

Alex knew he was out of cryo by the way his body hated him. He stifled the groan. For all that he hated having to wake out of cryo, he wished he could spend each night in it. He didn't dream there.

He heard movement and forced an eye open, only to shut it on seeing Will up and about, wiping the surfaces of shelves. Right, dust had accumulated over the months they'd been in cryo.

"Fuck," Alex croaked. "How do you do it? Be full of energy right out of cryo?"

"Used to it. In and out since a baby."

"So, I'll get used to it?"

Will shrugged.

"Great."

He tried to remember the last few moments before going under. Will and Asyr had brought him to his bed right after he was done wrestling life support from engineering, and connected the armbands. He'd been afraid of going under, of what the engineering processor would do to the ship without him to look over its code, but he was awake—well, trying to be—so nothing catastrophic had happened.

"Did anyone get hurt?"

"Few. Small stuff. Doc fixed them before cryo."

Alex nodded, then forced his eyes to open. The armband on his bicep was blinking green, so he took it off. It and the tubes went in the compartment in the wall, and he forced his legs over the side. The queasiness was due to cryo, he told himself, not what he'd had to do, not to the people that had gotten hurt because of it. He had to get back to work.

But first, he needed a shower.

\* \* \* \* \*

Alex loaded the message on his datapad. It hadn't been easy to get it, just like he expected the message node he'd used to transmit to his grandparents had been swarming with surveillance programs. Trackers, lockdowns, parasites. Someone had gone through the list and deployed all of them. He felt a little flattered, actually.

But he'd managed to maneuver around all of them. The few he had to neutralize, he did so in a way that kept others from noticing. He even convinced the node to copy the message to him, instead of transferring it, that way those monitoring the node wouldn't even know he had gotten it. After running the sixth disinfection program on the message, he finally brought it up and ran it.

A man with graying brown hair appeared. He was seated in the living room—Alex could see the shelves with pictures of their family over his grandfather's shoulder.

"Hello, Alex." He paused. "I don't know how to go about recording this. First off, you should know the Law came here to ask about you. That was before we received your message, so we didn't lie when we told them we didn't know anything about where you might be. They said you stole corporate property, and that you might have been involved in attacking them. Just what are you mixed in, Alex? You said you met someone—is he who attacked the corporation? The Law didn't give any details, other than it was an alien that did the attack. Did you get pulled

into it against your will? Was your interest in them used to make you do something you wouldn't have otherwise?

"I'm sorry, I don't mean to sound accusatory. You know we love you and we'll do anything we can to help you. Having said that, I don't think it's a good idea for you to contact us again; the Law is sure to be looking over our communications from now on. I wouldn't want to be responsible for them finding you. Me and your grandma love you. If you show up at our doorstep, we will take you in."

The message ended.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Hey, Crimson."

Alex glanced over his shoulder and went back to looking at the code. "Anders," he answered as a greeting, then added, "I didn't expect to see you in this part of the ship outside of an emergency."

"Well, this is sort of one."

Alex sighed. "What happened?" He'd spent the last week integrating life support with the central processor, and while it had gone smoothly, it had trouble actually figuring out how to run it, and there had been mishaps ever since. Nothing major, but each time he had to convince the processor it didn't have to micromanage the system.

"Here's the thing. We've been at dock for a full day, and you've spent all that time cooped up in this room. Isn't this your first time on another station? You need to come and see the sights."

Alex shrugged. "That can wait. I'll have plenty of time to see sights once I'm with Jack."

"Nope, sorry, but that doesn't work for me." Alex felt the man stand behind his chair. "Are you in the middle of anything life-threatening?"

"Not really, but I need to start reintegrating systems. I'm going through them, figuring out how insane the isolation made them. I figure I'm going to do it from the least crazy one up. That's going to put as little strain on the processor, and build it up to better deal with the less stable ones."

Anders patted Alex's shoulder. "I have no idea what that means, and don't bother trying to explain; I don't care about it. But you did confirm it wasn't vital, right?"

Alex hesitated for a moment. "I guess so."

"Good." The hand closed around his arm and pulled him up. "You're coming with me. I'm taking you ground-side."

\* \* \* \* \*

Alex didn't grumble during the shuttle trip. He worked very hard at not grumbling. He had better things to do than waste his time on a jaunt to some bar, no matter how good it was supposed to be.

