

Consciousness came slowly; he was coming out of cryo. He kept his eyes closed, enjoying the relative silence. Other than the ship's vibrations, everything was finally quiet. It felt to Tristan like it had been a long time since he'd had peace and quiet.

Why was he lying down? He never went into cryo on his back. He always did it in the pilot's chair.

Even before the answer came to him, he was scrambling out of the bed, his heart beating so fast he could feel his entire body reverberating with it. He looked around, searching, but not seeing what was there. Why was he reacting this way? He wasn't scared, he couldn't be scared. Fear was something he'd beaten years ago. He'd thrown it in the cage, locked the door, and forgotten about it there.

He tightened his hands into fists, then relaxed them in an effort to stop them shaking. The room finally registered, long, a closed ramp at one end, the open door to the cockpit at the other. The chair there was unoccupied. Each wall was lined with chairs. The one closest to the cockpit had a man sitting in it, still, under cryo.

Why hadn't he been in the pilot's chair? That was his place, not whatever it was he'd lied on. He turned to see what that had been, and caught sight of something clamped to his arm.

With a scream, he ripped it off and backed away from the medical bed. A chair hit the back of his knee, forcing him down in it. The cryo bracelet hung from its tube on the side of the bed. He had trouble breathing. He was trapped, needed to get out of here. He needed space to be able to fight what might come at him.

He'd taken a step toward the ramp's control when he forcefully stopped himself. "No," he growled. He clamped down on his thought. "I am not afraid."

Someone laughed behind him and he spun. Where were they hiding? The only one there was the man in the chair, but he didn't move, even as Tristan watched, so he wasn't acting like he was under cryo. The floor had a hatch, but that was closed.

He swallowed. The laughter had been in his head?

"No. I am in control of my mind. I'm the one in char—"

On a cold, metal floor, curled up in a ball, crying, pleading for his attackers to stop, but they didn't listen. All the people he'd killed wanted their revenge. They would make him suffer for killing them.

Justin gloated while Tristan was held. A woman in a lab coat placed something around his bicep. Justin went on and on like he always did. He was the better of them, Tristan would never escape this time. Tristan should have felt scorn for his brother, but all he could feel was fear.

His father was berating him for failing at yet another thing. Except it wasn't a memory. He was an adult, and he wilted under his father's disappointment.

He bit back a scream and held his head.

None of that was real. It couldn't have been. He didn't whimper, plead. He didn't feel fear at his brother's delusions, and he had never seen his father as an adult.

What was real?

Was this real? He touched his arm. The armband was gone. He looked at it, dangling off the side of the bed, but that wasn't the one he'd been feeling for.

He'd been captured, caged, but he'd escaped. Alex had helped. Possibly? He wasn't sure; some of the memories didn't make any sense, but he couldn't tell if they were real or not. Alex had visited him inside the cage, but he hadn't helped him then, so that couldn't be real, except why would Alex help him when he'd done everything he could to chase him away?

Was the air getting thin?

"Stay in control," he ordered himself. "It's the drugs." Yes, he'd been drugged. That was why nothing made sense. The armband was gone, but the drugs could still be in his system. That was why he had trouble controlling himself. He needed to get something to counter them.

He turned to the bed and there was someone standing in the cockpit's doorway: Alex. Tristan hadn't chased him away. He wasn't dead.

He was on his knees, keening as Justin told how he'd killed Alex, and Tristan had lost his mind.

Alex was alive—joy. Alex was alive—fear. Alex was alive—need. He remembered that need, craved it. The need to go to him, to touch him, to be his.

No! Tristan was no one's! They were his, to use and discard as he pleased. He took a step back, contrary to what he'd been afraid he would do, but he did so in fear, and that enraged him. Tristan didn't back away from anyone. He forced himself still. He didn't show fear, certainly not to this human. Alex was his, not the other way around.

Alex's face was hard, closed in. There was none of the affection he'd seen there before, expected to see now—wanted, needed to see, craved. There was none of the exasperation he could cause in Alex, delighted in doing. None of the anger he could easily trigger in him.

There was nothing on that face.

Tristan opened his mouth to...what? What did he want to say? Why should he even say anything?

Alex spoke. "How are you?" His voice was neutral, devoid of emotions. He stepped forward, and Tristan stepped back before he could stop himself. When Alex stopped, they were at each end of the medical bed.

