

Chapter 23

Victor mentally cursed himself; there was no Simon. But for just a moment, he'd sounded like him, looked like him. *Damn it, get it together, Victor, or he's going to kill you.* Or at least his partner would. He looked like he wanted to gut Victor right now.

"Stay where you are." He raised the gun higher to keep Tristan from moving closer. He was keeping Tristan well out of reach, where it was safer.

"How did you find me?" Any hint of Simon was gone. The eyes were hard again, cold, detached, calculating.

Victor shifted his aim to the other man—Crimson, the reports had named him. "That goes for you too."

"If I don't lock the door, it'll open at anyone who walks by. You really want some passerby looking in on this?" His voice was steady, but the anger in his eyes burned hot.

"Fine." Victor watched him, watched the lock display turn red. Once the man was facing him again, he moved his aim back to Tristan. "You're rather distinctive. Not so much that you stand out among the aliens we have here, but if someone happens to be looking for you... Well, the odds of there being two Samalians on this planet are slim, let alone another who looks like you."

Tristan seemed amused by that comment, but then he smiled, and that sent a shiver down Victor's spine. "So, you've been looking for me all those years?"

"Don't flatter yourself. I was never looking for you, and I gave up on *him* years ago. Do you have any idea what you did to me?" Victor growled.

"Vic, why don't you put the gun aw—"

"My name is *Victor!*" He was on his feet and had taken a step before he could stop himself, brandishing his gun like a rookie. He took a breath. Tristan couldn't be allowed to get under his skin. That was what he did, made you think things were one way, when in reality they were completely different. Victor was a veteran of the Law; he wouldn't let Tristan get to him. He knew how to handle criminals like him.

Right, which was why he'd come here without backup, without telling anyone. If Tristan killed him, no one would know until, or if, his body ever showed up somewhere. He should call this in. That was the smart thing to do, get other officers to witness this arrest, his vindication.

Tristan raised his hands in a placating gesture Victor knew from the courses he'd taken on how to defuse tense situations. If he'd brought up the file, the gesture would probably be an exact copy.

Victor had spent years dissecting the months Simon had been with him. He'd gone over just how perfect he had been, doing and saying the exact things to get Victor to go along with what he wanted. Most of the time, Victor had thought the decisions were his idea.

He'd researched methods of persuasion, and had found many that Simon had used to convince him to

go on excursions, to make love in places they'd had no business doing it. He'd thought it was because of the mischievous glint in his lover's eyes when he'd said please, but there had been so much more to it, he'd learned.

Well, he was wise to that now. Tristan no longer had any control over him. He didn't care how smooth, how smart he was. Victor was the one in charge. He was taking Tristan in.

"Well?" Victor asked. "Do you? Do you even care that you destroyed my career? That your partner here undid in a few minutes what took me decades to repair?"

Tristan opened his mouth, and Victor prepared himself to resist the smooth, soothing words.

"Do you really think I give a fuck what happened to you?"

The cold harshness in the voice hit him harder than he thought it could. There wasn't even an attempt at making him think it had to be some sort of mistake.

"Why?" Victor's voice shook. "Why me? How could you do this to me? Damn it all! How could you make me fall in love with you and then betray me like that?" In his peripheral vision he saw Crimson grind his teeth, make fists, but while a part of him recognized the danger, he just didn't matter. Tristan was the only one who mattered.

Tristan chuckled. "Come on, Vic. How could I not use you? How could I see this work-obsessed guy who looked at any couple passing him with longing and not see the perfect stooge? How did you do it, Vic? How did you make yourself so lonely, so miserable? Did you tell yourself it was a worthy sacrifice?" Tristan straightened and puffed out his chest. "That you were working for the greater good?"

Victor winced at the truth in those words. He'd seen himself as a hero, putting the need of the community above his own.

"How virtuous you were," Tristan continued, "to give up those high ideals the moment I gave you a taste of companionship."

"No! You tricked me. You used psychology to make me think that was something I needed."

