

“Tristan, are you okay?” The words were out of Alex’s mouth before he could stop himself. The darkness was total, none of the low lights from before. He’d lost track of the Samalian during the fight against all the holographic versions of himself.

“Alex?” Tristan’s deep voice. “Is that you?”

“It is.”

“Are...” the hesitation in Tristan’s voice scared Alex more than the fight had. “Are you the real one? Or one of Justin’s copies?”

He clenched his teeth. “I’m real. The others vanished when the system shut down.” He headed toward the voice.

There was a curse, Zephyr. “Crimson, any chance you can bring the lights back on?” His voice was shaking.

“No terminal in range.”

More cursing.

“You okay?”

“I don’t like the dark.”

“Really?” He reached where he thought Tristan should be, but his hands didn’t touch anyone. If he’d moved, Alex was going to scream.

“Yes, really. The dark is when the Arconix come out.” There was a shudder in the voice.

“I don’t know what those are, but there aren’t any here.” A hand clamped on his and he had a knife at that person’s throat, feeling fur tickle his fingers. He missed Zephyr’s reply in forcing himself not to cut it open.

“Alex? Is this you? Please, I’m not going to hurt you, I promise.”

He put the knife away and felt along the arm, over the band, and he reached Tristan’s face. As his hand touched the muzzle, he felt him lean into the touch and he almost pulled away, everything telling him this couldn’t be Tristan.

“I wish you were here, Alex.” The wistfulness in his voice made Alex want to yell at him. “I wish I could show you just how much I love you.”

The comment reminded him Tristan was naked, and of the state intense fighting left him in. He had his hand to his Samalian’s stomach before he stopped himself. This was not the time for it, and this wasn’t the Tristan he wanted to do it with. He cursed the universe again and brought his hand up Tristan’s other arm, feeling wetness along it.

“Are you hurt?” This felt worse than the dried blood in Tristan’s chest fur. “Zeph...” He cursed. Mary was the one with the Samalian-rated Heals.

“I’m fine,” Tristan said. “It’s just the thing I made for Mary.”

“What?”

“It got broken in the fight and now it’s leaking.”

“Can I ask a question?” Zephyr asked, raising his voice.

“I still can’t bring the lights on.”

“Don’t worry, I know that. I’m just wondering how it is you two are still standing.”

“Are you okay?”

“Took a couple of Heals. I’ll be fine, but I’m lying on the floor, trying not to think about what’s crawling in the darkness. How come neither of you are doing the same?”

“I’m not afraid of the dark,” Tristan said.

Alex smiled and brought a hand up to Tristan’s face. “This didn’t get anywhere close to the kind of fights we’re used to.” He felt Tristan smile, felt the lips part to expose teeth.

“This was fun,” he said. He leaned in and nuzzled Alex’s neck, whispering, “Really fun.”

Alex shivered and stifled a moan as Tristan licked his skin. He felt a hand on his ass and he was pressed against the Samalian. Yes, he was definitely excited.

This wasn’t the time, Alex reminded himself as he reacted to the touch, the memories of what Tristan could do to him. This wasn’t the Tristan he wanted this with, but it had been so long since he’d felt Tristan’s touch. Why shouldn’t he enjoy this? It wasn’t like anyone would see what was going on.

He wrapped his arms around Tristan and bit into his chest fur, tasting the dried blood. He ground against the furred body, and the Samalian rumbled. He opened his mouth to say “yes” as the lights came on slowly, until a soft glow illuminated the cavernous room.

Alex cursed softly. “Stop.”

Tristan made a sound between a whine and a question, but didn’t stop massaging his ass, or grinding against him. Alex pushed him away as a door opened and closed.

“That was a door,” Tristan said, coming alert and moving before Alex.

Alex glanced at Zephyr as he stepped next to Tristan. The man was lying on the floor, his clothing cut almost to ribbon. Those holographic knives had gotten almost mono-edge sharp before the lights went out. Zephyr was purposely looking away from him, and Alex thought he was blushing slightly.

Someone approached, and it didn’t take Alex long to recognize him. He sighed. “What do you want, Anders?”

“I—”

“I don’t know you,” Tristan said.

Anders looked at him then immediately away. “Fuck, I didn’t need to see that.”

Alex smirked. “Now you know why you could never interest me.”

“You’re sick.”

Tristan growled, and Alex placed an arm across his chest to keep him from attacking Anders. He was hearing a computer. It was simple, but it had a port to the rest of the system.

