

Tristan watched Alex walk away, wondering how it was possible to want two opposing things with such vigor. He wanted to hold Alex against him, comfort him, tell him it would all be fine. They would get through this. He also wanted to grab the human by the neck, smash his head in until there was nothing left of it but a bloody smear against the building's wall. The pain of being pulled in those two directions forced the keening out.

He wanted to reach inside his chest and rip his heart out to make the pain stop. How could such pain be possible?

"Because you're weak," his father sneered. The words ignited anger inside Tristan, and he latched on to it. Anger was preferable to pain. Anger he could use, focus, unleash. "There, that's my boy."

"Shut up," Tristan growled, teeth gritted. "This is your fault." His father had laid the groundwork for this, and Tristan hated him for it, for taking him from his mother. He hated Alex for coming into his life. For staying, for making him feel...

The sound changed into something dangerous and he spun, punching the building. He pulled back to strike it again, and noticed the faint traces of blood, next to where he'd hit. It was all that was left from the last time he'd punched the wall.

"Do it," his father hissed eagerly. "Hit it, tear the whole things down."

"What's the point?" he ran a hand over the faded blood. The stonework was good; he couldn't punch through that.

His father leaned back against the wall. "Don't sell yourself short. You're Tristan. You can destroy anything you want with your bare hands." The derision in his voice contradicted the words.

"Shut up." Tristan looked away from the stone, to the polycarbon sheets. He remembered them secured to the support armature inside the building. Construction adhesive held one sheet to the other, so he couldn't slip a claw between them, pull them apart. He'd need the corresponding dissolver.

And the stones. He ran a hand over them. Large stones, smooth with age, their fit almost seamless against one another. The quality of the work, the care someone took in shaping them, putting them in place. And so long ago, there hadn't been the tools that existed today. All this had been done by hand.

He looked at the stones on the ground, those he'd kicked and thrown in his anger at hitting Alex. Even now, the memory twisted his heart. What was his wall in comparison? Ugly, fragile.

"Then destroy that thing. Show them it isn't any better than what you made. Show that human this is a waste of time. That you'll never be weak like he wants you to be."

"I told you to shut up," Tristan growled.

His father raised an eyebrow. "Watch your tone, boy. I'm your father. You don't get to speak to me like that."

Tristan glared. "I'm going to speak to you however I want, because you're dead!"

His father snorted. "Oh, right. You're so good I couldn't have survived that knife."

Tristan looked up and sighed in annoyance. "You're such an idiot. One," he looked at his father again, "I broke your neck." He hesitated. He had, hadn't he? Or had he crushed it? Or maybe he'd ripped his heart out? No, that had been the hallucination. He'd killed his father in so many different ways he couldn't seem to remember the original one.

He shook himself. "How I killed you doesn't matter," he said at his father's smirk. "It even doesn't matter if you survived that. Do you know how long I've been gone from this place? A century and a half? More? We're longer-lived than humans, but the gray in your fur was already paling when I left, so how many years did you have? No more than a century, so even if you somehow survived me, time would still have killed you. You're nothing but random bones buried in a forest somewhere by animals."

"You're forgetting there's technology. It would have been easy for me to get to a

city, put myself through rejuv. Maybe go in cryo until you came back.”

Tristan stared at his father, then laughed. “You, use technology? The most technological thing you’ve ever had was the lock on the cage. You hate anything more advanced than a knife. ‘Makes you weak’, you kept grumbling anytime I asked about it. I had to carry Justin for the weeks it took to walk to your hut because you wouldn’t use a hover.” He closed his eyes. “Why couldn’t you have left us with mother?”

“You know why.”

“No, I don’t! You showed up one day, put Justin in my arms, and dragged me along with you. We were happy! I hardly remember anything of her, but I remember that! What right did you have to take that away from us?”

His father gave him a self-satisfied smile. “If you haven’t worked it out by now, don’t expect me to tell you.”

