

## Chapter 51

Consciousness fought Alex. It fought him hard. He had to wake up. There was a threat, and he had to deal with it. Why was it so hard to wake up? His brain was so messed up it thought there was someone speaking, but only in broken syllables. It thought someone was touching him. Not Tristan; the touch was gentle, so he knew it was making it up.

Or someone had boarded them.

He wrenched his eyes open. A face looked at him, human. Enemy, his brain screamed. Alex mentally rolled his eyes; he knew that already, so why not stop complaining and start working? The knives were at his belt, but when his hand slid there, he only felt flesh.

Cryo, he'd been in cryo. Where was Tristan? If they hurt Tristan, he was going to kill them. He was going to kill them regardless; they had no business being on Tristan's ship, but if they had hurt him, he was going to make them suffer.

"Alex?" the face asked. A woman's voice. "Can you hear me?"

"Is he okay?" A man's voice to the side, toward the cockpit where Tristan should be.

Alex tried to move his head. He had to assess the threat. If there were two, there might be more.

"The scan says his brain chemistry's out of whack, but I don't see any reason for it. The replacement system didn't give any errors when it finished bringing him back." The voice was familiar, but from so long ago he couldn't bring it up, and his brain wasn't doing anything to help.

"Could taking stims before do this?" The man came closer, motioning as he handed something over.

"No, stims would have been taken out of his system with his blood and cleaned out while the blood was kept alive. You know, if I didn't know it was impossible, I'd say he's having an allergic reaction to the process."

"Why do you say it's impossible?"

"Alex, focus on my finger. Try to follow it." It was in his face, and he did as she instructed. She sounded like she knew what was wrong with him. Like she was used to taking care of people.

*Come on*, he screamed at his brain, *it's almost there*.

"Someone took stims, and a lot of them. The cockpit has these vials all over the floor. If there's less than a hundred in there, I'd be surprised."

"Alex." The voice was insistent. "Did you take this? I need to know. If you took too much, it's possible the system wasn't able to clean your blood properly, and it went bad in transit."

Alex shook his head, or thought he did; his brain was telling him he was in a dozen-G environment right now. He did recall enough to know they weren't threats.

He tried to speak; he needed to know what had happened to Tristan. If he wasn't there, something had happened. "Tr—" was all he managed before his brain decided to take a break.

No, absolutely not. Tristan could be in trouble; he wasn't allowing his brain to keep him from going to his aid.

"Doc, maybe you need to take him to the clinic, run tests?"

"I'm okay," he managed to say, and his brain didn't immediately contradict him. He didn't sound great, and when he managed to focus on the face, she looked dubious. "I'll be okay," he corrected. He could move his head without feeling like it would fall off. His hands felt like they were where they should be. He had a towel over his groin. Where had that come from? Why was the floor covered with debris? Had they fought Tristan?

No, that was stupid; they wouldn't be alive. Then who had done this?

"Alex!"

He looked up at her. "I'm okay." He did sound better.

"Did Tech take this?"

He looked at the vial she was holding, wondering who Tech was. There was no Tech, he remembered; he was a mask. They meant Tristan. He opened his mouth to say no, but paused. If it wasn't him, and it wasn't Tristan, then who? He looked at the debris again.

"If he took them," she said, and he remembered she was the town's medic. "With his physiology, he'd have to stack their uses to get an effect. You said a hundred?"

"At a glance. I didn't do an exact count." The man was the portmaster. Jacoby.

"To go through this much, even stacked, it means he took them all day long."

"You can't know that."

"Jacoby, no one takes stims just for the occasional boost, not in a sealed environment where nothing needs to be done. For whatever reason, Tech didn't want to sleep. This much would have lasted a couple of weeks, a month at most."

"The system said it was turned on seven months ago."

She indicated the back of the ship where the light was coming in. By the open ramp was another intact chair, the only other one. "Tech must have used that one. If he took all that before going into cryo, he would have woken up with the worst withdrawal imaginable."

Jacoby snapped a vial in two. He turned a half upside down and a drop fell out. "Not seven months."

She raised an eyebrow.

"Unsealed stim dries out quick. A month and it's useless. This was used not that long ago, objective time."

"How did you get in?" Alex asked.

"How are you feeling?" she asked, pointing a light at his eyes.

He batted it away. "I'm fine, I told you. How did you get in? Where... Tech?"

"Home," Jacoby answered. "Barricaded himself in. He's not answering calls or his door. A lot of people in town think you dumped him."

"Are you crazy? After everything I went through for him?"

"Hey, I'm not—"

"That's enough," the doc said. "Alex, I need you to tell me how you're doing. I don't need any merc macho bullshit. I need to know if you need treatment."

