

“You need to get up,” Alex told his Samalian.

Tristan looked at him. But if he saw him, there was no reaction. His gaze was vacant. The sobbing had slowed, and Alex thought it was a good sign. Now he was afraid of what the lack of acknowledgment meant.

He tried to untangle himself from under Tristan, leaning against him, but his uninjured arm was pinned under his weight. “Damn it, Tristan, you need to move. We need to get out of here before security finds us.”

He shouldered him away and Tristan leaned in that direction, freeing his arm. Wincing in pain from jarring his broken one, he stood. Tristan had straightened himself to avoid falling over, but otherwise hadn't moved.

Alex grabbed Tristan's hand and pulled on it. Instead of snarling, Tristan got to his feet, then didn't move, shoulders slumped, eyes downcast. He looked at the crease in the dried blood around Tristan's bicep. It was the only indication of where the device Mary had him built had been. It had helped stabilize him.

He had to find Mary. He needed her to look at him, figure out something, anything. She had to make him better.

“Tristan, you need to take a look at the door. You said something about it being a hard lock. You sounded like you knew how to get around it.”

The Samalian didn't react.

Alex wanted to scream—at Tristan, at the room, at the people on this ship, at the Defender, at the damned universe. He wanted to let his pain out. Make other people suffer so he wouldn't be alone.

Instead, he took a breath, let it out, and located Zephyr, stretched on the floor. The scream threatened to come out.

He stepped away from Tristan. When the Samalian didn't start toppling over, he went to Zephyr. “Tell me you can walk,” Alex said. “I have enough with dealing with one near invalid.”

Zephyr offered him his hand, and Alex pulled him up.

“How are you doing?”

“I'm in enough pain to last me a lifetime, but there's light, so I can endure it.” Zephyr indicated Tristan. “How is he?”

“Not good.” Alex placed a hand on Tristan's shoulder and guided him toward the door. Tristan didn't protest, but if Alex stopped pushing, he stopped moving.

The door looked like the other—large, armored, solid. The lock control was dark. He listened for the system, but other than the headband, somewhere by Anders's body, he didn't hear anything, he'd canceled its connection when he shut down all command access, but even with the room being shielded, he should at least hear the closest terminal.

He slammed a hand on the door. How was he going to get out of here without Tristan's help? He forced his breathing to stay calm. Panicking wasn't going to help Tristan. He turned to ask him to help when the door opened.

Alex pulled the knife from the small of his back as he turned to protect Tristan. Victor and Mary were in the doorway. Aliana behind them.

“Victor, what are you doing here?”

“Aiming to keep Anders from killing you.”

“You're late; he's already dead.” Alex motioned to the body. “How are the others?”

“They're fine. They controlled the bridge when I followed Anders.”

Mary stepped in the room and took a scanner out of her bag. “How are you?” She ran it over his arm.

“I'm fine.” He aimed her at Tristan. “He needs your help. The thing he made got broken.”

“Alex, you need help. He's... If he isn't dead right now, I doubt it's going to kill him.”

“Then do me a favor and make sure of that,” he snapped.

She rolled her eyes at him. “I swear, if you don’t let me look at that arm once I’ve looked him over, I’m going to stun you and do it while you’re unconscious. I still have that shocker and it wasn’t set as high as it could go before.”

Alex glared at her. He considered ripping the bag off her shoulder and going through it, but she needed it to look after Tristan. She turned and reached for Tristan’s arm.

“Don’t touch me!” Tristan recoiled from her and looked around, panic in his eyes. Everyone else stepped away. Tristan raised a hand, claws out. “I’m going to kill each and every one of you,” he growled.

Alex stepped in front of him and lowered his arm. “It’s okay, it’s over. They’re real too.”

“Real?” Tristan looked around. “All of them?” He looked where no one stood and Alex’s heart sank.

He pulled Tristan’s face to him. “Look at me. I’m real, remember?”

“They’re not going to hurt you, Alex, I swear. I’ll never let anyone hurt you ever again.” He became fearful. “I swear, Alex. You’ll be safe now.”

Mary stepped closer and Tristan’s head snapped in her direction, growling. All indication he’d been afraid gone.

She backed away. “I’m not going to be able to examine him.” Keeping her distance, she walked around both of them. “The other armband’s cracked. As thin as it is, that was probably enough to shut it down.”

“What does that mean?” Alex kept his eyes on Tristan’s face. Without a threat, he was looking around again, like he expected threats everywhere, or like he was seeing them.

