

The sounds returned to the forest as Alex caught his breath. Tristan was still on him. Alex was still in him. He had no idea how that had happened—other than the obvious.

He cracked an eye opened and shut it. Tristan was looking at him with a gentle smile, the warmth making his brown eyes glitter. His breathing sped up, but not for the reason it had seconds ago. This couldn't be real. Tristan didn't care, he didn't submit this way. This was a trick, a game, a mask.

"It's okay, Alex. It's real."

Of course, he knew what Alex was thinking. Tristan was responsible for a lot of the code running in his head. Tristan moved off, and Alex shivered at the cool breeze, and how lonely he felt without his Samalian's touch. As much as he couldn't believe what just happened, he didn't want it to be over. He didn't want to go back to the distance, the coldness.

Tristan turned Alex on his side and pressed his furry chest was against Alex's back. A muscular arm draped over his side. Alex had so many questions, he was afraid they'd all pour out at once if he opened his mouth, so he didn't ask any.

In spite of his fear, he relaxed against the warm body. He opened his eyes, but didn't move. He didn't want to risk Tristan believing Alex didn't want this. The only thing of note in his field of vision was the metal cage.

"Did he really put you in there?"

Tristan moved, rested his muzzle on Alex's shoulder. "Yes." The word was flat. The intonation was pure Tristan, but the Samalian was trembling.

"For how long?"

Silence, then a shrug. "As long as it took for me to get myself out of it. It was the first lock I learned how to pick."

Alex tried to imagine being in there as a child. Being scared, calling to his father and being ignored. He shuddered. "How could anyone treat a child like that?"

Tristan's hand moved to his stomach, and he held him tightly. "My father thought it was the only way we'd learn to be self-reliant. He believed depending on anyone made us weak."

"It explains why you tried so hard to make me leave."

"Yes." The word was breathless, shaky. Tristan kissed Alex's arm. "Thank you for being stubborn."

Alex tensed at the praise. "I'm terrified this is something to manipulate me."

"I—I understand. I never gave you a reason to trust me."

"I do trust you." Alex was certain of that.

"No. You trust that I'm going to do what's best for me, and that so long as that includes you, you'll survive along with me. It's all I've ever shown you—how I've treated you."

Alex wanted to protest, but the words died before they came out.

Tristan had always done exactly that.

"I know this won't mean much," Tristan continued, "not right now, but I swear to you, Alex, things have changed. Things will be different. I don't want you as my weapon, as a thing I own. I want you as my lover, as my equal. I... I don't know how to do that yet. This is as new to me as it is to you. My father went out of his way to make sure I'd never care for anyone, and what I taught myself of caring was so I could use it against others. I'm still sorting what it means to care for someone."

Alex closed his eyes and shivered. He had no idea if he wanted that. Which was ridiculous. He'd put himself through hell to find Tristan, thinking there was someone in there who cared for him. But he'd learned to live with the loneliness.

To now be offered it all was overwhelming. What if he did something wrong, and Tristan decided he wasn't worthy of his love?

Tristan pulled away and Alex grabbed his arm, letting go of it immediately. He

didn't get to touch Tristan.

Tristan stopped moving. "Alex?" he asked after a long silence.

"Please don't go." Tears fell, and he cursed himself for them. Tristan had taught him control, where the fuck had it gone?

"I'm just getting your jacket; you're shivering."

"It's okay. Just hold me, please?" He couldn't help the plaintiveness in his voice. Where was everything Tristan had taught him about never showing weakness, about always—

Tristan's arm was around him again, holding him against his chest. "I'm never leaving you, Alex. If you don't believe anything else, believe that."

Alex nodded. He wanted to believe it, but he couldn't quiet the voice at the back of his head telling him he didn't deserve this. Tristan would realize it soon enough and then move on to someone else, someone better.

"You said 'we' when talking about your father making you self-reliant. Did he do the same to your brother? To Justin?" Talking kept him from hearing that voice.

Tristan's answer was hesitant. "Yes. As soon as Justin was too big to fit between the bars, he put him in there. My father never understood that what worked on me might not work on him."

"Fit through?" Alex had a horrifying thought. "How old was he when your father started torturing him? How old were you?"

"I was young. I don't remember how young. Justin was a baby when he took us. I had to carry him the entire way here. This region doesn't have noticeable seasons, so keeping track of the years wasn't possible. But Justin was too young, far too young, for what my father did to us."

"I can stop talking about this."

"No," Tristan whispered, then his voice was stronger. "You can ask me anything. Any subject. I won't have secrets from you, not anymore." He paused and Alex let him. "It's just harder than I thought to think about Justin, about my father. I haven't processed his death, either of their deaths."

"How?" Alex hesitated. Tristan had said anything, but did he mean it? He might as well find out now. "How did your father die?"

"I killed him."

"You killed him?" The dismay lasted only as long as it took the words to leave his mouth. Of course, Tristan had killed him, if for no other reason than that cage. Alex would have killed that man for putting Tristan in it, too.

