

Silence.

Not simply the absence of outside sounds, but a lack of noise in Tristan's head. When was the last time he thought this clearly? When had it been only him, without out-of-control emotions or disembodied voices? He could stay like this for the rest of time.

Only, where was he? Where could he be that silence was this absolute, and how had he gotten there?

The clarity in his head let him look at his memories. The last thing he remembered before noticing the silence was...what? He'd been stacking stones, using the harder stone he'd found to chip the bottom of those that wouldn't stay in place. He'd forced the voices and emotions down; it had been him and the stones. One at a time.

The Defender was at his feet. He'd known he was close to finishing and had taken it from inside the House. He remembered placing the slab, his hands trembling under the effort of keeping his excitement under control. All it took was one jerky motion and a stone could fall, and with it, his control.

But the Defender went in place, and then? Then had been the silence?

No, even with the clarity, his recent memories were jumbled. Before the silence had been a high-pitch whine. Not an engine, air whistling past something large. He looked up, saw Alex on the roof of the House, binoculars in-hand, looking up too. Tristan saw the dot, processing that it was a dropship by the time Alex threw himself off the House.

He felt joy and dread. A dropship meant people to kill, to let loose on, but his emotions should've been controlled. He'd put the Defender in place. Hadn't he earned his boon? The desire to kill had him take a step to follow Alex, but motion out the corner of his eye stopped him.

He spun, searching for it. Nothing, no one in the clearing all the way to the treeline. The only things visible were the heat-shimmers over the grass.

He turned to head to the town, when he realized it wasn't warm enough for heat to shimmer off grass. He looked again. It was in too small an area, and moving toward him.

Only one possibility left: distortion fields.

They were on him. He fought them, fighting the fear that crept in. How could he fight what he couldn't see clearly? His fist connected with one of them and a man appeared. Joy filled him and then...

Silence.

He opened his eyes. Before him was a stone wall, hip-high, and beyond it was a green field. The wall ended on his right, seven-hundred feet away. Less than a hundred on the left was an alcove.

This wasn't a wall, it was his wall, the one he remembered building over and over. The alcove was empty.

He closed his eyes, readying himself for the dread to come; he'd done all this work and someone had stolen the Defender.

The dread didn't come—only the knowledge that whoever had taken the statue would pay for it. He would track them down and get it back from them. He smiled as a plan formulated itself.

"You finally made it," a man said.

Tristan's eyes snapped open. A Samalian crouched on the stone slate on top of the alcove. Familiar sandy fur, a ripped ear, pants worn with age, and swords at his hips.

The alcove was empty, and here was this Samalian crouched over it, speaking perfect Standard. Tristan knew this Samalian. Anger sparked.

"You." He stepped toward the Defender. "This is your fault."

The Defender watched him approach, wind back, and swing at him. Tristan's fist swung through air. The Defender tipped backward, fell to the ground, and rolled to his feet on the other side of the wall.

“One,” the Defender said as Tristan jumped the wall, “I’m not the Defender. You’re just using its form so your mind has something to latch on.”

Tristan swung again, clawed, kicked. He did his best to connect with the Defender, but the Samalian was faster than Tristan, more skilled.

“Second,” the Defender stepped back and aside Tristan’s blows, “if you’re intent on blaming someone for what’s happened to you, you need to blame yourself.”

“You did this to me,” Tristan growled. Claws, kicks, elbows—nothing hit. “You forced me to care about Alex. You forced me to put his wellbeing before my own!”

“That wasn’t—” The Defender dodged the feint, jumped over the kick. “You’re not even listening to me, are you?” With a sigh, he caught the incoming fist.

Tristan flew over the Defender and landed on his back, his breath taken from him by the impact. He tried to get up, but the Defender had a hand on his chest, holding him in place.

Tristan pushed, but didn’t move. He aimed a swipe at the arm to force the other Samalian to let go, but the Defender slid it away, seemingly aware of the strike before it came.

How could a Samalian massing barely half of Tristan hold him down? He planted his hands on the ground and pushed as hard as he could, and didn’t lift.

He was wasting his energy. As impossible as it was, the Defender was stronger. He relaxed. The Defender would slip, they all did, and then Tristan would have the upper hand.

The Defender looked at him. “Does this mean you’re ready to listen? We need to have this talk. There are things you must understand if you want to live.”

