

Alex tried not to groan as he shifted on his bed. How many days was this now? A week? More? If this was how he felt from exercising every other day, let alone having to do hand-to-hand and shooting training on the off days, he wouldn't survive.

"Shouldn't I stop hurting by now?" he asked Will who lay on his own bed, eyes fixed on his tablet. "I thought all this training was supposed to help me, not leave me broken in pieces."

The younger man smirked, but didn't look away from what he was doing.

Alex finally managed to find a sitting position that didn't press on every sore spot, and pulled out his datapad. He'd managed to make it through the sentry programs which had been put around his vault the day before, and to ensure he wouldn't have to go back to that again, he'd transferred everything in it to his datapad. He hadn't realized just how much stuff he'd dumped in it over the years, and now he had to search through it for the manuals Asyr could learn from.

Someone knocked on the door.

"Come on in!" Will yelled, eyes still fixed on his tablet.

The door opened, and the captain stepped in. Alex put his datapad down, while Will looked up, mumbled a greeting, and went back to his tablet.

The captain looked them over, then at Alex. "Asyr tells me you've been fixing the computer." He looked up to the shelf, and Alex cursed himself. He'd left Jack's hologram running.

"Yes, sir." He hesitated. "I'm just working on the central processor right now; it shouldn't have affected any of the other systems."

The captain nodded. "She said you're forcing it to get better."

Alex's nod was tentative, unable to judge if the captain thought that was a good thing or not. "I'm not a computer medic, and the texts I've found on it haven't helped. The ship's computer is so far gone it would probably take an entire team of medics to be able to get any results in a reasonable time frame."

"So, you're good at getting computers to do what you want?"

"Yes, that used to be my job."

The captain looked thoughtful for a moment. "I have a job for you. We're going to board a ship, and the job's going to be a lot easier if I don't have to worry about its defenses stopping my crew."

Alex stared at him. "You...want me to help you rob a ship?"

"Yes."

"I can't do that." How could that man even consider asking him that? He wasn't a criminal.

"You agreed to work your passage off."

"I am. I was cleaning the corridors, and now I'm healing the computer."

"You're fixing damages you caused."

Alex looked away. "I'm not going to stop there. And if I finish that before we reach Samalia, I'll go back to cleaning."

The captain watched him in silence for a moment. "So, you're not going to do this job?"

"I'm sorry, sir, but no." It was one thing to coerce the ship's computer without corporate authorization; it was another one entirely to do it to some random innocent ship.

The captain continued looking at Alex long enough he began to squirm. Then he turned and left.

Alex stared at the closed door for a moment, then looked at Will. "What did he expect me to say?"

The younger man shrugged. "Dunno. Don't read minds."

“Does he really expect me to break the law for him?”

“His ship. Gotta be useful. Why keep you otherwise?”

“I am being useful.”

Will put down his tablet. “Doesn’t matter what you do. Captain’s gotta feel it. If he don’t feel you’re useful, he don’t keep you around.”

Alex thought it over. “So, it’s a threat? If I don’t do what he says, he’s going to space me?”

“Nah,” Will said before Alex could panic. “He don’t space nobody. Needs good reason for that. You’ll leave next dock we stop at.”

“But he can’t ask me to do something illegal.”

“Why not? Who’s gonna care here?”

“But I’m not a—” He almost said he wasn’t a criminal, but that wasn’t true, was it? He’d stolen corporate property, and while Emerill had let him go, technically he’d also broken his contract.

Will picked up his tablet. “Think on it. Figure the good, the bad.”

Alex considered that. “I need to get to Samalia,” he finally said.

“For your man. Got other ship going there?”

“It’s at the edge of civilized space. Who else is going to go there? They barely have anything to trade. I’d probably have to end up in the central systems to find a ship, and that’d be decades of delays.”

“Why the rush?”

Alex opened his mouth to tell Will how Tristan would hurt Jack during that time, but the words wouldn’t leave. He wanted Jack to be his prisoner, but he knew that wasn’t true. Jack was an act Tristan had played. So why did he have to hurry there?

His nightmares had told him why: there had been less and less of Jack in them. No matter how hard Alex pleaded with the alien, Tristan was the one in his dreams now, and Alex was terrified that Tristan would forget everything about who Jack had been.

