

Alex didn't know how to feel as he watched Tristan, on his knees, place one stone after the other on the foundation's demarcation. That he was working on the wall meant he was moving toward being better, but how long would this take? He knew it hadn't been realistic, but he'd wanted to show up, hand over the Defender, and have Tristan be himself again.

He picked up a stone, but even before he took a step to go help Tristan, the priestess caught his arm.

"Let go of me," he growled.

"You cannot help him."

He glared at her. "I'm not going to just let him do all the work; it's going to take him days."

"It is his boon, so the work is his. You read the stories. This is not something that can be done through proxy."

"What do you care how we do it? You don't even believe in them."

"You are wrong. I believe that the stories have something to teach us. That they guide us to live better. I do not believe they are a way to manipulate the Source to do your bidding, but..." She raised a hand to silence him. "I understand that you and him believe so. Sometimes, the belief in something is enough to help someone through a difficult time."

Alex snorted. "He doesn't believe in any of this."

She canted her head, and looked at Tristan as he picked up another stone, looked at it intently, then put it on top of the one by the building. "Then why is he building a wall?"

Alex tried to come up with an answer other than screaming "because he's broken!", but nothing came. If Tristan had been fine, he would have laughed at all of this.

She placed a hand on his shoulder. "Whatever comes of this, both of you will be fine." The tone was gentle, but Alex wanted to strike her for saying it, for believing it. If she'd been human, he wouldn't have hesitated.

"I have other duties to tend to," she said as she removed her hand, then left.

He continued watching as Tristan worked, slowly, mechanically. There was none of Tristan's usual enjoyment in building something, but maybe that was reserved for things he could cause destruction with. Maybe this was so boring he'd shut down his mind and let the body work by itself.

As if he'd heard the thought, Tristan snapped words Alex didn't understand to someone who wasn't there. No, he was aware of what he was doing.

He hated that he couldn't help, that he was afraid any help he gave would render the act worthless, and Tristan would remain broken. He hated his indecision, hated that he was afraid. He should make a decision, set the mission, and stick to it. It was what Tristan did.

As dangerous as leaving Tristan unsupervised was, he couldn't stay here; watching this would drive him insane. He could already feel the despair trying to claw its way up from the pit of his stomach.

So he returned to the hover.

He looked inside, and saw Jacoby still in the pilot's seat, the hover still powered.

"Shut it down," he said.

"I thought we were heading right back out?"

Alex shook his head. "This," his voice caught in his throat, "this is going to take longer." He gave him the rundown. "So you might as well power it down, take a nap, do something, anything, to pass the time."

"This sounds more and more like a con," Jacoby said, initiating the hover's shutdown sequence. "Getting him to do the work without having to pay him. I wouldn't be surprised if you found that priestess from the city let them know we were on our way."

Alex laughed. The seriousness with which Jacoby said it was too much. "It's just

stones stacked on top of another. Not something you expect to last. And It was Tristan's idea."

"The best cons have you think it was your idea."

Alex rolled his eyes. "Tristan's isn't in any state to do his usual high-quality work." Alex nodded to the hover's missing panel. Tristan hadn't remembered what he'd done with it as part of preparing the hover for them.

"Then a nap sounds like a good idea," Jacoby said, and headed for the couch.

"Take my room if you want," Alex said. "You shouldn't have to bother with a second-rate bed now that we're here."

"Where are you going to sleep?"

Alex shrugged. He'd only taken the room so he could be alone with his emotions. So he could scream if he needed and not be heard. Now, if he needed to, he could run to the forest and let it out.

Jacoby went by the bed and turned the field on and opaque.

He connected to the hover's comm, hoping to hear the network, but it was still silent. Something else Tristan had disabled to ensure LeisureTek couldn't track them.

The silence became oppressive. He considered taking a nap, since the trip here hadn't been the most restful—having to deal with Tristan's outbursts, him trying to take charge, or just screaming at both of them—but sleep meant dreams and nightmares, and while he didn't fear them enough to resort to stims, inviting them in wasn't appealing.

He looked at the mess that was Tristan's room. The mattress was upturned, the sheets strewn across the floor. That was something to do. He had the mattress back in place and was folding the covers when he brought it to his nose and breathed in the smells embedded in it.

Tristan's smells.

He was sitting on the floor, clutching the blanket to his chest, crying. He might never get his Tristan back. If this didn't work, he didn't know what he could try. Did he really want a human doctor to poke and prod at him? What would happen if a doctor managed to get Tristan to open up, to tell all the things he'd done? Then they'd have to deal with the Law again, and in his current state, would Tristan be able to do anything?

