

The silence was not unexpected.

The location was.

Tristan stood in a clearing surrounded by Ferstimer trees. It was smaller than how it stood now, after he had enlarged it to make the space needed for his and Alex's home, where his father's cabin had stood. But there, instead of it, nearly torn down by time, or back to the original state of when he'd last seen it, before his last encounter with his father, stood the house he'd built on Terion two, as part of the mask he wore. As part of being Tech.

How the house fit within the footprint of his father's cabin, Tristan attributed to the nature of where he was. If the Forces resided here, the rules that governed what he knew would be different, so he wouldn't waste time trying to understand them.

What he had expected were stones, stacked atop each other to form a wall the height of his hip. He had spent long enough, fought with building it hard enough it was imprinted in his memory. He dreamed of it, whole and fallen. Him despairing it would ever be complete, that he would ever be whole. Him destroying it because it represented someone he would never agree to becoming.

He was never within the dreams. The Defender didn't grace him with his presence in them; come when asked. When Tristan finally exerted control and remade the wall, finished it. Made the alcove and placed the Defender within it. When he brought him home.

The stories spoke of the boon someone gained in doing so. The boon Tristan had gained when he did so while awake. But it seemed the Defender didn't feel stories applied to dreams. So Tristan had found other stories. Other ways to get the Forces' attention.

He had sent himself to their world, if they wouldn't come to his.

He reached for the item in his pocket and found that he wasn't wearing any, and that it was already between his fingers. He rolled the sphere between them, watching its faint glow.

"I'm here," he told it. "Bring him to me."

The sphere glowed brighter, then fell dark.

He didn't call to it again. Stories always warned that the Source was not something that was ordered about, but he was Tristan. He did what he set out to accomplish regardless of other's beliefs. He would never have left his father's clearing if someone else's beliefs defined him.

If the Source wouldn't send the Defender to him, then he would go seek him out. He turned and smiled. His journey would be short.

Before him stood part of a half sphere building. Incomplete, damaged by raids. Patched by modern materials, but only until the right ones could be found. Stubbornness kept it incomplete. Hea'las and his.

She would only accept the ancient ways of remaking it. He would only accept the present ones. Maybe neither one was right. Maybe they both needed to put their desire for how the House should be rebuilt aside and focus on rebuilding it.

He did not let its completeness, once he stepped indie, surprise him. The half sphere surrounding him. Tristan existing within the Source, being part of it.

Why? It was the question that drove him to come here. The secondary job, along with curing Alex.

"Liar!"

He was on the ground next to the Source, his head ringing. He rolled on his back in time to get out of the foot coming down. The Samalian was dark furred with silver swirls. A wall of muscle with fury etched in his feature.

"Him?" the Aggressor demanded. "You think you're doing this for him?"

Tristan rolled to his feet. "I'm not here to meet you."

"Tough luck," the Aggressor snarled. "I'm here to teach what happens when you lie."

Tristan barely stayed ahead of the strikes. The Aggressor had no skill or finesse, but even glancing blows hurt. When Tristan struck back, he was the one feeling the pain of his fist impacting stone hard muscles under the fur. Claws raked, but didn't seem to have an effect.

That didn't mean he wouldn't fight any harder. He was Tristan. He wouldn't be defeated. He had survived the universe. This being wasn't going to—

His head rang from this impact against the wall, his vision swam as the Aggressor strode toward him.

“Lies, lies, lies. It’s all you are. Have you ever been truth?”

“I have never lied about who I am,” he snarled, then he was across the chamber from the punch. He’d been certain the Aggressor had been out of striking distance. He forced himself to his feet and smirked at who looked back at him in the alcove he’d landed next to. The Samalian there remained crouched, hand reaching for the sword at his feet, or maybe about to pick it up. That was the thing about the Defender. Either was possible. He was at ease with a peaceful resolution as much as a violent one when it came to protecting others.

“You lie about that more than anything else,” The Aggressor stated.

Tristan stood and faced him. “I am Tristan, I will not—”

The punches came faster than he could see. The next hitting him before he was done falling from the previous one. When they stopped, the hand around his neck had his thumb under Tristan’s jaw, against his voice box, pressing slowly, inexorably.

Of course, he’d been beaten. This wasn’t someone. He was one of the Forces, the one that represented him. How had he ever thought he could defeat the Aggressor? As much of him as Tristan had within himself, he was but a shadow.

And if Justin could break him, how could he think he was so strong. He hadn’t survived the universe. The universe had never done anything to him.

“See,” someone said, “admitting the truth didn’t kill you.”

The Aggressor was gone. In his place was a slim Samalian with sandy fur and a ripped ear. His jacket was gray, with hints of red throughout.

“You could have helped,” Tristan demanded.

“Nope. This was between you and... well, you.”

“I came here for you.”

“And here you go, lying again.”

Tristan glared at the Defender. “I took what you offered me. I accepted how I feel about Alex, the complications to my life it is bringing.”

“I think you have me confused with someone else,” The Defender said.

“Don’t play games with me!”

