

Alex pressed his back against the tree on hearing movement. Looking in Tristan's direction, he saw the Samalian's legs disappear up a tree. Alex wished he had that option. Standing still while the hunting party passed him by came with too many risks for his liking. It sounded like they would remain far enough, but all it took was for an animal to cross their path in Alex's direction and there would be an encounter.

He did not want another one of those. They never went well.

Moving North in a straight line over the last month had become a problem as settlements grew closer together. None had been so close as to qualify as neighbors, but too often, making a detour to avoid one resulted in coming across another. And with that came the increased groups out hunting or gathering.

Alex didn't understand it. The villages and towns were permanent, and while it had taken time, he'd identified fields where they grew the needed food. So why do much hunting? Tristan's theory was that it was due to the overpopulation he saw each time he was able to study one of the settlements. Whatever they grew and raised couldn't support the influx, so the hunting was how they coped with that.

Why there might be overpopulation in some towns was answered when they came across the deserted one. The bodies hadn't been fresh, and the violence that had been visited on them was massive, and didn't match animal attacks, even if many of them still had electrical burns visible. Tristan's theory was a raid by another town. The use of trained animals, or possibly crude weapons able to take advantage of the magnetic field to build a charge.

The one positive to come from discovery the deserted town was warm clothing for Alex, as well as a stock of fabric with which Tristan had made their new head protection. Hoods like those the natives wore. The fabrics were also more effective at channeling the magnetism, so could be lighter. Much more comfortable than the helmets, or skull helms. Tristan had even made his with space for his ears, although they couldn't move much without risking pulling the hood up.

They still had the bone helms to wear when a hood was damaged. Alex's helmet had broken during a fight against the natives, which had nearly cost him his life when he had trouble standing. Tristan had gotten rid of his about that time, opting for the bone helm too.

The hunting party moved away, and Alex relaxed slightly. And immediately cursed himself for it as an animal let out a cry that sounded closer and closer, along with the hunters.

The animal that ran past the tree Alex hid behind went up to his hip at the shoulders. Its back was scaled, and he saw vicious looking teeth that made him wonder why it fled instead of fighting back.

He looked for some other place to go to in the gap between it and the hunters, but the only direction that wouldn't make him visible to them was up, and without a branch low enough to grab, he wasn't going anywhere.

The hunters ran by on each side of the trees, six of them. Three with lances, three with bows and arrows in quivers at their hips. The arrows, like the lances, would be covered in a thin fabric, and the heads were metal. He'd learned the hard way they build a charge, the way the animals did. Not enough to incapacitate, but the arrow in the thigh he'd gotten had caused his leg to jerk hard enough it had sent him to the ground.

He didn't relax as they continued, and he was rewarded by not being taken by surprise when one stopped suddenly and turned.

They looked at Alex and called to him, sounding surprised, and Alex realized he was dressed the way they were. With the hood creating a shadow over his face, they couldn't see the uncanny differences.

Alex raised his hand in a wave, trying to come up with something to say. He hadn't heard enough of the language at this point to even guess what had been said.

The native froze in a way that made Alex think he'd done something wrong. And the tone when they called to him again lost all joviality. When Alex didn't reply, they called over their shoulder, the tone harsh.

Alex didn't look up, but he hoped Tristan was ready to scare them away. He didn't want to fight them, because he was getting fed up with their instant hatred of him, and the last times it had been difficult to stop as cutting them until they fled.

It had taken time, but he felt the need to kill coming back. He didn't want to unleash it on them. All they were doing was protecting themselves. Alex and Tristan were the intruders. If only they'd just go their own way, everything would be fine.

The native called again at Alex and this time, even if he didn't understand the words, he did the tone. Do what I say or else.

Alex didn't know what they wanted him to do, so he'd have to deal with the 'or else'.

The others were back, their questions in tones of amusement and concern. The response was dead serious. Not for the first time, a word was thrown at him that didn't seem to be natural to them. 'Prayte'. Or maybe it was the spite in how they said it that gave that impression. Whatever it meant, from the first encounter, it was made Alex's epitaph.

When they stepped forward, Alex knew things were about to escalate. "Tristan, if you're going to do something, now would be good."

The native froze, then the anger on their face turned to hate. Before they launched themselves at him, Tristan dropped from the tree and straightened.

Two of the natives ran at the sight of him, black fur on two legs, with exposed bone for a head. Another was only slower in getting running, while one fumbled putting an arrow to their bow. Tristan inhales and bellowed a roar at them and then it was only the two of them, a bow, and spilled arrows.

"Was there a reason you waited to scare them off?"

"They recognized what you said," Tristan replied, picking up the bow and arrows.

"You said they aren't from this planet, which means space, and that's SpaceGov. Is it surprising they recognize Standard?"

"But why react in anger at hearing it?" Tristan tested the tension on the string, then slowly pulled until the wood cracked. "It isn't the first time I noticed the reaction, but the first I'm certain was because of the language, not body language."

"As strong as they are, you're stronger," Alex commented.

