

Alex was sore from the training, if that was what it had been. Tristan always pushed him, forced him to fight hard, but this time it had felt different. It had felt like a real fight. Almost too real.

He let the cold water slosh over him. He grabbed the disinfecting body wash and scrubbed himself as he tried to rebuild the fight in his mind. It had happened so fast, been so hard, it was mostly a blur.

He remembered the pain, fighting through it, having to fight harder and harder to stay alive, determined to stay alive, and the harder he fought, the more fun he had. It had been so gradual he hadn't felt how he'd started to lose himself in the combat. And then it was over before he could completely get lost in it.

The laughter had been fear, and possibly exhaustion. One man had managed to take him there before, and if Tristan had kept pushing, Alex would have lost himself completely into the fight. Probably died that way.

Tristan had pushed him so hard, by himself, that he'd almost accomplished what, these days, took at least a dozen people attacking him at the same time to trigger. Fuck, and Alex had always thought he had at least a chance of winning one of these training fights.

Doubled over while trying to breathe, he'd seen his erection, and that just caused him to laugh harder—mirth this time. It wasn't the first time—the adrenaline of a good fight always caused that—but this was the first time fighting without pants.

He'd felt embarrassed too. It didn't matter Tristan had seen him naked. He'd required it, after all, for whatever twisted reason. Or maybe it was just to even the field; after all, Alex had seen Tristan naked often enough. The Samalian was far too comfortable not wearing anything. Just like Jack had been.

He'd caught Tristan storming to his workroom from the corner of his eye. Alex chuckled. Had the sight offended him? Couldn't the Samalian bear to see Alex excited? If that was the case, then good. He could consider that payback for all the dreams Alex had been forced to endure because of him.

But really? This offended him? Then why the nudity? And it couldn't be the first time Tristan saw him in this state. Yes, it was the first time after they'd fought, but Alex had enough trouble keeping them from happening around Tristan, around the reminder of Jack, around that strength, power, and yes, even deadliness.

He'd caught Tristan looking at him, when the Samalian didn't think he was watching. Alex had been careful not to make a show of it. He couldn't afford for Tristan to think he was what Alex was after. And he knew he'd been successful. After all, Tristan had made it clear Alex held no appeal to him.

He shut the water off, dried, and popped two Heal Alls. He felt better. He heard Tristan in the kitchen, pacing. If he was waiting for food, he could wait longer. No, Tristan wouldn't be waiting for that. If he was hungry he'd eat one of the nutrient bars. Why he was there, Alex didn't care. He was going to seal his wounds, and then go outside to give the Samalian space. He didn't know what was going on with him, but he had a feeling he didn't want to get close until he dealt with his problem.

He didn't hear Tristan approach, didn't even catch sight of him. He was grabbed, slammed face-first on the bedroll hard enough for his breath to explode out. There was a weight on top of him, and he screamed as he was penetrated.

Alex tried to fight back, but the weight was too much. He yelled, tried to tell him to stop, to beg him, but the words were mangled by the pain. A pain that increased with each thrust.

Through his scream he made out growling. It could have been an animal, which scared Alex even more. There was no reasoning with an animal. The movement on top of him became faster, more urgent, more painful, until pain was all he felt. Then a roar, and while Alex's ears still rang, stillness.

He felt the nose pad against the back of his neck, heavy breathing. Maybe lips?

And then Alex screamed again as whoever, whatever had been over him, pulled out.

The white-hot pain receded, and he noticed he was curled into a ball. His throat hurt almost as much as...elsewhere. He heard the shower in the distance, and the thing that had done this to him became someone: Tristan.

Why? Tristan didn't want him. This couldn't be a form of punishment; Alex had done

everything the Samalian had demanded of him.

The shower ended, and Alex put his hand over his mouth to stop the whimpering. If Tristan heard him, he might come back. He might do it again, and Alex didn't want that. He'd never wanted this.

The steps moved away, not closer, and he relaxed. The whimpering came back. What should he do? He couldn't stay here, it could happen again. He had to get out of here. Take his things and leave.

