex says.

Tristan shrugged. "Little to say. He sent a team to liberate the 3-Kf-23-N Shufer Plasma lance I had acquired. They destroyed my workshop. I lost decades of data, along with many unique prototypes I'd acquired."

"And he let you walk in?"

"He didn't know it was my workshop his team destroyed. I approached him offering to sell me the only Ershon atomic disperser left, after I destroyed the others acquiring it."

"You're making those weapons up. I never heard of a plasma lance, or an atomic disperser."

"Both were prototypes, both suffered from the similar problem of needing more power it was convenient to carry. Interesting designs, though. Potentially useful if they could be mounted on ships, but a forcefield requires exponentially more power the larger the item in encases, and it is the only thing capable of containing the plasma."

"Killed them with your claws?" Alex asked.

"No. That would be expected. I laced my fur with an airborne toxin designed to react with the wine Orvan delights in. Before the meal was over he wasn't recognizable. His bodyguards I killed with my hands, no claws involved."

"Broke their neck," Alex said.

Tristan smiled. "Humans never protect it properly."

"Then you understand my reluctance at letting you step in while wearing anything," a new voice said. "I'm not aware you have anything against me, but I expect Orvan was also under that misconception."

“As I explained when I contacted you, I am here seeking a medical consultation.”

“You have to excuse me when I question why Tristan, renowned for never getting other’s help, would seek mine.”

“I lack the knowledge to analyze someone’s memories to determine a personality triggering event.”

“That’s because there’s no way to analyze someone’s memories. The best you can do is sit them down, induce a recall mindset and have them talk you through what they remember. Then you have to work out what is real and what got altered over time, because —”

Tristan raised a hand holding the datachip containing Alex’s memories. “This contained the memories I need analyzed.”

“The actual memories?” the voice asked in disbelief. “Not just a recording of them being recounted? Where’s the tech that was used? I never heard of something doing that.”

“Considering the scientist who created it got off on ripping memories out of people,” Alex said, “the corporation who employed him made sure no one knew.”

“Employed?”

Alex shrugged. “We had a disagreement over how he made use of it. I don’t expect he survived us demonstrating what it felt like to be under it.”

“I see. The tech itself?”

“By now, it is no longer functional,” Tristan said, earning a surprised look from Alex. “What did you set to trigger the meltdown program you left inside the system?”

“The primary one was the end of his life signs, then there was one for if the system was shutdown, now if someone went in looking for any alteration to the code, one for a forceful reset of the system and finally one to listen to the signal I sent as soon as exited Cryo here. That’s what tipped you off?”

Tristan shook his head. “I knew you’d make sure no one else would suffer that.”

“The instructions remain,” the voice said. “You only get in, and get my help of you both strip. I’m not risking that this is all a ploy.”

“You realize he can kill you naked, right?” Alex asked as Tristan undressed.

“It remains the likeliest way I will survive.”

Alex undressed, hesitating only when he was down to the knives on his forearms, his calves and the small of his back. Tristan shook his head when Alex glanced at him. This wasn’t a time to push. Alex took them off, then the guards stepped aside and the door opened.

The room was small and dark, with only a dim light for illumination once the outer door closed.

“You’re going to want to close your eyes and mouth,” the voice said. “Covering your nose might be a good idea. Might be best to take a breath now and hold it until this is done.”

Tristan did as advised, then light shone bright enough to be visible through his eyelids. Humid air blew through his fur, then something dry, before air blew again.

“It’s safe to breathe,” the voice said as the inner doors opened.

The air had the remnant of chemicals to it. They’ve been put through a thorough decontaminations cycle.

The room they stepped in was large, more of a living space than an office. A lounge on one side, a dining area on the other. The man he was here to consult with seated at the desk on the other side facing them, between the two spaces. Broad shouldered covered by body armor, scared face speaking of more than one fight, and a surprised expression it.

“You comment on his cock,” Alex said, as the man opened his mouth, “And I’m going to feed you yours.”

“Your fur’s actually brown,” the man said. “Every report I read describes you as black furred.”

