

The hot barrel burned his hand as Tristan shoved it away, the heat surging as it fired. He opened his eyes, ignoring the pain. He pulled on the rifle, watching the man's eyes go wide as he lost his grip on it and the strap made him fall forward.

Tristan grabbed the stock with his other hand and shoved the butt back into the man's neck. Bones broke, and the man fell back, ripping the rifle out of Tristan's hands.

He was in a crouch as the woman reacted to what had happened and brought her rifle to bear on him. He grabbed the barrel with his injured hand, then pulled a knife from Alex's harness with the other. It vibrated in his grip.

The barrel became hot enough he heard his flesh sizzle, and the bolt burned fur off the side of his head. Her eyes flicked to his hand in disbelief as she tried to realign her aim. She steadied herself when he pulled on the rifle.

He threw himself at her, since she wasn't going to fall to him. He cut the strap, the same motion making the knife dig into her armor. It didn't go deep enough to pierce through, but the upward motion had it cutting the visor and her face. The weakened visor shattered as he pushed the knife in, and she fell back.

He flipped the rifle, put it to his shoulder, and scanned the area for anyone else. He used the sight to zoom on the treeline, looking for where their hover might be, but he didn't remember hearing one, so they had landed far, walked the rest of the way, and lay in wait until the dropship arrived.

As he lowered the rifle, he saw Alex in the corner of his eye and fear rose in him. He fought the instinct to bury it under anger at Alex for eliciting an emotion from him. His hand shook from the fear, the terror Alex might die. He looked at him, at his moving chest. The sight offered some comfort, but he was injured. The wound cauterized, but he couldn't know what kind of internal injury Alex had. Alex could still die.

He breathed in. I am afraid.

He breathed out. I have reason to be.

He breathed in. Things will only get worse if I let fear rule.

He breathed out and set the fear aside. He would return to it. Tristan would let it overwhelm him, when there was no longer any danger to Alex, to himself, to the others here.

He pushed that concern aside too. Why care about anyone other than him and Alex?

He felt Alex's pulse—strong, steady. The fear diminished.

The LR wasn't a military rifle, but their black armor was military issued, at least. The common merc couldn't afford this quality, not for five of them. They also couldn't afford a dropship. This was corporate security. He exchanged the rifle for one with an intact strap, and slung it over his shoulder.

Alex's two major wounds were his leg and side, neither life-threatening. Multiple burns indicated near-hits. "Armor, Alex. How many times have I told you to always be ready?" He was surprised at the lack of anger in his tone. He sighed. "When this is over, we need to have a talk about your safety."

How likely was it he could lock Alex up in their home? He smiled to himself. If nothing else, that would make for a fight both of them would enjoy.

He picked Alex up, and the world decided to tilt. He kept his legs under him and focused on his human. Alex needed to be moved to safety. The universe could play with gravity as much as it wanted once Alex was safe.

He walked slowly, recalling what the soldiers had said. He was target two, Alex three, which made Jacoby their main priority. Tristan was mildly offended this wasn't about him. Jacoby was just a retired merc.

Tristan was wanted for more crimes than most boards bothered keeping track of.

They had been seen moving away from the explosion, so the depot was the only place that could refer to. What had he missed?

Tristan snorted. What hadn't he missed? He'd been so distracted by his emotions,

the stims, trying to prove himself, his father. The chain reaction he'd caused was ample demonstration he hadn't been in any state to be on a job.

Alex was normally careful, but Tristan had been his distraction. Jacoby had lived through a long career as a merc, longer than most, but he'd been sixty objective years retired. He wasn't the merc he'd been.

Tristan shook his head. Analyzing what had happened didn't serve any purpose now, other than as a distraction from the concussion he had to be suffering from.

He was before the House's entrance. A glance at the town in the distance showed people running in this direction. Behind the town, the dropship was visible. His estimate of the capacity was five-hundred soldiers. Would a corporation fill it just to retrieve three terrorists? He was missing information. What had the previous attacks been about? Capturing Jacoby? Had he overheard anything that could give him answers?

When this fight was over, he'd have to fill in the blanks.

Inside the House, the priestess spoke to agitated children. Other adults stopped gathering supplies as they saw him. He expected things to become chaotic, but instead they calmed. Even the children acted like his presence meant they were safe.

What did they know that he didn't? This blank in his knowledge pool was becoming bothersome.

The priestess—no, people had names, hers was Hea'Las. He gave the Defender a silent curse. It would have been nice to know all the changes he'd be dealing with before having to plan to take on a corporate force.

He set the concern aside. It wasn't important right now.

"Alex is hurt," he told Hea'Las as she approached him. His voice was steady, his emotions under his control. "You have townsfolk coming. Some will be hurt, but you will see to Alex first, is that clear?"