He tried to stand, and the pain drew a yell he barely choked back. Had Tristan heard? Was he coming back? No, he could just make out steps deeper in the house, in the kitchen he thought.

The pain was too much to move. Only he was used to pain; pain was something he could ignore.

Or so he'd thought.

He grabbed his pack and injected painkillers. The coolness flowed through him and relief made him feel giddy. He sighed and looked at the ceiling.

It made no sense. Tristan was too good an actor to have to resort to this. He chuckled at the ease he had fallen back into analytical mode after what had been done to him.

If Tristan had wanted sex, he could have convinced Alex he wanted it too. He could have convinced him it was Jack who wanted it.

Jack.

Alex frowned as he remembered the pressure against his neck. He reached back and touched there. Pressure, almost gentle. A kiss?

Why kiss him after...that? Tristan wouldn't kiss him. Tristan didn't know what gentleness was. No, Tristan only knew violence and pain. So he'd never kiss him. Then...

He sat. The pain muffled by the medication.

Jack. Jack was tender, loving.

Jack wanted him. Had it been Jack?

No, it couldn't be. Jack would never force himself like this, he wouldn't have to.

But it wasn't only Jack in there. Right now there was also Tristan.

A part of his mind flashed lights, trying to attract his attention to the damage he'd suffered, but he ignored it. This was more important.

Maybe what Jack wanted had gotten mixed in with what Tristan was? He hadn't wanted to be violent, but Tristan had tainted the act. Alex touched the back of his neck again. That had been Jack's way of telling him he hadn't meant it that way.

He stood, and sharp pain poked through the fog of the painkillers. He ignored it. He ignored the lines of code describing the damage he'd suffered. The consequences of it. He'd deal with it later; he didn't have the time for that now. If he hurried, maybe he could finally reach Jack.

Where? Where would Jack be? He didn't know, but Tristan would be in his workroom. And where Tristan was, Jack would be.

He tried to hurry, but his body fought him. He overwrote the pain, ignored the liquid running down his leg. He forced himself forward in staggering steps, and by the time he reached the kitchen, he was steadier.

He froze there. Tristan was at the counter, his back to him.

Alex rushed across the room and wrapped his arms around the Samalian. "I'm here. I heard you," Alex whispered through his sobbing, feeling the metal diamond under his hand. "I'm not abandoning you, Jack. I will never abandon you. I'll find you. I'll—"

Alex flew back. His processes scrambled when he hit the wall, and only instinct kept him standing. To fall was to be an easy target, his mind screamed. Stay up, stay mobile.

The Samalian was glaring at him, panting. "Do. Not. Ever. Touch. Me. Again." Alex blinked and Tristan stood before him. "You mean nothing to me!"

"I'm not leav—"

The punch sent him to the floor. His jaw hurt. Tristan grabbed him by the neck and pulled him back to his feet.

He punched him in the stomach. "You are a thing." Tristan let him fall.

Alex fought the urge to throw up and looked up in those hard, angry brown eyes. Searching

for Jack. Tristan brought his foot down on Alex's arm and Alex screamed, feeling the bone snap even through the painkillers.

The pain didn't last, and Alex looked into those eyes again. "Stop him." His jaw hurt. He screamed again when a foot came down on his leg and broke it.

"Please," Alex pleaded. Tristan's hands curled into trembling fists. But Alex didn't care. When they came down on him, he kept searching. Where was Jack? Why wasn't he stopping the monster like he had before? Why wasn't he holding him back, protecting Alex?

Why couldn't he see Jack in those eyes anymore?

*Had he ever been there?* a voice whispered at the back of his mind.

Alex refused to listen to it. Jack had to be there. He couldn't have put himself through so much and not find Jack in the end.

*The hard truth, Alex,* the voice said. *That's what I show you, remember?*

Alex stared into those cold, deadly eyes, and was saved from confronting the hard truth by the fist that came down and took his consciousness away.