

The room smelled of fresh meat and iron filing. It was a large living room, with a couch against one wall and three plush chairs along another. Oh, and there were bodies littering the center of the room, nine of them.

Alex frowned and counted them again. Yes, there were nine heads, eighteen hands and feet. Except that wasn't right. He hadn't fought that many people here.

"Alright!" a deep voice said behind him. "Now that's what I call a massacre."

Alex sighed. Right, this was another dream. These dreams where he knew he was dreaming were becoming more common, but that didn't make them less annoying or disturbing from his regular nightmares.

"Go away," he said.

"Come on, Alex—"

Alex spun. "It's Crimson!"

Tristan took a step back, hands up. "Sorry, sorry. Crimson it is."

Alex glared at him.

"Do you mind putting those away? They're making me nervous."

Alex looked, and he was holding a knife in each hand. Holding them so tight his knuckles were pale.

"You don't deserve to call me Alex, not after what you did to me."

"I said I was sorry."

Alex sheathed the knives. "Just go away."

"Can't do that."

"Damn it! It's my dream! I don't want to dream about any of this!"

Tristan regarded him. "Don't you?" He indicated the room. "Look at this. You should be celebrating."

"What's there to celebrate?"

"You won, A— Crimson. You killed them."

"There was only five of them."

"Five, nine, what's the difference? There could have been twenty or fifty, you'd have killed them anyway. You've got what it takes."

"You say that like it's a good thing."

"You want to beat me, don't you? You want Jack back, right?" Tristan took Alex by the shoulders and turned him around. "Well, that's how you do it."

"Is Jack even real anymore?" Alex asked softly, terrified of the answer.

"Of course, I'm still here," a soft voice answered. A muzzle rubbed the back of his neck, a tongue licking his ear, and Alex shivered.

He turned around, and gentle brown eyes met his.

"Hey," Jack said, smiling shyly.

Alex reached for his face, hesitated, then placed a hand on the Samalian's cheek. Jack closed his eyes and leaned into the touch.

"You're real," Alex said, breathlessly.

"Of course, I'm—"

Alex hugged him tightly. A moment later, Jack wrapped his arms around him.

"I've missed you so much." Alex was crying.

"I miss you too. You can't give up on us."

"I'm—I'm scared of what I'll find."

Jack stepped away, took him by the chin, and gently lifted his head until their eyes met. “You’ll find me.”

“But Tristan—”

“He’s just a shell. Once you defeat him, I’ll be underneath. You just have to keep coming for me.”

Alex nodded. “I am.”

Jack smiled, leaned in, and kissed Alex.

The kiss took his breath away. Jack parted his lips and his tongue pushed into Alex’s mouth. He played with Alex’s, teased it and intertwined them. Alex’s body reacted, trembling and becoming hot. He held on to him, arms tight, fingers digging into the fur.

When Jack broke the kiss, he smiled at Alex. “Will you do anything to find me?”

Alex nodded. “Yes, I will.”

Jack’s hands moved along Alex’s chest, undoing buttons. Alex looked around and let out a nervous chuckle.

“Here?”

“Why not?”

Alex opened his mouth to point out the bodies and blood, but he caught sight of the golden-furred Samalian over Jack’s shoulder. He was relaxed, leaning against the wall next to the exit. His face didn’t show any emotions, no judgment. Watching him, Alex had one word light up: Consequences.

Jack stopped moving. “Is something wrong?” He made to turn, but Alex stopped him.

“No, everything’s perfect.” He smiled at his lover and ran his hand through his chest fur. He didn’t care about consequences; he had Jack back. It had all been worth it.

Jack smiled back and removed Alex’s shirt, then crouched to take off his pants. Moving back up, he nuzzled and licked Alex’s chest, neck, and cheeks, then kissed him. He wrapped him in a tight embrace before lowering him to the floor, and then they were moving together.

They rolled around, and at one time Alex moved on top of Jack, then it was the reverse. One took the other and then the positions flipped. It went on for an eternity, Alex’s pleasure building to an intensity he had never experienced before.

Alex was panting, on his back. Jack moving on top of him. He ran his hand through the fur, ignoring how red they were.

“I love you, Jack,” he said as he began to see stars.

His lover leaned in, still moving, still building Alex’s pleasure. Alex thought he was coming in for a kiss, but instead his mouth went to his ear, and as pleasure exploded, Jack whispered something.

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Alex woke with a gasp, shaking both at the intensity of the dream and at the words Jack had said. The voice had been Jack’s, but the words hadn’t been his. They couldn’t have been.

