

Well, that hadn't lasted long.

When Tristan had taken charge, Alex had been hopeful that in spite of all the wincing and lack of apparent confidence, he'd been able to pull himself together. Now it was clear it had been nothing more than a mask, and one that didn't even hold up to the first problem he encountered.

Alex waited a few seconds, and when Tristan didn't move out of the hatch, he shoved him, confident that Tristan wouldn't even raise his voice at this point. It took some strength to move him; the Samalian was a head taller than Alex and out-massed him, but he stumbled forward before going rigid again. Alex squeezed around and saw the problem.

People. Humans, actually, and a lot of them. He wondered where they'd all come from as he turned to face Tristan and cursed. The fear in his eyes wasn't directed at one person, but flicked from one to the other, as if he was searching through a system infected with malicious programs, looking for a safe path through them, but not finding it.

They didn't have the time to waste on this. He grabbed Tristan's arm and pulled him forward, only to have it yanked out and be glared at. Anger was better than fear, but Alex didn't have any patience for that either.

"Don't touch me," Tristan growled.

"Then move. You're gawking is starting to draw attention." The mass of humans in the concourse, peppered with the occasional Samalian, were glancing in their direction.

"I can't." His mouth moved, but nothing else came out. His eyes were wide, trying to look everywhere at once. "They're... I'm not..." He was shaking now.

Alex buried his anger, afraid he was going to hurt someone, desperately wanting to hurt someone. "Get back in there." He followed Tristan through the hatch. "Keep an eye out," he told Jacoby.

Tristan was resting his head against the wall, hugging himself and mumbling something Alex didn't understand.

"What's the problem?" Alex demanded. Tristan motioned to the open hatch. "Talk," he said through gritted teeth.

Tristan glared, then looked away. "They're going to kill me."

"Who?" Alex looked through the hatch, searching for anyone who looked like they could be a threat.

"Them." Tristan motioned at the open hatch again.

"Them who?" If he didn't start making sense, Alex was going to take out a knife and

—  
"Them, all of them!"

Alex stared at him. "What are you talking about? Are you telling me you're scared of those weaklings? You can kill all of them without even trying. I can kill them without trying."

Tristan shook his head hard. "They're going to gang up on me, crowd me, bury me under them and tear me to pieces."

Alex had no idea how to respond to that absurdity. "They can't hurt you," he said, trying for reason. "They're weak. I doubt any of them even know how to handle a knife."

"You weren't there, Alex," Tristan pleaded. "You didn't feel them tearing at your fur, ripping your flesh off your bones. Biting it off, digging their fingers in your eyes, over and over until I died."

"That was the drugs," he replied in exasperation. "It wasn't real."

"Yes, it was!"

"Okay, fine, then tell me how come you're here, alive, if they killed you."

The question confused Tristan. He looked at himself, around at the people through the hatch and, while it did nothing to reassure Alex, he nodded.

"Come on, let's go."

“No!” Tristan recoiled from the hatch.

“That’s enough! You’re Tristan, one of the most feared beings in the universe. Stop acting like a scared kid.”

“Alex, I can’t. They—” He was pleading, and the tone made Alex angry. It was a good thing the woman who’d done this to Tristan was dead, otherwise Alex would have made her suffer.

“No,” he snapped. “You don’t get to tell me you can’t do something, not after what you put me through. How often did I tell you I couldn’t do something, commit some atrocity you ordered me to do? You didn’t give me a fucking choice, so you don’t get one either. Shut the fuck up and take control of yourself.”

Tristan tried to speak. He ran his hand through his head-fur. When he finally managed to speak, he looked and sounded scared. “Alex, I don’t remember how.”

“Put a fucking mask on, or are you telling me you forgot how to do that, too?”

“Who?”

Alex wanted to scream. Tristan was the one who should make the decisions, not him. He noticed Jacoby looking at him and buried his anger, his fear. He certainly couldn’t show him weakness; he’d want to take charge and then have them fly back to Terion Two. How was he going to get his Tristan back if they left now?

