

Tristan clawed a throat opened and turned to step toward the door again, only for a slaver to jump on his back, wrapping their arm around his throat and pressing. The act only served to enrage him as the bones protecting his trachea kept the arm from constricting it. He reached back and dug his claws into the slaver's back, then pulled and slammed him to the ground until the man went limp.

He roared at the people standing between him and the hallway. Between him and Alex.

He should never have been caught, but he'd just drowned the man he loved. Thinking of anything else hadn't been possible. Fear had assaulted him. Had he done the right thing? Had he been deluded to believe a story from an ancient tome would lead to a cure? Was the Source laughing at him?

The people hadn't registered until he'd felt something around his neck. Then the shock had stunned him.

By the time he'd forced his body to obey him and fought through the pain to rip the collar off, his would be captors had dragged him to this chamber, where the Workfor who had accompanied him and Alex laid, crumpled in a corner.

Now, all Tristan wanted was to go pull Alex from that pool, hope he made it in time and revive him. Cure be damned. He'd take a monster over a dead man. A man he'd killed. They'd find a planet at the far end of the universe and live alone, happy.

He roared. But these slavers kept getting in his way.

A stun stick touched his side, and the pain blinded him. He grabbed the hand, crushed it and when he saw again, shoved the crudely made instrument in the woman's mouth until barely any of it was visible.

A detonation staggered Tristan, and his left arm wouldn't respond. He was on the shooter before a second shot was fired, teeth in his neck and ripping it out. Sixteen left.

He spat the bloody cartilage and meat and bones.

He had to give that to these slavers. They'd come knowing the kind of fight they were in for. Numbers and tools.

Two came at him, stun sticks in hand. He dodged one, grabbing the neck, and when the other stun stick pressed into his side, it was the human in his hand who scream, while all Tristan endured.

Someone had done research. Those were strong enough to bring down a Samalian.

But not him. He wouldn't let anything get in the way of saving Alex. Of reaching him before it was too late.

And if it was...?

He wouldn't have words with the Source. He would destroy it and anything connected to it.

If he couldn't have Alex...what else was there?

The pain ended, and he dropped to the human to face his other assailant. The woman rightfully looked terrified. Tristan smelled the smoke, the burned fur. He bared his still bloody teeth. Instead of running, she raised the stick as a club, and it was her last mistake. His teeth closed around her through and he bit down.

He drank her blood, before ripping the head off the body. He faced the others, stunned into immobility, and Tristan's jaw opened, the head falling to the floor, at what he

saw.

Alex, dripping water, gently pulled a knife from a slaver's belt, then slashed her throat. He turned to stab the one next to her, pulling that man's knife, and throwing it in to another slaver's back. They noticed the new arrival and turned. Alex was among them, moving with the kind of efficiency only he was capable of.

He dodged, slashed, stabbed and bodies dropped.

The kind of efficiency Alex displayed when he lost control.

Tristan shoved the disappointment so deep it would never make it out. Alex was alive. It was all that mattered.

His roar was filled with joy as he threw himself into the fight. He clawed and punched. He removed the opposition as quickly as he could, so there would only be him and Alex. He needed to hold his human. To smell him, to confirm he wasn't a grief fueled delusion.

Then it was only the two of them among broken and groaning bodies.

"Don't," Alex snarled as Tristan took a step toward him. "Don't you fucking think you get to touch me after what you did to me."

"But, you're alive."

"Didn't it ever occur to you to tell me what the plan was? Or was the game so fucking more important? I thought all this was a ruse, so I wouldn't see it coming when you threw me away!"

"It wasn't, Alex. I would never."

"Then why didn't you tell me!"

Tristan stepped back at the anger in his human's eyes. "I was afraid," he whispered.

"Of what? We both know what the Sovereign can create. Did you think I wouldn't trust your judgment of what—"

"It isn't Sovereign tech."

Alex stared at him. "You said..."

"I was wrong."

Alex had trouble forming words. "What is it then?"

Tristan shrugged, unable to admit to not knowing.

"Why the fuck could you put me through that if you didn't know what it was!"

"The Source put—"

"Don't you fucking blame that thing for your actions."

"Alex, don't you see? You're here, you're alive. You're..." there had been no maniacal laughter. His human had stopped fighting once the fight was won. "It worked."

Tristan went to embrace Alex, but the punch stopped him. The shock of Alex punching him more than any semblance of a sensation it caused.

"I told you not to touch me. You are fucking lucky I don't plant a knife in your chest right now."

"Please Alex, I was out of choices. I wanted to keep you."

"Of course. That's why you drowned me. You tell me that you love me and you fucking killed me!"

"I...I knew it would work, just like you did with me. Alex. I had—"

“How the fuck can you say it’s the same? What I did had you build a fucking wall. You killed me!”

“But it worked, Alex. The Source guided us here. To the cure. We did everything it asked, and it worked.”

The utter disbelief in Alex’s eyes hurt. Again, his human had trouble forming words. Finally, he turned away. “I’m going to check Durigna and the others. Don’t help.”

Tristan stepped back to where he’d been. A groaning slaver reminded him there was something else for him to do. He took a firearm lying on the ground and checked it was loaded. Aimed it at the terrified man’s head and pressed the trigger.

The shot echoed and was loud enough his ears rang even while having been folded back. Shaking his head didn’t help, so he moved on to the next slaver. A woman with broken legs and only one working arm trying to pull herself away from him.

