

Tristan jumped with a roar, saw the terror on her face as he landed on her, his claws sinking in the flesh of her throat as they fell back. She gurgled a scream as he ripped it out. Then he ripped at her chest, turning the front of her lab coat into ribbons of bloody fabric, rending her flesh.

Sometimes, on the previous times he killed her, he ripped her organs out, throwing them around in his rage, but not this time. He didn't want to spend any more time on her now that she was unmoving; he wanted someone else to rend apart.

He stood and search around for anyone who'd forgotten the rules. Anyone who wanted to live had to stay outside the cage. His gaze traveled over where he'd clawed the doctor to death, and she was gone. The floor was clean again.

He didn't care. She'd be back. She always came back so he could kill her. Maybe she'd even come back soon; he wanted to kill her again to make her pay for the things she was forcing him to endure.

With many of them, he had reasons to want them dead: his father, his brother, people who had wronged him, stood in his way. But with others—

Motion. His head snapped in its direction. A human was edging around the cage. He looked familiar—short, brown hair, thick-boned, someone who enjoyed life. None of that mattered to Tristan. Nor the fact that he didn't want him dead. He was inside the cage, and that meant he had to die.

In no time he had the man on the floor, clawing at his back, but his desire to kill was lessening. His motions slowed until his arms rested at his side and the body under him faded away.

Sanity returned, and he looked at his hands. His clean hands. He balled them into fists and slammed them on the metal floor. He had told himself not to play their game. To resist the urges, not to kill. He wasn't some plaything for them to manipulate.

He was going to kill them. He was going to get out of the cage, find his brother and that doctor, and kill them. He looked at the spots where their bodies had lain. Again.

He would kill them, but not now. Now he needed to prepare for what was coming. The fear was coming. It would be here soon.

He looked around. If they brought it, it was always between the killing rage and the fear. When had been the last time? There had been so many cycles he didn't remember, but he felt hungry, so it should—

There.

He jumped on the tray of food and devoured it. He didn't pay attention to what was on it, he simply ate it all before the fear took him and he couldn't hold the tray anymore. He needed to keep his strength up. Justin wanted him alive so he could suffer, but Tristan would use that to marshal his strength until he could escape. Then he and Alex would...

Where was Alex?

He looked around. "Alex?" he called.

When was the last time Alex had visited him, offered him comfort? Held him. No no no, it had been too long.

"Alex!" He crossed the cage, not even a dozen steps from one side to the other. He searched the darkness beyond the bars. Sometimes Alex stood there, waiting until Tristan was ready for him.

He saw a form, indistinct in the distance— No, two of them. One was Justin, he could tell, just make out enough of his brown fur and the mocking smirk to know. The other... The other was human, held against Justin's body.

"Alex?" Could it be him? No, it couldn't be. Alex would never ally himself with his little brother. Maybe he was a prisoner?

"He's mine, do you hear me? Mine!" He tried to reach past his tether, to grab them, either one. Alex, to take him away, to keep him safe. Justin, to make him pay.

The human recoiled, and Justin put his arm around him protectively.

No, it couldn't be. Alex wouldn't fall for that. What if Justin had turned Alex? What if

the next time he saw the human, it would be to find out he was leaving for good?

“Don’t listen to that.”

Tristan spun. The other Samalian was back, and Tristan swiped. He didn’t feel the rage, but this was the one person he hadn’t killed yet, and he felt he could at least try.

The Samalian stepped out of reach.

“Why shouldn’t I listen?” Tristan growled. “You want me to be honest, you keep telling me to be truthful, well, that’s the truth, isn’t it?” He pointed to where the forms had been. Now, they were gone. Justin had taken Alex away. Alex had left with his little brother.

“Do you really believe he’d do that? After everything he went through to be with you?”

“No, he wouldn’t. He’s mine.” Tristan could feel himself growing lighter with the thought. Alex was his. And he was—

He looked at the tawny Samalian in horror.

“You want me to hope, that’s your plan, isn’t it? Mother always said none of you could be trusted. You take as easily as you give.” He looked at his hands. The hands he wanted to use to hold Alex again. “You’ll just rip him away from me if I hope. Just like before.”

