

Alex had almost reached the House when he saw Rig'Irik running toward him. The urgency in his body language had been enough to make Alex pick up speed, and before the Samalian spoke he heard the roar, recognized the anger in it, and he didn't stop to listen to Rig'Irik's words.

The crowd almost stopped him, surprised at the size. He could hear the grunts of pain, a body fall to the ground. Where had everyone come from? He wondered as he pushed his way through. Had this been a morning of worship? No, there had been too many people in town.

"Tristan, stop!" he yelled as he broke through in time to see him slam a woman to the ground. A hush fell over everyone. "What do you think you're doing?"

At a glance, he counted a dozen Samalians lying on the ground, clearly alive. The last one was being looked after by an older Samalian, and she didn't look worried. Half that number stood at the edge of the crowd, multiple cuts on their bodies. Those who decided to leave the fighting while they could.

Tristan looked at him, then at the woman he was holding down, hand around her neck. If not for how solidly built they were, Alex would worry it would break. She grinned back at Tristan.

"I'm teaching them what a real fight is like." Tristan looked back at him. "Whatever you've been teaching them, that wasn't it."

The Samalian the old woman was tending coughed and groaned in pain.

"So you decided trying to kill them was a better way to go about it?"

Tristan pushed himself to his feet. "That's what fighting is," he said, smug. "Trying to kill your enemy." The woman extended her hand to him, and Tristan reached out for her to clasp without taking his eyes off Alex, and she pulled herself up. "What would you have learned, if I'd taught you the way you're teaching them?"

Alex didn't reply; he was busy trying not to panic at the bleeding cuts on Tristan's chest and arms. In his dark fur, the blood hadn't been visible until he stood and the sun shown directly on the wounds. Some of his opponents had been good enough to get in serious strikes. The woman had blood on her claws, and Alex had to force the desire to kill her down.

"This isn't your job!" he snapped at Tristan. What if one of them had managed to cause serious damage? "You're supposed to build that wall!" He pointed to the partially built structure.

Tristan narrowed his eyes. When he spoke, the growl sounded menacing. "Do not order me, Alex. Remember your place."

Alex stepped to him. "My place?" He shoved Tristan. "Don't you fucking talk about my place when you can't even put me in it." He looked for any reaction in Tristan's eyes, but all he saw was worry, fear, concealed under a thin layer of anger.

"Not until I know you teach them properly," Tristan growled at him. "I didn't train you so you would go easy on anyone else."

"Go easy?" Alex shoved at Tristan, who took a step back. He shouldn't move, shouldn't react to being shoved. He was immovable. "You think I want to go easy on them?" How hard it was for Alex not to bury his knives in Rig'Irik anytime the Samalian convinced him to spar. How he did everything he could not to fight so the temptation wouldn't whisper at him, remind him how good it felt to watch the life drain out of someone's eyes. "Unlike you, I don't need to beat someone within an inch of his life to feel like I'm teaching him a lesson!"

Tristan staggered back, even if this time Alex hadn't touched him. "Alex, I never..." His voice shook, but it was in fear now. "You weren't in danger. I know how much you can —"

"How much I can take? Really? Care to compare notes with Cornelius about that time you almost killed me?"

Tristan staggered again, and Alex hated himself for causing the pain he was seeing

in his eyes, but there had to be a breaking point somewhere. A point where the pain turned to anger, rage; a point where Alex would fear for his life again. Where Tristan would finally wake up.

“It was only once. Alex, I was angry. I lost control.” Tristan was pleading now.

No, don't you fucking dare plead. You don't plead, you demand! “Does this look like you're in control?” He motioned to the injured Samalians.

Tristan looked around. “They're not you.” He hesitated. “They don't coun—”

Alex pointed to the structure. “Go back to your fucking wall!” Fight back, Alex mentally demanded, remind me I have no right to order you. Please.

Tristan's shoulders slumped. “I just want to help.”

“I don't need your fucking help!” I need you to beat me. I need you to make me feel a pain I know I'll heal from. I need you back.

Tristan didn't come at him. He turned and walked away, defeat in every step he took. I need you to finish that fucking wall so you'll never let me talk to you this way ever again, don't you get that?