“I understand all I need to survive.”

“I’m not talking about surviving.” The Defender sighed. “I’m talking about living. Promise me you’re done fighting me, that you’ll listen.”

Tristan laughed, consciously made it something ugly, devoid of humor. The control felt good. “A promise? You think I’ll do such a thing after what the last promise I made over you cost me?”

The Samalian let out another sigh. “Why do I even bother?” He stepped away, arms at his side, tense. “Just remember, I can fight you as long as you want, and always win. Also remember that we don’t have an infinite amount of time. If you waste too much of it fighting me, you will run out of options.”

Tristan stood and noticed he wasn’t wearing anything. This was how he preferred being, but he had worn pants while building the wall. Jacoby and strangers had been around.

“Is this your plan? Hold my life ransom?” He pointed to the alcove. “I brought you home. I built the wall, the alcove, and placed you in it. You owe me a boon. I want control again.”

The Defender crossed his arms over his chest. “Anyone ever mention that you’re stubborn? I’ve already told you. That statue has nothing to do with this. It’s just stone, old, chipped, and painted to resemble some long-ago hero worthy of the qualities of the Defender.”

“You are lying.” Tristan allowed a trickle of anger to tint his words, rejoicing in the control he had in this place. The control he was owed.

“What is it going to take for you to understand? You did all of this to yourself!”

“No.” He made the statement as final as he could. “I would never jeopardize my survival the way you forced me to. I used the cure on Alex! I could have died! I would never have done something like that without your influence. You forced me to care about him! To care about someone else!”

“I liked you a lot more when you were drugged. Are you listening to yourself? No one can force you to care about another; that is a choice you make. You decided to let someone into your life, decided they were worthy of your time and emotions. No one

else.”

“You’re the Defender. You can force it, have forced it on me.”

The Samalian stared at him, seemingly unable to find words. He rubbed his face. “Okay, let’s approach this a different way. How do you feel?”

Tristan narrowed his eyes, looking for the trap in the question. “I feel fine.”

“What does that mean? Is that a feeling the Defender is forcing on you? Are you feeling fine because you’re refusing to deal with whatever problems you really have?”

Tristan studied how he felt, breathed in the silence around and inside him. He touched on each emotion, felt them, put them back in their place, waiting to be used against others. He called up various memories. “I am in control,” he finally answered.

“Is that real, or just the illusion of control? Is the Defender only letting you think you’re in control?”

Frowning, he recalled how he’d felt these last few subjective months. He identified each time control was wrenched away from him, looked at the emotions surrounding the events, compared that to how he was now.

“I am in control,” he repeated, having no doubt of it.

“Good.” The Defender nodded over Tristan’s shoulder. “Look over there.”

Tristan turned.

On the other side of the wall, Alex stood, frozen in place in the middle of running toward a group of five, also frozen in place. One of the two men, as well as one of the women, was firing in Alex’s direction, the energy bolts immobile halfway to Alex.

They were firing at Alex. His heart tightened at the realization, and his mouth went dry.

“Who is forcing these feelings on you now, Tristan?”

He spun on the Defender. “What is this place?” The Samalian was well out of reach.

“This is your mind.” The Defender motioned to the wide expanse around them. “You’re currently unconscious at the humans’ feet.” He tapped the back of his head. “Butt of a rifle, I think.”

“If I’m unconscious, how do I know Alex is being shot at? How do I know he’s running toward me? How is he frozen there?”

The Defender smiled. “Your mind. Think about it for a moment; I’m sure you can work it out.”

He faced Alex and felt the ache again at seeing him in danger. This was his mind. It could be a trick the Defender played on him. It was possible none of this was real, that Alex was not actually in danger, that he was running toward the town, to fight off the soldiers in the dropship.

The ache intensified.

No, this was real. Somehow, he knew it. Now he needed to figure out how. He focused. Alex wasn’t frozen; his foot lifted. With the realization that Alex was moving at a crawl, the silence was no longer absolute. There was a tone, just at the edge of his hearing.

This was his mind. He was processing events at the speed of thought while Alex was acting at the speed of reality. In his mind, he could control the speed at which he perceived reality. How else could he control it?

