

One at a time, he told himself. Don't look at what's left, just one stone at a time.

His father snickered, and Tristan glared at him. It let him see he had close to three-hundred feet still to go. His hands trembled. Why was this so hard? He could assemble a Karovan LR D-342 with just a screwdriver; he'd taken locks apart and rebuilt them with nothing more than his claws. Why was it so hard to build this fucking wall?

The trembling became bad enough he stepped away from the wall. He took a breath as he paced, willing his hands to settle. When it did, he moved to the wall again.

One stone at a time.

"So?" his father said, "how long are you going to continue wasting your time on this? Hasn't it been long enough? Clearly you can't do this."

Tristan tried to ignore him. He placed a stone, made sure it was stable, picked up another one.

"Come on, boy," his father whispered in his ear. "You know this isn't what you want to do. What you should be doing."

His hand shook. He ground his teeth trying not to scream. Of course, this wasn't what he wanted to do. He wanted to rend flesh so badly he could taste it.

"You ever tasted Samalian before?"

He glared at his father. Of course not. He'd never been that desperate for food here. But to feel his claws sink into flesh... Oh, how he wanted to do that. To rip someone apart. Be splashed by their blood. Hear them scream.

He looked around, looked for someone to stalk, licked his lips at the prospect. It was later in the day than he'd expected. The fighting Samalians were gone. He didn't hear voices from the shooting range. Where had everyone gone?

In the distance, he saw animals grazing in the field, but no herders.

He wasn't killing those beasts; they wouldn't offer him any challenge.

The town.

He would find someone there. He imagined himself hunting down that sandy-furred Samalian, the one who was always around Alex and cutting him. He saw himself do it, saw Alex scream at him.

Tristan winced, the fantasy broken. He glared at the wall and roared.

What right did Alex have to stop him?

"None," his father answered. "And if you were stronger, if you wanted to make me proud, you'd go prove that right now."

He would prove he was in charge. He would show Alex who belonged to whom. Would throw him to the ground, rip those pants he had no business wearing, lie over him, move in—

He screamed.

No, hurt him, he was going to hurt him!

He wound back to kick the wall, but snapped his head up. A sound. Distant, but distinct. The hum of a misaligned anti-gravity system.

Something was flying this way. He forgot the wall, Alex, and searched the sky. He found the object, still too small to make out details, but it was over the treeline, seemed to pull in one direction before the pilot compensated. If that person was anything close to competent, it meant the misalignment was serious.

The smart thing for them to do was land now, take the array apart, find the unit that was loose, secure it in place since the odds they had a spare were low. They were humans, they didn't plan for something like that.

They were humans. Flying toward him.

His breathing sped up. His hands were shaking again, but in excitement. Someone was attacking, coming from this side of the town. Alex wasn't going to be able to keep him out of this fight.

It was now close enough he could make out the shape, and he slumped. It was an old Camirlan bus. These weren't mercs, or the military, they were tourists.

His anger returned. He glared at it, then the sky. "What? It's too tough to give me a challenge anymore?" he yelled. "You decided you were going to drive me insane with this wall? What happened to you wanting me dead!"

His father looked at him with concern.

"Don't look at me that way. You're imaginary, you don't get to be worried about my state of mind."

His father looked offended.

The hover slowed as it passed over him. He made out the slight wobbling of the rear-left anti-gravity unit. An easy fix then, if he did it now. It continued toward the town, stopped midway, and came down to land.

He should get back to the wall. Alex wouldn't let him kill a bunch of tourists.

"Soft-hearted, boy. That's what he is. You need someone harder, deadly."

"He is deadly. He just..." Tristan sighed wistfully. "He cares. About them, about me." His eyes were getting wet.

"Are you going to cry, boy?"

"No," Tristan stated, rubbing them. When he moved his hand away, the doors to the bus were open and people were stepping out. They were too far for details, but something felt wrong.

They moved in an orderly fashion. They were controlled. They all wore the same gray colors. The jackets didn't flap in the strong breeze. And at their hips...

He ran.

These weren't tourists. He grinned.

These were armed and armored humans. Attackers.

They headed for the town and Tristan sped up. He had to reach them first. Alex would know about them now. He wouldn't scold him for killing these people, but if Alex reached them first, he might not leave any for him.

