

Tristan slashed, punched, and lunged at the human before him. None of his blows made contact. “You’ve improved,” Tristan said. “Who’s been training you?”

Alex only smiled.

A voice, somewhere at the back of his mind where he shoved anything that didn’t help him, whispered something. Something about what he believed being wrong—and that he knew that, had to stop pretending, but he ignored it. All that mattered was training, fighting, getting himself ready for when the time came.

His father and brother were watching them fight, both looking annoyed at being ignored, but Alex had helped him focus on what was important: preparing for the moment the humans would drop their guard. They kept trying to distract him, his father with his berating and his brother trying to get him into an argument, but Tristan knew the truth now. None of them were real, not his father, brother, or the golden Samalian standing in the distance, watching impassively. Only Alex and the training were, he told himself, repeated to himself to drown that voice which kept whispering what he didn’t want to hear.

Alex returned with a series of attacks, his knives moving so fast Tristan barely got out of their way in time. He punched, Alex ducked, slashed at his bare stomach. Tristan threw himself back, tripping on his brother’s foot. He rolled, got back up in time to dodge the knife Alex threw at him. He’d kill his brother later for interfering like that.

“Ignore him,” Alex said. “He isn’t real.”

Alex was right. This fight was real, and it and Alex were the only real things in his life. Alex had never left him, no matter how many time Tristan gave him reasons to.

He lunged at the human, slashed and felt the heat of his flesh as his claws grazed it. He was better, Tristan wouldn’t take that from him, but the drugs were also part of making this fight fair. He couldn’t think as quickly, react as fast. Then there was the lack of sleep, but Tristan was used to functioning with little of that.

How long had they been training? He couldn’t remember. He was sure they should have moved on to something else by now, something just as strenuous, just as enjoyable, but in a different way. But that would be after they were done training, and clearly, they weren’t.

The whispering was still going on, but that was now part of the ship’s background noises, like the hiss of the door when his brother came to watch him train, shaking his head in amusement. Why his brother bothered using that secret exit Tristan had yet to find, and come in through that door as if it was a surprise inspection, baffled Tristan, but then again, his brother didn’t always make sense.

He cursed as the blade almost sliced his chest.

“Focus,” Alex said.

Tristan nodded. Alex circled him, holding a long, curved blade—black metal with a sharp silver edge. “Where did you get that?”

“Ramerel Two, remember?” A series of slashes.

That wasn’t what he’d meant, but he remembered the planet. A bunch of savages Dolfic had trained to protect their research facility. They hadn’t stopped him, and he’d left the planet with the weapon he’d wanted, and Alex had kept a few of those blades for his collection, so it made sense he had one.

But there was still something wrong about Alex fighting with one of them now.

It came too close again, shaved some of his fur off his arm. He remembered the bite of the blade—a few of the scars under his fur came from those blades—something about the silver edge causing them to resist the Heals.

The door hissed open, and he glanced at where his brother had been standing as he dodged Alex’s attack, where he was still standing. He pivoted on a foot and kicked at the human who lightly jumped back, grinning. The woman who’d accompanied Justin that first time was walking to the cage’s door.

“Activate it.” Her voice was sharp, someone used to giving orders, having them obeyed

under threat of punishment.

Alex stopped and joined him in wondering what she meant.

Tristan was pulled back, flew back, arms and legs stretched. He hit the wall, but kept his head forward this time to avoid hitting it. He'd forgotten that was there; he'd even forgotten about the bracelets. He'd grown used to their weight on his wrists and ankles.

The clang of the cage's door closing resounded and Tristan fought against his restraints. He had to get out of here. The bars were closing in on him. Soon his father would come to add to the torment. He needed to be able to work the lock and get out before that happened, or it would be so much worse.

"It isn't real," Alex said. "Focus on me. None of this is real, just me."

Alex, yes, Alex was real. The rest? The drugs, that had to be it. The drugs were making him imagine the rest. His father wouldn't come, his father was dead. He'd pounded his father's skull into a pulp with his fists.

