

## Chapter 33

There were no dents.

With a scream, Tristan punched the wall again. There should be a dent to show the anger he was expressing. It was that or worry, and he wouldn't worry about Alex. At least the sink showed his anger. He'd ripped the spout out, so that now, when he turned it on, the water arched up. It made it easier to drink, otherwise it only made a mess.

He'd kept his anger in check while being escorted back to his cell. He'd even kept from ripping heads off as they ordered him to strip, then commented on his look. It wasn't the comments; he didn't care what others thought. He knew how well he compared to human men, what did it matter if he wasn't built exactly the same way humans were? Alex never complained. None of the lovers he'd had complained.

It was the pointing, being turned into something to amuse them, that stoked his anger. He was tempted to knock them out and show them how well he could perform, and see if they would still point and comment afterward.

But neither of them was Alex. He didn't want them.

Finally, they'd gotten bored, dropped another pair of pants, and left. He'd left them on the floor. He only wore clothing to blend in, and to appease humans and their sensitivities. It was difficult to pass unnoticed when everyone stared at you.

He searched for an escape. He couldn't use the same method; not only had they taken his tools by taking his pants and belt, they'd welded a plate over the door's controls. He searched the walls for a hidden access to the maintenance conduits without luck.

He pounded on the door, letting out more of his anger, but no one responded. Not having found a way he could escape, he was left stewing over his mistake.

He'd relied on the information provided instead of doing his own in-depth research. His employer had described his quarry as a family man driven by a need for revenge. There had been nothing in what she'd told him to hint at this level of planning.

Tristan had expected a rich sovereign playing at being a mercenary. What he'd gotten was someone who'd taken it seriously. Who had not only planned for what he wanted to do, but the eventualities that could occur in the process.

Cruise ships this old didn't come with security systems that would have alerted him to their escape. He and Alex had made good time reaching the bridge; for him to get enough warning to amass the men that had been waiting for them, the dead guard would have had to have been detected while he was still close enough to hear anyone coming.

So his quarry had either known he would escape and come for him, or had installed cameras in the corridor. Either spoke to someone planning far ahead, and the number of mercs waiting in the bridge indicated

that while his quarry might not know who he was, unlike most, he hadn't taken any chance. He'd expected Tristan and Alex to be a threat, and he'd worked out where Tristan would go.

Maybe Alex had been right, and they should have gone for engineering. If nothing else, it would have been the less obvious decision.

His anger ebbed over the hours. He didn't do personal recrimination. He'd made a mistake, acknowledged it, and learned from it. Next time, regardless of the time constraints, he would do a thorough investigation before accepting a job. He would have Alex do it.

Alex. They'd kept him for longer than he'd expected. There was nothing he could tell them that would make the job impossible, only more difficult. Knowing what he was after wouldn't allow his quarry to keep it from him.

They would hurt Alex, torture him. He'd known it would happen eventually, so he'd prepared Alex, taught him to resist pain, physical and emotional. He'd pushed him to his limits, and then past them.

His breathing troubled him, and his chest felt tight. He had to stop thinking about Alex. His human would survive, or he wouldn't. It was out of his hands. What he needed to do was escape, and the only option he had left was rushing the guards the next time they opened the door.

It happened faster than he expected, and he was up before the door was half open, halfway across the room by the time it was open, and he stopped as the guards threw someone inside.

Tristan forgot his escape as he rushed to catch Alex and lay him on the floor gently. He didn't feel anger, or rage at what had been done to him; he felt fear. He had to confirm Alex was all right, but he was afraid of touching him.

His face was covered with blood and was deformed by the bruises and broken bones. One eyelid was swelled to the point it couldn't open. His scalp was peeled off the bone in places and one arm had no angle in it, as if the bones had been removed.

"A-Alex?" His chest moved, so he was alive. Tristan wanted to pick him up, hold him tightly. Alex rasped something, and Tristan leaned in.

"Bastards took my knives."

