

The color on the walls was uneven and dirty. In places, panels were missing, and wires hung out where someone could trip over them. In others, the wall looked like it had been eaten by something, or worn down to nothing. He hadn't known the material used to make ships could wear down like that.

Alex considered asking about it, but he decided to wait until he knew Will better, figure out how he'd take such a comment. When they had to climb two levels using the emergency ladder, Alex couldn't stop that question.

"Isn't there a lift we can use?" He'd handed his bag to Will, and Alex was panting from the effort of climbing using only one hand.

"Not here. It's broken. Only ones working are at either end."

"I noticed a few places where repairs are underway."

"Nah, just missing stuff."

Alex almost missed a rung. "What do you mean missing? How can you get to space if you're missing 'stuff'?"

"Hey, the Yacht's a good ship," the younger man said as he reached an opening and stepped off the ladder. "Don't look like much, but it's always gotten us out of jams." He reached for Alex and helped him out.

"But no one cleans it?"

Will looked around. "Never no time. Too much to do." The man looked at his gloved hand, covered with grime from the ladder, and shuddered, and Alex thought he'd wipe them off on his pants, but he just lowered them. "This way."

Alex adjusted his estimate of Will's age down. He looked like he was in his late twenties, but the way he spoke made Alex think he couldn't be older than twenty, maybe even younger.

Will stopped at an open door. "Where we eat," he said, pointing in.

The room was large with long tables and benches. At the back, people were behind a counter preparing food. Even at this distance, one of them, a woman, stood out for being taller than the other, and also more massive. Her yells, as she gestured to a man, reached him, indistinct, except for her anger.

He noticed Will looking longingly for a moment, before catching him watching and turning. "Food's good. Captain makes sure there's lots. Says the crew works better on full stomach." He glanced at Alex's midsection. "You'll like it."

Further down the hall, then a right turn. Alex had no idea where he was on the ship. He'd seen the occasional terminal on the wall, but he didn't take the time to check for a map; he didn't want to lose Will and then be utterly lost.

Will pressed the controls to a double door, then smacked it before the doors opened. "We play here."

As large as the dining hall had been, this was larger. It was a vast room with clusters of seats around projection screens, and held tables with various games on them. On the closest wall, he made out lockers with exercise machines. Except for a handful of people around a table, it was empty.

One of them looked up from whatever game they were playing. "What are you doing here, Will? This ain't no place to bring your boyfriend." The man was short and squat. His pants looked to have been taken from a military store, black with lots of pockets and his shirt, while too long, could have been owned by an executive. His face was covered with scars.

"Fuck off, Anders," Will replied in a bored tone. "This is Crimson, just joined."

The man, Anders, raised an eyebrow, then stood and joined them. Up close he couldn't be more than five-six. He looked Alex up and down. "The captain hired that?" Disgust dripped from his tone. "As what? A cook?"

Alex was about to explain he could still work, in spite of his weight, but Will patted the short man's shoulder, smiling widely.

"You wanna question the captain? He's watching the unloading. But give me the code for your room. I'm going to get your knives since you won't need them anymore."

Anders glared at Will, but he didn't leave. "So, why are you on the ship?" he asked Alex.

"Don't answer," Will said before Alex could speak. "Don't owe him no damn thing. Captain says you're good, you're good. This asshole don't matter."

The short man grinned. "Just remember, the next time we go out, you're going to need me to watch your back."

Will scoffed. "Don't trust you to watch where I shit." He grabbed Alex's arm and pulled him away. When the doors closed he looked over his shoulder, and Alex did the same. Anders had stayed inside the room.

"Watch him," Will said. "Likes to cause trouble."

"Doesn't the captain space people who cause trouble? That's what it sounded like earlier."

Will shrugged. "People in there are Captain's favorite. Why they play instead of work. So, they get away with trouble unless they do it in front of him." He looked Alex over. "Anders thinks you're weak, so he'll come after you. Kick him in the balls when he does. He'll know you're not weak then."

Alex wondered how good of an idea that was; the man looked vicious. "Did you do that?"

"Four times. He don't bother me as much now."

Alex couldn't figure out if Will was joking or not.

They moved through more corridors, went up three floors using ladders, walked some more, then went down one.

"How many people on the crew?" Alex asked as he stepped off this one.

Will shrugged. "Hundred. More. Dunno. Engine people stick together, same for the bridge."

