

Alex cursed as he called up the station's map for the fourth time when the door that was supposed to lead to the docks opened up to a residential section. He'd gotten lost again. Maybe he had a problem with directions? Or more likely he needed to slow down and pay attention to where he was going, instead of rushing forward. This was starting to feel like one of those 'slower is faster' situations.

He traced the route back to the docks, memorized it, and walked there instead of running. If he hadn't taken the time to look at the code under the interface, he'd think someone was messing with him, but the code was in order, so this was all his fault.

The conversation had made him realized a few things: that he needed to pay more attention to his surroundings, the people, and how he got places. That he needed to be more guarded. Olien had picked him as a target because he'd shown how he felt, but more importantly, he was on the clock.

It didn't matter how good Tristan was, eventually he would forget Jack. And it wasn't like he even had a reason to try to remember him. As far as the alien was concerned, he'd never need Jack again. Alex was the one who wanted him back.

"Finally," he muttered as he reached the docks. Now he ran. He couldn't get lost here; all he had to do was follow the docks until he reached his ship.

Ten minutes later he had to check the docking list because he should have reached the ship by then. He cursed. The ship was docked on the other side of the station.

He finally made it to the ship, having had to cut through some restricted areas to make it as straight a line as he could. He stopped next to the captain who was supervising the loading and unloading of crates.

"Captain," Alex started, then had to wait until he caught his breath. "I'm done being your passenger."

The captain looked around them. "Are you certain? This isn't the best place to leave the—"

"I want to be part of the crew," Alex cut him off.

The man studied Alex for a moment. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. Until we reach Samalia, I want to be a member of your crew, but—" Alex stopped at the raised eyebrow.

"Why am I not surprised you want to put a condition on it? It seems to me that you don't quite understand what it means to be part of my crew."

"I'll make it wor—"

The captain raised his hand, and Alex stopped.

"Mister William," he called, and Will joined them. "Mister Crimson is considering joining the crew. Have him help with the freight transfer." He looked at Alex again. "If you still want to be part of my crew once you're done, come find me and we can discuss those conditions you want to put on your employment."

Will stared at Alex, then sighed and motioned for him to follow. When they were in the ship, Will looked over his shoulder and shook his head. "Walk."

Even as used as he'd become to the way Will spoke, it took Alex a moment to figure out what he meant. "I can walk away from this once I'm on Samalia."

"No." Will stopped and turned to face Alex. "This," he indicated the ship, "stays stuck." He tapped Alex's chest. Alex wanted to rebuff the statement, but Will was still trying to work out how to say what he felt he needed, so Alex waited. The younger man tapped Alex's head. "That changes, get dark. This me. Not you. You're bright. Crew steals that. Your guy, he gonna want

you?”

Alex understood Will's worries then. And he found he couldn't explain without telling him a truer version of the reasons than he'd given him up to this point.

“Will, Jack isn't waiting for me on Samalia; he's a prisoner of someone pretty bad. You say that being part of the crew's going to change me, but I think the only way I can save him is if I change. I need to be tougher. I don't think Alex the corporate coercionist can do it, but I think that Crimson has a chance.”

“Your guy?”

“I'll have to live with the consequences, but I think he'll understand.”

Will nodded, as if that made sense to him. “I help? Got friends.”

Alex smiled and placed a hand on Will's shoulder. “I have to do this by myself.” He wasn't exposing anyone else to Tristan. Not only would he have to explain what Jack was in relation to the alien, but he was certain others wouldn't survive the encounter.

Will searched Alex's face for a moment, then turned and grabbed two gravity sleds. He led Alex to crates which they loaded, and he followed Will to a warehouse where the crates were added to more. As far as Alex could tell, they were the results of the jobs they'd pulled on the way here.

He was able to keep his curiosity under control for three trips as part of the line of other crew members moving crates. “Why aren't we going back to the other station to sell this? Didn't Lea say that guy there gave really good prices?”

Will gave him an exasperated look.

“I'll answer that,” the woman behind them said, and Will gave her a grateful smile. She pushed her cart next to Alex and matched his speed. “There's a few reasons. The big one is that if we always go back to the same fence, the Law's going to notice, especially with the size of the hauls you've made possible. I'm Alison, by the way.”

“Crimson.” Alex offered his hand.

