

Tristan stared in worry at the circlet around his bicep. How long had he been at it? How long had he been here? It couldn't have been very long; he was still on his knees and they weren't hurting. The guards were the same ones as before.

He growled. Why didn't it have anything for him to slip a claw in? He was wasting his time. He couldn't do anything with it, so he had to move on to something he could actually do.

The bracelets around his wrists and ankles were also one piece, but there was play with them. He could spin them around, but they wouldn't move up or down.

He cursed as someone whispered something indistinct—no, whispered it again. He ignored it, he had to focus. His claw slipped into the gap between the bracelet and the part adhered to his arm, but both parts were metal, and he couldn't make a mark, or catch his claw on anything.

He stood with a huff of annoyance and the guards became alert. He ignored them and their whispering. Let them say whatever they wanted; they wouldn't get a reaction from him.

Why did the bracelets have to spin? He looked at the wall. They were what had held him there. So, magnetic. He went to the wall, studied it. He couldn't see where the corresponding electromagnet was, even knowing the area where he'd been held. The work had been done on the other side.

Which meant this wall couldn't be thick in places. If he could find where the magnet was, he'd have the weak point. He started tapping the wall to get a sense of how thick it was.

He spun, reaching for a throat.

No one.

There had been someone there. He'd felt them, had felt their breath on his ear as they whispered something he hadn't understood.

Where had they gone? How had they moved that fast? The door to the cage hadn't opened; he would have noticed that sound. So there had to be another way in and out. They had been close, so it couldn't be far.

He ran a finger along the wall. If there was a door, there would be a seam. It didn't matter how thin it was, he would find it, then he would escape and Justin would pay.

He spun again.

Again, the whisperer was gone. He'd been on the other side, so he'd missed the door. More people were whispering, but they were far. Where the guards were standing. Maybe further. No, that didn't work.

He backtracked, going slower. It had to be there, somewhere.

Someone chuckled.

"Shut up," he growled.

Tristan cursed and made a fist, which meant his fingers had left the wall. He could have missed the seam. The chuckle came back, and he forced himself to ignore it. He needed to find the door.

They were laughing at him, he could tell. He couldn't make out the words, not quite, but it was about him, about what he was doing. Mocking him.

With a roar, he ran for the bars, for the guards beyond it. His tether stopped and pulled him back. "Stop laughing at me! I will kill you all, do you hear me?" The guards were pale, terrified of him. Good, that would keep them quiet. He looked up. "Do you hear me, Justin? I will find that door and I will hurt you. I will take it all away from you again. You should have left us alone."

He stalked to the wall, tried to find where he'd been, and continued searching. They began laughing again. He turned, and the guards were still against the wall. Still scared.

"Where are they?" he yelled. The laughter increased. "Where are they hiding?"

He walked toward the guards, stopped at the limit of his tether. "Where are they?" he

whispered. "Tell me where they are, and I'll spare you." He plastered his ears back to keep the laughter from seeping into his mind, from driving him insane. "You don't have to be afraid of them. I'll kill them first. They won't hurt you."

The guards looked confused.

"Tell me!"

They jumped.

The older one took a step forward, pretended courage. "I— No one's laughing."

Tristan smiled, showed his teeth, and the man recoiled. "You don't have to lie to me. I'll protect you from them. I'll even protect your two playthings. Keep you all safe."

"I swear, we don't—"

"It's my brother, isn't it? What did he promise you? He won't keep his promise. He lies. He lies more than I do. Everything he says is a lie. Whatever he promised, he won't do it. I will. Tell me where they are."

Just more confusion from them. They were good actors, better than any he'd encountered, but he knew they were lying. They were part of this; they were Justin's pawns.

He had to get to Justin to end this.

He eyed the door to the cage. That was the exit. He had to reach it, then get out. He had to remove the cuffs. He looked at the one on his left wrist as he paced along the end of his tether. It had been put on, so there was a way to remove it. There was always a way.

Which model was this? He knew it. He knew he'd taken it apart. He found one of the joints, almost a perfect fit. His claw wouldn't slip in, but he could feel where both halves connected. He turned it around and struck out at the person who spoke in his ear.

His fist struck the wall and pain ran up the arm. He didn't react to the pain; he wouldn't show them any weakness. "You will not break me," he grumbled to his absent brother. "Father couldn't, and you will never be as terrifying as he was."

He focused on one of the voices. He couldn't make out the words, but the tone, the cadence, they were familiar to him. They had to be. This person knew him. He could tell.

He looked around. They couldn't have gone far, the cowards. He would find them and he would make them—

"Eratus!" He looked at the cuffs. That was who made these, which meant he was wrong. They weren't two halves connecting together; that seam had been for the cover. All he had to do was remove it and he'd have access to the control module. With that overloaded, these would be useless pieces of metal instead of restraints.

Yes, he knew he'd worked on them.

