

Alex threw himself to the ground to avoid the larger man, who jumped down from the rack to where he'd been. Alex had barely caught the motion in time to get out of the way. He rolled and got to his feet. He didn't reach for a knife; this was one of Terry's occasional tests, to ensure Alex was prepared to survive.

They annoyed Alex, because they always interrupted his work. This time he'd been sent to the hold by Anders to help Lea get things ready for the incoming cargo from the next job. Their third since leaving the station.

The larger man launched himself at Alex and swung. Alex blocked, and the force of the impact rang throughout his arm. He struck the man's stomach as hard as he could, and was pleased to hear pain as he let out a breath. He swung back for another strike—

"Crimson, there you are."

Alex froze, as did Terry, who had a hand near Alex's groin. *That would have hurt*, Alex thought, and made a mental note to see about getting protection.

"What's up, Mal?" Terry asked.

Malia looked at them and shook her head, her face a mix of amusement and annoyance. "Have you both forgot there's a job coming up?"

Alex checked his chronometer. "It's still two hours away. I'm not needed on the bridge until fifteen minutes before."

"Actually, Anders wants to see you in his briefing room."

Alex stepped away from Terrence and rubbed his arm. "Why?"

"I'm just the messenger. He said he wanted you in combat dress and to meet him there."

Alex frowned and looked to Terry.

"Just add your jacket to what you're wearing, and make sure you're armed."

Alex was wearing the gray pants and shirt Terrence had found for him, made of a thicker material than his jumpsuit and able to stop an unpowered blade. Alex liked it. It was comfortable, had a lot of pockets, and it even had red accents at the collar and down the sides.

"And grab a shower first," the man added.

Thirty minutes later he was entering Anders's briefing room—one of the smaller rooms in this section—with a table serving as a desk, and three chairs. He had his black and red jacket on, as well as one visible knife, and six more hidden on his body. He'd also put on the boots Terrence had gotten him, just in case this was the time he'd have to kick Anders in the balls again.

Alex stood behind one of the chairs. "You wanted to see me?"

Anders looked up from his datapad. A section of a floor plan was visible on it, probably the ship they'd be attacking. He looked Alex over and nodded in satisfaction.

"Yes, we need to get ready for the job."

"I still have plenty of time to get to the bridge."

"That's not where you'll be. You're coming with us for this one. I talked it over with the cap—" he stopped talking as Alex pulled out his comm.

He could see the anger in the man's eyes, but Alex didn't care. "Captain?"

"Make it quick, I'm busy."

"Just wanted to confirm you're not going to need me on the bridge for this job."

"I won't. It's a small one, so we're going old style, to make sure no one's forgotten how to do their part when you're not there watching their back."

Alex put the comm away. "I said I wouldn't go against the captain," he told Anders as an

explanation.

“And you think I’d put you in that position?”

Alex nodded.

“So much for trusting me.”

Alex barely held back a snort. “There isn’t any trust between us, Anders. You made sure of that. So, mind telling me why you set this up?”

Anders tried for an innocent expression, but Alex didn’t buy it. While the captain had said he wanted to do it that way, a small job meant less cargo, and no backup from Alex meant less intact cargo. The captain wasn’t a man driven solely by greed, but he did like his money. Someone else would have argued for it.

“Like the captain said, we don’t want to grow soft. You’re good for the cred-sticks, but bad for the combat readiness. And you haven’t felt what it’s like to be on the job. You’re always safe and secure on the bridge. I thought it was time for you to be in a real fight. Get your hands bloody, just like the rest of us.”

“I think they’re bloody enough,” Alex said, but he no longer felt anger at being reminded of what he’d done. It was in the past, something he couldn’t change, so he’d let go of it.

“Those weren’t fights. I don’t see what you’re worried about; Terry tells me you’re handling yourself well enough now. This should be a piece of cake for Golly’s Hero.”

Alex sighed. “Really? I finally got the rest of the ship to stop calling me that, and now you’re starting?”

Anders grinned, then stood. Alex followed him to the armory, where Terry, Zephyr, Malia, Barbara, and others Alex couldn’t remember the names of were putting on armor and arming themselves.

Terry handed him a chest vest, to put under his jacket. “It stops most low-powered guns, which is what security should have.”

“Just the chest?” Alex indicated Terry’s pants, with plating.

“I didn’t know you were coming, so I didn’t get anything ready for you.” He looked like he wanted to add more, but didn’t. The man handed Alex a gun belt, and he put it on, then checked that the gun was fully charged. He didn’t like having one—they still felt like it was too easy to kill with it—but Jennifer had taught him enough that he wasn’t afraid he’d hit a vital point when he was aiming for an arm or a leg now.