"I'm okay." He stood, and everything cooperated. "I always react this way to this kind of cryo. How long did it take for me to go from incoherent to standing?"

"A few minutes, five at most," Jacoby answered.

"You're allergic?"

"Not according to any of the doctors I've seen about it. There's nothing for me to be allergic to in there, right?" He took the pants Jacoby handed him. "It's psychological. You should see how bad it gets if I go under dressed."

She pursed her lips. "Are you sure? That's pretty extreme for a psychological reaction."

He shrugged, then put his belt on and found the shirt under the remnants of a few chairs. Ripped, but mostly intact. "I've stopped arguing with doctors since my first one sunk a scalpel in my thigh to keep me seated." He chuckled at her reaction. "She healed that too. I was being an asshole. Look, just how did you get in?" He found his jacket with a few scratches on it, but otherwise intact. It paid to buy quality armor.

"The ramp," Jacoby said while Alex looked for his knives among the debris, clipping them to his belt as he found them. He tried to remember if he had a harness at the house.

He stopped. "What do you mean, 'the ramp'?"

Jacoby pointed at the open ramp.

“How did you bypass the lock?” The question was out before he considered the implication. Tristan had left the ship, so of course he’d locked it.

“Lock-cracker.”

“One of those pieces of crap unlocked this ship?”

“Yes, only took it the whole morning, too.”

That made no sense, which was yet one more thing to add to the list of things that hadn’t recently. But there were more important things to deal with.

“Why did you want to get in?”

Jacoby motioned for Alex to follow him to the edge of the ramp. Alex noticed two other knives and clipped them to his belt.

“Notice the debris on the ground?”

“Sure.” Shards of something were everywhere behind the ship. Could be permacrete made to look like wood?

“That’s what’s left of the door. Tech flew through it to land, and he did a piss-poor job of that too. The ship’s crooked. I wouldn’t have been able to close the doors if they’d still been there. Not to say he left half the systems going. That isn’t how you prepare a ship for long-term storage. I had my suspicion as to why he’d been so out of it when I saw him alone. Now I’m thinking he was high on stims.”

“He wasn’t.”

“Alex, look at all—”

“He wasn’t,” Alex insisted. “He doesn’t do stims. In the years we’ve been together, I’ve seen him use them three times, and every time it was because what he was working on couldn’t wait.”

“That you know of.”

Alex had the knife at Jacoby’s throat before he’d considered his action. “Don’t you ever imply I don’t know him, do you understand? And don’t even think of bad-mouthing him. I’d stop moving if I were you, Doc. I’m not in a good mood right now.”

She stopped edging for the broken bar leaning against Alex’s chair.

“Alex, please lower the knife.”

“Or what?” he asked the man. Jacoby hadn’t moved, he hadn’t even twitched.

“Or nothing. I’m asking, not threatening. This isn’t a comfortable position to talk. If you didn’t take the stims, who else could it be? You know Tech, then you know how stressful his work can be. He could hide it from you.” Jacoby did move back as Alex pressed. “Think, Alex. You more than anyone know how easy it is to hide a habit. How many mercs have you dealt with that seemed perfectly fine until the habit got out of control?”

Alex considered Tristan’s one habit. How would he deal if he couldn’t go under cryo for some reason? How long could he stand the boredom until he had to try something, anything to take it away? He sheathed his knife.

“Alex,” the doc said, “if there’s something wrong with Tech, we’re here to help him. All of us, we look after our own here.”

“No, I’ll help him.” He turned to head out, but Jacoby grabbed his arm.

“Alex,” was all the man had the time to say before he was face-first in the wall, Alex’s arm pressing against the back of his neck. He had consciously decided not to use a knife this time. “Alex, I’m not your enemy. We just want to help.”

“We don’t need your help.”

He let him go and headed down the ramp.

“Alex,” Jacoby called again, this time with a threat in the tone.

Alex turned. “What?”

“Dump the knives.”

Alex snorted.

“I’m serious. I look after this town. I’m not going to let you walk through it looking like you’re ready to kill everyone there.”

“You’re not the person I take orders from.”

“Don’t push me on this, Alex, or we’re going to find out which one of us is the better fighter.”

Alex grinned. “I don’t see you with your ever-present gun.”

“I don’t need a gun to make you see reason.”

“Alright, that’s enough,” the doc said. “I swear, you mercs look for excuses to fight when none are

needed—and don't give me that look, Jacoby. I've seen you and Carlito 'train'. What? You think I don't know the difference between a broken femur from a fall and from the reinforced sole of a boot? I swear there are days you think I'm just some corporate doctor who hasn't seen anything."

