

Tristan installed the new terminal in the room Alex used, and programmed a firewall to keep it from talking to the computer in the workroom. It was something crude that Alex would notice the first time he looked through the code, but this wasn't about hiding; it was about making a loud "stay out" statement. If Alex decided to bypass that, then he would deserve what happened.

The morning training improved. Having Alex properly injured gave Tristan a sense of how quickly he healed and regained full motion. Paying attention to Alex's golden body also gave him a sense of how his muscles moved, of the sheen on them as sweat accumulated.

Because of the heat, Alex began doing the afternoon knife fights shirtless, and Tristan's eyes roamed his tanned chest and arms, appreciating the strength and agility in them. The distraction cost him three cuts on his arm and one on his leg.

Alex learned fast. Not so fast he could adapt during the fight and avoid the injuries Tristan gave him, but within a few days he'd have worked out a way to protect himself from that specific attack. And now, after all this time, he was able to avoid some moves Tristan used on him for the first time. Tristan nodded to himself when he realized Alex had learned to read his body, and proceeded to start lying with it to keep the human on his toes.

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Tristan stood in the doorway to the room Alex used, watching him. Alex had moved the computer to a corner, moving the boxes. Tristan was pleased to note he kept them alphabetical. It was turned to the side and gave Tristan a profile view of Alex, and he stood there, watching him work.

Alex should have seen him—the angle was so acute—but he was focused on the screen, typing and speaking. When he stopped what he was doing, Tristan moved away just as he lifted his head.

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Motion caught Tristan's attention in the window of the door leading outside. He put his tool down and stepped to it. Alex was outside wearing only shorts in the summer heat, and he was practicing. Alex favored knives, but he'd been taught to use his entire body in a fight. Kicks, knees, elbows, forehead. Alex was comparatively clumsy with them, but better than any human Tristan had fought.

He watched the human's tanned chest heave when he paused, not to catch his breath, but to build the next fighting scenario he'd go through—his motions were too directed to be random slashes. Tristan smiled as he watched him fight. He was working his way through the newest attack Tristan had used on him.

As always, he was pleased to know Alex took his fighting seriously.

He remained in place, watching his legs move, the layer of sweat giving them a glow in the sunlight. His arms bulged as he prepared a strike. Alex paused, put the knives away and his arms over his head. He was slightly angled to Tristan's position, giving him enough of a view to see not only the sweat that covered his chest, but the line of it rolling down over his stomach. Tristan found himself following the trail with his eyes, just as Alex stretched and arched his back, stretching the fabric of his shorts and making the bulge there clear.

Tristan's breath caught, and then he frowned. What was he doing? He had more important things to do than watch Alex.

He went back to his research.

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His hand was holding the Kaelic Pacifier, but Tristan didn't notice it. He was thinking about the training he'd had with Alex. Not the moves, not even how Alex had moved, just Alex. The way his muscles had bunched under his golden skin. How hard he'd fought to get out of the hold Tristan had him in. Then he was thinking of another time he'd held him, but Alex hadn't tried to get out of that hold. He'd pressed back against his body and moaned.

Tristan panted as his body reacted to the memory, then growled for allowing himself to lose control like this. He didn't care for the pleasure he'd experienced; that had been a job, irrelevant now.

He put the Kaelic on the table and retrieved his tools. He needed to see how much work it took to bypass the regulator and make it deadly.

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He heard Alex panting behind him. Tristan had pushed them hard for the last part of the run, and Alex had managed to keep up. He knew that if he turned, Alex would be bent, hands on his knees, but that wasn't what the panting reminded him of.

The two of them, spent after hours of sex. Alex still sitting on Tristan's groin looking down at him, the memory's chest matching the sound he was hearing. His body reacted again, and he clenched his teeth shut to keep the growl from escaping.

Why was his body doing this? It didn't want sex, because sex wasn't something Tristan wanted. It was something he used, and there was no need for it now, no job being done. Pleasure was like every other emotion, a tool to be used to manipulate others. He'd let himself enjoy the sex, because it was what the mask called for. It was the way to bind the mark to him. But now? He didn't need it. So why was his body reacting like this? He took a breath and forced control back on his body.

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Alex was moving before him.

