

The shuttle was crowded to the point the people standing were pressed against each other. Unfortunately, that was where Alex was stuck, between a woman who needed to see a doctor about her weight and a man who needed a bath. And to make matters worse, one of the corners of the case containing the Defender was digging into his leg, but he didn't complain. As much as his legs hurt after an hour of this, the shuttle hadn't cost him anything, so no ID had been involved in boarding; his pursuers had no way of knowing he was on it.

A dozen public shuttles went from the port to the station, all of them free. They were paid for by the smaller passenger ships who couldn't afford to have their own dedicated shuttle ferrying passengers back and forth. They were slow, always-crowded, dirty, smelly. Pick one of any adjectives for a place you'd rather not be in, and it fit.

The announcement the shuttle was docking came, and the entire cabin let out a sigh of relief. It clanged and shuddered, then they were invited to exit in an orderly manner. No one listened. The people standing in the aisle pushed toward the exit, while those seated tried to force their way among them. Yelling and screaming ensued. Alex just went along.

The moment he was out, he limped toward the lifts. By the time he reached them the pain in his leg was down to a dull throb, and he walked normally. He got in and found himself packed again, but this time he had enough foresight to put the case down between his legs.

He went down past the luxury cruisers, because there was no way he could afford those. Then past the passenger ships, and the passenger freight transporters, because if the Law ever came to them asking for Alex to be handed over, they would do it. Those ships obeyed the laws at all time. He needed something a little less reputable.

He got off the lift at the first of the cargo ship levels. According to the research he'd done, cargo ships were always looking for a way to make extra money. Some turned to piracy, other transporting less than legal goods, but a more common trend was that they were willing to take passengers.

Now all he could do was hope that one of them went to Samalia, and that he'd hidden his search trail well enough. It would really be annoying to be caught here because one of his coworkers had managed to untangle the mess of a search history he'd created.

"Excuse me," he asked the woman in a brown and gray uniform. "Can you tell me if you ever go to Samalia?"

"Never heard of it," was her reply before turning away and entering the ship behind a large crate on a hover plate.

"Excuse me," Alex asked a large man at the next ship, only to be told to go away in as vulgar a language as he'd ever heard. The next one said no to him before he'd even finished asking his question, and the one after that ignored him. The one on the next ship looked at Alex like he might be crazy, and so on. The people who looked to be in authority either didn't go there, didn't know where it was, or couldn't be bothered to answer him.

Alex wished that the cargo ships had destination boards like the cruise liners. That way he wouldn't have to bother asking about it; he could see at a glance, and then all he'd have to do was convince them to take him on as a passenger.

On the third level down, he did come across someone who proved to be friendlier.

"I'm sorry," the woman said after Alex asked about Samalia, "we don't go there."

"I understand, but do you at least pass by it?"

She pulled out a pad and checked it. "Samalia's a rim planet. We don't go to the edge; there isn't any freight worthwhile there. If you want, we can take you to one of the central planets,

like in the Alura or Thumbor systems. You'd have better chances of finding someone going to the rim."

Alex shook his head. "That would add years to the trip, and I don't even have a guaranty someone will go there. I'm in a bit of a hurry, so I'm hoping to find someone here that's going in that direction and can drop me off."

"Sorry, but even if we did fly by it, we'd have to get the crew out of cryo to maneuver the ship and drop you off. We only stop at our scheduled destination; waking crew is expensive, not to mention the delay having to stop and get back up to speed causes. We're talking weeks."

"I didn't know." He looked down the line of docks. At a glance, of the twenty he could see, ten looked occupied. Would it be the same with all of them? Would he have no choice but to go to a planet that acted as a central transportation hub and hope to find a ship going to Samalia?

"How much would you charge to take me to Thumbor?"

"I don't know, I'd have to check with the captain. She's the one who makes those decisions."

Alex nodded, and stepped aside as a truck pulled in close. He turned to head to the next ship, but she called after him.

"Don't go anywhere, just give me a minute." She looked over the manifest checked in the truck, made notes, and then called to the ship. As more crew exited through the opening dock door, she motioned for Alex to join her.

"Look, you said you're in a hurry. I do know of one ship that stops at Samalia."

"Which one?" Alex asked quickly.

"Slow down, there's something you need to know about it first. There are rumors surrounding it. It might not be the safest ship to be on, if you know what I mean."

Alex shook his head.

"Some people say they're actually pirates."

He opened his mouth to reply, but stopped as motion caught his attention. A group of uniformed people were walking down the dock. Station security. They stopped at a ship, far enough he couldn't make out what they did, but he did see that one of the people they spoke with pointed along the row of docks. At himself, Alex was sure.

"You're in trouble, aren't you?" she asked, looking where he had.

"No," he started to protest.

"The ship's name is Golly's Yacht. They're docked three levels below us, that's level eighteen. Talk to the captain, no one else about getting passage. There's a bank of lifts further down the row."

"Thanks."

"Just be careful. It isn't because he'll take you on that you'll be safe, but I can promise you that he won't turn you over."

Alex hurried away, thinking that for someone who had only heard people talk, she seemed to know a lot about that captain.

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Alex felt like he'd stepped into a different world when he got off the lift. Gone was the paneling on the wall; struts and exposed cables were the decorations here. Sparks flew from

here and there.

