

Tristan fought the urge to sneeze. This was the largest helmet he found, and the visor brushed against his nose. “Alex?” he called over comm. “I’m about to open the hatch.” He looked over his shoulder. Alex wore a suit of his own, seated at the ship’s console, without the helmet. He put it on, sealed it, and gave a thumbs up.

Tristan tapped the control by the hatch and watched the indicator show the air concentration drop. Katherine’s Folly didn’t have an airlock—those older, converted troupe-carriers worked under the assumption that if one needed to exit, all did.

The hatch opened, and he grabbed the top, stretching his side. He hadn’t spent time on a medical bed yet. The extent of the treatment he’d received was a stop at a medical clinic to clean the wound, properly seal it, bandage it, and stock up on Heals and immune-boosters. There only had been a nurse and one doctor during the night shift. He’d stuffed them in a closet and Alex helped treat him.

Having to be the laborer loading a crate onto the ship—one containing his unconscious brother—certainly hadn’t helped.

He pulled himself out of the ship, and out of the artificial gravity, flipping so his boots clanged and magnetically adhered to the surface. When he straightened, Justin’s ship—now Tristan’s—came into view. The sleek, luxury Corvette was a horrible design, prioritizing looks over functionality. The shielding was minimal, no weapons. Typical of Justin, who was more preoccupied by his own appearance than making sure he knew how to get things done. At least Justin had used the same station for his ship as they’d used for Katherine’s Folly. From there it had been easy for Alex to take ownership.

Alex had suggested renaming it Justin’s Folly, but Tristan had vetoed the idea. They would use that ship only long enough to get to his closest hideout and switch to a different one there. He’d wanted to use that one to send Justin on his long trip, but it didn’t have the long-life generator Katherine’s Folly did.

So now he was making the alterations to this ship to ensure no one would interrupt Justin’s trip, while Alex stripped everything from the computer that could cause it to try to reach out to someone for assistance.

The first antenna Tristan found was welded to the hull, so he cut it off, then sealed the hole. The second one was a later addition, screwed in place, but it had been there so long oxidation had spread over the plate. He considered cutting it too, but he wanted some time to think, so he set about removing the oxide.

“Tristan,” Alex said, while he considered how to remove the fourth antenna. The ship had twelve in total. “Are you too busy to talk?”

“Never for you,” Tristan answered, smiling and barely muting the comm before he sneezed. He knelt and began scraping the sealant that had been used to hold the antenna in place.

“You said you want to stay on Samalia, groundside. Any thoughts as to where we’ll live?”

“I have some.” Sealant wasn’t made to hold things in place, and it flaked off easily. The issue was that whoever had installed this antenna had used a lot of it. “Do you have a preference?”

“So long as it isn’t in a corporate city, I’m fine with it. I guess that just leaves the town. I doubt any other place would accept me.”

“They’d accept you if I told them to.” His scraper caught on something, and Tristan pulled a spike out of the sealant. “We should still have apartments in each of the port cities, as well as on the station. Each from a different identity. We don’t want to have to fight with security and have to justify our presence each time we go there.”

He found three other spikes. The genius who had done this repair hadn’t had anything to screw the antenna in place, and used spikes covered with sealant to do the job. Tristan wanted to insult that person, but the antenna had stayed in place for years, so the work was valid.

“Together?”

“Of course.” He secured the antenna to his belt with the others and moved on to the

next one.

“Don’t you think that’s going to attract attention? A human and Samalian living together is going to be odd enough, but there’s what, seven port cities? Even if we only have one apartment in each, plus the station, that’s going to be eight human-Samalian couples. Someone will notice.”

“I’ll just dress in a loincloth and you can pass me off as your pet, pull me along with a leash, have me perform tricks for the neighbors.” The silence stretched. “Alex?”

“Sorry.” A pause. “I couldn’t treat you that way, even for a mask. I already hate that LeisureTek looks at your people that way, as animals to be used.”