He shoved the idea of Tristan back in prison down as deep as he could. He wouldn't think about that. He'd focus on the here and now. Just a few days and then Tristan would be back to himself, and Alex would be... He shoved those thoughts down too. It would be over, one way or another, that was the only thing that mattered. All he had to do was keep it together until then.

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He woke up to darkness. He navigated the hover without light and looked outside. The darkness was almost absolute. The kind of darkness that was only possible with the absence of people—or humans, at least. Samalians didn't need much light; starlight was enough for Tristan to do a job, while Alex needed light-enhancing goggles. He'd suggested getting his eyes replaced, but Tristan hadn't allowed it.

Tristan wasn't in the hover. Alex wouldn't have woken up on the floor by the bed if he'd returned. Tristan would have screamed at him for being in his room, his space.

Was he still at the House? Working on the wall? Maybe he'd fallen asleep out of exhaustion. There were no lights to tell him where the House was. The only lights other than the stars were in the distance—the town, it had to be—and Samalia's satellite coming up over the treeline, beyond the town. It had a name, both a Samalian one and one assigned by the corporation which had first come here, but he didn't know either.

He'd come across the Samalian one in researching the myths. Something about an exiled son, he thought. He could take the data chip out of his pack and find it again, but he didn't see a point.

He could use the sensors on the hover to confirm Tristan was still by the House, working or sleeping, but he didn't want to discover that Tristan wasn't there. That he'd

left, gone inside the forest, outside the hover's small sensor range. Even in his current state, Alex had no doubt Tristan could lose himself there and never need to come back.

Alex needed to believe he wouldn't end up alone again for awhile longer. He had to keep it together until his Tristan was back, then none of what happened would be his responsibility.

He went back to the room before he gave in to the urge to check on Tristan, and wrapped himself in his smells. A few days, and he wouldn't have to worry about anything ever again.

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Voices woke him, many voices, distant. He'd forgotten to close the hover, or turn on the field that made the room. He was up and had a knife in-hand. Stupid. Anyone could have come in and attacked him while he slept.

He rushed to the hover's access and looked out. People were entering the House, a lot of people. More than Alex thought should be able to fit. Tristan was walking the field—wandering aimlessly, Alex thought—until he bent down to pick up something and returned to the wall. The stones would be further and further as the wall progressed. How much time would that add to the construction? Would gathering the stones close to the wall be considered interfering? The only way he could find out was to try it and see what happened, but that could result in Tristan not being fixed.

With nothing else to do, Alex got out of his clothes and went for a run, only keeping the sheathed knives at his forearm and ankles. He followed the treeline as it took him close to the town, which seemed deserted, then around the field where animals were wandering. The handful of Samalians watching them only reacted to his presence by watching and leaning close to one another to talk. Alex put them out of his mind the moment he couldn't see them anymore. He saw people leave the House as the treeline took him back toward it.

The priestess headed to what was her home—a small wooden cabin by the trees as Alex ran behind it. She looked at him more attentively.

When he approached the hover, Jacoby was outside, mug in-hand. He saw him, headed inside, and came back out. When Alex reached the hover, Jacoby threw him his clothes.

"You know this isn't back home, right?"

Alex looked at the clothes. "Why?"

"Because here you have more than just one woman who enjoys the titillation of watching two naked men run in view of her house."

"I doubt anyone here even knows what I should or shouldn't be wearing. And if they do, I don't care." He headed inside to shower.

He came out of the sonic shower knowing he was clean, but not feeling it. It didn't matter how often he used those, they never felt as real as water.

Jacoby was stretched out on the couch, reading.

Alex put the sheaths back on his forearms, taking the polycarbon knives out as he headed outside.

"Going to give the locals another show?" Jacoby commented, not looking up from his datapad.

"No."

"Then maybe you should put your pants on."

"Not while I'm training."

Jacoby looked up. "You and Tech—"

"Tristan."

"You two practiced naked?"

"Yes, and?" Alex glared at him.

"Nothing," Jacoby replied, with a grin that implied there was a lot he could say.

Alex headed out, moved away from the hover, and began the motions. It took him

a few tries to find a rhythm by himself. It had been years since he hadn't had a sparring partner, and he kept lunging too hard at an imagined attack from Tristan and throwing his balance off.

