

The jostling pulled Tristan out of... Chaos. He remembered chaos, inside and outside him. Misery. Pain, inside and out. The complete lack of control that had hounded him. Alex. Where was Alex?

He tried to call his human's name, but his body wouldn't obey. This was different from before. It wasn't just his body disobeying him, it was forced not to obey, but why?

His workshop. He'd been there, fighting the pain he'd felt inside at keeping Alex out of it, at not going to him, at screaming how much he hated him. He'd hated himself for saying those words, but he needed Alex out of his life, had to chase him away before his presence killed his human.

Sound, there had been a sound that didn't belong. A ship, yes. He couldn't recall the engine design, but definitely a small ship. A ship near his house meant an attack. He'd focused on that and pushed Alex out of his mind.

He'd needed a weapon. He'd searched through the mess he'd made for anything intact, but had to settle for the leg of one of the tables he'd ripped out of the floor. It was then the door had exploded, and the mercs rushed in.

He'd thrown himself into the fight with a roar, visors shattered, limbs and necks broke. He got his hands on one of their guns and shot holes in as many of them as he could, but more kept coming.

And then came the sting, the knife in his neck. No, a knife would have killed him. So a drug. He'd kept fighting, but he'd felt himself grow weaker, his coordination slip. He'd dropped to a knee, but still managed to rip the throat out of the man who'd thought that meant he was done for. Then he'd fallen on his side, they came close, grabbed him. Voices, but he couldn't make out the words.

Someone had carried something into his workroom. He knew what it was. It was something he'd studied before, something he'd used to remove enemies. He had to get out of there now, before it went off. He tried to get his body moving, and he was suddenly moving away—being dragged.

Run! He screamed at Alex. *Run, be outside the house. Let me have chased you away so you'll survive. Let him live,* he begged the universe. He'd admit defeat if it meant Alex would live.

They had been close to the ship when the flash occurred. It surprised the mercs, and they dropped him. He'd tried to get to his feet, needing to get to the house; he had to get Alex out of it. But the flash hadn't been a warning.

The shockwave washed over him, hot and dry. He'd gotten a hand under him and he would get up, would save Alex. Another knife to the neck.

No! Not again!

The hands had grabbed him again, then darkness.

It claimed him now, too.

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Hands on him again. The ship was shut down, but there was another vibration coursing through the floor he was lying on. Another ship, a bigger one. He needed to escape. He needed to kill them, take control of this ship and go back. He had to go save Alex.

They pulled him up and he reached for the closest limb, claws out. He fell back on the floor before touching anything.

"He's awake!" Scattering of boots on metal. "Fuck, I thought that thing was going to keep him under for hours."

If he could understand words, he could get the rest of his body to obey. He would fight this drug they'd given him, and he would make them pay. He put a hand under him.

"Don't be a wuss," a woman said, not closer to him than the others. "He can barely

move. Pick him up.”

He pulled a leg up, had a knee under him, almost fell over.

“Are you seeing that?” The first man. “Do you know who that is? The amount he has in him would have killed any of us, and he’s trying to stand. The captain said not to let him wake up under any circumstance.”

He smiled as he fought for balance. They knew who he was. They knew they were dead.

“Then inject him.” The woman.

“I am not getting close to that monster.” The man.

A sigh of exasperation, movement. Tristan had to get up. He had to be ready to kill whoever came close; it would be his only chance. His arms shook from the effort.

“I can’t believe you’re that scared of this thing. It can barely manage to stand.” She moved closer and Tristan readied himself. As soon as she was within reach he would—

There was a sting at his neck.

No! She was nowhere near, he was certain of that. The strength left his arm, and he toppled on his side. He forced his eyes open, and the foot was there, barely inches away. If he could reach for it, he could rip it out of the leg it was attached to. If he could...

Everything went dark again.

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He was on a metal floor.

He was on his back. The vibration told him this was a ship.

There was breathing, twenty feet away or so. He listened. Three of them. They weren’t moving enough for him to tell if they were armored. His captors had been.

He needed to take care of them. He tried to sit, but his body didn’t obey. Drugged. He’d been drugged. What did work? If he could think, something else had to work. He tried each muscle until one responded.

His fingers. He flexed them, trying move more of them.

“Guys?” a young man said. “Is he moving?”

“Can’t be.” Someone male, older. “They gave him another dose in the hangar.” The room was large, all surfaces metal.

He made a fist, then slowly forced his elbow to bend, raising his hand in the air. There was extra weight on it.

“Shit, he is awake!” A woman, not the same one who injected him.

He let his arm fall and metal hit metal.

“That’s impossible.” The older man, dismay in his voice. “That drug is supposed to last for hours.”

He raised it again, forced it to stay up, the strain shaking it.

“You have to get in there and drug him.” The young man. “The captain isn’t here yet.”

His arm dropped. Metal on metal again. The woman let out a start. Nerves, scared, good.

“Are you crazy? I’m not getting in there with him.”

He was inside something, they were on the outside. They weren’t talking through a wall; the voices were too clear. There was no interference to them, so the perimeter of what he was inside of was marked in a different way. A forcefield? Possibly, they could be set to let air through, which implied voices. He’d never studied how a voice would sound through one. He would look into that when he was out of here.

