

Chapter 01

Tristan looked at the human who had all but stuck himself to him from the moment he'd arrived. He knew the type—sycophant. Every prison had at least one of them, even this place, this “Down Below”, which was nothing more than the remnants of an old mine complex on a husk of a planet.

All it had taken was for Tristan to kill his welcoming comity, who must have been the leaders, if this man wouldn't leave him alone.

Normally, he dealt with them with a beating; they weren't worth more energy than that. It would be easy with this one; with the way he was smiling, he thought he'd already won. A beating would be the thing to get this human to leave him alone.

The problem was that Alex was alone with the warden and his six guards up above. Alex could hold a mask now, and the one they had worked on had enough flexibility in it that he could keep them busy for hours, but once he ran out of stories, Tristan wasn't confident he'd be able to come up with new material on the spot. Even after five years, Alex couldn't improvise all that well.

Then the fighting would start.

Alex was deadly. Tristan knew it, had seen to it, but he was still human. He'd taken on large groups and won, but these people were not only experienced, and vicious, they had military-grade weapons. The only things Alex had been able to get through the scans were a few of his knives.

As good as he was, as determined as he was to live, Alex might not survive such a fight, and Tristan didn't like that idea.

“I'm looking for Olirian Prian.”

The human gasped. “You're looking for the Killer of Hasteed? Why?”

Tristan stared at him.

“Right, none of my business.”

Tristan waited. “Do you know where he is?”

“Of course I do.” The man sounded insulted. “I did say I know everyo—”

“Then why are you still standing here?”

The human walked fast through the tunnels, and Tristan followed. “This is where Alvina stays.” He indicated an alcove which Tristan didn't bother looking into. “She'll try and seduce anyone of power that steps down here, so you should be careful of her. Unless you're into that kind of thing, of course.”

It was fortunate that he didn't slow as he talked. Tristan felt like smashing his head in a wall to shut him up, but that would make reaching his target fast problematic.

“That's Robinson's place. Don't try to understand the stuff on the wall. He's crazy. He doesn't even speak GovStandard like the rest of us.”

He pointed to a human in another alcove who glared at them. “That's Gargon. Nasty temper on that

guy. Even B&B avoided him—they were the guys you took out when you got down here.”

Tristan noted that human was missing a hand and a foot.

“That’s Sophia and Julia’s place. Nice girls. Always happy to please, but be ready to pay for it. They don’t give it up for free. That’s Quinn’s. Keeps mostly to himself. I don’t think he’s crazy, but don’t get too close. He’s been known to take literal bites out of people.” The human pulled the sleeve off his arm and made sure Tristan saw the scar from an old human bite mark. “Got it when he arrived. I tried to make friends with him, and this is what I got.

“Over there is—”

Tristan slammed him in the wall. “Enough, human.”

“M-Marty.”

Tristan growled, and Marty shrunk down.

“I don’t care who lives where. I don’t care who you think is important and who you need to avoid. Your only job is to take me to Olirian. Do you understand?” The human nodded. “Then do so in silence, unless you want me to crush that little skull of yours.” Tristan let him go and waited.

The human ran deeper into the complex of caves and Tristan followed him easily, memorizing the path they took.

The human stopped by the entrance to a large alcove—large enough to qualify as a small cavern. It was warmer than the rest of the complex, but Tristan couldn’t see anything generating heat.

In the middle of the floor, a man was lying on a bed of old clothes. He was old, Tristan had expected that, but he was also dirty and unhealthily thin. He was dressed in cleaner clothes than his guide wore, than anyone he’d seen had on, except for the two he’d killed at the entrance. Someone had brushed his long white hair and beard, as well as left objects around him made of stones, wood, and cloth.

“What’s all this?” Tristan knelt next to the man.

“Gifts, tributes.”

“What for?” He checked the man’s pulse. Weak. Thirty-two years in this place took its toll.

“Because you respect a man like him.” The human spoke softly, almost reverently. “From what I hear, he was the guy in charge before B&B—kept even them in check all by himself until he got too sick.”

“They didn’t kill him?” Tristan turned the cuff of his own pants and felt along it. He used a claw to detach the corner of a patch that was nearly invisible against the fabric and pulled it off.