Tristan hiccuped with relief and felt his eyes getting wet. He stood and hurried away while he still had himself under some control.

He didn't care for Alex, Tristan told himself. Alex was nothing but a tool. That they had damaged him was deplorable, and he should be angry that someone had done this to something of his, but the rest of what he was feeling had no business there. He didn't care. He wouldn't let himself care.

He looked at the human lying on the floor and directed his anger at him. That human had no business affecting him like this, not after the years he'd spent turning him into a thing. He went to stand over him, ready to order him to stand, ready to make Alex suffer for what he was putting him through.

Alex opened an eye and began pushing himself up with his working arm. His face was a mask of pain, but no sound escaped his lips.

Tristan was on his knees, hand on his chest to hold him down. "Don't." He tried to make his voice hard, but it cracked. Whatever anger he'd stoked had vanished at the sight of his agony.

"I'm okay," Alex gasped. "I can keep up, you don't have to worry."

"Don't move." The pain in his own voice worried him. He forced himself to think to avoid thinking about what he was feeling and why. Alex's one eye searched his face and Tristan tried to construct an uncaring mask. He couldn't see if he was successful; Alex's face was too damaged to be readable.

Alex was in such bad shape that if he didn't do something, he might—

He wouldn't think about that. He needed to do something.

And a thought occurred to him. He didn't think it would work, but he had no other plan at the moment.

"Alex," he whispered, "I need you to act hurt."

Alex gave a chuckle that turned into a coughing fit. He sprayed blood on the floor.

Tristan couldn't think. Alex had internal damage. If he didn't get him to a medical bay soon, he might

"Shouldn't be a problem," Alex whispered.

Tristan forced himself to focus on the problem. "How many guards?"

The response came slowly as if Alex was drifting away. "Two dragged me back. Two at the door."

"So potentially four of them."

Alex wasn't looking at him.

“Alex, stay with me.”

“I’m here,” Alex replied, focusing on him. “Four, right. Maybe. They said stuff, but I wasn’t listening.”

Tristan steeled himself. “You’re dying, Alex.”

“No, I’m not.” His voice was steel and the determination in that eye made Tristan proud.

“You are dying, Alex, and I’m panicking because I don’t know what to do.”

Alex opened his mouth, but paused. He searched his face and nodded. “I’m dying, right.”

Tristan smiled; even in his current state, Alex was sharp. “I’ll draw as many of them as I can, but you’ll need to take care of whoever will check on you. There might be more than one. I don’t know how long it’ll take to handle the others.”

Alex nodded. “I’ll deal with them.”

Tristan stopped his hand as it was about to rest on Alex’s head, and he was unable to tell if it was out of fear that he would hurt him, or that Alex would understand why he’d done it. He stood and used his conflicting emotions to build his mask. He reminded himself it was a mask—the mask of someone about to lose the person who mattered to him more than life itself.

“He’s dying!” The words were out before he started banging. Tears were falling down his face. “You have to help!” No reply came, so he pounded on the door. “You have to help him! I can’t lose him. Please.”

Someone said something he couldn’t make out.

“For the love of all, he doesn’t deserve to die. Please, help him!”

The door opened, and he had a gun in his face. He couldn’t make out the model through his tears.

“I don’t have to do a damned thing.”

“Please, he’s all I have.” He looked at the other two men, pleading. “Don’t you care at all?”

“No,” the man with the gun said. “We don’t. I should just shoot you so you don’t have to deal with your buddy dying.”

Tristan opened his mouth to plead again, but the man on the left spoke.

“The boss didn’t say anything about either of them dying.”

Tristan dried his eyes.

“You have got— Seriously? Doesn’t he realize how much trouble it’s going to be to keep that one alive?”

“You do it, and you tell the boss. Remember what happened to Umberlo?”

The man was thinking about it. Unfortunately, he was thinking it would still be worth it.

Tristan hunched his shoulders, made himself sob. “I’ll tell you everything. Just...just help him, please.”

“We get answers out of this and the boss is going to be pretty happy with us,” the man on the right said.

