

Tristan was still where he'd fallen. He couldn't see a point in moving; he'd just end back there. Even when the doctor had come to change the cartridge, he hadn't reacted. He'd hung on the wall as she spoke, waiting to fall back to the floor.

A new formulation, she'd said. More powerful, since Justin hadn't liked how little he'd been reacting over the last few days, how Tristan had just lay there. Tolerance, she'd said. It was to be expected after such a long exposure to the same drug. This would get him to react again.

He didn't care. He could have told her it wouldn't change anything. How could any drug-induced hallucination compare with the gaping hole Alex's death had left in him? Whatever misery her drugs brought him couldn't make him hate himself more than he already did.

How could he not? Alex was dead because of him.

When the rage came—created by the drug or by himself, he could no longer tell—he hadn't gone after anyone who dared enter his cage. The rage had left him alone with himself. He lay there as he clawed at his own body, cursing himself, hurting himself, for the pain he'd caused.

He'd hoped his brother enjoyed watching him lie on the ground, screaming in pain. Or wallowing in the misery of never being able to see Alex again, of never holding him, of never breathing him in. Those were the hardest, this knowledge that he was so utterly alone now.

And then, worst of all, were these moments when he couldn't use the drug as an excuse for how he felt. When he knew he deserved to be hurt and to feel this loneliness. That if he had been worthy of Alex, he would have treated him better. If he could redo it, he would cherish him. Hold him close, protect him from the monsters out there. Monsters like Tristan.

The guards' agitation registered first—jerky motion, hushed, but sharp tones. Constant glancing at the doors. The way they huddled together, seeking protection.

Were the whispering voices back?

No, it was the comm unit they were listening to. He couldn't quite make out what it said, but whatever it was, they were worried.

He chuckled. They were inside a ship that contained him. It was about time they got nervous about it. It wasn't normal how they'd gone around their business like they were safe.

These guards had forgotten what it was like to fear him. They'd used to jump anytime he looked in their direction. Now they didn't even look up when he screamed.

He slammed a fist on the ground. It wasn't fair. He growled and pounded his fist again, getting angry. They shouldn't be worried about something on their comm. They should be worried about him. He was the dangerous one, not whatever was outside.

How dare they ignore him?

With a growl, he turned. They didn't look away from the comm.

With a snarl, he got to his knees. They didn't even notice he'd moved.

He bared his teeth, rejoicing in the anger he felt. Anger directed at someone other than him. He got to his feet and wobbled. When had he eaten last? He looked at the trays by the door, four of them. Why hadn't he eaten? How could he have given up?

He didn't give up; he wasn't one of them, who let the universe pound them down until there was nothing left. He stood up to it, made it cower.

He shambled to the end of his tether, leaned forward, letting it hold him. "What's got you shaking?" His voice was raw and painful from all the screaming.

One of them, a young man, glanced up and yelped, backing up. The others looked up and had a similar reaction. Tristan smiled, showing his teeth. It felt good to be the one who was feared again.

"I'm talking to you, so you had better answer me. What does that say? What horrors have I inflicted on those outside this room?" He felt the start of the wallowing, but he

fought it. No. He wasn't ready for that. This was time for rage—to be feared. “Are you the only ones left? Alone, with only these restraints to keep you safe?”

“There's the bars,” the young man said.

Tristan looked at them. “Oh yes, those are bars.” He looked the young man in the eyes and licked his lips. “Bars are nothing. Especially not when they have a door. Doors are even less. Doors always open for me. A door will never keep you safe from me, but don't worry, you will enjoy what I do to you. Alex always enjoyed it.”

“Don't talk to him,” the woman standing next to the man said. “You remember what the captain said, what he'll do to you.”

“Oh yes, my dear brother, he is going to hurt you. He's good at that.” Tristan was still looking the young man in the eyes. “But I am so much better.”

“Damn it, Rivers, stop listening to him.”

“Listen to me!” Tristan roared to fight the insistent depression. “No one but me can keep you safe. Justin will make you suffer. He can be very creative in how he inflicts pain.” A thought occurred to Tristan, and he began laughing. “Just look at me.”

“Shut up!” the woman yelled. “You can't do anything to us, so why don't you just go back to crying in a corner. Damn it, Brian, you have the control, send him back to the wall. I can't stand listening to him.”

A man, older with a nastier face, moved to the bars. “That's not going to shut him up. I have a better idea.” He smiled viciously. “You like screaming, don't you? So how about you scream for me?”

Tristan clamped his mouth shut as pain erupted from his wrists and ankles. Even if the pain was more intense, he wouldn't give this man that satisfaction. But what was this, compared to the pain Alex's death had made him feel? That black hole that had sucked even his will to live out of him for a time.

No, this pain was electrifying. It helped him think clearly. Not giving into it reminded him of who he was. He was Tristan, and nothing stopped him. He smiled and shifted his gaze to the younger man. “I am stronger still. When my brother comes for you, I will keep you safe.”

Brian looked at the control and increased the intensity.

Tristan didn't stop looking at the young man. He knew very well the effect this had on his body, and the man had noticed it too. Tristan had seen him glance down, his eyes go wide before snapping back up. He didn't have to say it; the young man knew what his promise included.

“Still brave, Brian?” Tristan looked at the older man, at the fear in his eyes, the amazement. “Your toy isn't living up to the expectations? Did my brother give it to you?”

The door behind them was a rush job; he could see the incomplete welding around it. Still enough to keep him from ripping it out, but the lock was the standard lock Emerik sold to all shipbuilders. He'd encountered it often.

He let his head drop and smiled. Justin had only set up one real security measure to hold him in here: the manacles. If he overcame those, he'd be free.

“How come you're not writhing on the floor?” Brian asked, his voice cracking in fear. “This thing's supposed to have you feeling like you're on fire.”

Tristan chuckled and raised his head. “This isn't burning.” He fixed him with his gaze. “I'm going to keep you for last. I will show you what burning feels like. My brother isn't the only one who can be creative with pain.”

“You're not going to do anything!” Brian yelled, trying to get the remote to inflict more pain, but Tristan felt no difference. “Scream! Scream, damn it!”

“Stop talking to him, Brian!” The woman grabbed the remote from his hand and did something.

Tristan flew back and hit the wall. When his head stopped ringing, he grinned. The pain was gone, and without it, he felt the drug try to pull him down, but he remembered who he was.

He remembered that he never gave up. He always fought.

“Remember what I said, Rivers.” He didn’t raise his voice; he didn’t have to. It carried in the silence. “I will keep you safe. The others will suffer, but not you. You I will show how tender I can be. You will never suffer.”