

The day after the celebration, the two dead were thanked for their service, which consisted of them being brought to the House, laid down at the foot of the Builder and the Learner. Hea'Las spoke to them, then the small crowd within the building. Alex tried to follow what she said, standing at the back, but his grasp of the language was still too basic. Afterward the bodies were placed on pyres built outside, and they were burned.

The small victory the Samalians played a role in led to an increase among the people Alex had to train. So over the following week, he had to rearrange the group, dividing it into multiple smaller ones, with experienced fighters teaching the new ones. He was glad his con to convince Jacoby to handle the gun training worked, because his hands were starting to get full.

He even ended up with a handful of children wanting to learn, but except for the older two of them, they ran off to the town the moment they got hurt. Alex worried he'd have to deal with irate parents, but he never heard about it.

He continued learning the language with the children, getting better, but nowhere near fast enough for his liking. He only understood enough to work out every few phrases he heard, and he no longer wanted to have to rely on Rig'Irik for translations, not after the incident during the celebration. Rig'Irik seemed to have moved on, but Alex wanted to maintain distance between them.

The child said something. Alex repeated it, and the other children giggled. He couldn't pronounce most of the words; he lacked the muzzle that shaped them, and his voice box couldn't create the rumbling that was part of their language.

The canting of her head meant a question. He'd at least worked out the meaning of most head and ear motions. He recognized the word for fur, but none of the rest. After a moment, she pointed to his arm, and he offered it to her. She placed hers next to it. Her fur was the pale blond that was common with many of the Samalians here. Also, like many, she had splotches. Hers were black. She ran a hand through her fur, then over his skin, canting her head.

He smiled, understanding the question now, but he had no idea how to convey the answer. Fortunately, Sartas now hung around the class, ready to help him.

"I don't have fur." He gave Sartas time to translate. "Humans only have fur on their head." He ran a hand through his brown hair. It was due for a trim. She ran a finger on his chin and made a face at the bristle. "And there too, if I let it grow."

She took hold of one of his harness' strap and moved it aside, revealing a line of paler skin. Alex opened his mouth, but didn't know what to say. He'd run out of tanning pills weeks ago, so his skin only remained dark where exposed to the sun.

He looked at Sartas. "I have no idea how to explain tanning to her. Or tan lines, since my harness keeps that section of skin out of the sun. Do Samalian tan? Or I guess the sun would bleach the color from your fur instead."

"Yes, our fur gets darker if we spend most of our time inside, or wearing clothing. The reverse of your harness. It happened to me when I was in the city. Humans required that we wear clothing as they do there."

Alex nodded and listened to Sartas speak to the child. She ended with a very human quizzical expression on her face.

"As you can imagine, she hasn't seen anyone with fur not bleached by the sun. Even those who wear tool harness only wear them when they work."

The child continued moving the harness strap as she moved her hand down, exposing more pale skin. Then she let go of it and reached for the waistband of Alex's shorts.

"Stop," he said in Samalian. He couldn't do the ear thing, though Samalians had to deal with telling someone to stop when they weren't looking. The child stopped moving, canting her head. Alex gently took her hand and moved it away. He had to say the rest in Standard. "That part of my anatomy is off-limits to children."

Now even Sartas looked at him quizzically.

"I know no one here covers those parts, but if you let kids' normal curiosity lead to exploration of your private parts, don't tell me. I can deal with a lot, but that's one thing I don't want to know about." He hadn't seen anything like that, for which he was grateful.

Alex turned the child's hand, and the bracelet she wore dangled, the small golden sphere on it oscillating. He looked around, and all the children watching him had such bracelets. The adults in attendance had necklaces with a golden sphere on it, or one in their ear pavilion.

"Does everyone wear a representation of the Source?"

He looked at Sartas when she spoke Samalian. She was translating instead of answering him. The child looked at her bracelet and spoke. The cadence gave the words a sense she'd repeated them often. There was something about being part of... He lost the thread after that.

He looked at Sartas. "That's too advanced for me."

She indicated her ear, which had a half stud on each side of the skin, making a sphere. "We show our connection to the Source by them. They are a reminder we are part of a greater community than simply us, this town, or even this planet. That everyone is connected to everyone else, through the Source."

Alex nodded and filed the information away, going back to the lessons.

After another two weeks, he could follow some simple conversations, if the people spoke slowly. It helped that other than the children from the classes, Alex spent most of his time with the fighters he trained. When he joined them at the tavern, they made sure to keep the conversation to a level he understood, and they'd also picked up a little Standard, so he didn't always have to mangle their language.

