

## Chapter 49

Tristan closed his eyes and let the breath out. The job was finally done.

Then why didn't he feel his usual satisfaction?

It was because while the client's job was done, his wasn't. There was one thing he still needed to deal with.

Alex.

He wouldn't feel free, be satisfied, while he was still alive. All he needed to do was turn and slash his throat. He wasn't infected anymore; that would be enough to kill him.

Alex took a step back and his breathing sped up, but no knives were unsheathed. Tristan was familiar with that sound. He'd trained himself to listen for it since Alex entered his life. Disrupted it. Alex was expecting the attack, and even though he'd said he would submit to anything Tristan did, his survival instinct had kicked in. Alex was ready to die, but he didn't want to, even at Tristan's hands.

It didn't matter. Tristan could kill him...couldn't he?

The memory of their last fight came back. The ferocity in Alex's attack, the fear Tristan felt. He had never been afraid of Alex before, but something had changed, and it had left him vulnerable. A head-on fight might not be the best idea.

He forced his body to relax, and when he turned, everything about him said that things were fine. Alex was tense, hand near one of the multiple knives he'd accumulated. Of course, he knew Tristan too well to be fooled.

"The bridge," Tristan said with a motion for him to lead the way. Alex hesitated. No one but Tristan would have noticed it, but it was there, the fear of what would happen if he turned his back. If he made himself vulnerable.

Alex turned his back on him.

Now, Tristan told himself. *Grab his neck, smash his head against the wall until it caves in. No, break his neck. Wrap your hands around it and squeeze until you feel the bones break. Turn him into a lifeless doll. No, rip his limbs out and watch him bleed out.*

Alex was already at the intersection, and Tristan had to hurry to catch up to him. He could space Alex. That would be slow, and let the human reflect on the stupidity of taking on Tristan, thinking he could win.

The lift opened, and they stepped in.

He could reach for one of Alex's knives, plant it in his heart. Take each and every one of them, bury them in the human. In his back, his side, in those beautiful gray eyes.

He growled and Alex glanced at him, but didn't move.

Why was he wasting his time thinking of ways to kill him, instead of doing it? The doors slid open and Alex took the lead without being prompted. He was at ease. Not ready to fight, but accepting what was

coming.

*Good*, Tristan thought as he followed Alex, watching his back, the way the jacket moved, imagining the muscle under them, the smooth flesh. The way his claw could rend it, make him bleed. He told himself to do it. He wanted to grab the human, throw him to the floor, break every bone.

But his body didn't obey him.

Why wouldn't it obey him?

The answer came to him when they entered the bridge, and it was so obvious Tristan couldn't understand why it had escaped him. Of course, he couldn't kill Alex yet; he still didn't know how he'd modified the computer, so only he had control of it.

He could have undone his work. But he'd also worked out, subconsciously, that this would go much faster if he continued using Alex. Afterward, Tristan could end him. He hated that a part of Alex hadn't been under his control. If his subconscious could act against him, even with good reason, when might it act without a good one?

"I need navigation," he said. He'd deal with it later. For now, he needed to find a place to get rid of the ship and everyone on it.

"You have it."

He brought up the local area. They were still in the Bramolian system. What could he use here to obliterate this ship? Were there any industries in the system with something hot enough to break it down to component atoms?

He shook his head. No, of course not. But why was he looking to that when there was a star just waiting to be used? Because he couldn't use it, not this one. The local government had sensors around it, to study it, make sure it was generating the amount of light they needed. It would detect an incoming ship, and in their stupidity, they'd do everything they could to save it.

He needed to find a star no one would pay attention to. It meant more than a lack of population; it had to be a dead system, or as close to one as he could find. Or an empty one. He searched through the database, finding it more difficult than he'd expected. If a system was of no interest, it wasn't noted there.

He switched to scientific surveys; they were always going places they had no business going, just to see what was there. Exploring the unknown.

There he found plenty of stars with nothing to interest the corporations or SpaceGov, at least not yet. Eventually someone would decide they needed the raw material in the stars themselves and mine that, but until then, no one was paying attention.

The closest was an objective year away, based on how fast this ship could go and on a trajectory that, fortunately, didn't go close to any established travel lanes. A random ship could still come across it—there were plenty of people who made sure not to use the established lanes—but space was vast, and Tristan knew tricks to make even this large of a ship more difficult to find.

The obstacle was the distance. A year was too long. He brought up sensors, and all over the ship life was coming back. No matter what he did, with enough time, someone could find a way to regain control, change course, land on a planet, and infect everyone. The only way to make sure the ship was tamper-proof was to kill it completely, murder the processor, dump the fuel, and drain all the energy, but if he did that, there would be no way to ensure the ship stayed on course. Gravity was subtle, but at this distance, it took little to miss even a target as large as a star.

He'd have to stay on board, constantly killing anyone who woke up. No, he could leave Alex here. Let him deal with it, and leave at the last minute, ensuring no one had time to do anything.

But would Alex do it? He'd stay when Tristan told him to, but how long until killing the same people over and over lost its appeal? Would Alex stay without Tristan to keep him in line?

