

Tristan blinked and stifled a yawn as he followed Alex out of the hover. He should have slept—would have, if not for what happened when he did.

The building was a poor place for the people to have retreated to; it offered no protection. The stonework looked adequate, but the plasteel tarps and sheets were badly anchored. Anyone could pry them out and enter that way.

“For a place that’s supposed to be holy,” his father said, walking past the woman at the lead, “they didn’t take good care of it.” Tristan glared at him from behind Alex. He wanted to order his father back into the hover, where he wouldn’t cause problems, but it would alert the approaching Samalians to his presence. Not that his father ever did what he was told.

“Look who’s talking!” his father yelled from beyond her and among the others. “Weren’t you told to leave the gun in the hover?”

Tristan fought the urge to touch the Azeru at the small of his back. Alex would notice and check. He’d be looking for stimulants, but he’d still be angry about the gun. Jacoby had noticed him, but he’d kept quiet, had even nodded his approval.

Alex glanced back at him, and Tristan did his best to look innocent, focusing on the Samalians. There were seven of them, he thought. They melded into one another, as close as they were.

He yawned again, and wished he had smuggled stims like Alex believed he’d done. He should have been alert right now, not having to deal with his vision going in and out of focus. Coffee didn’t last anywhere near long enough.

The woman in the lead had sandy fur that shimmered with red highlights. She wore loose gray pants and a sleeveless vest that served more to hold items than to cover her. Her left ears had rings in them, and there were black marks under her right eye.

She stood tall as she walked and kept her face neutral. But even in his current state, Tristan could tell it was a mask she’d built to cover up how worried she was.

“Hey!” his father called from behind the group. “They have swords! Just how primitive are these people? Even I was past using swords.”

Right, because you thought claws were all we needed, Tristan thought, but his father was right. They were armed.

He forced his sight to focus and made out there were six of them, four men and two women, muscular and comfortable with the weight of the swords at their hip. They only wore pants, although one had a harness with tools hooked to it. They didn’t bother covering up their unhappiness at seeing outsiders.

Tristan leaned in and whispered, “They want to kill us. We should kill them first.”

“Don’t do anything,” Alex warned. “They aren’t the enemy.”

Tristan eyed the back of Alex’s head. When had he forgotten all he’d taught him? Everyone was the enemy. They couldn’t trust any of them. It was just a question of time before someone who acted like they were helping turned around and became a problem.

Alex stopped, and Tristan almost walked into him. He felt like snapping; Alex should give him a warning when he was going to stop abruptly, but he needed to maintain the act of subservience in front of the others. He frowned. Was he supposed to have a mask on? Which one? Who was he supposed to be right now? Had they discussed how they were going to proceed?

He itched to take out the Azeru and simply shoot all of them. Things were always simpler after he killed everyone. And if not, at least it would be something to do. He wanted to do something, anything.

Tristan stopped fidgeting when he noticed the woman watching him, studying him, both of them. She’d stopped approaching at a dozen feet from them. Her guards simply glared—no, they weren’t her guards.

They weren’t looking to protect her; they were just looking for a fight.

“Hello,” Alex said.

Her eyes flicked to Alex before returning to Tristan. She was judging him, he

realized. How dare she? What did she know of why he'd had to do all the things he'd had to? She would have done exactly the same if she had been in his place. The sanctimonious—

“Greetings,” she finally answered, her tone cautious. “How may I assist you? This region is not on any of the corporation’s tourism paths. If you are hoping to visit our humble House, I am afraid you will need to leave. This is a place of worship, not one for people to...” She searched for the words. “Gawk at.”

Tristan opened his mouth to reply, but the realization she'd spoken SpaceGov Standard stopped him. How did she know the language? This far from the cities? There was only one way: she'd been taught it, then planted here to wait for them. This was a trap.

“Don't move,” Alex warned, and Tristan realized it was directed at him, not the people before them. He stopped reaching for the Azeru. The warriors in front all had a hand on their swords, ready, eager for a fight.

“Alex,” he whispered, “it isn't safe. They're going to attack.”

