

Tristan found himself hurt by the dismay on Alex's face. He hadn't planned on grabbing Alex's hand. He'd intended on letting them get it out of their system, possibly for Alex to break a few of Jacoby's limbs, but when the knife came out, something shifted. Alex was out to kill Jacoby. Tristan shouldn't have cared; Jacoby was in their way, so he should die.

And yet.

"I'm sorry, Alex. I swear, I didn't plan to do this, but—"

"No!" Alex wrenched his arm out of Tristan's grip. He rounded on Jacoby, knife high.

Jacoby let out a curse, but Tristan stepped between them. He didn't reach for Alex, but he wouldn't let him kill this man.

"He's in your way," Alex seethed. "I kill anyone who gets in your way. That's what you made me for."

"I know."

"Look," Jacoby growled, "get him under—"

Tristan wrapped a hand around the man's throat without taking his eyes off Alex. He squeezed until Jacoby stopped trying to talk, then loosened his grip enough for him to breathe.

"I'm sorry for what I did to you, Alex."

"Stop apologizing," Alex snapped. "That's not you." Alex turned, took a step, turned back, ran a hand through his hair. "Are you going to kill him?"

Tristan wanted to say yes, wanted to mean it. It would appease Alex. But he'd promised not to lie. "It's more complicated than that."

"I can simplify it for you." His knuckles were white around the knife's handle.

He wanted to reach for Alex, but after having to grip his wrist hard to keep him from killing Jacoby, he wondered how he would react to another touch.

"Please don't. I need to do this my way."

Alex nodded, but Tristan worried it was a reflex, not understanding.

He did his best to keep his voice from shaking. "Will you be here when I return?"

The glare said Tristan had made a mistake. Constantly asking for confirmation Alex would stay was eroding his human's trust in him, in the fact that Tristan trusted him.

Turning without getting the confirmation was difficult. He'd promised himself he'd do what was needed to make Alex want to stay, that he'd accept it if Alex decided to leave, but seeing the possibility here, he didn't know if he could do that. If he could go on without him.

Alex didn't answer, and Jacoby was getting annoying with trying to pull his fingers off his neck.

The Defender hadn't said this would work out, only that he had a chance at being happy, at living life. He had to trust Alex and hope. He'd never realized—

Jacoby hit his arm. Tristan turned and shook him. If the man didn't stop, Tristan might end up killing him. Going to the door was easier once he'd broken eye contact with Alex. He listened. No sounds came beyond it. He could ask Alex to confirm, but he wasn't sure he'd be able to walk away if he looked at his human again.

He opened it. Jacoby tried to speak, so Tristan tightened his grip. The lift opened as he was about to call it, and a surprised man looked at them. Tristan grabbed the man's head as he entered and slammed it against the wall multiple times, until the skull flattened. He let the man and Jacoby go, keeping a foot on the threshold to prevent the door from closing.

The man dropped to the floor, dead. Jacoby took a step back, rubbing his throat and looking from the man to Tristan.

"What the fuck is going on, Tech?"

"Tristan."

"What?"

“My name is Tristan.” Tristan was calmer than he expected about this, but then, most of his attention was on his worry that Alex would leave.

“Tristan, Tech, what’s the difference?” Jacoby shrugged. “What is going on?”

“The difference is that Tech doesn’t exist, never has.”

“Bullshit. I know you—him. We’re friends. You’ve lived with us for years now. You’re one of us.”

Tristan shook his head. He should have been proud of how completely he’d fooled Jacoby, but having to do this gave Alex time to change his mind. He couldn’t afford to take his eyes off Jacoby, and even if he looked in the direction they came, he couldn’t see the door from here. Alex could find a different lift.

“You don’t know me, Jacoby. You never have. If you did, you wouldn’t have been surprised when I killed that woman, when I killed him.” He indicated the dead man. “I allowed you to get to know a mask, so you wouldn’t question why I was in your little town.”

Jacoby sighed. “Don’t do this. You don’t have to stay here. You don’t have to do what Alex tells you. Fine, you care for him, you love him. That doesn’t make you his slave.”

Tristan stared, surprise stealing the words from him. “What makes you think I’m doing what he wants? How did you even reach that conclusion?”

“He said you were going to stay near the town. He’s got it in his head he’s one of them or something. He’d rather live here than among civilized people.”

The idea of punching Jacoby hit him so hard, he barely stopped himself. He could see Jacoby on the floor, hand on his crushed throat, trying to breathe. He had no trouble envisioning himself breaking each bone as often as he could. The pain of his claws piercing his palm forced him to take a mental step back.

What had brought this on? Why was he angry? He went over the conversation. The emotion had spiked at the implication Samalians weren’t civilized.

Interesting. He’d never cared what people thought of them before. Explaining that civilizations didn’t need advanced technology to qualify was a waste of time. Jacoby was set in his way, as were most humans.

“What you heard was the end of a conversation where Alex agreed with my decision to stay.”

Jacoby threw his hands in the air. “Why would you do that? You don’t owe them anything. What the fuck did they do for you? Even if that wall had actually done anything, you fucking saved them a few times over.”

Tristan remained silent, watching him.

“Well?” Jacoby asked.

“Well what?”

“Are you going to explain your decision?”

“No.”

Jacoby’s mouth hung open.

“Tech would have answered you. He had to care what you thought because that’s what someone who is part of a community does. I’m not part of your community. I don’t care about your happiness, or theirs, back on your planet. As far as what I should have done, I should have let Alex kill you. It would have been the easier thing to do, but you looked past what you found out about me. You didn’t kick me off Terion Two, when you could have. It wouldn’t have changed anything to my life, but I find that I’m grateful you let me stay, so I’m giving you this opportunity. Go home, Jacoby.”