He willed Alex backward, and the scene reversed until he vanished. The humans also moved, their forms vague, but not hidden by a distortion field. When he paused the scene, Tristan was standing among the humans. He didn’t need to go past that. He’d been conscious, he knew how he remembered that.

This was the moment he was knocked out. What was happening? He felt betrayed that the Defender hadn’t showed himself, hadn’t made him better. The humans spread around him. One behind him, visible now, but in the middle of the fight, Tristan hadn’t seen him.

He let the scene proceed. Felt the memory of the impact, of crumbling to the

ground. There had been something else. He rewound it, played it again. Another time. He willed the image away, turning it to just sound. He rewound it again.

Just as he fell, he heard his name. Faint, distant, Alex calling for him — No, screaming his name. Even now he could hear the pain in the one word. This was how he knew Alex was coming toward him.

His heart tightened again. Coming to his rescue.

Now that he knew this, he wanted to know what else had happened.

He brought the humans back, played the scene.

“Op one to Central. We have target two.” Female voice, to his right.

Clear. This was why he saw her helmet with the front raised.

“Op one,” came a response distorted by a comm unit. “Please confirm you have target two.”

“Samalian, black fur with white spots. Matches the description of the Samalian with the two humans heading away from the explosion.”

“Good job, Op one. The dropship is about to land. Targets one and three should be easy to find among all the Samalians.”

A man snorted. “They don’t need to bother with target three; the idiot’s running toward us. This is going to be a twofer.”

“Op one, please repeat, you didn’t come in clearly.”

The woman spoke. “Target three is here, we can take him down. So the only one the others have to worry about is target one.”

“Op one, remember, you are to take them alive. They need to be questioned to find out who hired them, and how a message left the planet without us being aware of it.”

“Yeah, yeah.” A man, but different from the first one to speak. “Tell Central we’ll use low power and just scratch the surface. Their precious package will just need to be buffed and repainted.”

“Watch what you say,” the woman hissed, then spoke louder. “Understood, Central. We’ll take him alive too.” The sound of fabric. The comm unit being put away.

“Someone’s looking to be reprimanded,” a different woman said.

“Come on,” the man replied. “What does Central care what I say, so long as they get the packages they ordered?”

Tristan forwarded the scene; the dialogue was personal and of no value. When Alex became visible, he paused it again, noting the House was still absent. As he realized this, a faint outline of it appeared. His memory filling the space, rather than any clues in the present.

Alex was far. How could he know that? He was still yelling his name, no pain in it anymore, but anger. Tristan was working out the distance by how the voice changed.

The light of two bolts was just escaping the rifles. He rewound and listened. The tone of the cycler told him both were Dolfic LR-721. On a hunch, he slowed the scene, and the sound of the cycler stretched until it matched the one in the background. He set the scene going again.

Alex continued yelling as he was shot at. He was dodging, the tone changed as he pushed himself to the side. The shooters cursed. Tristan smiled. They’d expected Alex to be an easy target.

A man gurgled. His position made him the fifth one. A body fell down, trashed. More cursing. Tristan saw the knife in the man’s throat—another one with an open visor, or their helmet lacked a neck guard. The image he brought up before he was unconscious was too distorted to tell.

The Defender stepped next to Tristan. “That’s one down.”

Tristan considered hitting him, but he needed to pay attention to what was happening.

“And he’s still running toward them. That’s four against one. He does know those aren’t good odds, right? So why is he still coming?”

“He can take them; I trained him.”

“I’m not going to go into what you call training. But taking them on means he has to reach them. They’re armed with Dolfics, right? What are the odds he can keep avoiding being shot?”

“They don’t want him dead.”

“You know that, I do too, but does he? If you run toward four people shooting at you, what is the conclusion you reach? Why isn’t he reaching that conclusion too? Why isn’t he firing at them from cover? He does have a gun, right?”

Tristan pulled up the memory of seeing Alex on the roof of the House. Yes, along with his harness overloaded with knives, he had a gun belt on.

He wanted to be angry at Alex for being stupid. The Defender was right; he should have taken cover and shot at them. Tristan had trained him better than that. He should have strategized.

Tristan smiled. Strategies weren’t Alex’s strength. How many discussions had they had over that? Alex liked being told who to kill, leaving Tristan to figure out the how.

The scene froze, the silence returning— No, there was still that background tone. Tristan tried to push it forward or move it back, but it didn’t obey him.

