

Chapter 04

Tristan brushed the dust off his fur as the ringing in his ears subsided. He knelt by the old man and checked him again. No change; the explosion hadn't registered for him.

Tristan stood and faced Alex. "Well?"

Alex leaned into the lift's opening and looked down. "I can't see anything, but all I hear are falling rocks. I'd say that grenade brought down half the ceiling. They're all dead.

"And?" Tristan asked. Alex's back was covered with burns and blood.

Alex turned and gave him a quizzical look. "And what?"

"You just killed close to a hundred people with that grenade. How do you feel about it?"

"What does it matter?" His tone was controlled, but Tristan saw the emotions in his eyes. Regret, annoyance, some anger, but they were muted.

He was human and lacked the training Tristan had gotten growing up. This might be the best he could hope for. Still, he'd done what he'd been told, what he had to. He'd survived, and he wasn't hating himself for it. Those were the important things.

He looked around the room at the bodies, at the blood. Most had died from knife wounds, Alex's preferred weapon. Only two had been shot: the woman who'd been interested in him, and a man by the exit. Tristan shook his head in a mix of annoyance and pride. He'd tried to break Alex out of depending on his knives when he'd decided to keep him alive. Knives had their uses, but they shouldn't be the first weapon he reached for.

He should be killing his opponents at a distance, before they even knew they were under attack. A good gun, in skilled hands, could have taken down all seven of the people in this room before they'd had time to react.

But Alex's skill with knives was...impressive. Time and time again Tristan had watched him take down groups that should have destroyed him. Not only was he a master with the blades, but he had an ability to avoid getting hit, and when he couldn't, to endure the pain.

If Tristan had believed in the gods of his world, he could think this human was protected by them. He shouldn't have doubted him.

"What?" Alex asked.

"I don't like your face." It was a lie. He didn't care about it one way or another, but it was credible. And it meant he didn't have to mention what seeing Alex among the carnage he'd wrought, covered in his enemy's blood, made Tristan feel. "How is the cleaning coming along?"

Alex went back to the computer controls, a large case with only one screen and a control board that seemed to be missing half the command keys.

"I accessed the database before wiping it, to make sure. They didn't enter you in it because they never

believed my story.”

Tristan raised an eyebrow.

“The Sayatoga still has you as their prisoner, and the warden thought that more believable than me bringing you here in shackles.”

Tristan smirked. “Like a young bounty hunter could ever capture me. Did they believe you were who you claimed to be?”

Alex shrugged. “The warden didn’t; he saw through this face. Next time we need to use someone better.” He indicated canisters by the entrance. “I brought the most powerful DNA dissolver I could find. There won’t be any evidence we were here once I’ve sprayed that everywhere, and not much left of them either.” He motioned to the bodies.

“When you’re done, join me in our ship. I’m going to make sure our cargo is comfortable.

“I already put the medical kit by the cryo bed, in case he needs anything.

Tristan frowned.

“When I went back to get the dissolver, I thought there was a chance he’d be critical. I didn’t want you to waste time getting the kit.”

He didn’t like that Alex had spent extra time away from here. He had no way of knowing how long it would have taken Tristan to climb up, or for the prisoners to follow behind him. But clearly Alex had hurried, and the medical kit could come in handy. He still had this habit of thinking about the well-being of others, even an unconscious old man.

He picked up his quarry and carried him through the long tunnel that led to the hangar. It was dark, carved out of the rock itself, and other than the support beams to ensure it didn’t collapse, nothing had been done to make it look like anything other than a mine. It was so old that Tristan could tell that people had done the mining instead of machines. It was too irregular, and the tools had left marks in the rock.

The hangar was another cavern, this one natural, as far as he could tell; the only reshaping had been to level the floor. Three ships were there, two small ones barely able to house the seven people working here among them, and his ship.

It was a converted leisure yacht that could house two full families. It had belonged to a bounty hunter that hadn’t cared SpaceGov had annulled the bounty for the kidnapping. Tristan had kept the ship, spent the time needed to fix it up, upgraded the weapons the bounty hunter had installed, and decided that now that Alex was traveling with him, something more spacious made sense. It also had a more recent computer, and he’d supervised Alex as he brought it under Tristan’s control.

He laid the old man on the ramp, checked him again to make sure he wasn’t in danger of dying, and inspected his ship. He hadn’t been able to lock it as he preferred since part of the plan involved Alex getting things from it, but for the short amount of time they’d been here, and with Alex confirming no one had left the reception area, he was confident he could wait to secure the inside until they’d taken off.

His inspection confirmed nothing had been added to his ship. Everyone might have been in the room, but even a place as ancient as this one could have remote bots programmed to add trackers to ships.