“You don’t kill the Killer. Too many people here respect him, even B&B. They made sure he got enough food, even when he couldn’t go himself anymore. They even made deals with the warden to get him some meds. Made sure he was comfortable. What’s that?”

Tristan applied the patch to the old man’s neck. “Immune-booster.” He found the other patch and pulled it off the cuff. “Nutrients,” he said before the human could ask. He applied it to the other side on the neck. “What’s he sick of?”

“Nobody knows. B&B killed the only doctor in here when they found out he was drugging some of the younger guys and forcing them to have sex with him.”

Tristan felt for broken bones. His file said he was sixty. Real sixty, no rejuv treatments, but without access to medical care, he looked three times that age, and humans became fragile when they let themselves grow old. He didn’t find any broken bones. He picked the old man up and stood. He carefully placed him over his shoulder.

“What are you doing?” Marty asked, horrified.

“Leaving.” Tristan retraced his steps, accumulating a crowd as he went. When he reached the large cavern he’d arrived in, everyone there turned in his direction, then got out of the way, a mix of fear and respect in their eyes.

The bodies of the two humans he’d killed were gone, leaving only bloody stains on the stone floor. All, except for his guide, kept their distance from him as he headed for the lift.

He put the old man down as gently as he could and checked him again for any injuries he might have gotten in the transport. The job was to bring him back alive. Intact hadn’t been mentioned, but he looked too fragile for Tristan to risk some unnoticed broken bone piercing something vital. There was no telling how long it would take to get back to the ship, and the cryo-bed there.

Confident the old man was still intact, Tristan studied the lift’s door. Metal, slid into the wall. Nothing to grab onto to force it open. He looked at the control panel. Old, held in place by screws instead of molecular adhesive. That was good, in a way. Molecular adhesive required chemicals he couldn’t have brought in.

“What are you doing?” Marty asked, excited.

“Leaving.”

“That isn’t going to work. They recalled the lift after dropping you off and shut it down.”

Tristan didn’t bother replying. Screws first, then he’d see what work he’d have to do. He took off his pants and pulled them inside out.

He ignored the crowd’s sounds of appreciation, surprise, embarrassment. Humans still managed to find nudity a problem in a place like this. Tristan didn’t care what they thought.

He laid them on the ground and pulled off the material attached to it. It was thin, flimsy. He cut a section with a claw, two fingers wide and the length of his palm. He put that in his mouth and made sure it was coated with his saliva before laying it flat on the ground.

He cut another section, narrower but longer. When he was done, he checked on the drying piece. It still had give to it, so he went back to cutting what he needed, wetting them, shaping them, and laying them to dry.

When the first piece had hardened, he took what was left of the material, put it in his mouth, then against one of the screw heads, and used the straight bar to press it in place while it hardened and fused to the bar.

When the head of his makeshift screwdriver was dry, he slowly turned it. He wasn’t worried about breaking his tool; the material it was made of, once it interacted with the enzyme in his saliva from the injection he’d taken before they landed, and dried, was nearly unbreakable.

What he needed to be careful of was the screw itself. Too many things could go wrong with it if he rushed. He could strip the screw, or the screw could break when partially out, which would keep the cover on.

Alex’s research had shown that the lift’s controls had been refitted a few objective decades before, after one of the inmates had managed to pry the cover off. This new cover had a screw that went two inches in, and it had to all come out for the cover to release. Alex hadn’t been able to find out the material the screw was made out of, so he couldn’t know how they had handled the passage of time.

It resisted, then turned. It whined a few times, but eventually came out. He moved to the next one. As Alex’s research had indicated, all six screws had the same head. Poor security—he only needed one screwdriver to take them out. It was easier to smuggle in one tool than many.

Once the cover was off, Tristan looked at bundles of wires. The lift was so old it predated heavy computerization. This was controlled through electrical circuits formed by these wires. They should have updated the system when they redid the casing. Not that it would have helped them; Tristan would have used Alex if this had been fully computerized.

He looked over his shoulder, and the crowd took a step back. They were seeing a chance at freedom, and they were trying to decide when the right time was for them to go for it. Tristan smiled. They had to let him finish, and what came after that? Well, they wouldn’t care for it all that much.

He took two of the hooks he’d made and began pulling out wires, looking for the ones that would give him control of the lift.

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