And he realized there was more. If Tristan was captured again, would he ever be able to get to him? It wasn’t like he could just walk in a prison and request to see him, let alone leave with him.

All he wanted was to get Jack back.

“Are you telling me I shouldn’t do it?”

Will shrugged.

“Isn’t it your job to make sure I go along with your captain?”

Will shook his head. “Show you how things go, that’s my job. What I did. Never said I gotta push.” He leaned back against the wall. “You’re a good one, Crimson. You hang around, it’s going to go. Won’t be an ass same as Anders, but the good’ll be gone.”

Tristan had used him. Made him fall in love with Jack. He hadn’t been the first one used that way. The alien’s file had been filled with the names of people he’d used to get what he wanted. Compared to them, Alex had gotten off lightly. If he forced a confrontation, would he be that lucky again? Or would he become one more name added to Tristan’s file? Was it worth the risk?

Alex remembered the love in Jack’s eyes, his tender touch, his warm embrace, and he was filled with certainty that he could get that again.

“Sleep on it,” Will said. “Mind thinks best then. You’ll know after.”

Alex shook his head and stood, groaning as most of his muscles protested. He indicated the door and Will opened it, then followed Alex outside.

Alex didn’t ask where he’d find the captain; he would find him on his own. He started with

the bridge as the likeliest place, and got lucky.

The captain was the only one to look away from the board where one of his officers was showing him something. Annoyance crossed his face. "Why'd you bring him here, Will?"

"I'll do it," Alex said before his friend could answer.

The captain raised an eyebrow. "I thought you didn't want to help me rob a ship."

"You were right. I need to pay for my passage, and if that's the price, then that's the price."

The captain looked to Will.

"Not me. All him."

The man smiled. "Well, boy, with your help, I might not have to sacrifice anyone this time."

"First, I need to have a talk with you," Alex looked around. "In private."

The captain studied him for a moment, then motioned for Alex to follow. They entered a side room, an office with an old-style desk, minimalist, with a transparent top held up by thin metal legs. The walls had shelves with various objects on them. Mementos, Alex guessed, and one picture. A younger version of the captain with an older man and woman on each side of him. The three of them had tattered clothing, but the smiles looked genuine.

"I need to know you aren't screwing with me. If I'm going to do this, you have to assure me Samalia is your destination, and that you aren't going to take decades to go there."

The man seated himself behind the desk. He didn't offer one of the other two chairs to Alex, and Alex didn't sit down. He tapped the surface of the desk, and a star map appeared in the air between them. A jagged line crossed it with half a dozen points where it changed direction.

"This is the itinerary. I expect us to be at Samalia in one subjective year, give or take problems we might run into. Objective, probably four to five times that. Too many factors affect that to know for sure."

Alex looked at the map; it wasn't a straight line. He stepped around it to get a sense of it in three dimensions, but it could still be a lie. Alex didn't know space, and he only had the captain's word that the last dot was Samalia.

"Your trip ends at Samalia?"

"No, but I don't like planning more than six stops ahead. By the time we get there, I'll have decided where we go next."

Alex nodded. "Okay. I'm going to do the best I can to help you with this, but I can't guarantee the results."

"I thought you were good. Are you trying to set me up so you won't have to work hard, and I won't be able to complain when my crew starts dying?"

"Of course not. I am good, good enough a corporation found me while I was still in school and gave me a job. But that doesn't mean I can get just any computer to open up to me. I don't even know what that computer's going to be like."

Alex sat down.

"Look, back when I worked for a corporation, there was an entire department whose only job was to compile information on the system I had to coerce—who had built it, its core programming, which company had done that, and even which coercionists that company might have overseeing it. All of that helped me with the work, and I don't have any of that here."

"Can you get that information?" the captain asked. "There's time before they get in range."

Alex shook his head. "I doubt it. Corporations are constantly queried by various groups. It's easy to slip a request among those. I doubt ships work like that. If I start asking questions about

that one, someone will notice. I'm guessing that whatever they are carrying is valuable, so someone is going to wonder why I'm so curious about it."

The man nodded, tapping his fingers on the desk absently. "Alright. What do you need that I can provide, to increase your chances of success?"