“Why can’t I kill him?” Tristan asked, looking at Alex’s arm.

The question pulled him out of the system. He didn’t have the time to figure out what it did, he had to deal with this situation first.

“He’s here for me, not you. Isn’t that right, Anders?”

“Oh, I’m here for both of you.” Anders glanced at them and looked away again. “Can’t you at least have that thing put pants on?”

“Feeling inadequate?”

“Alex?” Tristan asked.

“You wish,” Anders said. “If you’d let me do you, you’d know why I have no shortage of women in my bed.”

“Did he touch you?” Tristan’s voice lost all timidity, and he was glaring at Anders, who took a step back.

“He tried, but he couldn’t measure up to you.”

“I should kill him for trying to touch you.”

“You’d better keep your pet furball away from me, unless you want to watch me tear him apart.”

Alex smiled. “I almost want to see you try, but then I’d be deprived of the joy of ending you myself.”

“I don’t think you can kill him,” Tristan said.

Alex ground his teeth and wished Tristan would keep quiet.

“See, the furball knows how things are. He knows a superior fighter when he sees one.”

“You’re nowhere near as good as Alex is,” Tristan said, “but you’re my delusion, so I’m the only one who can hurt you.”

“I think there’s something not quite right with your furball.” Anders moved, trying to keep an eye on the two of them while not being able to see Tristan’s nudity.

Alex took a breath to calm himself. “Tristan, Anders is unfortunately real, just like me, Zephyr, Mary, and Aliana. This is all real.”

Tristan looked around. “If it’s all real, where are all the dead yous we killed?”

Alex sighed. “They were holograms, remember?”

“No, they were you.”

“Yeah, you really picked a winner here,” Anders said, grinning.

“Shut up, Anders,” Alex said. “Look, I need you to trust me. Let me deal with Anders. It shouldn’t take long.” He pulled the earpiece out of his pocket.

Tristan looked at the man, at Alex, then the earpiece. “Fine,” he said, sounding petulant. He took the earpiece out of his hand. “But you don’t need this.”

“I do.” Alex motioned for him to put it back.

“But...you said this was real.”

“I don’t have the time to explain,” he hissed softly, “but I do need it.”

Worry flitted across Tristan’s face as he searched Alex’s. He placed a large hand on the side of Alex’s face and rubbed his thumb through the hair there, over where the implant had been installed. Alex fought the urge to lean into the caress, focusing on Tristan’s eyes, who seemed to finally be working things out on his own.

He placed the earpiece back in Alex’s hand. He closed the hand over it. “Don’t leave me, Alex. I can’t take it. I won’t be able to deal with losing you again.”

Alex smiled maliciously. “You don’t have to worry about that; this won’t be the first time I’ve kicked his ass.”

Tristan’s hand closed over his and his eyes grew hard. “You let him live?”

Alex felt better at having that anger directed at him. His Tristan was coming back. “It was before you taught me better. Don’t worry, this is the last time he’s ever going to bother me.”

Tristan nodded and let go of his hand. He stayed where he was as Alex stepped away. Anders looked relieved to move away from the naked Samalian.

“How can you let that thing touch you like that?” Anders asked, not bothering to hide his disdain.

“Loving him has a lot to do with it.”

Anders snorted. “That isn’t a ‘him’, it’s an ‘it’. They’re only good for hard labor, if even that.”

Alex smiled. “Considering your reaction, I think you consider him a ‘him’. He’s certainly more of a man than you ever were.” He indicated the metal band in Anders’s hair. “Went and crowned yourself a ruler, or something?”

Anders ran a finger along it, and resettled the band. “You like it? It’s one of the perk of being captain of the ship.”

“So that was your plan? Take over the Sayatoga?” Alex put the earpiece in his ear.

“Are you really going to use that? I thought you were tougher and better than I was. You really need to use this room to have a chance to beat me?”

Alex shrugged and pocketed the earpiece. “I’m surprised you came here yourself. You could have let the holograms kill me for you. Each iteration was tougher than the previous one.”

Anders growled. “You can thank that Lawman for that. He blew up my chair to stop this.” He smiled. “But it’s for the best. Now I have a chance to kill you myself.”

Alex nodded. *Sure, himself with the help of that band.* Now he had an idea of what it could do, and he wished he could confirm everything was in place, but all he heard through the band’s comm port was silence.

“Victor’s still alive? Are you going soft?” He took a knife from his belt. It had weight to it, so he looked for the trigger and felt it vibrate.

“What? Did you want me to kill him?”

