

Chapter 07

A chime reverberated through the room, and before Alex was conscious of it, he was sitting up, knife in hand, searching for a target. Still looking, he yawned.

The chime came again. "This is your preset wakeup time," a melodious voice said. "Have a good day."

Who had set such an alarm? Not him. The woman, to annoy him. They were on her ship, for a potential job. How many did that make? Twenty? Not quite; the old man had been job seventeen.

He fell back, his head hitting the pillow he'd put under his head. Unlike Tristan, he needed a pillow. His head couldn't handle a hard floor. His pack would do in a pinch, but he didn't have it and the pillow had been right there on the bed, asking to be used.

He wished he could go back to sleep, to the dream. He and Tristan, dancing in a large room, something out of an old vid, lots of flashing lights and deep throbbing. Any time they would brush up against someone as part of the dancing, that person would fall to the ground, dead.

Tristan kissed him and the music went away, as did the dead. And that chime sounded before things could get interesting. He looked down at himself. Yeah, it had been shaping up to be a great dream.

It was the touch, which had brought back the memory of Tristan and the shower. How he'd loved it. How he wished he could get more. But Tristan decided when it happened. Had he known what that touch would do to him? Probably, Tristan did nothing by mistake. He just wished the Samalian would make his position known, instead of giving him those occasional hints of possibilities and then back to being cold.

Tristan didn't care about how Alex felt, he simply used him as he pleased. And Alex? He looked forward to those moments.

What a screwed-up relationship he'd gotten himself into. He smiled. But it was his relationship.

He got up and headed out, in need of a shower. Tristan was at the table, reading. The only indication he'd moved was the glass, which was gone.

Tristan looked at Alex as he crossed the lounge. Took him all in, gave a nod of greeting, and went back to his reading. He didn't react to the state Alex was already in. Cold, uncaring, that was Tristan.

The shower was already cold, so Tristan had taken one. He let the water run down his body and tried to not remember the last one.

It was no use. He could feel Tristan's hands on his back, side, chest as he used him. Alex took care of the need the memory brought. There was nothing caring about the way Tristan moved, and Alex didn't alter the memory. This was what he'd agreed to when he'd given up his freedom to save Emil's life.

Alex felt Tristan take him, moving at a speed the Samalian found pleasurable, and leaving Alex to hope it would last long enough for him to reach his own climax. Tristan finished too fast. Held him as he caught his breath, pulled out, and left.

Like then, Alex had to finish himself. Not as satisfying as when it came from being taken, but

satisfying all the same. He just wished Tristan would hold him. Alex would be satisfied with that. To sleep together, to be held, kept safe. With that, this would be perfect.

He scrubbed himself, using the time to put away how he felt. Tristan knew, he didn't kid himself about that, but he wouldn't put how he felt on display. By the time he left the shower room, dry, there was no indication of what he'd been up to there.

Tristan could probably smell it still, but he didn't react.

He pulled the drawer open and his clothes were there, folded and cleaned. He put the knife he'd left on his makeshift bedroll in its sheath and attached that to his forearm, and placed the other ones in their proper places as he dressed.

When he rejoined Tristan, there was a cup of coffee waiting for him. "Thanks."

"Six minutes."

Alex nodded. Six minutes before they left. He listened to the computer as he sipped his coffee, going to the terminal to look at something. He bypassed a few security programs.

"We're getting an escort."

Tristan nodded.

Alex finished the coffee and disposed of the cup. He put his jacket on as the door chimed.

Tristan opened it and a young man in a pale-yellow uniform stood on the other side, wringing his hands nervously.

"Sirs, the Lady Dalia Prian would like your company for breakfast." He swallowed under the Samalian's gaze.

Tristan held him transfixed for a few seconds, then nodded. He pocketed his datapad and motioned for the man to lead the way.

They went a block and into a lift. Alex didn't feel it move, but he could trace the motion by the computer's voice as they traveled not only up, but sideways and forward to what had to be where the woman lived.

