

There was someone in the room with Alex.

The knowledge was instinctual, a sense honed over years of sleeping among people he couldn't trust. A presence meant a threat. His hand was in the pack and out with the gun before his eyes opened.

Pain made him open them. A brown form, large, with a hand on his wrist. The hand twisted and Alex screamed. The gun clattered on the floor. Alex was released, and he cradled his hand to his chest. He tested it. Not broken, just bruised.

"A Nurri 634." Tristan held Alex's gun, looking it over. "Low power, inaccurate, non-lethal, and easy to overload. Not that it'll do much damage even that way."

"It's easy to conceal," Alex grumbled. He put his good hand on the floor, resting his weight on it, and moved the other one to force himself to get over the pain.

Tristan looked from the weapon to Alex. "Do not point a weapon at me unless it is capable of killing me." He stood and placed the Nurri on a shelf, and crossed his arms over his chest. "Now attack me."

"What?" The question came, equally surprise at the instruction and at noticing Tristan was naked.

"The blade you are reaching for, take it an attack me."

Alex froze. He'd thought readjusting his weight to justify moving his hand closer to the edge of his pillow had been discreet enough. He could just feel the knife's handle with the tip of a finger.

He didn't move the hand, closer or away, but looked up into Tristan's face. "I didn't come here to fight you."

Tristan looked at him impassively. "You forced yourself into my environment. You will not leave. You wasted time with whatever you made last night. Since you intend to stay, I will say this only once. When I tell you to do something, do it. Now, attack me."

Alex jumped to his feet, knife in hand. He swung, but the Samalian was already out of reach. Alex reeled back, hand going to his face. He wiped his mouth, and the hand came away bloody.

Why now? Tristan could have killed him in his sleep, so why now? And why wasn't he pressing his advantage? Tristan stood there, looking bored.

Alex charged, swinging the blade in short arcs. Tristan stepped aside to avoid being cut. Alex moved in the cleared space and reached under the shelf, coming out with another knife. He felt more comfortable with two knives, although he wondered why the vibro-blade hadn't turned on.

He swung at the approaching Tristan, but couldn't shake that he was sure he'd checked the blade before hiding it. It had worked fine.

A fist came at him and he barely dodged. First survive, then worry about weapon defects. It still had an edge and a point, so he could use it. Maneuver to get a different one, a working one.

Swings and lunges forced Tristan into a corner, stopping himself before he backed into the boxes. The Samalian seemed as determined to keep Alex from damaging them as from cutting him.

He didn't know how far Tristan wanted to take this, but Alex hadn't trained to give quarters. He moved in, slashing high and low. The low strike was the most threatening one, but his intent had been to give Tristan a slash across the muzzle to show he wasn't kidding around.

Tristan moved faster than Alex registered. He felt an impact against the hand going for his muzzle, deflecting it, then a hand gripped his bruised wrist. The yell of pain was leaving his lips before Tristan's hand tightened, but that was cut off by a hand around his throat.

In the ensuing silence, Alex heard both knives hit the floor.

Alex grabbed the arm with his good hand and squeezed. When that didn't do anything, he hit the arm. Tristan tightened his hand around Alex's throat in return. Alex kept hitting it, but it was like hitting a metal bar. He tried to speak, to beg for his life, to call out to Jack to do something, but no air would get through. He pleaded with his eyes, but the Samalian's gaze was implacable—cold, taking neither pleasure nor sorrow in what he was doing.

Alex's vision was turning gray when Tristan broke eye contact. He dropped Alex, who gasped for breath, but never took his eyes off the Samalian as he tried to keep his footing.

Tristan brought the arm to his nose and sniffed it before running a finger through the fur. It

came away glistening with wetness. Tristan's eyebrows went up, and he regarded Alex.

Alex saw it then. Him, he saw Jack in the monster's eyes. The hint of satisfaction in them, and then it was gone.

"It seems," Tristan said as he rubbed his fingers together, "that you are not entirely worthless." His face hardened. "You need to better protect your neck. Be outside in fifteen minutes." He turned and stopped. "One more thing: do not ever tamper with the shower's temperature again."

Alex swallowed hard. He'd expected the Samalian to be excited after a fight, but he had been as limp as when it began. Fuck. Alex was excited. He wanted... He wanted the Samalian to take him. He'd almost died at his hand, and now he wanted him to f— "No," he growled to himself. He wanted Jack, not that. He wanted to be held, caressed. Loved. A slight moan escaped his lips. Jack had been there, pleased that Alex had managed to cut Tristan. Was that the method? Did he have to defeat the monster to release his lover?

If that was what was needed, then he would do it.

He picked up the vibro-knife off the floor and studied the handle. It looked fine. He gripped it, but it didn't come on. He opened it to check the power pack and a piece of plastic fell into his hand. Not a pack, just plastic about the right size and weight of a power pack.

Alex went through the room. Every vibro-knife he'd hidden had a plastic piece in place of the pack. He had tested them before hiding them, and retested them before sleeping since he'd been out of the house.

Tristan couldn't have done it while Alex slept; no one moved that softly. He would have felt it if the Samalian had entered the room, just like he'd felt him when he stood over him.

