

Chapter 08

The gymnasium was large, but not quite matching the room where they'd had breakfast. Alex noted the floor was marked with squares and circles, and a little less than half of them were occupied by men and women fighting. Most were unarmed, but some had staves, knives, and one pair fought with swords.

"Take off your jacket and shirt," Tristan said.

"I hope you're not planning on having us fight naked." Alex found a peg to hang his jacket on. "I don't think they'll appreciate that." Naked was the way Tristan insisted they trained. Considering the state those fights left Alex in, if it had been anyone other than the Samalian, he would have thought he enjoyed seeing him excited. He put his shirt over the jacket.

"Removes your knives, all of them."

He looked at Tristan. "Does that mean you're keeping the claws in?" He began unclipping sheaths and clipping them to pockets on the jacket.

"We are using something different this time." Tristan was looking along the wall at the variety of weapons there. He picked a set, and when Alex was done divesting himself of his knives, he threw them at him.

Alex caught them, one in each hand. Foot and a half long sticks of what looked like wood. On a hunch he tapped them together and sparks erupted. Stun sticks.

Tristan was on him, and Alex parried. Sparks cascaded off them. Not stun sticks, electro sticks. Stun sticks only shocked long enough to stun, hence the name. Electro sticks kept going as long as there was contact. They were easily fatal.

Alex backed and sidestepped, getting a feel for the sticks. By the way Tristan moved them, it wasn't his first time using them. Of course he was used to them; it was like he knew how to use every weapon ever invented.

Tristan struck again, and Alex jumped back to avoid the blow. There was a ding, and the circle he was now in was blinking. Tristan joined him, and they were officially in the fighting space.

Tristan came at him hard, but Alex had a feel for the sticks and he parried easily, stepping aside each time, following the line, but not getting close. He had a feeling he wouldn't like what happened if he tried crossing it.

Alex fell in the rhythm of the moves, their stick clanging and sparking. When he moved for the next parry, Tristan's sticks weren't there. He hadn't moved with the coming attack, he'd been lured in the trap of the rhythm on purpose.

The sticks impacted his shoulder and pain sent him down to a knee. It wasn't the blow that had him seeing stars, it was the electricity. He gritted his teeth and pushed himself to his feet, just as Tristan said, "Up."

Tristan had his back to him, walking to the edge of the circle. Alex only had one working arm, but he wasn't going to let that stop him. It only took Alex two long steps to reach him, but Tristan's ears twitched

and Alex knew he'd expected the attack. Alex jumped back as Tristan spun, and the sticks struck air.

Alex landed, steadied himself, and blocked the coming blows. Tristan wasn't striking as fast as he could, just enough to keep Alex on the defensive, having only one stick to defend with.

He didn't let the tingling in his hand distract him. It was the sensation coming back. He kept track of his fallen stick as they moved around the circle. It was just at the edge of the line.

On Tristan's next attack Alex rushed him, planted an elbow in his side, and threw himself to the floor. He grabbed the stick as Tristan let out a curse. He got back on his feet and Tristan was stepping off the circle's line, his fur standing on end.

Alex attacked him, still one-handed since he didn't have the strength to raise his other arm yet. Tristan blocked, struck back, and Alex spun out of his reach. He caught sight of someone standing in an elevated observation booth.

He blocked the next strike. "Your admirer is here." He struck. Tristan moved to parry, but Alex moved his other hand and struck Tristan's. It spasmed, sending the stick to the floor and it rolled out of the circle.

Tristan shook his hand, regaining control of it faster than Alex had. They circled each other. Alex wouldn't win. It didn't matter he was the one with two sticks; Tristan only got more dangerous when he seemed to be in an inferior position.

If this had been for fun, one of their training sessions on the ship, he would have continued like this, to see how Tristan would regain the advantage, but this wasn't for fun. Tristan had a point to make.

Alex threw both sticks aside. "Why don't we really fight?"

Tristan smiled. "Are you sure?"

Alex dodged the stick aimed at his head and ran at the Samalian, fists flying and connecting, but nowhere they were felt.

When Tristan struck back, Alex felt it, but he didn't show it. He took it and attacked again. He was always sore after training, which was why he was now buying his painkillers by the case.

On his next attack, Alex got under Tristan's defenses and punched him in the side hard enough to make him wince. It gave him a handful of seconds to plan an attack. The neck was out of the question; Samalians had bones around the windpipe, protecting it. And because this was Tristan, the groin wouldn't do any good, it would just piss him off. Alex never wanted to deal with an angry Tristan.

Tristan was back faster than Alex expected, again, and launched a flurry of blows that had Alex on the defensive until he let one through. He forced himself to move in spite of the pain, grabbed Tristan's shoulder for leverage and planted his knee in the same side he'd punched earlier.