“They're reacting to you,” Alex replied, impatience in his voice. “Get your hand away from that gun, now.”

“Don't listen to him,” his father said. “You know very well what's going to happen. You want to protect him, don't you?” The derision in the tone didn't make the words untrue.

“Alex, you could get hurt,” he explained, to which Alex looked at him, eyebrow raised.

“Don't do anything unless I tell you to; is that understood?”

Why couldn't Alex see the danger they were in?

“He's human, what did you expect?” His father snickered.

His father was right; Alex was only human. He couldn't see what he did. Understand the nuance of people the way he did. Even with all Tristan had taught him, he'd never... He had taught him.

“Oh come on, that isn't what I meant and you know it. Stop listening to him. You're Tristan, you should be in charge of this little job.”

Alex might not have been able to read people the way Tristan did, but what Alex could do was evaluate threats. He knew what they were both capable of, how much it would take to take them down. If Alex didn't see a threat here, why did he?

Tristan swallowed. He knew what sleep deprivation did.

“Fine,” his father said. “If you can't trust your judgment, trust mine. They are all going to kill the two of you.”

Tristan glared at his father. Him, he could trust least of all. He was a figment of his imagination, he remembered.

Alex noticed where he was looking, but didn't react. None of the others did. They were more interested in the little show he was putting on for them. He felt like snarling. Tristan wasn't an act for them to enjoy, but Alex was still looking at him, waiting for a response.

He forced himself to relax and nodded. “I trust you, Alex. I'll do what you tell me.”

The warriors reacted with disappointment as Alex faced the woman again. “We're not visitors. We're here to return something of yours.” He took a step forward and placed the case on the ground, facing them. He opened it and stepped back.

For an instant, the warriors tensed, and Tristan fought against shooting them. He trusted Alex, he told himself.

“Wasn't so long ago you thought he was going to get you killed,” his father said. “Isn't he the universe's tool to bring about your destruction?”

Shut up. Alex was his, not the universe's...wasn't he?

She glanced at the case and her face changed. Gone was the guarded expression, replaced by joy. She stepped to the case, bent down, and picked up the Defender. She

spoke words Tristan didn't understand, holding the statue with reverence.

Alex watched impassively as she spoke to the warriors. The one with the pale-red fur striped with tan replied, not happy.

She indicated the Defender, then Alex, as she replied to him. The warrior gave them a warning glare before turning and heading back to the building. The other warriors followed him, leaving only the three of them.

His father walked among the warriors, a mischievous grin on his muzzle. What was he planning now? He took a step to go get him.

"Don't move," Alex said.

Tristan froze. "But—" He took another step and Alex glared at him. Tristan lowered his voice, keeping an eye on the woman watching them. "He went inside with them. You have no idea the kind of trouble he can cause."

"Who?" Alex's question didn't have any of the worry it should.

"My father, who else?"

As Alex let out a sigh of exasperation, and Tristan remembered again. "Your father isn't there, or here, or anywhere. You killed him, remember?"

Of course, he remembered. He'd broken his neck, or had he stabbed him? He wasn't sure anymore, but he did know his father was dead, so why did he keep forgetting?

"Because you're crazy," his father said, exiting the shuttle and eating a nutrient bar. "That's why."

How had he gotten there without Tristan noticing? He wasn't real, he told himself again, growling in annoyance. Go away, he mentally told the figment of his imagination.

"Stop bothering with me, boy. They're the ones you should be keeping an eye on, they're the threat."

Tristan turned his attention back to them. She looked at him, puzzled, while Alex's expression was a mix of pained, angry, and sad. Tristan's ears drooped, and he felt like he needed to apologize, but he couldn't figure out for what.

"I am Hea'Las," she said, and Alex looked away from him. "I tend to this House and those who come to it. May I ask where you found our wayward Defender?"

"On Deleron Four, in a market there," Alex answered.

"Then I thank you for bringing him home." She turned to leave.

"I want a boon," Alex said, his tone making it clear this wasn't a request.

