

Alex didn't think he could stand being on this ship anymore. It wasn't what he'd done—he was angry at himself for killing that crew, even if it was an accident, but it was done. He wanted to put it behind him, to forget about it, but the crew wouldn't let him.

Each time he ran into someone as he headed to his training sessions, or to Asyr's lab, they thanked him for taking down their pursuers. Each time, they acted like he'd done the best thing possible.

He'd plastered a smile on his face and shook the offered hands, or took the pats on the back good-naturedly. All this was normal for them. Alex had committed murder on a scale none of them here had, and they reacted by thanking him.

That wasn't what he wanted. He wanted to be despised; there were no justifications for what he'd done. Why wouldn't they stop?

*Make them stop, then,* Tristan's voice said. *You're stronger than they are. Show them what happens to anyone who defies you.*

Why couldn't Tristan stick to being in his nightmares? Why did he have to haunt him when he was awake too?

*If you don't kill them, how are the others going to learn to respect you?*

Alex wasn't going to kill again. It had been an accident. They had all been accidents; he'd never kill on purpose.

Alex couldn't do it anymore, so he locked himself in his cabin—at least he tried. He tried to be alone, to stop the gratitude, and the temptation to give into the voice, but Will kept bypassing the lock.

It wasn't that he didn't want Will around. Of everyone, he was one of the few who let him be. He'd say hi, do what he had to do, and leave. He was clearly waiting for Alex to initiate a conversation. The problem was that more than once, Will wasn't alone, and that other person just wouldn't shut up about how great Alex was.

So Alex had done everything he could to disable the lock, short of destroying it. He'd scrambled it, rewired it, which was the one time Will had spoken, to say not to do that again.

This time Alex had merely told the computer to ignore any and all requests to open the door unless Alex spoke to it directly. He was the only one with an earpiece, so no one else could do that.

The errant thought popped in that he should get Asyr one. Maybe he'd give her his, as a going away present.

He held the base of Jack's holo. What would he think of what Alex had done? In his nightmares, Jack was there with Tristan, congratulating him. Tristan was proud of him for killing so many people at once. Almost as many as on the Osaqua. The worst of it was Alex basking in the praise, loving it. He was a killer.

Jack couldn't be proud of him, and Alex couldn't stand the thought Jack might hate him for what he'd done. He imagined him telling Alex he understood. Those had been impossible situations. He hadn't meant to kill anyone. Alex needed Jack's forgiveness.

What he got instead was Tristan's voice berating him for being weak. Reminding him Jack wasn't real, and that Tristan understood. He understood the need to kill, the thrill of it, the power Alex gained in doing it. The voice wanted him to kill again.

It took all of Alex's will to shut it up, and that was becoming more difficult. Because of the nightmares, Alex slept less than before. Having Tristan in them, egging him on was one thing, but Jack being proud of him for killing? Alex couldn't stand it.

He thought about taking the Defender out and begging it for forgiveness, but it was just a hunk of stone, shaped and painted. It hadn't even shown up in his dreams again.

His stomach grumbled. He'd barely eaten anything of the food Will brought him that morning before shoving the tray outside, locking the door behind it. Hunger was the only way he could punish himself for what he'd done, so he'd go hungry.

Alex looked up from the plastic base he held when the lock beeped. It beeped a few more times, but the door remained closed. Finally, Alex had managed to keep Will out. He had a moment of guilt—this was Will's room too—but Alex needed to be alone. He needed to suffer.

As he watched, the lock's display went dark. It blinked a few times, then came back on, and the door opened.

Alex watched Will enter and place a tray of food on the end of Alex's bed. Alex wanted to be angry, but he couldn't work up the energy. He eyed the food tray as Will changed, then took something from under his bed before leaving.

Alex tried to resist the food, but he didn't have the willpower anymore. He drank the juice and ate a few bites of the steak before putting the tray outside the room. He didn't bother locking the door. He was out of ideas on how he could keep his roommate out. Will was clearly better at entering places than Alex was at locking them.

Not long after that came sounds Alex recognized as them docking to another ship. They were attacking someone, and the captain hadn't asked—ordered—him to help. It made sense, Alex thought. He had to be terrified Alex would blow that one up too.

Sometime after that, the ship undocked. There was a celebration. Will asked if Alex wanted to come, but didn't insist. Will came back drunk and went on and on about how Alex had to stop moping around, and how they'd start training again in the morning.

It wasn't in the morning, but in the afternoon that Will dragged Alex in the bathroom and told him to clean up. Alex protested, but Will wouldn't let him out until he looked better, so he gave himself a rough shave. Alex was surprised at how long his beard had grown, a few weeks' worth at least. Then he showered.

