

Chapter 42

Tristan roared. Released the anger with punches, claws, his enemy's own limbs as he killed them. He needed to hurt someone—no, *him*. He wanted to hurt *him* for what he was doing to him. But any time he thought about *him*, worries assaulted him. Fear that he'd get hurt. *He* wasn't infected, so *he* could even die.

Tristan wanted him to die. He wanted to turn and see his broken body among the dead ones. He was terrified of turning and seeing exactly that.

He took out his rage on the men between him and his quarry. Grabbed one by the neck, used him to bludgeon another one until they both died.

He felt the impact, shots and knives, but ignored them. He would heal. He would heal everything the universe threw at him, right until the point where the virus that protected him would kill him.

He found a gun and fired at everyone. He would not let the universe win. It would pay for even considering it had a chance to kill him.

He saw his quarry, edging toward the door. Tristan fired at him, missed because of the man who tackled him, but his quarry was now moving away from the door. He placed the gun against the man's head as they fell and fired. He landed on his back and rolled, getting to his feet.

His quarry was scared. Good, he should be. All this was that man's fault. He should have done what anyone with money did: hired a merc to exterminate the people who had hurt him. Hired Tristan to do that job. But because he hadn't, because he'd infected him, he'd forced Tristan to make a choice, and that choice has been wrong.

The antidote was for him, not Alex.

His quarry was lucky the job required him to be returned alive. Tristan was lucky that the job didn't specify in what state.

He was going to make that man pay.

Men came between him and his quarry. They died.

With no one between the two of them, Tristan aimed at his quarry's head, reconsidered, and went for his arm. Did the virus regrow limbs?

Someone came at him fast, and he repositioned himself. Before he could fire, a hand was on his wrist. Skin, the pale-green of a sick human. The hand twisted, and Tristan felt the bone break. His gun clattered to the floor as he shoved the other alien away. His face was the same sick-human color. The features were just wrong enough no one would assume he was a sick human.

He ignored the pain as his wrist realigned itself. His quarry wore an expression of surprise at being saved. Not one of his then.

"You killed him." The voice was a low hiss with a slight distortion most wouldn't notice. "I am going to make you pay."

Tristan walked to sick-green man and punched him. Only, the sick-green man wasn't where he'd been. A hand on his shoulder, a shove forward, and intense pain. He spun, and more pain as his arm dangled. The man didn't move, only looked at him with a grim expression.

Tristan grabbed his shoulder and wrenched it back in place.

"I will hurt you," the man said. "I will make you feel the pain you forced me to feel when you took Jurran from me."

The name meant nothing to Tristan. He launched himself at the man, saw him move before Tristan was even close, as if he knew what was about to happen. Tristan changed tactics to claw the man in passing, but he moved out of the way from that too.

A foot hit him in the side before he landed. He felt ribs crack. He landed badly and his arm broke under him. He pushed the pain away and got to his feet. There was a stab of pain in his side, and then he was fine. "I am going to hurt you," Tristan growled, "and then I am going to kill you too."

He ran at the man, keeping his thoughts blank. Not planning his moves ahead. He extended his arm at the last moment, but the man had still gotten out of the way before he'd gotten there. Not a mind-reading species. He turned to face him.

"You can't kill me."

Tristan growled, ran, crouched to grab the gun, and fired. The man dodged the shots, approaching. Moving an instant before Tristan pressed the trigger. A punch in his chest sent Tristan staggering back, trying to breathe.

"You can't kill anyone on this ship," the man said. "It must infuriate a killer like you. Yes, I've figured it out. Even the dead heal."

Tristan gasp and grinned. "And you can't kill me either."

The man didn't react with the expected anger. "Oh, I'm certain there's a way. I'll take however long to find it as needed. You are not leaving this ship, ever."

Tristan pushed everything out of his mind. His worry over Alex or that his quarry was inching toward the door again. The virus would eventually kill him. The universe had piled on the ways it tried to kill him today, and this was the most pressing one.

"You can't even hurt me," the man said. "You can't touch me. How does it feel to be ineffectual?"