When Tristan had gotten him the procedure for the implant, there had been an option for an optical connection. It would allow him to get maps displayed as well as code, but he wouldn't have been able to interact with it unless he was at a terminal, so he hadn't seen the point.

There was a rumor of a suite of implants that could act as one, enabling the possibility of coercing without needing an intervening computer. He hadn't been able to confirm its existence, and even if he could, he wasn't sure he'd want it. The level of modification needed to accomplish that had to be beyond what he felt acceptable.

His implant couldn't act as a terminal; it didn't have anywhere near the processing power to accomplish that. The only way he could imagine getting anything powerful enough to act as one would be to wire the brain to be the terminal, and while he could see that making a powerful one, just what kind of changes would that cause to his personality?

The lift stopped, and the computer informed him they were in the Prian Tower, top floor. Hadn't that been where she'd offered for Tristan to room in? He had to push the anger down. She'd literally expected him to sleep in her bed, no coding around the port, just straight in.

The corridor had a window looking out on the "city" on top of the ship, more buildings, all lower than this one. Hovers flying between them, the void of space above them.

The people that crossed their path openly stared at Tristan and whispered among themselves. He forced himself not to glare at them. Flowers lined the walls, all different. He recognized one or two, but the others baffled him. Their guide reached a door and stepped out of the way when it opened. He motioned for them to enter.

It was a hangar of a room in a cream color, with the floor a marbled gray and green stone. The walls could be wood, with seats and curtains adding texture. As they walked toward the table, the wall behind it shimmered and showed the starry blackness of space. A projection, since this tower was nowhere near the hull.

The table was large, polished amber-colored wood, able to easily accommodate forty people, and only the three seats at one end were set. Ostentatious didn't even begin to describe this.

A door in the left wall opened and the Lady Prian entered, wearing a pale brown dress that had a shimmer to it, with a red design that appeared and disappeared among it. Her blond hair was made out in a plaid that went down her back this time.

She smiled at them, at Tristan. He was the one who mattered. Alex was the accessory that came along. Something tastefully understated to enhance Tristan's countenance? He might as well be a shirt, for all the attention she paid him.

"I'm so glad to see you were able to make it. Please take a seat." She sat at the head of the table. Tristan took the chair to her right, so Alex went around her to the left. "Please tell me, did you sleep well?"

"I did," Tristan answered. "Your floors are quite comfortable."

Alex didn't manage to hold back the snicker at her stunned reaction. Instead of asking about it, she indicated the food. "Please help yourself."

There were dozens of dishes before them with a variety of food: eggs—scrambled, fried, over easy. Meats—in slabs, cut in cubes, thin strips. Fruits and vegetables—steamed, raw, or roasted. And there were pitchers after pitchers of juices.

There was enough food there to feed two dozen people. Sure, it would be disposed of and go back into the pool for the food printer, but still, who was she trying to impress?

She picked something steaming that might have been a fruit and placed it on her plate. It had pale-orange flesh with waxy-looking maroon skin. "I expect that someone in your line of work doesn't get to enjoy such luxury often." She added a spoon full of cubed meat.

"No," Tristan answered. "Normally we have to content ourselves with the cooked grass we can gather around the ship. If we're lucky and there's trees, we can add bark to it. Had to breakfast on sand once because I'd landed in a desert."

Alex joined her in staring at Tristan, who put slabs of meat on his plate and began eating. What was he trying to do? Shame her? Well, he was going to keep his mouth shut. This was Tristan's game, not his. He put scrambled eggs, the cubed meat, and something he was confident was a vegetable on his plate.

"I take it you've traveled to many exotic places," she said, daintily forking a cube. "It must be interesting."

"It is." He ate systematically, not showing any sign of enjoying his food. "But after awhile, it ends up being much of the same. Planets with cities, where people kill themselves trying to live. Planets where you need to work for a corporation to live. Those planets where people work so someone else can live well. Oh, and let's not forget the occasional planets where aliens live. Those pretty much get crushed under the first boot that finds them."