“Who is Parmalien?” He forced his voice to be calm, composed, cold.

It took Tristan a moment to make sense of the question, then his face gained a semblance of control. “He’s a merchant. He had a store, groundside. He sells alcohol to the smaller bars. He isn’t there often anymore because he travels so much, looking for new alcohols to bring back. At least it’s what he tells his children; they run the store. The truth is that he can’t stand being around them. Their mother spoils them, so they always argue when he tells them what to do. At least they have a head for business, so even with all the bickering they do amongst themselves, the store keeps going.”

Jacoby was staring at him.

“So, can Parmalien handle crowds?”

Tristan nodded. “He always has to deal with them. The markets, the stations, the public transits.”

“Then be him.”

Tristan looked at his hands, turned them over. “My fur’s not right. His is gray with black swirls, I need to—”

“No,” Alex clamped his mouth shut at Tristan’s wince. He was going to kill someone. He buried that desire. “That doesn’t matter,” he replied calmly. “No one here knows who Parmalien is, or what he looks like. You just need to be him.”

Tristan looked like he wanted to protest, then his ears folded back. He nodded. He straightened, then slouched. Not in fear, but because of age, Alex realized. Parmalien had a soft gaze and pleasant smile, but his lips trembled with the effort.

Alex motioned for the hatch, making the gesture an invitation, rather than an order. Tristan—Parmalien hesitated, then started walking. Alex took position at one side. “Stay by his other side,” he whispered to Jacoby. “Keep anyone from getting too close; I don’t want him to bolt.”

“You know,” Jacoby said, “I know that name, Parmalien. I didn’t place it when you mentioned you’d set the ship as belonging to him, but with the fur color... He’s one of the Samalians I found when I checked Tech out and worked out who he is. How many IDs does he have?”

Alex shrugged. “A lot.”

“How many are Samalians?”

“I don’t know. Why are you asking about that?”

“I only found close to a hundred Samalians traveling in space. Now I’m wondering how many of them are him.”

“I don’t see that it matters.”

"I guess it doesn't," Jacoby said. "I was just curious." They fell silent.

Tristan kept hesitating, which gave the impression he had a problem with a foot. He'd hunch in on himself then, as if remember who he was, relaxed.

"I can't believe how much this place looks just like any of the other stations I've been on," Jacoby said, and if Alex wasn't so preoccupied with watching Tristan, he would have reminded him to stay alert. "I know the design is standard corporate, but—" He pointed to a storefront. "That's a chain from Firnak, and over there is a store right out of Sunifok. We're far enough from everything, I'd have expected there to be more local stuff."

Alex forced himself to look around. "It wasn't like this when I was here."

"How long ago?"

Alex shrugged. "A few objective decades. Give or take."

"Don't you keep track?"

"I tried, but it was too much of a hassle, and it isn't like I have anyone living only in objective time I keep in touch with." He looked at Tristan, whose hands were shaking, smile turned brittle. He was the only one he had contact with—well, the real Tristan, not this parody, and they lived time the same way.

"There weren't so many humans," Alex said. "I felt like the alien, not the other way around. Also, the stores catered to Samalians more than anyone else. It was more a marketplace than, well, whatever this is." He looked around. "You're right, I don't see anything aimed for Samalians." Tristan flinched, and Alex reached for the knife in his sleeve. He cursed having to pack away his good knives, but it wasn't a threat that had Tristan about to bolt, just someone bumping against him. There was no denying it; Tristan was about to lose it.

"Why don't we head over there?" Alex suggested, indicating a column on the edge of the concourse where there was almost no one. "You can rest, catch your breath."

"I can do this," Tristan protested. "I'm going to be okay." The words, the tone was all wrong. Alex couldn't decide if he would scream or cry.

He did neither. He took Tristan's hand. "No, you're not. You're shaking, you need a rest." Maybe Tristan couldn't maintain a mask, but Alex wasn't going to let him break character and attract attention.

Tristan wasn't happy as he sat, but Alex's glare kept him silent. "Well." Jacoby was by the column, at a terminal Alex had been too busy to notice. "Now I know why LeisureTek owns this station."

