

The temperature dropped quickly, as Alex followed Teklile deeper within the sanctuary, as did the humidity. The walls were at first covered with condensation, but as the temperature dropped, that went away.

“Stone is a good insulator,” the man said. “And the humidity doesn’t so much fall, as become less bothersome. You aren’t the first to be curious,” he added.

He hadn’t been. Alex had simply been happy for it. “What will I be doing?”

“That depends on you.”

Alex groaned. “If this is some ‘whatever I think I have to do is what you’ll have me do,’ I might as well leave now.”

“You are the one who knows what your problem is.”

“And if I knew the solution, I wouldn’t be here.”

“True.” The man didn’t elaborate and Alex distracted himself from the annoyance by studying his surroundings.

The initial open room had been set with exercise equipment. The men and women using them to the point of being vocal about it all had the air of merc, ex-military, or private security for the wealthy. Those who weren’t pushing themselves nearly looked like lost causes in comparison. Not all were thin, but they lacked the definition those who depended on their muscles for survival acquired.

Then had been a narrow passage that widened. This was when the difference in temperature registered. The hall had an unevenness, and lack of straightness to it that suggested it had been made from an existing cavern. Some section had straight walls, where widening had been needed, he expected, but they never went on long, or forced the hall to leave the natural curves that made its path.

Almost all spurs, in comparison, were straight and uniform in dimensions.

Light bars were set at regular intervals, bright enough to see and no more.

“What do you do here?” Alex asked. “I mean, other than preaching the value of control.”

“We don’t preach. And we don’t teach control as a single thing. We are a place where people come when they need sanctuary from the universe. Like you, many come having been scarred by it, and have to learn to simply exist again.”

“I know how to do that,” Alex replied, wondering if this was a waste of time already. From what Tristan had told him of his research, he’d expected something more... well, not just existing, at least.

“Do you? When’s the last time all you needed to do was scrub a floor? Sit still and be? Read a book to gain enjoyment.”

Alex snorted.

“As I expected.” Teklile turned into a straight corridor and after a dozen paces, the heat and humidity began raising, then he heard the rain in the distance. Wooden doors lined the walls on each side. An open one showed a small room with a something closer to a cot than a bed, along with a dressed, table and chair.

“Isn’t this kind of warm and humid to sleep in? Or is this for those you don’t like?”

“I don’t decide which bed someone takes. And not everyone is accustomed to controlled environments. For some, this is what they consider pleasant.”

“How come the wood isn’t rotting? This humidity can’t be good for anything organic.”

“The local flora has adapted to constant humidity.”

The rain grew louder, then they stood on a balcony carved into the stone, with an outcropping keeping most of the rain off them. On this side, the ground was lower, inclined, and had been cleared to make space for a plantation.

“I didn’t think you’d be able to farm anything here,” Alex said, slightly awed. His family had run an orchard plantation, and it had been automated, so he understood the basics of the logistics involved in establishing something on that scale. And even if this was more of a farm, they had people down there instead of machines.

“Those are local plants,” Teklile replied. “Although, calling them that after centuries of domestications might be a misnomer.”

“Objective?” Alex asked.

“Of course. It’s the only way we live here. Cryogenics would defeat the purpose people seek us for. The garden will be one of your duties. You’ll be shown what to do. How to collect the ripe fruits, as well as the leaves that are ready to be harvested.”

“Why don’t you automate it?”

The man turned to face Alex. “Because we are not a resort, and you are not a guest to be pampered. You will be one of us. Your duties will be those that come with tending a place like the sanctuary.”

Alex nodded.

“I’ll lead you to your quarters. What type of environment do you prefer?”

“A lot dryer than this.”

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Alex got up and went through stretching exercises. Once done, he put on the sanctuary’s standard attire. A shirt and pants, woven from a rough fabric made from the leave that came from the farm. The shoes were the same, with a sole of a soft wood. He wasn’t limited to this shirt and pants, but if he wanted something different, he was expected to make it himself.

It wasn’t about being self reliant, Amulyaa had told him when he’d asked. It was about putting the work into getting what you wanted. It was about learning to sit with the tools and the material and having the patience to make them what you wanted.

He’d envisioned Tristan working on the wall, stacking stone after stone. Learning how each fit against the other so they would stay in place until he had it and the alcove built so he could get his boon.

Would he be amused that Alex was expected to do something similar? Or, considering the sphere he’d taken to carrying, would he think it was an appropriate way to

fix what was wrong with Alex? He hadn't had time to think much on it then as she had led him outside and began instructing him on how to care for the plants that fed and dressed them.

Once dressed, Alex left his small room and headed for the showers.

It was one of the few places within the sanctuary with obvious technology. The room was larger and didn't feel as humid only because it was cooler, because water fell freely in the center from a crack in the high ceiling, to land in what should be noisily in the metal basin ten feet above the floor under it. Pipes extended from that and to showers around it. Thirty of them, and many always in use.

Alex had been surprised at the lack of modesty, of comfort about the men and women as they moved around, naked. There was none of the physical contact Samalian engaged in, but Alex had grown up in an environment where nudity was reserved for when you were alone or with your spouse. He acknowledged his personal experience once he'd joined Luminex hadn't led to situations where people were naked as a group, so he shouldn't have expected thing to be the way he expected them, but he'd still did.

