

Alex looked up from yet more weed removing at the change in the sound of the rain and made out the small form of a ship approaching. No, a shuttle, he realized once it was low enough, he made out the shape and lack of the engines needed to travel through space. Antigravs were all that were needed for planetary travels unless the speed required to get to a destination meant going suborbital. Then high power propulsion was also required.

“Here we go again,” Shaltel said with a sigh that put Alex on alert.

“Trouble?” The only knives on him were the two in his boots, the one at the small of his back, the one under his arm and one at his belt. If he wanted more before the fighting started, he’d have to make it to the food preparation area, but that might—

The man snorted. “Only if science talk can hurt you.”

Alex looked up again as the shuttle faded from view in the rain in the direction of the landing area. “Why are scientists coming here?”

Shaltel flicked a leaf from the plant he was de-weeding. “Every year they come back to study how the Carferess changes in preparation for winter.”

“What do you mean?” He looked at the leaves from the plant he was working on. Over the last weeks, they’d darkened, starting at the center, with that spreading. Now, only a quarter at the outer edge was still vibrant green, the center was nearly black.

“They want to know how it can keep producing while it gets so little sun, then not at all for the full-night months.”

“And how does it do it?”

The man laughed. “How should I know? I was a gunner before settling here. I can count on one hand the number of times I had food that came directly from the soil while I was in space.”

Alex looked at the plant. His experience with growing fruits, vegetables and other products was old. When his father had kicked him out, Alex had also stopped helping with the farms. His grandparents had handed them completely over to his father well before Alex was born, so living with them also hadn’t let to him learning more, especially since they, unlike his father, had allowed him to pursue his interest in programing, then coercion, instead of demanded he focus only on what would help their business.

He’d also lived on a planet with a less eccentric orbit, so the most the plants had had to deal with was the slight drop in temperature and daylight. Nothing as drastic as what had been happening here. In only the eight weeks since his arrival, days had gone with only a couple of hours of full dark, to more than six. And it would only increase until, for a little more than a month, there would be no sun at all.

“Why are they coming here to study them? Don’t they have plants and trees by their research station?”

Shaltel shrugged. “You’ll have to ask them. I had enough listening to science speech from our engineer. At this point, I’d rather shoot a scientist than listen to one, and I vowed to never touch a gun.”

“I can lend you a knife if it come to that,” Alex offered, and the man laughed again, so Alex went back to the weeding, trying to put everything else out of his mind the way he’d been instructed when his tasks had started.

Instead, his mind drifted to Tristan’s last visit. His injuries had been nowhere near as marked as that first one. The wildlife knew its place now, he’d said, so he only dealt with them, was hunting for food, or if one of the further predators wandered close enough to get scent of the new animal and wanted a taste. Tristan had to kill one or two of them between visits, and it gave Alex something to do to his Samalian after they’d exhausted each other. He wished they’d brought the Heals from the ship, but even that would have run out by now.

Tristan visited about every other week and stayed for a few days. Alex had asked to be relieved from his tasks during his visits, but that wasn’t how the sanctuary worked. The schedule was an important part of learning control. Of learning to set aside the wants to take care of the needs. Tristan hadn’t minded. The library had ample books he could read while he waited.

When the gong of midday sounded, Alex had yet to find a way to let go of all the thoughts bouncing in his head in favor of the task. It still got done, but more than once he thought about ripping the plant out of the ground and throwing it as far as he could. He supposed that the fact he hadn’t, mark that he was gaining more control.

The scientists were easily identifiable by the rain shelter they’d set up just outside the entrance. Three of them around a table, looking at the projected display from the computer.

Alex was momentarily confused at his inability to hear it, then remembered he’d deactivated his implant because all listening to the few systems the sanctuary had done, without their connection to the network, was to remind him of what he didn’t have access to.

As soon as he turned it on, the gentle background noise flooded in.

“Are you okay?” Shaltel had him by the arm, and Alex fought to regain his footing now that the initial euphoria passed.

“Yes,” He grinned. “Listening to an old friend again.”

The man gave him an odd look, but shrugged.

Alex stepped toward the scientists.

“Alex, we need to go eat.”

“You go ahead. I want to ask them something.”

“I’m not supposed to leave your side, you know that.”

Alex forced the chuckle. “Look around. There are others here. I’m not going to run away.”

“That’s not—”

“I’m not going to start a fight, Shal. I’m just curious about what they’re looking into, since you didn’t know. You’re the one who said I’d have to ask them.”

The man looked at those arriving and those who were still working. “Make sure someone is with you once you’re done.”

“Don’t worry, I know how it goes.” He stepped under the canopy. “Hi, I’m Alex. What are you looking into?” His question took the scientist by surprise and he used the time to step to the side until he saw the computer’s screen. “I’m new. The guy I was with said you are looking into the plants, but he didn’t know anymore.”

“I’m Janell,” the woman said, smiling at him. “We’re studying the adaptive ability of the Pevroseti Ferrion Colurum that allows it to continue drawing energy from the spectrum, even though the light levels drop to basically nothing. We know that the change to the foliage allows the plant to convert ultraviolet light, but the exact process by how it does it is what we are looking into.”

He nodded and made himself attentive as she began speaking again, but his eyes were on the screen. He subvocalized a command, and it flickered. He needed at what she asked. He subvocalized another command, and the screen flickered again, this time getting the man seated before it to flick its edge, as if hitting a computer ever fixed anything. Another command and the flickering resulted in garbled text.

“No, no, no.” The man’s mounting urgency as he typed caused the woman to stop talking. “Come on, don’t do that to me.” The screen flickered again, and the text reappeared. “Praise the low ones.” He smiled at the two, as Alex subvocalized. “We’re good, it was just—”

The screen went blank.

The scientist stared at it. Then tentatively tapped the board, then harder.

“Do you need help?” Alex offered.

“I think it died.” He tapped the board again.

“What about our research?” the woman asked.

“I think it had synced.”

“You think?” she asked, anger slipping into her voice. “We spent hours collecting data and you think it—”

Alex cleared his throat loudly. “Can I help?” he asked when they looked at him. “I have computer maintenance training.”

“Yes!” the man said, standing, while she looked at Alex suspiciously.

“If you’d rather I don’t,” Alex said, hands up, “that’s okay. I mean, I don’t want to put whatever secrecy contracts you’re under in danger.”

She sighed. “No, go ahead. And thank you. This is personal, not corporate. But it means a lot to us, so if you can turn it back on...”

Alex sat before the board and needed all his willpower to not start typing. As Tristan had spent years drilling into him. Once a mask was on, you stuck to it. “Just about every system smart enough to have some personality has survival subroutines programmed in to make sure that then can always be resurrected.” His smile faltered. “The thing is that I don’t know how long this might take. I’m going to have to go through a lot of code to work out how this specific system was programmed. I don’t mind you looking over my shoulder, so you can be sure I don’t steal anything, but unless programming is something you’re into, this is probably going to be boring.”

They exchanged a look. Then she sighed. “Let’s get back to the shuttle. You can make sure nothing’s lost, at least. I can’t believe you didn’t run it through diagnosis...” their voice faded into the rain and Alex smiled.

He ran a hand over the board. "Hi. I've missed you." He typed. He had to make sure the shuttle's system would confirm what he'd said. "Talk to me."