

The bar Alex found was large and airy. It reminded Alex of a commercial space where someone had added tables and a bar at the back.

He stood in the entrance for a moment, looking it over, and was surprised at how colorful the people's clothing was. It was a strong reminder that he wasn't on Deleron Four anymore.

A man stood and headed in his direction—long tan coat, blue canvas pants, white shirt. Alex stepped out of the way to let him pass, and the orange and black fur on his hand, feet, and face only registered at that moment, along with the muzzle and round ears on the top of his head. Was that a—

Alex turned to call out to him, and saw that the back of his coat had a slit in the middle, from his ankle to his waist, and he could see a tail in the same orange with intermittent black bands.

Alex let him go; Samalians didn't have tails. He wouldn't be able to help him find Tristan. His mood dropped a little again, and even noticing the handful of aliens in the bar wasn't enough to lighten it.

On his way to the counter, Alex noticed that some of the humans there acted oddly, or at least in manners he felt were odd. He passed by a table where two men and two women were seated, their hands perfectly still and splayed on the table as they talked. At another table, two women in stiff robes in shades of red and purple spoke in hushed tones, pointing to the others in the bar as if they considered them strange. And in a corner, a family in drab gray clothes held their children close to them, looking around fearfully.

"Can I have a Golden Hour?" Alex asked the man behind the bar.

The barman looked at him and replied in a language that sounded a lot like that of the woman who'd served him the stew. Alex stifled a sigh. Okay, people being different might be a problem if this was what he had to look forward each time he wanted to buy something.

He looked at the bottles lined up on the shelf and pointed to the only one he recognized, then handed the cred-chip. The display was visible, and Alex peeked as the man ran it through. It had over three-thousand on it. That was a lot of money. He'd have to ask Will about it.

The man handed him the chip and a glass, and Alex found a table to enjoy his drink. He sipped it and made a face. Or not.

Now that all he had to do was look at his drink, he couldn't avoid the question. What should he do? He had to reach Samalia, but could he risk his integrity to get there? Whatever he had left of it. He remembered Will telling him that staying on the ship would change him, but Alex hadn't believed him. That had been a mistake.

He wanted to blame someone for what was happening to him, but no one had forced him on the ship. No one had forced him to coerce that first computer. Yes, the captain had basically twisted his arm that time, but once Alex didn't have any options, he'd looked forward to doing it. He'd had fun fighting with the other coercionists.

Who did that? Who had fun breaking the law?

He knew that answer to that one.

What would Jack think of him? Alex shuddered as he remembered the dreams of him cheering Alex on as he fought and killed. He drank half his glass, then scrunched his face at the taste. At least it took his mind off the memory.

But Tristan was who Alex would have to deal with. He'd have to draw Jack out of him, and while he had the Defender to help with that, would it be worth doing if Alex became as much of a monster as Tristan was, in his hurry to get there?

Couldn't he take longer to get to Tristan, make sure there was enough of Alex left for Jack to care for? He didn't know where he was in relation to Samalia, but he should be able to find a way to get there from here, even if it added years to his trip.

Alex brought the glass to his lips and found it was empty. How had he managed to drink that and not realize it? He headed to the bar for a refill. It was probably a bad idea, but he needed help thinking.

With his new drink in hand, he turned and almost ran into someone. The only thing preventing him from spilling his glass all over the other's chest was that the man had caught his hand.

"Careful there, buddy."

"Sorry," Alex replied. He had a flash of memory, turning with a drink in hand, running into Jack, the alien apologizing.

This man wasn't Jack. He was human and bald, a head shorter than Alex with pale skin and worn clothing.

"It's okay." The man looked Alex up and down, still holding his hand. "Say, you speak the same language as me. Mind if we share a table?" The man gently squeezed Alex's hand.

Alex thought back and yes, the man was right. Everyone here seemed to speak a language Alex didn't understand. He hadn't paid attention, letting the conversations flow over him.