Tristan wasn't going to be denied this fight.

He roared, and one at the rear glanced over her shoulder. She stopped, barked something, and three more stopped and turned while the others continued.

Not as many as he wanted. He'd wanted all of them to stop for him.

He wanted a lot of people to kill, but he'd start with those.

Two dropped to a knee, putting rifles to their shoulders while the two standing aimed guns at him. He wove left as they fired, then right as they readjusted their aim. A few of the shots grazed him, and he wondered why the heat of the wound didn't cool.

With a scream he jumped at the closest man, rejoicing in the terror on his face as he understood he was dead. Tristan savored the sensation of his claws sinking into the man's throat as he impacted him, his fingers closing around the windpipe as they fell back. Ripping it out as he rolled off him.

He grabbed the gun-hand of the woman who'd first seen him. With a grin he pushed her hand up and punched the elbow. The sound of the crushed cartilage a balm that washed away the misery of these last months.

This he could do.

He spun behind her and she took the blasts in his place. At this range, her light armor did nothing to stop the Dolfic Perforator's blast.

"Helmet!" he yelled at them, as he fired in the man's face. "What is it with you and never wearing any helmets?" He threw the woman at the last man, who dodged her, but he looked around near panic.

There had been four of them, against one Samalian. Each of them had thought themselves a predator, a killer, someone to be feared. Someone who shouldn't be a victim.

Tristan grinned at the man, and the human realized he was the victim. The punch was strong enough it broke the man's neck.

“You’re all my victims. I’m the only predator here.”

He grabbed the Perforator, and the Kentric EB-52 handgun, before running for the town. As fast as he’d been, this had given the attackers time to reach it.

He heard the sound of Ardiez Carbines being fired, the distinctive cycling of the EB-52’s cooling system between shots. Something that sounded like the HH-12, and someone had a Gunther, an old model.

One of the humans looked around the corner of the building that served as his cover and fired at people deeper in the town. Tristan grabbed him by the back of the neck and slammed his head through the wall.

Too easy. He wanted one of them to give him a fight. A real one.

He moved to another alley, where he heard a Virtek Sleek fire. Five humans, their backs to him. A youngling before them, eyes wild with terror as she pulled on an unconscious adult, trying to pull him to safety.

The humans laughed, a sadistic sound. He roared and the five men spun.

Tristan stood still, giving them time to get over their surprise. He waited until they raised their weapons at him before moving, running at them, feeling the heat of the shots as they almost managed to hit him, and the searing pain as the Sleek burned a line in his side. Then it was too late for them.

He slammed the butt of the rifle in one man’s face, grabbed him and turned, using him as a shield. He grabbed the knife and threw it into another man’s neck. He dropped the dead body, went low as the three left fired, punching one in the groin and the other in the stomach as he stood. The last stepped away just before the fist could connect with his throat, so Tristan grabbed the man’s HH-12 instead.

The man was smart enough to let go, so he didn’t lose his hand when Tristan pulled. The man drew his knife, looking grim, determined.

Tristan smiled.

The few slashes the man managed were slow, clumsy. Nothing like Alex’s smooth and graceful motions. Tristan grabbed the wrist, twisted until bones broke and the knife fell out of his hand.

A scream of warning: the youth.

Tristan kicked the man in the stomach and pulled on the arm as he turned, feeling it pop out of the shoulder, and then heard the flesh rip. He swung the arm at the man behind him, trying to aim while holding his stomach. The impact left a bloody smear on the man’s face as he was knocked off his feet.

Tristan crushed the man’s neck with a foot. The last man was still on the ground, hands over his crotch, blood seeping through them. He wouldn’t cause problems.

The youth stared at him, eyes wide in awe.

“Go,” Tristan ordered, pointing to the adult and away. More screams, and he ran toward them.

He planted his shoulder in the back of a shooter and felt her ribcage cave in as he crushed her against a wall. He felt the narrow heat of a knife barely cutting his back and turned, using the woman’s body to bludgeon the man who hadn’t been smart enough to plant the knife in, instead of slashing. Both bodies were broken beyond recognition by the time he was done.

