

Tristan listened to the birds, the small animals, the rustling of the leaves in the breeze, all the while trying to find the words to explain to Alex what he was planning. For possibly the first time in his life, words wouldn't come. He couldn't come up with the words that would calm Alex while explaining how important this was.

He thought he had something when the trees thinned out and a wooden structure appeared before them. Tristan froze on seeing the metal object next to the old cabin.

He hadn't expected the cage to be standing—or the cabin for that matter, not that there was much of that left. The forest had mostly reclaimed it, moss growing along the base, small trees breaking through the walls.

The cage was untouched. The metal still gleamed in the light, the floor covered with debris, but nothing grew there. He shuddered at memories, real and fabricated, involving the cage.

“What is this place?” Alex asked.

“This—” Tristan's voice cracked, earning him a stare from Alex. He willed his pulse to calm, his breathing to slow. “This is where I grew up.” He indicated what was left of the cabin. “My father's cabin. My brother and I lived here after he took us from our mother.”

“And that?”

Tristan didn't look. He didn't have to; there was nothing else Alex could ask about.

He still heard the door slam shut. The days he spent begging to be let out. Promising anything, to do anything for his father. Some of the things he recalled promising couldn't have been real; he hadn't known about those acts as a boy. Additions from his time under the drugs.

“It's where I was put anytime I did something wrong.” He was surprised at how steady his voice was. He wasn't trying to be strong. The purpose in coming here was to show he wouldn't hide his emotions around Alex anymore, but everything he'd been forced to feel while drugged didn't seem to have left very much now that he was willing to talk about the cage.

Tristan rubbed his arms. “Or anytime he felt like it. I'm not sure he ever had a plan when it came to us, other than making us survivors, like him.”

Alex gasped, and something had to have shown on Tristan's face, because Alex's emotions were right there on the surface—dismay, pity, love, fear. Tristan read his desire, his wanting to hold him, to comfort him, and then Alex's face closed off. He became the weapon again.

Tristan's heart broke, but not because he didn't get the reaction he wanted. He'd done this to Alex. He hadn't used a cage to break him, but he'd still done the same thing his father had: forced him to wall off his emotions, to control himself, no matter what. To survive, instead of live.

Alex looked around, stepped to the cage, looked in. Tristan saw him steel himself. “I guess it makes sense this is where it'll happen.” He turned to face Tristan, and Tristan read nothing on his face. One of the rare times Alex managed to shut himself down completely.

“What do you think is going to happen?” He wanted to make his tone light, like it was a playful barb, but Alex's cold expression dampened any attempt.

“Don't play games. I deserve that, at least.”

“Alex, I'm not—”

“Just do it!” Alex's control cracked, fear, desperation.

Tristan kept hold of his own emotions. He couldn't react to Alex's outburst with one of his own. “Do what?”

Alex motioned around them. “This is your past. It makes sense you're going to do it here. You're leaving me behind, too.”

Of course, he thought that. How often had he threatened to kill Alex? There had been no substance to it, in the end, they both knew it, but Tristan had embedded that knife deep. “I'm not—”

“Stop it!” Tears fell from Alex's eyes. “Don't you get it? I knew this was the price.” He threw a knife at Tristan's feet and opened his shirt. “Just make it quick. You owe me that.”

Tristan looked at the knife, the exposed heart. He wanted to yell at Alex to stop being stupid, but the words wouldn't come. Alex's reasoning was sound, with the information he thought he had. Their entire relationship had been based on the idea this day would come.

He picked up the knife and stepped to Alex. Surprised registered in Alex's eyes. Somewhere, he hadn't believed this day would come. A small part of him had hoped things would change, would get better. Now he watched his death approach.

Alex trembled as Tristan stopped before him. Slowly he put the knife back in its sheath. “I'm not going to

kill you.” He grabbed Alex before he bolted.

“You have to!” Alex fought to get free. “I’m your weakness. I’m a threat to your survival.”

Tristan laughed. “I couldn’t kill you back when what I felt couldn’t be defined. I have no desire to kill you now.” He let him go.

Alex threw himself to the side, rolled, and was back to his feet, a knife in each hand. At least one of them emitted the hum of a vibro-blade.

“I’m going to make you do it. I’m going to make sure you survive, no matter the cost.”

Tristan watched him, amused, annoyed, concerned. “You can’t make me do that, Alex.”

Alex lunged at him, fast, determined. Tristan was still faster. He caught one wrist, then the other, spinning Alex so his back was pressed against Tristan’s chest.

“Stop it, Alex.”

Alex screamed as he tried to break out of Tristan’s arms.

“Please, Alex, just listen to me.”

Alex fought and screamed harder.

Tristan let him go. This wouldn’t work; Alex only saw them as they used to be. Tristan undid his own gun belt and held it, along with his knife, waiting for Alex to face him before letting go of them. He spread his arms, wishing he wore a shirt so he could echo Alex’s gesture.