Tristan snorted. "Don't kid yourself, Vic, you needed it. If you hadn't been so insecure and gone looking for it before I showed up, I'd have never been able to lay a finger on you. You humans, how you love to complicate something as simple as satisfying a need. You're horny? Just go and fuck someone already. But no, you have to wrap it in all those layers of social acceptance. Fuck, you guys have sex parlors and you still manage to think you need to feel something for the other guy."

Tristan looked at Crimson—who didn't react—then back to Victor. "Do you remember how you reacted when I touched you that first time? A hand on yours, and you were trembling. When I caressed you? You were whimpering. That first time I made love to you?"

He tried to make it an order, but the words came out weak and shaking. "Stop it." How often had he dreamed of Simon touching him? Moving against him? Kissing him?

"Do you have any idea how pathetic you were, Vic? You were so desperate for something you could have gotten anywhere on this planet, but were too scared to do anything about it. Vic, you fell in love with an alien just because I touched you. And don't kid yourself in thinking you're a xenophile. Unlike Alex, you aren't. You said yes to the first stranger who showed up. You gave up the Law for a touch, a kiss, a sense of companionship."

Fingers took Victor's chin and raised his head so he had to look into Tristan's brown eyes. When had he moved so close?

"You abandoned your ethics for me, Vic. Your morality. That's how desperate you were. Alex never did that. You have no idea how much work it took to get him in bed with me. You? You threw yourself at me at the slightest hint of an invitation. You say I used you? Well, look in the mirror, because you were using me right back. The only difference was that I knew it."

"I loved you." The words sounded pathetic, even to Victor.

"Bullshit. That was later; no one falls in love on first meeting. That wasn't love, that was 'want'."

Tristan smiled. "That was greed. Just like this, now. You know you should never have talked to me. You should have stormed this place with everyone in every precinct in the city. But that isn't what you want, is it? Just like that first time, when you should have pushed me to the ground, cuffed me, and thrown me in a cell. Do you remember what I said that made you hesitate?"

Victor wanted to look away, but those fingers held him in place. He couldn't even close his eyes. The coldness in Tristan's eyes melted away. They became deep, inviting. Victor wanted to lean forward, lose himself in them, kiss the Samalian. And he dreaded hearing what he was going to say.

"Do you have any idea how beautiful your eyes are?" Tristan's voice was smooth, tender, husky. Simon's voice. "They're like a cloudy sky, just as the sun's about to break through them. There's so much potential for light in them."

Victor wanted to scream for Tristan to stop, but he was entirely in his power. Then, he did scream as he fell back into the seat. He was panting in fright, and something else, trying to understand what had happened.

Tristan held his gun. With a few deft motions, he took the power pack out of it and then a few more components, placing them on the dresser. "You need to get yourself something better, Vic. The standard issue Similic is crap. Get yourself a Dolfic." Tristan studied him. "I'm thinking the Milgran Hand-cannon would suit you. Don't let the name fool you. It's the size of the Similic LE-56—" He indicated the disassembled weapon. "—but it has enough power to bring me down with one well-placed shot. You will need to get the tools needed to take it apart when you want to inspect and maintain it, but at least this wouldn't have happened to it."

"He caught you?" Crimson asked in the following silence.

Tristan shrugged. "I had to make contact with him. Unlike you, he didn't go to bars, human or otherwise. He was a detective, just gotten his five-year marker. I couldn't simply show up at his doorstep and take him to bed. I'm good, but I'm not that good."

"Yes, you are," Crimson replied. "You just wanted the thrill of the chase."

Tristan quirked a smile and Victor knew he'd been right; these two were more than partners. A spark of anger ignited, but did little to burn the shame he felt at still wanting what he couldn't have.

"Anyway, he was young, full of his own superiority. There was no way he'd be able to just walk by a crime in progress. After that... Well, it was easy, not much thrill in it. Unlike you."

Emotions flicked through Crimson's eyes. Victor caught regret and pride, but he couldn't make out the others. Then Crimson caught him looking, and only anger was visible.

Tristan fixed his gaze on Victor, and he straightened in his seat. He wasn't out of sorts anymore, but he also no longer had any power over the situation. His only play was to activate the distress signal. He'd catch hell for having come here alone, but at least Tristan would be locked up. He could get his answers then.

