

Alex couldn't figure out where he was for a moment. The room was too large, and someone was talking. He looked in that direction, and saw a woman was tending to a man's cut-up back. Right, he was in the medical bay.

"Don't even think about getting up," Doc said without looking away from her work.

"I'm not. How long did I sleep?"

"Twelve hours."

"Why am I still wearing that?"

She looked at the cast he was pointing at. "I didn't want to wake you. Once I'm done with Murray, I'll take it off."

The man gave Alex a small wave.

"What happened?"

"An explosion in engineering."

"What were you doing there? I thought you were a pilot."

"I'm a combat pilot, so I'm only on the bridge during jobs to get us away in a hurry. The rest of the time I go wherever Anders sends me. This time it was to help out in engineering."

Alex thought it over. If Murray was part of Anders's crew, could his absence from the bridge have been planned? Alex had been too focused to see what he was doing. He hadn't even noticed him leaving, and with the way the ship's system was partitioned, he could have let the man in.

Alex closed his eyes; he was getting paranoid. Murray had been found knocked out, so clearly he'd ran into the other man. He needed something to distract himself.

Myths.

Thinking of the book in his dream reminded him how vivid it had been. He couldn't recall ever remembering a dream that clearly before. And it wasn't as macabre as the others. In fact, it had been rather tame.

Except for learning he was changing.

He needed to think about something else. He moved carefully, and—

"I told you not to move," Doc warned. "I am going to strap you down."

"Calm down, Doc. I just want the tablet on your desk. I'm going stir-crazy."

She turned to grab it, saw the blood on her hands, growled lightly, and went back to Murray. "Fine, but be careful, and don't even think of making a run for it. I don't care about covering you with blood if it comes to it."

"I'm not an idiot, Doc. I just want to do some reading." He hobbled to the desk and back.

"Your previous actions make me question that."

"What happened?" Murray asked.

"Shut up," Doc told him. "You know damn well what your boss has been up to. I better not find out you helped him, otherwise you're going to have to get yourself a new doctor."

Murray gave Alex a confused look, but Alex just shrugged as he got back on the bed. He sat as comfortably as he could and began reading.

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"Did you know Samalians worship their sun?" Alex asked once Murray had left the room.

Doc looked up from the sink. "Is that the race your guy is?"

Alex nodded.

"Plenty of cultures worship the sun. It's right there in the sky."

"I guess. They also believe that they can become, well, gods I guess."

"Really? That's new. How?"

"The treatise doesn't say. The guy who wrote it spent a few years among them, but he never got the hang of the language. Lots of growls and guttural noises, according to him."

"You know it?"

"No, Jack never spoke it. I didn't think to ask him."

"Jack?"

"His dad thought he'd get along better with a human n—"

Except that wasn't true. Jack hadn't been his real name. That was Tristan, which was another human name, so maybe the reasoning was the same?

"Sorry," Doc said. "I didn't mean to remind you he wasn't there. You miss him?"

Alex smiled. "A lot."

He went back to reading, stopping only when Will came by to let him know what was going on. He seemed happy that Murray had gotten hurt, and glared at Doc for fixing him up. Perry and Ana also dropped by to check in on him.

A day later Doc allowed him to go to his room, but he wasn't allowed strenuous work for another one.

The first thing he did was check that the Defender was still there. The relief that flooded him on seeing it under his bunk was so intense he had trouble standing. He wished he had a way to lock the bunk down. He trusted Will, but he didn't want anyone to be able to get to it.

Unable to come up with a way to keep people out of it short of welding it shut, Alex told himself the locked door would be enough to keep people out. He had trouble believing it himself.

He spent the day doing more reading. Having nothing else to do, he found other texts on Samalia. He ignored the surveys and reports on its population, technological progress, and suitability for annexation, and focused on anything relating to their legends.

They had a lot. It seemed that Samalians loved their stories. After reading a couple hundred, Alex could tell that most were coaxed as the adventures of the twelve gods, the more important figures in Samalian religion after the sun. Each seemed to have particular types of events happen around him or her—half of them were women.

One had things relating to the mind: intellect, puzzles, and outwitting foes. Another took care of mothers and babies, tending to one, and bringing the other to be. Alex wondered if they actually believed supernatural entities made babies.

He recognized the Defender in the stories. He was always described as young, full of energy, with golden fur, and there when people needed defending.

Alex also realized that while each figure had a primary function, which the stories used to give them names—the Defender, the Mother, the Wise One, the Aggressor—they also did more than that.