Wouldn't he?

He looked at the knives on the floor, and much of his certainty vanished.

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Unsure of what was coming, Alex waited outside. Tristan joined him, arm washed and seal-gel visible through the fur.

And very much still naked.

Tristan ran off at a jog without saying anything. Alex ran after him, and spent the next two hours trying to catch up to the Samalian. The trail was well-trodden, going around the forest, then through a plain with a house in view. It rounded back and then through the forest, then out again to return to Tristan's house from the opposite direction.

Tristan headed for his workroom without bothering to put anything on. Alex stayed there, panting, trying to stop seeing that ass. Trying to stop thinking about what else he knew of that body, how it had felt against him, in him.

He ran inside, threw his clothing in a corner, and headed for the shower. The shock of the cold made him gasp, but he couldn't change the temperature; Tristan had locked the controls. He forced himself to endure the cold, hoping it could curb his desires and his body's reactions to them.

He was starved for sex. That was why he was reacting this way. He didn't want Tristan, he was just reacting because the body was that of Jack and because it had been years since he'd felt a body against his. He'd probably have reacted this way if a human man were to press against him at this point.

It was his mantra throughout the day. The body wasn't what he needed. It was Jack.

The run reminded him that even if the temperature outside wasn't hot, the sun still shone down. His exposed skin was red and felt burned, even after the shower. He found the bottle of skin protection pills he'd bought after that job in the desert had left him blistered and burned, and popped in two of the pills.

After they had lunch at the tavern, Alex placed an order for meats and vegetables to be delivered. Tristan hadn't touched the meal in the cooler, so Alex had his meal for that night, but he didn't want to have to buy his ingredients every day.

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The next day began with another attack on Alex as his wake-up call. It ended when Tristan disarmed him, leaving Alex's sides bruised. He hadn't managed to injure the Samalian this time. After the fight, they went for a run.

When they came back, Alex had a cold shower to try to get his body to obey him and stop

wanting Tristan. Then he prepared himself a breakfast. Tristan walked by as he headed for the shower, but didn't comment on the food, or Alex's darker skin.

Lunch was uneventful in that people acted like the two of them eating silently at the same table was how it had always been. Joanifer, the owner's wife, stopped by and talked with Tech. She spoke with Alex and he did his best to appear attentive, but she picked up on his lack of interest and moved along.

When they returned to the house, Tristan went back to his workroom.

Alex wandered around the house and the edge of the forest since he had nothing to do. The area reminded him of his father's house, but instead of the forest, it had been the edge of the orchard. He'd wandered among the trees feeling free and happy—well, until his father caught him in bed with— He shuddered, and forced himself to think of something else. Being kicked out of the house had been traumatic enough. He didn't want to have to remember that too.

When dinner came, Alex reheated what he'd left for Tristan and ate alone. He cleaned up and went to bed.

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It became the routine. Day after day, woken up being attacked, the run, the shower, and trying to keep occupied.

When he'd had enough, he remembered that he had his own training regimen that he'd been neglecting. He grabbed two of his knives and stood outside. He began with the slow movement he'd been taught as a warm up, then moved into faster motions, attacks and parries Zephyr had taught him, that he'd improved on.

A shadow fell on him and he reacted, dodging and slashing. He cut air, but he'd forced Tristan to sidestep and go off balance. Alex attacked him, seeing the dangerous smile on the Samalian's face, but not caring. This had been his time, not Tristan's.

Tristan blocked with a knife. One of Alex's knives. The Samalian attacked back, fast slashes and thrusts Alex had trouble keeping up with. He pushed Tristan back and was forced back himself.

He'd thought Zephyr had been an expert. Alex had never come across anyone who had pushed him as hard as Zephyr had, until now. Tristan only used one knife, but managed to block both of Alex's attacks. He struck so fast Alex realized he had been an attacked when he felt the cut, not seeing the knife coming.

Zephyr hadn't been fast.

He'd been a slug.

Tristan didn't move, he transported himself. He'd be on Alex's right, then the left, without crossing the space between. A cut would appear, but as far as Alex could tell, Tristan hadn't stepped close enough.

He'd known that Tristan could kill him. Every report he'd read made it clear Tristan was a remorseless killer, but until now he'd never understood the ease with which the Samalian could do it. If Tristan ever decided Alex was to die, Alex wouldn't even know it had happened.

Instead of discouraging Alex, that thought pushed him. Alex wouldn't be killed without fighting back. He wouldn't ever come close to it and not have given as good as he'd received. Never again.

The fight stopped when Alex fell to his knees, unable to breathe anymore. His shirt was sliced up, red instead of white from all the shallow cuts covering his arms and chest.

Tristan stood, regarding him. In the sunlight, against his dark brown fur, Alex saw one wet line, on his leg. Tristan's face didn't show anything, as usual, but Alex knew that this fight had been different. He could see the Samalian's excitement.

If only he hadn't been so exhausted, he might have been able to rejoice at that. Or at the fact he had managed to cut Tristan. As it was, Alex had trouble taking in air.