What was the answer? His mind reeled in all directions. He was ecstatic that Alex was alive. He was terrified of the same. He desired Alex, and control was leaking out of the cracks.

"I'm fine," Tristan said, but his voice shook. He tightened his fists to steady himself. He needed to touch Alex, run his hands over his smooth, naked body, breathe in his scent, hear him moan under him. He needed to rip him apart, destroy him completely, remove him from his life.

"Don't even think of destroying something." Alex's gaze was on Tristan's hand, the one he hadn't noticed gripping the corner of the bed. "I already had to get it fixed once because of you. I'm not doing it again."

He felt the tension in his muscle as he pulled on it. He wanted to use it to bash Alex until all that was left of him was a puddle of blood on the floor. No! He couldn't hurt Alex, he was... Shut up! Alex was nothing! He was everything.

He bit back the scream, turned it into a growl. "Don't tell me what to do. This is—"

"My ship," Alex snapped.

The two words cut through his anger and turned it to fear. Ice. There had been no heat in them. None of the anger he enjoyed causing the human. Tristan had never heard this tone from him. He'd screamed, pleaded. He'd been defeated, broken. But there was always a form of heat, always anger somewhere deep inside Alex. Even before he'd stoked it hotter, it had been one of the things he'd lo— Shut up!

"You want this ship to be yours again, then you fucking earn it." Alex took a step forward, Tristan one back. "Look at yourself, you're shaking. You can barely control yourself." Another step, and Tristan backed up again. "That isn't what I fought to rescue." Another step, and Tristan had his back against the ramp. He glanced at the release, but the light showed a steady red. They were in space. It wouldn't open without bypassing the safeties. Alex was only two paces away. He could reach out and wring his neck.

"What are you waiting for?" Alex asked. The words were hard, but his eyes searched Tristan's "If I cause you so much turmoil, just remove me. I'm standing in your way, so get rid of me already."

Tristan wanted to kill him. No!

He wanted to hurt him. No!

He wanted to make him pay for destroying his well-organized life.

Yes! He had Alex against the wall, he was pressed against him. Alex let out a

scream of ecstasy.

No!

Tristan shook as his desires fought each other.

Alex's mask cracked. And for an instant, disappointment and pain leaked through.

Then it was back. "This isn't you."

Tristan stiffened. How dare he—

"Something's been done to you."

Of course something had been done: drugs and torture. He was stronger than that.

He was going to beat it like he'd beaten everything else the universe threw at him.

"I know how to fix it."

Tristan's ears straightened. Alex could fix this? He wanted him to do it. No, he didn't want that. He wanted to give in to the madness, stop having to worry about it all.

No, he wanted control; he needed it if he was going to survive.

Alex turned. "Come on, let me show you."

Tristan bristled; that had been an order. Where did Alex think he'd gotten the right to order him about? Tristan was following Alex without realizing it, only pausing for a moment as he caught sight of the planet on the screen, with readouts by it. He followed Alex up the ladder.

He remembered that room, but it was in better shape now. He'd left a greater mess than it had started in after raging in it. When had that been? Some time ago. After he'd tried to kill Alex while helpless in cryo. Alex caught him looking the room over as he opened a cabinet.

"I had to get this fixed too, so don't touch anything." He took a case out and opened it. "Do you remember this?"

The statue was of a Samalian. Sandy fur, a sword at his belt. The paint was faded, one ear was chipped. "You had that when you barged into my life." He tried to put anger in his voice, but it sounded wistful to him.

"Do you remember anything else?"

He shook his head. There were seated at a table, outside, the statue between them.

"You made me a promise, do you remember that?"

Looking into his blue eyes, holding his hands on each side of the statue. He snorted. "Should I?"

"You promised to love me until the universe ended." Alex's words were flat.

The joy in those blue eyes, the happy tears falling as he leaned forward, and they kissed. "And you believed me?" Please say you did. No. He is a tool, nothing more. He knows his place.

"I'm still here, aren't I?" No anger, no resentment.

"Fine." Yes! "So I conned you and you fell for it." No! It wasn't a— Shut up!

"Do you even know what this is?" Alex was looking at it, not him.

"A carved stone someone painted."

"It's the Defender, one of the deities from your world."