He reached for his belt and felt fur. He was naked. He didn't have any tools.

They were laughing at him again, and he glared at the guards. "I knew it!" he told them. "I was just distracted. It isn't like I'm not used to being naked. Unlike you, I don't need to cover myself. You're the ones who can't stand being naked."

Let them be ashamed of what they were. He didn't have time to waste on that. He had more important things to do.

"Show yourselves, cowards! Come and laugh at me to my face. See how much you like it." He glared at the guards. "What about you? Do you want to laugh at me, too?"

They shook their heads.

"You're lying, I know you want to. I know you're doing it when my back's turned."

"We're not—"

Tristan locked eyes on the young man and he turned white.

"It doesn't matter how good you are. I know you're laughing too." He straightened. "It doesn't matter. You're all going to die, anyway."

He turned and headed to the wall.

He sat against it and studied the cuff. Now that he knew who'd made it, he could...

Who had made it? He couldn't have forgotten already. He'd known it only seconds ago, had figured it out. He cursed. Who was it?

He could figure it out again.

He studied the cuff, felt along the seam. Searched for the other one. There had to be another one. When he got bored with it, he studied the other one. He didn't learn anything new, so he moved to the ankle cuffs.

They kept mocking him. Mocking his determination to beat them. To win, to survive. "I will survive," he told himself.

His eyes closed and snapped open. He couldn't sleep. Escape, he had to escape. Reach the door. Make Justin pay.

He rested his head against the wall and thought. He would find a way out. That whisperer he almost recognized said something he almost understood. It was the kind of thing he always said to Tristan. Never once had he been complimentary; it didn't matter how hard Tristan tried, even if he'd succeeded. Put down, always put down.

His head snapped up and pain shook the tiredness away. He'd almost fallen asleep, he noted as he rubbed the back of his head. He couldn't do that, though he wasn't sure why, other than it was bad.

Tristan got to his feet and stabbed the air. The laughter redoubled, but he ignored it. He wasn't trying to hit one of them. This was practice, training. It was to get the blood pumping, keep himself awake until he came up with a way to get out of here.

Someone snorted. Not a whispered snort at the edge of his hearing, something loud. "I got to say, boy. I don't think you're up to that task."

Tristan froze.

He couldn't be here.

"Really?" the voice said. "And why would that be? Oh right, you think..." He chuckled. "Yeah, who's surprised that you screwed that up?"

Cautiously, he turned.

The Samalian standing before him was a couple of inches shorter, Justin's height. His fur was pale gray with dark swirls through it, not the dark brown of Tristan's fur. He and Justin took their coloring from their mother. He remembered her fur.

"You're dead."

The Samalian felt himself. "I don't feel dead."

"You were dead, I checked. I'd never have left you alive to come after me?"

He tilted an ear. "Really? So you think you're the only one clever enough to play dead?"

Tristan snorted. "You were never that clever."

"So you think I taught you everything I knew?"

Tristan stepped to him. "Yes. You were so desperate to show how great you were, but all you knew was delivering was pain and misery." He grabbed the man by the neck. He didn't bother squeezing; it wouldn't do any good. "I took everything you could give me, learned everything you had to teach." He placed his thumb under the muzzle, between the two solid bones there, and pressed. The man began struggling, trying to breathe. He grabbed at Tristan's arm, hit it, clawed at it.

"And then you killed me," the man said from behind him. Tristan spun. "How's that working out for you?"

He wasn't holding him anymore. "How?"

"You keep thinking you're smarter than everyone, boy. That's your problem. You thought you could kill me because you had nothing left to learn from me."

"No. You stood in my way. That's why you died. I told you to go back to Justin, I told you to go take care of him and let me leave. You had nothing for me anymore."

"Is that so?" The clang of the cage door resounded through the air.

Tristan jumped, searched around him, and felt the bars pressed against him. Then it

was gone. There was ample space between him and the bars.

“Seems to me I still have one thing for you.”

“It’s a trick. You’re dead.”

The Samalian tilted an ear.

Tristan looked up. “I know you’re doing this, Justin.”

“Oh please,” a new voice said behind him. “Stop it already with the blaming me for everything.”

Tristan stepped sideways, then turned to look at both of them. How had Justin entered the cage without making a sound? No, when his father had shut it, that clang, that was when. He’d done it to distract him.

He saw the guards studying him, looking perplexed. They probably hadn’t figured out how his brother and father had made it inside the cage. Let them wonder.

“I’ve never blamed you for anything.”

“Really?” Justin drew out the word, making it a mockery of itself. “And why is it exactly that you sent me here? Come on, help me out. No? Then let me refresh your memory. I got stuck in one of those tubes because you, wait for it, blamed me for getting caught.”

“You set it up.”