The Mother didn't just help mothers to be, she also helped crops, along with the earth tender. The Wise One brought knowledge, but also mischief. The Aggressor attacked the enemies, but he was also there to give encouragement when hard work became too much. The Defender, for his part, not only protected, but he bound one to another. Promises were made by

him and over him, and the stories told of unfortunate things that happened to people who broke those promises, and how some promises couldn't be broken.

Alex smiled, imagining Tristan having to deal with misfortune because of what he'd done to him. It would serve him right for the misery he'd caused. After a moment, the smile died.

He'd rather have Jack back than see Tristan miserable.

His smile became wistful as he remembered their game in the market, Jack showing up with the Defender, explaining some of what it represented. Of them kissing over it...

Alex sat up. Jack told him he'd always love him, had made a promise over the Defender. Not Tristan, Jack. Except they were the same. Did that mean Tristan was the one who had promised to love him? What would it be like to have such a monster love him? Alex shuddered.

It didn't mean anything. Gods weren't real. Statues couldn't force someone to keep his promise, even if that person had been a mask someone else wore. But he could hope.

And for the first time since all of this started, Alex didn't have a nightmare that night. He dreamed of Jack and him, kissing before the golden-furred Samalian, of being blessed by him and told their love would endure.

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When Doc finally gave him the all clear, Alex chased down Ana, Jennifer, and the knife expert Jen had found for him. He tried to get all of them to train him every day. He insisted that he needed to be ready for Anders, but they wouldn't do it. They scheduled him to have one training session each day, and one day of rest on the fourth one.

Alex had to agree, but what none of them could get him to do was take it easy. He kept pushing the one-hour sessions past their end, and he used much of his free time to work out. He spent hours there. Will tried to get him to slow down, but Alex didn't listen to him.

On the rare days when Alex didn't feel like exercising, all he had to do was remember that moment when he'd realized everything Anders had done was a trick. He remembered the pain of the betrayal, and the anger would pull him out of bed.

It was Asyr that got Alex to slow down a little, when she reminded him the computer still needed to be healed. Alex had another short bout of self-hate for neglecting that promise, and he made that the bulk of his time.

Alex spent the next three subjective months happily lost in training, working out, reintegrating the computer, and teaching Asyr the basics of coercion. Over that time, they reintegrated half of the smaller system.

The only interruption Alex allowed to his schedule was when the captain requested him for a job. After that first time, he didn't want to let a resource like Alex go to waste.

Alex found he enjoyed taking on people whose livelihood depended on beating him. It made his job more challenging. Back at Luminex it had just been his day job, same as the people protecting the systems he attacked. He always did his best, as he was sure his opponents did, but neither side was at risk of being fired for failing; it was accepted that someone had to fail.

Now, if he didn't beat the other guys, the crew would get hurt, cargo damaged, and the captain might decide Alex wasn't pulling his weight and dump him at the next station. Each coercion came with a sense of urgency Alex began to crave.

He'd never gotten such a rush from coming up with a program on the fly that took down enemy defenses before. His heart had beaten so fast he thought it might burst as an opposing coercionist closed in a net around Alex, only for him to find a flaw in the code and exploit it to victory.

Alex had never been so utterly exhausted after a job than he was when these were over, but he'd also never been this happy. In those times of fighting other systems and coercionists, nothing else mattered. He had no other problems than the one before him, and this, he knew without a doubt, he could beat.

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"What's wrong?" Will asked, making Alex jump.

Alex had been staring at his reflection, still damp from his shower and holding the towel around his waist. He hadn't even heard the door open, and he couldn't seem to make sense of the question.

"Oxy's low?" Will asked.

Alex pointed to his reflection. "I have abs."

Will snorted. "Never saw them?"

"I never had abs." Alex ran a hand over them. They weren't chiseled or even very defined, but they were visible. He turned. He had no stomach bulge anymore. He flexed an arm, and his bicep bulged.

Alex laughed. "I never thought I'd look like this."

"Your guy know you now?"

"Jack will know me."

Will was already stretched on his bunk, and Alex went to his. He pulled the armband out of the cubbyhole. This was his fifth jump, and he'd finally worked out that the less clothing he wore, the easier it was for him to come out of it on the other side. It didn't make any sense to him as to why it should be like that, and Doc had agreed, but this wasn't the weirdest thing she'd heard over the years. So now he went dressed only in a towel.

"Any idea of the job waiting for us on the other side?" Alex asked.

Will smirked. "Cleaner don't know that stuff. Only big shot." He gave Alex a meaningful look.

"I'm not that important." Alex clamped the band around his arm, around his hard bicep. He smiled. A moment later the machine in the wall whirled. He closed his eyes and stretched out. Watching his blood being suctioned out through the transparent tube made him queasy.