

The door opened without Alex having to coerce it. If he hadn't seen the green of the lock as he approached, he'd have wondered if Golly was still around, helping him. It could still be, but he didn't want to have to think about that.

He preferred to think that she was just that cocky. In so tight with Justin, she didn't think anyone could get to her. Alex was about to show her just how wrong she was.

The room he entered was large, and had the feel of a medical bay.

There were two beds on one side of the room, with the readout screens at the head of them. Neither was occupied at the moment. The opposing wall, as well as the back one, was one long counter with a variety of machines on them. He recognized a couple of medical fabricators, the only visible difference from any other portable model being the bio-hazard warning on the front. There were scanners, and other devices he didn't know.

The lone occupant was a woman in a lab coat, seated at the counter reading the text displayed on a terminal. She glanced over her shoulder, barely registered him, and continued reading.

"Is it finally over?" Her tone was bored, not worried. "Is this nonsense with the power resolved? Is my subject back in his restraints?"

Her test subject? Was that what Tristan was to her?

He crossed the room, hand tightening on the gun he'd taken from the guard he'd killed. He fought the need to kill her right there for what she'd put him through. For what watching a broken Tristan was doing to him. She would die, but first she had to learn a lesson.

He struck her on the side of the head hard enough to send her off her stool.

The shock was replaced by surprise as she touched her head, winced, and then became outrage as she looked at the blood on her fingers. "What is the meaning of this?" She glared at him. "Well, I asked you a question. You'd better answer before I decide to strap you to a bed rather than report you to the captain."

"His name is Tristan."

"Who?" At least she was smart enough to know he didn't mean the captain, but that she didn't even know who Tristan was infuriated him.

"The man you've been torturing, pumping full of drugs. He isn't your test subject. He has a name, and it's Tristan." He bit the last words, trying to keep his anger in check.

"That isn't a man," she scoffed, "he's a Samal—" She closed her mouth as Alex moved his finger from over the trigger guard, to within it. Good, she knew what that meant.

"Say his name."

She eyed him, then sighed. "Fine. Tristan, you said? His name is Tristan. Are you happy now?" She stood and used her clean hand to dust herself off.

"He's mine," Alex said through gritted teeth.

She sighed and reached for a cloth on the counter. "He really needs to stop letting the crew mingle with my subjects. It makes things so—"

Alex punched her in the face, and she had her hand over her nose, trying to stanch the blood. "Shut up."

She grabbed the cloth and put that over her nose. "I'll have the captain void you for this," she said, somehow managing to still sound haughty. "Do you have any idea who I am? What I am to him?"

"You mean the dead captain?"

She looked at him suspiciously.

"You are talking about Justin, right? Looks a lot like Tristan because they're brothers."

She nodded, her hand reaching for something on the counter.

"Are you looking to lose the hand?"

"It's a blood coagulant," she said. "For my nose."

He motioned for her to continue, and waited until she was spraying it in her nose.

"So yes, Justin is dead. The people who control this ship are friends of mine."

She didn't react with the fear he thought she should. "That's fine. Just tell them not to bother me and I'll make what they want." She removed the cloth. The front of her face and shirt were bloody, but the flow had stopped.

"Make?"

She washed the cloth and used it to wash her face. "Drugs, medicine, even poisons if they want to kill someone. So long as they let me conduct my research in peace, they can have anything they want."

"You've got this wrong. All this. It's over for you."

"What are you talking about? Get the captain down here. He'll see reason."

Alex started shaking his head, but smiled. He went to an unused terminal and contacted the bridge.

"Bridge," Murray answered.

"Alex here. The scientist wants to talk to the captain."

"Err, is that a good idea?"

"She's insisting," he said, as she nodded.

"Okay, let me check."

"Yes?" Will said a few seconds later. Alex motioned for her to speak.

"Captain, my name is Isabel. Your underling seems to be under the impression that his authority supersedes yours. I think—"

"Yes."

"Excuse me?"

"Yes."

Alex could hear the annoyance in Will's voice.

"Could you elaborate what you mean?"

Alex chuckled.

"Look," Aliana said. "I don't know who you are, and I don't care. Will's too busy to deal with you. Yes, Alex doesn't obey his orders. Alex isn't part of the crew. He's here to get Tristan and then he's leaving, so just do what he tells you and don't bother the captain again."

"Now listen here, I won't be—" The communication terminated. "I will not stand for this." She headed for the door and Alex sub-vocalized a command to lock it.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"To talk to the captain." She tried to open the door, let out a strangled cry, and punched in a code. "What is wrong with this thing?"

"Nothing." Alex tapped the open button, and it opened. He had the gun in her side before she moved. "But you're not going to see the captain. There's someone more important for you to talk to."

She rolled her eyes. "Who could be more important than him?"