“They wouldn’t describe him at all, if he’d let me have my way with them,” Alex said. “And it’s usually darker than that. We’ve been spending a lot of time in the sun, not that long ago, subjective.”

The man nodded. “Sun bleaching. Most furred animals have—”

“I don’t have the patience to listen to you compare my Samalian to an animal. He’s not the only one who can kill you barehanded.”

The man crossed massive arms over his chest. “I apologize. I’m not aware of other furred species, so resorting to—”

“Just how badly do you need him alive?” Alex asked, silencing the doctor, who looked perplexed that his musculature wasn’t having the intimidating effect he was used to.

“Not only alive, but willing to assist me. This is for you, Alex. I need his help so I can fix what is wrong with you.”

Alex rolled his eyes. “This is for you. I’m perfectly fine.”

“Can I see the chip?” the man asked. He’d set aside his inability to intimidate a smaller man to focus on why they were here. And ego was less likely to bruise when it had something to distract it.

Tristan crossed the room and handed it. In his peripheral vision, Alex followed, eyes glued on the doctor for any reaction to Tristan’s body.

There were none. Tristan didn’t know if the man had interest in male or not. As with any mercenary with rare and highly sought skills, he kept what could be found about him to a minimum. Psychologist who could deal with merc weren’t a common breed. Once who experienced the life even rarer. That he have an interest in aliens made it even less likely. At best, is interest would be in how Tristan thought, instead of what his body felt like.

The man inserted the chip, watched the screen for a few seconds, then looked at Tristan, surprised. “This is real?” he glanced at Alex. “How much of his memories are there?”

“A few years’ worth. Mostly centering on while he worked for Luminex, but also some from before that. From the reports he compiled many of the earlier memories are linked to the question he was being asked.”

“Memories linked to what he was remembering or experiencing,” the man mused. “What exactly are you expecting me to help you with here?”

“Primarily, confirm that the process hasn’t created a combat fugue stated in Alex that comes with an inability to distinguish friends from foe.”

“How invasive was the process?”

“According to the man’s reports, not at all, but I witness one of his subjects who had screamed herself until no sound came out.”

“Any insertions in the brain?”

“No.”

“Just from that, I can say it’s unlikely this could cause something like the berserker state you described.”

“I need confirmation. Then I need to know if the event that triggered it is recorded. I went over everything and saw nothing, but this isn’t a field I have studied.”

“Outright memory analysis isn’t something anyone’s studied. My research into memories was mainly as part of getting a better grasp of the psyche of people who became mercenaries.”

“Which is why I am here.”

The man leaned back in the chair, watching the screen. “This isn’t going to be quick. I figure I can skip large chunks, but anything of interest will have to be studied.”

“We have time.”

“I’m talking hours at least. Possibly days.”

“I am more interested in an answer than in leaving.”

The man’s eyes snapped up from the screen, indicating he had caught the threat in Tristan’s tone.

“Alright.” He tapped the desk. “Alto, Bass, I’m giving my guest free reign of the compound. Please hand them their clothing once they leave, and they are to be left along unless they start something.” The man looked at Tristan, who nodded. The end result would be the same for anyone trying to stop either him or Alex, but they were here seeing assistance.

“Alex,” Tristan said without looking away, “you are not to coerce any systems here.”

“Sure, I won’t—”

Tristan fixed his gaze on his human as the attempt to mask the dismissive tone. “I am serious, Alex. We are here—”

“You’re here for his help. I’m just along because you want me to.”

“This is for—” Tristan closed his muzzle as the forming derision in Alex’s eyes. “Regardless. They are allies for the moment. If that changes, then you can turn this compound against them, but not before. Am I clear?”

The nod was resigned. “I’m going back to the ship then.” Alex left the room.

“You’re not going with him?”

“Later, once I have your initial thoughts regarding what was done to Alex.”

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“Has he spoken to anyone about what happened to him?” the man asked. He had been looking over the data for hours. Tristan passed the time going over the ways he could bring this compound down around them.