He was almost thrown out of his seat when the shuttle landed, but he didn't grumble—

much. The others laughed and commented on how the place needed better cushions.

They'd been waiting for them at the shuttle, Milo, a man barely out of his teens. From listening in on the conversation, he'd figured out he'd joined the crew on the stop before where Alex joined. He'd been looking to get away from abusive parents, or something to that effect.

Barbara was one of Anders's usual hangers-on, so he wasn't surprised to see her there, but the last one had been a man with golden skin and white mohawk. Alex had seen him on the ship—he was hard to miss—but before now hadn't known his name: Zephyr.

Alex got out of the shuttle, fully intending on getting back on as soon as the others were out of it, but he froze and found himself looking around at the dilapidated buildings.

"Where are we?"

"Junaly's Port," Anders answered, placing a hand on his back and pushing Alex forward.

"This isn't a port. It's nothing more than a field."

Anders laughed. "You think every planet is like where you're from? That was a capital world. This is a fourth-rate mining world with nothing to attract tourists. Barely anyone ever comes down from the station."

"Then why are we here?" Milo asked.

"Because," Zephyr answered, "in spite of how it looks, the richest fence in the universe lives here." He had a rich bass for a voice that made Alex shiver. "With the haul we got this time, it's the only place we can move it."

"That's fine, but why exactly are we here? There's plenty of places to get a drink on the station, and they have to be better than anything here."

"For one thing, we need to see a sky every so often," Anders answered. "You too, Crimson. You can't spend your life in a box. I'd think you more than any of us would appreciate that, since you were a ground-sider until recently." He began walking.

"A sky's a sky. I'll see plenty of it once I'm—"

"With your guy," Anders finished for him. "We know, you can't seem to shut up about it."

"Just look at it," Barbara said, awe in her voice. "It's beautiful. Do you have any idea how rarely we get to see one? We're not usually docked long enough to allow time for trips. Sometimes, I forget what color it is."

The golden-skinned man looked up and wrinkled his nose. "It's blue, what's so nice about that. You should see the ones back home: beautiful orange sky and purple clouds streaking it. Now that's worth looking at."

She snorted. "You're weird."

"No fighting you two," Anders admonished. "It's a big universe, there's plenty of sky for everyone's tastes."

"You're mightily jovial," Zephyr said, his tone suspicious.

"I'm just happy to be breathing unrecycled air. The one on the ship's been leaving a bit to be desired recently."

"Sorry," Alex said, his ears burning. "That's one of the reasons why I should have stayed on the ship."

"I'm not complaining, Crimson, just a statement of fact. But even then, this is better than any ship air. And because of you, this haul is going to take so long to move we can go to the best joint in this part of the universe."

"How do you know that?" Milo asked.

Anders placed an arm over the shoulders of the youngest of their group. "Because the last

time I was here, I talked with the natives and they all raved about it.” Anders began whistling and ignored the other questions Milo had.

Twenty minutes later, he stopped the group before a building that looked much like every other: gray walls with gray doors and no windows. Unlike the others, it was a squat, one-story thing, and wider. If it was a bar, there were no signs or other indications of that.

“Okay,” Anders said. “Before we go in, I need a favor from the two of you.”

“Sure,” Milo said.

Alex raised an eyebrow.

“I need you to start a fight.”

“Why?” Alex asked.

“Does it matter?”

Alex snorted. “Yes. I don’t make a habit of starting fights for just any reasons. I don’t particularly enjoy getting beaten up.”

Anders smiled. “You’re not going to get beaten up. Just start the fight and get out. We’ll meet up with you—” he looked around, and pointed to a building, “—behind there.”

“You’re going to fight?” Milo asked.

“No, we need the distraction so we can slip in the back.”

Alex groaned. “You’re going to rob the place.”

“Yeah,” Barbara answered, grinning.

“I’m not having anything to do with that,” Alex said.

“Come on, Crimson,” Anders said.

“No! Damn it, Anders, I’m not a criminal.”

Anders silenced Barbara and Zephyr with a raised hand before they said anything, and by their expression they had much to say about Alex’s statement.

“I’m not asking you to commit any crimes. It’s just a bar fight; nothing illegal with that. The three of us will be the ones breaking the law.”

“Does the captain know about this?”

“I try not to bother him with inconsequential stuff like this.”