There was nothing but Alex and him. No house, no ground, just the two of them in an infinite emptiness.

Alex moved like he did when he fought, decisively, but he didn't hold knives, and the movement stretched the fabric of the shirt over his chest, of the pants over his legs. He moved slowly, the attacks against a non-existing opponent sensual.

Tristan didn't have to go to him; Alex's movement brought him. He pressed against Tristan, turned, and ran his hands over sensitive places.

Tristan growled, not to make it stop, but because he wanted to grab him, raise him and do pleasurable things to him, but he couldn't move. His body wouldn't obey him as Alex's hands ran through his fur, cupped and caressed places that hadn't been touched like this in...since the last time Alex had touched him in this way.

Alex turned and pressed his back against Tristan. With a moan he ground his ass on Tristan's needy groin. Alex took Tristan's hands and placed them on his chest, running them up and down the silky fabric. Tristan wanted to claw it away. He wanted to feel flesh under his fingers.

Alex guided the hands lower, over the rough material of the pants, and Tristan felt Alex's need, the need he so desperately wanted to fill.

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He opened his eyes.

He didn't growl, although he was angry. To do that, to yell, scream, would be an admission he wasn't in control.

He forced his breathing to slow.

The dream had been bad enough, but he could feel his erection, the need to go to Alex's room and use it. He could sense Alex calling to him, offering himself, but he knew that was just the remnant of the dream.

He was Tristan.

Urges didn't control him, he controlled them. He brought them out in others and used them to get what he wanted. This was the universe trying to get to him again, trying to get him to make a mistake so it could kill him.

He wouldn't lose control.

He was in control, not the universe.

His breathing slowed, but the erection remained. The growl escaped him as he stood. In the shower he entered the override code and raised the temperature until he could barely tolerate it, and then a few more degrees.

There was only so much heat he could endure, so it was the perfect reminder to his body of who was in control. He stayed there, kept his hands away from the control, even if all he wanted to do was lower the temperature. His body knew what it needed to do for the discomfort to end.

When his erection finally went away, he shut the water down and dried himself. When the steam had cleared and the room's climate controls made it comfortable again, he enjoyed the cool air before heading back to bed.

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He wouldn't look.

He had work to do.

He was in control.

He was at the window, watching Alex again.

With a growl, he turned. He comforted himself that his mind hadn't gone wandering this time, and that his body had stayed firmly under his control as he sat and went back to study the blueprints of the new Kataran Destroyer.

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He felt the cut on his chest, the fifth cut during this practice. His gaze had dropped to Alex's crotch, and the pouch in the short that suggested something he already knew to be ample. His mind had provided the reminder, and then he felt the heat on his chest as a reminder that he needed to keep his body from betraying him to the human.

He was in control, he ordered himself, not his urges. Not that human, with his tantalizing muscles, and what he kept barely hidden by the shorts. He, Tristan, was in control.

He fixed his gaze on the human and attacked, pressing until Alex hissed in pain and a long, shallow cut appeared on his face, almost a mirror of the scar on his other cheek.

Tristan controlled his life and those in it; the universe only thought it was in charge. Tristan wouldn't let anything this human did take that away. If he thought teasing him would work, Tristan had a surprise for him.

"Strip."

"Wha—"

Tristan took a step forward, but Alex hurriedly took off the shorts and threw them with the shirt. Tristan watched him, his tanned skin gaining a pinkish hue, except for his midsection, which was still pale, his darker hands contrasting as he covered his groin. The skin-protection pill had worn off, and the tan was natural now.

"From now on, unless someone is over, you will remain naked."

Tristan expected protests, but while still confused, Alex nodded.

Tristan took care of the confusion by attacking him.

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They sat at their table in the tavern. The wife of the tavern owner came to serve them, but for the first time, didn't say anything, only blushed. Tristan didn't react to it, and after a moment, Alex worked out who the house along their course belonged to and also blushed.

Tristan didn't show how pleased he was at Alex's discomfort. He'd thought he could trick him, and it had been turned against him.

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Tristan's satisfaction didn't last.

The next day, during their training, his gaze drifted down again, and on top of there being an even tan, from the pills Alex took that morning, he could see the effect the fight had on Alex, and he had to work at staying focused. He kept comparing the inept, plump human he'd used, to the lean, muscled human before him. The scars on his body spoke of someone who'd taken control of his fears, and had gone out to confront the universe.