She shook it. “Oh, I know who you are. Everyone on the ship does. The other reason is that the captain likes to do a circuit. It's pretty big, and it isn't identical from one time to the next. I've been with him for fifteen years, subjective, and when we unloaded for Harligon, it was only my second stop there. He does it so the Law can't trace our route. After this, we'll be stopping at Samalia.”

Alex nodded, remembering the captain showing him the stops to Samalia. “Then why couldn't he tell me when you'd get there?”

“Because that's going to depend on the number of jobs he can line up on the way. The more jobs, the longer it takes.”

Alex nodded. “But people knew you were heading to Samalia...wouldn't the Law know that too? Couldn't they find you that way?”

Alison grinned. “We were a merchant ship where we picked you up. Merchants show where they're going. If you haven't noticed, our board doesn't say anything here.”

“What board?”

She looked at him, surprised. “It's where the ships put up their itinerary.” She took out her datapad, and after a few taps showed it to him. Multiple ships were listed, with many, but not all, showing destinations. Golly's Yacht was there, without a destination.

“And you do this on all stations?”

“Of course, isn't that how you found us?”

Alex shook his head. “I asked around, and someone pointed me to you.” He’d looked at the passenger cruisers’ destinations, but it hadn’t even occurred to see if the merchants advertised it. He thought it was risky—the Law had to know and be able to track them this way—but they’d been doing this for years without getting caught, so they had to know what they were doing.

It took six hours to empty the hold and bring in supplies. By the time they were done, Alex was sweating, tired, and wondering how many jobs it had taken to get that much cargo. He’d helped on six, maybe seven before the accident, but he didn’t know how many others had happened while he was in self-imposed lockdown.

How many more jobs had the captain planned between here and Samalia? How long would they take?

“I see you’re still here,” the captain said.

“Yes, sir. I haven’t changed my mind.”

“Very well. Go clean up. Meet me here in an hour and we can discuss your terms.”

Alex nodded and headed for his quarters. There he took out his clothes and looked them over. Will had taken him to buy a few extra sets on the last station, but they matched his old, normal clothes. The kind of things he’d worn when he was a corporate coercionist.

He felt he needed to set the rest of his trip apart from his previous life. He was a pirate now, and he wanted to...not so much look the part—everyone on the ship dressed how they pleased—but fabricate a look that would help him make the division. Something he could step out of when he had Jack back and things were normal again.

He had nothing that let him do that. He’d have to go shopping after his conversation with the captain.

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The captain was talking with official-looking people when Alex found him, so he stood back to what he thought of as ‘at attention’. When the captain was done, he turned to Alex and his lips quirked in a smile.

“I don’t run a military ship, Mister Crimson. You don’t need to stand stiff like that.”

“Sorry, sir. I don’t really know what’s expected of me as a crew member.”

“Pull your weight, follow my orders or those of whoever you’re working under at the time. Don’t cause trouble you can’t get yourself out of.”

“Seems pretty simple.”

The captain nodded. “I run a relaxed ship. Now follow me. I need a drink.”

Alex followed the man a few bays down to an unmarked door that opened into a bar. The lights were low, and only a few of the tables were occupied.

“Hey, Meron!” someone called. “Come on over and have a drink with us.”

It took a moment for Alex to find the man who’d spoken. He was thin, with scars on his face. The captain had located him too, and looked annoyed.

“Follow me, but don’t say anything.”

Three others were seated at the table with the man who had called to the captain. Two women—one dark-skinned and the other very pale—and a squat man.

“Rogan,” the captain said, his voice neutral. “I didn’t know you were here.”

The man smiled. “Got here a few days ago. Come on, sit. Let me get you a drink. Wine work? You still like red?”

“That’s fine.” He pulled a chair and sat as Rogan left for the counter. The captain nodded to the dark-skinned woman. “Hello, Felicia, how have you been doing?”

“Don’t act like you care, Meron,” she replied. Alex took the time to look her over. He needed to get in the habit of doing that. She was wearing a tight body suit in beige with gold trim. She was, as his grandmother would say, well-stacked, and she had pale brown curls. She looked tense.

“I’m just being polite, Felicia. Why don’t you introduce me to the others, so we don’t feel like we have to converse?”

“That’s Volantia.” She indicated the pale-skinned woman. She was wearing a white business suit. Her hair was black, and eyes violet. She nodded to the captain.