Tristan went inside, and when Alex was able to pull himself up and to his room, the shower was running. He swallowed a couple of Heal Alls, and when Tristan vacated the bathroom, he took a shower, the cold forcing his awareness to the surface. Once clean, he applied sealant on the cuts and made himself dinner.

The next day, Tristan ordered him outside in the afternoon for another fight. And they fought as hard, with similar results. It happened the next day and the one after that. Alex always ended on his knees, and Tristan always enjoyed the fight, even if his face never showed it.

The days turned into weeks, and one morning, Tristan grabbed a piece of broiled meat off Alex's plate, sniffed it, and ate it. He shrugged and continued to his workroom.

That evening Alex prepared two plates, and sat to eat. Tristan joined him without comment, ate in silence, and when he was done, went back to the workroom.

Alex wasn't sure what to think of it. Tristan hadn't looked like he enjoyed the food; it had been methodical consumption. The only thing he'd left was the slice of cake. He'd taken a bite, made a face, and not touched it again. He tried to see the Samalian's eyes while he ate, but hadn't managed it. He was sure that if he had, he would have known if Jack was there.

Still, Alex considered it a win.

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And it continued. He made breakfast and dinner for the two of them, and they ate in silence. If not for the dreams, Alex could find contentment in what he had while he worked out how to get Jack back.

Sexual dreams weren't new for Alex. Sometimes he felt that the dreams of Jack and the sex they shared, and would share again, were the only thing keeping him sane. There had been other dreams, other men, faceless, or men he'd fantasized about in his youth. The kind of dreams any man who abstained were bound to have.

But now he dreamed of Tristan, of the monster he sometimes wanted in his desperation for company. When Tristan took him, there was nothing gentle about it. It was hard, violent, without mercy, and in the dreams it always left him wanting more. In some of those dreams he'd hear his father's voice sneering at him, telling him this was all that he deserved.

He woke up in the middle of the night, confused and ashamed of the feeling he was left with. How could he want that over what Jack offered? What he hated even more was that his body demanded attention after those dreams. Wouldn't let him go back to sleep until he took care of it. He felt like he was betraying Jack.

During the day he reminded himself Jack was who he wanted. No one else. It was only a question of time until Jack showed him the chink in Tristan's armor, just like the metal diamond occasionally flashed at him through the fur, and then the two of them would be together.

The weeks turned into months, each day the same: fighting, running, breakfast, nothing, lunch, fighting, nothing, dinner, nothing, sleep, and then the dreams. On days where Tristan had to go help someone from the town, Alex had even less to do.

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On this day, Tristan had left with an artisan. The man had introduced himself to Alex as Ikary, and explained that he worked with fused quartz, then went on about something being broken and being sorry to take Tech away from him, but he could come if he wanted to. Tristan was behind the man, so he didn't see the expression the Samalian gave Alex, but he hadn't needed it. He wasn't interested in watching Tristan play the role of Tech, not when watching him act reminded Alex of what he'd been through.

That had been right after lunch, and Tristan—Tech—had mentioned it would take most of the day, so Alex was left with nothing to do. After the intensive knife fights, practicing alone didn't hold much appeal.

He checked his knives—Tristan no longer took the packs out of them—took his gun apart, inspected the components, and reassembled it. He'd inspected the house twice, out of boredom.

He was in the kitchen when he walked by the door to the workroom, and remembered the computer in it. When was the last time he'd checked any of his twenty identities? Not since arriving here. And he hadn't on the merc ship. He had no way to be certain they didn't have a monitoring system independent of their ship's system.

He was looking at over a year now. Had any of them been scheduled for a tweak to avoid triggering pattern-recognition programs?

Before he thought about it, he opened the door, and let go in surprise as it did open.

When had Tristan stopped locking it? When was the last time Alex had tested it? He hadn't, really. The last time he'd tried entering was a week after settling in; he'd wanted to ask Tristan

something.

Had his lack in trying the door led to Tristan not locking it? Maybe he'd forgotten before leaving for lunch? Right, like Tristan ever forgot something. What kind of security did the door have? The room? If the door had them, it was already too late. Would the room record his presence? Alert Tristan he was there?

What this a test? Had Tristan engineered Ikary's need so Alex would be alone? Maybe Tristan had doubled back when Alex wasn't looking and he was hiding, waiting for him to...what? If this was a test, what were the parameters? It wasn't like Tristan had said anything about this room.

Anything at all.

He began closing the door and stopped. Cameras and sensors were likely, but Tristan wasn't here. As cunning as the Samalian was, what was the point? He dug the portable scanner from his pack and checked the room from the doorway. If the security had any kind of intelligence it would hide from the scan, but why would Tristan have something like that here?

The room was clear.

That didn't inspire the confidence it would if he was dealing with anyone else. Still, he stepped in. He paused and looked around. Taking in the space, he told himself, when the reality was that he wanted to make sure Tristan wasn't standing in a corner.

He didn't touch anything as he walked by the table. He had no idea what it was Tristan was working on; everything had been taken apart. He put the earpiece in and didn't even bother trying to make it comfortable. He couldn't waste any time.

He sat and looked at the computer. "Okay, talk to me."