"How about the man you've been torturing?" He motioned for her to move. "I think you owe him an apology, at the very least."

"Apologize to one of my subjects?" She snorted. "Why would I ever want to do that?"

Alex smiled at her. "Because the alternative is that I gut you here and leave you to die." She opened her mouth, and Alex indicated all the knives he had on him. "Trust me, it would be my pleasure to kill you right here."

She looked at the knives and the gun, then started walking

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Alex dragged her unconscious body into the arena.

She'd been stupid enough to run. He'd easily caught up to her, but the run had jostled

his arm and he'd been in a bad enough mood by then to simply clock her and drag her the rest of the way. At least with Will in control of the ship, the lifts were safe to use.

He shook her. "Wake up." He looked around at all the light walls, then the corner he'd left Tristan in. He wasn't there. He searched the room as she stirred.

He noticed Victor, Mary, and Zephyr first, because they were moving through what looked like a maze of transparent, colored walls. He saw Tristan, sitting on the floor in a large area without walls.

He pulled her up and took the few steps that took him to the light-wall and touched it. Solid. He looked in the others' direction and opened his mouth to tell them to shut it off, but closed it. He had no idea if it was even one of them that had caused it, and he didn't need them.

"Holographic shutdown."

The walls shattered into pieces of light and vanished. He pulled her along as he headed for Tristan.

Tristan had his arms around his knees and was rocking slightly. He looked so pitiful he felt like killing her right there. Instead, he forced her to her knee before him.

"Apologize."

She snorted.

Alex leaned in. "Look at him. Look at what you did to him."

She looked at Tristan, didn't seem impressed, then gasped. "What did you do to my injector!"

He had the gun out of his belt and at her head. "That's what you're noticing?"

"Alex, stop."

Alex sighed. "Victor, leave." The man was well away from them.

"Alex, you need to get back from him, both of you. There's no telling when he's going to go berserk again, and this thing stopped working." He was holding a headband.

"We're fine," Alex replied. "You'd better go see to Zephyr; Mary seems to be having trouble dealing with him." She looked to be supporting most of his weight, though he far outweighed her.

"They'll be fine. Zeph mostly needs to rest; Tristan had us moving around a lot while I got the hang of this place."

"Then just go to them so you don't see what's about to happen."

"Alex, you can't just bring some random person here and put her in danger like this."

Alex sighed and leaned into her. "Do not move." He stood and pulled Victor aside. "She's the one who did this to him."

"What?" He looked at her. "Does he know?"

Tristan growled. He was staring at her.

"I'd say that he does."

Victor moved toward them, but Alex held his arm. "Let go."

"No."

"Alex, I swear if you don't let go of me I'll—"

"What? Arrest me? Try to make me feel bad? Maybe you forgot this while you were with Anders's people, but you work for me. You do what I tell you. I'm telling you to leave."

"Alex, you can't let this happen," Victor pleaded. The woman was on her ass, slowly backing away while Tristan stood. "This is premeditated murder."

Alex raised an eyebrow. "Don't you get it? This is what living with Tristan is like. This is what your happy ending looks like."

"And you're okay with it?" Victor searched his face. Alex could see the moment it finally sunk in. The moment Victor's illusions that Alex was still a decent human under it all shattered.

"I made my choices."

“It isn’t too late, Alex. Stop this.” The woman’s pleas became louder than Tristan’s growls. “Alex, I swear, if you don’t stop him, I’m going to stop him myself.”

Alex let go of Victor and had a knife under his chin before he could react. “And how do you think you’re going to—” He clamped his mouth shut to keep from screaming as Victor twisted his other hand. The wrap kept tension from happening, but it wasn’t designed to deal with torsion.

He pushed the knife up and Victor went on his tiptoes, but didn’t let go of his hand. He just needed to fight through the pain and muster the strength to push the knife through Victor’s jaw and into his brain.

“Crimson,” Zephyr said behind him. “Stop.” He sounded exhausted. “It’s too late to stop your man from doing what you brought her here for. Vic’s just new. He doesn’t understand how things are. You need to give him a chance to learn.”

“Not after this betrayal.”

“I didn’t betray anyone,” Victor said, trying to move further up.

“He made a mistake,” Zephyr continued. “He still thinks he’s Law. He doesn’t get that that doesn’t exist in this life.”

Alex shook with the focus to move his hand up. No one who tried to take what was Tristan’s got to just walk away. She belonged to him for what she’d done, and Victor would pay for thinking he could take that away.

“Anders would kill him.”

The words shattered his determination, and his hand dropped. Victor staggered back, letting go of his hand. The relief from the pain hit him almost as hard as the pain had. Hands steadied him.

Mary threw him one angry glare, then was treating Victor.