The man with the gun, a Z4P, nodded. “Yeah, he will.” He motioned for Tristan to move. “Over there, and don’t try anything, or I will kill you. The boss can’t say anything if it’s in self-defense.”

Tristan did as instructed. He even raised his hands in a show of compliance.

“Lyr, you check him out. Ahmed, keep an eye on this one with me. I don’t trust him.”

Ahmed was the stockier of the two. He pulled a Z4P too and Tristan had to fight not to roll his eyes. Both stood between him and Alex, blocked his view. He took a step to the side.

“Don’t move.”

“I just want to see how he—” His voice caught as Alex went in convulsion. He took a step forward and had a gun in his stomach.

“Don’t even think about it.”

Tristan glared at the man. How dare he keep him from Alex? He needed him. He had to go help him.

“Guys? Something’s happening to him.”

Tristan had his hand on the gun before the man had started the motion to look over his shoulder. He ripped it out, coming away with a couple of fingers. As the man opened his mouth in pain, Tristan shoved the Z4P in it until the back of it was behind the teeth.

He turned to the other man as this one dropped to the floor. There was a flash from the gun. He felt heat at his side, smelled burned fur and flesh. He closed the distance. There was another flash, but no corresponding heat. He batted the hand away and punched the man in the face.

The man backed away, punching Tristan, but he didn’t care. When the man was backed against the wall, Tristan kept punching him in the face. When the man began slumping down, Tristan held him in place, and he hit him over and over until his fist hit the wall. He let the now-headless man fall.

Tristan turned to go help Alex, but his guard was sprawled over him, a knife in his neck, which Alex

was trying to pull out. Tristan pulled the man off him.

“My knife!” Alex gasped, then fell back.

Relieved and amused, he pulled it from the neck and handed it to Alex, who cradled it. “This obsession of yours is starting to sound unhealthy.”

“Says the Samalian who owns at least one of every gun that’s ever been made.” Alex turned on his side with a silent cry. Tristan took a step to help before stopping. No! He cursed himself. He didn’t care about him, about the pain he was in.

Alex stopped once he made it to his knees, panting and blood running down his face with his sweat. He looked up and managed a smile. “Neither one of us is healthy when it comes to what we love.”

Tristan narrowed his eyes, searched Alex’s mangled face. Did he know? Had he realized Tristan’s emotional conflict? Alex chuckled and winced. No, this was about himself. What he’d let Tristan do to him because he loved him.

Alex looked up again, offering him his working hand. “I’m going to need help for the last bit; if I try to jerk myself up the pain wi—” He gasped as Tristan pulled him to his feet none too gently.

Tristan held Alex against him, supporting him while he regained his strength, nothing more. He could smell Alex under the blood. He could smell his pain, his fear. Tristan wanted to— He growled to himself. No, he wanted nothing.

“I’m okay,” Alex hurried to say. “We can go. I’ll keep up.”

Tristan kept an arm around Alex as he headed outside. They made it a few steps when a man turned the corner.

“Guys, you’ll never guess what they’re doi—” The man’s words were cut by the knife in his throat. He staggered, surprise registering as he fell down.

“Where’s your gun?” Alex asked.

“All they had were Edeku, not worth using.” Tristan hadn’t even thought of grabbing one. Even as he walked by the dead man, he didn’t think about arming himself, but Alex pulled on him. “The knives.”

“Alex.”

“I need my knives.”

Tristan leaned Alex against the wall and pulled the knife out of the man’s neck. He took the sheathed one off the belt and, since the man had an Azeru, he took that too.

Alex raised an eyebrow as Tristan clipped the sheath to his belt.

“You’re the one who pointed out I’m not armed.”

“I should have pointed out that you’re naked.”

“More important things to do than worry about that.”

Alex chuckled and coughed blood. “Unhealthy, I tell you. That’s us.”

“You’re delirious.”

“I am dying, after all.”

Tristan felt himself grow cold. “No, you are not.”