She stopped, turned, and glared at him. "A boon? Your people come and take from us, and you think that you are entitled to a boon?" The last word came out as a barely understandable hiss.

Alex tensed, and Tristan readied himself for the fight. Alex would kill her. That would draw out the warriors, and the fight would be fun.

Instead, Alex let out a breath, and Tristan almost let out a sigh of disappointment as the tension left him. "I'm sorry you were robbed. If I could do something to keep that from happening again, I would, but this is all I'm able to do. The boon isn't for me, it's for him. He made a promise over the Defender, years ago, and it's destroying him. I just want him released from it."

"What did he promise?"

Alex hesitated. "To love me."

The surprise was clear on her face. "How would that—"

"He doesn't love!" Alex snapped, losing what control he had over his anger. "He doesn't care for anyone other than himself. Being forced to love me is tearing him apart. You heard him. He thinks his dead father's here—and that's the least of what it's doing to him."

"Hey!" his father objected, taking a step toward Alex. "Show some respect, human."

Tristan growled a warning to him.

She looked at Tristan, fear flashing there, until she saw where he was looking, then

concern replaced it as she instead looked at Alex. “And you? Did you promise to return the same? Will you be released from it too?”

Alex shook his head. “I’ll continue to love him. I did before the promise, I will after.”

She searched his face. “If he’s released, won’t he stop—”

“I don’t care.” Alex’s words were pained. “I’d rather have him abandon me, rather be alone than have him be like this.” He motioned to Tristan, and the next words took his attention away from his father. “I can’t stand that.”

Tristan couldn’t breathe. Alex couldn’t stand him? After everything they’d gone through? How? He growled. How could he! What right did he have to say that to him? He opened his muzzle to let him know exactly how he felt.

“Follow me,” she said, the tone an order, and she headed for the building.

Alex followed her, and without being able to unleash his anger, it evaporated.

“Well?” his father said. “You were finally going to take care of him, what are you waiting for? You can’t kill him standing here.”

“He loves me,” Tristan whispered, putting as much conviction as he could in the words. Alex had said as much, hadn’t he? He might not have promised it over a hunk of stone, but he had meant it.

“He’s human,” his father said. “What does he know of love? You know very well that boy has deeper issues. And why does how he feel about you mean anything? I loved you. I made you strong, taught you everything I—”

He ran to catch up to Alex. He didn’t want to listen to his father. His dead father, he reminded himself again. He knew love. He’d studied it, weaponized it. His father hadn’t loved him.

Tristan entered the building a step behind Alex and was momentarily plunged into darkness, then his eyes adjusted to the low light. Except for not being circular, and much smaller, the room was a simpler version of the one in the city. In what seemed to be the rough center of the room was the half-sphere, emitting a faint light. The other lights were powered, but not trying to appear like firelight; they were simply set to a low emission. They were placed between each small statue surrounding the room.

Close to a dozen people were in the room with them. The warriors from earlier were watching while the others ignored them, intent on whatever they were doing by the statues.

He didn’t like how many shadows there were in the scaffolds holding the plasteel sheets and plates in place. So many places for one of the warriors to hide, ready to shoot them.

“Where did you learn Standard?” Alex asked.

“You mean the human language? In the city.”

“I wouldn’t expect someone to want to learn it, not considering the way the corporation treats people here.”

“I was young, naïve.” She gave them a sad smile. “And the corporation here, back then, wasn’t as aggressive in making us like you.” She indicated the half-sphere. “I loved telling stories, and your people were avid listeners, if not apt to believe.”

She indicated a statue of two Samalians of indeterminate sex in an embrace. “These are the Lovers. They represent the love we can feel for one another. The power that makes us willing to sacrifice much for someone else.”

The statues were the size of the Defender, with their paint just as faded. They looked nothing like people in love. They looked like they were acting at being in love, showing a dream version of what love really meant.

He snorted. Where was the pain of the betrayal? The desperation to be with the other? The annoyance at never being left alone? Whoever had made these had never been in love.