"It's what he taught me." Tristan let out a dry snort. "Although I doubt he expected to become a victim of his teachings. 'Remove anything that stands in your way.' He stood in mine." Another pause. "Once I decided he couldn't teach me anything, I was leaving. I'd seen ships and shuttles through openings in the canopy. I wanted to go where they went, but he wouldn't let me go. He told me I had to stay, only together could we survive. Even back then, I saw the contradiction, but I didn't understand it. I think I do now. He didn't want to be alone."

"How?" Alex asked, wishing he could take it back. Was it morbid curiosity? Or did he want to see how far he could push?

"I don't remember how I killed him."

Alex nodded. "It was too long ago. I guess he's just one more person you killed."

"No, he was my father. He—I..." Tristan breathed deeply. "Before Justin kidnapped me, I knew how I'd killed him. It wasn't something I thought about all that much, but I remembered it clearly. The drugs changed that. My father made me question how I'd killed him, that I'd even killed him at all. Each time, I remembered doing it a different way. Now I can list all the ways I've killed him, but I don't know which is the real one."

Alex tried to sort how he felt, how he should feel. How he thought it would be to kill your own father. If Tristan had remembered it after all these years, it couldn't have

been as simple as just killing him.

"I'm sorry you had to do that."

Tristan buried his muzzle in Alex's hair, breathed in. "Thank you, but I'm not. I didn't feel anything when I killed him. The drugs tried to muddle that, but I know I didn't. He wasn't my father, just something in my way. My father wasn't a good man. Maybe he didn't deserve to die..." Tristan shrugged. "...but I doubt the universe would have been a better place if I'd let him live."

Alex tried to reconcile his cold-blooded killer with the Samalian who'd just admitted it was possible he shouldn't have killed someone. What did that mean for their future? He didn't want to think about that right now.

"Justin didn't seem to be like you, or your father. From the little I gathered about him on the Sayatoga, he surrounded himself with people."

"I have no idea how, but Justin is, was, more comfortable dealing with people than I am. He sucked at picking the cage's lock, but he could always talk me into doing it for him. Of course that meant I'd take his place in it once my father found out, and he always did. I'd promised myself the next time Justin was on his own, but he'd open his mouth and I'd pick the lock for him. If nothing else, it was great training on how to learn to ignore people."

They fell silent.

Alex relaxed against Tristan, felt comfortable even with the Samalian's body against his, the breathing in his hair. He opened his mouth, but Tristan spoke.

"I wish Justin wasn't dead."

Alex sputtered. "How can you say that? He tortured you. I'm pretty sure he tried to have you killed before that."

Tristan nodded. "Multiple times, but he's still my brother. He's the only family I had left. I never admitted that before, but I enjoyed those games we played. Him trying to have me killed, me taking my revenge. I didn't want that to end, and that's why I never killed him. It gave me something to look forward to. A way to spend time with my brother."

"That's some screwed up family dynamic."

Tristan chuckled. "You don't get your typical family being raised by my father."

They fell silent again, and this time Alex didn't hesitate. "You said you felt something for me from the start, back when we first met, that it's why you didn't kill me then. Is that why you didn't kill Victor?"

"Yes." Tristan paused. "Well, maybe. I didn't feel the same for him as I felt for you, but yes, I did care. I think I still do. Something else I'm going to have to process."

Alex shivered as Tristan licked his ear.

"This is why I buried all my emotions; they're so complicated. I'm not going to replace you, if that's what you're worried about."

Alex nodded. "You say that you love me."

Tristan nibbled on Alex's ear. "I do."

"When?" Alex gasped.

Tristan let go. "When what?"

"When did you know?"

"Alex, I—"

Alex cursed himself. "It isn't important." Why did he have to shatter the mood? He'd felt Tristan getting excited.

"I allowed myself to acknowledge I loved you when you almost died. When you came to my rescue. I—"

"How do you know what I did?"

"I regained consciousness as they were about to kill you." The words were tentative.

Tristan was keeping something back, almost waiting for Alex to call him out on it.

He could; Tristan had said he could ask anything. But if he wasn't saying it, there had to be a good reason, so Alex kept quiet.

"I reacted without thinking, saved your life. I didn't even think of the consequence to mine. Like when I injected you with the cure, but this time I understood what it meant. I can't tell you about before that, because I wasn't equipped to deal with the emotions."

"You think?" Alex clamped his mouth shut to keep anything else to slip out.

Tristan chuckled. "I can say I did care. Why else would I have kept your hologram?" Silence again. "I destroyed it. I'm sorry. I can't tell you what lie I told myself to justify keeping it, but it isn't a coincidence you saw it on me when you found me on Terion Two. I never took it off."

Tristan's hand was between them, where the diamond would be. "Maybe I loved you even then, even if I couldn't admit it, but I definitely did when we went after the virus. It's why I acted like I did. I couldn't accept you were more important to me than my own life."

"I didn't mean to cause that."

