

Alex stood at the entrance of the lounge, looking at the mass of people in it. He'd been there before a few times with Will, to watch a vid or play games at one of the tables, but this was his first time coming in alone. The mass of people, without Will to act as a buffer, made him nervous.

Will had introduced him to a few of the men and women he knew, but Alex hadn't caught the names, and hadn't really wanted to get to know them. They were pirates, big and scary, the lot of them. Even those who were thin scared him; they had a look in their eyes that screamed of violence.

His younger friend was already somewhere among the mass. He'd offered for Alex to come with him, but he'd said no, a mix of not wanting to be with other people and figuring Will could use some time away from his babysitting duties. Maybe Carlina would be there and he'd get the chance to tell her how he felt.

But after an hour of lying on his bunk, looking at Jack's hologram and feeling miserable, he decided he needed to distract himself. He couldn't use the terminal in their room to access the entertainment library among the nightmare that was the ship's computer. He couldn't contact the network; the captain had cut all transmissions a few days after they left the station for a reason Will wouldn't tell him, so he couldn't get any entertainment that way.

So that left the lounge, with its screens, game tables, and lots of scary people. After more than a month Alex finally had enough of an understanding of the layout he no longer needed Will to guide him to the common areas like the dining hall and the lounge, and he was confident that if he was dropped anywhere on the ship, he could manage to find his way back to his room, in time.

Like the previous time here, the first thing Alex did was look for Anders. That man scared him more than the others, and he didn't want to be surprised by him. He found him at a table, drinking and talking as usual, but this time he wasn't with his normal group. These people seemed to be at ease with him too.

Knowing where the man was, Alex picked a vid screen on the opposite side of the room. Half of the twenty chairs were occupied by an even mix of men and women. They were watching a show Alex didn't know, but he quickly figured out it was a violent one. He didn't care for violence, but now that he'd sat down, he didn't want to stand and risk attracting attention to himself. After a few minutes, he found himself transfixed by the gore on the screen.

\* \* \* \* \*

"You look pretty good," someone whispered close behind him. The words were loud enough to pull Alex out of the show at the moment where the killer was finishing dismantling the bounty hunter's family. The scene had been very graphic, and had reminded Alex of the pictures from Tristan's files, although that act on the screen hadn't had the same effect on him. Even if he watched it happen, it was missing something Alex couldn't explain, but it took away the sense of real from the act.

"I said, you look pretty good." The voice was louder, and Alex realized the man wasn't just close by, he was right behind him. Alex turned. The man was muscular, like most of the others on the ship. He wore a gray shirt and pants, and his pockmarked face was covered on top with a

mass of messy brown hair and stubble over his jaw. The man smiled at him, showing surprisingly white teeth.

Alex still looked left and right, but they were the only ones there. "Thank you," he replied nervously, then turned back to look at the screen.

Alex felt the man lean in. "How about we go back to my bunk and make it rattle?"

"No thanks," Alex said, trying hard to keep his voice from shaking, but not succeeded at keeping it entirely steady.

"Why not? You're too good for me? Is that it?"

Alex turned to face the man in surprise. "Of course not."

"You think I'm ugly then?" the eyes narrowed, the voice gaining a menacing edge to it.

"No," Alex replied, his voice shaking now. "I'm with someone."

"You have someone?" the man said, tone dubious. "Here?"

Alex shook his head. "He isn't here. I'm traveling to meet him." Alex stood to leave, but the man grabbed his arm. Alex held on the back of a chair to keep standing as he felt his legs wobble from fear. "Look, I don't want any trouble. I'm just looking to get to my destination."

"Oh? You don't want any troubles, do you?" the man sneered. "Maybe you should have kept your mouth shut then."

Alex tried to free himself by pulling on his arm. For a fleeting moment he had a vision of gnawing it off at the elbow to gain freedom.

The man watched him, amused. "You think I wouldn't hear what you said about me?"

"Look, I don't know what you're talking about." Alex pulled harder and his arm came free. He staggered back, regained his footing, and turned to head for the exit.

"Don't you fucking walk away from me!" the man bellowed. "Something like you doesn't get to question my place here and my abilities, and not answer for it."

A wall of people with faces set in anger formed before him. Alex tried to push them out of the way, but they didn't move.

The man grabbed his shoulder and pulled. Alex flew back and landed ass on the ground. He stood and looked around. The wall of people formed a circle around the two of them.

Alex raised his arms. "I don't want to fight," he said, his voice cracking. "I don't know what you heard, but I'm sorry. I didn't mean any of it."

The man laughed. "Fight? We're not going to fight." He grabbed his crotch and shook it. "I'm going to show you I can perform better than anyone you've ever had."