“I’m proud of you.”

Jack couldn’t want that for him. Jack couldn’t want him to be this killer. Alex didn’t want him to want that for him—but the sticky wetness at his groin said otherwise.

Alex cursed, and only then thought to check for Will. He wasn't in his bunk. Good, he wouldn't wake him. He sat up, and was relieved to see he wasn't covered in blood.

Had he ever had such intense sex before? Even in his dreams? Fuck, he missed Jack, being held, touched, pleased. His body reacted as his mind brought the memory of the dream. The two of them moving as one among the blood and corpses. Alex shoved it away; that wasn't what he wanted.

He stood and noticed the datapad on the shelf.

"Doc said to let you rest," was written on it, "but you've got to come to the party." That was from Will, but Alex looked at the complete phrases, surprised to see he was capable of writing that way. Was his truncated speech an affectation? He didn't think so; more than once Will had grown exasperated with his inability to explain something.

He cleared the pad and headed to the shower, doing his best not to let the pain bring him down. He stopped by the mirror and looked at himself. He didn't look in too bad of a shape; the small cuts had sealant on them that made them almost impossible to see, the bandage on his cheek not showing any signs of bleeding.

He saw Jack before him, his fur matted with blood. Felt him move on top of him, lean in. "*I'm proud of you.*" With a curse, he shoved the memory away. He didn't want to remember that. He didn't want his body to react to the memory.

He undressed and showered, the water hot enough to scald the memory out of him. Except it didn't. When he got out, skin bright red, he looked at himself and thought he was covered with blood. Immediately he remembered Jack's hands on his body as he took Alex from behind.

Alex punched the wall, which only added one more pain to the multitude he felt. He couldn't stay here. He'd end up reliving the dream over and over, he knew it.

He dressed in a clean uniform, another gray and red one, but with this one, the red was in patches on the shoulders, chest, and back, instead of lines.

He'd head to the lab, check in on the computer. That would keep his mind busy. But first, his body demanded he did something about the pain.

Doc was in the medical bay, as usual.

"Don't you ever sleep?" Alex asked.

"Yes," she replied, indicating the closest bed.

"You sleep here?"

"No. Sit, there."

Alex sat and she looked him over. "You look like crap," she said.

"I feel like it." He almost told her about the dream, but he wasn't sharing that with anyone. "You said I could get a second shot."

"I thought you weren't going to get it?"

He tried to smile. "I changed my mind."

She nodded and injected him. "Heading to the party?"

"I don't know. Are you going?"

"I went earlier. Did some dancing, a bit of drinking. Then someone sprained an ankle so I brought her here, fixed her up, and sent her to bed."

Alex stood, the pain vanishing.

"You should go," she said. "You look like you could use a drink and a distraction."

"What I need is work," Alex replied as he left, but he found himself going down to the lounge, instead of up to the lab.

As with every other post-job celebration, the music was loud. People saw him and waved, clapped him on the shoulder. Said something that could have been congratulations, if Alex could have heard the words.

He headed for Anders's table. He should pay his respect before the man found out he was here and had him dragged there. With him he found Barbara, Milo, and three others Alex couldn't remember the names.

"Hey, Crimson! You're alive!" Anders yelled.

"So Doc claims."

"Here, sit." Anders grabbed the glass from one of the men and handed it to Alex. "Drink." It wasn't a suggestion.

It was a dark liquid, and smelled strong. He hesitated, then downed it. If nothing else, alcohol would muddy the dream's memory. He nearly choked on it.

"What the hell is that?" he gasped among the others' laughter.

"It's called 'A Taste of the Void,'" the previous owner of the glass said. "One of Etrigan's own creation. Don't ask me what's in it."

"Fix, get Etrigan here," Anders ordered. "Tell him to come make a Starry Night for Crimson."

The man stood. Anders indicated one of the available seats.

Alex sat, and found there was another glass before him, a light red liquid this time. He took a sip and it was sweet and fruity.

"How did we make out on the job?" Alex asked.

"Didn't you check?"

"I've been busy sleeping." *And dreaming.* He felt Jack's hand on his back, his muzzle along his neck. He downed the drink, and the mild burning chased the memory away.

"We did pretty good. Not too much damaged cargo. About two-hundred crates. Lea's going to do the inventory over the next few days."

A tall man returned to the table with Fix, both carrying five bottles between them.

"Crimson, meet Etrigan."

Alex had seen him on the ship before, but as with most of the crew, he hadn't bothered getting to know him.

"Pleasure." Alex extended his hand.