Tristan locked eyes with him and Victor couldn't move. He hated himself. It wasn't fear that paralyzed him, it was yearning.

"Do you want the truth, Vic? The real reason why out of every officer in the precinct, I picked you? Why, of all the ways I could have broken into the precinct's database, I chose to seduce you? To use you?"

No! his mind screamed. He'd had enough revelations to last him a lifetime. He nodded.

Tristan put both hands on the armrests and leaned in until his muzzle was almost touching Victor's nose. "You wanted me to," he whispered. "You were desperate for someone to break the bubble you'd built around you. A bubble of rules and regulation. You wanted to see the other side. You wanted to let loose, to throw away those restrictions, if only for a little while. I gave you what you wanted, Vic."

Victor swallowed. He wanted to scream denials, but how could he? Tristan was reminding him of how it had felt, how good, how freeing. "But you took—"

Tristan shook his head. "You gave that to me. Do you remember when you showed me how to access your precinct's database from your home? When you gave me your password, the needed IDs? Do you remember why you did it?"

"You told me to."

"Come on, Vic." The words were soft, but called him a liar. "It's just us here. Tell the truth."

Victor did look away then. "I wanted to break a rule, a big one. I wanted to take a risk so big I could lose my job over it. I wanted to impress you." He looked in Tristan's eyes. "But you manipulated me. You played off my insecurities and fears. My desire to keep you close to me."

Tristan smiled. "I see you've been reading. But did I ever say how you needed to go about keeping me with you? You chose how to show your devotion."

"You knew that's how I'd do it."

That smile and the flicker of triumph in Tristan's eyes were the only confirmations Victor needed. He'd been angry with this Samalian before, but now he could feel pure hatred.

"Can I ask you a question, Vic?" Tristan asked, then continued without giving him a chance to say no. "What did you learn from your time with me? Did you learn to ease up on the job? Meet people, make friends, find a lover who'd be a better match for you than me?"

Those eyes peered into his, and Victor could swear Tristan was looking down to his very core, seeing exactly who he was.

Tristan shook his head sadly. "No, you're still this lonely man. What excuses are you using now to keep everyone away? 'Everyone's a monster like me'? No one's like me, Vic, you of all people should know that. Do you at least get laid now? Does it bring you much satisfaction? I gave you a need no one can match, can they?"

Victor couldn't swallow. He couldn't speak to deny it or blame him.

"But that isn't all, is it?" Tristan straightened and sat against the edge of the dresser. "No, that precious Law of yours has lost its shine. I wonder, in how many little ways do you break it now? In hunting me down, you learned that there are things you can't get if you always obey your Law. Vic, you can't stop there. You can't be the predator who keeps the little one safe if you let the Law shackle you."

"You're wrong," Victor snapped, finally finding his voice. "The Law is what keeps everyone safe."

"Really? Even you?" Tristan was mocking him, Victor could tell, he just didn't know how.

"Yes." Victor gritted his teeth.

Tristan grinned, showing his own teeth. "Then, Vic, how is it you never told your captain that file vanished from your vault? I mean, with all the security around the precinct's information, I'd think you'd want him to know there was a tiny hole in it."

Victor lost his voice again.

"Come on, who do you think took it? The only reason it took me so long to get to it was that I didn't know it existed until Alex showed up at my doorstep, explaining he'd used it to track me down."

"How? How do you know I never told anyone?"

"You still have a job." Tristan's grin became bright. "You're a detective, right? Detect. Think. How did I get through all that security?"

Victor was going to faint. "My codes? My IDs?" Tristan didn't react. "But they've been changed!"

Now Tristan beamed. "Did you ever scrub the house system of yours? You know, the one where you showed me where you kept your passwords? Your personal information? Your IDs?"

"You used me. Again!" Victor was on his feet, anger propelling him. "Fuck this, I'm bringing you in. They'll see I had nothing to do with any of it. I'm going to be the guy who caught the infamous Tristan. Sinor's not going to have a choice but to respect me after that. It's even going to bring the prison system down a peg or two, considering the Sayatoga still claims to be holding you. Maybe someone at SpaceGov is finally going to look into how it is that criminals keep escaping."