"I didn't—"

"Just stow it, Jacoby. This isn't a contest, or at least it wouldn't be for anyone else." She looked at Alex. "Please leave the knives here. There's no one in town who will hurt you or Tech, and everyone is a little on edge there because of him. Coming through armed like you are isn't going to help anything."

"Doc, I don't have to—"

"There are kids, Alex. Do you really want to scare them? They haven't experienced the harshness of the universe; we keep that from them here. I'm asking you to respect that."

Alex unclipped a knife and dropped it by the seat Tristan had used. He'd learned, among a lot of horrible things, that Tristan didn't let children get hurt. He unclipped another one. He didn't think he'd get a beating for scaring them, not normally, but Tristan wasn't acting normally right now.

He kept two knives, but moved one to his boot, mostly hidden under the pants leg.

"Happy?" he asked unhappily. She might as well ask him to take off every stitch of clothing he was wearing for how naked he felt.

"Thank you."

Alex turned and left them to find out what was going on with Tristan.

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He wished they'd leave.

Alex hadn't intended on gathering an entourage on his way to Tristan's house, but as soon as he'd been seen, he'd had to deal with the crowd, the accusations.

He was proud of himself for not killing any of them. He hadn't even raised a hand to them, but he'd had to raise his voice. He'd had to explain that yes, he and Tech had experienced a disagreement, and that he'd slept on the ship for the last few days, but that he was going to apologize to him.

There had been much rejoicing and, unfortunately, a decision on their part to provide moral support by accompanying him. He'd tried everything he could, short of slicing a few throats open, to discourage them; but they kept telling him how they wanted to be there for the two of them. Growling they didn't need any help, had only made them smile. Once this was resolved, he was going to ask permission to kill a few of them, Alex promised himself.

At the property limit, he put his foot down. This was a private matter. They could see the house from where they were, and that was all they'd get. He wasn't having them listening in on his pleading to be taken back.

Surprisingly, to him at least, that had been acceptable.

He headed for the workroom's door. It didn't open, but he could look in. The place looked like a war had been fought there. Tables were thrown all over the place. Tables, which he knew had been secured to the floor. Equipment lay in pieces among that. Tristan's wall of weapons was devoid of them, which meant they comprised the debris. Why had Tristan destroyed those?

Where was he? He scanned the room. He had to be there. This was his sanctuary, where he went to collect himself. He almost missed the Samalian, against the far wall, between two upturned tables. He was seated on the floor, knees pulled to himself, arms around them, head resting on them.

He banged on the door, and even at this distance, when Tristan looked up, Alex saw the misery in his eyes. He banged again, but Tristan lowered his head.

Alex cursed. If Tristan wouldn't come to him, he was going in and damn the consequences. He tried to connect to the lock, but it didn't respond. He listened for other computers. Two of the three terminals responded, which he thought impressive considering the damage. Unfortunately, they didn't control anything. The other door also didn't respond, but the house's system was active.

He took out his datapad and coerced it. It was harder than a house system should be, and carried Tristan's distinctive rigid coding architecture, but he made it in. He confirmed everything was in order, and he took a gamble in telling it to unlock the front door.

When the response returned, and the house didn't explode, he sighed in relief. If Tristan had been secured the house the way he did his ships... Alex decided not to think about that.

The sun was closer to the horizon when he put the datapad away, and the crowd had thinned noticeably. He wondered if they thought he'd spent all this time talking with Tech.

He headed for the door and got thumbs ups and clapping. He gave them a wave while rolling his eyes

and stepped inside. He waited until they were all gone before heading for the door connecting to the workshop.

Tristan was closer to this door. Enough that when Alex knocked on the glass, the Samalian snarled at him and Alex heard it.

“What happened in the ship? While I was under?” Tristan bared his teeth at him. “Tristan, let me in. I can’t help you from out here.”

Tristan was at the window so fast Alex didn’t have the time to react. “Help me?” he growled. “You don’t want to help me, you want to destroy me. I see through your ploys now. Get out and go tell the universe it failed again. You can’t get to me anymore. I’m safe.”

Alex placed a hand against the window. “Tristan, it’s me, Alex. Your weapon.”

“Liar! You’re a traitor! You’re not mine, you’re its. You’re its knife, planted deep inside me.” He hung his head. “I thought I could trust you, Alex.” Tears fell down the Samalian’s face.

Who was this? It couldn’t be Tristan, the monster who manipulated everyone, who feared nothing, cared for no one. Tristan certainly didn’t cry.

“You can trust me. I’m yours, only yours.”

“Mine?” Tristan asked, hopefully, “really?”

“Yes, Tristan. You know I love you. It doesn’t matter that you don’t I—”

“I hate you,” Tristan snarled.