After that one was a statue kneeling on the ground, by a stone slab, with pieces of

stones carved like gears. Next to her was one holding scrolls to his chest. Looking across the room he found the another one, almost the same, except she was offering the scrolls to whoever stood before her. The Learner and the Teacher.

Where in the city they had been within alcoves, here they simply stood on plinths, lining the periphery of the wall. Among the scaffolding stood the Aggressor—tall, back straight, claws out, ready, eager to take on anyone in a fight.

Tristan peered into the shadows beyond it, looking for the enemy he could feel hiding there.

She stopped before a plinth next to the Aggressor, one without a statue—one of three among the twelve in the room. She carefully placed the Defender on it.

“If all you had done was return him to us,” she said, running a finger over its head, “this is where he would go. To be back among his brethren, looking over us, reminding us that we too are part of something greater.” She sighed. “But as you want a boon from him, that is not sufficient.”

“The stories say that all that’s needed is to return him home,” Alex said, anger seeping in his voice.

She motioned around them. “This is a House. It represents all that is. The Source at the center and the Aspects at the border.” She indicated the plinth. “But that is not his home.” She headed for the exit and Alex glared at her back, but after a breath, he followed. Tristan started after him, but he caught motion in the shadows and froze. He’d known someone was hiding there.

He saw it again, and he stepped to the scaffolding. The easiest way to deal with this opponent would be to bring it all down around him. If nothing killed his opponent, it would at least pin them in place, and he could finish the job.

He had a hand on the metal bar, ready to pull it out, when an errant beam of light showed him gray fur, and the flash of white teeth in an amused grin.

He let go of the bar.

His father was trying to goad him into bringing down the wall? Playing off his lack of sleep. Why? He looked around. Why would his fath— His father was dead. This was a figment of his imagination. Part of him was doing this.

Why did part of him want to destroy this place?

Alex’s back was vanishing out the exit, and Tristan ran to catch up with him.

“Doing a lot of running after that human,” his father said, “even though he’s supposedly someone who belongs to you.”

“Shut up,” he growled, and caused Alex and the woman to look at him. “It’s my fath—” He shut his muzzle.

They walked around the building, then followed the visible foundation in the ground. The foundation wasn’t the exact circle he’d seen from the air; he could see where alcoves had been placed at regular intervals.

She stopped at the fourth such alcove, crouched, and touched the ground. “This is where his home was. Where he was stolen by your people. He stood there, watching over us, reminding us to look after one another, to protect those weaker than us.” She motioned to a depression in the ground, in the center of the marked foundation. “That is where the Source should be. Where it will be again once the House is rebuilt.”

“If you rebuild it,” Tristan said, looking around.

“We will rebuild it,” she stated.

“The corporations won’t let you.” He indicated different depressions. “This isn’t the first time this place was rebuilt and destroyed. The fourth, I think. And that was before the corporations were involved. So it was caused by humans just looking to steal and destroy. Corporations destroy anything that makes aliens different from them. This isn’t going to survive.”

She didn’t look any angrier, or even perturbed by what he’d said. “So we should stop trying? Because the corporation wants us to bend to their will, to become human, we

should abandon who we are?" She smiled. "Would you?"

Tristan indicated the space where the building had stood. "I'm not this."

"We are."

"Okay," Alex interrupted, his anger climbing. "If that's his home, why did you put him in there? Why are they all in there, if this is where they belong?"

"Would you stay outside? Exposed to the elements?"

Alex snorted. "I would, I have."

"And did you call that home?"

Alex's mouth snapped shut. Tristan saw the explosion come, and he wondered how long it would take for the warriors to realize what had happened. How long until they ran out and he could fight them?

Alex let out a breath and Tristan sagged. No explosion.

"Are you telling me we came all this way for nothing? That you won't do anything for him? We brought the Defender back. What else do you want from us? The stories—"

"Are stories," she interrupted him calmly. "They inspire us to be better. To keep our word, to make penance when we have to break it. You are looking for some outside force to intervene and fix what you feel is wrong with him, but that is not how the Source is. It isn't how the Aspects are. You should not be here for help, you should go consult one of your doctors. Many of them have studied my people. They will be able to help him."