“And what happens if you get caught?”

Anders smiled. “I never get caught.”

Alex glared at the smug bastard. He tried to see if this was some scheme to hurt him. Anders had been cordial even since coming on to him, friendly even, but Alex wondered if that had been a ploy to get him to drop his guard. Even if it wasn’t, Alex couldn’t get involved in a crime. If they got caught, he’d be stuck here.

Alex turned to leave, and Anders stopped him by putting an arm around his shoulders.

“Don’t be like that Cr—Alex. Nothing bad’s going to happen, I promise.”

“Damn it, I’m just a passenger. I’m not part of your gang.”

“I know that. I just thought you could do with some fun. You’ve been—”

“Fun?” Alex glared at him. “You call a robbery fun?”

“Of course. Look, no one’s going to get hurt...well, not much anyway. Brawls happen all the time in places like this; it’s just part of the entertainment for them.”

Alex didn’t know how true that was. Alien-Nation, the only bar he’d frequented, wasn’t like that; but every movie he’d ever watched that had a bar scene did tend to have a bar fight. That couldn’t be an accurate representation of life.

“Come on,” Anders continued. “Are you really going to let Milo do this by himself?”

Alex looked at the young man. He too seemed uncertain, so he could probably convince him to leave. Except, what would the others think of him? Milo was part of the crew, and working for Anders was probably a big deal. Unlike him, Alex would be gone soon enough, so he didn't have to worry about what people thought of him.

Or did he? Soon enough wasn't tomorrow, but months from now. Would the crew care he was just a passenger? He'd gained some respect from his help on the job, enough that other than grumbling about the injuries caused during his fight for the life support system, no one attempted any reprisals on him.

If he didn't do this for Anders, what would the others think? How would they behave if there was another incident with some of the ship's system? Would they believe he'd done everything he could to prevent it? Or would they remember he was an outsider on their ship?

He cursed under his breath. "Fine. But this is a one-time thing, Anders." He ignored the man's smile and looked at the building. "How the hell am I going to start a fight? I barely know how to fight."

Anders slapped his shoulder. "That's the spirit, and you'll think of something. You're resourceful." He faced the others, forcing Alex to turn too. "You and Milo go in first, get a drink, enjoy the atmosphere. When you see us enter, get the brawl going." He pushed Alex toward the door.

Milo was next to him, all smiles. "This is going to be fun."

"How do you know that?" Alex opened the door for the young man.

"Everyone knows Anders is the best. He's one of the captain's favorites, and with this, we're going to be in with his gang."

"I kind of wish he'd checked with me first."

Milo looked at him in surprise, and almost bumped into someone. "You don't want in? Why not? His gang gets the best of everything. They get an extra cut of the hauls, the best quarters. I even heard they have private parties with enhancers."

Alex didn't ask what that was. He found two available stools at the bar and took one.

"I'm not a party guy," he told Milo. And he definitely didn't want to be in a room with Anders where his judgment might be impaired. Anders had backed off when Alex had told him he was taken, but he didn't think that would stop him from trying again if he thought Alex might say yes that time.

Alex asked for something local when the barman was before him.

"You shouldn't use that," Milo said, ordering his own drink and handing over a credit stick.

"What?"

"You used your cred-chip. That leaves a tag of where you are."

"And that doesn't?" Alex indicated the stick the barman returned, along with their drinks.

"It's tricked up. Everyone on the crew has one. I guess you're too new, but if you just ask someone, they'll give you one." He grinned. "Ask Anders after this. Then transfer some money to it, but not too much. You don't want to lose everything if it gets stolen. Just enough for whatever you have planned."

Alex was considering explaining he wasn't part of the crew when he noticed motion by the entrance. Anders and the others were here. Alex swiveled on his stool and looked around.

The crowd looked rough, mostly men, in stained and worn clothing. They all looked strong and ready to pick a fight.

How was he supposed to do this? The movies made it look easy: push someone, insult

someone's companion. The problem with those was that the guy always ended up hurt in the process. Also no one looked ready to give him an excuse to start the fight.

Then he smiled. There was one person here who he knew wouldn't hurt him. He spun to Milo.

"What did you just say?"

Milo sputtered in surprise, spilling some of his drink. "I—"

"Don't give me that." He shoved the young man off his stool and into the woman next to him. The woman shouldered Milo away, but didn't do anything else.