“What do you expect me to tell the others?”

Tristan shrugged. “I don’t care. Tell them he decided to stay with his people, since that’s the truth. Tell them he died, tell them he never existed. Just leave, Jacoby. If you get in my way again, I will not be this understanding.” He stepped out of the lift, and the doors closed before Jacoby reacted.

He headed back to Alex, stopping before that door, looking at the control showing

the door was unlocked. What would he do if Alex wasn't there? Would he track his human down? They belonged together, so he would ensure that happened.

No. Alex wasn't a quarry. If he wasn't here... If Tristan went after him, it would be to ask forgiveness, explain. If that wasn't—

Fuck, he was procrastinating. He opened the door.

Alex stopped pacing, looking up from his datapad, and faced him, relief on his face.

Tristan closed and locked the door behind him. "I'm sorry, Alex. I couldn't—"

"He matters," Alex cut him off, but not angrily. "It makes sense, and I was just too angry to see it. If the people in the town matter to you enough to want to protect them after only a few months there, you've known Jacoby for years."

"I didn't expect this to happen. When the Defender offered me a chance to live, to be happy with you, he didn't say anything about how everything else would change."

Alex raised an eyebrow, but didn't look at him like he thought he was crazy. Alex had seen him crazy already, so he knew how that looked.

"It's a long story," Tristan said. "I'll tell you when this is over."

Alex nodded. "I need to know, what are you going to do if Jacoby comes back? I get letting him go now. But what if he tries this again? Jacoby can be stubborn."

"I warned him his life was forfeit if he got in my way again. I mean it. This is a one-time thing."

Alex sighed. "This is going to complicate things, this letting people live because they helped."

Tristan laughed. "Oh trust me, I know. Fortunately, there are a lot less of those than people who want to make my life complicated. But even if there were millions of them, I'd still do it this way." He crossed the distance separating them, and took Alex's hands. "This isn't about making things simple, it's about being worthy of you."

Alex raised an eyebrow. "I'd really rather you killed him."

Tristan smiled. "That's the weapon I made you into talking. I remember a man who refused to take advantage of a lost Samalian. Who slept on a couch no matter how badly he wanted to jump in bed with me. I destroyed that man. I—"

"It was my choice. I don't hold you responsible for who I am."

Tristan nodded. "You asked me once if I had any idea how much it hurt when you watched me walk out of your apartment. I do now. When you wouldn't promise me you'd still be here after I dealt with Jacoby, that was the fear I felt. The things I could see myself doing if the door opened, and you weren't there... I am sorry for the pain I caused you. I will do whatever I can to undo as much of the damage as possible."

"What if I don't want you to fix me?" Alex asked. "What if I like who I've become?"

Tristan leaned in and kissed him lightly. "We can argue about what's best for either of us later. Right now, you need to decide if this job can still be done."

"Of course it can."

"This was a three-person job. Without Jacoby, we have no one guarding the door. How long will it take for you to take control of the array? Send your program off to destroy LeisureTek?"

"I don't know. It's independent of the rest of the system, for obvious reasons, so I'm going to have to coerce it first. It can't be much more complex than the corporate A.I., but it won't be a simpleton."

"And I can't leave the other controls since I'll have the key, and I'll have to enter it at regular intervals to keep the communication going. The moment the missing guard is noticed, this will get much more interesting."

Alex nodded. "I'll have the cameras on that position fooled, but all it takes is for one person to walk back and notice there should be a guard there. And by then I'm going to be deep in coercion, so if they storm the room, I'm going to be no help."

"This is your job, Alex. It's your decision. Are we proceeding?"

Alex hesitated. "I want them to pay for hurting you." He searched Tristan's eyes,

looking to him to give a confirmation that wasn't coming. They were equal partners now.

"I will keep up, Alex. Where you go, I go. Just tell me what we're doing."

"We're hurting them." There was no hesitation this time.

"We're going to need a different lift," Tristan said. "I didn't kill Jacoby, but there was a bystander. He's dead."

"Killing them is supposed to make things easier." Alex looked at the map on his datapad and indicated the opposite direction.

"It helps to be able to dispose of the bodies."

"This is going to affect the timetable."

"Can you erase the lift's memory? If they don't know what floor he was going to, they're going to have to search each one."

"It's too late now," Alex said as the lift's doors opened. Tristan followed him in. "The time we spent talking means it reached another floor."

"And yet the floor isn't flooded with security, no alarm is sounding. Jacoby must have done something to keep the body from being found."

"Why would he do that?"

Tristan chuckled. "Because he doesn't want Tech to be caught."

Alex sighed, then cursed. "He's going to be a problem. I just know it."

Tristan looked at Alex's datapad. The feed showed a hall filled with people. "That's our floor, isn't it?"

Alex nodded.

"Does your predictive program show you when there's going to be a gap big enough for us to exploit?"

"Not anytime soon. They have a bunch of labs there, a lot of researchers."

"They advertise this place as a vacation spot," Tristan said. "What would they bother researching?"

"No idea."

"I'd say we should look into it when this is done, but you're not going to leave enough to search through. What's security like?"

Alex looked through various feeds. "Other than the guard at the comm array's door, it's only civilians in there. But any one of them can sound the alarm."

Tristan smiled and took the gun at Alex's back. "The alarm is going to sound at any moment, so let's give security a stampede to deal with. That should slow them a bit."