“I’m not going to fight you. You want to hurt me. You have a right to it for the way I treated you. Go ahead.”

Alex’s anger became marred with confusion. “I can’t. I’m not allowed to hurt you.”

Something he’d taught Alex without meaning to, but it would have served him well, before. “I’m giving you permission, Alex. I mistreated you badly. You are entitled to retribution.”

“No!” Alex paced. “It isn’t how this works!” Consciously or not, he was pacing the length of the cage. He was pacing a cage Tristan had built, stronger than metal, than polycarbon. He’d made this cage out of Alex’s own emotions.

“Things have changed, Alex.” He kept his voice soft. “I have changed.”

“No! The deal was you were going to be fixed!”

“To what?” Tristan snapped, the anger pinning Alex in place. “What the fuck was there of the old me you wanted to keep around? I was an uncaring monster!”

“You survived! I’m in the way of that!”

“Fuck surviving!”

Alex paled.

“Don’t you get it? That’s what I got. That was my boon. Not to go back to what I was, but to understand it wasn’t worth going back to it. I don’t want to survive anymore, Alex. I want to live, and I need you for that.”

Alex trembled. The knives fell out of his hands. “How am I supposed to deal with that?”

Tristan went to him and carefully pulled him against his chest. “I don’t know. I have no idea how this is going to go; it’s new territory for me. I’ve never allowed myself to care for someone before.” Tears fell down his cheeks, but he didn’t feel sad. For all the reading he’d done, he’d never believed there could be this much relief in crying. Before now, getting someone to cry indicated he’d won. He’d broken them.

Now he felt whole for crying.

They were silent while Alex wrapped his arms around Tristan, tentatively at first, then with more strength. “What happens now?” he asked, his voice muffled in the fur.

Tristan looked the question over, at everything implied in those three words. Where did they go? Who were they now? What would the dynamic be? He didn’t know the answer to all of them, but he could answer one, and as he realized that, he also understood he had to take a risk.

“I want you, Alex,” Tristan said. “More than I can express, but I’ll let you go, if that’s what you want.”

Alex tightened his hug, telling Tristan his answer before he spoke it. “No.”

Idiot, a voice said at the back of his head. Of course he isn’t going to leave. You trained him better than that. The voice, his father’s voice, didn’t understand what he meant, nor did Alex. It wasn’t a one-time offer. From this point forward, Tristan had to make sure Alex wanted to stay with him, if he wanted to keep him.

“Thank you,” Tristan whispered, rubbing Alex’s back. His body reacted to the closeness, to the smell of Alex’s sweat, his hair. His desire. “Alex, I want you. I want your body. I want to—”

Alex was out of his arms. "You mean...now? Here?" The hope in those eyes was terrifying.

Tristan nodded, because he couldn't get his mouth to work.

Alex looked around as he pulled off his clothes. He headed for a bed of moss before the cabin and lay on his stomach, his skin covered with goosebumps, in spite of the warmth.

Tristan dropped to his knees next to him. He wanted this so badly it hurt, but did he deserve Alex? That was the wrong question. Tristan would deserve him, but did he have the right to pleasure himself with Alex, after the way he'd treated him, used him? Alex's back was covered with scars, so many of them sets of two or three parallel lines. He placed a finger on one and traced it.

Alex bolted away from him. "What are you doing?" Tristan tried to explain, but he hardly understood his own reasoning. "I don't want an act," Alex said. "Just take what you want."

"I can't take from you anymore, Alex. I've taken too much."

Alex shook his head vehemently. "You take what you want!"

Tristan looked at his hands, saw all the things he'd done to Alex, everything he'd taken from him. "Not from you. Never again." He looked at Alex, tears falling. He fought the reflex to stop them, to admit he didn't know how to win this, or if he even wanted to. "Alex, I need to fix what I did to you. I don't know how, so I need your help. What do you want?"

"I want to feel you inside me," Alex answered in a tone that screamed it should be obvious. "I want you to take me."

"Don't you deserve more than that?"

"What the fuck does that even mean?" The dismay was genuine. Years of being used had taken away Alex's sense of what he wanted.

Tristan nodded. "Do you trust me?"

"Yes." No hesitation. Not long ago, Alex thought he was going to die at his hands, yet the utter trust he had in Tristan was terrifying.

"Then please lie down. Let me do this. Let me try to give back some of what I took from you."

Alex didn't move. "I don't want anything."

"You deserve everything, Alex." Tristan took a shaking breath. "I want to start figuring out how to go about giving that to you."

Alex searched his face, and Tristan tried to make his expression honest, but he knew how meaningless that was. How often had he done exactly this to manipulate Alex?

Fear filled Alex's eyes. "If this is a game, an act, just tell me. Just stop it, okay? You don't need to do this. I'm yours already. You can't—" He closed his eyes, and tears fell from them. "You can't offer this to me if you're going to take it away."