He was able to breathe again.

The woman was before him, studying him. Her expression was a mix of interest and annoyance. "This is what happens when I'm not allowed to run my tests on a proper living subject. You should have been a babbling mess weeks ago." She reached for his muzzle and he bit, growling menacingly. He missed her hand, but now there was worry on her face. Good. Soon he would have her afraid of him.

"How did you resist it?" She looked into his eyes. "Is it determination? Or some sort of immunity? I wish he'd let me dissect you, or at least strap you to my table. All this would be better if I had you under direct observation."

Tristan smiled. "Let me down, and you can observe me all you want. We can even do it on that table of yours." Alex wouldn't like it—Alex hadn't liked the idea of Tristan being with anyone else, so he hadn't, but he had to do what he needed to escape. Alex would understand.

He imagined himself and Alex in bed, let his excitement grow as she looked perplexed.

"Do—" Her eyes left his face and noticed his crotch. She made a face. "Really? You think I'd do that with you? You're just a test subject."

"Let me down!" he roared. "Let me down or I'm going to rip you to pieces!"

She took a step back and now fear showed in her face.

Finally.

It didn't stay. She looked at his wrists, which he was pulling on, trying to reach her, but they wouldn't move from the wall.

"You are perfectly innocuous." She stepped closer again and he bared his teeth in a growl, but it had no effect.

He deflated. She hadn't given in to her desire for sex, or into her fear. Those were always the best ways to manipulate humans.

His father snorted. "You mean the easiest. The ones that satisfy you the most. Doing it with those creatures. That one." He indicated Alex, who was staying away.

"Don't you dare belittle what we have," Tristan growled.

"Have? You call beating him until he does everything you want having anything? You call getting him to crave you so badly he offers himself any chance he gets having something?"

"I did not beat him!"

The woman raised an eyebrow that matched his father's tilted ear. She had something in her hand. What was it? He cursed his father for the distraction.

An accesser, that was it. What size? Much smaller than what he used.

"I know what a beating looks like," his father said. "I gave you enough of them."

He glared at his father. "I was training him. Molding him into the weapon he could be, that I needed."

“Right, that’s why you did it naked and were always excited. You were training him for something alright. But it wasn’t fighting. The great Tristan couldn’t get any so he trained himself a human plaything.”

“I did no such thing! He offered himself to me. He wants me.”

The woman smirked as she worked.

“And I never called myself that,” he told her. “I’m not Justin. I don’t need a title. It’s the news vids that called me that after I blew up that Tetsui station. Like that made me great. It wasn’t even my highest body count.”

The band on his forearm vibrated.

“You made me miss how she opened it!” he screamed at his father. He smirked. She winced. But he could see accesser, the way she was holding it. A sixteenth of an inch? Smaller than that? It would explain why he hadn’t felt the opening. He tried to reach for it, but his hand was held in place. He whined. He needed to get it if he was going to get out of this.

A thin slice of the band slipped out and the yellow blinking light turned red.

Wait, when had it turned yellow? When she started working on it? No, before that. Sometime before that. Hours? Days? How long had it been since she’d been here last?

He banged his head against the wall. Why couldn’t he remember?

“That’s it,” his father said. “Smash your brains in like you did me.”

“I used a knife,” he replied. Or had he suffocated him? He couldn’t recall, but he was confident he hadn’t smashed his father’s brains to a pulp. Right?

She was holding a cartridge so thin he could see through it. Where had she taken that from? He glared at his father, who looked back innocently.

She took out a small box and put it in before removing another one. That one was colored, a sick-looking blue.

“Alex,” he whispered, “now’s the time. She has her back to you.” The woman stiffened. “Do it before she realizes you’re there.” She cast a worried glance over her shoulder, looked around, then shook her head in annoyance.

Alex smiled at him. He hadn’t moved from where he stood. “You don’t need me to escape, you know that.”