Once they were armored and armed as a group, they headed to a large room with a large airlock on one wall, and what looked like the entire crew standing in groups. Anders led them to the front and no one stopped them.

“So, if I’m here, waiting with you guys, how are we getting close to the ship without being shot down?”

The man on his left snorted. He was a head smaller than Alex, twice as large, all muscles with platinum hair. Jurgy? Alex thought his name might be that.

“We were doing this for years before you showed up.” His voice sounded like someone had shoved a digitizer down his throat. “Murray’s using the blind spot caused by their engines.”

The woman before him turned, her name was Natalie. “They don’t bother covering it because it should be too hot there for most ships, but the Golly was built to work close to stars.”

“How did the captain get it?” Alex asked.

“To hear Anders say it, the captain won it in a card game.”

“He can’t be ser—”

“Alright, people!” Anders raised his voice and the entire room fell silent. Alex glanced around and everyone was looking forward. Absolutely everyone was paying attention to Anders.

“You all know the drill, but we’re doing this one old school, like before we had our own little hero to watch out back. So, let’s go over it in case some of you forgot how this works. My team goes in first. We’re going to keep security busy while the rest of you make us rich. If you get hurt, you come back to the ship. If someone next to you gets hurt and can’t move on their own, you get them back to the ship. This isn’t a suicide mission. I don’t mind you getting hurt, but we’re all coming back, got that?”

As one, the men and women in the room answered with a deafening, “Yes, sir!” which continued reverberating in the following silence.

Alex was amazed at the discipline. He hadn’t seen anything on the ship that would lead him to think this was even possible. There were people who hated Anders standing at attention, waiting for his next orders.

He caught the motion of the man making his way toward him because Terrence’s lessons had taken root, and Alex never kept his gaze fixed in one location anymore. He saw the mohawk and knew who it was. He fought the reflex that told him to relax as Zephyr took position on this right.

“You have your knives?” the golden-skinned man asked.

Alex nodded.

“I know how you feel about killing. Don’t worry about it; you won’t have to do that. In fact, for the job we’re doing, trying to kill everyone we meet is going to be too time-consuming. All you want to do is incapacitate them.”

“Don’t worry, I’m going to do whatever I have to do to pull my weight.”

“I don’t doubt it. You’re tougher than any of us gave you credit for.”

Alex wasn’t so sure of *that*, but he wasn’t going to be the one to hold the others back. If that meant he had to kill someone, then so be it.

The ship shook.

“Stick with me as much as you can,” Zephyr said.

The ship shook again. There was a loud whine, metal against metal, a few loud knocks, then silence.

Alex had no idea what to expect when the hatch opened, but again he was surprised. No one rushed in a disorganized mob.

“Move out!” Anders yelled, and they walked through the large connecting tube in an orderly manner.

Alex looked at Zephyr. “Okay, I get we’re protecting the others, but what does that mean exactly?”

“We’re handling the perimeter. Anders and his inner circle will go to the hold to secure the entry points. Our job is to thin the security forces.” He indicated the gun he was holding. “You’re going to want to use your gun for that.”

Alex took it out without hesitation. They entered the ship in a corridor. Zephyr and a large group headed to the right at a jog. At each intersection, some of them separated from the group. Zephyr stopped at a panel in the wall as the rest kept going.

“We’re going down a level,” he said, removing it and revealing a ladder. Alex almost suggested the lift would be faster, but he couldn’t see it, and then realized the stupidity of using that. The ship controlled those.

Zephyr indicated up. “Cover that until I give you the all clear.”

Alex pointed his gun up.

“We’re clear,” the man said, just before an alarm sounded.

“Where’s everyone?” Alex asked when he was next to Zephyr. “How come the alarm only sounded now and not when we connected?”

“This is a courier ship. No passengers, just security. It’s why the captain prefers targeting them: no innocent bystanders.” They were still in cryo when we docked, so no one to sound the alarms. It gives us a few minutes to get in position.”

Voices came in the distance.

“The one drawback is a ships like this has a lot of security.” Zephyr ran for the voices.

Alex didn’t know why the man was running toward them instead of finding cover and waiting, but he followed. Zephyr fired as he turned the corner, and screams erupted. By the time Alex turned that corner, two men in dark blue uniforms with white bars down the sides were down. He shot a woman in the leg before she could pull her gun out, then a man in the gun-arm. The four other people had holes in their chest. Zephyr had no problem killing.