He glared at the Samalian. “You work for him! You’re in league with my brother!” He threw himself at the Samalian, only to land in the dirt.

“Pathetic,” his father said. “What a disgrace you are.”

Tristan stood and spun. His father stood between him and the shack—which meant that behind him... He looked over his shoulder and there stood the cage, door opened, waiting for him. He took a step to the side.

“Don’t even think of moving,” his father warned. “You think you can avoid your punishment? After the way you failed.”

He’d failed? What had he been told to do? He looked around, trying to find any indication of the task. If he could find a clue, if he could work it out, he could finish the task, show his father he wasn’t a failure.

“I—” There was nothing. What had he been expected to do? How had he failed this time? “I tried,” he said, and even to his ear it sounded like an excuse. Tried? Survivors didn’t try, they accomplished. He’d never be a survivor, not like his father, or—

“Why can’t you be even a little like Justin? At least he succeeds at what I tell him to do.”

“How?” he pleaded. “How does he do it? Father, tell me, explain it to me and I’ll do it.”

His father grabbed him by the throat, lifted him. “Tell you? What kind of weakling are you that needs to be told what to do? Are you even too stupid to work out what’s expected of you?”

“I want to survive, Father! Please, give me another chance.”

“You think the universe is going to give you another chance? It’s going to crush you, and there’s nothing you can do about it because you’re such a weak, stupid boy.”

He flew back, hit the metal bars before he could ready himself, and the clang of the closing door made him tremble. He reached for the door, wrapped his hands around the bars to pull himself up. He reached through them. “Father, please? Let me out. I’ll try harder.”

His father shook his head in disappointment. “Maybe by the time you get yourself out of there, you’ll have learned something.” His expression said he didn’t believe it as he turned and vanished among the trees.

The lock, he had to unlock the door. It could be done. He’d seen Justin do it dozens of times. He always made it look so easy, like all he had to do was put a claw in and wriggle it around, but he couldn’t feel anything for his claw to work with. How? How was he supposed to do this?

“Father?” he called as he grabbed on to the bars and tried to shake the door open. He

would never be as smart as Justin. He would never get out of the cage. He wouldn't survive. He was a failure. He should just accept that.

He rested his head against the bars and found that they were cold, they vibrated slightly. The air had the tang of the recycler when it went through it too often. He opened his eyes and the bright light almost blinded him.

No, he couldn't be back here. Not again.

He went to move, but a hand clamped around his neck. He tried to pull away, but the man was stronger than him. He felt him move closer.

"I can't believe you couldn't even do that right," the man whispered in his ear. "Just what kind of bitch are you?"

"I'm sorry," Tristan heard himself say.

"What was that?"

"I'm sorry, I'll do better next time."

"Really? You think you deserve yet another chance? How many does that make now? Well? Tell me."

He tried to remember. How often had he failed? Too many, he couldn't keep track. Each time the Butcher had given him a chance to prove himself worthy of being kept alive.

"Just one more, please?"

The hand ran down his back and Tristan shuddered. He wanted to say no, but he had to survive, no matter the cost. He had to do whatever was needed to stay alive.

"And why will it be different this time?" the Butcher asked.

"I'll—I'll do whatever you want."

"You've said that before, but you always balk at the last moment, don't you? I always heard so great things about you, how strong and determined you were. How you weren't afraid of anything. But that isn't you, is it? I wonder who it could be that you stole the reputation from?"

No. He hadn't stolen anything. He'd earned it. He'd done what his father taught him, survived at all cost. This was all him, not—

His face hit the wall. "Well? Who did you steal it from?"

"It's me, sir. It's all me."

The Butcher sighed, and in it, the disappointment came that had haunted him his entire life. From his father, when he threw him out of the forest. From his brother, when he gave him a chance. From all the captains he'd worked for as they kicked him off their ship. And now from the Butcher of Kraven Klaw. Another person he'd failed to impress, and he'd done everything he knew.

"Please," he begged.

The Butcher pulled him away from the wall, and Tristan hoped he'd be given another chance to show he was worthy of being at his side.