Alex couldn't get his mouth to work for a moment. "You—you're going to what?"

"I'm going to fuck you," the man clarified. "If you didn't want a piece of this, you shouldn't have been talking about it."

"I didn't say anything!"

The man snorted. "Well, then. Once I'm done with you, you're going to have plenty to say." He took a step forward, and Alex darted to the side. The man turned to keep facing him. "Nowhere to go, little thing. You're not getting out of here until I've had you."

Alex tried to push through the people, but they didn't move. "Please," he pleaded. "I haven't done anything. Just let me through." Hard faces looked back at him. Someone pushed him back.

The man caught him. "I knew you'd change your mind."

Alex spun, and to both's surprise, punched him in the face. Alex looked at his fist in horror while the man touched his cheek, a smile growing on his lips.

“Well, well. You have some fire in you. Good, I do like for my bitches to have a bit of a fight in them.” He backhanded Alex and sent him to the floor.

Alex ran a hand over his mouth and it came away bloody. His nose hurt and something ran down from it.

The man smirked. “Come on, get up. Show me you have more fight in you than this.”

Alex got to his unsteady feet. “Look, I don’t want to fight you. I don’t even know you.”

“Well then. It’s going to be real easy. Drop your pants and turn around.”

Alex shook his head and forced the fear and anger down. “No.” He made his voice as firm as he could. “I’m Jack’s.”

“No Jack I know has a plaything,” the man replied.

“He’s who I’m going to.”

“I don’t care who you’re going to. Jack or not, you’re mine. I’m the boss here. I’m going to fuck you, and when I’m done I’m going to pass you around to everyone I know. Now, drop those pants.”

Alex shook his head.

The man shrugged. “I guess I got to hurt you some more then.”

Alex raised his arms to protect his face as the man approached, but the fist hit him in the stomach. Alex’s feet left the ground, and when he came back down he lost his balance and backpedaled back in the wall of people. This time they moved, and he fell to the ground among them.

He felt like he was going to throw up as he watched the man lumber toward him. Alex scrambled back and the people moved out of his way, chuckling or outright laughing. If he could turn around and get up, Alex knew he’d be able to race for the door, but he could barely push himself back with hands and feet.

The man’s laughter joined the others, and fear got Alex to put more distance between them. Just a little more, he told himself, and he’d be able to get up and run.

His hand came down on something uneven and he twisted his wrist. He fell back, and the pain was such he couldn’t stop his yell. Eyes tearing, he moved to the side to get up before the man came too close. He turned and saw what had caused his injury.

A gun.

He grabbed it with his good hand and pointed it at the man. The people closest moved away, forming another circle.

The man stared. “Well, who’s the idiot that’s leaving weapons lying around?” he demanded. A murmur traveled through the crowd, but no one responded. He shook his head in annoyance. “Okay, hand it over before you hurt yourself.”

Alex shook his head. There was no way he was relinquishing the only thing that evened out the field.

“Don’t be stupid. There’s no way you even know how to use that thing.”

“Stay away,” Alex said through gritted teeth, shaking the gun in a demonstration of his willingness to use it. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

The man snorted. “Don’t worry, you won’t. I, on the other hand, am going to hurt you badly if you don’t give me the pistol.” He motioned with his hand.

Alex placed his finger on the trigger, hoping that would convey his seriousness.

“Oh, you’re all brave now that you’re armed, aren’t you?” He looked at the people behind him. “You people are going to want to get out of there. If he fires, it’s one of you he’s going to

hit.” He fixed his gaze on Alex and took a step forward.

“Don’t come any closer!”

“Or what? You’ll shoot me? Go ahead, shoot. I’m standing right here, not moving. Come on, shoot already, because if you don’t I’m going to fuck you so bad that Jack fellow isn’t going to want to have anything to do with you anymore.”

He had to shoot. Alex didn’t want to be hurt, even less raped, and he believed the man when he said he’d do both. He couldn’t see any mercy in those eyes. He had a thought of Tristan for a moment, but instead of being ice cold, the man’s eyes were burning hot. He had to pull the trigger. It was the only way to make sure he’d see Jack again.

He had to pull the trigger, he repeated to himself.

The man laughed. “Told you. You’re not tough, like us. You’re a groundling, weak. You don’t have the balls it takes to survive out here, so you’re going to be my—” he jerked forward, “—bitch!”

Alex startled. There was a flash of light, then the man was staring at Alex, stunned. He looked down at the burned hole in his chest before crumbling to the floor.

Alex watched the unmoving body for a moment, then dropped the gun. What had he done?

“Alright,” a voice boomed in the silence. “What’s going on here?”

Alex turned and stared at the captain in the doorway looking in his direction, and that of the dead man.