Alex thought about turning the man down, but there was something about him that felt comforting. His smile was inviting. "Sure, why not?" He'd be able to get back to his thinking once they were done with their drinks.

"I'm Olien," the man said before pointing to a bottle and paying for his drink. "I haven't seen you before. What brings you to this pleasant little place?"

Alex used the time to decide how to handle this. He couldn't be careless. "Crimson," he finally answered. "Just passing through." He guided Olien to his table. "What about you?"

The man sat, then looked at his hands. "Oh, I've been here for a while now. It wasn't the plan. I was on a trip and got into a scuffle. I got detained, and the ship left without me."

"I didn't think passenger ships could do that. Aren't there rules about all the passengers needing to be aboard before they leave?"

The man shrugged.

Alex thought about giving the man money to help him out; he had more than he needed. He'd even started to reach for his pocket when he got an odd sense about the situation.

There hadn't been any money involved, but the bumping into someone, the not-quite sob story, the offering of help. Those were almost an exact repeat of what had happened with Jack.

He changed the motion to scratching his chest, then sipped his drink, watching the man not watch him. "No luck leaving?" Was he just being paranoid? Had Anders turned him into someone who didn't trust in people's goodness anymore?

Olien shook his head. "This place doesn't get a lot of ships, and those that do dock, well, I don't know that I'd want to travel on them, if you know what I mean."

Alex nodded, his unease growing. When the man reached over and placed a hand on Alex's, he had to resist the urge to pull it away. "I'm just hoping to survive until someone trustworthy can take me away from this place."

Jack hadn't been this overt with his approach. He'd been ill at ease with the situation, much more believable as someone in trouble. Alex had been the one to make all the first moves. Except he hadn't. Tristan had manipulated him into making them, into being the one to make

the offer of assistance.

“Didn’t you say the ships here aren’t trustworthy?”

Olien gave him a sweet smile. “I get a good feeling from you.”

Alex forced himself to return the smile. He interlaced his fingers with Olien’s, then pushed the hand up and back, bending the man’s wrist until he grimaced. Alex wasn’t falling for the same trick twice.

“You’re hurting me,” Olien hissed, but kept his voice low. He glanced around to see if anyone was paying attention to them.

The action confirmed Alex’s suspicion. He didn’t care if they attracted gazes, but no one was looking their way. “Who are you?”

“I told you, I’m O—”

“You’re not really stranded here, are you?”

“Of course I—”

Alex bent the wrist back some more and the man clamped his mouth shut, eyes closed in pain. “Okay,” he whispered. “I get the message. I’m sorry I tried to con you.”

Alex relieved the pressure, but he didn’t let go.

“Look, just let me go and I’ll get out of here. I won’t bother you again, I promise.” Now that he wasn’t in pain, the man’s demeanor had changed. He wasn’t meek and in need. He was carefully looking at Alex, and around, making sure he was safe.

“How badly do you need the money?” Alex asked.

“The—” Olien’s surprise made it difficult for him to find the words. “I need it.”

“Are you willing to work for it?”

“I-It depends.” The man studied Alex. “How much are we talking about here?”

“Three-thousand.”

The man’s eye went wide for a moment, then he had control of himself. “What do you expect me to do?”

“Answer some questions.”

“That’s it? Questions? You don’t expect me to kill anyone?”

Alex shook his head, and the next words slipped out before he could stop them. “If I wanted that, I could do it myself.”

The man paled a little. When he’d regained his color, he nodded to their hands. “Look, if you’re going to pay me, you won’t need the torture.”

Alex let go of him and sipped his drink.

“Before we start, can I ask you something?” The man rubbed his wrist.

Alex nodded.

“You’ve been conned before, right? That’s how you saw through me, right?”

Alex nodded. That was an understatement.

Olien took a long swallow from his glass. “Okay, ask away.”

“How did you pick me? Of everyone here, what told you I might be a target?”