He opened his eyes. It happened without any unnecessary effort, but they wouldn’t focus. He turned his head toward the voices and saw the indistinct shapes as they gasped. Whatever the delineation was, it didn’t register with this lack of focus.

He pushed himself to a sitting position and most of his body obeyed. He heard armor hit a wall as someone backed away. He smiled. He raised his hand and there was indeed something around his wrist. A large, metal bracelet.

He blinked, rubbed his face, and his vision cleared.

The three of them were against the wall. Blue and yellow armored guard uniforms—he knew the combination, but it wouldn't come to him. Still too much of the drug in his system.

Bars marked what he was inside of. Three sides were marked by them, the fourth was the wall. He was in the center of his cell about ten feet from each wall. The corridor between the bars and the other walls had to be no more than five-feet deep.

He snorted. Bars? Did they think bars would keep them safe from him? Why would they think such a thing? Bars were flimsy things, unless they were part—his entire body grew cold—of a cage.

“No.” The word was a croak, so weak it carried none of the horror he felt. He couldn't be back in here. He had to get out of it before his father returned.

His thoughts crumbled.

This couldn't be his father's work, he was dead. He had killed his father, years ago. And the cage was too large. His father's cage had been small enough that by the time he'd left, he could barely move when he was put in it. He calmed down, but the sense this was bad wouldn't leave.

With a roar, he moved to a knee.

The guards were staring at him in horror. The idiots weren't even wearing helmets. As soon as he found the strength, he would rip their throats out.

His head fell in exhaustion. This had taken a lot out of him. Far too much.

A door hissed opened and closed.

“Captain,” the young man said, “he's awake!”

He raised his head and saw a woman, human, tall. Walking with a regal demeanor. She had someone with her, but he only caught a shape as his head fell back down. Male, wide-shouldered with fur. Dark fur.

A Samalian.

“Why am I not surprised?” he said in disappointment, and Tristan froze again. He knew that tone of voice. Not in that voice, in someone else's. “I thought you said your drug would keep him out for hours. It's barely been forty minutes since he was injected.”

“All I had were computer models,” the woman replied, and Tristan heard the shrug in her voice. The Samalian didn't impress her. “You can't expect me to be all that accurate with those. If accuracy was so important to you, you should have let me test it on you as I requested. Only on a living body can I get accurate results.”

“You had plenty of bodies to test it on.”

Annoyance, and that sounded nothing like what Tristan had been used to hearing. He found he could breathe easier. This wasn't him. It couldn't have been, but for a moment he'd been afraid this had been his father.

“Human bodies,” she replied, matching his annoyance. “How do you expect them to tell me how he'd react? You were the only valid candidate, seeing as you two are so close.”

He had to lift his head. He had to get a good look at the Samalian. There was something about him that was so familiar, and he almost had it.

“Still,” the woman continued, “he might be awake, but he is weak. Once I have put this on, he will not cause you any problems, ever again.”

Tristan tried to look up, but any movement of his head started the floor tilting. He got a sense of her holding a circle.

“Open the cage,” she ordered.

Tristan shuddered. He'd been right, this was a cage.

“Sir?” the older guard asked.

“Open it,” the Samalian replied. “He’s getting stronger. Unless one of you brave people feel like being the ones to go in and sedate him again, I need her to make him inoffensive.”

He was in charge? She was with him, not the other way around? Tristan tried to remember the corporations where aliens could attain positions of authority. There weren’t many of them, but he couldn’t recall even those. He cursed the drug.

There was a loud clank, and Tristan jerked. He knew that sound far too well. The cage being unbolted. This might not be his father’s cage, but that sound was ingrained in him so deep he’d never break the reaction. Being let out of the cage didn’t mean an end to his suffering, just a change in its provenance.

“You remember it.” The voice was close. He’d missed them approaching. “Oh, you have no idea how glad that makes me. I worked a long time to get it just right.”

How? How could this Samalian know?

Tristan forced his head up and looked into brown eyes, surrounded by brown fur almost as dark as his, with speckling of white. “Little Brother?”

The foot hit him in the face and sent him sprawling on his back. Pain flared and cleared his mind.

What was Justin doing here? No, what was Tristan doing on the same ship as Justin? The guards’ colors. He knew who they represented now.

“Surprised to see me? You never guessed I’d be smart enough to get out of this, did you? You must have been so proud of yourself, sending me here in your place.” The foot hit him in the side this time, and his mind cleared some more.

He was on the Sayatoga, and his brother had found a way to get out of the cryotube they’d put him in. He’d taken control of the ship. Tristan found himself strangely proud of Justin for accomplishing that.

They wouldn’t have given him a chance to proclaim his innocence, not when they thought he was Tristan. They would have put him in the moment he’d arrived, might not even have let him regain consciousness. And somehow, he had managed to get out. After that, taking control would have been easy for his brother. It was what Justin did so well—insinuate himself among people of authority, gain their trust until he ran things instead of them.

“Put that thing on and let’s get out. I want my dear brother to enjoy his alone time.”

