

Premise-2

Tristan didn't know why he was surprised.

He looked at the ruins surrounding the ship.

He'd known this place would be old. The book he'd tracked down had been written in a language that predated standardization, so it placed it in the thousands of year old, objective. He had no reason to believe this society would still be here, other than how SpaceGov had molded everything after itself, long term existing materials and all.

Only, by how worn everything was, this could have happened well before SpaceGov discovered this part of the universe. He wished the information surrounding the book had had more than just where it had been found. Something about the state of this city would have been helpful.

Not that it had to have looked like this, then. He had no idea when the book had been taken from here. Only that it had, and then spent time moving from collector to collector as one of the rare artefact to not fall victim to SpaceGov's militaristic standardization.

"Are you okay?" Alex asked.

Was he? This had been the last of his finds. His last hope, unless he was willing to put Alex under Cryo for the years it would take to unearth another promising lead. If those still existed.

Was he okay?

"No." There had been so many dead ends. "I thought this was it. The description of their process was clear, except for the equipment. Now, I'll have..." He didn't want to think about the Source's method.

Alex chuckled. "You know, my lead isn't that horrible." He sobered as he looked around. "Although, it is as much of a reach as this is, in its own way."

"We're running out of options." He rolled the sphere in his pocket between his fingers. He couldn't even muster anger at it. It wasn't doing this to target him. It wasn't doing this at all. This was simply one of the many paths along its surface he had decided to take. There had not been a promise of success.

The Source never gave that.

Even the path he couldn't stop from thinking as the one the Source wanted him on didn't come with a promise of success.

Alex squeezed his arm. "How about we don't lose up just yet? There's the underground complex the scanners showed. What you're after might be there."

The breath that escaped Tristan shuddered. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't feel this way, but... you're..." Alex deserved the truth. "I'm scared, Alex."

"This isn't over yet. And if this and my lead don't give us result, there are others out there. One of them is going to be real."

And wasn't that what scared him? Because if, unlike everywhere they'd looked, the Source's path was real, Tristan would have to figure out how far he was willing to go to cure Alex. What he was willing to risk.

“Let’s go look.” He headed for the largest of the ruins. The books had described the place of worship as larger than any other. It was where those who had stood between the people here and their enemies came to be able to rejoin their society. Where they stopped being killers and were again fathers and husbands and mothers and daughters. Or the species’ equivalent.

The books had made it clear those who’d lived here hadn’t been human, but hadn’t gone in depth over what that meant. It had been written by one of the inhabitants, and the book was about their culture, not their biology.

He didn’t know if the desert had been here when the city was inhabited. If not, it had come not long after the end of these people, because there were no traces nature had grown around the stone structure that remained. The marks of destruction were broken or sandblasted. Earthquake, or the wind.

The passage leading underground was buried by stone. Maybe the roof had caved in, or a wall had fallen over it. It was impossible to tell; it had been worn down to an indistinct chunk of the same tan color as every other around.

Carefully placed explosives removed it from their way, then they ventured down a cooling passage, illuminated by their torches. The passage turned and bifurcated, had stairs going down, and sometimes up. Rooms had no doors, and eventually, something of the people who had existed here survived time.

“Look at that,” Alex said in awe, his light revealing part of a faded painting on a wall.

People were gathered before a building larger than the others, the sun over it with a beam shining down on one of them adorned in more elaborated garbs. The people weren’t human. They were multi-limbed, some eight, some six. The priest had eight, using three for support, two to hold a large book, one a multi-pronged dagger, another what might be a feather, and the last something Tristan thought was a drinking vessel, held high under the beam of sunlight.

Maybe the ritual needed the priest to have so many limbs.

“You said they were warriors,” Alex said. “They must have been great, able to hold so many weapons.”

“They weren’t naturally violent,” Tristan replied, “if I translated the text correctly. They had to undergo a process to unleash that part of themselves, and have that turned off once the fighting was over.”

Alex faced him. “Are you telling me some ancient civilization already had the process I’m investigating?” He chuckled as he looked at the painting again. “You know, now I kind of want us to find it, just so we can shove it in to those corporate faces that it’s not always high science that wins it.”

“I want us to find it,” Tristan said, stepping behind his human. “So we can go back to our lives. With our friends.”

Alex leaned against him. “Okay, that’s better. Do you make anything useful from this?”

“The structure is a place of worship. The placement of the sun makes it important to their beliefs. It might also mark a specific time, for when the ritual is to take place.”