"Of course," she said, taking Alex off his hands.

Tristan took two steps toward the mats being set up and the universe kept its part of the bargain. Gravity went sideways.

A hand steadied him. Once gravity was the way it should be, he looked at the Samalian—frail, her fur almost completely white with the exceptions of pale-gray swirls and hints of copper. She lowered her gaze and spoke words he didn't understand.

Hea'Las had placed Alex on a mat and studied Tristan.

"I have a concussion. Do you have anything to treat it?"

"I have nothing prepared, but I have sabato bark. I can steep some for you."

The word had been Samalian, but it was one he knew. He had to dredge it from his memory—his father teaching him what plants in the forest could help him. Proper medicine was what he needed, but he didn't have the time to go to the hover. Without help, he might not remain standing long enough to reach the House's exit.

"Just give me the bark."

She spoke to another frail Samalian, a male with some black and brown in the mostly white fur, and he began cleaning Alex's injuries as she went to a cabinet.

She returned with a handful of strips, placed them in his hand, but didn't let go. She studied his face, searched his eyes. "You seem better. Did you get the boon you came here searching for?"

He looked at Alex, felt the emotions stir. He shook his head, and regretted that as gravity shifted again. She kept him from falling.

When his stomach settled, he spoke. "I got something different."

She canted her head. "Is that a good thing?"

He looked at Alex again and smiled. "It's for me to decide. I wasn't promised something easy, but something that would be worthwhile accomplishing." He untangled his hand from hers, broke the strips into smaller pieces, and popped them in his mouth. The bitterness washed over his tongue, and he swallowed.

She made a face. "How can you stand the taste?"

“It’s just taste. So long as it gets the job done, I don’t care what I have to endure, and with this taking care of my concussion, I can deal with your pest problem.”

“You will help us?”

He almost nodded, but instead dredged something else from his memory and twitched his ears. This earned him a smile, but no comment.

“I will. The boon I received is more complex, and helping you is part of that. But remember that I need you to look after Alex.” His voice hardened, “I need him to be well.”

Her ears twitched, and he memorized it. “He will be.”

Tristan turned, and gravity remained as it should. He took a tentative step, and a second, and a third. He made it outside at a normal walk.

He ran a dozen step, then the voice came. “Don’t be doing that, boy.”

Tristan stopped. It had been too much to hope to be done with him, it seemed.

“This isn’t your problem. It’s theirs.”

He turned and faced the ghost of his father. The look Tristan received was stern, his father disapproving of him, one of the common expressions on his face.

“They brought this on themselves with their belief and their prayers. The hover is over there. All you need to do is get in it and leave.”

Tristan watched this dead man and wished he was really here. There was no time for it, but he wished he could explain to him all the ways in which he’d been wrong. Instead, he locked eyes with his father. “You are dead. Go away.”

With an expression of surprise, his father vanished.

Tristan took a second to appreciate that this was permanent, turned, and ran toward the incoming group, popping more of the bark in his mouth.

They parted to let him pass, and their faces lit up. They spoke to him, but most in dialects he didn’t understand. The few words he caught said “savior”, “protector”, and “envoy”. He took the confusion he felt and set it aside; he took the anger and dismissed it. They had a right to see him as something he wasn’t, but he didn’t have to be bound by that vision.

The emotion that surprised him the most was the sadness he felt at the knowledge that many of the people here would die. They didn’t matter to him, not in the way Alex did, so the sadness didn’t make sense. That too, he set aside. Once all this was done with and he had time, he had a lot to process.

When he was close enough to the town to make out people, the first ones to jump out were those in black. Six at the edge of the town, intent on keeping anyone else from escaping. This was more than capturing the three of them; they were actively hunting the townsfolk. The flash of blaster fire showing they were firing inside the town, not at those who’d escaped.

One of the black-clad soldiers fell, and Tristan smiled. The people were fighting back. He put the rifle to his shoulder, cranked it as high as it went, and took aim. The sight’s magnification let him see the back of their helmets, the space between it and the chest piece. Not an easy shot, but with the LR, power could compensate for skill.

He fired, and the beam hit the base of the helmet, the top of the chest armor, and everything in between, severing the head cleanly. He fired at a second soldier, and another head fell in a bright blast of energy.

Now the soldiers noticed him and moved, putting buildings between them. Tristan dropped to a knee to make himself a smaller target, and waited. One of them would realize the problem they were causing for themselves and make the expected mistake.

One of them stepped out from the cover, looking for their attacker’s position, and the idiot raised his visor to see better. There was nothing left of the head after Tristan fired.

Now he stood and ran; he wouldn’t get a second free shot like that. He avoided straight lines—no need to take chances—but no one shot at him all the way into town.

