

Tristan considered letting go of Teklile on hearing the yell. It came not from up the stairs leading to the floor, but from where and Alex had come, before separating. It wasn't what had been said, since that was too distorted by the distance to be made out. It was who had yelled.

Alex.

He settled for moving quickly, forcing the man he was supporting to limp along. A second voice. Utterly indistinct for speaking quieter, calmer.

"Are you fucking insane?" Alex yelled. Tristan turned into the passage leading to the garden. "Stay away from me!"

The rain was only a drizzle, and in the light from the broken window as well as that used to illuminate the garden, Alex stood, a body at his feet and over a dozen of the acolytes.

"It's alright," the one in the front said, in a soothing tone, hands up to show he was not making any aggressive motions. "We understand that—"

"You don't fucking understand—" Alex looked at him, and Tristan tried to puzzle out the anger. "You were wrong," he snarled and advanced. "All this looking inside me was just bullshit, wasn't it? What's your game? How long were going to play me? Were you going to have some job? After which I'd be fixed?"

Since Tristan wasn't the target of Alex's anger, he stepped in his path, letting Teklile stumble to the wall.

"What happened?" he demanded.

"I lost it," Alex snapped. "There were only eight of them, and I fucking snapped. Killed them, then one of the locals approached and I was about to slice them to pieces when your fan tackled me and shoved the two of us out that window, after I planted two knives in him." He glared at Teklile. "This is all your fault. You said I'd gain control!"

"No journey is ever as straightforward as we'd wish," the man replied, pained and panting. While the only significant injury he had was received from the stray shot from those he and Alex initially stopped, the mercs hadn't been gentle in trying to get him to reveal where the entrance to the room where the art was stored was.

Tristan was impressed by the man's resilience. He hadn't given in by the time Tristan arrived and hadn't commented on the brutality with which he had ended the mercenaries.

"That is so fucking convenient."

"Alex, once you have calmed down, you will see that this simply means you have more work to do. We can talk, and you—"

"You want me to stay? Are you fucking insane? I turned one of yours into a killer. Nearly killed another and actually killed that one!"

“Maraco’s death is unfortunate, but it happened while—”

“I came here so this would never happen again! Don’t fucking make excuses for what I did. And don’t act like you aren’t disgusted by what I did. Only someone sicker than me can look at me killing someone decent like that guy and not put a gun to my head.”

“Alex,” Tristan said gently, reaching for him.

Alex batted the hand aside and walked inside the sanctuary. “We’re leaving. I’m not putting anyone else here at risk.”

Tristan followed him, waiting until they were out again, in the front, to place a hand on his shoulder.

His human turned and buried his face in Tristan’s chest. “I thought I was finally done with this,” he sobbed. “It was only eight of them. I kept it together at the research station. This should have been easy.”

He wrapped his arms around him. “Were they good?”

Alex nodded.

“Teklile is right. This is a setback not—”

“No. I’m too dangerous. These people don’t deserve to have someone like me among them.”

“Alright. We’ll look for another way.” What that would be, he had no idea. “I’m not giving up, Alex.”

“I know. I don’t want to give up either. I just don’t want to put anyone else at risk.”

“I understand.”

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“Will has something for us,” Alex said while Tristan continued reconnecting power to the rest of the ship. “I’m going to go see what it is.”

When Tristan pulled himself out from the conduit, Alex was still seated, subvocalizing instructions. He considered what to do with his other ships. He could program them so they would fly to one of his hiding places, but that came with the risk someone would notice them and, through that, discover it. Depending on what Will had for Alex, they could escort the ships. Slaving them to this one meant they would be able to take advantage of the same indirect route programing.

Or he could leave them here. They were far from the sanctuary and hidden from view by the regrowing canopy. The way the flora grew here, he expected that by the time winter came, it would be impossible to tell multiple ships had landed here. Fully shut down as they were, someone would have to scan specifically for ship building material for them to register as more than mounds containing mix of those elements.

“Will found him,” Alex said in a dark tone that had Tristan looking over his shoulder. His human had an expression of pure maliciousness. “And it turns out Hard isn’t the nice guy he was passing himself off as.”