The priestess entered his peripheral vision, stopped with enough distance between them she wouldn't get in his way. He continued through the sequence of strikes, blocks, and parries, and slowed to prepare for the next one.

"May you have a fruitful day," she said, then turned to leave.

He should've let her go and continued practicing. He wasn't here to be nice to her or anyone. His grandmother's voice sounded in his head, soothing, even when she pointed out he did something wrong. 'Politeness is free, Alex. It costs nothing to return it.'

"Good morning." He wondered how his grandmother was doing. He hadn't contacted her since leaving Emil with her. For her own protection, he told himself.

The priestess paused in her turn.

To avoid any kind of uncomfortable silence, he nodded toward Tristan. "Do you know where he slept?"

She shook her head. "I'm not aware he did. He was still working when I went to bed, and when I woke."

Alex sighed.

"I would think you would be pleased. If he works hard, the wall will be finished sooner, and you will know if the Defender is pleased."

He wondered if she was mocking him, but he had more pressing concern. "He gets unstable if he doesn't sleep enough."

She smiled, showing teeth the way Tristan did to intimidate. "We all do."

"He can be violent. You should tell people to leave him alone." He indicated the handful of people who watched Tristan work.

"I will let them know. May I ask you a question?"

"Sure." He turned and began a series of slow slashes.

"Is your attire now common among humans?"

"No. Tristan got me in the habit. He requires that's how we train. Is it a problem?" He reversed a knife and picked up speed.

"No, simply unusual. It was a common complaint among visiting humans in the city that we were not covering ourselves."

"You're wearing pants."

"A leftover from that time. The pockets are practical." She sounded amused. "You'll find that other than for protection, we don't need them."

"Jacoby is going to be overjoyed," he replied dryly.

"Why? He enjoys watching nude Samalians?"

"No. I was being sarcastic." A thrust and he yanked the knife up, ripping an imaginary stomach open. "Do you have a service every day?"

She canted her head. "Ah, you mean the gathering. No, today is Gathering Day. We gather to thank the Source for the good it graced us with, the chances to improve ourselves, and the help it sent." She paused. "If you wish to give thanks, the House is open to you. The Source is here for all."

"That's okay, I don't believe in this stuff."

"Truly?"

The question threw his rhythm off. If you don't believe, why are you here? a voice asked at the back of his mind. Because somewhere, somehow, Tristan did believe. It was the only way the Defender could have bound him.

He tried to get back into the motions, though his emotions threw them off—fear, doubt, hope, anger. He brought them under control. Only a few more days, then Tristan would be in charge again, and he wouldn't have to worry about any of this anymore.

“Has he eaten?”

“Not that I am aware of.”

He went in the hover, took a handful of nutrient bars, and put on pants before heading out.

Tristan stacked a stone on the others. He was working on the second row, being halfway to where the alcove would be. He had no idea if that was slow or fast. This wasn't the kind of work he'd ever seen someone do. They had machines for this.

“Did you eat?”

“I'm working,” Tristan replied.

“You need to eat.”

“Once I'm done.”

“Tristan, you—”

“Will you shut up and let me work!”

Alex took a step back at the anger in the voice, but Tristan wasn't looking at him. He was glaring to the left, at nothing, not even the Samalians watching.

“Like I care,” Tristan grumbled. “Since you have no intention of helping, just shut up.”

Alex placed the bars by the House's wall for Tristan to find, and left him to work. He'd done a layer and a half overnight. How many were needed for it to be finished? They couldn't expect him to do the whole wall, not this way.

A few more days, just that, then it would be over.

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Life was boring, Alex realized the next day, when after his run he had nothing to do but practice. How did people do this, day in and day out? This not having anything to do? How had he ever lived this way? He hadn't. He'd had things to do, a computer, the network, systems to coerce, missions. Back when he was a corporate lackey, he'd go to Alien-Nation, spend time with the aliens there. Go home, cook, practice coercion.

He used up a few minutes digging out a bottle of tanning pills when he realized his skin was turning red. He'd only used a few of them back when he lived with Tristan, at their home, before his skin maintained the tan without help. He wouldn't be here long enough for it to matter, but he didn't want to spend that time dealing with a sunburn.

He wished he had a connection now, a way to talk to the network, or just listen to it, instead of walking aimlessly through the town's buildings, but there weren't any computers he could hear. There was the weather station, and some of the farming equipment had processors, but while the station was connected to the network, it was on a dedicated connection to the weather-monitoring satellites, and it had nowhere near the processing power Alex needed to coerce his way out of them.