There was still fighting to be done. He followed the sounds, ran toward them. He jumped in the middle of a firefight, grabbed hot guns, using them to smash faces in, to break limbs. He ripped arms out and blood sprayed over him.

He smiled. He couldn’t remember being happier.

Then, all was silent.

He let it sink in, breathed in the scent of fresh blood. He finally felt calm, at peace. He saw the wall, finished. He saw how each stone fit into it. He knew how to finish the wall.

Steps, close by.

His eyes snapped open. Samalians around him, out of reach. He readied himself. Alex wouldn't be happy with him for hurting them, but he wasn't going to let them attack him without...

There was no wariness in their eyes, no fear, no anger. Awe, admiration, joy. Those were what he saw there.

Then they were talking, all at once. He couldn't make out the words in the cacophony, but there was no threat in the tones. He didn't lash out when he was touched, his arms squeezed and patted. The hugs he received. He hated that they touched him, but he endured it. He ignored the scents of arousal through the blood, his and theirs. The fight had caused it, and unless one of them tried something with him, he wouldn't react to any of them.

The people around him moved away, toward other voices in the distance. One looked at him over her shoulder, said something he didn't understand, motioned for him to follow.

He didn't move. He should go back to the wall, finish it now that he understood how each stone fit into it, but something pulled at him to follow her.

How had Alex fared?

The sounds were joyful. These people weren't contented, as he was. When he reached the town's center, what he saw matched the tone: they were preparing for a celebration. Of course, this wasn't a normal thing for them.

"That's because they're weak," his father said. "If you hadn't—"

No. They weren't weak. Tristan saw it in their injuries, in the seven dead Samalians stretched on one side of the space. These people had fought. He found the youth, tending to an injured adult, the one she'd pulled to safety. He saw the similarity in the fur now. Father and daughter.

These people had fought as hard as they had known how. Without him here they might have died, his father was right about that, but it didn't take away their victory. They deserved this celebration.

Music came, and a memory joined it—a small room, a stringed instrument being plucked, a woman's voice. He shook it away.

Men and women with instruments were seated, playing them, laughing in spite of their injuries. Couples, trios, and more, danced.

He should join in. Should do what he had to, so no one would notice him. He had to blend in. He had to put on a mask. But as much as he watched them, nothing came. Why couldn't he build a mask this time?

He'd partied before. Parties were one of the easier ways to approach a mark. He'd mixed in, became one of them, unnoticed in spite of his alienness. What was different now?

Someone handed him a large mug. He sniffed it, smelled the alcohol, downed it. He barely felt the burn as he tried to understand what about this made it impossible for him to blend in? He was one of them, after all.

Or was he? It wasn't the torture Justin had subjected him to. It had done something to him, his dead father's presence proved that. He didn't even think it was his time in space, among humans. This difference began long before that, he thought, at the hand of his father.

He felt a hand on his hand, and almost growled, but the astringent scent of kaltobar root made him look at her. Though young, she was an adult, silvery fur with black highlights. She said something he didn't understand. She raised the wooden bowl she held in her other hand. The unguent.

She locked her light blue eyes on his. "Honored," she said.

He looked away, around. Among the celebrant, men and woman went to the injured, reverently offering bowls. Some were taken, the greenish unguent applied on wounds. He couldn't hear what they said to each other, wouldn't understand if he could,

but the body language told him all he needed to know to understand the significance of her offering him the bowl. The scent of her desire also made that clear.

“Strong,” she said, and the tone was wistful.

Tristan didn’t react. He didn’t understand her actions, her desire. He hadn’t done anything to attract her to him. What was she trying to do? He searched her eyes, and the answer was clear, innocent. She wasn’t looking to manipulate him, all she wanted was him, his body. She wasn’t trying to make him desire her, she simply desired him.

He could play the part, could play the lover. He hadn’t done it often with women, but some jobs had called for it, so he’d made sure he knew how to give them what they needed so he would get what he wanted in return. He could take her to a private place, could go through the motions she wanted. But doing that with her wouldn’t gain him anything. She had nothing he wanted—no one here did.

His head snapped up, searching the crowd.

There was one person who had something he wanted.

He took the bowl from her hand and walked away, ignoring her distress. He walked through the crowd, looking for the one person he wanted to do this ritual with.

He wanted Alex.