“Tristan, I—”

“I hate you!” He slammed a hand against the glass and it cracked. “I never want to see you again! Do you hear me? Get out of my house!” He began sobbing. “Get out, stop hurting me. I hate you.” He slid down, but Alex could still hear him repeat, “I hate you.” He sounded more tired than angry.

Alex stood frozen there, trying to come up with something to say to help, but how could he help if he didn’t even understand what was going on? Tristan blamed him for this, but Alex hadn’t done anything.

Had he?

His stomach growled, and reluctantly he left to get something to eat. He remembered one of the rooms having boxes of nutrient bars. Walking through the living room, he noticed the Defender on the shelf where he’d placed it so long ago, before leaving on his first mission with Tristan.

He was almost out on the opposite side when he turned and pointed at it. “Oh, I bet you think this is funny, don’t you? You think that’s what I wanted? The promise was that he’d love me.” He pointed toward the workshop’s door. “Does that look like love to you?”

Alex threw his hands in the air. “What the fuck am I doing? It’s just a chunk of rock.”

He turned to leave again, but continued until he faced the Defender again. “Five years! Five fucking years he’s been treating me like an object, a thing to use when he saw fit. I was okay with that, do you hear me? I was okay with him being cold and uncaring because I was with him.” He pointed at the door again. “That isn’t what I wanted. Give me my Tristan back or I swear to whatever you believe in I’m going to smash you into pieces.”

Alex grabbed his head and turned with a muffled scream. He made it into the corridor before turning and striding back in the living room. “Why are you even doing that to him? It isn’t like he believed in you. You ever see him give a damn about anything Samalian? You can’t affect him!”

Alex’s eyes went wide as something he’d heard somewhere came back to him. “*Belief gives power.*” Except that Tristan didn’t believe; he only believed in himself. He looked at the door. Something was affecting him.

Except that thing was just rock with pain on it.

“*Belief gives power.*”

He’d been in a bar when he heard that. Alex rolled his eyes at himself, like that even mattered. He was having an argument with a piece of rock over the sanity of a monster.

“I need food. Hunger’s causing this.”

He didn’t move.

Either the Defender was real and had actual power—which Alex didn’t believe was possible—or Tristan believed in it, which couldn’t be possible.

Except Tristan had grown up on Samalia. He’d left when he was a young adult, if he’d pieced the fragments correctly. That was a lot of years to be immersed in a culture and not soak up some of it. Especially since things that happened to someone young lodged themselves deep in the subconscious.

He had to have heard stories, maybe told to him when he was a child, before whatever turned him into

what he was had happened.

Could he use that? Could he use something Tristan didn't know he believed in to get him back to himself? Or he could try to locate a psychologist with military training and an army on retainer to get Tristan to sit down and talk through his problems.

He laughed.

When he sobered, he glared at the statue. "You'd better have a solution for this, because my threat was real. If you don't help fix this mess you caused, you're going to get acquainted with the floor real hard."

He sat and accessed his vault. He pulled all the research he'd done on Samalian culture. Their history and stories. He scanned through it for anything on the Defender. Somewhere in there had to be a legend he could use. Something that would explain Tristan's condition while giving him a way to fight it, to fix it, to get back to himself.

The house light came on when darkness fell. He ignored his hunger, and the sounds coming from the workroom. Tristan was breaking things again. He ignored the beeping of the communication system because he found something.

The story was about the Defender granting a traveler a boon for taking its representation back to where it had been worshiped.

He jumped to his feet. That would work. "Tristan!" he yelled, turning toward the kitchen and the door there. "I know what's wrong with you. It's—" The flash of light blinded him. The detonation deafened him, and the blast threw him across the room.

He hit the floor, rolled, and then the house was falling down around, and on top of him. He felt bones break, his legs, and arm, his back. The pain had to be intense, but he didn't feel it.

He lay on the floor, looking at the Defender, which had been thrown off the shelf and landed not far from him, but instead of being crushed by the debris, two sections of permacrete had fallen over it in such a way that they rested against each other, protecting it from everything else.

"We were supposed to be happy," he told it, although he couldn't hear his own voice. It couldn't end this way. He'd done too much for this to be the end. "It was over you, it was binding." His eyes were wet, and through the tears he thought the Defender winked at him.

Something sparked at the edge of his vision. "Tech? Alex?" The voice was Jacoby. But there was an electronic quality to it. It was the comm system. "Curse you both, answer me! There's a ship heading for you. It just swooped in, the buoy isn't registering its tag. Get out of there! Whatever you're in the middle of, stop and run!" There was a squawk, and the message repeated.

"It was over you," Alex repeated. "You promised it to us." Alex thought there might have been a response, but the pain of his injuries came surging, and then there was only darkness.

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