“What happened?” he asked the Defender, who sat on top of the wall, his back to the fight.

“We’ll get back to that in a bit. We need to talk about this, because this is what you need to understand. What you’ve actually worked out, since I’m about to tell you, but that you haven’t been able to admit. Alex is running flat-out toward death. Why is he doing that? Because he cares about you.”

“Because he loves me.” Tristan had meant to throw the words as an attack, to show how little he understood of how deeply Alex’s emotions ran. Somehow, he said them in awe.

“He loves you,” the Defender agreed. “He is setting aside care and self-preservation because you did everything in your power so he’d become attached to you. You did an amazing job of it too, but do you realized the kind of power you gave him in doing that?”

Tristan shook his head. “I didn’t give him power. I did it because it was the most efficient way to ensure he’d stay by my side, that he’d do what I wanted.”

The Defender smiled. “So he’s doing what you want right now?”

“No.” Pain and fear choked the word he hadn’t meant to say. He didn’t want Alex to put himself in danger like that.

“Here’s the thing you’ve never been willing to acknowledge, in spite of all the reading you’ve done about psychology and emotions. There is power in caring for someone else, in being willing to put aside your wellbeing for theirs. What he’s doing right now isn’t the smartest thing he could do, but that emotion? Sometimes, it can give you the strength to pull off the crazy stupid stuff.”

“Are you telling me I have to love him to get out of this?” Tristan growled.

The Defender laughed. “I’m telling you to stop denying you already do. Stop fighting yourself so damned hard. It isn’t because you’re an Aggressor that you also have to fight with yourself. Look at him. Look at what he’s pulling off because he loves you.”

Sound came back.

Tristan watched Alex dodge bolt after bolt, moving ever closer as the cursing intensified. A man let out a grunt, but didn’t fall. He didn’t see this knife; there were too many areas that wouldn’t instantly kill for Tristan to work out where it hit.

Knife sliding against polycarbon. Alex was in close range. A man gasped. The scene froze.

“How did he make it to them?” the Defender asked. “How is he still standing after being shot twice?”

Shot? Tristan rewound the scene, let it move. Alex grunted in pain. Low power on

the LR series was a misnomer. The beam didn't so much diminish, as narrowed. It could still make a hole through permacrete, but it would be a small hole.

Alex had two such holes in him. Where?

He heard the footsteps, the broken rhythm. One was in the leg. He wouldn't bleed out—the beam had cauterized the wound—but the pain anytime he put weight on it would be intense. How hadn't he fallen?

He could make out his labored breathing now. He knew how Alex sounded when out of breath, what it took to get him to that point. This was a chest wound. Nowhere vital, but it was yet more pain.

Had he seen Alex take painkillers at any time?

"Where are they?" the Defender asked.

"In his emergency kit. He should carry it at all times, but he's dressed down, and even if he had some in a pocket, they can't have taken effect yet.

Alex's image became sharper as Tristan looked at him, the harness, the scars on his tanned skin. The muscles as he fought. The sweat covering him. Tristan realized he desired him.

"Don't fight it."

Tristan glared at the Defender as he pushed the emotions down. "I will not be distracted by him!"

The Defender threw his hands in the air. "Does he look distracted to you?" he yelled. "What do you think is going through his head right now? What is the one thought filling his mind at this very moment? In the middle of a four-to-one fight? Do you think he's worried about himself? That he's thinking about what will happen to him?"

"He—"

"Not you. Not what you'd do. What he's doing. You know him. You know how his mind works." The Defender was in his face, yelling. "Do you hear him laugh? If he isn't lost in the fight now, what's the only thing that can be occupying his mind?"

Tristan looked away. "Me." The word was filled with shame.

Why? Why feel ashamed here, now. He looked at the Defender. Was this something he was doing? No, this was all his own shame, knowing that Alex had never occupied his mind.

He'd told Alex he would be better. Even insane with drugs, he'd said it. They'd given him clarity. He'd promised the universe to stop fighting if it gave him back Alex. Now that he thought clearly, he could trace his feelings back to before the drugs, but always kept locked away, only using them to manipulate Alex.

And Alex had thought about Tristan before being reshaped. Alex had been conflicted, before there were hints there of something there worth loving, but Alex had always kept Tristan in his mind, he could see that now.