It was what Tristan would have done, he told himself, but he knew he was wrong. Tristan didn’t kill for mistakes, not genuine ones. Tristan would hurt him, make sure he knew he’d done wrong, but he’d also give him a chance to show he’d learned the lesson.

Victor’s eyes were already filled with pain, and it wasn’t physical. Maybe now he understood what he’d given up when he’d agreed to this. Maybe he realized he didn’t have what it took to be with Tristan. It didn’t matter. Alex could see the pain was enough for this lesson.

When he was steady, he looked at Tristan. His Samalian was on his knees, back to him. His hand went down and up, each time spraying blood in the air. It was finally over.

“Will has control of the ship,” he told Zephyr. “Take him and Mary to the bridge, and Will can arrange to get them wherever they want to go.” He reached in a pocket as Mary stood.

“I’m going with you,” she said, cutting off Zephyr.

“No,” Alex snapped. “We’re done dealing with the lot of you. All you’ve done is get in the way.”

Zephyr didn’t react to the words. Victor hunched down, and Mary glared at him.

“Don’t you dare take that tone with me,” she said. “I stabilized him. I patched everyone who got hurt, even you.” Alex opened his mouth. “Don’t even think of putting his current condition on me. He built that thing, it’s not my fault it failed. I could have walked away, Alex. More than once I saw my chance, but I stuck by you. You don’t want me to travel with you, fine, but you need me to settle your man in so he’ll have a chance to get better. If you’re too fucking proud and angry to see that, then you deserve the corpse you’ll have when you arrive wherever you’re going.”

Alex wanted to hit her, but he fought his anger down, because she was right. He needed her to help Tristan. He wouldn’t know how to set the medical equipment in the ship. He gave a short nod, and then worked at being rational enough to speak.

“What do we do about Miranda?” Zephyr asked.

“She stays in the cryotube until me and Tristan are gone. She’s going to be pissed when you take her out, and she probably won’t care for whatever explanation you give her as to

why I did what I did, but warn her that coming after me or Tristan isn't worth her life. She's been paid, she should be content with that. That goes for you too, Victor. Once the pain's gone, if you decide revenge is what you want, don't. Zeph's right, this was a mistake, so you get to live. Coming after us will be a decision you won't survive."

Alex left them to join Tristan, who was kneeling in the woman's remains, covered in her blood and entrails. It gave his fur a red tint. He'd never seen this level of savagery from him. Even Anders's death hadn't been quite this messy.

He knelt in front of Tristan, uncaring of what was under his legs. "Tristan?"

He looked up. Whatever he had felt that had caused this carnage, it was gone from his face. His eyes took a moment to focus on him. "She usually vanishes." The words were soft, but they hit Alex like a knife. He still thought none of this was real.

"She's really dead this time. She's not coming back, will never hurt you again."

The hope in Tristan's eyes was so deep Alex had to look away. For him to hope for it so hard meant she terrified him still. No one should have been able to do that to him.

He stood and offered Tristan his hand. "Come on. Let's get you cleaned up, and then we can leave." Tristan looked at the hand, and Alex feared he'd then go back to staring at nothing, but he took it and stood. He walked without needing to be prodded, but he followed rather than taking the lead, as if he needed Alex to guide his steps.

Zephyr and Victor were gone, and Mary kept what she must have felt to be a safe distance. He opened each door they came across until one opened to living quarters—empty, fortunately for the owners. He closed and locked the door before Mary could even consider following them in.

He set the temperature, then undressed. He got Tristan under the jet and joined him, the cold water feeling good. The water ran over the two of them, but Tristan didn't move to clean himself.

Alex scrubbed his fur, intensifying the red that flowed down. He stopped, rested his head on Tristan's shoulder, and started crying. Tristan, his Tristan, would hit him for such a loss of control. He wouldn't stand there, silent, letting him hold on so Alex wouldn't crumple on the floor.

He wanted to be pushed away, to be scolded, to be screamed at. He wanted a monster to look down at him and sneer for how he'd lost control. Alex needed *his* monster back.

He tried to dry his eyes, then chuckled at himself, at the futility of drying eyes under a jet of water. He went back to scrubbing Tristan, stopping only once, when he saw the cuts on his chest and stomach. Sets of three parallel cuts Alex was familiar with, since most of his back and front were covered with them. Tristan had done this to himself. He almost asked why, but realized he was afraid of not getting a response, and of finding out why Tristan had felt he needed to mutilate himself.

When he reached Tristan's groin, Alex tried to get a reaction out of him, but it was like every program but life-support had been shut down. He wished he knew if it was the drugs causing this, or if the act of killing her had made something snap.

When the water ran clean he dried his Samalian, and himself, then dressed. He looked for something that might fit Tristan, but the reason these quarters were emptied was that they were unoccupied. He shrugged. It wasn't like Tristan cared if he was naked, even normally.

Alex took his hand. "Come on, it's time for us to get out of here."