"I didn't—" Milo raised his hand, looking like his confusion was real.

"I don't know how they raised you in the cesspool you call home, but where I'm from, you don't say that if you know what's good for you." Alex pushed him again, and this time Milo lost his balance as he was forced back. He fell on a table, tipping it over, sending drinks and game pieces flying. The men barely got out of the way in time to avoid having them spill over their legs.

Alex ignored their cursing. He pushed one out of the way as hard as he could before reaching down to grab Milo by the collar to pull him up.

"You better start fighting back," he whispered.

Milo looked at him in confusion for a moment, then punched him in the stomach.

Alex's plan to overreact to the impact wasn't needed as he staggered back, trying not to double over in pain. He backed up against someone, and that person shoved him. Alex turned and punched her. He barely got out of the way of the return punch.

The sound of glass and tables breaking filled the space. Alex was shoved and punched, and he struck back. He ducked under flying items. Curses and yells were added to the sound of breaking.

Alex struck someone in the back that was stumbling toward him. He dodged the man's reply, blocked a hard blow from someone that left his arm numb. But even with that pain, Alex found he just couldn't stop grinning.

He kept looking for Milo as he fought, and saw his back, limping toward the door, punching a woman on the way there.

Alex thought about staying—this was turning out to be more fun than he'd expected—but he reminded himself he couldn't get caught, so he weaved and bobbed through the crowd, exchanging a few punches before reaching the door.

The younger man was wiping blood off his face when Alex reached him behind the agreed upon building. Alex leaned against the building. His heart was racing, and he was in pain. He laughed, which earned him a stunned look from Milo. The young man looked like he might start crying.

Alex forced the laughter down. Why was he laughing anyway? He'd hurt people. He shouldn't be enjoying this; he wasn't like that. He wasn't like *him*, but he had enjoyed himself. The idea made him uncomfortable. He wasn't a violent man; he'd only gotten in one fight, when he was a kid, with another student, and his parents had grounded him for a month.

Looking back on it, he'd felt the fight had been a mistake, caused by his youth and out-of-control hormones. He tried to remember how he'd felt during the fight and about it, but it was so long ago. He knew being grounded had felt bad, but that was because that's what being punished did. He didn't actually remember feeling like that. Now he wondered if he was grounded not because he fought, but because he'd enjoyed fighting.

“Glad to see you two made it out okay,” Anders said, not stopping as he, Barbara, and Zephyr walked by. The three of them looked proud of themselves.

Alex glanced at Milo, who looked back to him and shrugged, then pushed himself off the wall and followed. Alex winced as he walked, his foot hurting, but he didn’t ask them to slow down. Looking at why, he realized he wanted to show he was as tough as they were, in spite of his weight.

“So?” Alex panted. “How much did you get?”

“Haven’t counted it yet.” Anders patted the box. “But there’s got to be thirty in there.”

Milo gasped. “What? I got beaten up for thirty lousy credits?”

“Thirty-thousand,” Barbara said. “And for your part in this, you’re getting three of them.”

Milo beamed.

Alex only managed to keep his mouth shut for a few seconds. “That’s what you call a fair cut? Milo clearly had the worst of the job.”

Alex was distracted by Barbara glaring at him, and he almost walked into Anders when he stopped.

Anders turned and looked at Alex thoughtfully. “You know, I guess we should be splitting this evenly.”

Barbara threw Anders a worried glance, while Zephyr didn’t seem to care about the conversation.

Alex shrugged and walked around him, and Anders fell in step with him, going at his speed instead of the earlier faster pace.

“Six-thousand is enough for each of us, right? Thanks for reminding me to be fair.”

Alex glanced at him. “Are you saying no one’s complained before?”

“I guess everyone’s just used to doing what I say.”

“And are you in the habit of giving them a chance not to?”

Anders looked thoughtful. “I guess I’ve gotten in the habit of ordering people about. I’m a little surprised you aren’t pissed at me.”

Alex sighed. “I should be, shouldn’t I?” He shook his head in annoyance at himself. “Just don’t blindsides me with something like this again.” He sighed again. “Look, I’m not saying I’ll ever do this again, but if I do, I want to know what I’m going to get into first.”

Anders studied him for a long moment, and was silent for the rest of their walk back to the port.