A truck honked as he rushed by it, pulling a series of hover plates strung together, each carrying crates. Instead of conversing amicably, the people he saw were arguing and screaming at each other. He couldn't shake the feeling the station knew exactly what kind of ships these were, and had grouped them together in the worst part of the station in hopes they'd shoot and kill each other.

None of the ships had boards giving their names, so Alex had to approach someone to get directions. He avoided the first two because they were armed, and looked at him like they wondered how much they could get for his individual parts.

The third ship had a woman screaming at the people hand-carrying boxes out of the ship.

"Excuse me? Can you tell me where the Golly's Yacht is?"

"No," she replied curtly, and went back to screaming.

The next ship had a man leaning against the wall, next to the hatch. Alex approached him even if he was armed.

"Excuse me, do you know where the Golly's Yacht is?"

The man eyed him. "Why'd you want to do business with them?"

Alex shrugged. He didn't know how to proceed. Should he explain what he wanted? Could he trust this man? His instinct screamed he couldn't.

"I promise you, whatever you're looking for, this ship's got better quality."

"I just need to talk to them."

The man smirked. "Right. Suit yourself. Fourth ship down."

"Thank you."

Alex kept a wide berth from the next ship. The crew was dirty, armed, and looking like they were spoiling for a fight. When he reached the fourth ship, they were in the process of taking cargo out. At least thirty men and women were pouring in and out, carrying boxes or pushing crates on hover plates.

He threaded his way through them, getting cursed at, and went to the man standing on the other side, supervising the work. He was dressed in a dirty white shirt, gray pants, black boots. His black hair was mixed with gray, and he needed a shave.

"Excuse me, is this the Golly's Yacht?"

The man grunted a yes.

"Do you know where I can find the captain?" Alex had trouble keeping his excitement out of his voice.

"Why? He owe you money?"

"What? No, I was told this ship goes to Samalia."

"We do, sometimes."

"Then I need to talk to him about booking passage."

The man turned and looked at Alex. He looked tired, but his eyes were alert.

"This isn't a cruise ship."

"I know, I'm not looking to travel on one of those. And they don't go to Samalia. That's where I need to go."

"I said we go there sometimes." He snapped his head to the people working. "Clarkson! If all that shaking breaks something in that crate, I'm taking it out of your hide."

Alex looked at the man holding a crate that had to weigh two hundred pounds and respond with a soft, "Yes, sir."

“Wait, you’re the captain?”

The man looked sideways at Alex. “What do you think.”

“Then I want passage. I need to go to Samalia.”

“I don’t think you heard me. I don’t do passengers. Go ask one the cruise ships. They’re a few levels up.” He screamed at someone else to watch what she was doing.

“They don’t go there. Look, Captain, I’m willing to work. I don’t care what I have to do, you’re the only ship I’ve found that goes there.”

The man didn’t respond for a long time, looking over the working crew. Eventually, he sighed and turned to face Alex and looked him over.

He was unusually aware of being overweight. “I know I don’t look like much, but I’m a hard worker.” For a moment he thought about offering to pay for his passage by spending his nights in the crew’s bed, but he didn’t want to be unfaithful to Jack.

And this wasn’t a porno vid.

“So, if I tell you to grab that crate,” he pointed to one that two women were carrying between them, “and walk it to the Oularon’s warehouse, you’d do that?”

“I don’t know where that is, but yes, I’d do it.” Not that he knew how he’d manage that. The women were muscular, and they looked to have trouble with it. Maybe there was a hover plate he could use?”

The man chuckled. “What is it you actually know how to do?”

“I’m a coercionist, sir.”

“What’s that?”

Alex started to explain the details of his work, but thought better of it. “I work with computers, and I get them to do what I want.”

“Can you clean off infections?”

“Yeah, I can do that.” He didn’t have any credited training in that area, but like all coercionist, he’d taught himself so he’d know what he’d have to fight.

The captain turned his back to him and silently watched the work. “Alright,” he said without turning back. “If you’re willing to work, I’m willing to take you. I can always use free labor. Here are my rules: I only keep you around so long as I find you useful. You don’t question my orders. The first time you do that is going to be the last. You start trouble with the crew, and I’m throwing you out the airlock, is that clear?”

“Yes, sir,” Alex answered without hesitation, which earned him a glare. “You won’t regret it.”

“I better damn well not. Will! Get your ass here!”

Alex couldn’t stop smiling as a man a few years younger than he was handed his box to someone else and joined them. Alex couldn’t tell what color the man’s canvas pants and shirt had originally been, but now they were a dirty brown with sweat and other kinds of stains. He was shorter than Alex by a few inches, had matted black hair that went down to his shoulders and, like everyone else moving crates, was muscular.

“Will, this is…” the captain looked to Alex.

“Alex. Alexander Crimson.”

“That’s Crimson. He’s your cabin mate from now on. It’s your job to make sure he fits in with the crew.”

Will nodded. “Sure thing, sir. The cargo?”

“Let the rest deal with that. You start your babysitting duties now.”

“Sure thing.” Will offered his hand to Alex. “I’m Will Williams.”

Alex didn't hesitate to shake the dirty hand, then Will guided him through the people entering and exiting the ship. Alex stopped once he was inside and turned back to look at the station.

"Second thoughts?" Will called from a doorway further in.

Alex smiled as he took one last look at this place and joined him. "No, I'm just accepting that this is finally happening."