"But this is an indication I can fashion a weapon that will give me range." He studied the arrows. "They left with them when they ran from the previous fights."

"You know they're going to sound the alarm, right? We really need to get out of here unless you want me to kill a bunch of them."

Tristan looked at him as he started walking. "It hasn't gone down?"

“It pretty much goes away when they aren’t around, but these attacks are getting on my nerves and that’s pissing me off and that’s making me want to go extreme cutting on them.”

“Maybe we should pit you against one of the animals so you can work that off.”

“I don’t think it’s going to help. I’m not angry at the animals. Out of curiosity, how come none of the Samalian in the town back home had bows? It’s a very basic weapon and while it’s nothing against a gun, it would make hunting animals easier.”

“We are closer quarters hunters. We ambush and chase. I don’t think extending our range would occur to any of them until they were exposed to guns, at which point that would be the desired weapon. How do you know about these? As you said, they are basic.”

“Vids. Stories about lost colonies falling into primitiveness are popular. I think they were my first exposure to ‘alienness’ even while it still looked human.”

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“This isn’t going to work,” Alex complained after nearly falling again. “I can’t see a damned thing, and holding your hand isn’t telling me what’s on the ground. Breaking my legs isn’t going to make us progress faster.”

They’d opted to try traveling at night, even with Alex’s lack of night vision, because like him, the natives weren’t equipped to function in near full dark and didn’t leave the towns. If it had worked, it would have meant more direct travels since they wouldn’t have to detour around hunting parties.

“We’ll make it to a tree and settle for the rest of the night.”

“Then I hope that tree’s close, because unless you want to keep catching me as I fall, you’re going to have to—” Alex let out a surprised scream as he found himself in the air and in Tristan’s arms.

“I’ll carry you so you don’t get hurt.”

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“I am so fucking fed up with this place!”

The yell came from further a head and Alex froze in surprise at understanding it. “Okay,” he said, keeping his voice low. “Considering the way our luck tends to go. What are the odds they are here for us?”

“We weren’t being chased when we got here. It’s unlikely we are the reason they’re here.

“You’re welcome to stay at the camp next time some of us are sent out, then. I’ll take this over having to be in so close quarters with those things. Make my skin crawl.”

“You think they’re xenophobic?” Alex asked.

“It’s more likely they’ve had to deal with the natives more than they want to.”

“Is it worth making contact?”

“It is, if only to find out how they crashed. More of their ship might have survived.”

When they stepped into view of the human group, they were welcomed with bows being raised and staves, with electronics attached to them. Nine of them, five women, four men. Their heads were covered in something like the helmets Tristan had modified, but which showed more work; repairs and modifications. If nothing else, they seemed lighter.

For once, Alex wasn’t who most of the weapons were aimed at.

“Where the fuck did you come from?”

“That direction,” Alex replied when Tristan didn’t speak. “We’ve been walking for a few months from where we crashed.”

“And you decide to come up here?” she asked in disbelief.

“We figured the magnetic fields wouldn’t be so strong at the poles. Maybe come up with some way off this place.”

“And how did you end up crashing on this place? Following legends of lost Family Ships too?”

“Legends, but I don’t know anything about lost families.” He looked at Tristan, but his Samalian was watching the people before them, on alert.

Alex looked at them again, searching for what had him keep his guards high.

They were dressed in spacer gear, although they’d been patched and repaired often enough they might be local clothing, but there was a clear utilitarian aspect to them still. Knives, arrows, and metal circles attached to their belts, Alex couldn’t work out what they were for. They might have been suit helmet collars, but electronics had been added.

One whispered something to the woman who seemed to be in charge, nodding to Tristan.

“He’s yours?” she asked.

“Our relationship’s more complex than that.”

“What I mean is, is he tame? He looks to be one of the beast kind aliens. Heard they’re pretty dangerous.”

“I can be dangerous,” Tristan replied, and they stepped back. “If I’m given a reason.”

The only indication Alex got to ready himself for trouble was Tristan’s claws extending.

“Well, okay. I’m glad you’re one of the smart ones,” she said. “It’s going to make this easier. We have a camp about three days’s walk in that direction. We have shelter, food that’s not going to make you sick. Meds too, if you need those. We can always use more people working toward getting us off this planet.”

“Like working in those mines?” Tristan growled.

“How do you know about those?” she asked in surprise.

“I heard what he said. The only thing I’m good for. I look stronger than the others working the mine, I’m going to make the work go faster. Not to worry about how dangerous I look. The collars will keep me in my place.”

Alex looked at the collars again, piecing together what Tristan said and implied. They thought those would be able to control his Samalian. There was only one way people like them control what they thought of as animals.

They applied pain until they broke.

Alex had a knife in her chest before any of them realized he’d moved. “You will not hurt him.” He ripped it out and looked at the others as she fell. “You are not going to touch him. He is mine!”

The arrow hit his shoulder and the electrical jolt made him drop his blood covered knife, but his anger was too loud for the pain to bother him. He was going to make them pay for thinking they could hurt Tristan.

He was going to make all of them pay.