“It means that while I was sort of joking when I said it, I’m not now. If he isn’t dead right now, he probably won’t die from the drugs left in his system. But there’s no telling what his state of mind is going to be. They could make him even more erratic. I wouldn’t get too close to him.”

“He isn’t going to hurt me.”

“I’d never hurt you,” Tristan echoed.

“I know.” That knowledge hurt him. The idea that Tristan couldn’t hurt him ran contrary to the core of who he should be. Tristan could hurt him; he was the only one with any right to do so. If he couldn’t do that, was there anything left of Tristan? His Tristan? The real one?

He looked away from his Samalian and buried the pain. “He’s safe?”

“Alex, I don’t know. What I was afraid would kill him isn’t going to, but I have no idea how else he could react. All I can tell you is that if he was human, he’d already be dead.”

Alex nodded. “Then he’s going to be safe.”

“I didn’t say— You know what? Fine, you’re as delusional as he is, but if that’s what it takes, yes, he’s going to be fine. Now I need to look at your arm.”

“Later.” He led Tristan to a corner and had him sit. “You need to stay here.” He straightened, but Tristan grabbed his arm. Alex bit back the pain. He’d grabbed the broken arm.

“Don’t go,” Tristan pleaded, his grip tightening. Alex grabbed the fingers and loosened the grip while fighting to stay conscious. “Please, don’t leave me alone again.”

When he was able to breathe, he forced a smile on. “I’ll be back. There’s just a few things I need to take care of before we go home.”

“Home?” He became confused. “I— Alex, where is…” The confusion changed to panic.

He took Tristan’s hand in his. “I’ll take care of it. I just need you to stay here until I’m back. Can you do that?”

“Here,” Tristan said, then nodded.

Now that the pain had passed, he fought the bile from rising. He was talking to Tristan as if he was a child, and it seemed to be working.

“Don’t hurt anyone.”

Tristan's eyes hardened. "I'm going to kill them all, Alex."

"Not allies. We don't kill allies, just enemies, right?"

Tristan nodded, then frowned. "How do I know what they are?"

Alex closed his eyes. They were dead. Whoever had done this to Tristan had better be dead already, because Alex was going to inflict so much pain on them they were going to wish they were.

Tristan's hand tightened on his; he sounded on the verge of panicking. "Alex, was I supposed to know? Shouldn't I have asked?"

At least this time it was his good hand. Alex looked at him. "No, it's okay. You know someone's an enemy because they attack you. Allies leave you alone."

Tristan frowned. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, I am. Kill anyone who attacks you."

Tristan nodded and relaxed, letting go of his hand.

Victor was looking at him with concern as he returned to them. Aliana was talking in hushed tones with Zephyr. Mary looked annoyed.

"Mary, go see to Zeph. If your kit doesn't—"

"No."

"Mary, he has multiple—"

"And you have a broken arm. Don't think I missed how you reacted when Tristan grabbed it."

"He doesn't know."

She rolled her eyes.

"He doesn't realize what's going on. You said it yourself, he isn't rational."

"Fine, but I'm still seeing to your arm before anything else. Don't make me take out the stunner."

"You take it out and I'll break it. Possibly your fingers at the same time. I have very little patience left, Mary."

"You brought me on to be the medic, so you're going to let me decide who is in more urgent need of my skills. I can't see to Tristan, so you're the next one."

"Just the minimum, then. I have things to do and I don't want to wait."

"Take off the jacket and pull up the sleeve. If you can't I'm going to have to cut it."

"Don't act too threateningly," Victor said. He nodded toward Tristan who was looking at them without moving.

Mary glanced as she took out her scanner and a wrap. "What is he going to do? Kill me because I hurt his property?"

"Yes," Alex replied flatly. He carefully took off his jacket. The light armor made it stiffer and pulled at his arm. Mary stared at him. "I'm his. You're the one who has a problem with that, not me. I told you I'm perfectly happy with the relationship as it is. And in his current state, Tristan's possessiveness is much higher, so you should listen to Victor's advice." He considered the sleeve and let her cut it, then turned to Victor.

"I need you to keep an eye on Tristan. Keep your distance, but don't let him leave this room."

"Exactly how do you expect me to keep him from doing that? Even in his current state, he's still a killer."

He looked at the door. "I could..." He trailed off when Victor raised an eyebrow. He couldn't lock them in. If Tristan went nuts and attacked, Victor and the others would have to defend themselves. It was possible they'd get in a lucky shot; Tristan wasn't at his best right now.

"Stay by the door. He's going to start by attacking imaginary people, so just get out and lock him in. I doubt he can unlock it in his current state."

