

The mess he'd made of Alex made him recoil. He needed space. He had to get away from Alex. He had to think.

He walked. He was Tristan; he didn't run away, but the feelings stayed with him. He ran, but that wasn't enough, so he pushed himself as fast as he could through the trees.

When he stopped it was because he couldn't breathe, but that didn't help. There was something pressing on his chest. Emotions wrapping around himself, trying to suffocate him. He pushed at them. He had to bury them back down. He didn't let his emotions get the better of him.

He screamed.

One of the large predators ran away from him.

He dug his claws in the bark of the closest tree and ripped it off. He slashed at the tree, clawing at it, making deep furrows in it. His fingers became sore, but it wasn't enough. He still couldn't breathe.

He made fists and pounded on the tree. The blonde wood slowly became red with his blood. He kept hitting it; he needed something real to focus on, something he could use to bury what he felt.

When he finally could think again, the thought that ran around in his head was, how could he have let this happen? He didn't lose control. Everything he did was because it served a purpose. He never let his anger burn hot like it had. It was cold and calculating.

His anger was carefully planning Justin's downfall in retaliation for his imprisonment. It was taking away what his brother cared about, arranging for him to be incarcerated in Tristan's place. Justin had stolen ten years of his life, but he hadn't exploded. Like he had just now because Alex had...

What had Alex done? Other than being there? Was that all that had been needed? Yes, he could see it now that he could think again. Alex's presence was all that had been needed to erode his control.

What if Alex went to the portmaster with this?

All this would be over. Tristan would have to erase his presence here, which meant erasing the town and everyone who knew of him. It would be time spent away from his research. Not to mention however long it would take to settle in his next place.

Could he get rid of Alex?

One of the predators roared. No. The portmaster knew Alex was an experienced mercenary. He, if no one else, wouldn't buy an animal could have killed Alex. And there were no guarantees the animal would eat the body and make any evidence of what he'd done to Alex go away.

He rested his head against the tree. Why did Alex have to come looking for him?

He ran a finger against the metal diamond on his collarbone.

Tristan could be the one to leave. He could vanish and make sure Alex didn't find him again. He snorted. Tristan didn't run, especially not from a human. He stood his ground and took down the problem.

Which was Alex.

Could he kill him? How could he even wonder that? Of course he could. It was the ramification of that act that was the problem.

The portmaster was the only threat here. The only one who could cause problems if he decided Alex's death wasn't an accident. Not only did he have subjective decades of experience as a mercenary, but he controlled the port. But that meant running.

Tristan had a plan to make all of this vanish, but it wasn't in place, not fully. He could destroy the town with one command, but the farmers had expanded. Six new farms since the last time he'd brought his plan up to date. How long? How long to fully erase everyone who knew about him? Too long.

What were the alternatives? Leave without destroying the town? He didn't like the idea, but it gave him speed. He could get through the port's security and erase everything about the ship he'd take, but the portmaster knew every ship there.

He had a ship hidden an objective month from here, but that was too close. If the portmaster alerted the Law, his problems escalated quickly.

Did he actually have to leave? The only current threat to him was Alex. Him reporting what

Tristan had done, showing himself as the proof. But would Alex do that? Would a man who had sacrificed everything to find him for a chance at being reunited with a fictitious lover just give it up because of something like this?

Alex was stubborn. He might not give up, but if he exposed Tristan, he'd lose any chance to get that Jack back. He could use that. He could put the mask back on. How close would it have to be for Alex to believe he was Jack? He barely remembered how Jack had acted. If he got a crucial detail wrong, it would set Alex against him.

Alex could go to the portmaster. Two experienced mercenaries working together would cause a challenge.

He looked up at the pale blue sky visible through the canopy. "What did I ever do to you that you're so set on seeing me dead?" The question was stupid. His father had explained it to him a long time ago. The universe wanted them all dead. It wanted to remove every living being, and it would use them one against the other to accomplish that.

The universe didn't answer his question, and he went back to thinking about his problem. He might be able to trust in Alex's need to get Jack back, but he had information he could hold over Tristan's head. All Alex had to do was document the damage he'd received, and at any moment he might threaten to make it public. Tristan would be right back to having to leave.

He smiled.

So, he needed to change what had happened. If the injuries Alex had received weren't due to an assault, they couldn't be used against him.

He felt better now that he had a plan. And he noticed his emotions stayed in their place. As a test he imagined Alex, naked, sprawled on a cot, inviting him. His body didn't respond to the image. Whatever Alex had done to him, it was over. He'd regained control of himself.

The idea he had lost control didn't sit well with him, but now he knew what had caused it. Alex wouldn't be able to use it against him again.

The house looked the same as he approached. The door he'd barged out of was still open. The lights were still on. He heard no sounds which would indicate Alex was moving about, maybe preparing to attack him.

He entered, and the scent of blood led back to the kitchen where Alex still lay on the floor, unconscious. He was still breathing, so his plan was still valid. He watched Alex, his injuries, as he considered what story they could tell.

He'd tried to do that on his way back, but had found he couldn't remember what injuries he'd caused. It had happened too fast—his rage had blinded him. He knew he'd broken bones, but what else had he done?

He'd bruised Alex, bloodied him. A lot.

He couldn't keep Alex here until he healed. The bone-mender was on his ship, and even with Heal Alls and some bone growth accelerant—if Alex had any of those—it would be weeks before they would be sufficiently mended for him to walk and behave as if everything was fine.

Someone would notice how their routine had changed and ask questions.

How did he explain the injuries? What could he tell the medic that she would believe enough not to push?

Broken bones could mean a fall, which would explain the bruises too. A fall could mean the escarpment. Normally his running path took him there, which meant the tavern keeper's wife would see them, but it was daytime. Odds were she was at the tavern. If not? They could have taken a different route so she wouldn't see them. There was one injury a fall wouldn't explain, and if they were going to do that, Tech wouldn't want to advertise that fact.