"Don't. Alex, don't take the blame for this. There's nothing to be blamed for. You were yourself, your wonderful self. I was just too stubborn to see how amazing you were for me."

Alex closed his eyes. Words, these were just words. Words were easy for Tristan. They were tools, weapons. He turned to face the Samalian. He needed to figure out if this was a mask, a game. If this was Tristan being cruel.

He looked into those beautiful brown eyes and saw none of the calculations, but he didn't trust that. He'd believed he could tell when Tristan was acting, but how often had that been proven wrong?

Not looking away, he placed a hand on Tristan's chest, dug his fingers through the fur, rubbed. Tristan's expression didn't change; if anything, the eyes grew warmer.

"You hate it when I touch you."

"Does this feel like I hate it?"

Alex felt Tristan grow harder against his groin.

"I love it—always did, which was the problem before. When you touch me, you make me want you. You make me want to hold you, you make me want to fill my life with you. I couldn't have that. I couldn't want something so badly. It was a weakness, and if you ever realized it, you would have used it against me. So I pushed you away. I made sure you knew I was the only one to decide when we touched—that I would touch you, never the reverse. I fought the impulse. I fought my desire for you until it became too much and then I— Fuck, Alex, I abused you so much."

"It's okay." He didn't like hearing vulnerability in Tristan's voice. "I wanted—"

"No, Alex. You never wanted that. You settled for it because it's all I'd give you." Tristan buried his muzzle in his neck. "You deserved so much fucking more, Alex. Why did you let me do that to you? Even then, you could have stopped me, at least long enough to leave. Why didn't you leave?"

Again, there was so much he wanted to say, he didn't know if he could trust himself. "Do you remember Jack?" He looked into Tristan's eyes as he searched for the memory.

"He's who I pretended to be when we first met."

"Yes. I fell in love with him. You remember that, right?" Tristan looked away, then nodded.

"He's who I was looking for when I found you again."

"But I showed you he wasn't real. I—" He closed his eyes. "I raped you, Alex. Then I beat you."

"You think I hadn't done worse to myself by then? You were all I had. I'd destroyed everything behind me to find you and... I was pretty sure it was my imagination, but I thought there was something. Not Jack, but—It doesn't matter. I stayed because I had

nowhere to go. Then there was Emil. To protect him, I gave myself to you, but by then I'd convinced myself that was okay. That whatever little I got from you was better than being alone again."

"I'm sorry." Tristan licked Alex's cheek. "I can probably give him back to you, if that's what you want. You'd have to remind me who he was, but—"

Alex had a finger on Tristan's lips. "Don't say that, please" Tristan raised an eyebrow and took the finger between his lips.

Alex fought not to chuckle. "I don't want him; I'd probably tear someone that naïve apart. I couldn't love someone that soft. I'm not a starry-eyed corporate slave anymore, so I want someone as hard as I had to become. I want you. The uncaring monster who molded me into a weapon, who treated me like an object to use at his leisure." Tristan opened his mouth, but Alex replaced the finger on the lips. Tristan's expression said he considered ignoring the finger, but he nodded.

"That's who I wanted then. Who I settled for, like you said. Who I'd be willing to continue having, if that was all that was offered, but if you're honest in your offer, I want to find out what that means."

"What if I don't know what that means? What if processing my emotions means I can't be the monster you want?"

"Then I'll take who that is. I'll adjust. We'll adjust together." He dreaded the idea Tristan would become gentle, too gentle. That they would settle into a quiet life. "I just want you, whoever that ends up being. So long as you let me be with you, I'll be happy." He buried his face in Tristan's chest and fought the tears.

Tristan held him. "Okay, I can do that. I can give you who I'll be. Whoever that ends up being."

Alex knew he couldn't make more demands, but he still asked the Defender for violence. For his monster. In his mind's eye he saw the golden-furred Samalian tilt an ear, cross his arms over his chest. A reminder he had to live with what he got.

He would. He'd make it work, he just didn't want... "What are we doing about Jacoby?" He didn't want to go back there, where everyone was so friendly and pleasant. Where Tristan would have no choice but to be nice, too. "He's determined to take you back to his town."

"I'm not going back there." The finality in Tristan's voice comforted Alex. "The town's compromised. I should have moved on the moment you showed up—if not then, after Emil—but training you was more important. I have other places set up." Tristan was silent. "A lot like this, actually."

"Really?"

Tristan didn't answer immediately, looking around. "I don't think I ever left this place behind. Most of my hideouts are in, or are close to, forests—my workshop and little more. A house if it's needed for camouflage."

Alex rested his head on Tristan's chest. "That sounds nice." He yawned. "I don't care where we go." He yawned again, his eyes heavy. "So long as I'm with you," he slurred with exhaustion.

He felt the kiss on top of his head, and the words sounded like they came from far away. "Always. So long as you'll have me, I will be there."

Alex smiled as he realized he was falling asleep in the arms of the only person who mattered to him.