

Alex spun at hearing someone speak Tristan's name. He'd been trying to make himself understood by the Samalians inside, going from one to another and seeing if they spoke SpaceGov Standard. As much as he respected the rights of aliens to be their own people, there was something to be said about speaking a standard language.

He hadn't kept track of Tristan once he'd seen him studying the statues in the alcoves, and mostly keeping away from the others. Now a Samalian was addressing him directly, and in Standard, and Tristan looked nervous.

Jacoby was by the entrance, where he'd stayed. He was watching the two attentively, and Alex hurried to join them before Tristan lost it, or Jacoby decided he had to intervene.

The Samalian was slightly smaller than Tristan, slighter of frame and not as massive. In humans that would lead Alex to think woman, but here? He had no idea. Even though they were shirtless, none of the Samalians had breasts the way human women did. And their pants were looser than Tristan's, which meant that there was no clear indication of bulges.

They noticed him approaching, and by the time he reached them, they were speaking Samalian, and Tristan had his ears folded back. He was afraid.

"That's enough." He had a hand over the pommel of the knife in his sleeve before he remembered he was here looking for assistance. Killing one of them wouldn't help that. The case he was holding made his motion obvious, and the Samalian looked at him.

Good, Alex thought. Stop bothering Tristan and deal with me. He wanted to yell at Tristan to get himself together. He was a killer, and the other Samalian knew it; they were tense.

"Who are you?" their Standard was heavily accented, but understandable. She looked beyond Alex as Jacoby joined them. She said something in Samalian, and Tristan looked at Alex before answering. He should've been breaking that Samalian, not acting like a scared child.

"I said, that's enough." He handed the case to Jacoby. He didn't need that getting in the way of making his point. "I'm Alex, this is Jacoby. You clearly know Tristan."

"I know of him," she answered. "Anyone who pays attention to what happens in space will know of him."

"Fine, who are you?"

Instead of answering, the Samalian looked beyond them and Alex reached in his sleeve. Tristan tensed, not ready to fight, but to flee. The Samalian raised a hand and spoke. Alex turned. Two of the larger Samalians in the room, both wearing identical dark-red pants with a sword at their belts, stopped. There was a short conversation, and they turned back to the door they'd come from.

"I am Mal'irtan." She considered something. "Humans would call me the head priestess of this House."

Tristan said something in Samalian, without any confidence. She nodded.

She motioned to a different door. "Will you accompany me? I believe this is better discussed in private." She turned and headed for it.

He wanted to throw a knife in her back for the way she wasn't even checking to see if they were coming with her.

"Are you okay?" he asked Tristan. He wanted to take him, hold him, but he looked ready to bolt.

"I can take him back to the shuttle," Jacoby offered.

Alex didn't want the two of them alone, but Jacoby's suggestion did make sense. The shuttle was a controlled environment, away from anything that could set Tristan off.

"No," Tristan said, his voice shaky. "I'm okay, I can handle this." His head snapped to the left, and he opened, then clamped his mouth shut, glancing at Alex. "I'm okay," he repeated.

Alex fought the reflex to look where Tristan had. He knew there would be no one

there. He couldn't still be hallucinating people; the drugs were out of his system.

Mary's warning about Tristan being broken beyond the drugs came back, and he had to bury the need to scream. Tristan was already enough of a mess without adding seeing people to it.

"Are you sure? You need to stay in control. I can't have her say something that'll set you off."

Tristan nodded.

Alex didn't believe him, but he preferred keeping him close. "Jacoby, take the rear."

The man nodded.

The door was still open, and on the other side was a short corridor with two doors on each side. She waited at the furthest one on the left, then went in.

The room was large, a mix of an office and storage. There was a desk in the far corner and large crates along the wall, as well as a few smaller ones set randomly on the floor. He walked by an open one containing emergency rations—the kind of stuff sent to planets without the technological infrastructure to deal with catastrophes. What were those doing here? With a corporation present, they should be able to handle anything the planet could throw at them.

She rested against the desk, comfortable in her space, in her authority. She spoke in Samalian. Tristan opened his mouth, closed it. Alex kept his expression neutral when Tristan looked at him. Without understanding what was being said, he didn't want to influence the conversation.

Tristan looked away. "He's in charge," he whispered to the priestess. He glanced briefly in the direction of no one and winced, his ears folded back, as if he was berating himself. No, he was seeing someone berating him. Alex wished he knew who it was. Maybe he could help stop it, but what if Tristan was seeing him doing it?

"I had heard Tristan was fierce," the priestess said. She looked surprised by what Tristan had said. Her ears were straight and forward. "Humans call him a killer, a monster. Is that a lie? Have humans made him a..." She searched for a word. "Myth?"

"No," Alex answered without hesitation, hating the idea someone might doubt who Tristan was. Which left him having to figure out how to continue when she looked at him expectantly. "He was kidnapped, drugged, and tortured." He pressed his lips together. "And he was bound by the Defender."