Tristan sighed. “Don’t be so smug. You can’t tell me because you don’t know either. You’re a figment of my imagination, so you only know what I know. Just go away. I killed you. I don’t want to ever see you again.”

His father snorted. “You’re forgetting your place, boy. You’re not the one who gives the orders here.”

Tristan stifled a snarl and looked at the stone wall. At the workmanship in it. He couldn’t see where it had broken, so he’d have to go inside, but he expected it would be a staggered line, made where the stones had abutted one another. That this had survived humans attacking was a statement to the skill of the person who had built it.

“It should have been destroyed,” his father stated. “They all should have. The only thing they’ve ever done was make people weak. Make people think they’re protected from the universe. No one here is ready to survive it, unlike you and me.”

Tristan looked at the town in the distance. He could just make out the music, see the tip of the bonfire over the buildings. “Why didn’t you tell me about them? Our people?”

“I told you everything you needed to know. I told you’re they’re everything you shouldn’t be. That you can’t trust anyone of them. They’re all jealous of us, of how we know how to survive when they don’t. They hate us for that, and they’ll work with the universe to kill us.”

“They haven’t done that.”

“Give them time, boy. They will.”

Tristan focused and could just make out voices in the distance, too faint to be understood. Why hadn’t he stayed after killing his father? Why hadn’t he gotten to know his people back then?

He looked at the sky. Space had called to him. Each ship he’d seen from the top of the trees had been an invitation to leave, to see what was out there, and he’d been more curious about that than what was groundside. Had he considered Samalians primitive, back then? Had he looked down on them for staying on the ground? For not doing what they could to learn how to survive? Or had that come later, as he read human files on them?

“Stop that,” his father ordered. “You’re wasting your time; they aren’t worth it.”

“Knowledge is never a waste of time.” Other than his brother, had he ever encountered a Samalian in space? He couldn’t recall. If he had, he wondered how the meeting had gone. Had it been like encountering a brother? A family member? Or had they been alien to him, then too?

He knew more about humans than he did his own people.

“Of course, they’re everywhere. They’re the universe’s tool to destroy you. You had to learn everything about them so you could turn them against the universe, use them.”

Tristan nodded. He looked at the hover. He’d used them, all of them. He’d either killed any human the universe sent after him, or turned them into his own tools.

Almost all of them. His heart ached.

“Where are you going?” his father demanded as Tristan walked toward the town, away from Alex, from the pain in his heart.

“I need to study them,” Tristan replied. He needed to do something so he wouldn’t think about Alex, about the one human who’d managed to get to him. Who’d planted his claws into his heart and was slowly killing him.

“There’s nothing you can learn from them, boy. I taught you everything you need to know.”

Tristan snorted. “Considering how much I learned after I killed you; no, you didn’t.” Maybe he’d be lucky and the noise of the celebration would drown his father’s voice.

“Don’t count on that, boy. I’m better than any of them. I might be old, but I can still take each and every one of them on, and win.”

Tristan didn’t answer his father. He let him rant on for the entire walk, focusing on the sounds and scents the wind carried to him.

Discussions he couldn’t understand, meats and vegetables being cooked, sex. He boxed the memory and feelings those things elicited in him. He didn’t want to think about Alex right now. He heard some of them in nearby alleys as he walked through the town. The idea of doing it with them didn’t make his body react.

The center of the town was filled with people. Some danced, others watched them or talked, ate, and even had sex, at the edges of the space.

He realized none of them stood alone; everyone was either paired or in groups, and most of those were engaged in sex. Within the groups that weren’t, the people touched constantly. Not sexually, but casually. Holding hands, leaning against one another, hand on arms.

My people are gregarious, he remembered telling Alex, trying to convince the human to sleep with him, so they could have sex, so he could make him fall in love with him. The box cracked open, and he hurried to shut it before the pain overwhelmed him.

He’d made that up because it was something plausible that Alex couldn’t verify. Or he’d thought he had made it up. Maybe he’d remembered something from his childhood, when he lived with his mother.