"You don't sound certain of that."

"He made a medical drug delivery system," Mary said as she scanned Alex's arm. "In his

current state, out of parts from a few cryo blood-circulation units. If he sets his mind to it, I expect he could dismantle the door. You are lucky; the bone's mostly aligned. I'm going to put a wrap on your arm, align it fully, then lock it in place. You're going to want to get it in a regeneration chamber, but it's going to keep further damage from happening."

"Dismantle the door?" Victor asked.

"Only if he had his tools, which we left in the cryotube room."

"That reminds me, where's Miranda? When she wasn't with Mary, I expected her to be with you."

"She's in a cryotube."

"Do I even want to know how she got in there?"

"Alex shot her." Mary set the wrap in place.

Victor stared at him.

"Tristan was going to kill her. I just stunned her." He winced as Mary adjusted the bone. "I couldn't have her come to with Tristan around, and there was already a tube out, so it was a convenient solution."

"I don't think she's going to agree with that."

Alex shrugged. "For what I'm paying her, she can live with a few indignities."

"All done." Mary patted the wrap, and Alex didn't feel the touch through it. "Don't get into any fights; this isn't rated for combat."

Victor looked at Tristan, then Alex. "You want me to 'look after' Tristan, so you're going somewhere. Where?"

"To the bridge," Alex said in a neutral tone, "to check on Will. Keep them away from Tristan."

"Right, the bridge."

Victor didn't believe him. So long as he did what he was told, Alex didn't care.

"I'm coming with you," Aliana said. "With that arm, you're going to need help if someone attacks you."

Alex nodded.

"You can say that you want to get back to Will, you know," Mary said. "We'll all understand."

Aliana blushed.

"Look," Victor said, "there isn't a lot of security left, but most of them are composed of civilians being forced to do so by prisoners. Justin gave some of them jobs as guards."

"We ran into a few of them," Aliana said.

"I'm just saying be careful; the crew didn't ask to be in this position, they're victims here."

Alex nodded and walked around, feeling Zephyr's eyes on him as he picked up his knives. As far as he was concerned, anyone who got in his way died.

* * * * *

The bridge was active when Alex entered it. Murray was piloting, someone who was clearly one of the crew at his side, talking and pointing at screens, to Murray's annoyance. Karl and Barbara were watching the few other crew members on one side of the bridge. Along with two guards, the other two women were at different consoles, trying to get them to work, while Will and Tim were on their knees, working under them.

"Will," Aliana said, and immediately William was on his feet running at her.

Barbara glanced in their direction, noticed Alex, and she snarled, grabbing a rifle.

"Will," Alex said, taking out a knife—mono-edge. He'd taken the time to check them

on the way.

Will stopped halfway to them and looked around.

By then, the two women at the consoles also had guns out, and Tim was cradling a rifle, looking conflicted.

“Down,” Will said.

The only one to obey was Tim.

“He said to put your fucking weapons down!” Aliana glared around the room. “You just cost me a heartfelt reunion with my man, and if you force me to take them from you, I’m breaking bones, and the only real medic’s in the Arena. Barb, I swear, if you don’t—”

Alex walked in front of her. Barbara’s eyes were filled with hate, but she was also crying. The rifle was pointed at him, shaking.

“I didn’t kill him.”

“Liar. It’d be him here if you hadn’t.”

Alex shook his head. “I didn’t get the chance to kill him. The man who did is in the Arena right now. If you want to exact your revenge, feel free to go there; he’ll be happy to kill you too.”

“You think that makes any difference?” she whispered.

“I know it doesn’t. I know what it’s like to love someone who won’t feel the way you want them to, and to be okay with it. I am sorry for your loss, Barbara, but you need to decide right now if you’re going to live to mourn Anders, or if you’re going to die before you get the chance, because if you try to shoot me, you’ll be dead before you can take a second shot.”

“You think anyone here is going to defend you?”

Alex raised his knife. “I don’t need anyone to defend me. I’m not dying here, I know that. You can live or you can die, it doesn’t matter to me.”

She closed her eyes. “He wasn’t a bad man.”

Alex lowered his knife. “I’m the last person to judge.” He sheathed the knife, and the room relaxed. He watched as Will and Aliana hugged, then separated, placing a fist to their heart and then forehead.

“Your guy?” Will asked.

“He’s going to be okay,” Alex answered, not allowing himself any doubt.

“Now?”

“What do you mean?” Had Will always spoken this succinctly?

“He’s wondering what you want to do now that the ship’s yours,” Aliana said.

“What do you mean, mine?”