They were at a table in a corner, Alex against the wall with a view of the door, and the seats on each side vacant. Samalians were tactile, constantly touching each other as they spoke, but none of them seemed comfortable touching Alex unless they were fighting. He figured his lack of fur made him too alien for them.

Rig'Irik had been the only one who'd sat next to him, and touched him. It hadn't been sexual or even suggestive—a shoulder bump, a hand on his arm, same as the others did amongst themselves, and before he'd realized the Samalian was interested in him, Alex had been okay with it. Now he was happy Rig'Irik wasn't joining them.

But the lack of touching made him miss Tristan's touch even more. He didn't care that each one had been an act calculated to make Alex want him. He wanted Tristan to touch him right now.

"What?" Alex looked around at the silent table, the expectant eyes on him. The Samalians burst out laughing.

"Alex far," Janden said. "People here, not away."

"Then the people here should say interesting things," he mumbled before sipping his mug. It was fruit juice, the base for one of their alcoholic drinks. He got head-canting as a response, but didn't bother explaining.

"Ask question," Janden said. "What Alex do?"

"I teach you how to fight."

A negative tilt of the ears. He pointed up. "There, space."

Alex looked in his mug, working out what he could say. As comfortable with violence as they were, he didn't think they'd understand the level to which he and Tristan immersed themselves in it.

"I'm a coercionist," he finally answered.

The exchange of looks told him they didn't understand. "I work with computers, make them do what I want."

They spoke among each other, the conversation becoming fast and excited. Alex understood "computer" since it was one of the few words in Standard that had become part of their language, and wondered how, since they didn't have one.

"You fix computer?" the maroon-furred Samalian with pale gray stripes asked. He

was older, one of the recent additions to the training.

Alex shrugged. "Sometimes."

"Fix one now?"

"There isn't a broken computer right now." Or was he asking for a demonstration?

"All broken."

Alex looked at him. "The only computer you have is the weather station, and it's working fine."

Janden, the most fluent at the table, gave a halting translation. "Others broken," the older Samalian said.

"What other computers?" Alex asked. "You don't have any other computers; I'd know." He'd spend enough time listening for them when he'd arrived, hoping for something to talk to the network with. Weather stations were dedicated machines, only receiving the weather information without a way, or the processing power, to get it to talk to anything else. The arrival of the shuttle, with its functioning comm system, had saved his sanity.

"Six computers," Janden said, in that way that asked how Alex hadn't known about it.

"How come I can't hear them?"

Head canting, quizzical looks. Alex lifted his hair to show the patch of skin. He tapped it. "I can hear computers. I'd know if there were computers here."

"Broken," the older Samalian said after another halting translation. Janden hadn't sounded confident, and Alex hadn't understood most of it.

"No power?" he asked in Samalian.

"Off."

"Why off?"

"Turn on," Torbim said, "word appear, stop moving. Turn off, turn on, same."

"How long?"

Torbim shrugged, looked around, head canted.

"Long time," the older Samalian answered. "First just slow, then slower, now stop."

Alex tapped a finger on the table. "When did this start? Before or after the corporations arrived? No, never mind, it's after; they brought the technology. Was it after LeisureTek arrived? Is this linked to them trying to pressure you into giving in to their demands?"

They hadn't understood him; Alex doubted even Rig'Irik would have.

And he realized that LeisureTek had no reason to cause this. Who would they call with a working connection? The Law? SpaceGov wasn't here, only the corporation, so it was the law stand-in. And a working computer was to LeisureTek's advantage; it meant they could call the moment they had enough of being attacked.

"Did anyone..." He switched to Samalian. "Did human offer to fix?"

Negative tilt of the ears. So either the corporation wanted them unable to talk to anyone else, for some weird reason, or they weren't aware this was happening. If there weren't aware, this wasn't a corporate attack, and if it had been, they would have left one channel open, so the town could call in their savior.

"I look?"

The older Samalian agreed eagerly. He and Janden led him to the computer in the closest home. It was on a desk, with enough dust on it to show it hadn't been used in recent times. It was so old Alex didn't recognize it, finding out it was a Celaran only after dusting it off and seeing the name on the casing. This had to predate his birth.

He turned it on, and just watched the screen. As explained, words appeared, a script he only recognized because he'd seen it written on papers Samalians used, but he didn't understand it. After half a dozen lines of what had to be the startup checks, something that should happen so fast they couldn't be perceived, nothing else happened.

He shut it down, deactivated any recording capability on his implant, and turned the computer back on, listening to it. From the start its voice was distorted and stretched to the point it was a low hum. It happened too fast for him to get a sense of what caused it.