He listened to the people closest to him. They’d noticed him, gave him space. Maybe they understood he wasn’t one of them? He tried to make out what they said, but didn’t understand it.

How could he not understand them? He knew Samalian. He hadn’t spoken it since leaving the planet, but he knew it. No, he had spoken it more recently, in the city, with the priestess there. It had taken her a few tries to get him to understand what she’d said. No, she’d tried different dialects.

Samalia had more than one language? Had he known that? What did he remember of his time trying to get off-planet? Barely anything. He remembered talking to people, but he couldn’t recall if there had been difficulties in making himself understood. All he really remembered was being inside a shuttle, looking out a window as the sky went from blue to black. His awe, his desire to see everything he couldn’t. To learn everything contained in that vast blackness.

He smiled to himself, but it didn’t last. When had he last felt that sense of wonder? When had learning what the universe contained turned into learning what he needed to survive?

His first kill in space. The captain who had taken him on, who had decided she would use him as a bed warmer, as her toy. The reminder that the universe wasn’t a wonderful thing, but a deadly one. That because he’d let his guard down, he’d almost been turned into someone else’s possession.

Something poked his thigh. He looked down at the child poking it, nose wrinkled in disgust. It, he? She? Noticed him watching and with a yelp ran off. As with human children, he couldn’t tell much about them. The altercation attracted more attention from the adults. Most went back to their conversation, but a younger man, slight, copper

fur with black splotches, continued watching him. The child was hiding behind him.

He approached, said something, his nose wrinkling.

“I don’t understand you,” Tristan replied in Standard, then repeated it in the Samalian he knew.

“You speak Rrowgarr!” The man smiled. “I know some.” He placed a hand on the child’s head. “Daliriela thinks you are a statue. You so still.” Another man joined them, this one carrying a bucket. “You are Tristan. Aggressor. You fight, kill humans.” He tapped the Kentric at his hip. “I kill humans too.”

Five other Samalians had joined them—two women and three men.

They spoke softly, touching each other.

Tristan tried to remember if any Samalians had behaved this way in the city, but he hadn’t paid attention to them. They hadn’t been important, neither a threat nor a target. “Tani’er asks how old.”

“How old is what?” Tristan looked at the woman who’d just finished talking to his translator. She gave him a shy smile and looked away.

“You?” The man chuckled. “Still like old one, but not old. You move fast when fighting. I saw.”

The young man with the bucket reached for Tristan who growled at him. For an instant he saw himself ripping their throats. Using their bodies to bash the others here to death.

They took a step back. His father hissed his approval, but remained unseen. Maybe coming had been a mistake. His translator said something and Tristan focused on him, realizing he’d missed an agitated conversation between them.

“Merrlsdorg offers apology. He did not mean offense.”

Tristan looked at the young man holding the bucket. Blonde fur like many of the Samalians here. The local coloring, probably, with black rosettes. He looked apprehensive as he spoke.

“He asks if he can wash you.”

“Why?”

The question seemed to surprise his translator. “You have blood from the fight. You smell of time.”

Tristan nodded. He’d been so focused on building his wall he hadn’t washed. And it had been weeks since the last rain.

“Why does he want to do it?”

“Honor to wash the battle off the warriors.”

Tristan nodded to the closest group engaged in sex. “That will not happen.”

His translator told the young man, and Tristan tried to read his face, but he knew nothing of Samalian body language, or he’d forgotten the little he had known. He expected he was weighing if it was still worth going through with it.

“It is fine. He does not seek to have sex with you. Only wash you.”

“Then what does he want? What does he get out of doing it?”

“The honor of washing you. Of washing Tristan.”

What did that even mean? He nodded. He could use a wash, and if the man tried anything, Tristan would stop him, permanently.

No one moved, looking at him expectantly. “Yes,” he said, realizing he hadn’t seen any Samalian nod.