Then Tristan was flying back, the "no", echoing in his ears as he passed the ship's open ramp and floated into space. He screamed, to be given another chance, not to be abandoned, but no words left his mouth; he didn't have air to scream, to plead. He would float into the vastness of the universe forever, never able to prove to anyone he wasn't a failure.

The metal was cold, even through his fur, and he pulled himself into a ball to try to stop from shivering. How could he fail them all? He wondered. How had it surprised him that Alex would pick Justin over him? How couldn't he? How could he have expected someone as wonderful as Alex to settle for a failure like him? Maybe if he stayed here and didn't do anything, he wouldn't disappoint anyone else.

"You haven't disappointed me."

"Go away," he told the tawny-furred Samalian. He pulled in on himself, tried to make himself as small as he felt, as he deserved to be. Maybe if he was small enough he'd

vanish, and people would forget all his failures.

“Those feelings aren’t real. It’s the drugs.”

“It doesn’t matter.” Nothing mattered except never failing again.

“Of course it does. Drugs are just chemicals inside you. You know you can fight those. You’ve done it before.”

“I tried to.”

“No, you did it. You need to remember that.”

“Why do you even care?” Had he whined? How much more pathetic could he be?

“Because a part of you hasn’t given up. A part of you needs you to keep fighting. It needs you to remember that no matter what, you always fight back.”

Tristan shook his head. “You’re not real.” There was no point in fighting back. All he’d get out of that was more pain, more failure.

“None of this is real. It’s the drugs.”

Tristan nodded, but just to make the Samalian stop. It was real; how he felt was the only real thing. All the victories he’d thought he’d had, those were the illusions. Justin’s accomplishments that he’d tried, and failed, to steal.

He’d wanted to be like his brother, better than him, but he never would be. He was weak. He had to dream about besting Justin because he’d never accomplish it in real life. And this was just one more failure at Justin’s hand. He just wished that, for once, his brother would simply kill him and let it all finally end.

The Samalian spoke, his tone insistent, but Tristan was done listening to him. It was easier to wallow in his misery than to listen to anything he had to say, to the hope he was trying to instill. One day, his brother would get bored with watching him and would end this.

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Time passed, he thought.

He wasn’t certain. He thought he’d slept, but he couldn’t recall when. Maybe he’d eaten? At least he remembered the tray with the food on it, though not what it had been, and his hunger never got too demanding.

He recognized this for the lucidity that occurred between the drug-induced dementia. Or at least he thought there were times he was lucid. It was all so jumbled. Maybe he was just imagining being lucid? Maybe this was another illusion concocted by the drugs.

He couldn’t know, and since he had nothing else to do, he planned. This was the torture his little brother had promised him, or had it been someone else? No, his brother had wanted him to know that he was out of control. That his life, his emotions, even his will, wasn’t his to control. Justin had finally found the one way to hurt Tristan at his core.

And for that, he would pay.

He thought there were five guards. That’s the number he heard, but how many of them were real? That didn’t matter. What did was that there were never more than five. And real or not, five he could take on and win. They were armed with Pisterons, though he didn’t know which models since the only time he’d examined one, it had cried in his hand and he’d ended up cradling it until it fell asleep. But so long as he didn’t wake them up, he would be okay.

The soft hiss of the door told him someone might be approaching, as did the soft click of claws on metal. If either was real.

“Open the door,” someone said. Someone in authority, power. Someone better than Tristan. No, that was the drugs talking. Someone had warned him about listening to them. They lied to him.

“Shouldn’t he be restrained, sir?” Tristan smiled. He could hear the inferiority in the

quivering of the voice.

“I said, open the fucking door, or do I need to do it myself and leave you in there with him?”

There was the clang of the cage; but he had suffered it so often by now he didn't react. The clicking of the claws came closer, stopped before him, and he saw the feet. Dark brown fur with a dusting of white, not tawny as he'd expected.

The Samalian crouched. “You look...” Justin hesitated. “I'll be honest, you look horrible, Brother. Being here isn't doing you any good, but you're eating, and you've managed to stay in shape. I have to say I'm surprised at that. She said you'd wither away under all the emotional torment, but I've been watching you fight. You can be scary.”

