

Chapter 44

The woman went limp in his arms and ceased to matter. He let her go, and for once managed to hang on to his knife. He was already turning, responding to the flick of her eyes and the quiet shuffling behind him.

He expected to block an arm and have a knife close to his face. What he saw instead was a polycarbon stick held by a lanky man. The man backed away and the tip of the stick grazed Alex's arm, sparking and giving him a light jolt.

It brought memories back. Memories of pain inflicted by hands and feet and by such a stick. Memories of the man, standing over him, touching him with the stick. Of the man, hand in the air, a woman before him, a cheek red from the impact.

Of a promise Alex had made.

The man thrust the stick at him. Alex dropped a knife to grab the hand holding it. Three quick slashes on that arm, cutting armored cloth and ligament, and he was the only one holding the stick. He flicked it in the air, caught it with the tip pointing at the man, and planted it in his stomach.

The flash of light was bright, the spark sounding like an explosion. The man's scream was exquisite as he flew away. Alex followed him, cutting down the men who thought they could hurt him now he only had one knife.

When he reached the man, he was still on the floor. His chest still moved up and down, so he still mattered. Alex touched the stick to his chest. The man jerked, but didn't scream. Alex's laughter faltered for a moment. He discarded the stick and flicked a knife in the man's throat.

He grabbed two new knives and waited, listened. The room had grown silent. Movement in the distance, but no threat. His laughter began to fade, then hitched as he smiled. Light steps behind him. Someone was trying to sneak up on him.

He spun and slashed. She screamed and backed up. He followed her. He slashed, but she was light on her feet. He cut into the white coat she wore, felt no resistance from it. Unlike the others she didn't try to attack, focusing solely on staying out of his reach. That was fine; Alex had time. Nothing but that.

A voice resounded, deep, full of authority, but far. Not a threat, but coming closer. Once he dealt with the woman, he'd deal with the voice.

He laughed and slashed, counting her coming death by the number of steps she could still take. By the time her back hit the wall, her coat was in tatters. She yelped in surprise. Her eyes grew wide, and it turned into a scream as she raised her hands in an attempt to keep death from reaching her.

His knife was moving down when he heard the clicking behind him. He spun before it bit into her flesh and came slashing up at the new threat. It didn't bite into that flesh either.

The form was large, muscular, male, and black. He grabbed Alex arm's and flung him away. Alex crashed down, rolled, and was up, pulling a knife to replace the one he'd lost in the flight. This would be a good

fight.

He laughed as he ran at the man. He slashed, missed, slashed again, was blocked. The man's mouth moved and Alex noted it was strangely formed. Not like the others he'd fought. The sounds that came from it weren't screams, so were meaningless.

They fell into the fight, the motions familiar to Alex. The man always gave him good fights. He pushed, the man pushed back. He felt the knife bite into flesh, but the man didn't scream. He never screamed, no matter how often his knife bit into him.

The sense that there was something wrong with the fight crept in slowly, with each time his knife cut the man, stabbed him. The flow of it was wrong. This had gone on too long. He should be feeling pain by now. Every other one of his opponents had managed to hurt him at least a little, and this one was much better. He always hurt him.

They'd fought this fight before.

Many times.

He wouldn't win.

Alex's laughter diminished as too many wrong things crowded his mind. Why wouldn't he win? He always won.

No, not always. There was one person he never beat: the one he was fighting right now. Except if this was that fight, it should be over already, with Alex on his back, not with him pressing the man against the wall, about to cut his—

"Alex. Stop, please." The anguish registered first and stopped him. It was wrong. It wasn't a tone this man used, not at Alex. The words registered second.

Alex's laughter died.

Things came into focus. The man wasn't human. The knife vibrated slightly in his hand, pressed at Tristan's throat. The Samalian's eyes were filled with fear, pain, desperation.

Alex let go of the knife and hurried to back away. "I—" How? This couldn't have happened. There was no way he could best Tristan. He wasn't allowed. Why had Tristan let his happened? Why hadn't Tristan stopped him?

He wanted to apologize, but the words wouldn't come. He couldn't look away from those deep brown eyes. He couldn't keep himself from imagining them going flat as the life flowed out of them.

Why didn't he see anger in them? He'd disobeyed him. Those sounds Tristan had made, they had meanings now. They were orders for him to stop, the tone growing more and more desperate.

Alex always obeyed Tristan. It didn't matter what state he was in. Tristan never let him disobey.

The look in the eyes registered: fear.

Tristan was looking at him with fear, afraid of Alex. How could that be? Tristan was never afraid. Alex didn't want him to be afraid. He took a step forward and Tristan jerked back, recoiled.

Alex froze. What was going on?

He needed to explain. Alex hadn't betrayed Tristan, he never would. Whatever this was, whatever had happened, it was an aberration. Alex would do anything to comfort Tristan.

Alex opened his mouth, but pain erupted at the back of his head. His reaction was instant, spinning as he grabbed a knife. He caught sight of someone, a tattered white coat, but the world kept spinning and his hand wouldn't close on the hilt.

Then it all went black.

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