He stepped over the dead, mostly Samalians, but a few soldiers. He killed one, taking the Kentric Destructor, along with the gun belt, and slung it across his chest. The handgun was new, no scuff marks; these people had been equipped with brand new weapons and armor specifically for this attack.

The sounds of fighting drew him deeper. He killed the two soldiers attacking a Samalian woman.

“Get everyone out of the town and to the House,” he said as he helped her up. Her injuries were superficial. Her confused expression made him repeat himself in broken Samalian. It didn’t help, so he indicated toward the House. He needed someone who understood Standard, or the version of Samalian he spoke. There were some, he remembered that, just not who they were.

He fired at every soldier he came across. Neck and joint shots, the weakest points on this kind of armor. He added another gunbelt to the one across his chest, then unclipped holsters from the dead soldiers’ belts to add them to his bandoleers. As an afterthought, he clipped a knife to the belt.

Every gun he took, he set to maximum power. He didn’t bother with powerpacks; there were so many soldiers it was simpler to grab a new gun when one ran out of power.

He found he liked the Destroyer for this situation. It was bulkier than his Azeru, but the kind of damage it caused more than made up for the loss in precision. At close range it was even enough to go right through the soldiers’ armor.

With each Samalian he rescued, he told them to find those hiding in the town and take them to the House. He needed the town emptied for what he had planned, but he wasn’t finding anyone who understood him.

The next fight had a blonde Samalian in a close-combat fight with three soldiers. Tristan shot one, then had to get close himself to pull another off the Samalian, breaking his neck.

The Samalian dropped the dead soldier and opened his mouth, only to stare at Tristan.

Blonde fur with copper swirl. This was the Samalian who’d made advances on Alex. The one who’d almost driven Tristan to kill him. He felt shame at the loss of control, but it was in the past, irrelevant now. Also irrelevant then. Alex would never go with that Samalian. Tristan knew it now, should have known it then, regardless of the state he’d been in.

The Samalian snarled. “You’re no good for him.”

Tristan canted his head. “This isn’t the time.”

“He deserves better than you.”

Tristan bristled. “Alex knows what he wants. If he wanted you, he would have—”

The Samalian ran at him, claws out.

Tristan saw the flaws in his movement, the way he advertised where he planned to hit. He saw the three ways to kill him without moving from where he was, only one of which involved shooting him.

Tristan stepped aside, grabbed the Samalian’s neck, and forced his head into the hard-packed earth. “Listen to me,” he hissed.

The Samalian raged under him.

Tristan looked around while holding him, letting him exhaust himself. None of the fighting sounded close, but he didn’t have the time to deal with a hormone-filled jilted lover.

If nothing else, at least his life meant he had never been in a position to be like this young man. Control had been too important to his survival.

A black form turned the corner. Tristan emptied the Destroyer in the chest, dropped it, and took another one from his bandoleer, aiming it where the soldier had come from.

The Samalian stilled.

“Do you understand the danger we’re in?” Tristan asked, not taking his eyes from that building. “Do you?” he asked again when he didn’t get a reply.

“Yes.”

“Will you behave? We have more important things to deal with than your hurt feelings.”

“I’m better for him.”

“We don’t have the time,” Tristan growled. “Your town is going to be wiped out. If you insist on this, everyone here is going to die along with it. Start prioritizing!” He didn’t have a choice. He let the Samalian go and stepped away.

The young man stood, glaring at him.

“I need you to get everyone out of the town and to the House. Get everyone who can help you. Forget about the soldiers; kill them if they are in your way, but don’t bother chasing them.”

“Why?”

“I told you, your town is going to be wiped out. I’m trying to get you to save as many people as you can.”

“You’re an Aggressor. You don’t care about who lives, just the killing you can do.”

“If you continue arguing about this, I’m not the one who’s going to do the killing. It’s going to be the soldiers.”

“You can’t kill the soldiers alone.”

Tristan smiled. “I’m an Aggressor, right? Killing is what I do. You do the saving and let me worry about the killing.”

“When this is over,” the Samalian said, “I will fight you for him.”

Tristan pointed. “Get moving!”

The Samalian glared at Tristan, the message clear. I’m not doing this because you’re telling me to. Were his interactions with people going to be that annoyingly complicated now? Having them recoil in fear made things so much simpler.

The Samalian ran off, shouldered the first door, looked inside, and moved on to the next one.

This wouldn’t save everyone, but it increased the number. He looked at the dropship, visible over the roofs of the building. The boy had been right about one thing: he needed help. Before he could take on the dropship, he had to find one person fighting in this mess. Once he had him, he could start on what needed to happen to make sure the corporation never bothered these people again.