"He's crazy, you realize that, right?" his father said, leaning against the dresser. "Completely loony."

"A piece of rock," Tristan said, trying to ignore his father's interference in his life.

Alex wasn't paying his father any attention either, but was still looking at the statue. "According to the stories I collected, one of the things the Defender is known for is binding promises. Samalians who wanted to show they were serious would go to one of the temples, stand before the Defender, make the promise, and the Defender would bind them to it."

"I've known crazy people in my time," his father said, "but no one that nuts."

"It's a piece of rock," Tristan repeated, glancing at his father. "It's just something I found in a market and figured you'd like because you were infatuated with me."

Alex smiled as he looked at him, but there was no humor in it. “Really? Just a piece of stone? Then explain to me why the fuck you risked your life to save mine.” Tristan took a step back under that anger.

“Well,” his father said, “you wanted him to show emotions, there you go.”

“You, Tristan, whose only goal in life is surviving, injected me with the only cure to a virus that was certain to kill you!”

“There was more—”

“No, there wasn’t! You didn’t know Mary could make more. As far as we knew, it was the only dose that existed, so explain to me why you used it to save me.”

“I’m kind of curious about that myself,” his father said. “I thought I’d taught you better.”

“I don’t know, okay?” he snapped at his father. “I was going to inject myself, but then my arm moved and it injected him.”

His father nodded toward Alex and the human was watching him, his face an emotionless mask again. He looked from his father to Alex again. Alex wasn’t ignoring his father; Alex couldn’t see him.

His father grinned.

He wasn’t crazy. He was in control. He was—

His father laughed. “You’re crazier than he is. I have to say, you two are a pair.”

“There are ways to get the Defender to relinquish his hold. To release you from your promise.”

“Oh, this should be good,” his father said.

Tristan kept his mouth shut to keep from having Alex think he was crazy. He glared at his father and was about to ask how, when the information he’d seen on the screen told him where they were.

“No! There’s no way I’m setting foot there again.”

“Goody,” his father said, “we’re going home. I haven’t seen the place since, well, since you killed me, but I’m sure it’s still the same mess of people just waiting to die. Places like this never change.”

“You have to,” Alex said. “You need to place the Defender back where he belongs. He was taken from one of the temples, so you need to return him there. You need to bring him home. You do that, and the stories say you can ask him to release you.”

“Nice story,” his father said.

“No!” Tristan said over him. The anger in his voice didn’t make Alex flinch. “There’s nothing for me there. They’re just a bunch of primitives with their muzzles in the dirt. I need to go out there and find Justin. He’s due for a beating that’s going to remind him not to fuck with me ever again.”

“I don’t think that boy can learn,” his father said. And Tristan almost snapped at him, but Alex’s mask broke, and the sadness he saw there stopped him.

“Justin’s dead.”

“Really?” his father said. “But you didn’t kill him.”

It couldn’t be true. His legs shook, but he locked them in place. Something bubbled inside him, and a sound wanted to escape him. He was on his knee, keening for a death.

He clamped down on his emotions, forced them under control. He wasn’t going to lose it over his brother. He summoned anger. “How dare you kill him?”

“Yes!” His father was next to him. “Finally, he just gave you a perfect reason. Do it! Remove him from your life, finally!”

“He was my brother. My only family.”

“Hey, what am I?”

He ignored his father. “Only I had the right to—”

“Anders killed him.”

Confusion washed away the anger. “Who?”

“Human,” his father said. “Kind of an asshole. He showed up in that large room with the holograms.”

Tristan nodded. He remembered that man. His claws in his flesh, the sound of breaking bones as he broke his ribcage open. Shoving the man’s heart down his throat. So he’d avenged his brother, good.

His father shook his head and nodded to Alex.

Anders had threatened to kill Alex. That was what had caused him to fly in a rage. Still, it meant he had avenged his brother’s death, even if he hadn’t known it, right?

He dropped to his knees. His brother was dead. A hole opened up inside him.

“Come on, can’t you ever be satisfied? You spend your life trying to kill the boy and now that he is dead, you miss him?”

Hands pulled at him, getting him to stand, then he was lying down. “On a bed,” his father complained. “Get your ass on the floor, now!”

He grabbed a pillow and buried his muzzle in it before the wail escaped him.