He placed a foot on her stomach, lined up the shot, and pressed the trigger. Only for his hand to be pushed aside. The detonation made his ears ring again, and Alex staggered back from it while stone shattered from the shot.

Alex yelled something Tristan didn’t hear through the ringing. Alex shook his head and glared at him. Tristan lined up the shot again, but Alex shoved him away.

“Alex,” Tristan warned, and his voice sounded odd through the ringing.

Alex yelled, gesturing.

Tristan glances that the Workfor, struggling to their feet. So that wasn’t the problem. He searched for another threat, or a more pressing matter, than ensuring all the slavers were dead. Nothing.

Alex glared at him impatiently, arms crossed over his chest. He mouth something and fragments of sounds made it through. Tristan narrowed his eyes in concentration and Alex spoke again.

“Can you finally hear me?” his voice was faint, sounded like he was much further, and Tristan had to pay attention to make the out the words.

He nodded.

“Good, then I’m telling you to stop killing them.”

Tristan frowned. He couldn’t have heard that correctly.

“Alex, if we don’t—”

Alex stepped back. “Don’t shout.”

He wasn’t shouting. But the ringing was still present, and he could be compensating for his voice not sounding how he was used to it.

“They’re going to come back to cause us problem if we let them live.”

“I know that,” Alex replied unhappily.

“Then I have to—”

“I said no.”

“Alex, I don’t understand.”

“You think I do? You wanted me cured. Well, this is what it looks like, okay. You git cured, and it turned you insa—” He ground his teeth. Breathed. “It made you care about strangers. On top if putting me in control, my cure seems to make it so I don’t want to see them dead.”

“What happens when they take their revenge?”

“Then I’ll deal with them. I have no problem killing to defend myself, but once they’re down...”

“You can’t kill them anymore. It’s okay, I will—”

“I don’t want them to die. I have no trouble seeing myself going to each and everyone of them, and slicing their throats. That doesn’t do anything to me. It doesn’t disgust me, it doesn’t make me happy, the idea does nothing. I just don’t want them to die.”

“Alright.”

Alex looked at him suspiciously.

“You accepted what my cure looked like.” His human snorted. “I can accept what yours means. We will deal with them when they attack us again.” And then, Tristan would make sure no one survived the battle itself. More of them would have died if he hadn’t been distracted by the joy he felt.

“Don’t,” Alex warned as Tristan took a step toward him. “Go tie them up, or something. I don’t care. I’m going to check the Workfor.”

Did Alex understand tying them almost certainly ensured they died? Should he follow the instructions, or listen to Alex’s stated desire not to have them die? There had been no implication they should patch them up.

His arm. He could close his hand by pushing through the pain. He could also tense the muscle in his arm. So it wasn’t lost.

He touched where the bullet had hit his shoulder and found the exit wound. His fur had acted as a stopper as blood dried in it. He searched the closest slavers and found Heals. He suspected they were made locally, which made their composition suspect, but human’s systems were nowhere near as robust as Samalian’s. If they could take them without ill effects, he’d be fine.

He swallowed four and pocketed the rest. Alex would need some for his cuts.

He settled for separating the dead from the living. If their situations changed later? Then it would be on them to move the bodies.

“We’re leaving,” Alex said. “You aren’t coming.”

Tristan froze mid step. “Alex, what do you mean?”

“Exactly what I said. I’m escorting Durigna and the Workfor back to their people, and you are not coming.”

“Alex, please. I—”

“What do you expect from me, Tristan?” Alex snapped and Tristan staggered back. “You did the thing you promised you’d do when I forced myself in your life. The thing you told me you’d never be able to do anymore. How the fuck am I supposed to ever trust you again?”

Tristan nodded, eyes on the floor. That had always been a possible resolution. One he’d rarely been willing to look at. Alex cured, but no longer in his life. It hurt, and Tristan didn’t want to accept it. He was Tristan; he didn’t give up.

He tried to lock eyes with Alex, but the storm in the gray forced him to look away, and he found he couldn’t muster much strength in his voice.

“What can I do to fix this, Alex?”

“I don’t know.” There was no anger in the voice. As reluctant as he was to define the tone Alex spoke with, he was far too familiar with it not to recognize it. He used to regale

in hearing that defeat. “How about you start by finding us a way off this rock?”

“And then?”

“I don’t know, Tristan. I know you said you were out of options, and I do understand what that feels like. But it doesn’t help. I don’t know if there’s anything you can do that will ever make me trust you again.”

“Alex, I—” he closed his eyes to stop them from stinging. “I understand.” This time, it was his voice that was filled with defeat. “I’ll get you back in space. I promise.”

“Us. Tristan. I don’t know what the future looks like, but we are both leaving this place. Along with as many of the Workfor as we can manage. If you think sacrificing yourself for me is going to mean anything, forget it. You are not getting out of whatever I decide comes after.”

Tristan nodded. “I will get us all off this planet, Alex. I promise.”

Alex followed the Workfor, looking over his shoulder before exiting the room.

Alone, Tristan contemplated what to do. The first thing was that he needed to deal with the still living slavers. He turned to face them and, as one, those conscious recoiled.

With Alex gone, he could do whatever he wanted to them. He could slaughter them in misdirected anger. He could justify it by making sure they never became trouble.

He could betray Alex, again.

He crouched before them. Or... “I have a proposition for you.” He could make use of them. “How would you like to be included among those I get off this planet?”