“No, but when he wasn’t with my group I figured he was in yours, and that the first thing you’d do was kill him.”

“What kind of monster do you take me for?” Anders took position, raising his fists. Alex noticed the man was without a gun. It explained why he hadn’t just shot him on entering.

“Oh, you’re not a monster. You couldn’t be one even if you tried. What you are is an idiot who thinks killing people in your way is how you engender loyalty.”

Anders began moving, circling Alex. Alex moved with him, catching Tristan's impatient expression.

"I notice you haven't asked about Short Stuff."

"Will's alive."

"How do you know?"

"For one thing, you still need him. For another, you know what Captain Meron is going to do if you hurt him."

"That's only true if I go back to the Golly, which I have no intention of doing. After all, I didn't go through the trouble of explaining to the good captain the value of having me here to protect you and William, just to go back to being under his boot."

"I can just imagine how difficult that was." Alex grinned. It had been simpler than he'd expected to convince Captain Meron to let Anders come, when the man suggested it. He was beginning to worry that Anders wasn't going to be satisfied being the highest-ranked crew member other than his command staff.

Anders frowned.

"You really thought this was your idea? Who do you think arranged for you to find out I wanted to borrow Will? Come on, Anders. You're dumb, but tell me you aren't that dumb."

"Alex," Tristan growled. "If you don't kill him right now, I will."

"Reminiscing's over," Alex said, to which Anders only replied with a glower before running at him. Alex blocked the punch, sliced at his stomach, but Anders moved and the blade cut air.

It had been too long for him to remember the little of how he'd seen Anders fight, and as much as Tristan wanted this over quickly, Alex wanted to make the man suffer for a while. At least force him to bring out his obfuscated weapon.

Anders came again, a series of quick punches and kicks that Alex blocked and dodged, slamming an elbow in the man's face at the last moment before stepping out of range.

Anders wiped at his mouth and sneered at the blood. When the man ran at him again Alex blocked the punch, but barely noticed the foot coming at his knee. He moved it, so the impact was glancing instead of full-on, but he limped away.

Anders grinned at him.

"Alex," Tristan called, "stop playing. End this now."

"Stay the fuck out of this," Anders yelled back, glaring at Tristan. Transparent blocks of light appeared around the Samalian's arms and legs, and Anders stared at them.

Alex tackled Anders, and they landed on the floor. He had the knife coming down when the flash of light sent him flying back. He threw it before crashing down, but there was another flash of light as Anders raised his hands to protect himself, and the knife clattered to the ground.

Anders laughed as he stood. "So that's how the fucking thing works."

Alex stood and took out another knife. Polycarbon, by the weight.

"I wouldn't if I were you," Anders said, motioning to Tristan. He was being pulled apart by the light boxes. One appeared around his groin and turned opaque. "There, now I don't have to see that anymore." He smiled. "I wonder what I can have happen inside it."

Tristan looked like he was holding back a scream.

"Any injury you give him," Alex said, taking out a second knife, "I'm going to give you, so you'd better think about what you're doing."

Anders looked at him and lost his smugness. He might have had the superior weapon, and Alex had no idea if his contingencies were in place, but he was going to kill the man, and it had to be visible on his face.

"You can't beat me," Anders said. "I control this place."

"Then go ahead and try to kill me." Alex ran at him and Anders made motions. Nothing happened until Alex was about to slam a knife in his chest. Anders screamed in

what sounded like terror, and there was a flash of light.

Alex landed, rolled, and took out another knife, the edge lighting up as he stood. Anders was feeling his chest, surprise on his face. When he looked at Alex, there was no confidence there until his body was covered with a thin layer of light. Armor made of light.

Anders smiled. Knives formed in his hands.

Laser-knife against light-armor. Would it do anything? No, laser-knife against forcefield covered with a hologram. That he knew he couldn't beat. He'd have to count on the fact Anders didn't seem to have conscious control over it, to stay alive until he got a signal.

Alex strode toward him and Anders waited. His armor seemed to react to his movement instantly. Alex let the sounds of the headband processor flow around him, since he couldn't do anything about it yet.

Anders slashed and thrust, forcing Alex to parry and dodge. The laser-knife stopped the light-blade, but the polycarbon one was sliced in two. Alex discarded it as he backed up and pulled another one, throwing it away as the weight told him it was also polycarbon. He took another one, vibro-blade. Would that do any good against a forcefield? He'd find out soon enough.