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Tristan was puzzled and somewhat impressed by what a visual scan of the planet showed.

He’d flown them around the planet, wanting to avoid giving away their presence with active scanning, looking for the structure the mercs William had hired for them had described, and it hadn’t taken long.

The structure in question was an amalgamation of cities covering half the planet, with a massive tower at its center, and separated by massive walls nearly matching the tower in height. Passive sensors didn't register any of the signals technology emitted, with the only significant one being small pockets of heat. Inside buildings, or, on the night side, lining the streets.

Fire for light and heat.

The mercs had been chased off by the tower's defenses. But it had only been triggered once they approached the landing pad at the top. Their report had described precision fire, but not how they had been detected. Most likely, proximity sensors, but it was possible they had attempted a scan they hadn't included in the report and that had been the trigger.

He risked a scan of the edge of the city amalgamation based on the lack of technological indicators and most of the results matched what he saw. Stone and wood were the principal materials used in the building's construction. Other than the wall delineating the cities, there were no synthetic materials within what he scanned.

The walls, on the other hand, were another thing. They were polycarbon with a coating of synthetic stones. They were hollow, and mostly empty, except for the magnetic ground transport tube with stations at regular intervals. He scanned as close to the tower as he felt safe to do so and it the tube and stations were within all the walls.

"That confirms this isn't natural," Alex said, reading over his shoulder. "Are those fields?"

Tristan changed the focus of the scan and nodded at the results. "Grain, registered under SpaceGov's Agricultural Registration Protocol."

"So this is approved?" he asked, tone dubious.

"I doubt it. The registration protocols exist to ensure that anything a planet exports that will be consumed falls within what SpaceGov considers safe. According to the algorithms, the size if the fields within this enclosure will barely produce a surplus from what is required to feed the population the scan reveals."

"So, they barely trade," Alex mused, "or the wealthy consume the excess."

"The latter I expect. While the walls show hidden accesses, they can only be controlled from the inside."

"What's the point? When Will's mercs mentioned Hart was off his drive in their report, I didn't expect this." He looked at the scene on the screen. People shabbily dressed in a place reminiscent of the market Alex had taken him while he wore the mask of Jack. "Do you think he's the one who had this built? Or did he just inherit it?"

"That is..." Tristan zoomed out until the entire city was visible. "What civilization if Marllove Arthonom from?"

"Who?"

"The artist who painted Moonset on Shoroun."

"That's the painting Hart was after, right?" Alex asked uncertainly.

"Yes. See what you can pull from the net. Try to find me a map of the city he lived in among that."

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"You can't be serious," Alex said, looking at the juxtaposed cities. "What I found was

a badly preserved drawing of a city map. There's no way they can match."

He moved the image to overlap. "Unless that drawing was the blueprint used to build this city."

"But there are people down there, and they look like they live in the kind of civilization that Arthonom was from. But it can be them. The guy died over a thousand objective years ago. Shoroun is in the SpaceGov registry, so that means they're at least space faring. If that city's still around, it's all modern, including the people."

"I think that Carter Hart didn't settle for collecting Marllove Arthonom's art. He collected the artist's life."

"But why build everything out of ancient material? Have the people there dressed like they do in those primitive civilizations?"

"Authenticity, I think," Tristan says, bringing up a section of the wall with a station and access leading out of it. "These only make sense if someone will step out and move among the people. The transport tube will have an access to the tower, it's most likely where it originates from. Primitives build with what is around them. The way the Samalian town is made of the stones and the wood they can get from the forest and the hills. Using synthetic materials would...mare the experience for someone who knows the truth of the city."

"You're saying the people there don't know they're being collected? How do they explain the walls?"

"How do primitives explain anything? Gods and entities more powerful than anything they can imagine."

"Someone has to have tried getting through, or over it."

"Most likely, but the tools they have access to would never scratch what the stones on the walls are made of. No one sane would attempt to climb a wall this tall, and any crazy enough to try it would give up, or fall."