The sound dampener wasn't the only technology in the room. The showers had temperature controls, and by the steam, people liked the water hot, in spite of suffocating under it the moment they stepped outside. Alex barely warmed his above its surprisingly cool temperature, considering how hot the rain outside was.

He was done, dried, and in the corridor when the chime announcing breakfast sounded. Another of the few evident technologies. Speakers in the walls, with only a mild attempt at having them blend in.

Once eating was done, Alex was paired with Nandol, and then cleaned a room with broom, mop, and brush.

"There has to be an easier way to do this," Alex had grumbled, that first time, on his knees and scrubbing at a stain embedded into the stone floor from the juices of a local fruit, he'd been told.

"This isn't about getting it done," Nandol had replied calmly as he scrubbed at another stain on the wall. "It's about letting yourself fall into the act, into the motion. It's about being here, now, and not yesterday or tomorrow. This is a moment, not an eternity."

"Feels like it," Alex had grumbled, getting back to scrubbing, and Nandol had let out a quiet chuckle.

After a morning of tasks, came the chime announcing lunch, and then came the time Alex initially looked forward to, but now dreaded.

Free time.

The first days he'd filled it mapping the sanctuary. His escort never kept him from moving about, even when Alex came across the stairs carved into the stone and found out the sanctuary had deeper floors. Workshops and studios, most unoccupied, but some with someone working wood or stone, with archaic looking tools. One painted, other wrote, on paper, with stylus.

They were all things he associated with Samalians, not humans, and he had to force the mental step back and remind himself that there was a time when they too used such tools. That even as advanced as they were now, there had been a time when they weren't.

But why they'd want to go back to them? That, Alex didn't understand.

The sanctuary had six subfloors, with the lowest a massive library of physical books. “Where do the books come from?” Alex had asked when he’d tracked down Teklile. He’d seen some, even before Tristan started acquiring them, but they’d always been oddities, collectors’ items, antiques.

“I can’t tell you where most of them came from,” the man replied. “The originals came with the sanctuary’s founder. Books he collected in his travels. More were added by those who spent time here. Now, people interested in preserving their existence more than collecting them will sometimes bring us books to keep. We are remote enough few know about the sanctuary, or our library, and its conditions are surprisingly good at preserving printed material.”

The explanation had been...mundane. Alex had even expected an attempt at obfuscating its importance.

But then, he’d run out of places to discover. He’d attempted to find something to do, but the most advanced computer was his datapad. Even the water heating system barely spoke. He confirmed some of the mercs had pads of their own, and that their ships had the best they could afford, but they were shutdown. They were here to get away from the universe, and that included the net and computers.

Alex couldn’t even reach the closest research station to coerce it.

Out of desperation, he tried to fill his time with more chores, but he his escort led him away with an admonition that everyone had their duties is it wasn’t for other to do them.

“Then what the fuck am I supposed to do?” he’d yelled. “Go insane from the silence?”

“This is a time for you to be with yourself, for you to be you, whatever it means.”

He was a killer. Was that really what they wanted from him?

Frustration led him to spend more time exercising, but that grew tiresome faster than it burned away his frustration, so he’d moved on to training, and that had caused a commotion.

“This isn’t a fighting place,” the merc that had outed Tristan had told him when he’d caught Alex in the empty room next to the weight one and had nearly earned himself an open gut as a result. “People come here looking for peace. They have no fucking business seeing someone train like that.”

“I don’t fucking care what you’re here for,” I Alex had replied, hand tightening on the knife. Vibro-edge; off because he hadn’t seen a point in activating it for training. Now, it was difficult not to turn it on. Not use it on this annoyance. “They tell me to be me. Well, this is who I fucking am.”

The man’s expression darkened. Then he turned, stepped away, and faced Alex.

For a moment, he thought he was about to challenge him.

“I’m not here to fight.” Maraco said. “I’m not here to fight you,” he added as Alex opened his mouth. The expression had to make it clear what he thought of the other’s attempt at pacifism. In the entrance, a crowd of what Alex had come to refer to as “the locals”, had gathered.

“What’s your job?” Maraco asked. “I know there’s one. He wouldn’t be here otherwise.”

“I’m the job,” Alex said through clenched teeth. “He’s here because I’m a danger to the life we want to build. I can’t want to kill you right now, so bad I’m having trouble not running at you and showing them what I’m able to do with a knife. I need to be able to be in a crowd and not risk blowing up just because some human talks down to a Samalian. I want to be the one to decide when I kill and when I don’t.”

The man didn’t look satisfied, but, fortunately for him, he didn’t push. He’d turned and left. The locals had talked among each other as Alex fought to gain control, then left too.

He’d expected to be told to leave before the chime for dinner came, but other than the occasional glances as he ate, no one mentioned the incident.

So he continued his training and ignored those who paused to watch him from the doorway, or the few who spent longer than a pause watching him.

When he grew tired of training, Alex often found himself standing under the rain, looking into the jungle, wondering what Tristan was doing, and when he would be back.