He had the story, now all he had to do was make sure Alex's body told one close enough the medic wouldn't feel a need to look too deeply.

How did he need to dress Alex? Normally they ran naked. It would be natural for them to be nude on his property, but humans could have odd reactions to seeing nude people. Only the tavern owner and his wife knew about the running, and he hadn't heard any comments about it from anyone else.

He went to Alex's room, and from his pack took shorts and a shirt. The ones he'd worn when Tristan let him run dressed. He put on something similar, dropped the clothing next to Alex, and grabbed what he'd need from the cabinets before heading outside. He returned with a few large stones and dirt in a couple of bowls.

Alex gasped and thrashed as he woke up from Tristan moving him. He held Alex down with a hand and waited until the wildness left his eyes. Should he be caring? Would Alex respond better to something Jack-like? The human's eyes locked with his and there was only anger in them.

"Don't fight me," Tristan stated. "Avoid moving."

Alex nodded, the response of someone who knew he couldn't win.

Tristan dressed him, pleased with himself when the sight of Alex's exposed groin didn't elicit any reaction from his body, before the shorts covered it. Alex winced and caught his breath as he bit back pain, but otherwise didn't react. Quickly enough Alex was dressed.

Tristan took one of the dirt-encrusted rocks and held Alex still as he moved it close to his head. "You had an accident," he said as he scraped the rock against Alex's forehead. He broke skin, but not bone. He took dirt from the bowl. "We went to the escarpment to spend time together." He applied the dirt on Alex's face. "To enjoy each other's company. Afterward you moved closer, to get a better view. You fell, that's how you were injured."

Tristan took another stone and ran it over Alex's broken arm, making him scream in pain. When that didn't rip the shirt, he finished the job with a claw, then added more dirt.

Holding another stone, he watched Alex and he brought it to his leg. Alex tensed, but didn't say anything. He tried to hold back the scream as Tristan brought the stone down on his leg, scraping the skin, pressing hard enough to leave shards in the wounds.

Tristan scraped Alex's stomach, his other arm and leg, massaged dirt in each wound, anywhere on his body a falling man might have gotten scraped. He stood and looked down. Alex did look like someone who had taken a bad fall.

"Why?" Alex croaked.

"Because the injuries need to be consistent with a fall. I will not have you hold what happened over me. I will not give you that kind of power."

"Why bother?"

"Because your death will raise too many questions. Too many people here have begun to care about you, about what you mean to Tech. I would have to leave. I have invested too much time and effort in this place. I will not let you drive me away from it."

Tristan dropped the stone and dirt down the disposal, bowls included, for them to be broken down to their component atoms, removing any evidence. He went to his computer and reprogrammed the cleaning bot, removing the safeguards that would have it send an alarm when it detected blood during its next cleaning cycle.

That done, he went outside to make his body match the story of someone who had run down the escarpment, took a tumble on the way to rescue someone he cared deeply about.

When he re-entered the house, he was covered in dirt. His legs were scraped in many places, his pants ripped. He crouched next to Alex and considered how to pick him up. He couldn't simply grab and heft him up. Tech would want to be careful. He wouldn't want to add to Alex's injuries.

Alex bit back a yell as Tristan picked him up, then he settled in his arms. Alex tentatively placed his unbroken arm around Tristan's neck, and he had to fight the urge to have him remove it. Tech wouldn't mind. He also wouldn't mind Alex resting his head against the shoulder, and the sigh that escaped the human's lips.

Tristan ran.

He ran as fast as he could, conscious that Tech wouldn't want to hurt Alex any more than needed. He ran through the town, attracting looks, but not answering questions. The clinic was on the opposite side, almost the same distance his house was from the town.

When the clinic came into view, he slowed only enough so that the door would detect him and open.

"Cornelius!" he yelled, even though she was sitting behind the desk by the door.

"Tech?" She stood, her expression growing serious. "What happened?" She pulled a plank from the wall and set it before her. It bobbed in the air once and settled.

"At the escarpment," Tech panted. "Went too close." He placed Alex on the gurney. Alex appeared to search his face, his eyes, but Tristan didn't give him anything.

She pushed Tech out of the way and ran a scanner over Alex. "What happened?" she asked him.

“Fell,” Alex replied, his voice barely audible. “Hurt.”

Tristan looked at him then, and Alex gave him a small nod.

She looked at the display on the scanner. “No wonder you’re in pain. You’re lucky you survived.”

“Not luck,” Alex whispered.

She looked at Tech with a critical eye. “I suppose not. Well, definitely not how I like to officially make someone’s acquaintance. I’m Cornelius Mallard.”

“Alex Crimson.”

She smiled. “Oh, I know who you are. Everyone in town knows.” She leaned in and lowered her voice. “You’re Tech’s ‘friend.’” The way she said the word made it clear she thought they were more than that, and Tristan folded his ears back. Tech would blush at that.

Alex’s ears turned a bright shade of red. Unlike him, the reaction was autonomous, because Alex was watching Tristan, studying him through his pain and answering the medic’s questions. The expression in the human’s eyes didn’t have any of his usual emotions. He had distanced himself from all this, from how he felt. He was guarding himself against whatever might happen next.

The medic returned from a cabinet and placed a band on Alex’s head. “This is going to take the pain away.” She activated it and Alex went limp. She pushed the gurney down the corridor and called over her shoulder. “Stay here. As soon as he’s settled, I’ll be back to look at your injuries.”

“How is he?” Tech called back, his voice shaking with concern.

“He’ll be fine. You got him here with plenty of time. Just sit down, I’ll be right back.”