

Tristan spent two weeks observing Luminex. The building was located at the edge of the corporate district, deep within the capital. Their security was impressive. Guards were posted at every door, that it had a lock or not.

He growled when he didn't recognize the lock's design. Was this a new lock that had been put on the market while he was in cryosleep or one of the corporation's own design? A company as large as this one had to develop their own security system. Either way, it was a model that could get in his way.

He poked about the edge of their computer system. It was a very smart system, with strong anti-virals, antibodies, certainly backed up by expert programmers. Given time, and a good enough system, he could insert himself into the employee database, but to get in, he would also need an access card.

He could claim to have lost it, but his alien nature would work against him. The building had a few aliens coming and going, but they were close to human in shape; he would stand out.

He couldn't afford to draw attention to himself, especially now that they knew he was after them. They would be looking for him to make a move. He couldn't steal a card from an employee. It would be reported and deactivated before he could make the changes that would allow him to enter unchallenged.

That meant he needed to use one of their employees to get in. The registry had been too deep within the system for him to get access to it, so instead, he contacted the government's medical registration system and coerced it into giving him the information he wanted.

The joy of living in an age of cross-connected corporations and systems was that you could always find one with the information you wanted and that you could get into. It was just a question of finding it. Government systems were usually a good bet for that.

The list provided him with something extra he hadn't expected: the medical information also came with a basic psychological profile. This allowed him to quickly weed out anyone with antipathy toward aliens, then anyone with mistrustful personalities. He could use one of them if it came down to it, but why make his work harder than it had to be? Then he removed anyone living with a family.

Eventually, he was down to four people he could use. He put the female at the bottom of the list. He knew he'd have to get intimate with his target, and while he could perform with women, he never enjoyed it. Looking over the three males' files, one jumped out. He lived alone, was a hard worker, not overly social among his peers, gay, and according to the psychological profile, had a fascination with

aliens.

After following that man around for a few days and observing him, Tristan knew he had his target. The alien bar he went to after work would be a perfect place to initiate the contact. All he needed was get something to ensure they would be compatible.

...

Alexander walked into the bar and let the noise wash his concerns away. For a few weeks now security had been ramped up, without warning and no reasons he could see. The delays that created caused him to log in late a few times and his supervisor kept getting on his case about it.

Explaining why didn't help; the guy just didn't care. He was now leaving home two hours early just to make sure he didn't have to deal with his temper tantrums. He couldn't wait for whatever had security on edge to pass.

He stopped a few paces in from the door and took-in the atmosphere. This was his ritual: look around at the mix of shapes, sizes, and colors. Listen to all the different sounds, and breathe in the smells. Deleron Four had a large alien population compared to other planets, around a hundred-thousand last time he checked, spread among forty different races or so. Each one of those was represented in this bar.

After marveling at the diversity, he headed to the counter and waved at the barman. Aphalar was a Jolarnian. His skin was perfectly smooth, light gray, and looked slightly oily. Because of that, everyone called him 'Slick.' Alex was pretty sure he was the only one who ever bothered learning his real name. Instead of hair, he had two tentacle-like appendages draping down to the middle of his back. Most of the time they just hung there but, once in a while, he used them to move something if his hands were full.

More than once, Alex wondered what he might be like in bed, but he'd never manage to work up the courage to make the offer. To him, or any of the other patrons he was curious about.

"Your usual?" Aphalar asked.

"Please," Alex replied. He found a spot at the counter. He was the only human in the place, which, he guessed, made him the alien here. No one paid him any more attention than to nod an acknowledgment in passing. They were used to him now.

That hadn't always been the case. Things had been tense that first time: no one talked to him, and he was certain that among the stares and cold shoulders he received, he'd heard a few threats to his life.

He understood their reactions. Aliens were treated like second-class citizens by the humans they worked with. When they came to a place like this, it was to get away from the stares and mistreatment. They saw him as an invader, here to remind them of their place.

Even Aphalar had been cold to him then. He'd serve him and taken his credits but made it clear he didn't want him here.

Alex came every day after work for a month, enduring the bad-mouthing and a few assaults. Eventually, Aphalar asked why he bothered. He didn't belong among them, and they didn't want him here.

He told him how he wanted to get to know the other races. To find out who they were beneath the slang names and species stereotypes. He wanted to get to know them as individuals and discover how they were similar, as well as different. Alex hadn't lied, but he hadn't told the whole truth.

What he hadn't said was that watching them move around sent a sexual shiver down his spine. How he wanted to feel those tentacles, scales, or feathers running over his body. How he wanted to feel, each and every one of them move inside him.

He hadn't said it, not because it would have gotten him thrown out, but because he was ashamed of feeling that way. To act on those desires would mean he thought of them as second-class citizens, there for his pleasure. He would never do that to them.