“That’s Druin.” The man wore a loose, unbuttoned shirt. His blond hair was disheveled, and he was slouched in his chair instead of sitting straight, like the others. The man nodded to the captain then looked Alex over, a speculative smile on his lips.

Alex couldn’t shake the feeling the man was undressing him mentally.

“Who’s the fellow with you?” Druin asked.

“The newest member of my crew,” the captain answered.

Druin’s smile widened. “And what is it you do for your captain?” he asked Alex.

Alex wasn’t sure if he should answer, so he glanced at his captain, who gave a small nod, lips tight.

“I clean floors, sir,” Alex answered, figuring that was a safe answer.

“And you shine them? Polish them?”

Alex hesitated. “Yes, sir.”

“Meron, can I borrow him? I too have...hmmm...floors that need polishing.”

“No,” his captain answered bluntly.

“That’s a pity.” Druin looked at Alex. “You should jump ship. I have far better assets to offer you. Why, even my—”

“There you go,” Rogan said. Putting a glass before Alex’s captain.

He stared at the glass while the others snickered. It was filled with grapes.

“I see you’ve run into some of my crew.”

“Yeah.” Rogan could barely contain his laughter. “They had great stories, as usual.”

“I’m certain.” The captain’s voice was cold, and Alex thought he was doing his best to control his anger.

“So, what else have you been up to, Meron? It’s been a while since we’ve been at the same station.”

“It’s only been three years for me,” the captain answered.

“Really? It’s got to be going on ten for me.”

The captain smiled. “I can tell. You shouldn’t stand still for so long. Someone’s going to catch up to you at some point.”

“I’m not worried. I can take them on, whoever they are.”

The captain smiled. “I have no doubt you aren’t worried.” He stood. “While I appreciate the drink, I have business to discuss with my new crew member.” He nodded to the dark-skinned woman. “I know you won’t believe this, but it’s good to see you again, Felicia. It was good to

make your acquaintance,” he told the other two.

He led Alex to a table on the other side of the bar, where he sat against the wall, eyes fixed on the others. Alex sat facing him, and a waiter came to take their orders.

“I don’t know what the procedure is,” Alex said. “Am I allowed to ask you a question?”

The captain smiled. “If we’re in a bar, neither of us are on duty, so yes, you can ask.”

“Who are they?”

“Other captains. This is a captain’s bar. We come here to get away from the crew, to talk business among each other, or if we want to conduct private discussions without the rest of the crew finding out.”

“That Rogan guy, you don’t like him.”

“You can think of him as a rival. He tried to steal my cargo more than once.”

“So, letting you do a job then attacking you?”

The captain nodded.

“Lea told me about the grapes, but why did he do that? Serve you a glass of them?”

“He’s rubbing my nose in a failed job. He hoped I’d get angry and start something. He’s looking for an excuse to kill me.”

“Can’t he just pull a gun and shoot you?”

“Not without provocation, not if he wants to keep working with the others. We have a code. It’s rather loose, but the primary tenant of it is that we need to trust each other. If Rogan just shoots me, no one’s going to be able to trust him. Some might even let the Law know where they can find him.”

“But he tried to steal your cargo.”

“That’s expected; we are pirates after all. But I made him pay. My ship’s better-armed, my crew more experienced. I’m sure he’d love to blow me out of the void if he thought he could manage it. We’re not all as trustworthy as the others.”

Alex nodded. “The dark-skinned woman?”

“Felicia. She used to be my first mate, and my wife.”

“Ouch.”

The captain shrugged. “This isn’t an easy life; there’s a lot of stress. She found she preferred giving the orders over relaying them, so she tried to take over my ship. She hates that I won.”

The drinks arrived, and the captain downed his and ordered another. Alex settled for a sip.

“Now,” the captain said, “all those questions sound to me like you’re procrastinating laying down your ultimatum.”

Alex stared in his glass. “It isn’t an ultimatum.”

“Your words were, ‘I’ll be part of the crew, but.’ Sounds like an ultimatum to me.”

Alex looked at his captain. “I’m not—”

The man glared at him.

Alex sighed. “I’m not going to withhold anything, no matter what you decide. I can’t; I need you to take me to Samalia, and I need to get there as soon as possible, but that’s the thing. I need to be there soon.”