Tristan’s heart broke. “Of course I need you, Alex. I always needed you.”

She put the cartridge in the slice and it slid back in. The light went back to flashing yellow.

“It won’t stop me,” he told her. “You’re wasting your time. I’m going to get out of this cage. Then I’m going to kill you.” He looked over her shoulder at the four guards. “And anyone who was part of keeping me here.” The man backed away from the bars, but even the three women looked worried.

“This is something different,” she said, unconcerned at his threats. “You should have a more noticeable reaction this time.” The light on the band turned green. She was too confident in his restraints. He’d have to show her how feeble they were at some point.

For now, he leaned forward as much as he could and lowered his voice. “Tell my little brother that he’d better start running now, because it doesn’t matter how far he goes. When I get out of the cage, I will make him suffer.”

She looked him in the eyes, calm, collected. “I’ll relay the message.” She turned and headed for the door. He prepared himself as it opened. He wouldn’t react this time. It closed with a loud *clang*, and he twitched.

His father laughed.

“Release him,” she said. She looked at the women by the bars. “You should step back; there’s no telling what he’ll do.”

The wall let him go, and he dropped to his knees. He watched her leave and promised himself he wouldn’t show any reaction. This drug would do nothing to him, just like the previous one.

He looked at the band, watched the green light flash. The slice had been just below it, but he couldn't see the demarcation. He also couldn't feel it under his finger. The spot for the accesser to unlock it had to be close. He cursed his father again for making him miss that; if he knew where it was, he might have had a chance at taking it off.

He eyed the green light.

That bitch did this to him.

With the unbidden thought came a flash of anger. He shoved it down. Anger wasn't going to help; it never did. He needed to think. He could think of a way out of this. He always had.

He screamed. She and Justin had done this to him. He was going to kill them, rip them to pieces. He looked around for his brother—would start with him, make him pay for the way he interfered with his training, but he wasn't there. Nor was his father. Or Alex.

"You promised!" he yelled. "You swore you'd never leave me!" He wouldn't kill him, not Alex, but he was going to show him how displeased he was that he'd broken his word.

He caught motion out the corner of his eye and his head snapped there. The guards. They were part of this. They were in league with Justin, with that woman.

He stalked toward them and they watched him approach. They showed concern, but not the fear they should be feeling. He was going to make them hurt for not fearing him.

He reached the end of his tether and was forced to stop, but he kept trying to reach them. He screamed at himself to calm down. This would be solved by thinking, not by throwing himself at it.

In response, his body screamed incoherent threats.

The guards stayed by the bars, watching him like he was something on a vid. He snarled at them. He wasn't an attraction for them to gawk at.

He tensed and, with a roar, he pushed past the end of his tether, taking an extra step. His muscles protested as he reached for them.

They scrambled back with fearful curses. He was almost at the bars. If he could grab onto them, there would be nothing they could do.

One of the guards fumbled with the remote.

His fingers touched the bar, and then he was flung back. He landed on the floor, panting. The flash of rage that had let him push through was gone, leaving him shaking, but also cold, calm.

He pushed himself to his knees and eyed the guards. They were afraid of him, which was good, but he didn't feel any of the elation watching them fear him had brought on earlier. He felt nothing.

"You're going to die," he stated, his voice flat. Not a threat, not even a promise. Simply the statement of a fact.

The guards didn't laugh. As one they looked at the cage's door. Tristan followed their gaze.

"I will get out." Not now. He didn't have the drive to push through the end of his tether, but now he could work out how it would happen. He'd have to get angry, rage beyond anything he'd felt before. Abandon control completely. That would let him reach the door. Once there, he'd be able to break the lock.

He scratched at his arm.

Patience. It would have to be when the guards were distracted. Not this group; they wouldn't drop their guards now that they'd seen what he could do. One of the other groups.