Alex thought about it. If he couldn't get any information, there was really only one thing he needed. "I need time. I'm going to need the ship's system to help me with this, so I need to heal the processing core. I'm going to need help with that." He thought of a second thing. "And I'm going to need to be on the bridge. Nano-seconds can make a difference here. The processing core is built into the bridge, so the closer my input is to it, the better the results are going to be. Is there any station I can use for that? Hopefully something I can reconfigure for the work I'll need to do."

"I can't control how much time you'll have—the ship is scheduled to be here between ten to fifteen days. As for the bridge, that isn't a problem. Asyr has a board so she can do her computer work, but she's hardly ever there, so you can use it."

Ten days.

Ten days to at the very least undo the damaged he'd done, to then hopefully give the ship access to more computing power. He'd have to work day in and day out to accomplish that. Doc was going to have to deal with the fact he couldn't exercise or train during that time.

"There's one last thing. I need Anders off my back."

The captain raised an eyebrow. "Have you been getting in his way?"

"No, I haven't done no damn thing." Alex stopped and shook his head. He was picking up Will's patterns.

The captain chuckled.

"I didn't do anything to him, but he's gotten it in his head that I'm trying to make him look bad or something. Some of his people have threatened me, and Doc had to arrange for me to get bodyguards. I'm going to be coming and going at all hours to get the computer where I need it. I can't ask them to deal with that."

The captain nodded. "I'll call you for a briefing later today. Be there."

Alex hesitated, then nodded.

"Unless there's something else you need to discuss with me, Mister Crimson, you can go."

"Oh, right." Alex left.

Will stopped talking with Perry and fell in step as Alex exited the bridge. "Not good."

"What?"

"You. Not good."

"What do you mean?"

"Doing this, making mistake."

Alex sighed in exasperation. "Will, I really wish you actually spoke full sentences at times."

Will pulled Alex against the wall as four people ran by, tools in hand, speaking in a communicator about a transmission conduit being down. He didn't start moving when the way was clear. Alex watched him collect his thoughts.

When Will spoke, his pace was measured. "I told you, this is going to change you. You should stay separate from this life. You won't—"

"I'm going to be fine. I'm just helping out. It isn't like I'm going to be on the other ship doing the actual stealing. Other than not having corporate protection, this isn't going to be all that different from what I did at Luminex."

Will sighed. "Not simple."

"No, it probably won't be simple, but that's okay. I don't mind a good challenge.

Will shook his head. But instead of speaking, he began walking again.

"Look, Will, I appreciate that you're looking out for me," Alex said as he stayed with him, "but this is just to help out."

"And next time?"

"What do you mean?"

"When captain asks again."

That gave Alex pause. "I don't know. I guess it's going to depend on what he needs me to do that time." They reached the lift, only to find one of the women who'd ran by half in the empty shaft.

She saw them and shook her head. "You're going to have to take one of the ladders. This thing's down, and I don't know when it's going to function again."

Will growled. "Always break." He began walking again.

"It's okay. I don't mind taking the ladder."

"You start minding. Or you're gonna do worse." Will put his hands in his pocket and hunched his shoulders down.

Alex wanted to ask what he meant by that, but someone whooped from an open doorway and he peered in. A group of three men and three women were playing some sort of game at a table. Alex couldn't tell what kind, but it involved gold, gems, and other valuable things being piled in the center of the table.

He watched for a moment, trying to discern the game, but when one of the women looked at him and grinned, he decided to rejoin Will, who had kept walking. The younger man ignored him for the rest of the way to their room, where he occupied himself with reading his tablet.

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Alex entered the room he'd been called to and stopped in the doorway.

Will whistled at the assembly, but stayed on the other side of the door. He pushed Alex in and the door closed.

Alex couldn't move.

The captain was at the opposing end of the table from where Alex stood, and sixteen dangerous-looking men and women were seated around it. Anders was seated at the captain's right, and Jennifer at Alex's end.

"What's he doing here?" Anders asked, not hiding his anger.

The captain indicated the chair next to Jennifer, and Alex sat.

"Mister Crimson is going to be the key that unlocks the ship's riches, as well as muzzles its defenses. As such, it's imperative he knows what we will be doing." He tapped controls on the table and read something. "Also," he continued without looking up, "until further notice, Mister Crimson is under my protection."

"What?" Anders asked in disbelief.

"He is vital to this operation, therefore I can't afford for some vendetta to get in the way of what he needs to do. Am I making myself clear?"

Everyone nodded, even Anders, but he glared across the table at Alex.