One of her ears tilted. Confusion? He hadn't realized until now how human Tristan's reactions were. He couldn't use how he read him to know what she thought.

Reluctantly, he let go of the pommel and took the case from Jacoby. He opened it so she could see the contents. "This was taken from one of your temples."

"House," she corrected. "Our word for what this is means a place of warmth, of belonging. The inscription at the entrance reads: 'All are welcome to the Source. All are of the Source. Be at peace and enter.' Human temples are not that."

"Fine, it was taken from one of your Houses, and we want to return it."

"Why?" she asked in disbelief. She looked at Tristan, who was turning one of the emergency rations in his hand. She said something in Samalian, and he stopped. When she continued, it was in Standard. "I was under the impression you have no faith, Tristan. Do not all survivors turn their back on the Source?"

Tristan shrugged, then closed his eyes, as if pained. He rubbed his muzzle.

"Then why do you care if he is returned?"

Tristan glared at Alex. "I don't."

She looked to him. "You want to return him? Isn't he worth more to your human collectors than I could ever pay?"

"I'm not doing this for the credits."

"You are a mercenary, are you not? Are not credits all mercenaries care about?"

"Not me."

"Or me," Jacoby added.

“Then why?”

Alex couldn't keep from glancing at Tristan, who was staring at the ration as if it was an encryption he needed to break. “I need a boon from him.”

Her muzzle opened as if she was going to say something, but she threw her head back and a series of barks escaped. She seemed to have trouble getting them under control, and Alex realized she was laughing. He had the knife out, ready to gut her for laughing at him.

She saw it and her laughter died away. “I offer an apology,” she said between persistent snickers. “I meant no insult.”

Alex didn't believe her, but he still needed her to arrange whatever needed to happen for this to work. Despite that, he didn't put the knife away.

She let out a sigh, and still smiling, she said, “They are old stories. From before we knew the world was larger than what we saw.”

“Are you telling me no one here makes promises over him anymore?” He tightened his grip. If he'd come all this way and she wasn't going to help him...

“They do. But they are rituals. They give comfort, they provide...” She trailed off, then whispered a word in Samalian.

“Structure,” Tristan answered. “Yes, structure. There is no power.”

“I don't believe you,” Alex snapped. “Belief grant gods power. And plenty of people here have to believe in them, even if you don't.”

She watched him, and he felt the desire to cut her increase.

“God' is a human word,” she said. “The Defender is no god. He is a part of us. All of us.” She looked at Tristan. “The Aggressor also. As are the Thinker, the—”

“I don't care what you call them.” Alex could almost hear the pleading in his voice. “All I'm interested in is if you'll take him back so I can get a boon.”

She sighed and stepped to the case. She took the statue out, surprised at the weight. She hadn't believed it was authentic. She studied it, running her fingers over it with something like reverence.

She placed it back in the case. “He doesn't belong here.”

“Listen here—”

She glared at him with such authority that he stopped. “If you want a boon from him, he must return to his House, not another's.”

Alex reigned in his anger. “Fine. Where's that House?”

She sat on the edge of her desk again. She looked from him, to Tristan, Jacoby, and back to him. “First, I need payment.”

Alex raised his knife. “If you think you can just play me...”

“I know his House. I know they will be happy to get him back. He was taken long ago. I will not tell you without payment.”

Alex took a step.

“Threats will not work.” There was no hesitation in her voice. “Others have tried.” She pulled on a pant leg and what she exposed was more scarred flesh than fur. She raised it to her knee.

He couldn't help feeling sick. They had been done over a long time, but a few were still scarring over. The cuts had been done with care, to inflict as much pain as possible. The scarring continued under the pants.

But didn't go above them. Her chest and arms were fine.

“They do not want others to tell what they do to me,” she said, noticing his gaze.

Alex nodded and wanted to ask her who had done that to her. Shoving that desire down was tougher, but he managed it. Her pain didn't matter to him, other than to show him he couldn't force her to reveal what she knew.

He sheathed his knife. “Alright. How much do you want?”

“I will not take credits. I will not take anything those corporations have a hand in.”

“Then what kind of payment do you want?”

“I want these corporations killed.” The hate in her voice burned hot. “I want each of them reduced to dust so the wind can spread them over the land.”

Jacoby chuckled.

She glared at him. “My anger is unjustified?”

“How you feel isn’t any of my—”

“They take my people away. Some they send to the mountains, the prairies, the forests, and jungles. They say it is so ‘they can live with nature as they are meant to’. Others they have act as humans, put on clothing like you, go into the towers and sit in rooms. More they take to be trained, to be made better.” She snarled. “Those they turn into animals for hard tasks.”

She paused, caught her breath. “I will not do violence. I am not an Aggressor. But you are.” She indicated Tristan.

“Let me see if I got this straight,” Jacoby said. “You want us to destroy the corporation running this place in exchange for where that rock comes from?”

She nodded.

“Alex, this is stupid. Let’s get out of there.”