“My people?”

“They are, aren’t they? Isn’t that what it means for us to stay here? You said you wanted to learn more about them.”

Tristan considered that. “I suppose. I’m still processing the reasons for some of the things I want to do, but Samalia being my home isn’t something I ever thought I’d say.” The next antenna was a proper weld. “However we do it, we’ll manage.”

“We can get adjoining apartments and install a door between them.”

Tristan smiled at the idea of sneaking around with Alex. “A Samalian owning his own apartment next to a human will attract even more attention than ones living in the same apartment. And in places where I can get one, you’ll attract attention.”

“Maybe I can be your pet human?”

Tristan laughed. “I’d spoil you too much.”

“Okay, so apartments in the cities will take some work. You said you have thoughts on where our home will be.”

“Where my father’s cabin is.”

The silence stretched, but Alex spoke before Tristan worried. “Is that a good idea? Won’t it be a constant reminder of what you suffered at his hand?”

“It’s why I want to live there. To show him he didn’t destroy me, that I’m going to be happy, in spite of what he did to me.”

“Alright, I can see rebuilding the cabin, but there isn’t that much space. Where are you going to put your workshop?”

Tristan looked up, watching the stars, feeling them watch him back.

“Tristan,” Alex called, “where are you going to put your workshop? And if you say you don’t need it, I’m coming out there to smack you.”

He smiled and took out the cutter. “We can clear as much space as we need to build a proper house, with a workshop, and land.”

“A proper house? You do realize those come with bedrooms, right? I don’t know if you went in one of the houses in the town, but Samalians do sleep on actual beds.”

Tristan tried to imagine sleeping on a bed. He’d done it before, as part of a job where he’d had to seduce someone—and when he played the role of Jack for Alex—but the ground was where he was comfortable.

“Tell you what,” Alex said. “We’ll need a temporary home while we do the work, and we can re-acclimate ourselves to sleeping in beds during that time.”

The antenna went with the others. “I don’t know how easy it’s going to be. Comfort has always been a tool used to get a mark close to me.”

“I could be the mark.”

“No! Alex, don’t say that.” He shut his mouth, surprised at the anger the idea Alex might consider himself a mark triggered. The fact he could easily imagine how he would trick Alex didn’t help.

“We have time,” Alex said softly. “No matter what happens, we’ll do it together.”

Tristan reached the next antenna and pulled out the wrench. “Alex, I’m going to turn off the comm for a few minutes.”

“Is everything okay?” Alex sounded worried.

“Yes, it’s just that the suggestion you could be a mark doesn’t sit well. I spent too many

years thinking of you that way.” He looked up, felt the reproach coming down on him. “I just need to be alone for a time.”

“Okay, I’m almost done here. Then all that’ll be left will be for you to go over the systems inside.”

“I won’t be long.”

He shut down the comm, and looked at the antenna. He didn’t owe it anything, part of him said. He should finish the work, go back inside, and never think about this again. But that was the old him, the one who could justify everything he did as being part of surviving.

“I’m sorry,” he told the universe. He looked up. “I’m sorry for making you the personification of the paranoia my father instilled in me. I’m sorry for thinking you were set on killing me.” He remembered Victor and found what he had to say now was more difficult. “I’m sorry for purposely destroying any chance at happiness you sent me.”

He looked down, unable to take its focused attention anymore, and imagined Alex working on the computer, talking it into being a slave to him. “Thank you for Alex.” He forced himself to look up at the universe. “I wish…” He chuckled at the stupidity of what he was going to say, knowing he couldn’t stop himself. “I wish you’d have come down and told me what you were doing, instead of letting me muscle my way through all the false beliefs I had, but we both know all that would have accomplished is me punching you.”

He crouched by the antenna and set to work. “I’m going to do my best to stop blaming you for everything, and accept that sometimes, things just happen.” He forced the bolts out. “I’m going to apologize right now for when I do curse you. We both know it’s going to happen. I’m stubborn and I’ve been doing it for far too long, but I’ll do my best to stop.”