Anders caught it and lowered it to the table. "Etrigan doesn't do physical contact unless he's having sex. And you're not his type."

"Sorry."

Etrigan smiled. "Don't worry about it. The Starry Night's for you?"

"It is," Anders said.

Etrigan placed a clean glass on the table and poured some of each bottle in it. The liquids mixed to form something very dark.

"That looks suspiciously like that Void drink I had."

The man smiled. "Just wait." He took a small bottle from a pocket in his light blue jacket and dripped three drops in the black liquid.

Alex waited for something to happen, and was about to ask, when a myriad of points lit up within the liquid. They didn't fill the glass with light. Each point was distinct, coming into being, lasting a few seconds before vanishing.

Alex stared at it, unable to look away. Lights came and went, and the drink lived up to its name. Alex felt like he was looking at a night's sky contained in one glass. When he was finally

able to look up, he wanted to ask how he'd done it, but Etrigan wasn't there anymore.

"Don't bother asking," Anders said. "He hasn't told me, so he certainly isn't going to tell you."

Alex nodded and picked up the glass. Looking at it, there weren't as many stars in it now, and it reminded him of Jack's fur. And he remembered him moving on top of him, leaning down.

He drank it all in one swallow and gasped again.

Anders laughed. "Thirsty?"

Alex shook his head. "Trying to get myself to forget your ugly mug."

Anders laughed again, but Alex thought it was strained.

"Unless you require me to stay, I'm going to go mingle."

Anders made a shooing motion, and Alex stood. Two steps away from the table someone intercepted him, handed him a glass, and they toasted the job and riches they'd acquired. A few steps later he was holding another glass, and another group was toasting. And it happened again two times before he reached the bar. That's where he'd seen Etrigan before, behind the bar.

Alex ordered another Starry Night, and spent minutes watching the light. His mind was fuzzy enough by then it didn't remind him of Jack, or Tristan. It was just pretty lights.

When they faded he grabbed it, turned and raised it, proclaiming a toast to the captain. The people around him joined in and he downed the drink.

He found himself among the dancers, moving and stumbling. He was pulled one way and kissed. Alex didn't resist. He kissed back, hard, then laughed when he realized he was kissing a woman. They separated and went back to dancing. Men and women kissed him. Some also offered for them to go back to their room, though Alex politely refused. Kissing was okay, but nothing more would happen.

Glasses appeared in his hand, were drained and replaced. His dancing became less and less coordinated to the point where he almost fell, only to be caught by a strong hand and pulled back to his feet.

When he looked up—because the man was a head taller than he was—brown eyes were looking down at him. The man had dark skin with a clean shaved head and chin, and an amused smile.

He opened his mouth to say something, but Alex kissed him. The man didn't protest. Arms embraced Alex and tightened protectively. Alex's body reacted to the intensity of the kiss, and when they broke apart, Alex was blushing hard.

He looked at him and took in the broad shoulders and muscular arms under the loose, dark green shirt.

He leaned in. "You're Quincy, right?" he yelled in his ear.

The man nodded and turned, placing his mouth to Alex's ear. "And you're hot."

Alex blushed even more.

They dance for a while, close, because each time Quincy let go of Alex, he almost fell. While they danced, no other drinks appeared, and when Quincy suggested they should go somewhere quieter, Alex was able to walk with him.

They stopped regularly in the halls to kiss and grope each other. Alex was so needy it was painful. His shirt was open and he moaned as Quincy's hands moved over his chest. Somehow, they managed to make it to a room, then tumble into a bed. Alex pulled off Quincy's shirt and ran his hand over the furless chest.

All of a sudden, his mind cleared and he realized who he was with, or rather, who he wasn't with. He pushed Quincy off him, and with a mumbled apology ran out to his room, where he buried himself under the covers. He'd almost cheated on Jack, was the thought that ran through his mind as he fell into a dreamless sleep.

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The banging on the door woke him, and with a groan he checked the chronometer. He'd slept for ten hours. The banging came again. Alex grumbled, realized he was in his pants but not his shirt, and opened the door.

Quincy stood there, holding Alex's shirt and jacket. "I think you owe me an explanation."

Alex remembered making out with the man, wanting him, the sense of betrayal, and nodded. He let him in and explained about Jack. Quincy, unamused, had a few choice words for Alex. Alex explained he'd been way past drunk, but Quincy didn't care. They'd been enjoying themselves, and some absent guy had gotten between them. He called Alex some harsh names and stormed out.

Alex let himself fall back on his bed.

"I'm done drinking," he told himself. "I am not risking this again." And then he was asleep.