He took out his datapad, partitioned it, and connected it to the computer. The new partition immediately filled with code, even if the computer couldn't do anything. The code kept replicating once he disconnected the pad from the computer.

He let it continue until his datapad started slowing down.

He froze the partition, cut part of the code, caged that, and deleted the partition. He brought up the cage and let the program in it run. In no time the cage was filled with replicated code. No wonder the old Celaran had been overwhelmed.

"What?" Janden pointed to the code on the pad's screen.

Alex studied the code. "That's a malicious program." It was simple, but elegant. The coder who'd written it was skilled. "It's what's causing the computer to stop working." He realized this was beyond Janden's comprehension, but before he could figure out how to simplify it, a new voice was speaking, translating.

Alex looked behind him to see Rig'Irik in the doorway. His expression was neutral.

"Can you fix it?" Rig'Irik asked.

Alex looked at the code on his pad again. "I'm going to need a more powerful computer, but yes, I can. I don't know how long it'll take though." He shut down the computer and hurried to exit, feeling Rig'Irik's eyes on him the whole time.

He heard the laughter from the two other Samalians, and Janden said something, to which Rig'Irik snapped an angry response. Unfortunately, Alex now understood just enough Samalian to know what the jab had been about. He so didn't need this complication.

This temptation.

Jacoby looked up from the work he was doing. The outside of the hover was without panels now, many of the components pulled out, newer ones on a tarp, waiting to go in. Alex hoped there wouldn't be a need to fly anywhere for some time, because this didn't look like it would be quick to put back in place.

Jacoby raised an eyebrow, then looked at the sky. "It's not dark yet. What are you doing back here? Your new friends throw you out?"

"Fuck off, Jake."

"Don't—" Jacoby snapped his mouth shut and went back to work. Alex sat at the control and was pleased that even with the work Jacoby was doing, the power was still on. He didn't want to use the other hover for this.

This was a time when he didn't want a connection to the network. Most coders put instructions for their programs to call home so they could keep track of how it was proceeding, and some could work around shutdown comm systems.

The hover's broken system guaranteed the program wouldn't talk to anyone but him.

Alex created a partition within the hover's systems, walled it off, and then added security to ensure the malicious program couldn't escape.

From the little he'd seen of its code, if it found a way out of that cage, it would fill the hover's system so fast Alex wouldn't have time to stop it.

He released the code into the cage and set to work.

First he tried to erase it, but as he expected, it reproduced faster than he could cope. He released antibodies, but even that was too slow and got eaten up. By then, the cage was filled and he could barely make out the code anymore.

He wiped it, reinserted the code, and slowed the system as much as it would go. For all intent, the hover was now inoperable, but he could watch the code work, saw it bloom around itself.

Yeah, this was going to take awhile.

Part of what made this take longer was that Alex had to go from one hover to the other to do his research. It would be easier to bring the other hover out of the forest and closer, but Jacoby had removed so much it couldn't fly anymore. He confirmed this wasn't a corporate operation, or at least not one using code that had been collected before. The database of which corporation used what kind of code and grammar was extensive, and new code didn't operate for long before being added to it. As much as corporations didn't want their own code to end up in it, they depended on the database to know who was attacking them.

He also confirmed this wasn't a known code. So not a large operation, and no one who'd encountered it before with information on how to deal with it.

So it was back to basic, cut-and-study coding, building a custom antibody designed specifically to deal with this program.

He worked on it every day before training, with Jacoby having to pull him out when the fighters were assembled. Then he went back to it in the afternoon, instead of taking part in the classes and going to the tavern.

This was a convenient way to avoid Rig'Irik. Alex didn't like the way he was reacting to the Samalian. The temptation kept growing as the Samalian became a better fighter, as he managed to cut Alex more often. He couldn't avoid Rig'Irik during training, but the rest of the time he didn't have to tempt himself.

He was Tristan's, he reminded himself, no one else's.

After a week, he had something he was confident would work, only to have it be overwhelmed when he released it into the infected computer. He'd made the mistake of thinking a small sample inside the cage would be the same as a fully infected computer.

It had been too long since he'd done this.

Two weeks later, he had a more robust program. The woman who lived in the home watched him as he released this program into the computer. His program worked, he could see that, but it was slow. It had to compensate for the almost-frozen processor, but after a few hours it was picking up speed as more of the malicious code was broken down.

"I check tomorrow," he told the woman. "Keep on."

"Fixed?" she asked, hopeful.

"Maybe. Know tomorrow." Alex stood, turned, and froze. Rig'Irik stood in the open doorway. This couldn't be good. Alex walked toward him, and had to stop when Rig'Irik didn't move.