He had to claw the woman, force her to stay away, but while the pain cleared his mind, it drained his body and nothing obeyed him. She knelt next to him and looked—no, visually dissected him. The eyes were cold, clinical. He was an experiment, not a person.

She put the circlet around his bicep and fear bloomed. This wasn’t good. He screamed and managed to get his other arm to move. It went up and came down on her. Fabric tore, flesh. The smell of blood rose in the air.

She backed away, dismay on her face. His arm was draped over his chest. His breathing was ragged.

He flew back and up, hit the wall hard enough his vision blurred, then began darkening at the edges. He fought to remain conscious. He wanted to see the fear in their eyes. They’d thought him defenseless, and they’d paid.

“He struck me.”

Tristan smiled at the horror on her face. Red was spreading along her side. He wanted to go to her, strike her again, not stop until all that was left were ribbons of her flesh, but he couldn’t move. The wall held him, spread eagle.

Justin smiled. He was as pleased by her reaction as Tristan was.

“I told you not to underestimate him. Tristan is a destroyer. How long until it takes effect?”

She took something from a pocket, pointed it at Tristan, and his bicep beeped. The

circlet she'd attached to it had a blinking green light. His wrists and ankles had their own metal bands, which were glowing softly to match the glow in the wall where they touched. He was naked, he noted. Justin would know better than to leave him anything he could work with.

"How should I know?" she snapped, getting to her feet. The arm she pressed against her side did nothing to stop the spread of the blood. "You never let me test it on you."

"Go get that seen to before you leave blood everywhere," Justin said in a dismissive tone. He followed her to the cage's door, but didn't exit. He turned to face Tristan as she exited the room.

"Release him," Justin said.

"Sir?" the older man asked cautiously. He held a remote in his hand.

Justin gritted his teeth. "I said release him!" he snapped.

There was his little brother's other side. Underlings didn't deserve his charm. The man jumped and almost dropped the remote. Not so well trained to obey immediately, but trained enough to fear his anger.

Justin looked at Tristan and they shared a look. *Humans.*

The force holding him against the wall stopped, along with the soft light, and he dropped to the floor. He didn't fall. He ran the instant his feet touched it. He was going to kill his brother. His claws were out. He would eviscerate him.

Two feet before his brother, something caught at his arms and legs and brought him to a stop, stretching him. He was at the end of his tether.

"You're going to suffer for this, Justin," he snarled. "You think this cage can hold me? Father's couldn't. I'm going to make you pay for putting me in it."

His little brother smiled. "You really are dumb, Tristan. You think this is the first step in some machination that's going to end with me trying to get you dead. It isn't. This is the end. No trying to blow you up, or have you assassinated. No, you're staying right here, in this cage, where I can keep an eye on you. And believe me when I tell you this: you are never getting out of the cage."

"Kill me now, Little Brother. It's the only way you'll ever be safe."

Justin scoffed. "Too easy. You're going to suffer for everything you put me through, for everything you took from me." He indicated the bars. "You think that's the cage I'm putting you in? No, those are just so no one gets the stupid idea of getting close to you. *That's your cage.*" He indicated the circlet on Tristan's bicep. "I'm going to take away the one thing you value more than anything else: I'm going to take away that precious control of yours, make you an emotion—"

Tristan burst out laughing. He hadn't intended to laugh, didn't want to laugh. He wanted to glare at Justin, but it happened against his will. Like so many things recently.

He wanted to tell Justin why it was so funny. His little brother's disbelieving expression just made him laugh harder. All this. His brother had done all of this to hurt him in the only way he could think of, and he was too late. Alex had already done it. And Alex had done it without even trying.

Justin backed out of the cage cautiously, as if he was in the presence of a dangerous animal, and normally the reaction would make Tristan smile in pleasure. This time it just made him laugh harder, until the door closed.

The loud clang cut through his laughter and he could see his father, slamming it shut. Fear coursed through him and then left him, taking the adrenaline with it. He dropped to his knees. He wanted to close his eyes, lie down so he could rebuild his strength, then he would kill them all.

No, it wasn't what he wanted.

He wanted Alex. He wanted to hold him, to feel him against his body, find comfort in his smell, the feel of his soft skin. But Alex wasn't here. He might never smell him again, touch him. Alex could be—

No!

He wouldn't think that. Alex was his, and no one, nothing else would kill him. And since Tristan couldn't seem to be able to accomplish that, Alex would never die.

He had to stop thinking about Alex. The memories were dragging him down, but he had work to do. He needed to get out of this and make everyone responsible pay.

He ran a hand on the circlet, feeling for a seam or controls, but it was smooth. He tried to pull it down, but it didn't move. This was more than it being tight; they'd used an adhesive, probably something tied to his DNA like—

He felt at his collarbone, but only found a scab. "What have you done with it?" He was standing and pulling against his tether. The guards backed against the wall again.

"No, no, it wasn't you." He remembered ripping it off, smashing it. "Why? Why did I do that?" He remembered the anger, the fear. The utter lack of control.

He'd destroyed his only link to Alex.

His legs failed him, and he was hugging himself as he began crying.