"So you and the ones outside are what? Laborers?"

Will grinned. "Must be. We do the hard stuff." He took off a glove and pressed a clean door control. The door opened. "That's it."

The room was small. Alex had expected that; it was for the crew after all, not passengers, but still, he was shocked at how small this was. Ten feet deep at the most, eight wide. There was a bed on each side of the room with shelves above them and a small cabinet at the foot. Unlike the rest of the ship, this room was impeccably clean.

"That's yours." Will indicated the left bunk as he dropped on the right one. He indicated a door at the back of the room. "Shitter and shower's through there." He looked back to Alex and burst out laughing.

Alex glared at Will.

"Sorry," Will said, and Alex realized he wasn't being mocked. "Looked like you thought this was your bedroom when your dad made it a kitchen."

*What did that even mean?* Alex wondered. He sat down and put the case and bag beside him. "I just didn't expect the room to be this small."

"S'okay. I know. This ain't no rich cruiser, but we get our own shitter and shower. First ship I was on was all communal." He shuddered.

“How long have you been here?”

“Forever, feels like. Captain took me away from them. Clothes go in the dresser. Rest under the bed. Anything you don’t want taken, keep in your pocket.”

“Doesn’t the door lock?” Alex asked, crouching between the beds and feeling along his for a latch.

“Sure, but don’t trust it.”

Alex found it, and the bed lifted easily. The space under it had a dozen open boxes. Four contained small statues, human women from what Alex could tell. One had computer processor chips. Another contained energy packs for...well, Alex wasn’t sure what they were for, except they weren’t for eating. The last one with items in it had chronometers.

“Yours, I’m guessing?”

Will peered in. “Sorry, forgot I had that. Never got a roomy before so I take everything. Shoulda handed that over last time. Worth good money.” He looked around the room. “I’ll move them.”

“It’s okay. This is all I have.” He put the case in one of the boxes, and after taking his clothes and the holographic projector out of the bag, he put them next to it. He sat back on the bed and held the projector in his hands.

“What’s in it?” Will asked.

Alex hesitated for a moment, then a dark-furred Samalian appeared right above the projector. The image was a little over a foot in height, facing Alex and smiling. Alex returned the smile.

“Who’s that?”

“That’s Jack.” He didn’t care what everyone else said. He refused to believe Jack and Tristan were the same person. This was all he had left of his time with Jack, and that would always be who this showed, his gentle, furry lover.

“He’s your special guy, ain’t he?”

Alex’s head snapped up, eyes wide with fear.

“S’okay,” Will said, a gentle smile on his face. “Don’t care who you’re close to.”

It took Alex a moment to understand the words. Memories of his father screaming at him after catching Alex in bed with an alien student from his school came back to him. He’d lived with the fear of being judged for being attracted to aliens ever since. Even while a prisoner and questioned, he’d been reluctant to admit to what he and Jack had shared.

He’d been justified, considering the onslaught of ridicule he’d suffered after the admission. Every time someone had learned his interest in aliens was more than platonic, Alex had suffered for it.

“I’m cool with it.”

Alex focused on the young man.

“I swear, I don’t care. But others do. Some really hate aliens. You best keep that hidden.”

Alex nodded. “Thanks for the warning.” He took out the chip from the projector. “How about you? Do you have someone special?” He set the projector on the shelf. It was an easy reach for when he wanted to remind himself of why he was doing this.

Will reclined on his bunk, hand behind his head. “Oh yeah,” he sighed. “Carlina Fortuna.”

Alex smiled at the goofy expression on the young man’s face. He knew he’d worn such an expression many times when with Jack.

“How long have you two been together?”

“Ah, err. We’re not.” This time the sigh was filled with sadness.

“But you care about her, right?”

“More than the stars.”

“Doesn’t she care about you?”

“She don’t know about it.”

“Why not?”

Will sat up. “Remember the big woman in the kitchen? The one screaming?”

Alex nodded.

“That’s my Carlina.” He pulled his knees to himself. “Kinda scared of what she’ll do if she don’t like me back.”

Alex tried to imagine them together. They were so different, he young and smaller, while she was really big and had to be older. Then he found himself thinking about Jack and him. They were as different as them, in their own way, so why couldn’t those two make it work?

Still, he didn’t offer any encouragement. Will was right, she was rather scary.