Alex studied her, the fire in her eyes. Violence might not be something she’d do, but she wished she could. “What you want can’t be done.”

She glared at him, and he thought there was a time he would crumble under such hate.

“What’s here isn’t all there is. LeisureTek is spread throughout the universe. They’re on hundreds, if not thousands of planets. Unless you’ve traveled through the universe, you can’t understand how vast it is.”

She closed her eyes, forced her breathing to slow. “I know.” The words were hard, as if she hated them as much as the corporations. “I know,” she said again, smoother this time. “I have not seen the universe, but I do know.” She opened her eyes, and the fire in them was down to low embers. “What I want cannot be what I ask for. What I ask for is that you force the corporations to stop building their city. They wish to suffocate me and my people with it.”

“Come on, Alex,” Jacoby said, “You know even that can’t be done. This is a con.”

Alex put his own anger aside, his desire to help her, and considered what she was asking as objectively as he could. “Jacoby’s right. We could be at it for years; there’s too many possible companies involved. We’d have to identify them, find out where each company stores their equipment, and figure out a way to destroy one depot without alerting the other companies as to what was happening.”

She hurried around the desk and took a datapad from a drawer. An Arcant, Alex figured, one of the older models. She laid it on the desk and brought up a map. It was small; the pad didn’t have holographic capability it was so old. She pointed to an area on it. “It is all there.”

“They put everything in one place?” Jacoby asked doubtfully.

Alex studied the map. He couldn’t see any information about the location, but the road names were in SpaceGov Standard. He entered them on his pad and pulled more information.

“Equipment has been destroyed in other places. The corporation says vandals, but it is sabotage.”

“You know who?” Alex asked, perusing the building’s information.

“No,” she answered in a tone that meant she did. “Companies complain. Too expensive to protect. The corporation does this. Now guards are there, and the equipment is safe.”

“How many machines are we talking about?” Alex asked. The building was a LeisureTek processing center, as well as a handful of offices linked to that. Destroying that would add to the problems LeisureTek would have in restarting the construction.

“Many. No one can go in to count.”

Alex nodded.

“You can’t seriously be considering this,” Jacoby said.

Alex looked at her. “No one can go in?”

She nodded. “Only humans are allowed near the building.”

He glanced at her legs. “That hasn’t stopped you from trying.” They knew she knew who was doing this. They couldn’t outright kill her since as a priestess, she had a standing among the community. Her death would stir everyone up. They wouldn’t be able to take the corporation down, but they could cause it enough bad publicity, if news got out, it would push back whatever plans they had by decades. It wouldn’t stop them—corporations worked on time frames of decades and centuries—but that didn’t mean they enjoyed being delayed.

How long? He wanted to ask. How long had it been since they last came to question her? How long had the corporation been subjugating her people? Had they been the first? Or was LeisureTek simply the first to work out how to make enough of a profit here to warrant such aggressive methods?

He wanted to ask, to do something about it, but he didn’t. It wasn’t important to the job he was taking. This wasn’t about helping her and the Samalians under the heel of a corporation, this was about paying for the information he needed.

“What is the security like?”

She brought up a file.

“Alex, look, this isn’t worth making enemies of a corporation like LeisureTek,” Jacoby said.

Someone had done their research. She had the guards’ schedule, their patrol routes in and outside the building, even pictures. That meant she had access to a coercionist. He doubted the coercionist was Samalian, and it made him feel better to know that not all humans ignored aliens’ plight.

“They can only be our enemies if they know it’s us,” Alex said. “I want to be clear. We destroy this compound and you tell us where to go to return the Defender. No running around and trying to get me to do another job.”

“Yes.” The one word carried so much eagerness, Alex could have laughed.

“Alex, come on, there has to be an easier way to get the information you want.”

Alex looked at the map. He didn’t think this would be all that difficult. “Maybe, but I’m not wasting the time looking for it. This is here and now.” He copied the information from her pad before putting his away. He closed the case. “I’m leaving him in your care. Think of it as my incentive to come back.”

He motioned for Tristan to lead the way.

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“Alex, this is a waste of time.” They were outside now, and he was surprised Jacoby waited that long to speak. “Blowing up that place is barely going to slow LeisureTek.”

“That isn’t my problem. She gave the price, I agreed to it. What happens once we’ve left is her problem. The Defender is going to be back where he belongs and Tristan back to himself.”

“Are you telling me this is about some mumbo jumbo stuff? It’s a piece of stone, Alex. You can’t cure Tech—”

“Tristan,” he growled.

“Tristan,” Jacoby sighed, “just by dropping it off to some temple. He needs to see a medical professional.”

“Feel free to leave.”

“What?”

“I didn’t force you to come along, Jacoby. You don’t like this, just leave. Head back to the ship, take it, and go wherever you want. We can find ourselves a new ship once we’re done here.”

“I’m not abandoning either of you,” Jacoby replied in a tone that said Alex was an idiot for thinking otherwise.

“Then stop arguing and start working on a plan to destroy all those machines.”