

The new human was a mercenary, possibly a bounty hunter, but not someone to be worried about. If the portmaster and self-appointed guardian of the town hadn't liked him, he would have sent him away. If the man had managed to avoid him, he would have contacted the tavern owner who, in return, would have warned everyone here of the possibility of danger.

The human knew Tristan—he'd seen the recognition in the human's eyes—and there had been a moment when the human had tensed, possibly to come to him. Instead, once Tristan's gaze drifted past him to address the approaching wheat farmer, the bounty hunter had collected himself. Tristan asked about the repairs he'd done on the farmer's combine and didn't pay attention to the answer, simply smiling and nodding.

The human sat at the bar and, after exchanging a few words with the tavern owner, was handed a glass with a purple liquid in it. The human downed it, not even wincing at the atrocious sweetness of it.

The bounty hunter possibly thought he was discreet, glancing at Tristan in the mirror as he sipped a second glass. In return, he had no awareness of how Tristan was observing him over his datapad.

He was experienced, that was clear. The gray and crimson jacket and pants were armored, but nothing obvious. No one else noticed how the human was studying him, so he wasn't horrible at it. The knife at his belt was only one of many. Tristan saw three places where others were concealed.

Motion out the corner of his eye meant he needed to go back to playing his role. The tavern keeper's wife was approaching, a tray held against her stomach.

"How was the food, Tech?"

He smiled at her. Tech was a friendly sort, if somewhat of a loner. "It was amazing, as usual. I wouldn't come back every day if it wasn't."

"I'm glad to hear that. Do you want another plate?"

"No, thank you, I'm not hungry anymore."

"Are you sure? You've only had one." Her tone became huskier. "You're so tall and muscular, you must need more than just what you had." She was even clumsier than the bounty hunter as she looked down his body. Her skin did nothing to hide the blush, and he could tell where her mind was going.

He patted her hand, and her breath caught. "It's alright, I don't like to overeat. It makes me drowsy, and then I have trouble keeping with my work." He made the gesture not quite platonic, rubbing her hand, but nothing that would let her know he was aware of how she felt about him.

"How does someone like you manage to maintain such a body?"

If Tristan was interested he could have her here and now, in front of her husband, and he doubted she'd object. As far as he could work out, the two of them were happy together, but Tristan was something she couldn't have, and therefore so much more desirable.

"I run, mostly," he replied. She already knew that—her deepening blush said as much—but as Tech, he wasn't quite as aware of humans' body language as Tristan was.

He made sure his run took him along both property lines, and their house was close enough she could watch him, and she did. Her interest wasn't in him as an alien. She was firmly attracted to humans, but she was even more attracted to males, and while alien, his physiology was close enough that the part of the male anatomy that interested her was present, and Tristan was a fine specimen of the male form, especially down there.

The humans watched their interaction with barely disguised interest. Tristan considered taking the flirting with the tavern owner's wife a step further to see his reaction, but the information gained wouldn't outweigh the trouble it would cause.

The tavern owner was aware of his wife's interest in Tech, just as he'd noticed Tech's lack of interest in his wife. This was why he allowed the interactions to continue. If Tristan pushed things further it would disrupt the town's balance, and he needed that maintained so he could continue to work in peace.

As a mask, Tech was a flimsy one, but the set of behaviors had been established over years of living within the community. One such set marked him as a gentle soul, someone who would do nothing to hurt someone else, either physically or emotionally. No one knew this was to ensure his own peace, but it did mean starting a fight between husband and wife wasn't

something Tech would do.

Tristan was good enough he could be utterly normal, even for humans, but he'd realized during early attempts at blending in among humans that "normal" was a varying definition, and that being too normal was just as bad as being too different, especially for an alien. So he'd added minor things to set him apart, things others could assume were based on his alien-ness, like running naked in view of a house.

Any human would know not to do it, that it was considered indecent, but Tech wasn't human, so he could be forgiven for such a mistake. If she hadn't enjoyed the view, the first time she saw him, she would have told him, explained how it wasn't appropriate, and Tech would have stopped. But other than her blushing, she'd never brought it up. Her husband also knew, but just like he knew Tech had no interest in his wife, he figured this was innocent.

The bounty hunter was back to "discreetly" glancing at Tristan in the mirror, as she left his side to go see to other customers.

Tristan didn't put him out of his mind as he went back to reading about the report on the tests Dolfic put the RF-23 through. The rifle would be released to the military in three objective years. His only interest in it was to see how those tests results compared to the ones he was putting the weapon through.

A form approached, and Tristan looked up at the bounty hunter. Tech's smile hid the concern Tristan felt. How had the human moved away from the bar without him noticing?

"Hi." There was an edge to his voice, but also a familiar tone to it. The gray eyes had an undercurrent of anger in them, but also need.

Tech placed the datapad on the table, screen down. "Hello." The man was muscular, in a lean way. If it came to a fight, he would be quick, rather than strong. Something about his scent tickled his memory. He placed a case on the table, but Tristan didn't look away from the face. What was it about that scent?

"I'm here to help you keep your promise," the human said.

And he knew.

