

Tristan watched the Samalians mingle around the large, circular room, trying to find the few among them he knew. He hadn't expected all these people for what he'd considered a private event, but he didn't mind them being here. This would explain why Hea'Las had insisted on doing this here, and not at his and Alex's home. This was more than the immediate friends they'd expected.

A Samalian whose orange and black fur was now splotched with white headed for him, took Tristan's hand in his, and shook with vigor. He spoke the Roug'arn dialect with an accent, which made him originally from the Togarian Mountains. He thanked Tristan over and over for the help he provided. Tristan replied in the same dialect, minus the accent. He and Alex had enjoyed the outing they'd gotten while clearing gangs out of that region.

The man rejoined his family by one of the alcoves housing the Aspects. They all had people by them, being a natural gathering point, even if no praying happened. Four of them claimed most of the attention. Life-sized representations, instead of the miniature statues the other alcoves contained. The local artist was slowly sculpting new representations for all of them. She'd undertaken the project once the House was rebuilt. The Lovers, the Nurturer, the Defender, and the Aggressor were complete.

The Aggressor had been the first the artist delivered, and Alex had laughed on seeing it. Tristan had been tempted to snap the artist's neck. Instead, he'd pointed out the coloring was supposed to be local. The middle-aged woman with pale copper fur and expanding white swirls looked him up and down and replied with confidence that dark-brown with white speckling was indeed a local coloring, since he bore it.

Alex, still laughing, had pulled him away before he could pointedly explain he wasn't local. Even his home was days away by hover.

"The universe is laughing right now," Tristan had grumbled.

"They're honoring you," Alex had replied, resting his head on his shoulder.

The next time they came to see an addition to the Aspects, Tristan didn't laugh. It hadn't been easy, but he didn't. Alex had been mortified at what he felt was a desecration of the Defender. He'd pointed to his arm and yelled at the artist that color didn't exist in Samalian fur, and had no business being put on the Aspect. And that he should be dressed traditionally, meaning barely, and not in modern pants and a jacket. Only when he'd calmed down had he noticed they were gray and crimson.

"Wait here," he'd told Tristan. "I need to go kill that artist."

Tristan had caught his arm. "She's just honoring you," he pointed out.

"I'm not a Samalian."

Tristan held his human against him and kissed the top of his head. "Seems you are now."

A woman approaching pulled him back to the present. She spoke the language of the Ice Plains, Norg'Al'Tora, which Tristan was still learning, so his replies were tentative. They'd been returning from a supply run in one of the southern cities when Alex intercepted the call for help.

They'd gotten there too late to save the town, but had gone after the raiders responsible. Mercs, hired by one of the corporations that had filled the void left when LeisureTek's hold on Samalia had finally been broken. He hadn't known anyone that lived that far south until then, with their white and silver fur. These mercs had been after spiritual objects—not the Aspects worshiped elsewhere, but sculptures of creatures of legends.

She spoke of the reconstruction of her town and introduced him to a young man, his white fur spotted with pale gray spots, and invited him and Alex to attend the re-consecration of their shrine on the first sunless day.

He promised the two of them would be there.

People gave the glowing half-sphere in the center of the room plenty of space, which Tristan found amusing since it was supposed to be a show of respect for the Source,

but they were already within the Source, the House being a half-sphere representing the same.

He contemplated approaching it, just to show nothing would happen, but decided it was better not to attract any more attention than he already was.

Alex spoke with Rig'Irik, who looked exhausted, holding his youngest daughter, while his two sons—the twins—ran around his legs. Those two took full advantage of the reverence Rig'Irik had for their status as twins to run all over him. Tristan located Rig'Irik's mates, Janalar and Gorforn, caught their attention, and indicated their suffering mate.

Someone needed to go rescue him, since Alex wouldn't. He enjoyed watching his friend driven to near insanity with fatherhood. Once their mother and father reached Rig'Irik, they freed him of the burden, and the six of them moved away.

Tristan was happy Alex and Rig'Irik had managed to rebuild their friendship, but he tolerated Tristan, at best. Rig'Irik still felt Tristan had been wrong for Alex, and Tristan just didn't care, which seemed to infuriate Rig'Irik even more.

"You're cruel," Tristan said, nuzzling the back of Alex's neck.

Alex leaned into him. "He was always going on about being a father; he even said we needed little ones too. I'm just enjoying watching him reap what he sowed."

Tristan watched them vanish in the crowd. "Considering the amount of sowing those three did, he should be lucky he only has three kids."

"They decided they were going to wait a few years before the next one."

Tristan snorted. "Unless Janalar goes to the city to get her fertility paused, no level of precaution is going to keep the fourth from arriving before the year's up. Gorforn is too impulsive."

The hush that fell over the people in the House kept Alex from replying. Everyone turned to watch the woman enter. Hea'Las wore a skirt of wooden beads that rubbed together and clinked as she moved. That and the bone necklace were all she wore, both traditional.