Tristan crossed his arms over his chest, not looking impressed. "That's nice. And how is that going to help you?"

"It's going to make me—"

"What? Famous? Don't kid yourself. Look into everyone that's caught me before, and see if anyone's talking about them. Do you really think bringing me in is going to make them all forget what they had to endure because of what you let happen? What you helped make happen?" Tristan stepped up to him, still smiling. "Okay, let's say that they do, then what? Your captain starts assigning you cases, you bury yourself back in your work, isolate yourself from the outside because you think it's the only way to vindicate the flimsy mask of a tireless pursuer of justice you built for yourself."

"Fine!" He shoved Tristan. "I'm a nobody. I'm a failure!" He shoved him again, following so he could pound on his chest. "My career is in the gutter, but I'm too spineless to leave it for anything else." His fist hit the fur, the muscles, but the Samalian didn't flinch, didn't even seem to feel them. "Is that what you want to hear? That I'm useless? That I'll never accomplish anything worthwhile anymore?"

Arms wrapped around him. Strong arms held him against the chest he'd been beating on. He could hear the strong heartbeat. Hear the deep breath the alien took. Victor hated himself for finding comfort in those.

Tristan rested his forehead on top of Victor's head. "You're not useless, Vic. You never were. I don't pick useless people."

Victor snorted, breathing in Tristan's smell. He'd forgotten how good the Samalian smelled. "I'm so damned good I couldn't even see what you were doing to me."

"I exploited your weaknesses. It doesn't invalidate your strengths. You're still in a job that seems determined to destroy you. That says a lot about how tough you are."

He pulled away, but not enough Tristan had to release him; he didn't want that. Didn't want wanted the comfort the embrace provided, the strength it gave him to say what he needed to say. All he wanted was to look him in the eyes.

"Maybe I'm just too fucking stupid to know when it's over. Why didn't you kill me? That what you normally do. Why didn't you end my life when I was still happy? It would have been so much bet—"

Tristan's lips were against his. His tongue pried them apart with little effort, and then the tongue was inside Victor's mouth. He moaned and wrapped his arms around the Samalian, kissing him back. He pushed his own tongue past his and into the muzzle. He'd forgotten how he tasted. There was a gaminess to his kissing, as if he'd just eaten raw meat.

Tristan's hand cupped his ass and pressed him closer, Making him feel his excitement. The erection triggered Victor's, but his was trapped in his pants and he couldn't know of the Samalian felt it. Know how much he enjoyed this.

He was panting when Tristan pulled away. He was sweating, he was so needy. He opened his eyes and had a shock when it wasn't Simon who looked back at him. It wasn't the cold, calculating gaze Tristan had shown him before, but there was a seriousness Simon's mischievous eyes never had.

"Why?" Victor breathed.

Tristan was back leaning against the dresser, uncaring of the tent in his pants. His partner looked ready to murder someone, and Victor wasn't sure if it was him or Tristan who would get it. Maybe both of them? Yes, these two had what he'd wanted.

"A reminder of what you once had, what you could have again, if you stopped letting your fears get in your way."

Like there was any chance he'd ever have Simon again. "I don't know how. I've been screwed up for so long I can't see how I'd ever fix any of it."

Tristan ran a finger along Victor's cheek. He didn't lean into it, like he'd done with Simon. It was missing the hint of a claw in the touch. Simon always hinted that he could be dangerous; it was one of the things that Victor had found so appealing about him.

"You're what, Vic, sixty? Seventy? You're not even middle-aged, and if you get Rejuv? You'll have centuries ahead of you. Don't let the now stop you from trying to get more later."

Victor shrugged. Maybe it was easy for Tristan to make changes in his life—he did change personalities faster than politicians changed opinions—but he wasn't like that. Simon had been his way out, the way he could have something. When he'd vanished, abandoned him, all Victor had wanted was to get him back. When he'd wizened up and understood there had never been a Simon, he hadn't had anything other than his job to go back to. He'd never learned anything else.

"Vic, look," Tristan said, his tone understanding. "If what you're looking for is something to prove that you're better than this, how about you help me save the universe?"

Victor stared at him. "Care to repeat that?"

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