Tristan grinned. "I have hurt you. I didn't have to touch you to do it, did I?" He ran at the man, made as serious an attempt at clawing him as he could, knowing it would fail. The man moved, a foot against his leg, and Tristan crashed to the ground, his leg at an angle it had no business being.

He chuckled as he gave the virus the time to fix the injury. He had the advantage, and the man didn't even know it.

"You are pathetic," the man spat.

"Your lover," Tristan said, "Jurran—"

"Don't you dare say his name, you murderer," the man hissed.

Tristan smiled. He'd already won. He got to his feet. Clarity, control again. He was himself.

"Jurran whimpered as I hurt him." He ran at the man again, saw the anger in his eyes, bright and hot. The man caught his arm, turned. Tristan felt the elbow in his back, the spine break. Lost all sensation in his legs and crashed to the ground again.

He pushed himself to his back and waited. He stayed quiet and saw the satisfaction in the man's eyes. When it came, the pain was exquisite.

"He begged me not to kill him," Tristan said, standing. The man shook, barely restraining his rage. Tristan walked to him, tried to punch him, but went flying over the man's shoulder instead. He landed and felt his leg snap.

He chuckled, getting up before his leg was done healing. "You should have heard the things he said he'd do for me if I just let him live. How could you be with a man like that?"

"You'd better stop talking."

"He offered himself to me, can you imagine that? Like I'd ever even think of doing something with someone like him." Tristan snorted. "He offered you to me."

With a scream, the man came at him.

Tristan waited. He had no idea how many seconds of warning he got, or if whatever sense of danger he had worked, now that he was enraged, but he couldn't take any chances.

His arm snapped up at the last moment and clamped on the man's neck. Rage turned to surprise, then fear. Alex would have something biting to say. A life lesson before killing him.

Alex. Was he—

No. He wouldn't relinquish his control now that he had it again.

He lifted the man off the floor and brought him close. "I don't have to try. I don't have to experiment to find a way to kill you." He turned him, wrapped an arm around the man's neck, and began twisting his head.

"It won't last," the man gasped. "I'll heal. I'll come back. I will make you hurt. I'll hurt him."

The threat sent ice through his heart, and he almost turned to check that Alex was still alive.

The man's chuckle stopped him. "You're not immune. I will find him. I will make him suffer until you offer me anything to stop."

Tristan leaned into his ear. "You couldn't hurt him. I've seen to it no one can ever hurt him again. But don't worry, you won't get the chance. I am going to make your death permanent."

"You can't—"

Tristan twisted the man's head hard. The spine broke, and he kept twisting it until it was facing forward again. This should give him enough time. He put the body on the floor, a knee on his chest. He grabbed the head with both hands and pulled. It took more strength than he expected, each time he did this, to rip a head off a body. The neck was such a fragile thing on humans and most species close to humans in physiology, but even when it was shattered, it wanted to stay attached.

The ripping sound came, then the blood, and then he was standing, looking the sickly-green man in the surprised eyes. "There is such a thing as too damaged for the virus to repair." He lobbed the head away from the body.

He breathed. "I win," he told the universe, and the universe whispered a name back to him: Alex.

Ice flowed through his blood.

"No!" He was in control. He had regained his control.

Alex. He'd sent him to fight everyone, he'd sent him to die. Why had he done that?

The universe laughed at him.

He searched the fight, but he couldn't see individual fighters. Couldn't see anyone fighting. They were standing, making a wall, blocking his view.

He took a step toward them, knowing that if Alex was anywhere, it would be there, then saw his quarry out the corner of his eyes, trying to get the door to open.

Him.

Tristan snarled. It was his fault. He was going to pay.

The man noticed him and shrieked. He backed a few steps, then seemed to remember who he was.

"You think I'm afraid if you?" His voice trembled in spite of the forced bravado. "I'm going to make sure each and every one of you dies. Mercs are a bane on the univ—"

The man flew back at the force of the punch. Tristan hadn't held back. The sickly-green man had reminded him that there was very little he could do to his quarry that would be permanent.

He smiled as he stalked his unmoving quarry. He was going to have fun with this.

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