And Tristan had not even once thought about him if he wasn't looking to control him.

"You," the Defender said gently. "He's doing all of this because of you. He let you turn him into what he is because you were the one doing it."

Tristan nodded. "Even if I'd told him the boy was in no danger from me. If I'd just asked, he would have said yes."

"Look at him." The fight restarted. Metal on polycarbon now, the sizzling of a laser blade cutting flesh, the scent of that burnt flesh. Another body fell to the ground. "Tell me that what he feels for you makes him weak."

Tristan wrenched his gaze away. "He could die!"

The Defender shrugged. "Does he look like he cares?"

Someone gurgled, a woman. It was down to two against one—odds Alex had no problem with.

Tristan turned as the scene froze. Alex's face was set with determination. Not anger, or fear, or even the joy of when he finally went out of control. This wasn't someone whose

emotions had stolen control.

How he felt was strengthening his control. He knew the stakes, the odds, but he wasn't letting that stop him. He wasn't abandoning Tristan.

Tristan had difficulty breathing. Alex wasn't fighting for his own life, he was fighting for Tristan's. He was doing something that went against everything Tristan believed in.

And Alex was winning.

The fight restarted, and the butt of a rifle hit Alex in the face. He went down. The scene froze.

"Oops," the Defender said, "looks like caring about you wasn't enough after all." He pushed himself off the wall, looking at the scene. "But you have to admit, it took him pretty far. Farther than you thought it should have. Maybe farther than he had any right to reach."

The Defender leaned in and whispered. "Imagine how far he could have gotten if you'd been at his side."

"Is any of this real?" His eyes were getting wet. "Why are you showing this to me?" His emotions were in turmoil. Not the out-of-control assault from before and during the drugs, but they were untethered, making it difficult to think.

"Think about him," the Defender whispered. "Not what's happening to him—you still have time—just him."

Tristan closed his eyes, the tears falling, and thought about Alex. The emotions washed through him: pride as Alex got through his defenses to cut him. Appreciation at his skill with computers, annoyance at his insistence with cooking meals occasionally. The desire for that perfect body as it moved. The shame at having used Alex for his own survival, for his own pleasure without regards for him.

He didn't judge the emotions. He watched them as they settled around him, tried to understand them, considered what he should do about them, and realized he could think clearly again.

"And finally you get there," the Defender said. "But you're cutting it close."

Tristan looked at the Samalian. He understood what was coming wasn't good news, and while the emotions moved, they didn't get in the way of his thinking.

"Now that you've worked all of this out, you have to make a decision. You can go back to locking away all your emotions. Cutting away any attachment. You can go back to surviving, if that's what you want. Now that you know the truth, there won't be anything getting in the way of that."

Resting his elbows on the wall, the Defender looked at the frozen scene. "Or you can decide that these emotions can do more than be tools to control others. That being among other people can strengthen, instead of weaken you. I can't promise you it's going to be easy."

The Defender sighed. "If you want easy, go back to survival; that's a sure thing. You'll live until the universe gets the better of you, faking any interaction you have. You'll never care. If that's what you want, you can do it."

Tristan watched Alex, sprawled on the grass. "I don't know how to do anything else."

The Defender smiled sadly. "That's a possibility, but are you at least willing to try?" He nodded to Alex. "Can you believe me when I tell you that he can be the reason you live? Not just survive, but actually live?"

"What if you're wrong?"

The Defender shrugged. "Then I'm wrong. It's been known to happen, right? You're not as infallible as you like people to think. What I can say is that regardless, it will be worth it."

"Central wants them alive," the woman said. Tristan tried to stop it.

"Do I look like I fucking care what Central wants?" Rustling of clothing moving closer. "That bastard killed Valdi, Gronto, and Mal. Just tell them he caught a stray shot."

“Why can’t I stop it?” Tristan yelled over the woman’s voice.

“Between the eyes is going to make it a tough sell.”

“Fine.” The man moved, the sound of the cyclor closer, increasing as it reached its crescendo, beginning to merge with the background tone.

“Because you need to make the decision now,” the Defender answered, his voice cutting through the other sounds. “Are you going to survive, alone, or are you going to live, no matter the risks that brings with it, with Alex?”

The two tones synced.

Tristan reached for Alex. “No!”