"Stay here," Alex told Tristan.

He joined Jacoby.

"Welcome to Samalia," the screen read, "the newest vacation destination from LeisureTek. Come experience primitive life, an archaic belief system. Come see the natives endure brutal weather, all in the comfort of LeisureTek's best recreational hover."

"They're turning this place into a vacation world," Jacoby said in disdain.

It explained the disproportionately large number of humans, and why the stores catered to them. He felt something different from disdain. He felt betrayal. SpaceGov was supposed to keep this from happening. They were supposed to protect local populations from the might of corporations.

He shoved the emotion aside, unable to tell where it had come from. Probably some naïve part of himself that had managed to survive this last decade. This place didn't matter to Tristan, so it didn't matter to him. Let the corporation strip it clean, so long as they waited until the two of them were gone.

Tristan was sitting on the floor, hugging his knees to himself and rocking in place.

"We can't take a public shuttle," Alex told Jacoby. "There's no telling if he'll go from being terrified to becoming murderous."

"I thought you didn't care what he did to them. Didn't you say he could kill them all?"

"I'm not interested in finding out if he's going to be able to stop at killing only the people and not blowing up the shuttle while we're still in it. He can't be fixed if he's dead." He took a credit chip from a pocket. "There's enough here to cover something good." He handed it to Jacoby.

"Wouldn't it be better if you took care of that?"

And leave you alone with Tristan so you can try to convince him to leave with you? "Do you know how to handle an out-of-control Samalian?" he asked instead. Not that he was sure he could either at this point. The only thing Alex knew was that if Tristan went berserk, he wouldn't hurt his Samalian.

Jacoby shook his head.

"Get something large enough for the three of us to be comfortable in." He watched Jacoby vanish in the crowd and ignored the looks he was getting. He had more important things to handle than being annoyed at people who couldn't mind their business.

Tristan wasn't rocking anymore, which Alex took to mean he was regaining some of his control, but how long until he was able to move?

"Is everything alright?" a woman asked.

Alex turned, hand reaching for the knife in his sleeve, but she had a gun at her belt, her hand on the butt, wore a light blue uniform and had a badge opposite the gun. He didn't recognize any of the individual parts, but together they meant security.

He reigned in his anger. "We're fine, ma'am."

"Really? He doesn't look fine to me." She studied Tristan. "I've never seen him before. Is he one of the new guides? They let them up here with less training every time. There should be tests before they come up here. I can't have one of them lose it."

"He isn't a guide." Alex couldn't stop some of his anger from slipping in. "He's a friend."

Her smile wasn't amused. "Haven't you gotten the warnings about associating with them? If they aren't trained, there's no way to know what they'll do." She took out Samalian-sized cuffs. "How about I just take him off your hands and we leave it at a warning?"

Alex forced his hand away from his knife, even as he noticed the places he could bury it into her. "Please don't." He placed himself between them to hide what she'd taken out. "He's just overwhelmed. He wanted to see the station. He's never been off-ground before. He thought it would be a fun little trip, but he didn't understand how busy it would be here. I have someone getting us a shuttle and we're heading back down."

She studied him, then looked around him. "You actually befriended one of them?" she asked in disbelief.

Alex nodded. His face hurt from smiling so much. How did Tristan manage to make it look effortless? "He's nice. Really not like any of the others."

She shook her head, amusement mixing in. "Famous last words, buddy. Alright, you take him back down, but if he starts anything up here, I'm taking both of you in, got that?"

"Got it, thanks."

She turned, and Alex envisioned himself planting a knife in her back a few times—a dozen should be sufficient to make her understand how much he hadn't wanted her here. Seeing her dead let him relax a little.

Jacoby walked by her. "What was that about?" he asked Alex.

"Nothing," he growled. "You have the shuttle?"

"I do. I asked for a shuttle large enough for a human family, and I got stared at like I was crazy. I got us a group shuttle for long-term excursions. We'll be fine in that."

"Let's go, because if I see her again, just imagining her death might not be enough."