"Finally," his father exclaimed. "Let's get out of here. I can't believe I'm saying this about one of those idiots, but she's talking sense."

"Alex?" he called, hesitantly. "What's the job?"

"To get the Defender to fix you," he replied flatly, not looking away from the priestess.

He wanted to tell Alex there was nothing wrong with him, but there was his dead father, urging him to leave.

If his father wanted away from here so badly, if part of him wanted to leave, should he just run? Would Alex run? Alex thought the answers were here. That the Defender had them.

"A home is a structure that offers protection," he whispered, studying what he could see of the foundation. "Walls, ceiling, an access. A way to see outside is optional." He noticed Alex and the priestess staring at him. "What?"

"You're talking like her," Alex said.

"A different dialect," she said, "one I'm not familiar with."

"I was speaking Standard."

"No, you weren't."

"I said that a home is a house that has an emotional connotation." Alex looked at him, still confused. He knew he'd spoken Standard this time, hadn't he?

"You are correct," the priestess said.

"I guess," Alex agreed.

Oh good, he'd been right. He pointed to the building. "That is a House, because you worship there. All that's required is to build a home here. That's simple enough."

She considered his words, while Alex still looked confused.

She nodded. "You could build something that would be a home here, but for it to be the Defender's home, it needs to be connected to the House. It cannot exist apart from the whole."

Tristan shrugged. "Then all I need to do is make sure it's connected to the rest of the structure. Build a wall from here to..." He trailed off as he looked from where he stood to the building. He ran the numbers without meaning to. Three feet high to qualify as a wall, three-hundred? Four-hundred feet long?

He staggered back. "No." That couldn't be it. "No," he pleaded to Alex. "We brought it back, we can go home now. I don't need to be fixed. I'm fine." His father snickered. "Shut

up! You've never done one thing for me in my entire life, you can at least do that!"

Alex watched him, the worry marring the mask of cold disinterest he was trying for.

"I suppose that would work," the priestess mused. "It would adhere to the spirit of the stories, but—"

"You," Tristan snarled, making her step back. "You just want more from me, don't you? Blowing up a building wasn't enough, now you want me to build one? Well, get your own people to do it. I'm not your tool." He motioned to Alex as he stepped toward her. "He's mine, my weapon. He's going to kill you when I tell—" He had to stop because Alex stood before him. How had he moved there without him noticing? "Move."

"No." The word was hard.

"Alex," he warned, putting as much threat in his tone as he could. Alex didn't react to it. "

We came here to get you back to yourself."

"I'm fine!"

"You keep talking to your dead father! That's not you being fine! You're out of control, Tristan. That isn't who you are. That isn't who I want."

"Alex, move, or I will move you."

Alex crossed his arms over his chest. "Go ahead."

Tristan raised his hand, claws out. Alex's eyes showed no fear of what was coming.

"I'm waiting," Alex said. "I'm standing in your way. You remove any obstacles in your path, right?"

As hard as he tried, his hand wouldn't come down.

Alex snorted. "This is you being fine?" He turned his back to him. An exposed back, the easiest kill there was.

"What are you waiting for, boy?"

He was trying. He wanted to kill Alex, had wanted to do so multiple times. So why was the human still alive?

What was wrong with him?

He noticed the stone in the ground and looked at his hand. Who was he if a human like Alex could simply stand in his way? What was he if he couldn't kill that one person?

Tristan sunk his fingers in around the stone and pulled it out. It was larger than his hand and heavy. A decent weapon. Something that would make bashing in a head easy. Alex's, then the priestess'.

Alex stood there, his back to him. She looked horrified.

He didn't have to see Alex's face to know he wasn't worried. He knew the truth; that was why they'd come here. It was time for Tristan to admit it to himself.

Something was broken.

He turned the stone over in his hand and looked at the distance separating him from the building. It could be a decent weapon, or it could be the start of a wall. He headed for the building. Four-hundred feet long, three feet high. That was the price he had to pay to fix what was wrong with him.

He would pay it.

And then he would kill Alex.