The young man led him to a bench. Tristan sat, and the man took a cloth out of the water, which smelled of ash and something else he couldn’t place. Tristan closed his eyes, listening to the sounds, letting the sensation of the cloth rub against his fur soothe him.

His father railed at him for indulging in Samalian rituals, but Tristan ignored him. It served a purpose, regardless of it being spiritual, or whatever Samalians called it.

He heard the bucket being exchanged multiple times, but only opened his eyes

when the young man spoke. Tristan didn't understand the words, but the man was indicating his pants. He'd finished washing Tristan's upper body. Tristan took them off, and the man went back to washing him.

When he was done, the man spoke again. The translator had moved on, and by the dark sky, this had taken some time. The man spoke again, but the cadence of the words led Tristan to think they were part of the ritual, and not something he was expected to respond to. The young man picked up the bucket and walked away, disappearing into the crowd.

Tristan stood and moved closer to the fire, to be able to see the Samalians better. He didn't bother with the pants. Most didn't wear them either.

He watched them, trying to understand the meaning behind the ear twitches, but without understanding what they said, it was impossible to establish the context.

"Come dance," a man said. Older, his fur more white than black and gold, excited.

"No."

The man didn't reach for him, but motioned. "Dance, celebrate life."

Tristan shook his head. "I survived; I don't need this." They hadn't expected to survive, that was why they were celebrating. They'd expected to lose.

"Weak," his father said, "just like I said."

Were they? Tristan wondered.

"Of course. How can they survive if they expect to die? I don't see you celebrating just for surviving."

Tristan remembered a fight. A criminal cartel he and Alex had taken down for engaging in selling children. It had been a hard fight, and when it was over, only he and Alex remained. He'd looked at Alex, covered in blood, and he'd taken him right there. He'd given into his need because he knew he could have lost Alex, and he needed to feel his human against his body, prove to himself the man was still alive.

Alex.

He closed his eyes as the box cracked open. Saw him walking away, felt the pain of not having him at his side.

"Sad?" someone asked, a hand touching his arm.

"No," he growled, batting it away. He slammed the box shut. He wouldn't miss the human, he didn't need him, he wouldn't want him. He snarled at himself. Why couldn't his emotions stay in the boxes they belonged in? He didn't want the pain, he didn't need it, but it kept seeping back in.

The growl intensified as he opened his eyes and looked around for someone to hit, to fight, to kill. He was alone within a large circle. The people at the edge watched him warily. Good. They understood the danger he posed, they feared him.

"You need to remind the human of his place," his father whispered. "You need to remind him to be afraid of you."

His father was right. He needed to grab Alex, pull him close, rub his muzzle against his cheek.

"No!" Tristan growled. He needed to do what his father told him to. He needed to make sure Alex never looked at him with pity again, but with desire.

He roared, and the silence that followed was near-absolute. Everyone watched him. He didn't care, he was too busy trying to keep the box shut. Trying to keep the pain from seeping in again. He needed to get away, find some place safe. He needed to find Alex, have him, hold him, have him soothe the pain.

"No!" The crowd stepped back, then ran out of this way as he stalked out of the town.

Alex wasn't comfort; he was the cause of this pain. He needed to remove the human from his life.

"Yes," his father hissed.

The box cracked, and Tristan almost fell to his knees from the pain.

“Stop being weak!” his father screamed. “I didn’t raise a weakling. You don’t need anyone. You are Tristan. You are the only one needed to ensure your survival!”

He made it to the House, to the back of it. He leaned against the polycarbon sheet, dropping to his knees from exhaustion. He could survive this. He had to. That was who he was.

He fought sleep. He had a wall to build, he reminded himself. Sleep would only bring the nightmares. Alex touching him, Alex leaving him. He fought it, even as he knew he’d lose the battle; he’d already kept it at bay for days, and he didn’t have stims.

All he could do was hope for a rare, dreamless sleep as his head fell forward and his eyes shut.