He slammed a hand on the board. There were days he hated how time was outside his control. Or was it? Cruise ships went out for long periods of times. The appeal for passengers was to experience that time, but how sensible was it for their possessions to also suffer the effects?

He brought up the ship's schematics, found the cargo hold—holds, this ship had been luxurious enough to have different classes of holds. He smiled. And one of them was equipped with a cryofield.

The field would fail as the heat of the star fried the systems, but—he looked up the manufacturer—the tolerance levels meant that by then, it would be too late for them to do anything other than cook.

He set the course, then he and Alex went through the ship, killing everyone again one last time and bringing the bodies to the hold. He let his anger loose on those who were able to provide him with some challenge. Too little, but it gave him an outlet until he could end Alex.

Once he'd confirmed everyone was in the hold, even those that had been cut to pieces, he turned the

field on.

“Can you kill the core processor and leave navigation functional?”

Alex shook his head. “It’s needed for everything to run. I can lock it up tighter than it already is and make it near impossible for anyone to work out which terminal is the one that can access it.”

“Near impossible?”

“I can’t disconnect all the terminals. The one I’ll use has to stay connected, but I can wrap it in enough obfuscating programs that the only one here who has a chance of finding it is Katherine’s coercionist. The two others are nowhere near as good as they’d have to be.”

Tristan nodded. The name of that woman reminded him he’d seen Alex drop her in the hold. “Go do it.”

Alex left without hesitation. He’d grown comfortable again with their relationship. Good, it meant he wouldn’t expect the killing blow when it came.

He waited until Alex’s steps vanished in the distance and turned the field off. He found the woman and rolled her on her back with a foot. She had a knife through the heart. Alex hadn’t wanted her to wake and cause him any more problem.

Tristan snarled at her. She’d tortured Alex. Used him, made him complicit in tracking Tristan down. He wanted her to be alive so he could make her pay for what she’d done to him.

He growled and walked away. Not Alex’s life. She’d made *his* life difficult, that was why she should suffer. He came back to the body and yanked the knife out. The wound started closing.

*There*, he thought as he left the hold. *Let her deal with not being able to escape her fate.* He activated the field.

He went to engineering to get tools, and then traveled the ship, disabling every escape pod but one, destroying their emergency beacons. Working alone for days on end brought him back peace and reinforced his decision to be rid of Alex and focus only on his research from now on.

He disconnected the ship’s tag, keeping it powered, and secured it in the one remaining pod, launching it on a course to the edge of the universe. He’d prefer destroying the tag, but there was a chance someone at SpaceGov would notice and send a team to find out what happened.

The one time he saw Alex, at a terminal, lost in coercion, the desire for him had been so strong Tristan had almost done all the things his body wanted to him. He screamed, found a shower, made it hotter than he could stand, and forced himself under it.

It took too long to regain control of himself, and he hated Alex for doing that to him. Once he was back in control, he went to the bridge and reduced the energy output as much as such a ship could take. Less energy meant fewer chances a stray scan would detect it. He shut down the communications system, then went outside and physically destroyed every antenna.

Back inside, he made sure he no longer needed the bridge’s control for anything and destroyed them. He threw himself into it, ripping every panel out, every wire, circuits and conduits. When he was done, he was panting and shaking, and he didn’t know if it was because he’d wanted it to be Alex he was ripping apart, or because he hadn’t wanted to think of doing that to him.

He turned, and Alex was in the doorway, watching him with a blank expression.

“What?” Tristan yelled, pushing the anger to mask the ache, the fear of what Alex was doing to him. *Soon*, he told himself, *far too soon, it would be over and he’d be alone again.*

“I’m done,” Alex replied. “I’ve locked the core in a box so small that it’ll go insane within a week. If anyone manages to find it, they’re not going to be able to deal with what’s going to be there.”

“If?” Tristan growled.

Alex sighed. “You, more than anyone, knows how things don’t always go the way we plan, okay? It’s locked, and the only terminal that can access it is in one of the passenger rooms. It’s not even powerful enough to do serious coercing, so no one should think of looking there, and it’s camouflaged within the system. But luck could be on their side. Not that it’s going to help them. If they open the box, the processor is going to go murderous on them.”

“Destroy the ship?” if the idiot had set up a situation that could cause the virus to—

“Of course not. I remember enough biology to know it’s possible for viruses to survive in space. I’ve taken away anything that could let it do that. It can void the ship, that’s about it. Anyway, it isn’t like they’re going to be getting out of that cryofield from inside it.”

Tristan felt better knowing Alex had kept that in mind. He buried the pride that threatened to surface. “Are you sure you’re done?”

"I am."

*Then you're staying*, Tristan wanted to say. "Then we're leaving." He headed for the merc's ship.

Without being told to, Alex sat at the communication board while Tristan opened panels and searched for any traps left there. He found a few simple ones, trip-switches set to overload specific conduits if the ship wasn't powered up in a specific way. He bypassed them; he'd remove them completely when he was home.