The scar on his left cheek hadn't been there and the face had been plumped, rather than lean. The eyes had sparkled with joy, unlike now, where they remained hard, even as Alex smiled.

He felt the metal under his fingers, the diamond shape. On realizing what he'd done, that he'd given himself away, he fought the need to jerk his hand away. Why had he even kept that thing? Let alone continued wearing it?

He forced himself to look away from the gray eyes and to the case. Alex had opened it while their eyes were locked. Tristan cursed himself for not having been aware of that. In the case was a Samalian figure he recognized, but still feigned ignorance. "I'm sorry, do we know each other?"

Alex—Alexander Bartholomew Crimson—glared at him, his jaw tightening, his breathing speeding up. Tristan prepared himself for the attack as Alex's hand twitched to the hidden knife on his left side, but he wouldn't move until Alex was committed to the fight. This wasn't the man he'd met years ago. This man was harder. He'd exchanged his aura of weakness for one that warned anyone able to read it that he would inflict as much, if not more, pain than you'd try to cause him.

The attack didn't come. The effort was visible on Alex's face, but he looked around, not studying threats, but reminding himself there were others, and he decided that this wasn't worth causing them pain. When his gaze fixed itself back on Tristan the eyes were still hard with anger, glimmering with need, but he had relaxed.

Tristan found that he was impressed. The Alex he'd used had been strong-willed, but Tristan doubted he'd even felt this need for violence. Holding that at bay wasn't the same as steadfastly refusing to give into a desire for sex.

Alex leaned forward and spoke in a low but hard voice. "I'm not here to play one of your games. You know damned well who I am. I'm here for what you promised me."

Tristan's raised eyebrow was genuine curiosity, as was the tilted ear. "What did I promise?" His tone was light, Tech replying to something he thought was a joke. Alex wasn't just looking him in the eyes now, he was searching for something in them.

"Jack promised to love me," Alex growled. "I want him back."

Tristan had to think back; he'd used so many names on so many jobs since then. Jack had been the mask he'd worn to seduce Alex. It had been easy; Alex had been waiting for an alien to love him.

"I'm afraid I don't know any Jack," Tech replied. He shut the datapad down before picking it up. "You must have the wrong person, Mister..."

"Crimson," Alex replied through gritted teeth.

"It was a pleasure meeting you, Mister Crimson." He stood. "If you'll excuse me, I need to get back to my work." He stepped around Alex and headed to the bar.

"Problem?" the tavern owner asked as he took Tech's money chip.

"No, he confused me with someone else. This makes sense; we all look alike to humans, don't we?"

The man smiled. "Only to those who don't know you, Tech. I'd never confuse you with another Samalian."

Tech smiled back. "Do you know if anyone's heading off-planet anytime soon? Isn't Cornelius due for a supply run?"

The man shrugged, handing the chip back. "If she is, she hasn't said anything to me. Jake would be the one to ask. What about you? If you're going on one of your mysterious trips, you could drop him off somewhere."

Tristan felt himself smile at the idea of him and Alex locked in a ship, but made it sad. "I'd be happy to, but I don't have any plans to go anywhere for a long time. I have a lot of work to do here."

"Right." The man studied Tech. "Inventions. Something for one of the corporations."

Tech gave the tavern owner the same enigmatic smile he always did at the guesses.

"One of these days, I will figure out what you're up to in that workroom of yours. You know that, right?"

Tech shook his head in amusement. "I've told you many times, all I do is research."

"Sure, and I believe that." The man leaned in and lowered his voice. "But what are you researching, and why?"

Tech leaned in too and, in a conspirator tone, said, "Oh, this and that."

The man laughed and clapped Tech on the shoulder. "See you tomorrow, Tech."

Tristan felt Alex's gaze on him until he stepped outside. He ignored it, ignored him. The human and what he wanted didn't matter. He'd realized soon enough he was wasting his time. Whatever promise he thought had been made was in his imagination, a fabrication, just like Jack had been.

"How did it go?" The portmaster had been leaning against the wall when Tristan exited.

"Jacoby!" Tech startled. "You surprised me." Only the tavern keeper got to call him "Jake". Tristan looked into any connection between the two, but hadn't found any before the portmaster joined the community. "How long have you been waiting here?"

"Not long," the man answered in a manufactured casual tone. "So?"

"So, what?"

The man nodded to the door. "How did it go?"

"Oh." Tech realized what he meant and shook his head. "He has me confused with someone else."

"Really? He described you pretty well."

Tech shrugged. "Samalians all look alike to humans."

The portmaster studied Tech, and Tristan thought the man was waiting for him to admit to something. "I guess they do," he finally said. "Enjoy your day, Tech." The man turned and walked away, hand on the butt of his ever-present Dolfic HG-342.

If it came to a fight, the man would be a threat. He had decades of military experience as well as mercenary work. He was clever with portable anti-personnel explosives and at improvising weapons. His military file was filled with commendations, and the few mercenary commanders who'd bothered filing reports with the guild had nothing but good things to say about the man. Why he'd decided to settle here, rather than go on to more mercenary work, Tristan hadn't been able to find out.