

Alex moved; a down slash with a reversed held knife. Slashing open an imaginary opponent's chest. He dropped under the response, since the people Alex pitted himself against when practicing didn't go down simply by being cut open. He slashed up as he stood, cutting this one from groin to throat, and that removed him from the fight, but he hurried to spin to block the punch from the imaginary partner.

The strike he responded with would have sent an actual opponent to the ground, head spinning at least, possibly with a broken jaw. And on rare occasion, a broken neck that ended the fight.

This opponent was tougher than that, and Alex blocked the punches, protecting his head and chest from the fists, waiting for the opening. When it came, it was in the form of his opponent moving too close, and leaving his crotch open for a knee. Alex stepped back, arms up, giving them time to glare and come back, angrier, vicious.

He wanted to work himself to the point where he forgot this was shadow fighting. He wanted to feel the strikes, even if they were imaginary. He'd asked Tristan to train with him, but he'd said no. The fight had only been the day before, and Tristan wouldn't be able to not push him as hard, push him until the control was precarious.

Alex had wanted to tell him that was the point. He wanted to lose control and know he wouldn't hurt anyone. That he would feel the fight, get pumped, and then they could lose themselves into each other and anyone who walking in on them could be damned.

One angry punch across the imaginary opponent's jaw had him off balance, then one in the stomach, hand on their head and knee in the face hard enough to break bone and Alex stepped back, the fight over without even a hint of the satisfaction fighting the mercs had giving him.

His back was to the door, and he ignored the eyes on him. While there had always been those who watched him train, it was in passing, as they headed elsewhere within the sanctuary. Over the last four days, ever since Tristan had left for the jungle again and Alex started up his training, those eyes lingered longer, had grown more numerous.

He sheath his knife and turned. Six of the locals stood against the wall. Some, in the doorway, hurried away as Alex noticed them. He waited for one of them to speak. When they didn't, he left for a shower and to find a way to keep the rest of the afternoon from driving him insane with boredom.

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A loud discussion welcomed Alex when he reached his training room after receiving the request to join Teklile there.

"You don't know what you're asking," Tristan's fan told the leader. "This is going to destroy this place." Maraco noticed Alex and pointed. "He's a killer, you saw what the

bodies. You really want someone like him teaching them?"

Two dozen people were in attendance, half of them the retired mercs, standing behind Maraco. Which meant all the mercs were here, while the twelve other were only a fraction of the locals.

"I don't want anything," Teklile said, his calm demeanor contrasting with Maraco's agitation. "Felial, and Armand approached me on the behalf of themselves and a few of the others. They are the ones who want to learn how to fight."

"This is supposed to be a peaceful place," Maraco replied. "You think any of us would be here if violence was how things went? We got plenty of that before. We're here trying to put that behind us."

"And no one is asking you to take part. No one expected you, or the others, to jump in and fight the mercenaries that assaulted us."

"Really? Not one of you thought that because we have the training, we should have been out there? What would you have done if he hadn't been in the garden? If he hadn't been here at all? Let those mercs hold you hostage?"

"I don't know what we would have done," Teklile replied, still calm. "What I do know is that no one here would have gone to you and demanded you do something about it. Any who come to Solitude have their wishes respected. You came to get away from the fighting. To learn how to exist without it. Not everyone who comes here is like you."

"And we're not asking to be turned into mercs," a woman says. "Some of us were in the garden, and we saw our friend get hurt. Dorum was killed before us and we didn't know how to do anything. Maybe it'll never happen again, but if it does, I don't want to freeze and be herded around until someone shoots me in the head."

"But you want him to teach you?"

Alex raised an eyebrow at the pointing finger. Some only seemed to realize he was there now. He considered them. The theory of what they wanted was sound. That he be the one to teach them? That was insane. One of the mercs had to be willing. For them, training wouldn't be the same as fighting.

Except they were all looking at him.

"Teklile, can we discuss this in private?"

"Of course," the man replied.

"You're making a mistake," Maraco said, and Alex agreed with him.

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The office was small, like every private room within the sanctuary, Alex had decided. The desk was made of wood and had been repaired a few times. Teklile sat and motioned to one of the two chairs opposite him.

"This is a mistake," Alex said, sitting.

"You don't think they should learn to defend themselves?"