"That's our cue," Alex said, and Tristan swallowed hard, suddenly nervous. As much as he'd looked forward to this moment, now that it was here, the great Tristan was afraid. Afraid that even with all they'd gone through, this would be too much for Alex, that this was when he'd leave.

Alex looked at him over his shoulder, smiled, and motioned for him to come, and Tristan reminded himself of his promise, so many years ago now. It was Alex's decision to leave or stay. He'd done everything he could to ensure he wanted to, but in the end, Tristan would accept whatever that decision was.

Idiot boy, a voice said in the back of his head. He's here, isn't he? What are you waiting for? He hurried to join Alex, so they reached the glowing half-sphere together.

Hea'Las joined them, watched them, and smiled. "The Source," she intoned, her voice carrying, "is where all come from, and where all go toward. It is the beginning and the end, but while all start at the same point and end the same; the paths along its surface are infinite. Some we forge ourselves, others we are put on without realizing it." She fixed her gaze on Tristan. "And we fight against it so hard, it can be a wonder the Source even bothers trying. But we must remember that no matter where we are on those paths, the Source is with us. The Source is always the path we are following."

Tristan narrowed his eyes at her. Really? She thought now was the time for yet another reminder he'd always been walking the path? The chuckles that circulated among the crowd told that others had also noticed the intent. Her smile lost none of its innocence, and that made him want to return the jab, point out her inability to settle for the lovers she cared the most for, to have children the way it was a priestess' duty, but he kept his mouth shut.

He was more in balance now, his anger—the Aggressor in him—no longer having to be obeyed. The Lovers served to remind him that she said it because she cared. She

reminded him of the path that led him here because he needed the occasional reminder, lest he forget all he had invested and take it for granted. Take Alex for granted.

When the crowd grew silent again, she continued. "The Source doesn't judge. It doesn't tell us who should and shouldn't be together."

"Good thing too," Tristan said without meaning to. His ears burned as Alex chuckled.

"Yes," Hea'Las said, her smile not wavering. "I expect watching you take that up with the Source would be...amusing."

The crowd used far less polite words for what they thought it would look like. And who would win that argument. Tristan thought his name came out louder.

"Aggressor and Defender," Hea'Las said, raising her voice as a reminder of why they were here. She looked at Tristan and Alex. "The two of you still have work before you. You are a pairing that isn't known for having an easy time of it. The Aggressor's combative nature can easily be fed by the Defender's willingness to endure, to let the other take and take until there is nothing left. It may all crumble when, in desperation, the Defender finally fights back."

When she continued, her voice was solemn and sad. "We have many examples of such explosive attempts: Omar and Opher, and Tur'Got, Fadel, and Larhor, to name but two." She smiled again. "But today we are witnessing a pairing that will go down in history not because of how explosive it was, but because they reached that rare balance point where both Aggressor and Defender are not only at peace with who they are, but who they are with."

She opened her hands between them, and Tristan placed his in hers, Alex doing the same. She brought them together, and they clasped hands. They had done this before, rehearsing the ceremony, alone and with Hea'Las as well as the people representing the Source, but Tristan felt something this time. A tingle ran down his arm as Alex's hand closed on his. He felt his eyes grow wet, and had to fight the reflex to wipe at them.

"Who has the rope?" Hea'Las called, and Rig'Irik approached, presenting a thick rope. "Would you bind these lovers?" She asked.

"Do I look suicidal to you?" Rig'Irik replied, and his ears folded back in embarrassment as laughter spread. Even Hea'Las had to cover her mouth. He cleared his throat. "It is not the place for such as I to bind anyone," he said, tone official. "It is their love that will bind them. It is their will that will keep them together." He dropped the rope and walked away.

"Who here would test these lovers?" Hea'Las asked.

A woman with golden fur and copper stripes approached. She was taller than Tristan, muscular, determined, and with a sense of humor Tristan had trouble grasping at times. He enjoyed fighting with her, and she'd made it clear she would like to do more than fighting.

She looked at Tristan, her face severe, and placed a hand over his wrist. She looked at Alex and did the same. She looked at Hea'Las and spoke in her deep voice. "It is not the place for such as I to test them. The Source will offer its own test. It will try to pull them apart, and it will be for them to keep their love together." She removed her hand and stepped away.

"Who here would ask that those two show their love for the world to see?" Hea'Las asked.

A young girl stepped forward. She'd survived the destruction of her town, and had grown up in part because of Alex and Tristan's actions. That adoration had caused its own problems, but Hea'Las had taken her under her tutelage.

She opened her hands, each offering a half stud. "It is not the place for such as I to demand that you show your love. But I present myself with the choice for you to tell the world that you have fought and won, that you will stand by one another through the coming trials, that you hold no shame in how you feel and for whom you feel it."

Tristan took the one offered to him, black instead of golden, as was the tradition. He'd wanted them to stand apart from the rest. He'd wanted anyone who knew of the tradition to not just see that Tristan had a mate, but that there would be no doubt as to who he was.