Tristan tried to speak, but he could barely breathe. "Alex..." The name felt like it was too big for his throat. "I will never put on an act with you." His throat relaxed. "I will never lie to you. You stayed when you had no reason to. I don't deserve you." He raised his hand to silence Alex's protest. "I don't. I've mistreated you worse than anyone deserves, and I can't take that back. All I can do is try to give back to you. I want to be worthy of having you at my side."

Alex looked at him, dubious. "And you want to do that by touching me?"

"I want to give you what you want, but more. You want me to take you. I want to earn the right to do it."

"You have it."

"No." He shut his muzzle, pushed the anger aside. He wasn't fighting Alex, he was fighting himself, fighting the way he'd trained Alex to be. "Alex, please, let me do this. Let me try to do this right."

Alex hesitated as he lay down before Tristan.

"Thank you."

As he traced the scars, Alex trembled. Tristan forced himself to remember all the ways he'd hurt Alex, from the first time, when Tristan had forced himself on— No, the first time was when he'd abandoned Alex. Walked away, telling him he was insignificant. He remembered how he'd hurt Alex, physically and emotionally. He marveled that Alex had endured it all.

A tear fell on the scar-covered back.

"Tristan?" Alex asked worried.

"It's okay." He leaned in and licked the tear off. Then he licked Alex's neck, down his back, and finally

between his cheeks, preparing him. Alex shuddered and moaned.

When Tristan lay on top of Alex, he moved slowly, listening to Alex's body react. He knew Alex could endure anything Tristan did to him, but this was about pleasure. He used all the skills he'd learned to pleasure another man, all the ways in which he knew sex could be weaponized, and applied them to bringing pleasure without any ulterior motive.

Once fully in, he rolled them to their side and held Alex as he moved. He'd never bothered learning the topography of Alex's body before. He did so now, licking his neck, nipping at his ears. Listening for every gasp and moan, no matter how small, and filing them away as things to use to make Alex happy.

Tristan ignored the demands of his own body. He'd listened to it for too long when it came to Alex. He let Alex's body tell him how to move, how fast or how slow to go. He listened to Alex's pleading, instead of sneering at it.

When he finally climaxed, Tristan was exhausted, but satisfied in a way he'd never been before. Alex was panting. How had he not known sex could feel like this? He'd researched it, done it often enough, but he'd never felt this level of pleasure from it. Before, his reaction had been simple: once the act was done, he no longer cared for it.

Now? If he hadn't been so tired, he would do it again.

Alex placed a hand on Tristan's arm and squeezed it. The gesture made Tristan's breath catch, and he wanted that hand to remain there forever. He never wanted to let go of him. He wanted the smooth flesh against his fur. To breathe in his scent. He could stay like this until the universe came for him.

He rubbed Alex's stomach, the firm abs, and something wet touched the back of his hand. He looked down and saw he'd forgotten something.

No, he hadn't forgotten. He could forgive himself for getting carried away in the moment, but this was worse. For all his talk of this being about giving back to Alex, the thought of making sure Alex reached his own orgasm hadn't even crossed his mind.

He pulled out gently and rolled Alex onto his back. Alex looked at him, a satisfied smile on his face. It vanished when Tristan licked between his legs.

"Tristan," he gasped. "You don't—" A moan cut him off as Tristan swallowed his length, slicking it.

"I do." He moved to straddle Alex's hips. With a hand, he held the erection in place as he lowered himself on it. This was as painful as he remembered.

"Tristan, stop." Alex gasped. "You don't have to do that."

"I do." He kept his voice steady, in spite of the pain. He ignored Alex's protest as he seated himself on his groin. Panting, he opened his eyes and Alex was looking back, worry and lust in equal part in them.

"You don't have to hurt yourself for this," Alex said, not quite managing to keep his voice even.

"It's just pain. If it brings you pleasure, I can endure it."

Alex rolled his eyes. "Right, like you ever took pleasure in my pain." Tristan closed his eyes, his ears burning with shame. "I did, at first. When I thought you were purposely trying to make me want you. Your pain felt like a way of asserting my power over you."

"I don't need to assert anything over you."

"I want to give you—"

"You can't give something I don't want." The smile, the gentleness of the tone, were contrary to the rebuke Tristan knew the words to be.

Tristan rocked slowly. "Then I'll make sure this doesn't hurt, next time."

Alex's reply was incomprehensible among the moaning and gasping. Tristan picked up speed. This didn't overwhelm him as much, so he was able to study Alex's reactions. Alex was loud in his pleasure, hiding nothing, and Tristan found he wanted to see more of it. He wanted to be the reason Alex screamed.

He wanted to be himself when he brought Alex such pleasure, rather than any sort of act. He wanted to lose himself in pleasuring Alex. To be unable to look away from Alex's face as he tensed under him, bucked, screamed loud enough to chase the animals and birds into silence.