

Chapter 03

“If you touch him,” Tristan said, watching the human edge toward the old man, “I’m going to rip your head off.” He reached inside for another wire, trusting to the human’s fear of him to make him obey. Three more wires moved and reconnected, and the panel lit up.

“How?” the human asked.

Tristan looked at his singed fingers and turned, causing the crowd to shuffle back. They’d gotten closer than they should have, the way they outnumbered him giving them courage, until they saw his unconcerned expression. A fight with them would be more of a waste of time than a problem.

The human was checking himself, his face showing panic, his back against the column, as if anyone here had an interest in him. The column vibrated, and the human moved away from it, in front of the door.

Tristan growled, and the human backed away, almost to the crowd, where he shrieked and jumped away from everyone. He calmed himself and looked at the opening doors.

“The forcefield can only be turned off from the office.” He stared at the blue glowing field in the doorway. His tone was one of authority, but he was scared and disappointed, same as the rest of the crowd.

Tristan turned his back to them and looked in, waiting. The glow blinked off, and he smiled. The crowd shuffled forward in unison and Tristan looked over his shoulder, growling and baring his teeth. Most backed away immediately. A few brave ones waited until he turned fully and extended his claws. The human hurried back when Tristan leveled his gaze on him.

He put the remnants of his pants on, and bent to pick up the old man when the lights inside the lift flickered and went off. He looked in the panel, searching for the wire that came undone, but they were all in place.

Metal ground against metal somewhere in the distance, inside the lift column.

“Tristan?” came Alex’s faint voice. He stepped inside, found a corner that was damaged, slipped a finger in, and pulled it down. “Tristan?” Alex called again, louder.

“Alex, what happened?”

“The shield I put in front of the panel fell, and a stray bolt blew it. The entire system’s down.”

“Can you bypass it?”

“There’s nothing to bypass. It’s ancient, all mechanical. It’s more your area than mine, but the controls are all up here.”

Tristan glared at the crowd, who’d decided this distraction was permission to approach. They backed away. “The guards?”

“Dead. The warden plus six. Unless the information was incorrect, that’s all of them.”

“The ships?”

“No one made it out of the control room. So it’s fine, as are the other two.”

The sycophant edged closer, looking hopeful, but he kept his distance. It was another human who caught his attention by running.

“Fuck this,” that man said. “I’m getting out of here.” The man was short and wiry. Tristan let him get in the lift, and when the man tried to elbow him aside, Tristan grabbed him by the neck, slammed him against one wall, hearing bones break, then the other one, with more breaking. When he threw him out of the lift, Tristan yanked his hand back without opening it and kept a bloody souvenir.

The human fell on his back, the others watching in horror as he gasped for breath, bubbles bursting through the blood pouring out of his neck. Tristan threw the windpipe he kept next to the man, and the crowd parted with a gasp.

Tristan looked around, then up. “I’m coming. Start wiping everything.” He stepped out of the lift and everyone took a few more steps back. He looked them over, evaluating the rags they wore, then looked at the sycophant. What he wore looked in marginally better condition.

“You,” he pointed at him, “come here.” Marty hurried to Tristan’s side. “Your shirt.”

The human looked at himself. “What about—” Tristan grabbed the collar on each side and ripped the shirt off the man’s body.

“Leave.” He ripped strips from the shirt.

“But...you need—” the sycophant began. Tristan’s growl sent him running for the wall, away from the rest of the crowd.

He did a quick weave of the strips, and tied them around the old man’s wrists. He wiped the blood off his hand with the rest of the shirt before slipping the man’s arms around his neck, making sure he wouldn’t slip off. He went back inside the lift, pulled himself up using the edge of the roof, and then, stepping on the struts to grab hold of the cable, he pulled himself up.

He hurried, hearing the crowd rush for the doors. They fought one another, more interested in being first than escaping.

He was most of the way to the door to the guard room, when he felt the cable shake. Someone had managed to get through the crowd and start climbing. The shift in the cable became more pronounced as more people climbed. When he reached the door, Alex reached out and pulled him close enough for him to step in.

He lay the old man on the floor and checked his pulse, slightly more erratic.

“You know you have a following, right?” Alex was looking down the shaft.

Tristan looked around the room. “That one has grenades. Throw one down.”

“Are you sure?” Alex crossed the room. “Won’t the corporation who owns the prison be pissed at us?”

Tristan watched him. “If they do, is it a problem?”

Alex shrugged, plucking one of the grenades. “I just think we have enough to do without adding complications.”

“Did you wipe the system?”

“As best as I could.” He dropped the grenade down the shaft. “This thing is beyond antique.”

The grenade pinged against the walls a few times. People screamed in terror, then in freefall before the floor shook and a blast of heated air erupted out the shaft’s door.

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