

Alex packed a bag the moment he was done with the files. He was ready to go and rescue Jack from that monster. Unfortunately, bag in hand and stepping out of his apartment, he realized he had no idea where to go. The reports hadn't had any information on where Tristan lived. No details or clue that might tell Alex where to start his search.

He spent a few days on his couch. He told himself he was trying to think of something, but he knew what he was doing was moping again. Once he accepted that, he went to work. If he couldn't figure out what to do, the least he'd do was keep busy.

He saw her watching him within minutes of sitting at his desk, and her constant surveillance proved one more distraction to him doing good work. Another was his coworkers, who came to inquire about his absence; he told them he'd had a relapse, and they seemed satisfied with the answer.

The last and worst distractions were Jack and Tristan, the two Samalians who had changed his life in such different ways. He couldn't stop thinking about them. He didn't mind thinking about Jack, although his absence weighed on him, but as soon as Jack popped in his mind, Tristan was there too. One brought Heaven to him, the other Hell.

Added to all that was his lack of sleep. His nights had been filled with nightmares from the first picture he'd looked at. Fortunately, he had no repeats of the one where he murdered his interrogator, but every night he saw the dead, Tristan's victims, or on some nights it was Jack who killed them. His sweet Jack who looked at him with love while dispatching a child, or a woman.

Those were the worst. The thought that his Jack might be capable of committing such atrocities made it difficult for him to go sleep.

As a consequence, his performance suffered, but other than being constantly watched by her, no one mentioned anything, even when his attention drifted to the point he'd let a target system gather its wits and push him out.

And because all those weren't enough problems for him, every time he sat at his console, he had at his fingertips the most powerful computer he knew of. With it and his skills, he could scour through ships' passenger manifests. Tristan had to have left Deleron Four on one of the passenger ships that came here.

He didn't believe the ship's destination would be where he'd find Tristan, but it was a start. At least with that, he'd have a direction. What he'd do once there he didn't know, but he'd feel like he was moving forward, toward Jack. Not sitting still.

All he had to do was break a promise, and commit a crime. Coercing any system was a crime, but when he did so for the company he had its protection, so if any of the targets managed to identify him personally, the lawyers would form an impenetrable wall for him to hide behind. Odds were that it had already happened, and he hadn't been aware of it.

But to attack a system without authorization left him vulnerable. Worse, attacking the company's system would make him out as the traitor his interrogator thought him to be. And he'd have to attack it. He couldn't simply make use of its power between assignments, he'd have to take control, convince it not to notice what he was doing, and if it did, not to report it to anyone.

So he could find out where Tristan had gone, if he was willing to become a criminal.

He wasn't ready to do that. He did his best to put the idea out of his mind, focus on his work, and at the end of the day, go home, cook, and eat.

He'd tried not to overeat. With all the weight he'd lost during his imprisonment, he'd told

himself it would be easy to watch what he ate and follow an exercise regimen. He'd even managed to eat better for a few days, but in the middle of the despair he'd felt, preparing the food and eating it became an island of comfort.

He knew it was crazy, but until he'd began reading the files on Tristan, it had been the one time in his day he'd felt like he was accomplishing anything. When he cooked, all the wasted time trying to coerce system nodes into telling him where the information was hidden went away. While he ate, for that short period of time, he felt contentment. As a consequence, he'd regained all the weight he'd lost, and then more of it, enough he'd had to buy new pants.

For two weeks he fought the temptation to coerce the company system. He did his best to focus on his work, ignore Jack, Tristan, and his interrogator, constantly watching. He also did his best to ignore the desire to kill her, which was coming back as his annoyance rose.

The day he caught himself starting to coerce the company system was the day he knew he couldn't stay anymore. He'd stopped himself before he'd opened a communication port, so no one knew what he'd been about to do, but he couldn't lie to himself. Knowing full well the consequences, he'd been willing to break his promise.