“What have you done to him?” He hadn't planned on saying anything. He usually stayed silent and let his brother rant on, but this felt different, and the question simply came.

“Done to whom?” Justin asked, curiosity in his voice instead of mockery.

Tristan opened his eyes, looked up at his brother. He was right there, within reach. All he had to do was grab him and he could break his neck. But how would he get his answer with his brother dead?

“Alex. Please, tell me that he's okay. Justin, tell me you're at least keeping him safe.”

His brother canted his head. “Who is Alex?”

Tristan closed his eyes. No. Not this time. He wasn't going to play his brother's games. The rage wasn't there yet, but he didn't care. He put his hands under himself.

“Sir!” someone called. Fear in her voice.

Tristan looked up to glare at his brother, but he'd moved back. No fear on his face, but concern. “Where is he? Why have you kept him from me? He has never done anything to you.” Tristan was standing and forcing himself to walk forward.

“I'm afraid you are delusional, Tristan. I've heard you say the name, but I don't know who that is.” He was finding this amusing. He was mocking him.

“Liar!” His brother took a step back, even if Tristan was at the end of his tether. “You used to let him come with you. You've mocked how I feel about him often enough. I know you took him from the house like you did me. Tell me how he is!”

Justin's eyes lit up. “He was in the house?”

“Yes! Please, Justin. I'm the one who hurt you. Let him go.”

Justin leaned in, smiling. “Tristan, dear brother. If there was anyone else in the house, they are dead. My people were quite thorough.”

“No, you're lying.” The sound of something breaking resounded around them, but Justin didn't react to it. “He's been here, with you. You have him, in his own cage. I've seen him.” The sound came again, and this time the metal between Tristan's feet broke with it.

“Tristan,” Justin said in a conspiratorial whisper, “you've been hallucinating. You've been very entertaining, but whatever that's had you fighting, crying, and cowering, it wasn't real. I'm proud of you, Brother. Isabel said you would have broken long before this, but I knew you'd hold out. We're made of tougher stuff than those humans think, you and I.”

The cracking sound continued, and more cracks appeared in the floor. “No, it can't be true. He was here. Alex has to be alive.”

“No, Tristan. It was just wishful thinking on your part.”

The cracks covered the floor and were spreading up the wall.

He remembered the pain in Alex's eyes as he screamed his hate for his human. Alex had walked away then, so he could have been outside, but no, he knew his human. Alex wouldn't have given up on him. He'd have prepared a meal for them to eat together.

He felt the impact of the floor on his knees. His arms were wrapped around himself. “He can't be dead, what am I...” Justin's face came into view as he crouched, and Tristan

tried to find the words to convey his pain.

Justin searched his face. “You... You actually care for him?” He burst out laughing. “And you have the gall to bitch about me never listening to father? What was his first lesson? Caring about anything or anyone only causes pain.” He stood, chuckling. “Oh, I wish I’d known that before. Trust me, I’d have made sure they took him too. I’d heard you were working with a human; was that him? But I figured you were just using him, you know, like normal. But you care about him? I’ll admit, that thought never crossed my mind. Father would be so disappointed in you for a change. You know, I really don’t care for males like you do, but I think that just for you, I’d have forced myself to take him, just to see your reaction as I brought him pleasure. Who knows, maybe he would have preferred me over—”

Justin squawked as Tristan’s hand closed on his shirt’s collar. He’d wanted to grab his neck, but the bracelet had pulled back, since it was past the tether’s end.

“You lay one finger on him, and I’m going to cut it off. You get your dick close to him, and I’m going to rip it out and shove it down your throat.”

Justin grabbed at his hands, sunk his claws in, but Tristan ignored the pain. His brother’s eyes were finally filled with fear, and that brought a smile to his face. It was good that his little brother finally remembered who, of the two of them, always emerged victorious in their constant battles.

“The wall! You idiots, turn the fucking wall on!”

He flew back, part of the collar ripping off Justin’s shirt, pulling him forward, sprawling him out onto the floor. Tristan hit the wall as his brother got to his feet and ran out of the cage, and then the room.

The sense of victory left him as the wall released him. He fell to the floor and crumpled, alone.

Without Alex waiting for him, what was the point of escaping?