When he was presentable, Will dragged him to the gym. Alex halfheartedly went through the exercises. He didn't see a point in them, but he didn't want to argue with Will. This became Alex's only time out of his room.

The ship attacked another one. Again, the captain didn't request his help.

Coming back from exercising, Anders crossed their path. The man sneered and threw insults at Alex, but otherwise kept his distance.

*See, the voice which had been leaving him alone said, even Anders is scared of you now.*

Alex didn't want that. He wanted Anders to beat him, hurt him, as he'd promised he'd do.

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The ship docked, but none of the usual bustle from them attacking a ship came. There had been a third attack, not too long ago, a few days? Weeks maybe? Alex had trouble keeping track.

Will came in, grabbed a box from under his bunk, threw stuff in it, and stood. "Station," he said, before leaving.

They were docked at a station, so no attack this time. He settled himself back to mope, then realized that a station meant going off the ship. Away from the crew. He showered, put on clean clothes, and headed off.

He didn't walk by anyone on the ship. It wasn't something he'd planned, it just happened. He wasn't planning any of this; he just needed to be away for a while.

Maybe longer. He didn't know.

Once he left the dock section of the station, the conditions improved. The people looked to have a comfortable life—the walls were clean. Since he didn't have a destination in mind, he found himself following a lively group having a loud discussion.

As they progressed deeper into the station, the hallways became crowded, so much so that people had to push each other aside to move. But there was no anger; it was simply how things happened here.

Conversations mixed, some serious, others joyful. Alex couldn't make anything out through the cacophony, but the comfort everyone had with each other, the happiness in the voices, chased away some of his gloom. He even found himself smiling when he caught sight of two kids, no older than five, chasing each other around the adult's legs.

Then the crowd thinned, and Alex realized they were in an open space filled with booths. A marketplace. He froze, as for a moment he thought he was elsewhere. Maybe if he stood here, Jack would find him. He looked up, expecting to see the sky, even while knowing it was impossible, but all that was above him was a bulkhead with lamps. And with that, the illusion was broken. Jack wasn't here in this market buying him something.

His mood dropped a little, but he wouldn't let himself fall back into depression. He was off the ship, among people going about and shopping. Buying, selling, doing normal things. He walked among them and found he felt better. This was something he'd missed since leaving Deleron Four.

Normality.

Nothing on the ship had been normal. That made sense—it was a pirate ship—and the one time he'd gotten off it, he'd been forced into a bar fight. He'd then had to run after the Defender and had been abducted. Not exactly typical for Alex.

He smelled meat and spices, and realized he was hungry. No, he was famished. His stomach made it clear Alex was done eating only a few bites here and there; it wanted to be filled. He followed the smells to a booth with cloth walls. Cookers were lined up with pots filled with bubbling liquids in them.

"What is it?" he asked the woman standing behind the counter. Alex breathed in the aromas of fruits mixed with the meat and spices.

She looked at him and replied something Alex didn't understand. Alex wondered if there was something wrong with his hearing, but when she repeated herself, he realized she spoke a different language.

For a moment he was confused; she was human like him, so why didn't she speak the same language? Then the realization came: he wasn't on Deleron Four anymore. In fact, he probably wasn't in any corner of the universe he was familiar with. Of course she wouldn't speak the same language he did.

He gestured to the pots and spoke slowly. "What is this?" he mimed eating.

She smiled, nodded, and filled a bowl.

It wasn't what he'd intended, but he'd know what it was. He took the bowl and she extended

her hand, palm up. Right, that gesture he knew.

He reached for his ID card, then realized it might not work here. Different language, so maybe a different system altogether. But what else did he have to pay with? Except that in the pocket with his ID was something else: a chip.

He pulled out the cred-chip. Where had that come from? He couldn't remember putting that there. Will, maybe? Or maybe one of the chips from Anders' job had gotten stuck? Would it work? The kid at the bar—Milo?—had said something about always using them. He handed it to her, and a moment later she gave it back, still smiling, so it had worked.

He turned it in his fingers, but his stomach wouldn't let him think about it. Hunger now, thinking later. He found a table in a quiet corner and dug into the stew. It was sweet and savory and spicy. He didn't detect any fruits in it, and was surprised to realize the sweetness came from the meat. It was the best food he'd ever eaten.

But that could have been the hunger speaking.

He had a second bowl, which was just as good. He was still hungry, but he didn't go for a third one. He wanted to be able to enjoy his time here, and overeating would make him lethargic.

He wished Jack was with him; he'd enjoy this market. The thought of Jack brought Tristan with it, and a reminder of the situation Alex was in. As much as he wanted to enjoy the market, he needed to think.