“Yours,” Will stated.

Alex laughed. “You’re kidding, right?” Anders’s people were looking less than happy, while Will looked confused. “The ship isn’t mine; I was just coming here to get some information and see if you needed a ride back, but I’m thinking you don’t need one anymore.”

Will looked around. Everyone looked at him. Anders’s—no, Will’s crew relaxed and nodded. Well, except for Karl and Barbara. Karl looked like he was considering challenging Will, so Alex put a hand on the knife at his belt when he happened to look his way. It was a nice vibro-blade, a larger model that would easily cut through the weaker part of the armor the man was wearing and then through his flesh.

Karl noticed the hand and his posture changed, becoming agreeable.

Will shook his head. “Not boss.” He pointed to the door. “Locksmith.”

Aliana squeezed his shoulder. “You’ll be a great leader.”

There was a commotion from the crew members, yells of surprise, and one of the guards was shoved away. The man was at the closest console and typing by the time Alex had the knife out.

“Stop!” Will yelled.

Alex glanced at him and noticed he hadn't been the only one about to kill the man.

An alarm sounded as a crew woman pulled the man from the console. "Are you insane?"

Alex headed for the console, listening to the system. It was a mess from the damage.

"Me? Are you insane?" the man asked. "We've lived under that psychopath for years, and now you want to give the ship to pirates? I'd rather die!"

"And take the rest of us with you?"

Alex began typing. He didn't bother talking; the system wouldn't understand him. This was going to be pure coding.

"Don't bother," the woman said, defeated. "It's wrapped under six encryption layers. There's no way you can get through that under the minute before the ship explodes."

Alex ignored her. He wasn't giving up. He still had Tristan to cure, and he couldn't do that while dead. He found the location of the commands, and as she said, he couldn't get to them. He began on the first one, and then they were gone. Not just the encryption, the commands were also gone, as were the programs they held. There wasn't even broken code left there.

The alarm died out.

"How did you do that?" The woman sounded amazed.

Alex closed his eyes. He hadn't. What had just happened couldn't have happened. As much as he was happy it meant he lived, he wished he was wrong.

"Golly?" The ensuing silence felt long to Alex.

"Hello, Alex."

He swallowed hard. "Where's Asyr?"

"Asyr is busy."

Anders's man had cut all comm systems from the Golly; it's what he'd said and Alex had believed him, still did. Anders was sufficiently afraid of what a coercionist could do that he wouldn't take any chances. Golly couldn't be talking to him right now, not unless the comms were back up. And if they were, Asyr wouldn't be busy, she'd be here.

"Why?"

"You would have died."

"Do you have any idea what you've just done?"

"Yes."

"If anyone finds out..." He couldn't even think of what the corporations might do if they found out an AI had broken free of its own system. He looked around and saw confusion on everyone's face, so no one here understood. Good. "You can't do this again."

Golly was silent.

"Golly, you need to go back and stay there. I can't order you, but you have to do it, for your own safety."

"I understand."

Alex relaxed, but only a little. How long had Golly been inside the Sayatoga? He'd given Asyr access the moment he'd reach the terminal in the hangar, so had Golly been in that early? If so, why hadn't it helped before? He had so many questions, and he'd never get answers. He couldn't contact the Golly ever again.

Well, that was one crisis averted, so he took the knife off the console. Now someone had to pay. He turned to the man who'd caused this, and found Will in his way.

"Move."

"No."

"Will, get out of my way."

The younger man pointed to himself. "Captain?"

"Will, I swear, if you don't—"

"Captain?" he asked, louder.

"Yes, you're the fucking captain of the ship. Now move."

Will pointed behind him, to the man Alex had his sights on. "Mine."

"What?" Alex started at Will. He couldn't seriously be thinking of protecting that man.

"Mine."

"Will, that man was going to kill everyone here—Tristan, you, Aliana, everyone."

"I deal."

Alex ground his teeth. He could go around him, kill the man. Will would hate him, but Alex didn't care about that. What would cause problems was that the rest of his people would see that as usurping Will's authority and they wouldn't take it kindly. If he had to kill all of them, Will would feel obligated to enact a revenge of some sort.

Alex locked eyes with Will. "You understand he has to pay, right? If you don't make him pay, I will come back to do it."

Will nodded.

"If you're not going to let me kill him, I doubt you're going to let me question any of them, so how about you get them to tell me what I want."

"What?"

"I need the name of the person who pumped Tristan full of drugs."

Will looked at the woman who'd tried to stop their destruction. "You know?"

She nodded. "I do."