“Oh please, why would I do that? I was nice and busy running my corporation. I didn’t think about you. You were the furthest thing from my mind, but you couldn’t stand that you hadn’t been perfect. One merc, that’s all it took to catch the great and amazing Tristan. So of course, it had to be a plot by little old me. No matter the truth, you had to fabricate a trail that led to me.”

“You ran.”

Justin looked at him in disbelief. “I ran. Really? You come gunning for me and you’re surprised that I ran? You were leaving dead bodies in your wake. What was I supposed to do, get a pot of coffee going? Put out little morsels of nutrient bars on a platter? Of course I ran, you idiot. Considering the number of times you try to kill me.”

“I never did that.”

Justin crossed his arms over his chest. “You tried to blow me up, twice.”

“You’d already fled when I detonated them. I didn’t want you dead, I wanted you to suffer.”

“Convenient that, you wanted him to suffer. Great excuse for screwing up over and over. You just can’t do anything right, that’s your problem.”

“Shut up,” Tristan growled.

“And then,” Justin continued, “you go and find someone to blame.”

“Shut up!”

“Or what?” Justin asked. “You’re going to try to kill me again?”

Tristan lunged for Justin, but his brother wasn’t there.

“Yep.” His father threw his hands in the air. “Can’t even do that right.”

He spun, and the two of them were side by side. “How did you move so fast?”

Justin looked around. “Fast? I wasn’t fast. You’re slow. Always were.”

“How long did it take until you finally managed to kill something?” his father asked. “How many beatings did it take before you finally learned?”

“I was a child! I didn’t want to hurt anything!”

“You were *made* to hurt *everything*!” His father was before him and Tristan stepped back. “It took me so long to get that to stick, and how do you repay me?”

Tristan lunged forward, and this time he was the faster one. The knife sunk in his father’s chest. He held the older Samalian and lowered his muzzle to his hear. “The only thing you taught me is to survive at all cost, to remove any obstacle in my way. The rest I learned on my own.”

“That’s why you killed father?” Justin looked at the body at Tristan’s feet. “You blamed

him because you couldn't learn what he had to teach you?"

"He was in my way," Tristan snarled. "He was keeping me from leaving."

"You weren't ready," his father sighed. The body was gone, the floor was clean, the knife was gone. The man stood away, shaking his head. "I tried so hard with you. I wanted you to make me proud. If only you'd stayed, can you imagine the things we'd have done together, the three of us? No, you had to snap my neck and go about sowing chaos and destruction."

"I survived," Tristan said, hearing the bones break, feeling them under his hands. It was difficult to break a Samalian neck, but not impossible.

"You call that surviving? How many times was it pure luck that you didn't die?"

"Never! I've been holding the universe at bay through my planning and my actions. Not because of—"

"And there he goes again, blaming something else." Justin was lying on the ground, shaking his head. "Like the universe ever did anything to you."

Tristan pointed to their father. "Didn't you listen to anything he taught us? The universe is a harsh place, always looking to destroy us."

"I never said that."

Tristan stared at his father. "You did."

"You're just blaming him for something else you created."

He looked from one to the other. "He did! I remember it."

"Like your memory is such a great thing," his father scoffed.

It had been the coming of the cold season. There had been a fire for warmth, and he'd been falling asleep in the heat. His father was telling them how the universe wanted them dead, that one day it would find them and send people to kill them, that it would never stop, that they could never, ever give in to the temptation to drop their guard.

"I never said that," his father said.

"Fine," Tristan agreed. "You said it was the world that would come for us. You always did think small."

"No, I didn't say any of it. I took care of you. You were an ingrate and ruined everything we could have done."

He went to reply, but a new voice stopped him.

"Don't listen to them." He relaxed at hearing that voice. Everything would be fine if he was here. He turned and smiled at the human standing before him.

Alex was dressed in his usual gray and crimson. "All they ever did was stand in your way."

"You're here. You found me. You need to help me get out of here. If you kill the guards, you can get the remote, shut it down, and we can get out."

Alex smiled. "You don't need me. You're Tristan, and nothing can stop you." Hearing Alex say that, he could believe it again. "All you need is to be patient, and they'll make a mistake. Humans always make mistakes, that's what you always told me. You could always count on that. So be patient. Wait and watch. When the time comes, you can kill all of them."

He reached for Alex, but he was further than he'd thought. "Alex, don't go." The desperation in his voice scared him. He couldn't be attached, he wouldn't. He didn't need anyone.

Except Alex.

"I'm here."

Tristan relaxed. "You did something to me."

"I know." Alex guided him to the wall.

Out of the corner of his eyes he saw someone, a golden-furred Samalian he'd seen before. He was shaking his head sadly, but he was so far away it might not be because of Tristan.

“You need to rest,” Alex said.

That was true. He sat against the wall.

“So long as you ignore them, and only listen to me, it will all be okay.”

Tristan smiled and closed his eyes. Yes, so long as Alex was there, it would all be fine.