“Okay,” Jacoby said, “I think that's it for today. Rig, get people here to see to the injured, remind everyone to put the powerpacks in the charger before they leave.”

People moved, but Alex ignored them, focused on Tristan's back. When the Samalian reached the wall, he kicked at it like a sullen child.

Alex wanted to cry.

“Alex!”

He rounded on Jacoby, hand on a knife, when it registered the man had called his name a few times before that. “What?” he growled.

“What was that?” Jacoby's tone was controlled, but angry. “I thought we came here to help him get better. This doesn't look like anything resembling that.”

Alex's hand tightened on the pommel. “You think I don't know that? You think this is what I want? And what the fuck are you doing to help?”

“Watch the tone, Crimson. This might be your job, but I'm not going to let you talk to me like I'm some second-rate lieutenant.”

Alex glared at Jacoby, and the man responded in kind, which only made Alex want to stab him. He pushed his anger down, and used every trick Tristan taught him to seem sincere. “I'm sorry.” Hopefully that was enough to get Jacoby to leave him alone.

Jacoby sighed. “Look, Alex, I know this is screwing with you. You and him have a complicated relationship, and it looks nothing like this. I get that.” He looked toward Tristan. “I think you need to admit this isn't working. I can have the hover functional before the end of the day. Let's just go home. Cornelius is going to know people who can help.”

“No.”

“Alex, you—”

“No,” he snapped. Didn't the man understand how close he was to being stabbed a hundred time over? “We're giving him time. This is harder on him than us.” He had to believe that. Alex had to believe that Tristan wanted to be better, that all those losses of control were because his nature was at war with what was required of him.

“Come on, what's so difficult about stacking stones?”

“Have you bothered talking with anyone here?” Alex asked. “Did you learn anything about them?”

“No.” The answer was flat, as if Alex should have known.

“Samalians are wired differently than us,” he said, putting as much conviction in the words as he could. That had to be true. “They have a core attribute. Tristan's destruction.”

“Come on, Alex. That's primitive superstitions. I get they think that, but there's no way you believe it. Tech's built plenty of stuff. He rebuilt Montgomery's water condenser from scratch.”

“Tech is an act.” Alex forced himself to let go of the knife. If he continued holding

it, it was going to end up in the man's chest. "Everything Tristan did back there was to maintain the facade of this friendly Samalian. Everything. Did you pay attention to anything you found in the wreckage? Did you find anything in there that was constructive and not about one of you? Tristan collects weapons. Who does that and doesn't look to cause destruction?"

"Plenty of people collect weapons."

"How many of them keep them in perfect working order? With a fully-charged pack in them? How many of them also know everything there is to know about every explosive ever made? About every ship design out there? You don't get it. If it isn't about destroying something, using people, or getting himself out of a jam, Tristan has no interest in it." He pointed to the Tristan. "That wall is the most difficult thing he's ever had to do."

Jacoby studied Alex. "You actually believe that, don't you?"

"Look at him and tell me that isn't what you see."

Jacoby looked at Tristan, then back at Alex. "I see someone in pain. I see someone desperate for the pain to end. So desperate he'll try anything, even something he knows, deep down, isn't doing any good."

"Well, that isn't what I see. I'm staying. Tristan is staying. We're staying until that wall is built, and he's better. I told you before, you're free to leave—"

"I'm staying. I told you, Alex, I'm not abandoning Tech."

"Then go keep busy; I have to see to his injuries. I should have had you get us Heals," Alex grumbled as he headed for Tristan.

He was a few-hundred feet from the House when Hea'Las came out of it, carrying one of the unguent jars. Their eyes met, and her ears canted in the negative.

Alex stopped and realized she was right. Forcing himself on Tristan wouldn't help either of them. He should've been angry that she had a rapport with him, he wanted to be angry, but in the end, he was just happy there was one person here Tristan seemed to be willing to listen to, even if it wasn't him.

And she hadn't looked angry, so she wasn't about to tell them to leave over the fight. At least that was one fight Alex didn't need to worry about. The one he had to was what the townsfolk were going to demand in reparation for the people Tristan had hurt.