He still had his bag packed, so he looked for people to take the few possessions he had. Doing that distracted him from Tristan, and maybe that's why it was when he realized that while he didn't know where the Samalian had gone to, he knew where he'd come from.

Alex had a destination. He'd go to Samalia. Someone there had to know Tristan and where to find him. Maybe he'd get lucky and he'd find him there, along with Jack.

He did some research on the open net about the planet. There wasn't much; Samalia was remote, on the edge of what was considered civilized space. It was part of the trading network, which meant ships went there, but it barely did any trading, so few of them had reason to go. They didn't have their own spaceflight capability, but they did have a small space station, built by one of the trade corporations to ease the little trade happening there.

He came across a treatise on Samalian beliefs, and learned they had multiple deities, represented by historical figures, but centered on a golden sphere, representing the sun. He found an entry on the Defender, who was always represented as a male Samalian holding swords, and positioned to demonstrate that he was either putting them down or picking them up. Alex looked up at the statue and couldn't determine which position he was in; its crouch seemed to lend itself to either.

Once done with the article, he looked around his apartment. It was mostly empty. He'd told the people who wondered why he was getting rid of so much that he was simply changing his life. The few things no one had taken—the couch, most the kitchen stuff—he didn't mind leaving for the company to dispose of as they wanted.

He only had a few things left to do before he could leave. One would be easy, if not simple, the other simple, if not easy, and he had to start with the simple one if he wanted any chances of getting away with this.

During the trip to Alien-Nation, he tried to work out what he would tell Alphalar, but couldn't settle on anything. He felt he had to at least tell him he was leaving. He'd already vanished without words once; he didn't want one of his few alien friends to worry about him.

It was the middle of the day, so most everyone was at work, and of those there, Alex only knew Alphalar, who stood behind the bar, as well as a Duroth he'd talked to a handful of times. The Duroth was seated rod-straight, which told Alex he was drunk out of his mind. A Satorish hissed at him when he got close to her table.

“Alex,” Alphalar greeted him, “This is an odd time for you to come.”

Alex leaned against the bar. “I figured I should come say goodbye before I left.”

“Finally decided this place isn’t any good?” a woman two stools down remarked. Alex’s first thought was she was human, but she looked at him, and empty pools of darkness filled where eyes should be.

He swallowed. A Fifirogh. He hadn’t known there were any on the planet. Stories said corporations used them as spies because they could cloud the minds of men.

She snorted and sipped her drink.

“I’m guessing the reason you’re leaving has to do with what you said last time you were here.” The Jolarnian’s tentacles placed a glass on the counter and reached for a bottle.

“I’m not having anything to drink; I won’t be here too long. I have something else to take care of. Yes, it has to do with that, only not the way you think. You thought Jack had died, but he didn’t. He’s been kidnapped.”

Alex told Alphalar about Tristan taking Jack away from him, a little of his imprisonment, as well as some of what he’d learned about the Samalian. He didn’t give details; no one should have to know the things Tristan was capable of.

He hadn’t intended for the Fifirogh to listen in, but she watched him the entire time he spoke.

“So you’re just taking off to go chase down a mercenary?” Alphalar asked. “Shouldn’t you just tell the Law and let them deal with it?”

“It wouldn’t do any good,” the Fifirogh said before Alex could figure out how to explain why he needed to do it himself.

“And you know that how?” the Jolarnian asked.

She smiled at him. “Alphie, you are well aware how I know that. I’ve been employed by them often enough.”

Alphie? Did they know each other so well they had nicknames for one another? Was Alphalar straight? In all his time fantasizing about the barman, before Jack entered his life, he’d never bothered asking who the Jolarnian was attracted to.

She put her glass down. “Anyway, he tells the Law, they look into it, find out it’s corporate business, so they pass it back to them, and you heard how the head of security thinks he’s that mercenary’s partner. What do you think she’d do? The same as she’s doing now: look for anything even hinting he’s guilty of something.”

“I don’t think she’s the head of security anymore. She was ‘punished’ for what she did to me.”