Tristan pushed him away, and Alex saw he'd made a mistake. Tristan was holding his side, breathing hard, but the look in his eyes promised Alex pain like he hadn't felt before. Alex didn't bother planning; they were beyond that.

When Tristan came at him, Alex simply reacted, blocking, dodging, parrying, and taking more blows than he managed to give. As the fight progressed, Alex felt himself slipping toward letting go of all control, and as anytime it happened, he felt himself smile. This was going to be a fight to be—

The punch hit him in the jaw and sent him down, his head ringing on the padded floor.

"Up," Tristan panted.

Alex didn't even try. His body wouldn't respond to him. He glanced at the clock hovering above the circle and smiled to himself. He'd lasted almost a full extra minute since their last all-out fight. He closed his eyes and wondered if unconsciousness would take him this time.

Someone clapped. His eyes snapped open.

"That was an impressive fight," Lady Prian said. "Your reputation as a fighter is well-deserved, I see."

Alex glared at her, at the way she was eyeing Tristan. "That wasn't fighting." He forced himself to sit, held his side. He might have broken ribs. Alex was amazed his jaw wasn't broken.

She looked at Alex, annoyed.

"Look around, do you see any dead bodies? No? Then this wasn't fighting." He readied himself and bit back a groan as he got to his feet. "This was training. You don't want to see him fight; you don't have the constitution for it."

"Alex." The warning in the tone wasn't the playful one they used on the ship.

Alex was in enough pain to almost not care. He was pissed at this woman who thought she could have what was his, just because she had more money than SpaceGov, probably. Almost.

It wasn't the beating he'd receive—deservedly so—if he continued that stopped him. It was the knowledge that he'd have interfered in Tristan's plan. He had set this up. He'd wanted her to see them fight. So

he turned to face Tristan and nodded.

“Did you come just to watch us train?” Tristan asked.

Alex closed his eyes. He couldn't watch Tristan's reactions to her ogling him. He couldn't risk seeing even the hint of fabricated interest. If he saw that, he was going to lose it and kill her, he knew it.

Whatever she'd expected, the disappointment in her voice made it clear she hadn't gotten it. “You are an impossible man, Tristan. Once you've cleaned up, come to the Geofam Hospital. My grandfather will be in a state to see us.”

Tristan grabbed Alex's jacket and shirt and motioned for the open hall opposite the observation deck she'd stood on. Alex followed him, the showers calling.

Tristan opened a locker, threw Alex's things in it, and rounded on Alex. “This has to stop.”

“Don't act surprised. It's what you want.” Alex didn't lower his voice, and the other couple getting dressed glanced in their direction.

Tristan did give him a surprised look.

Alex rolled his eyes. “You do everything to keep me wondering where I stand with you, so you can't act surprised when I have a problem when a woman, of all things, throws herself at you.”

Instead of anger, Tristan looked at him, disappointed. “Alex, I told you I have no interest in her. She might throw herself at me, but there's no chance I'll catch her.”

Alex forced himself to calm down. “I believe you.” He took off his pants. At least the incident with the Lady Prian had taken care of his excitement. “I just can't help it, there's something about her that just sets me off.” He cursed. “She makes me feel like I'm just one more conquest. That I don't deserve you. That she's the one you should be with.” He threw his pants in the locker. “Fuck, this is insane.”

When he looked at Tristan, the Samalian's face was guarded.

“I'm not going to throw a fit,” Alex said. “For one thing, I really don't need another beating today. I know my place. Once we're out of here, away from her, it'll be better, I promise.” He headed for the showers before Tristan could reply.

He didn't want to see Tristan naked. His control was sufficiently frayed that he would react immediately at that sight. He rushed for a stall when just the idea of Tristan naked made him react.

Alex was okay with being naked in public; he hadn't had any choice in the matter. Tristan, possibly because of his fur—not that it hid anything important as far as Alex was concerned—didn't believe in wearing clothing unless they were working. So Alex had learned to be comfortable with nudity, but showing his excitement was another matter entirely.

The shower came on as he entered the stall, the water far too warm for him. He cooled it down and began washing. Water showers were something too infrequent in his life, so he enjoyed each and every one of those he got. Not all of Tristan ships were as well-equipped as the one they were currently using.

He felt the presence behind him more than heard the door, and berated himself for getting too wrapped up in his head. He rinsed the soap from his face and turned, only to find a door in the process of closing, but no one there.

Maybe it had just been someone who hadn't noticed the stall was occupied until they were in? Alex slapped the control to lock the door and went back to washing.

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