\* \* \* \* \*

He found them in the town center. Benches had been brought out, and they were seated on them, speaking excitedly as they applied the green unguent on their wounds, or had someone apply it. They spoke too quickly for Alex to make any of it out, but the tone wasn't somber as Alex expected, and the people around them listened with rapt attention.

Alex found Rig'Irik talking with young Samalians, mimicking a fight as he spoke. He stopped once he noticed Alex, told the youth something, and shooed them away.

"What are you doing?" Alex asked.

"Telling them the fight."

"You told them how Tristan beat up a bunch of the people here?" Alex looked at the man suspiciously.

Rig'Irik canted his head. "I tell them how hard everyone fight."

"They lost. They got hurt, some of them badly." He indicated a woman who had a splint on her leg, on top of the deep cuts being tended to. "I'd expect everyone here to be angry."

"You fight, you get hurt." Rig'Irik shrugged and indicated Alex's chest. "You know."

For the first time, Alex wished he'd put a shirt on. Those scars were a history of what he'd paid to be with Tristan. He didn't like they were compared to a bunch of people who'd just lost a fight.

"So what? They're happy they lost?"

Rig'Irik's ears twitched, some of it matched the affirmative, but there was more to

the movement Alex didn't recognize.

"Tristan Aggressor. Tristan strong."

The Samalian looked at Alex expectantly.

"Yes," he answered, not bothering with nodding.

Rig'Irik indicated the injured. "They fight strong Aggressor, so they strong too."

"So, by fighting Tristan, they demonstrated how strong they are. They weren't looking to win? Just to be able to get a few cuts in before being pounded was enough?"

Rig'Irik's ears twitched in affirmative.

"You didn't fight him."

"I..." Rig'Irik watched Alex. "I not that strong."

Alex thought he detected a trace of shame in the voice, but he looked around, only now noticing that everyone injured was older, if what he'd worked out about Samalian fur turning white with age was accurate.

Only the older, more experienced fighters had gone up against Tristan. "I still don't get it. Tristan can't be the only strong fighter here, not with the cuts he got. I don't see them fight all the time. I mean, most of them aren't even taking part in the training."

"Tristan is..." He looked up, silently mouthing words. "One who wins." He shook his head, then said a word and looked expectantly at Alex again.

"I have no idea what you just said." He tried to repeat it. He'd heard it and could hear each part in his head, cut up in code sections so he could assign meaning to them, but his throat wasn't built to make a lot of the sounds Samalians used.

"Fights with little," Rig'Irik said, "still wins." He shook his head, raised his voice, and spoke with clear annoyance.

Alex heard Sartas's name, then she exited a home, answering him. They exchanged words, Sartas seeming amused. Even with the conversation at a normal pace, Alex only understood a few words, and none that shed light on what they said.

When she reached them, a younger man who'd been seated on a bench, watching Rig'Irik and Alex, stood and indicated the vacated spot. She thanked him and sat. She'd said she wasn't one of the town's leaders, but people still treated her with deference. Alex wondered if it was due to her age, and if Rig'Irik's apparent authority over the younger folks was because of her, or something he'd earned on his own.

"You have questions?" She sounded out of breath. Rig'Irik said something, but she shushed him with a gesture.

"Rig'Irik called Tristan something he's having trouble explaining." Her ears twitched in the affirmative, but didn't say anything. Alex looked at Rig'Irik, but his ears twitched in the negative. Alex sighed. "You're going to force me to mangle your language, aren't you?"

She smiled, full of teeth. "I have heard you practicing. This will be more of that."

He said it as best as he could, and she nodded.

"That is better than many who take pride in how they butcher my language. How they say it's wrong to speak like we do. The word is used to describe some of our people who believe that all this is a hindrance to their survival." She motioned around them.

"The town?"

"That, the people, the technology." Alex raised an eyebrow.

She chuckled. "We have little because technology is expensive. And we do not need most of it. They believe that any but the most basic of technology is a hindrance. It erodes our will to survive, makes us soft."

"They think Tristan's one of those, what, survivalists?"

She mouthed the word, thinking. "That is a good word for them. Yes, they see him as such. He sleeps by his wall instead of in the House, or in your hover. He kills small animal with his claws."