“It might explain why she’s been hanging around here.”

“She’s been here?” Alex looked around worriedly.

“Corporate security has been surveying my bar?”

“I guess it’s her. About my height, brown hair to her shoulder, mean eyes, dressed corporate, shoulder holster, knife in the back and at her ankle.”

Alex stared at her.

“Did you frisk her?” Alphalar asked.

“No, I know what to look for.” She looked in her glass. “Alphie, could you be a dear and get me a refill?”

The Jolarnian reached for a bottle on the shelf.

“I’d really prefer a fresh bottle, from the darkest corner of your storeroom. You know how light screws up the taste.”

Alphalar frowned, then understanding lit his eyes and he looked from her to Alex. “How long should I spend looking for that bottle?”

She shrugged. “Let’s say twenty minutes. I’ll make it worth your while afterward, I promise.”

The Jolarnian grinned, and vanished in the back of the bar.

“You and him?” Alex asked.

“Not important,” she replied, turning on her stool to face him. “Two things. First off, you do know you’ve got it wrong, right?”

“What do you mean?”

She studied his face long enough Alex started to squirm. Those pools of darkness seemed to have something moving in them. “You know what I mean. You’re doing everything you can to deny it, but it will come back. It isn’t a truth you can keep buried.”

Alex opened his mouth to deny he was hiding anything, but she stopped him with a wave of the hand.

“But never mind about that. You mentioned that your Jack bought you a statue, something from his world.”

“A Defender.”

“Right. Do you know anything about them?”

“It’s one of the deities Samalians follow, something related to the worship of their sun.”

She shook her head. “That isn’t what they are, but their exact nature isn’t important. Do you know what the Defender can do? What his role in their pantheon is?”

“You know about Samalians?”

“I spent a couple of years on a job there.”

“Do you know anything about Tristan?”

“I know the name, heard a few stories, but those files you read will have told you more about him than I ever could.” She took a sip of her clearly not empty glass, then looked at him again. “So, do you know what the Defender does?”

“No, but it’s a reproduction, so it isn’t like it’s going to have any ‘power’ to a Samalian.”

She snorted again. She grabbed a napkin and pulled out a pen from a pocket. “You ever hear about the Great Nonick?” She began sketching something.

“No. What is it?”

“The Devourer, from my people’s beliefs. Now, ignoring the fact that to draw any representation of it is the greatest sin I can commit, is this him, or a reproduction?” She turned the napkin and showed him a creature with wings, horns, and smoke coming from its feet.

“I don’t understand what you mean.”

“Look at it, although you’re going to want to be careful. To look at Nonick’s image is to attract his attention, and he might decide whatever humans believe powers their lifeforce in you is ready to be consumed.”

Alex had almost set eyes on the drawing and looked away. “Are you trying to hurt me?”

“It’s just a drawing I did.”

“Yeah, but of something you said can consume my soul.”

“I didn’t think you believed in Nonick.”

“I don’t. I mean gods and beings like that are constructs to explain the world. I know that, but—”

“And that’s my point. Those figures don’t gain their power because they are ‘real’, they gain them because people believe in them. Though this statue was made by another artist, it doesn’t

change the fact that it represents a Defender, with all the power the Defender has.”

“Okay, so what power does it have?”

“The one that matters to you is that the Defender has always been the enforcer of promises.”

“How does that help me?”

She smiled at him. “That’s going to be for you to work out, but my recommendation is that you bring it with you.”

“I was already going to do that. Jack gave it to me, and it’s one of the few things I have left of him. I’m not going to throw it away.”

“Good. Now I suggest you get going. You don’t want to delay the next part of your plan any more than you already have. And I don’t think you want to watch what me and Alphie are going to be getting up to.”

“You’re going to do it here? In public?”

She grinned at him and revealed that her teeth were pointed, and that she had a lot of them. Alex hurried out, not interested in knowing whatever it was the two of them would do anymore.