He slashed at Anders who didn't even bother trying to block, letting the armor turn the blade aside while he stabbed at Alex. Alex moved out of the way, but the armor around Anders's fist expanded. The knife missed him, but the impact still sent him flying.

He landed on his back and needed to catch his breath. That had been harder than Anders should have been able to punch. He heard a difference in the sounds behind the headband's processor, and remembered the mask as he was opening his mouth.

He took the earpiece out and put it in his ear. "Tell me you're there."

"No fucking way!" Anders was before him faster than he should have, and he had the earpiece out of Alex's ear as he rolled out of the way.

He tried to get to his feet, and a kick sent him flying. He heard something, but the pain kept him from understanding it.

"I did some reading on you coercionist types." Anders opened his hand and pieces of the earpieces fell to the floor. He leisurely walked toward Alex as he picked himself up. "The earpiece isn't enough. You need to be able to focus."

Tristan roared, and Alex glanced at him as he pulled out two other knives. It sounded like he was in pain. He cursed himself. Anders was who he should be focusing on. The fist hit him in the face, and he staggered back.

"You think you're so smart, don't you?" Anders swung again, but Alex dodged. "Well, I'm not letting you take this away from me. You're not the only one who can tell machines what to do anymore. I'm in charge, not you!"

Alex grabbed another knife, only for Anders to punch him and make him lose his grip. He took another one and blocked the incoming blade with it, and discovered that vibro-blade didn't do much against forcefield edges. It did divert the knife enough it sliced Alex's side instead of planting itself into his chest, but he had to throw it down and patted himself for another one.

"Out of knives?" Anders smirked as Alex grabbed one at the small of his back and slashed. Anders stepped back reflexively.

"I'm never out of knives."

"That isn't going to help you." Anders swung a fist and Alex blocked it, the strength behind the impact sending a lance of pain through his arm as he fell back, dropping to a knee.

Anders grinned, the knife in his other hand elongating. "Well, looks like you won't get to see what I'll do to that thing you call your man." He raised his hand and didn't move.

By the strain on Anders's face, Alex could tell he was trying to bring it down, but he was locked in place.

A woman appeared next to them. She looked from one to the other. "Sorry I'm late. They had a lot of security and coercionists trying to keep me from doing what I had to. I swear, whoever is in charge of this ship is paranoid."

Alex let himself relax as he sighed. "Asyr, your timing is impeccable."

"Asyr," Anders growled. "What are you doing?"

She glanced at him. "What I was hired to do, what do you think?"

Alex forced himself to his feet, letting his arm hang and ignoring the pain. "Can you give me a rundown of what's going on?"

"The bridge is mostly secure. I can see a handful of groups held together by rough-looking guards, but—" She vanished.

Anders's sword struck the floor where Alex had been, and before he could react, Anders had backhanded him. "Did you really think I didn't know she was part of this?"

Alex stayed on the floor; it was easier than to deal with the pain of standing. Anyway, he was now hearing what he'd been waiting for. He started chuckling.

Anders stood over him. "Did I knock your brain out of alignment or something? What's funny about me killing you? If you're counting on Asyr to pull a last-minute rescue, all communications from the Golly have been shut down, so it isn't going to happen."

Alex laughed so loud it actually hurt.

"What is wrong with you?"

Alex managed to calm the laughter to intermittent snickers. "Anders, in all that reading you did about coercionists, did they say anything about the first thing a coercionist does when gaining access to a new system?"

"What are you talking about?"

Alex smiled. "He takes full control over it. Or in this case, gets the other best coercionist he knows do it for him."

Anders raised his foot over his face.

"Full holographic shutdown!" Alex yelled, rolling out of the way.

Darkness fell on the room, giving him time to catch his breath and letting the pain pass.

"Excluding recognized voices, disable all command input." He forced himself to his feet.

Zephyr moaned in fear somewhere in the darkness.

"What did you do?" Anders asked. "Where's my armor?"

"Light, centered on me, four-yard radius, stop," Alex said when a glow matching that of ship lighting was reached. Anders was looking at his arms. "Come on, Anders, did you really think that of the two of us, you were the smart one? I'm the one in control of this place now."

"You can't do that! I broke your thing!"

Alex rolled his eyes. "I haven't needed that thing for a while now." He raised his working arm. "Now that we're both on the same level, how about we finish—"

A roar exploded in the darkness.

A form ran into the light, and before Alex could understand what had happened it was gone, having taken Anders with it.

A scream came from the darkness, which turned to a strangled gurgling. When it fell silent, the only thing Alex heard was the ripping of flesh.