“I remember reading something about how a lot of primitive societies worship the sun because it’s so important to their lives. What I read about Samalian culture, before I set

out, said you worshiped the sun too.”

The source is everywhere, Hea’Las said. Every planet with life had a sun. “It’s not an unreasonable mistake to make.”

“No confirmation what you’re looking for is here?”

Tristan studied the painting for clues as to the ritual’s purpose, but he lacked information. The book hadn’t covered their religious aspect, only referred to it here and there. There had been enough regarding defending themselves to piece together that the process was considered part of their faith, but other than some device their warriors lied in after ingesting the power of the sun, there had been little of help. The painting could depict how the power was harvested, or it might have been a roof being opened on them and the device.

If that was the case, it could have been solar powered, which spoke of a society more advanced than the book led him to believe.

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“Do you think that’s it?” Alex asked, light over a stone casket leaning against the wall of the room. This one had no decoration. Only the casket at the back of the room.

With Alex’s help, they removed the cover, and except for a pile of dust at the bottom, it was empty.

“All that’s left of the occupant?” Alex asked.

Tristan studied the sides for...anything.

Even if he broke down what he’d worked out to their basics, there was a device that did something in conjunction with ingesting something else that turned the people here in to warriors and back. It wouldn’t be a...simple box. There would be something to enable the change.

“It isn’t,” he snarled, hitting its side. It didn’t move.

Alex took his arm. “It’s okay. There’s more to explore.”

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With a roar, Tristan pushed the casket until it fell onto its side, the stone cracking. Another empty casket, another box that did nothing but hold the dead.

“Feeling better?” Alex asked.

“This is for you!” Tristan snapped. “Can’t you at least act like it matters to you?”

“Are you feeling better now?” Alex asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Yes. No.” He took a breath. “I don’t think we’re going to find anything here.”

“Do you want to go back to the ship? We can go on to my job.”

They’d come here first because, relatively speaking, it had been on the way to Alex’s site.

“Let’s continue. It could be the next chamber over.”

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Tristan let the cold water fall over him, and Alex massage the soap into his fur. The dirt piled into it was the only thing they’d found to take back with them. There had been more paintings depicting aspects of the society’s life. Enough Tristan has a sense that part of it had been spent underground.

What they hadn’t found was Alex’s cure. Or even something he could fool himself into thinking might be it. Whatever the book had described hadn’t been there. Maybe it was

in another city, but—

He moaned as Alex pressed against a knot.

“I don’t think I’ve even seen you tense like this before.”

“If I blame you for it,” Tristan replied, his chuckle cut off by another moan. “Will you hate me?”

“You know I won’t, but I’ll tell you to stop. You don’t have to worry about me.”

“Alex, if we—”

“No. Look, even if we don’t find a cure for my condition, all that means is that I can’t be around humans. Our friends are fine with some violence.”

“Rig’Irik might demand you join his family if you lose it on him.”

Alex paused, then patted his back. “You can joke about him now?”

“I haven’t had a reason to joke about him before. He hasn’t felt like a threat to us since I became myself again.”

“I don’t think his mate would be as keen as he is for me to join them. The three of us are the rare Xenophiles, it seems.” He massaged his back again. “But I’m serious. I’m okay with never seeing another human, if that’s what it takes. I’ll live among Samalians, other than when we do jobs.”

Tristan turned and looked his human in the eyes. “I’m afraid...” Alex didn’t look away. “I’m afraid this will get worse. Untended wounds fester and get worse.”

“You think I’m wounded, now?” Alex asked with a smirk.

“Someone did this to you, Alex. Not me,” He added as he opened his mouth. “I exacerbated your condition, but this core of death within you was there before I started molding you. I had trouble stopping you from killing Zephyr. I was worried you would be lost in killing when I came back from taking down Carter Hart and I wouldn’t be able to stop you then. If I can’t stop you, Alex, I’m going to lose you.”

Alex hugged him. “I want to fix this. I’m just saying that if what I’m after isn’t it, or the one after that, or the next one. We don’t have to stay out here until we find the solution. So long as we keep looking, we can go home.”

Tristan tightened his arms around Alex without meaning to.

“It’s okay to be scared,” Alex said. “Just remember that we saved the universe. It kind of owes us, so we’ll beat this.”

Tristan laughed, also without meaning to. He gently raised Alex’s face so he could look him in the eyes.

“Alex, the universe paid me back, and then some, when it put you in my life.” He kissed his human and thanked the Source for the path that led to their meeting.