Alex smiled. “Then I guess I’m not.”

“You need to get patched up. The medical bay is—”

“Two levels up, on the port side. First thing I looked up. Always know where you can get patched up, one of the first things you taught me.”

Tristan took him to the closest lift.

“Is that safe?” Alex asked, his head resting on his chest.

“You’re in no condition to crawl through conduits.”

Alex didn’t reply; his eyes were closed.

“Alex, wake up.” He shook Alex as gently as he could.

Alex made weak sounds of protest.

Tristan leaned and whispered. “If you don’t wake up, Alex, I am never touching you again.”

Alex’s eyes snapped open. “I’m awake.”

“Stay that way.”

The doors opened onto an empty cage.

Tristan held the Azeru even tighter as they rose. Moments before the lift came to a stop, he felt the grip’s casing crack under the strain. He tried to relax, but there was a reason lifts were considered death traps.

He raised the gun as the door opened and fired...at the opposing wall. He looked left and right. No one?

He didn't like this. His quarry had to know they'd escaped again. Had he called everyone to the bridge again? Maybe the mercs were in the medical bay? He'd deal with them when he got there.

"Alex?"

"I'm here," he slurred.

"Alex, stay awake."

"I'm awa..."

"Alex!"

He dropped his gun, took Alex in his arms, and ran. "Alex, stay with me. Don't you dare die on me, do you hear me?" He reached the door, and it opened at his presence. He rushed in, uncaring if any mercs were in it. And relieved when he found it was empty of people.

When Alex was better, he was going to question where everyone was. Right now, he had to see to his human.

The bay looked like it had been turned into a storage room. He ignored it all, although the fabricator tucked behind a few crates nagged at him. In the center of the room he had to walk around something that took most of the space to reach the medical beds on the other side.

As soon as he put Alex on it, the screens lit up to tell him that Alex was alive, but dying. He had massive internal damage. His stomach was punctured, his liver crushed. His blood was already so toxic he'd need a full transfusion.

Tristan waited, but the bed did nothing else.

Alex coughed more blood.

He turned away before his control broke. He wouldn't give Alex the satisfaction of seeing how he'd gotten to him. Even now.

That's what he told himself as he felt tears streak his cheeks.

He cursed the universe. What kind of medical bay didn't have a full-range medical bed?

The device in the center of the room had a green flashing light, which turned red as he watched. At the same time, the lock on the door flashed red and then yellow—quarantine lock.

He couldn't worry about that. He needed painkillers and as many Heals as he could find. Could there be some cryo system in one of the crates? If he could find a field one, then he'd have as much time as he needed to get Alex some place he could be saved. He'd take a fluid replacement system if that was all he could find; at least that would stretch how long Alex had to live, hopefully enough.

"You really want to take your secrets to the grave, don't you?" His quarry's face was on a screen under the cabinet Tristan was emptying. "I have to admit, considering the state of your partner, you made amazing time here. Well, maybe you don't realize it just yet, but you found what you came here for."

Tristan stopped. "What are you talking about?"

The man's sigh was so theatrical Tristan felt like telling him to stop. "Come now, stop this game. It's over, you lost. We both know you're after the killer virus my grandfather hid. Congratulations, you found it."

Tristan turned. The machine at the center of the room, now that he paid attention, it could be a vaporization system. The virus could be airborne.

"It was released only seconds ago. I expect you no longer have long to live. I do hope you suffer." The screen turned off.

Alex convulsed on the bed, and Tristan ran to his side, trying to see what was wrong. He was still breathing, so that was good. He looked at the screen, as the liver vanish from the list of injuries. He looked at Alex and the minor cuts were healing.

Alex was infected.

Tristan looked at his hands. They both were.

The universe had won.

He closed his fists. No. This wasn't the end. He didn't give up. He would fight until the last moment. The universe only thought it had won. It had thought that often before and Tristan had defied it each time. He would again.

Alex gasped, and Tristan forgot all about his eventual death. All that mattered to him was making sure Alex was okay.

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