Alex ate fast to keep himself from asking what this was about. Tristan didn't care for any of those, so the only reason to bring them up with someone as rich as her was to get a reaction.

She did look like she'd lost her appetite. "Well, considering that, I'm wondering if you ever thought about hiring yourself full-time to a lone employer? Someone who could make it very rewarding for you—and your associate," she added as an afterthought.

Tristan shook his head, ate another slow, methodical bite. Alex couldn't help letting out the occasional moan at how good the food was. It was said that food printers made everyone master cooks, but he'd never gotten one to make something this good.

"Really?" She smiled and reached to place a hand on Tristan's. "Then maybe you should listen to what I have to offer. It might be what you're looking for."

Tristan moved his hand just as hers was about to touch it, reaching for a pitcher and filling his glass with a deep red liquid. If she realized the move had been calculated, she didn't show it.

Tristan offered the pitcher to Alex, who shook his head; he already had some almost-clear juice in his glass that tasted sweet and sour. He offered the pitcher to the Lady Prian, and she smiled, raising her glass. "I am listening," he said, filling the glass.

That seemed to surprise her as much as his previous comments. "Well, I could pay you handsomely. I could offer you protection from the Law. I could offer you comfort like you can't imagine, between missions you'd do for me. You'd have the knowledge there would always be a place for you to come back to. One that would always be safe, and where you can enjoy yourself however you want." She smiled and licked her lips.

"Do you even know how I like to enjoy myself?" he asked between bites of the meat.

"Surely, violence is not the only thing you enjoy."

He smiled at her, showing a full set of sharp, predatory teeth. "Oh, it isn't, but nothing compares to it. Trust me, you wouldn't like how I enjoy myself."

Alex saw Tristan shoving her against the wall, getting his relief hard and fast. Her in pain. He found he'd lost his appetite. He forced himself to remember Tristan had told him he'd go to someone he trusted for his relief, but if a job called for it, if he had to convince her of what he meant, he would do it.

"Well, you say that," she replied playfully, "but you never know. Maybe I can show you things you've never experienced, that you'd enjoy more."

"There's nothing this place has that I'd care to learn to enjoy."

"Now, I know you can't mean that. Everyone enjoys quieter things, quiet pleasures with special

people.”

Alex thought he saw Tristan looking at him, but by the time he glanced up, he was focused on eating.

“Any idea when your grandfather will be ready to talk?” Tristan’s plate was empty, his face expressionless.

She pursed her lips, then relaxed. “The doctors tell me it will be a few more hours before they are done cleaning his system. They don’t want to wake him before that.” She looked at the fruit on her plate in annoyance. She’d barely touched it.

Tristan filled his glass from another pitcher and drained the amber liquid. He stood. “In that case, we’ll see you then.”

She stiffened. “Where do you think you are going?”

Tristan considered the question as Alex joined him. “I don’t know. To keep busy, I guess.” The two of them headed for the door.

Alex listened as commands were sent to it. He indicated it with a nod. Tristan shook his head. They reached the door, which didn’t open.

Tristan waited a few seconds. “This game we’ve been playing, Lady Prian, has been amusing. You don’t want to ruin it by making me think your offer was more of a demand.”

The door opened.

When the lift came into view, Alex spoke. “Do you think there’s a point at which she’d be angry enough not to care about the job she wants us to take?”

“If she does, we’ll leave.”

“By that point, she’s going to make it very interesting for us to reach the ship.”

Tristan nodded. “It would allow you to release that anger you feel toward her on her guards.” Alex forced himself not to react. “I told you, Alex, I have no interest in her.”

“That doesn’t mean you wouldn’t do it.”

That Tristan didn’t deny it both comforted Alex and annoyed him. They’d reached a point where Tristan no longer needlessly lied to him, but it didn’t mean it was the answer he wanted.

“You know...” Tristan smiled. “I think we can ensure things don’t escalate if we show her why it’s a bad idea to take us on. Find me a gymnasium with fighting equipment.”

Alex stopped at the terminal by the lift for the information, and the lift took them there directly.

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