“I’m not. You’re the one always playing games, aren’t you?” he put a hand to his face and pulled. “Masks over masks, never showing your true self unless it serves you. Look around, you put yourself in this situation, and yet you still play games.”

“You—”

“If you say I did this, I’m going to show you the Aggressor isn’t the only one able to beat you up. I’m not the one who engineered the whole thing about bringing Alex here so he’d lose control, and do the one thing he thinks himself incapable of doing.”

“I did that for him.”

The Defender waited, ear canted in the ‘I’m waiting’ way Samalians did.

“And me,” Tristan admitted. “But you wouldn’t come otherwise.”

“I’m always here,” the Defender replied.

“Not this,” Tristan motioned around them. “Not in the way of me going to a House and talking to an unresponsive representation. This.” He motioned to them. “Face to face with you, able to give me answers about what the Source wants with me!”

The Defender’s eyebrow went up the way Tristan hadn’t seen Samalians do. It was human body language. One Tristan had taught himself and uses so often he now did it along with the ear twitching.

“I don’t know anything about the Source.”

“You’re the Defender. You’re one of the Force that guides us, you have to know what it wants to be able to do that.”

The Defender stepped up to Tristan. He was shorter than he remembered, almost a full head shorter. He’d seemed taller the last time.

“I’m a piece of your subconscious you’ve given this form to because it reminds you of comfort,

peace, and pleasure.”

Tristan snorted. “I know myself. No Samalian represents those things to me.”

The Defender smirked.

“I’m not asking for secrets,” Tristan said in a softer voice.

“No, you just want to know that there’s a reason behind everything,” the Defender replied. “You, Tristan, who prides himself with always being in control, need to know that there is something else controlling things now that you decided the universe wasn’t out to destroy you. You need to know that you didn’t spend your entire life on a delusion that led nowhere.”

“It led me to Alex,” Tristan stated. “If not for him, I…” he had no idea how to voice the nothing his time before Alex felt like. “So it happened for a reason. I know the universe isn’t some thinking thing that moves us about.”

“So you decided the Source is what did it.” The defended chuckled. “So quick to exchange one delusion for another.” He caught the fist in a hand, still shaking his head in amusement.

Tristan growled, tried to pull it out.

“Do we really have to do this again? Do you think you have that kind of time? You do remember how you got here, don’t you?”

Him looking down at Alex, opening his mouth and particulate filling his throat because he needed him to know. He couldn’t let him think that he held this against him.

*I love you.*

When he stepped away, the Defender let go of his fist. “Why is the silence total?”

The Defender canted his head.

“The last time, I was still aware of what was happening outside. Why not this time? Is it because you don’t feel I need to know? Without Alex in danger for you to use to make your point, the outside doesn’t matter?”

The Defender sighed. “I am not doing this.”

“You’re lying.”

“I’m part of your subconscious, so that’s probably to be expected, but no.”

Tristan fixed his gaze on the other male. “Alright. What’s the price?”

The Defender canted his head again.

“What is the cost for the answer I seek.”

“There is no cost.”

“Everything has a price,” Tristan snapped. “It’s the way the universe works. State it, and I will pay it.”

“Would you?”

“You know I would.”

“What if the price is Alex? What if you have to give him up?”

Tristan swallowed. “Would he be fine without me?”

“You seem to think so.”

“That isn’t an answer.” The growl slipped in his voice in annoyance at the games the Defender was playing.

“I’ll repeat myself again. I’m part of your subconscious. I can’t know what you don’t know. I have no idea if the other team reached the stack room, if they got the secrets Karliak is hiding there. I don’t even know if any of them are still alive, because you don’t know any of that.”

“Why? Why are you being like this? I’m not demanding the Source set me free. I’m not here telling you I want nothing to do with it. I want to know what it needs of me. What it wants me to do.” He faltered, “I need…”

“something outside of you to focus that control of yours,” the Defender said, sounding sad.

“Is that so much to ask for?” Tristan pleaded.

“I don’t know. I think that if it was something I could give you, I would. But I can’t. I don’t know what the Source wants anymore than you do. You’ve read enough on it to know that’s not how they believe it works.”

“It can’t just set paths before us and let us chose where we go. It must have a plan.”

“Maybe. Look, all I’m saying is that I don’t know. Even if I were one of the Forces; that’s not the kind of things something like the Source would tell us. They don’t exist to guide you in one direction or another. They exist to explain what you are. Each of them is a little piece of you, and together, there you are.”

“Are you telling me there is no plan? That it’s all chaos?” The idea of an ungoverned universe was... not a good one.

“I’m telling you that I don’t know.” An ear turned back. “And this is coming to an end.”

“What do you mean?”

“Time’s up.” The Defender turned and walked away.

“I’m not done,” Tristan stated. “You haven’t—”

“I’ve given you the answers you’re getting. It’s not my fault they aren’t the ones you wanted to hear. Oh, and Tristan,” the Defender added as he faded from view. “A word of warning. Even with this extreme of a method, you’re not seeing me again.”

And Tristan realized it hadn’t been the Defender that was fading away. It was everything.