When the antenna was free, he caught it before it drifted away, attached it to his belt, and sealed the hole. He looked up, and when nothing else came to him, he turned the comm back on.

“Feeling better?” Alex asked.

“Yes.” He took a breath of the stale suit air. “There’s only a handful of antennas left to remove, then I’ll be back in.”

“You want me to wait for you?”

“No, if you’re done before me, go to Justin’s—our ship. What needs to be done inside isn’t something that you’ll be able to help with.”

“Are you sure you want to be alone, with him?”

Tristan looked up at the stars, and for the first time in as long as he could remember, he didn’t feel any judgment returned. “I need to do this alone, Alex.”

* * * * *

The room had been an officer’s ready room at some point; Tristan could see the marks on the floor where the desk had been welded, part of them under the bed. He remembered waking up in that bed—confused, scared, angry. He wondered if his brother would feel the same when he woke up.

Justin was stretched on the mattress, within the active cryo-field. He’d considered sitting him in one of the troupe’s chairs, but his brother enjoyed his comfort, and Tristan decided to indulge him here.

He secured the skin-repair kit in the cabinet, and marked the door as containing such. He didn’t know what his brother would wake up to, but he didn’t want him to have to go through the rest of his life looking like he did now. It wasn’t like he’d be able to use the medical bed when he woke up.

He went to the wall and almost activated the recorder. Could he do this? Could he do it in such a way his brother believed him? He could feel himself about to cry.

He rubbed his face and put on a mask—the mask of who he had been before. Of an uncaring monster who could throw away someone he cared about without second thoughts, and activated the recorder.

“Hello, Little Brother. We’ve always wanted for the other to be out of our lives, so now we’re getting it. I’ve done the calculation on the how much power this ship has left, so

when you'll hear this, I'll be dead for at least three-million years. I don't see myself using rejuv treatments unless Alex insists, and even with all the traveling we do, I doubt we'll top a thousand objective years. So you can relax, you are finally free of me. You no longer have to worry that I'll hunt you down. You can live your life however you want. There's medical equipment in the storage cabinet, fully charged and under their own cryo-field. There are also enough nutrient packs for a decade, which is also about how much power you have left, if you're careful, which is why I deactivated the medical bed. I know you, Little Brother. Your vanity would have you drain all the power in an attempt to look good. Believe it or not, I'd rather you live, rather you reach a planet and then get yourself fixed up.

I don't know what the universe you'll wake in looks like. I don't even know where you are; Alex left the ship enough intelligence to avoid anyone who could rescue you, and that will alter your trajectory, but even if you're between galaxies, you have enough power to get back under cryo and make it to the closest one, and a planet you can survive on. So you win, you outlived me."

Tristan reached for the control, but hesitated again. "Justin, please don't waste the time you have left. Father was wrong. Family isn't a burden, friends don't weigh you down. Love... Love isn't a weapon, Justin, it isn't a tool. Not the way father insisted it is. It's power, but only when—" He closed his eyes. "I'm wasting my time. I didn't believe it until the right circumstances happened, so you won't either." He forced a smile. "Well, this is the last time you'll see me, unless you replay this message, so rejoice!"

He shut down the recorder just before the mask crumbled and he let the pain make him sob. This wasn't the conclusion he wanted, but it was the only feasible one. Justin and him couldn't live together. They couldn't mend what their father had broken so many years ago. If they were both to live, it had to be in different times, at different ends of the universe.

He wiped his tears and looked up. "I know I have no right to ask this, but you know me, I just don't care." He chuckled and fought back more tears. "Look after him. Help him, like you did me. He's going to take a lot more work. If you think I was stubborn, wait until you deal with him, but try anyway? He deserves happiness. The real thing, not this illusion our father convinced us came with power."

He set the playback to start the moment the sensors detected motion, and left his brother into the arms of eternity.