Olien shrugged. “I didn’t pick you here. I’ve been following you since you left your ship. You were distracted, lost in your head. Maybe a bit depressed. I followed you through the Center waiting for the right time, and when you came here I knew you’d be receptive. I figured that you’d be more inclined to help me out to avoid thinking about your own problems.”

“Didn’t you take a risk when you didn’t let go of my hand?”

“What risk?” Olien smiled. “At worst you’d have said you weren’t interested and I’d have let

go. But I knew you wouldn't mind. I watched you check the bar out. Your gaze slid over the women, but you lingered on the men."

Alex frowned, trying to remember if he'd done that. "Maybe I was just checking out who was a threat."

"You're not a fighter. You're too at ease, and you wouldn't have overlooked the women if you were."

Alex nodded. Ana was certainly enough of a threat to his well-being when she put her mind to it. "Out of curiosity, if I hadn't stopped you, what would have happened next?"

Olien sipped his drink then leaned forward. "Depends on what you needed. Right now I'm thinking companionship, but that's just based on the little from when you had your guard down. I would have picked up more as we spoke, adjusted my actions to that, slowly becoming the person you needed. You'd have become comfortable, maybe we'd have sex—"

Alex shook his head.

"—or not. But at some point, I'd have mentioned I needed money and by then you'd have offered to help me out."

"Just like that?"

The man shrugged. "People are predictable."

Alex nodded. "So, you don't plan who you'll be ahead of time?"

"I can't. Until I know you, I can't know who you'll respond to."

Alex didn't think Tristan had made things up on the go. Based on everything he'd read, the alien was technologically savvy. Alex's file would have had everything Tristan needed to plan ahead. Alex's psychological profile was on file from the evaluation he'd taken when he was hired by Luminex. Just that would have everything Tristan needed to manipulate him.

"Out of curiosity, how long could you pull this off?"

"What do you mean?"

"How long could you be this person I needed? How long could you draw it out if, for some reason, what you wanted from me wasn't readily available?"

"I don't know. I mostly work in the short term since my marks have to get back to their ships, but I guess I could do it for as long as needed, unless who I'd have to be is someone I really didn't like playing."

"So charming me for months? Acting like you're in love with me?"

Olien studied Alex for a moment. "Yeah, I could do that." He paused as he finished his drink. "Shit, is that what happened to you?"

Alex didn't respond, but the man winced.

"No wonder you were ready to rip my hand off."

"How about if I'm not around?"

"Well, if you're not here I don't have to worry about how I act."

"But when I come back. Could we pick up where we left?"

"How long are we talking here?"

Alex shrugged. "A year, maybe more."

"Am I waiting for you to come back? Like is this a business trip or something?"

"No. As far as you know, I'm gone. When we run into each other again it isn't planned."

"I don't know. I mean if we'd been together for a while before that, I might be able to remember the gist of what we had, but the whole thing? Probably not. I'd miss some details here and there."

“What do you mean by forgetting details?”

“You get that what I do is just an act, right? Once you’re gone, I go back to who I was, so I can deal with my own stuff. Probably find another mark. The more time passes, the tougher it’s going for me to remember you and who I was for you.”

Alex stiffened. Jack had been an act? Of course he had. Even his dreams told him that over and over. He knew he’d have to draw him out of Tristan, so how hadn’t he realized that part of it? Was he so obsessed that he couldn’t see it? But he couldn’t have been just an act. A monster like Tristan couldn’t know how to love. He’d been over that before, more than once.

What Olien told him confirmed that time was a factor. If he wanted Jack back, he couldn’t let Tristan forget him. How long had it been now, objectively? Years? No, not that long. Tristan had to reach Samalian, same as Alex. Each stop Alex made widened the gap, but it had only been six months, seven at most since he’d lost Jack. So, they couldn’t be more than a year apart.

But each second’s delay increased the time difference between them. How long did he have until Tristan forgot Jack completely?

He stood and flicked the cred-chip to Olien.

“We’re done?” the man asked.

“We are.”

Alex left. He had to go talk to the captain.