"You fought me, Alex. Everyone fights me at one time or another, but you fought so hard. I don't think I've ever met anyone as stubborn as you, as determined to get what he wants, no matter the cost. Stories usually describe the Defender as taking more hits than he gives, but what must be remembered is that with each hit he takes, he stands taller, harder against his enemy. I thought you were weak. I thought that you let me do everything I did to you because you couldn't stop me. I didn't realize that you did it because it made you stronger, that when you finally held your ground, I had no choice but to stop and pay attention. To finally see the warrior you were. You took what I gave you and then demanded I become worthy of who you were. You demanded that I become worthy of this moment. And for that, I thank you."

He pressed the stud against Alex's left earlobe and looked him in the eyes, not caring that he was crying. "Apart, we are less than the halves we were."

Alex smiled and reached for the other offered stud. He was crying too. He turned it over in his fingers, and for an instant the fear returned in Tristan's heart.

"I never realized how desperate to live I was," Alex said, his voice distant, and Tristan almost corrected him. That hadn't been what they'd rehearsed. People in the crowd spoke softly, translating Alex's words. He knew multiple Samalian dialects, more than Tristan, but his throat wasn't designed to pronounce the language.

"I'd convinced myself my father was right, that I didn't deserve a life. That because of who I was attracted to, all I could have was the shadow of a life." He looked up at Tristan. "Then you showed up with your lies and this perfect facade I couldn't help but fall in love with. You lied to me, but in the process revealed truths: I could live. I could be happy. And you took that away. In doing so you showed me another truth: I wasn't made to sit in a cubicle, doing a corporation's work. I was meant to go after what I wanted. I wasn't a creature of civility; that was a mask that had been forced on me without my knowledge. I am a hunter. My hunt for you burned away this mask and revealed the creature underneath, the criminal, the killer. The lover. I've hated you at times, I've hated what you did to me, the choices you forced on me, the games you played with me. But I don't regret any of it. It wasn't the path I imagined I would take to find someone who would make me feel this way, but for this moment, among our friends, with you, I'd go through it again."

He reached up for Tristan's left ear and applied the stud. "Together, we are so much more than the whole we form."

In the following silence, Hea'Las placed a hand on each of their shoulder. "You are one."

Tristan leaned in and kissed Alex. It was an act they'd done often, at least once a day, usually more than that. And it wasn't particularly passionate compared to some they had exchanged, when they were both hot from fighting or lovemaking, but it sent a tingle down his spine. This was their first kiss as one under the Source.

This destination had never been certain, as far as he was concerned. So much had stood in their way: his own stubbornness, Alex's traumas, the way they saw the universe.

If there was one thing all the reading he'd done about Samalian beliefs had shown him, it was that the Source didn't care what people thought they wanted. It made things happen the way it wanted, and Tristan couldn't be happier.

The kiss ended, and they gazed in each other's eyes. Alex's gray were bright, almost glowing. Tristan expected his own shone as brightly. He leaned in for another kiss, but someone slapped his shoulder, and before he could growl at the interruption, someone was congratulating him.

Hugs pulled him away, and he glanced at Alex who was being treated the same

way. They grinned at each other, and the light caught on Alex's stud. The crowd might pull them apart, but they would always be together.

He set aside his anger and smiled, thanked his friends and the strangers who'd come to the ceremony. He spoke with people, managing to pull Alex into a kiss before he was dragged away again. Tables were brought out and food laid on them. They ate, cheered, sang, and danced. Couples and groups found unoccupied places to do their own celebrating. He saw Gorforn pull Janalar and Rig'Irik in the Teacher's alcove. Yes, they would have a fourth child before the year was out.

Sometime later the crowd thinned, retiring for sleep or more private celebrating. Only remnants of the food were left, the musicians played softer, and just a few dancers remained.

Hea'Las stood between the Aggressor and Defender, looking serious, and when she noticed Tristan looking at her, she seemed to hesitate before motioning for him. He found Alex dancing between Rig'Irik and Janalar, and motioned to the priestess.

When Tristan reached Hea'Las, Alex was by his side. "How are you two feeling?" she asked.

Alex's smile was brighter than the sun when he looked at Tristan. "I'm going to need awhile before how I feel drops to a level that can be described with words."

Tristan pulled Alex against him. "I'm happy," he said.

Alex rolled his eyes. "Don't let him fool you; he can't find words either."

She smiled. "I also have no words to express how happy I am for you. I knew this day would come—" Tristan snorted. "—hoped this day would come," she corrected. "You give me hope that one day humans may see us as equals. That we will no longer be things to be used or shown off." Her smile faltered. "That day isn't today. I know you said you no longer did jobs, but I am hoping you will be willing to take one, as a favor to me."

Tristan's straightened. It had been years since they'd done a proper job. He and Alex had agreed to stick to Samalia, only help locally. For him, it was a way to get to know his people, as well as ensure neither would grow too bored. Boredom wasn't healthy for them, and the people around them.

He looked to Alex, who nodded. Maybe it was time to get back into the life. "What's the job?" he asked.