Alex snorted. "You don't ask a killer to teach someone to defend themselves. The only thing I know is killing."

"I find that difficult to believe. You have someone sufficiently dedicated to you to wait in the jungle. You must have a quality that causes that to happen."

"I'm deadly. He is too."

"But it isn't all you are. If it was, you wouldn't be here."

“I’m not here to be less deadly,” Alex replied. “I’m here to in control of my deadlines.” He stopped there, instead of adding what he thought of the likeliness any of this had of succeeding.

“Teaching is a great tool to better learn what you do. You can’t simply pit your student one against the other and tell them to bash their heads in until they learn. You need to—”

“That’s basically what I had them do. When I wasn’t the one doing the head bashing directly. I had to make them understand they should take me seriously.”

“Then you have taught before. Good.”

“No, not good. I don’t know how to not fight. That’s how I received most of my training. I had to fight for my life.”

“And your students went along with it?” Teklile asked, surprised.

Alex chuckled. “They were teenagers. I think they were more looking to prove to one another they were tough enough when it started. And fighting is in their blood, in their culture. They’re evolved from some predatory animal, I think, so they see strength as a quality and demonstrating it as part of life.”

“Then they weren’t human?”

“Samalians, like Tristan. Training them was basically me fighting the best of them and explaining how he kept losing to me. Then the others paired up with someone they wanted to impress or prove themselves against, and they fought. It always ended with tending the injuries. And the first week of that, I was surprised each time they came back for more. Then I started understanding them.”

“And here you already start understanding your students, since they are also humans.”

Alex snorted. “I don’t get humans anymore than you get Samalians.” I don’t particularly like humans, Alex almost added.

“None the less, you have some commonalities. You know how they can move, what they’ll need to protect, how to build their strength.”

“You don’t get it. I wasn’t teaching the Samalians how to defend themselves. I was teaching them how to kill the mercenaries who kept attacking their town, their livestock. They were okay with it because attacking other town is still something that happens when the times are bad. Like I said, they’re okay with fighting and dying in a fight is just something that happens. They honor the dead, mourn them in their way, and get on with living. I didn’t have to bother with control because they are built in such a way they’re okay with taking the worse I can give them. Humans aren’t.”

“So you never had to exercise control while teaching them?”

“Oh, I had to keep myself from strangling one of them a few times, until he understood I was taken.” That sounded better than cutting Rig’Irik open.

“Then I want you to consider something. This isn’t about turning them into mercs. It’s not even about turning them into fighters, even if they don’t understand that yet. It’s about giving them the confidence to be able to think under duress. What’s eating a most of them is that they panicked. It’s not that they wanted to fight and protect the others. It’s that they weren’t able to stay calm and get the others to hurry to get inside.”

“It wouldn’t have worked.”

“Possibly not, but they weren’t even able to consider doing that. Their mind blanked,

and all they could do was become victims to.”

“Look, I get what you’re saying. I really do. But get one of the others to do it. Play this little game of this being for the greater good with them until you convince one to help.”

“If you weren’t here, Alex, I’d consider it. But you are, and I’m not doing this because it’s for the greater good. I’m doing this because, unlike them, you have something to learn from it.”

“Excuse me?”

Teklile smiled. “You said it yourself. You didn’t have to exert control when you taught the Samalians. You were able to “cut loose” and they were able to take it. You’re here because you want to learn control. While no one has mentioned it, it’s apparent our standard method isn’t as effective with you as it is with others.”

Not effective at all.

“I think this will be good for you. You will deal with a subject you know well, but you will have to think about what you do, so you won’t hurt your students. We have books on how to teach, if you feel you can benefit from them, but the primary goal for you, in relation with yourself, will be to be restrained. To remind yourself that you are not getting into a fight, but a teaching exercise. This will be about maintaining control in a situation you have already stated you lack experience in.”

“And what if I don’t agree to do this?”

“You came to us to learn control. I’m not forcing you to stay.”

Alex glared at the calm man.

That was the worse thing about the situation. He didn’t have to stay. He was confident that if he told Tristan, without doubt in his voice, they’d leave and move on to some other method of fixing him.

All Alex had to do was admit defeat. Admit there was something he couldn’t win against.

Give up, Alex, and you can go home.