“I paid a psychologist to study him. The results were satisfactory.”

“As in, they didn’t tell you what you wanted to hear?”

“As in, they had nothing to offer that would help resolve the situation.”

“Anyone else?”

“Some. The best results were the same.”

“And the worst?”

“Bodies that needed to be disposed of. Alex took objection to the suggestion that his condition could be resolved through invasive intervention.”

“It sounded like he takes objection to the suggestion he has a problem.”

“He’s at the stage of denial. My attempts to get him to realize he has a problem have not been successful.”

“Do I even want to know how you tried to get him to see that?”

“I told him, which didn’t work. Then I caused him to enter the combat fugue state, introduced a bystander he would see at an opponent to kill, and interjected myself, taking the killing blow. My hope was that—”

“Stop. I’ve heard enough. I might not be accepted at any of SpaceGov’s recognized medical institutions anymore, but I’m pretty sure that if you keep talking, I’m going to feel compelled to convince them to take you and lock you away.”

“You won’t survive the attempt.”

“Which is why I don’t want to hear anymore.” He considered something. “Did you know you aren’t the first alien Alex had sex with?”

“An aborted attempt,” Tristan replied. “His father caught them, got angry, and threw Alex’s partner out.”

“That memory’s there, although not as clearly as I’d expect for what must have been traumatic.”

“His father also denounced him. His grandparents took him in and have not spoken to their son since.”

The man nodded. “There’s more I need to go through.”

Tristan nodded and went back to mentally taking the compound apart.

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The guards let Tristan in without searching him, which was careless on their part. They couldn’t know if his intent had changed in the two days since he’d arrived.

“We might have a problem,” the man announced as Tristan entered his room. “I’m not sure anything on there is reliable.”

“The recording have not been altered,” Tristan stated.

“Maybe, but the memories might have been.” He motioned and Tristan was looking up at himself. An angry version of himself. Alex would have been on the floor to see him like that. This was when Tristan had told him how he had used Alex. This was when he had broken his heart and set him on the path to become the man he was now.

Tristan was ambivalent about that moment. He hated himself for what he’d put Alex through, but without it. He would still be the uncaring monster who believed that being alone was the only way to survive. That survival was enough.

“Did you notice this?” With a motion of the hand, the man moved the scene forward.

“There’s a glitch in the recording,” Tristan stated at the slight jump. “The technology wasn’t perfected.”

“I don’t think so.” He moved again, slower, and Tristan found himself remember his first meeting with the Defender. Moving his recollection of what was happening around his unconscious body back and forth trying to piece together the events, as the Defender explained to him how important Alex was.

When the man stopped, the scene was distorted as if it had been torn in two, and put

back inaccurately.

“Those...tears, for lack of a better word, show up in many of his memories. Each time around an event that couldn't have been pleasant, just from the context.”

“Then the technology had difficulties handling what must have been high energy memories.”

“One, if that was the case, the scientist you took this from would have made notes of so he could improve the process. There are nothing mentioning them. Two, if you want high energy memories, I can show you those where you have sex with him. I don't think it comes any higher when it comes to emotional energy and the records of them don't have those tears.”

“Then what can this indicate?”

“What do you know of the human mind's ability for self delusion?”

“Human misremember things, I've often taken advantage of it.”

“everything misremembers. That's just a misfire of the synapses. I'm talking about outright remembering the wrong things. Convincing ourselves something happened when it didn't. Or,” he indicated the stilled image. “That it didn't occur exactly the way it did. I think this tech can see those moments. That each time one of those tears happens, it's him convincing himself things didn't happen the way they did. And based on how often those are recorded, I'm guessing that he is extremely skilled at self delusion.”

“What does it mean for what I asked you to do?”

“It means I can't help you, because I can see this isn't what actually happened, but I can trust anything he'd tell me, because he believes the wrong thing is the right one.”

“Then how do I go about helping him? How do I find out what happened to him to make him the ways he is?”

“I don't know. The only thing I can tell you is that he's probably the only person you can't ask about it.”