He felt wetness under his finger and looked down. He'd clawed a gash in his arm. His other forearm itched and as he glanced at it, the fur rippled. No, the flesh under it moved.

He slapped a hand over the crawling spot. He didn't feel anything move under it, but now his thigh itched. It was more than that. He could feel something there, moving under his skin. He raised his hand to slap at it, and the sensation stopped.

It would restart, somewhere else, so he waited. This time he was going to get it, whatever it was. He slapped his chest just as the itching began.

What was it? Nanites? Why would she put nanites in him? To take him apart atom by atom? His side, and this time he didn't stop at a slap; he dug his claws into his flesh. It couldn't be nanites. He wouldn't feel them this way.

Parasites. Something to eat at him. They were in his calf now, and he stood. He looked at the rippling fur as it traveled down to the ankle. When it stopped, he could feel them burrowing deeper into him.

He looked around. He needed something to cut his leg off before it spread back up, but his cage was empty. All he had was him—his claws, his determination.

He sat down again. He could still feel it, digging around his ankle. He dug a claw in his flesh, ignored the pain—pain was easy to ignore, he'd learned that lesson young—and began cutting.

"Tristan, stop!"

His head snapped up, and he looked into golden eyes.

"That's it, focus on me, not what you're feeling."

The eyes were set in a face covered not in golden fur like it had seemed at a distance, but tawny. The Samalian's muzzle was short, his right ear notched. Where had he come from? Was he another one of Justin's prisoners? Had he put them together to... Why would his brother put someone else in the cage with him?

And why did he feel like he knew this other Samalian? He wore pants, unlike him, a blue faded by time and wear. His belt had a sword on each hip.

Swords were important. There was something about them. Something about what swords could do. He was scratching at his thigh.

"Ignore that," the Samalian said, his tone hard, an order. "It isn't real. It's just the drugs. You're in trouble, Tristan."

"I'm going to escape. I just have to be patient. Alex said so."

"Alex isn't—" The familiar Samalian stopped. Took a breath. "Think. If you're so sure you'll get out, how? Think about that."

Tristan searched the Samalian's face. "Have we met? You look familiar."

He rubbed his face. "We so don't have the time for this. Yes, you've seen me before, I couldn't be here otherwise. Now focus. Tell me—"

Where had they met? He hadn't met many Samalians in his life. Maybe when he was a child? Before his father took him from his mother? No, he had a sense of a crowded place. Lots of voices. Human voices, not Samalian.

Yes, he'd met him in a bazaar. Maybe they'd crossed path as he was searching for something... What had he been searching for? It wasn't for him, it was for Alex.

He smiled. Alex had been so happy on that day, his smile so genuine. Why didn't he smile like that anymore?

He grabbed his chest, almost doubled over at the pain. He'd taken the smile away from Alex. It was his fault.

"Tristan!"

He looked up, even if the voice was far away. "I hurt him. Why? Why did I do that to him?" Alex had been so good to him, he'd taken him in, helped him, respected him. What had he done in return? Abused his trust, given him pain, made it so he'd never smile again.

"Focus, Tristan. Yes, you did all that to him, but you can't do anything about that now. That's for later. Right now, you need to prepare yourself."

"I'm ready," he growled. "I'm ready for anything the universe can throw at me."

“Oh, you are so not ready.”

Tristan looked around. Was the cage getting smaller?

“Ignore that too. It’s just going to be worse if you pay attention to it. You need to prepare your mind for what’s coming. If you don’t, it will destroy you.”

“No.” Yes, the cage was definitely growing smaller.

“Yes, it can!”

Was the Samalian moving away?

“Listen to me!”

He certainly sounded like he was further than he’d been.

“You need to figure out what to give into and what to fight! If you try to fight all of it, you’re just going to tire yourself out and you won’t be able to withstand the worst of it!”

Tristan curled in on himself, making himself as small as he could to avoid touching the bars. He didn’t want to be in the cage. When was his father going to let him out? What had he done to deserve being in it?

He began crying.