Aphalar hadn't exactly warmed up to him after that. He'd still keep his distance, watching him suspiciously. Weeks passed, and Alex was always polite, not just to him but everyone, even those who did all they could to convince him to leave. He never did anything to give them a reason to think he didn't see them as equals. Slowly, Aphalar started talking with him, and eventually, they became friends.

That had been the signal the others had been waiting for. Now Alex was just one of them, here to relax after work.

Aphalar placed the tall glass, filled with amber liquid, before him, and Alex paid for it. They exchanged a few words, and then he turned to head for a table. Someone backed into him, making Alex splash his drink over his shirt. He muttered a quiet curse as he reached for napkins.

"I'm sorry," the alien said. "I am so sorry. I didn't notice you there."

"It's okay," Alex replied, distracted by dabbing the shirt as dry as he could. "Things like this are bound to happen once in a while." He looked up at an alien he'd never seen before. He was a full head taller than Alex, covered in a deep brown fur with a splattering of light-colored specks. Like stars in a night sky, he thought. Alex wasn't used

to looking up. At six-foot-one, very few of the bar's patrons were even close to his height.

The alien fidgeted in place. "I really should replace it. I mean, I made you spill your drink. And now your shirt's dirty. I'm really sorry." He looked down at his feet.

Alex smiled. "Tell you what, I'll let you buy me a new drink, and we'll forget about the shirt. My name's Alex." He extended his hand to the alien.

The alien looked at it for a moment, and then his eyes brightened as he recognized the gesture. He took Alex's hand in his and carefully shook it. "I'm Jack."

Alex raised an eyebrow. "Jack? Is that short for a longer a name?"

Jack let go of the hand and rubbed the back of his head, embarrassed. His ears folded back against his skull. "No, my father thought it would be better if I had a human name." Jack went to the bar and signaled for Aphalar's attention.

"I take it you're new here," Alex said.

Jack asked for another drink for Alex. "Yes, I arrived a few days ago." The glass was placed on the bar, Jack picked it up, and handed it to Alex.

"What are you having?" Aphalar asked Jack.

Jack looked at the balance on his cred card and shook his head.

"What brought you here?" Alex asked, leading him to a table and making sure no one bumped into him.

"I heard that Glacomel has started doing business with my home world. I thought I might be able to find work there." Jack said as he sat down.

Alex thought the name sounded familiar. He'd probably come across it as part of his work. "How is that going?" He sipped his drink.

Jack shrugged and looked down. "They told me to check again in a few days."

Alex winced. "That isn't a good sign."

Jack nodded, and they were silent for a moment while Alex drank. "Where are you staying in the meantime?" Alex finally asked.

"Near the port. There's a place there."

"That can't be cheap," Alex commented, and Jack shrugged again. Alex took a long swallow of his drink, a crazy idea crossing his mind. If he played this right, he could have an alien staying at his place for a while. An alien to himself, to admire, get to know, maybe even experience.

No.

He stopped that line of thought. He wasn't going to take advantage

of him like that. He wasn't that kind of man.

He swallowed hard. "You know, if money's getting tight, you're welcome to stay at my place."

Jack's ears perked up. "You'd do that? Really?"

Alex finished his drink. "Well, I've sort of been there when I was younger, alone in a new place and running out of money." He hoped the lie wasn't too obvious as he realized he really wanted this alien to stay with him. "I was fortunate. I found work before I was out of credits but, more than once, I wished someone had helped me."

"Alright." Jack was smiling. "Okay, yeah. I'll do it. Thanks. It's really going to help."

Alex beamed. "How about we head there now? It's about a thirty-minute walk."

* ... *

Alex let Jack in. "Here it is. Make yourself at home." He took off his shoes and walked further in to give Jack space in the tight hallway. He turned to find that Jack was right behind him. He looked down and realized he wasn't wearing shoes. Alex moved further in. "This is the living room."

Jack nodded and opened a door further along the wall.

"That's the bedroom," Alex said. He pointed to the opening opposite that door. "And over there is the kitchen and dining room."

"There's only one bed," Jack commented.

"I know," Alex replied, trying very hard not to imagine the two of them in it. "You can have it. I'll sleep on the couch."

"You really don't have to. I mean, I can use the couch."

Alex shook his head. "I doubt it. I just barely fit on it; there's no way you could sleep comfortably." He pointed to the couch in question on the other side of the room

"I really don't want to put you out," Jack insisted.

Alex found himself looking up at the alien and smiling. "I know." He tried to remain composed as he reached for Jack's bicep. He forced himself to pat it, instead of running his fingers through the short fur. "I don't mind," he said, unable to stop himself from imagining them together in his bed.