Tristan felt something. He'd felt it before when he'd noted how good Alex was with his knives. It hadn't been sexual then, but now it echoed off the other things he felt when looking at Alex, and his mind tried to go down a path he wouldn't let it. With an effort, he buried that emotion with the others that didn't serve him.

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Alex was moving before him. Sensual movement, only made more so because he was nude. Tristan wanted him. He wanted him in ways that burned inside, that hurt. He wanted to go to him, to run his hands over that golden skin, to take him and bury himself deep inside him until they were both screaming in pleasure.

He couldn't go to him, and instead of moving closer, Alex's dance took him further away. Tristan fought the chains that held him back. He screamed for Alex to come back. The need in his voice, the pain, was almost more than he could bear.

Alex continued moving away, taking his seduction with him.

He fought the chains, pulled on them, yelled at his frustration at being denied. He was Tristan! He always got what he wanted. And he wanted, needed, this human! He had to feel

him against his fur, to enter him, to fill him like he had never been filled before. With one supreme effort he pulled, and the chains broke.

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Tristan opened his eyes, the sound of his panting loud. He tried to sit, but his fingers stuck in the roll. His claws had dug in, and he pulled them out, ripping the fabric in the process.

He didn't want anything the human had to offer, he reminded himself.

His erection contradicted him.

This time, he had to make the shower scalding before his body gave in to his commands.

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He woke Alex by attacking him, as usual, but where he would have used fists on previous days, this morning he used claws. He would punish the human for what he was putting him through.

He batted aside all of Alex's attacks, struck through and around his defenses. Alex tried to take his ferociousness, but he couldn't.

When Tristan finally shoved the human away, cut and bruised, and left the room, he was exhausted and hurting, but one thing was definite: he no longer wanted the human.

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For the following weeks, anytime Tristan felt something for the human—not Alex, the human—he attacked him and beat that emotion into submission.

And Alex—no, the human—took it. He fought harder, learned, and kept getting up. Tristan felt other emotions for Al—the human, things he'd never felt before, like admiration and respect, but they got tangled with the desire that kept coming back, so he buried them too.

Only one person mattered to Tristan, and that was Tristan, he told himself over and over as he attacked the human. Anyone else, anything else, was only there for him to use. Tools in his ongoing quest to survive the universe. To feel something, anything, for one of them only set him up to be killed.

That would not happen.

So he fought harder.

He fought Alex. He fought himself.

He fought the universe.

He wouldn't lose.

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He saw Alex—sweaty, bloody, panting, hands on his knees as he caught his breath—instead of the lock he wanted to dismantle. Alex was smiling, even chuckling. They had fought until both were out of breath, and Alex had enjoyed himself.

His enjoyment had stood proudly for Tristan to see.

With a growl, Tristan buried that image with everything else he felt about the human and focused on his project.

The Juriken Implacable was supposed to be the company's masterpiece, even better than any of Titanial's locks. A mix of a mechanical, electronic, and biometrical mechanism that would—Alex was panting and chuckling. The motion made his erection bounce in ways that invit— He shoved the image away.

Alex had done it on purpose. The human knew how he affected Tristan. Somehow, he'd seen through his carefully crafted indifference and was making sure to distract him, to force him to make a mistake.

Tristan slammed a fist on the table and pieces of the lock bounced. He heard some of them hit the floor, but he didn't care. He didn't make mistakes. He was in control!

He cursed as his fist left a bloody imprint on the table. He opened his hand. He'd dug his claws into his palm. Trying to keep his breathing even, he cleaned the mess, washed the wound, and applied sealant, then collected the pieces on the floor.

Alex had purposely done this to him. He'd forced himself into Tristan's life, disrupted his careful order. He'd made it so Tristan couldn't think properly, distracted him with his body, with his scent. Alex was making sure Tristan would get killed.

He'd tried to put the human in his place, he'd tried to beat him there, but nothing seemed to work. He just didn't seem to understand who was in charge here.

An image came to him, and he smiled. Well, if the human wouldn't understand the attacks for what they were, Tristan knew of another way to put him in his place.

Grinning, he went stalking to the house, looking for his victim.