He picked up the man and entered. He passed the locker holding his and Alex’s EVA suits, the oxygen tanks, the lounge, and kitchen to reach the first of the five rooms. It was the only unused one; Alex had suggested keeping it in case they had passengers, and since he had no use for it, Tristan hadn’t objected.

He laid the old man on the bed and took the portable scanner from the kit at the foot of it. The man was in bad shape—malnourished, failing immune system, internal infections. He wouldn’t have lasted much longer here. The immune-booster had stabilized him, but that wouldn’t save him. He needed a full body flush, half his organs regrown, and possibly to get his mind rewired. Nothing Tristan could do here. One of the few things this ship didn’t have was a medical table. The previous owner had removed it to make space for more capacitors for the weapon system, and Tristan hadn’t had a chance to get a new one installed; he’d been taking Alex on mission after mission, honing his new weapon.

Fortunately for the old man, what Tristan had made sure was on the ship was a field cryo system, so he didn’t have to worry about deteriorating while they traveled. He activated the system and rods raised out of the corners of the bed. There was a flash of blueish static, and then the old man was as still as death. Once out of it, he’d be their client’s responsibility.

He put the scanner back in the pack and stored that back in its locker. From another locker he took what he needed, and went around placing explosives on the other ships. He set them by the engines, computer core, power generator, sensor array, and the cockpit. He didn’t want anyone who might have survived the grenade to make it off this planet.

When he returned to his ship, he heard the shower going in Alex’s room. The yacht was luxurious

enough to have a water system, and Alex enjoyed it. He entered the room, took off his pants, and entered the shower. The water was pleasantly cold.

Alex startled, but before he could strike, Tristan was holding his arms. He didn't say anything, only held Alex against him and let him feel his intention.

Alex relaxed and Tristan used him.

That was all he did. Use him. Tristan wasn't as rough as he'd been at the start of this arrangement, because he didn't have to be anymore. He'd learned not to wait too long, not wait until his desire for the human eroded his control. Now as soon as he felt the desire, he used the human.

He could go months before he needed to do so. Tristan wasn't driven by a need to satisfy such urges, and he'd satisfied them only a few weeks ago, but seeing Alex standing among the bodies, covered in their blood, had stirred something in him.

Yes, that was the only reason he did this.

The last time had been a particularly intense training session, where he'd pushed Alex to his limits and then fought the monster he became. Tristan had taken him there, still out of control. Alex had come back to himself moaning and begging for more.

The time before was because they'd almost died in a trap laid by their target. The adrenaline had made it impossible for Tristan to stop himself. He'd needed release, and Alex had been there. That moment of lost control had allowed the target to make it off-planet, but Tristan hadn't cared. They'd eventually caught up to him and gotten paid.

He held Alex, but that was just to keep him in place while he used him. He didn't see to Alex's pleasure, although his hands did move over Alex's toned chest and abs. Worrying about his partner's pleasure was the mark of someone who cared, and Tristan didn't care about Alex. He was a tool, a weapon, and Tristan used him as he saw fit.

The human's moans and groans did something to Tristan, making him go faster, harder. Alex enjoyed it this way. Tristan learned what Alex liked as a way of controlling him. Making him react this way, doing this and eliciting pleasure from Alex, demonstrating his control over him in such a primal way, made this act that much more enjoyable.

Tristan didn't care that Alex enjoyed it, only that he was the one causing the reaction.

When his climax came, Tristan held on to Alex tightly, letting the shudders pass. He continued holding Alex afterward as control returned. When Tristan trusted his body to obey him, he left the human there and dried himself before putting his pants back on and getting back to work.

Tristan was almost done checking the inside of the ship for any signs of tampering when Alex exited the shower room. He always stayed in longer after Tristan used him; it took longer for Alex to regain control of himself than it did Tristan.

Alex sat at the communication and computer board, speaking in a low voice. Tristan finished the checks before taking the pilot's seat and getting the ship ready for takeoff.

He didn't supervise Alex's work. Alex had shown he could be trusted to do exactly and only what Tristan instructed him to, and in return, six subjective months ago, Tristan had demonstrated his trust in Alex by replacing those earpieces he could, and had, lost at times with an implant.

Now Alex's ability to coerce computers couldn't be taken away from him, not even by Tristan.

"The system's clean," Alex said. "No one contacted it while we were out, no malicious programs are in it."

"Will the hangar door open? Or do I need to blow it?"

"It's on its own system, modern enough for ships to talk to it. It'll open."

Tristan sent the instruction to the hangar door, and it obeyed. He sent another command, and the ships exploded as he took off.

Tristan flew past the door in the bloom of the explosion, angled the ship up and quickly enough the rocky ball that housed Down Below, a now-defunct prison, shrunk until it vanished.

"Let our client know we have the package and are on our way to the rendezvous."

Alex set to work as Tristan entered the coordinates, and smiled to himself as the memory of how he'd made Alex moan bubbled up to the surface.

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