Alex wondered how he'd missed the hunting. "Those are things survivalists do?"

Her ears twitched. “They live in the forests, the mountains. Anywhere people don’t live. They stay small—one family, maybe two. They hunt for their food with claws and little else. They make what they need. Some have their own language, have nothing to do with others.”

Alex shook his head. “Tristan is nothing like that. He has—had a home, he loves technology, knows more about it than most people I know, more than me. He has nothing to do with people like those.” He opened his mouth to add more, but considered their sleeping arrangements—on the floor, even when there was a bed. The showers were as cold as was bearable. Alex had figured it was because of his fur, but water in streams would be cold. Food was minimal unless Alex cooked something, and Tristan always seemed put out when he did. Tristan preferred to survive on nutrient bars.

Then there were the jobs Tristan had taken, those away from the cities. When Tristan had spent time in the forest with Emil. Alex thought that was roughing it, but he’d been allowed a tent. On those following jobs, Tristan had thrown all that out. Alex had been forced to sleep on the ground. Even being allowed blankets had been a fight, and in the end he’d only relented because Alex didn’t have fur.

Tristan did have a habit of going the minimalist route when it came to life. Was that because of his upbringing? He’d mentioned growing up in a forest, and only his father and brother seemed to have been close family.

She was watching him, silent, letting him think.

“So there’s what? Honor in fighting one of those survivalists and not getting killed?”

“They are tough, fight hard. They think every fight must be to the death.”

“Do any of them realize that if I hadn’t stopped it, Tristan would have gone around killing each of them?”

She shrugged. “They lived. They can tell how they fought, they can show the scars they gained as proof of the fight.” She smiled. “Say how they could have won.”

Alex snorted, and watched the group. Those tending the injured used care, reverence. None of those had the kind of scars the fighters had, even if some looked to be a match in age. As he watched one of the women being tended to by a younger man and woman, she spoke to them, but they wouldn’t look up at her. When she stood and walked away they followed her, the man’s excitement clear for anyone to see.

He decided not to think about what they were going to do. About how he’d react if he’d been tending Tristan and such an invitation had been made.

Fuck, he missed being touched that way.

She was watching him again, nostrils flaring. Great, she knew exactly where his mind had gone. Rig’Irik was unreadable at the moment.

“So, I don’t have to worry about any of them trying to get in some revenge? Find him while he’s sleeping and try to hurt him?”

She tilted her head in the way inquisitive Samalians did.

“Not many humans fighters take well to the kind of beating they received. They’d want to prove they’re better, even if it meant an ambush, or ganging up on him. Pride is a powerful thing with us.”

Her ears twitched in the negative. “If one wants to test themselves against him, it will be when he is awake. If they have friends, it will be to provide encouragement. But they won’t. Your friend keeps apart from us. They will respect that. They will respect what he is doing, what he is trying to gain.”

Alex shook his head. “You people are strange.”

She smiled. “Many humans say the same. It is what makes them come to Samalia, to see something stranger than them.” She sagged. “It is what makes the corporation look at Samalia, come here.”

“They should leave all of you alone,” Alex whispered to himself. He turned to leave and stopped. “Do you mind if I talk with you again? When I’m not training Rig’Irik and his friends. Everything I know about your people comes from the net, and that isn’t

accurate. Hea'Las told me a few things about the Aspects, but I'd like to learn more about you as people."

"I thought you wanted to leave," she said. "The other human, Jacoby, doesn't like being here."

"I have to wait until Tristan's done, and I get the feeling it's going to take longer than I expected." Alex chuckled. "To be fair, I expected to only be here a couple of days, not the close to two months we've already been here."

When he'd began observing them, it had been to gain information to use if he had to force their cooperation on something, but he'd noticed that his only Samalian example, before being here, was so human, he couldn't use anything from that as a frame of reference. And now that Alex was confident the townsfolk wouldn't be a problem, he found he was curious about who they were. That none of the research he'd read had bothered with the people, just the stories about them.

She studied him, ears unmoving, face still. "Come and ask your questions," she said finally, "and I will decide if you should know us."

With a nod he headed back to the House, for questions, and to see if Tristan was better.