Alex kicked the guns away from the two he’d shot as he ran to catch up with his partner. A dozen people in the same uniform came around a far corner, but before they could react, Zephyr turned into the closest one with a curse as Alex followed him. Shouts came behind them.

Zephyr wasn’t waiting for him, putting more and more distance between them. Alex saw he was chasing someone. Shots erupted around him and Alex blindly returned fire. He could tell his vest took a few hits by the smell of his burning jacket. He pushed himself, but Zephyr was three intersections ahead of him by then. He was on his own.

Alex was trying to figure out what he could do to survive this when two things happened: two guards turned a corner ahead of him—guns drawn, and a door opened.

He threw himself into the open doorway, and hoped the ones in the corridor hadn’t noticed him. He bowled over the guard as she was exiting. They landed on the floor, and before he could react she struck his hand, making him drop his gun. Alex noted the dark blue and gold uniform, and the sound of the door closing. He rolled away until he reached the wall, then got his legs under him and grabbed a knife out of his boot as he stood. She got to her feet, and Alex swung to force her to keep her distance.

Small room, two doors, a table with four chairs around it. He grabbed a chair and threw it at her as he moved to put the table between them. The little space meant he didn’t have much maneuvering room—not to his advantage, nor was being backed against a wall, but at least that was one direction he couldn’t be attacked from.

His plan was simple: knock her out, and go find Zephyr. She pulled out her own knife— at least it wasn’t a gun —and came at him around the table. If he moved away, she would force him in front of the closed door. Anyone could come from there. That might even be her plan, so he went for her.

The surprise made her take a step back, but her wild swing left a cut across his left arm. He didn’t care; he slashed up with his right and opened up her leg. She went down to a knee and he backhanded her across the face.

A door opened. He glanced, and saw it was the one leading deeper into the apartment. Two men came out, both with guns. Alex tried kicking the table to force them back, but was the one pushed back instead. The table was bolted in place. He hit the wall, and a beam hit next to him.

Guns weren't good. They could kill him without ever coming in knife range, unless he threw it, which he did. He then threw himself to the floor, using the table as partial cover and pulling a knife from his sleeve.

Another door opened. Alex didn't think, he threw his knife at the form in that doorway. The form backed up, and Alex saw it grabbing for its neck as the door closed.

He took out the knife from his other sleeve. He couldn't stay down, or in one place. One against three in a small room made for great vids, but were horrible to survive.

The woman moved. Alex rolled under the table, putting a pair of legs closer. He cut it, but only deep enough to elicit curses from a man. A gun appeared below the edge and Alex stabbed the wrist. There was a flash of light, and his side burned. The hand wrenched away, taking the knife with it.

He took a knife from his belt and stood, slashing at the man with the bloody hand. Hadn't there been three? He glanced away in time to see the light reflecting off a blade. He moved to the side, was blocked by the table, and felt the cut on his face and saw the tip of the blade move past his eye.

He had a moment of terror that he'd lose his eye, then realized the blade was moving away in the upswing. He slashed, and forced that man to move away.

He didn't see anyone holding a gun anymore, but it was still three against him. If he didn't want to die, he couldn't worry about what kind of damage he'd do to them; he needed to put them down as quickly as possible. He gave one thought to Jack, asking forgiveness, and launched himself over the table at the woman.

He felt her knife bite in his arm, but his was in her side. He twisted and tried to pull it out, but his hand slipped on the blood now coating it as she fell.

Pain up his back pushed him forward. He took out the other knife from his belt and slashed back, not hitting anything. He couldn't worry about the wounds; he'd do that once he'd survived this fight.

The two men were on each side of him with the table in the middle of the three. They each had a knife, and moved carefully as they slashed back and forth at him. The moves were all show; they were trying to intimidate him. He grinned. Too bad for them he'd been fighting with Zephyr. That was an intimidating knife fighter.

Alex took a step toward one, then back and toward the other. He slashed, fainted, and dodged. He got in a few cuts, received some, but he got their measure. They weren't very good.

With another feint, he rushed past the man to his left. The two men were in each other's way trying to get at him. He grinned as he passed the open door, making for the exit. He was going to survive this.

A hand shot out of the open door, grabbed his arm, and pulled him in the other room. The force was enough that Alex didn't have the time to be surprised before he was off the floor, flying and falling to the ground. He saw thick arms as he was in the air, a wide torso, and breasts.