The farming equipment didn't have their usual connection to the network—not that he could have done much through them either—but it told him they hadn't been acquired legally, or maybe they were old machines someone here had managed to repair. He smiled to himself. Like anyone here would know how to fix that level of technology.

How could anyone live without a computer? What did they do all day?

It was the boredom talking, he knew it. He could see how everyone kept busy making repairs to houses, or should he call them homes? Was “house” exclusively for “the House”? He could smell meals being prepared. In one field people tended to the animals, in another they were farming. He came across a group, working leather and hides.

And they wore almost nothing. No wonder the priestess hadn't reacted to him being naked. The only thing he saw some wear were aprons for protection, and harnesses for tools, and the occasional sword and knife. Which meant, he realized, that the warriors who had welcomed them had worn pants because they expected a fight. Why just pants and not also shirts?

He headed back to the hover and found Jacoby had removed outer panels.

“What's wrong with the hover?”

“Nothing T—he hasn’t damaged.” He indicated Tristan. “There’s only so much reading I can do. Tuning this will keep me busy until Tech’s done and we can leave.”

“His name’s Tristan. You know it, start using it.”

Jacoby pull out of the section of the hover he was in. “I know him as Tech. I told you before, I don’t care what he’s done out here. Back home he’s Tech, that’s who we know him as. That’s who he’s going to be again when we get back, so no, I’m not going to start calling him something else just because you don’t like it.”

Alex looked at the man too stunned to be angry. Did he actually think Tech was the real one? This went beyond delusi—

No, it didn’t, he realized. He’d been the same way. How long had it taken him? How long had he seen Jack in the littlest things? In when Tristan didn’t beat him up as badly as he could? That he’d convinced himself being forced to have sex was a show of caring?

Jacoby wasn’t delusional, he’d simply fallen for Tristan’s trickery, and hadn’t been forced to live with anything that utterly contradicted what he believed in. He could explain what he was seeing with the drugs, the trauma.

He was in for a shock once Tristan was back.

“Alright, fine. You call him what you want. How long until you have it back together?”

Jacoby smiled. He probably saw this as a victory. “I can have it back together in a couple of hours. I’m just giving it a proper adjustment. Whoever Tech stole it from never took it in to be looked at.”

Alex ignored the use of the name. “Can you reestablish the connection to the network? I’d like to have something to do.”

“Sure, if you can get me a broadcasting array. Tech took it out and dropped it off somewhere before bringing it to us.”

Alex sighed. “So it’s going to be utter boredom for me.”

“You can help, if you want.”

Alex shook his head and went in. “Mechanical and electronics are Tristan’s things. I do killing and coercion. I don’t think anyone here will appreciate it if I start killing.”

“No one anywhere appreciates that,” Jacoby replied.

Alex went through the cabinets. He’d searched them before, when looking for Tristan’s stash of stims he had been certain was hidden, and he’d seen binoculars. Now he was wondering if they’d let him pass the time.

He found them shoved in with lamps and other camping equipment. Who bought a hover like this and then put a portable habitat in it? He checked the binoculars’ setting and found it had a zoom function. Good. He climbed on the roof of the hover and set about looking at the field with the animals and herders.

Eight men—buff, furry, and naked—worked in the field, three of them staying at the periphery while the five others herded the animals. They used hand-signals to communicate, but Alex was more interested in admiring their bodies than figuring out the code.

He watched them for half an hour as they rounded the animals and harassed each other, sometimes ending up in a tussle that left the participants excited, but none of them appeared to react to it. With nudity being normal, erections were also considered normal. While he enjoyed those sights, Alex felt himself blush. He knew he wouldn’t be able to be as comfortable with that as they were.

A group of men and women joined them, carrying food, and while they ate, two of them stepped away, holding each other close, until they were out of his sight. He had a good idea what they would be doing, and he wasn’t interested in spying on that. He didn’t need the reminder of what he wasn’t getting at the moment.

After eating, the herders went back to their work, although it sometimes felt more like play to Alex. After another hour, he was considering heading inside and making

personal use of the sights he'd gathered, when the mood among the herders shifted.

They tensed, and as they did, Alex felt his own tension increase. They were on alert, looking up and over the trees. As he started searching the skies, Alex heard the high-pitch sound in the distance. He found where it came from: a hover was approaching.

He couldn't make any details from it, but the herders were now hurrying the nervous animals toward the barn. If they didn't like the approaching hover, Alex didn't like it either.