He put the last of the panels back on and found Alex looking at the chairs against the wall, grimacing. "Fluid-replacement systems, I hate those."

"I don't care," Tristan said, walking by him and doing all he could to ignore the human's smell.

"The system's clean and obedient."

"Fine, go under cryo." Tristan entered the command to close the hatch, then deactivated the magnetic lock. With a slight thruster push they moved away from the cruise ship.

He turned and stared as Alex took off his shirt. He watched the muscles move on his back when he threw it over the other chair, where his jacket already rested. He licked his lips as Alex bent down and took off his boots. When he took off his pants, Tristan took a step forward before catching himself, before burying the desire so deep it would never resurface.

"What do you think you're doing?" he snarled.

Alex turned, and Tristan's desire broke out of its prison. He wanted him so badly he shook.

Alex took a step back and raised his hands. "I'm not implying anything. I know better." He didn't cover himself and he wanted Tristan too; the smell and sight made that clear.

"Then why?" His voice was almost only growl, fighting against himself to stay still.

"It's the fluid system. I deal with it better when I'm not wearing anything."

"I'm supposed to believe that?"

Alex eyes never left his. "I know, it makes no sense. I talked with a couple of doctors about it, and they say it's in my head, but it still real enough for me. If I wear anything more than a towel, I'm a mess when I come out of it."

"You think it matters?"

Alex snorted. "I know you're going to be pissed when we get back and I can't do anything to help with shutting the ship down. The way your temper's been flaring, I'd rather avoid being hit if I can control it."

He kept his gaze locked with Alex's, trying to make himself do anything other than what he wanted. He could see himself slamming Alex against the wall, taking him there. He could hear Alex moan. Smell how badly he wanted it.

No, it wasn't only Alex he smelled.

"Fine," he snarled, and made himself turn his back on Alex. If the human had broken their gaze and looked down, he'd have seen through Tristan's barely existing mask. He looked at the controls, sent the message to the client with the location where she could find the quarry. After considering it, he added instructions on what to do with the biochemist. He finished as he heard the click of the clasp going around Alex's bicep. The beeping and whirling of the fluid-replacement system turning on.

Finally. It was happening. Alex would be out of his life. The beep of the transfer being complete came, and Tristan waited. He waited to feel relief, for control to come back. But all that came to him were visions of him and Alex on the floor, moving against each other.

He whirled on the still Alex and roared. "I don't want you!"

His erection called him a liar, and the universe laughed.

"You will not win!" he yelled at the ceiling. "He's powerless, I will kill him."

He went to Alex, claws out. Stood before him. The human looked peaceful, sleeping, except for the erection. Tristan remembered it, from so long ago, when he'd acted at caring for what the human wanted. He remembered the pleasure he'd brought him.

"I don't want that. Do you hear me, Alex?" He raised his head to look at the ceiling. "I don't want him!"

He placed his fingers against Alex's neck, caressed the smooth skin. One quick jerk of the hand and the vein would open. Alex would die and not even know it. It took so little pressure for his claws to pierce human skin. For them to cut a throat open. He'd done it often. Humans never seemed to think about that vulnerability, even mercs who knew how easy it was to kill.

He moved his fingers, but his claws were sheathed. They moved down to Alex's chest, covered with scars, but still smooth. Scars that proved Alex's determination to live. Scars that made Tristan proud of the work they'd done together. Of how they'd fought. Scars that made him want even more.

Tristan could see himself doing so many things to this human. Things they would enjoy. Things that would bind them tighter. "There is no 'us'. You are mine. You live because I let you. And I am done letting you." He continued caressing Alex's chest. Watching his face.

His vision blurred, and he blinked. He felt wetness fall down his face. He touched it and before he could even question why, he realized what this was. He backed away from Alex in horror.

He did not cry; his father had beaten the reflex out of him. Only when he wore a mask did he cry. Crying was a tool he used to control others, just like every other emotion. He wasn't wearing a mask now, so he couldn't be crying, right? He certainly couldn't be crying because of that human.

He eyed the armband. He could rip it out. Alex might wake, but the process would be irreversible, and he would die. He took a step, tried to take another, but couldn't. He tried to extend a hand toward it, but he couldn't either. It was like a field was keeping him away from Alex, protecting the human from him.

With a scream, he punched the wall, leaving a bloody dent in it. He was Tristan. He was always in control. He controlled everyone around him, and himself.

"I am in control!"

He ripped the chair next to Alex out of the wall, causing sparks and cryo-fluid to spill. He wielded it like a club and tried to swing it at the human's head, and he couldn't. With a cry of anguish, he threw it at the floor.

"You will not beat me!" He ripped another chair, and another one. Each time he tried to use them against Alex, and each time he froze in the middle of the motion, his body defying the order he'd given it.

When he dropped to his knees in front of Alex, tears flowing freely from his eyes, and more than half the chairs were lying on the floor, broken to pieces. The wall around Alex was covered in dents, but none came close to the human.

Tristan looked up at him, barely able to speak through his sobbing. "What have you done to me?"

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