Alex thought she might be Will's type as his head rang from the impact. Staying down was death, so he pulled a knife from his other boot, gritted his teeth, and jumped up, slashing at the hand that reached for him.

She didn't scream at the line of blood that flew from her hand, she just closed it with a grunt and swung at him. He dodged and looked around.

A larger room, couch and chairs against the wall. More maneuvering room, but he was back

to three opponents, and while she wasn't armed, she looked like she could break him in two if she managed to grab him.

Alex moved, staying out of her reach and studying the space. Three doors in the back wall—bedrooms, probably, not exits. He looked for something he could put between him and her, but the space was open. Anything he could use was against the wall.

As he was looking at the open door, the two men came in. Alex figured he could easily maneuver them away from it, then run in and to the other door, escaping to the corridor, but one of them was holding a gun.

"Put that away," the muscular woman said. "You're not putting holes in my furniture." Her tone was calm, confident. She had no doubt she could take him, even without the others' help, and Alex realized something. He wasn't running. He was done running away like some scared kid. He was Alexander fucking Crimson. He was going to take on Tristan, so these guys better not scare him.

He grinned as the men threw themselves at him. He dodged toward the woman, ducked at the last moment, and the punch she intended for him struck one of them. He rolled, stood, dodged the coming knife, swung.

Alex stopped thinking about Jack. He stopped thinking about Tristan. He even stopped thinking about the fight. Only one thought remained as knives flashed in the light and people screamed: "I will survive this."

He felt impacts and cuts, but not the pain that should've accompanied them. He heard the screams, moans, and among them, the sound of his laughter. People wanted to kill him, and he was having the time of his life.

Then there wasn't any more moaning, no more screams. Only his laughter, which by itself sounded out of place, so he stopped. Pain made itself felt now, as well as exhaustion.

He was the only person standing in the room. Five lifeless bodies were sprawled at his feet.

He had done that. He had killed them. He waited for the voice to tell him it was wrong, that he wasn't supposed to be a killer, but it didn't come. What it said was that he was alive. He had survived. He had won.

Sound, motion.

Alex swung. Someone blocked his arm, twisted it, made him drop his knife. Alex turned out of the hold, reached behind, and pulled out his last knife from the small of his back. With it in hand, he launched himself at the new opponent. He was going to survive this as well.

He slashed, swung with his other fist. He felt the knife bite through fabric and into flesh. He dodged the punch, but the hand grabbed his wrist instead of striking him. His opponent pulled him, spun, and Alex went flying over the man, only then realizing he was sporting a mohawk.

Alex's vision exploded with stars as his head hit the floor. He lay there, looking up at Zephyr's face. He groaned, putting a hand to his head.

"You can be pretty savage," Zephyr said, looking at the cut on his arm, "when you put your mind to it. I'm going to have to keep that in mind." He extended the bloody hand to Alex, who looked at it for a moment before taking it. "Are you okay?"

"My head hurts," Alex replied.

"The rest of you?"

Alex looked at himself. His clothes were cut and covered with blood. He had no idea how much if it was his. "I'm not feeling most of it. Just generalized aches. What happened?"

"How about that?" the golden-skinned man said. Pointing to the right side of Alex's face.

Alex touched it and pulled his hand away as pain surged. His fingers came away bloodier. "How bad is it?"

"Let's just say I'm surprised you're not screaming right now." He pulled out a hypo from his pack and injected Alex.

Immediately, the pains Alex didn't think he was feeling went away. "What are you doing here?"

"When I caught up with the guard I was chasing, I realized you weren't there anymore. I came looking for you. I had to deal with more security on the way."

Alex looked Zephyr over. Except for the cut he'd given him, there were no indications he'd done any fighting. "How did you know I was in here?"

"The woman with a knife in her throat on the floor in front of the door was a good indication." He indicated the bodies. "You did this." It wasn't a question. "How do you feel?"

Alex had to think about it for a moment. He looked at the bodies, expecting to feel revulsion now that he wasn't in the middle of fighting anymore, but it didn't come. "I'm not happy I had to, but it was them or me. I wasn't going to let them kill me."

"Good. That mindset will keep the nightmares away, and help you stay alive."

Alex rolled his eyes. "You say that like nightmares aren't the norm for me." He shrugged at the surprised look that got him. "As for surviving, yours and Terrence's training has everything to do with it."

"I'm glad you think that, because you're still leaving yourself open on your left side." Zephyr grinned and handed Alex his knife back. "How about we get back to taking down security?"

Alex returned the grin. He was looking forward to doing just that.