The Samalian spoke to the woman, but Alex didn't understand one word of it. She answered, and again Alex didn't understand it.

"You've got to be kidding me," he sighed. Had they purposely kept part of their language hidden from him so they could talk around him like this?

Rig'Irik canted his head. "Kidding means joking?" he reached for Alex, who stepped back. The woman used that opportunity to slip around Rig'Irik and out the home, leaving the two of them alone. "Who is joking?"

"You, them," Alex answered in exasperation. "You're not teaching me Samalian, are you? What is it, some sort of shortened, simplified version?"

Rig'Irik canted his head again. "You learn Grr'Ler'nin."

"So that's what you call what you're teaching me? It's a kid's language?"

"Grr'ler'nin is my language."

Alex rolled his eyes. "It isn't what you spoke with her; I'd have understood at least some of that. So what did you speak with her, some sort of code?"

"I speak Rorlar'grr with Nianer."

"So what did you tell her you didn't want me to understand?"

"I say I want to talk with you. She asked I do it elsewhere. I say I will take you with me."

Alex glared at him. "And you couldn't say that so I'd understand it?"

“Her Grr’ler’nin is weak. Weaker than you. Easier I speak Rorlar’grr.”

“How can her Samalian be worse than mine? She grew up here.”

“She from mountain region. Here not long. Come for mate.”

Alex closed his eyes and forced his exasperation down. This didn’t make any sense.

“Why would her being from another region matter? She’s from the same planet. I’d get it if she had a regional accent, but she’s still Samalian.”

Rig’Irik looked as confused as Alex felt. “Here, speak Grr’ler’nin. Where Nianer is born speak Rorlar’grr. Different place, different language. Swamp different. Forest different. Other plains different. Language different. That normal.”

“No it isn’t. Everyone speaks Standard, that’s why it’s called Standard.”

“How everyone speak same language?”

“Because SpaceGov makes sure everyone does.” Alex rubbed his face, how could Rig’Irik not know that?

“What SpaceGov?”

Alex stared at him. “What do you mean, what is it? It’s everything, it controls the whole of space. Enforces the laws, makes sure everyone talks the same. You’ve never heard of it?”

Negative flick of the ears.

“How can you not...” Alex smiled. “Oh, the bastards. Of course corporations aren’t going to let you find out about them. You could get SpaceGov involved, and then they’d have to play by the rules.”

Rig’Irik canted his head.

“Never mind,” Alex said. “It isn’t like you can call them anyway; any communication on this planet has to go through a corporate node, and that’s going to be supervised to make sure SpaceGov never gets involved.”

Rig’Irik motioned up. “Everyone speak same?”

“I’m guessing there’s a few primitive planets that’ll have their own language still, but yeah, if they have access to space, they speak the same language.”

Rig’Irik looked at him with what Alex could only interpret as shock. “How many languages does Samalia have?”

Rig’Irik shrugged. “I know Grr’ler’nia, Rorlar’grr, Klakterk. Many others.”

Alex indicated the computer. “But you have those.”

“Broken.”

“It wasn’t always. What do you use them for?”

“Call family who went away, friends, mates.”

“But you can talk to everyone else on the planet, in space, the whole of the universe!”

“Why?”

Alex opened his mouth and found he didn’t have an answer. He was so used to it that he’d never considered why someone else might need all those possibilities.

“I don’t know, to find out what’s out there? Out of curiosity, what version does Tristan speak?”

“Human.”

“No, he spoke something like what you did.”

Rig’Irik canted his head and Alex tried to recall when he’d heard Tristan speak it. “It was in the city, so I guess you haven’t heard it.”

When he looked back at Rig’Irik, the Samalian was close to him. Alex placed a hand on his chest to keep him from coming even closer, wondering why he hadn’t even considered reaching for a knife. Rig’Irik’s skin felt hot under his fur.

“Alex.” The Samalian’s voice was soft. “I am strong.”

“Don’t do this.” He tried to sound stern as he pushed Rig’Irik back, but all that happened was his hand sinking deeper in the thick fur.

“I am strong enough.” Unlike the last time, Rig’Irik didn’t reach for him, but his desire was visible in his eyes.

“I’m not Samalian.”

“I know.” The words were breathed with desire in them.

Alex growled. At Rig’Irik or at himself, he didn’t know. He pushed harder, and the Samalian backed up a step. “I told you, I’m taken.”

Rig’Irik sniffed the air. “I can smell what you want.”

Alex opened his mouth, ready to tell him to mind his own business, but a yell of alarm came from outside. There was another hover inbound.

He and Rig’Irik ran out to get everyone ready.