"And you think Hart built all of that?" Alex pulled up the collected scans that reached nearly two third of the way to the tower. "That's what, thousands of cities? Millions? Where did he get everyone?"

"There are millions of lost colonies throughout the universe. Which means plenty of people for someone like Carter Hart to have collected and transplanted."

"That...has to have taken centuries. A lot more than how old the records claim Hart is. Two hundred and fifty-eight are what each of his duplicates claim he is."

"And how certain can we be of those claims?"

Alex snorted. "Give me five minutes and SpaceGov's records will have you being twelve."

Tristan smiled. "Doesn't SpaceGov regulate age of sexual maturity at something older than twelve?"

"You are quite mature for your age," Alex replied. He looked at the screen. "What do you think those other cities are about, then?"

"I suspect that Carter Hart collects more than only Marllove Arthonom's art."

"And the read I got off him was that he was nothing more than a harmless rich guy with the usual 'what I want is mine' mentality. I thought the mercs were a bit much, but I was more on Teklile's side with this. It was just him being spiteful. Looking at this

though... I'm thinking the Sanctuary has seen a lot worse since we left."

"Possibly not. Without knowing where the painting is kept, Carter won't risk a level of assault that could damage it. If the ex-mercenaries care about the sanctuary, they will get over their fears and take up arms to defend it."

"Not a believer in the peaceful approach?" Alex asked, chuckling.

"I believe in the controlled and willful application of violence."

"Then what kind of application of violence are we using here? Your ever favorite, blowing up the tower with everyone in it?"

Tristan brought up the visuals on the tower, studying zoomed sections. "Those are field generators. Within an atmosphere, the only reason for them, considering the materials used to build the tower won't be bothered by even the worse the planetary weather can throw at them, is as a protection against energy attacks. Taking into account the wealth demonstrated by what was accomplished here, and it will be the best that can be obtained."

"You can't tell who made those?"

Tristan narrowed his eyes at Alex. "I can barely make out the emitters which, by now, are mostly standardized."

"Sorry." His human raised his hands in a defeated gesture, grinning widely. "I was under the impression you could tell everything about offensive and defensive equipment with just a glance at a speck of them."

"Regardless of my lack at being able to identify who made this system. It's reasonable to assume the energy required to overpower it would be enough to ignite the atmosphere. While the older me would have no problem doing it, there is half a planet's worth of people who didn't have a say in being here. It feels...wrong to force them to pay for one man causing your training at the sanctuary to end early." He studied Alex's reaction.

"I'm not going to go off on you not being willing to murder, I don't know how many, billion of innocents. My training is about no longer carelessly killing. If we can't blow it up, what is the plan?"

"Were you able to coerce your way in?"

"Barely, the window of contact they have is so short all I could do was sneak in a few programs to report with each window." He reached over to tap his console and the image of the tower appeared through the holographic display. "It's incomplete. I can't tell you how many windows it's going to take to get all the information on the tower. Everything they gathered between windows was sent, but for some reason, all I got were these few layers of information." He waved a hand through the projection and the outside went away, revealing voids through a solid form. "The corridors and rooms are all that came in at this point. I'm hoping to get—"

Tristan studied the large void six levels down from the top. It took nearly half of that available floor, with only one noted access. There would be others, he was sure of it, but they wouldn't be noted on the living schematics. Which was what this was. Carter Hart had added protection layers against someone acquiring the plans to his tower by splitting all the information layers and storing them in different locations within the system. Without a coercionist to guide the program's search, it was simply bad luck for him that Tristan

already had the most important information.

“That’s his panic room.”

Alex studied it. “How are you working that one out?”

“His collection. If all he has is one piece from each artist the cities represent, he will need a large space to display it in. He will also not allow that space to be easily breached because, while it is for different reasons, like Teklile, he won’t be willing to let anyone leave with his art. The level of protection required to build such a room makes it a natural place for him to retreat to in the event the tower is assaulted.”

“Okay, so we know where we’ll find him once we get in. Which we still haven’t worked out how to—”

Tristan smiled.