Alex looked in his glass, drank it all, and then told his captain everything. How he met Jack, fell in love with him. How Jack turned out to be Tristan. How Alex was used to gain access to Luminex and then abandoned. How the company treated him, held him prisoner. How he tried to get back to his normal life, but couldn’t. How he stole company property and fled, determined to find Tristan and bring Jack back.

“And I spoke to a con man who uses the same trick, and from what he tells me, the longer I wait, the lower the odds are that Tristan will be able to even recall Jack.”

The captain sipped his drink. The server bringing it was the only time Alex had paused. “You realize your plan sounds insane, right?”

Alex shrugged. “It’s all I have.”

“You have us. You could make a good life on my ship. Your skills could get you up in rank. By the look of you, you’ve taken to the exercise fairly well. I’m sure you can become a good fighter.”

Alex shook his head. “I have to do this. I have to at least find out if there’s anything of Jack left, but for that I need to get to Samalia soon.”

“I’m afraid I can’t do much about that. I can’t shorten the distance between here and Samalia. And before you bring that up, no, I can’t push the engines. That’s something that only works in the vids. The maximum speed my ship can reach is set.”

“Alright, but each time we do a job, that costs us what? A week, two? I can’t say I’ve paid attention.”

“Around that, yes.”

“Okay, how many jobs between here and Samalia?”

The captain considered for a moment, tapping his fingers on his glass. “Probably a dozen. It’ll depend on what I hear on the network.”

“So that’s an extra three to six months to the trip. Do you really need that many jobs? With my help, I mean. When I take over a ship, it doesn’t matter how large their security force is. You could go after larger ship, better cargo.”

“That’s already my plan. I have feelers out for ships with high volume and high-value cargo. Twelve of those, and we’ll be set for a while.”

“Are you saying you’ll stop going after ships once we reach Samalia? Lea said that no one she knows had ever been able to put this life behind them.”

Alex gave the captain a moment to contradict him. When he didn’t, he continued. “If you’re not stopping, isn’t going after twelve ships just greed?”

“What’s your point?”

“On that first job, Lea said that with my help, we got two or even three times the cargo than if I hadn’t helped. So, let’s say that with me, each job is worth twice as much. We could do six jobs and have the equivalent of twelve.”

The captain smiled. “Starting to think a lot of yourself, aren’t you?”

“Anders, of all people, said I should take the glory I’m due. I don’t think I’m irreplaceable, but I do think I make a difference in how the jobs go. Even you said as much.”

“So, you want me to do six jobs instead of twelve, and I expect you want to keep the downtime to a minimum too?”

Alex almost agreed, but shut his mouth to think it over. “I don’t think I know enough to say how short that should be.”

The captain smiled. “Alright. Here’s what I’m willing to offer you. I will seriously consider doing fewer jobs, but only on the condition that you fix this thing between you and Anders.”

“I’m not sure I understand, sir. There’s nothing between me and Anders.”

“Bullshit. I’m not dumb, I know what happens on my ship. You and him have a problem. I want it resolved.”

“I don’t have a problem with him. Anders is the one with a problem.”

“I don’t care. If I do this, I need to be sure you’ll be alive to do your part.” He silenced Alex

with a hand. "You're not a passenger anymore. I can't offer you protection; that would be playing favorites, and as much as people call Anders's group my favorites, they earned their positions. They didn't kiss my ass to get it."

The captain leaned back. "The thing is that this issue between the two of you has affected the whole ship. You two are dividing the ship between yourselves."

"Sir, I didn't do anything to make that happen."

"You think I care? There've been fights because someone badmouthed you. Not everyone likes Anders. He's hard and uncompromising, but he's good. He's been with me for a long time now, and he's one of the few people I can trust to follow my orders without questions. Before you showed up, he was able to keep everyone in line. Yes, I know, you didn't ask for any of that. Tough. This life's hard, and I'll remind you that you decided to join the crew."

Alex looked away. Was this a mistake?

"Before you think of quitting, you can't. Plenty of people heard you joining. If it hasn't spread to the whole of the ship by now, it won't be long. You're giving all the people who don't like Anders someone to rally behind, because of everyone on the ship, you're the one who's been standing up to him."

"Will's kicked him in the balls more often than I have."

The captain's serious expression cracked for a moment. "Will's not a leader. All he's doing is defending himself, but when Anders gives him an order, Will obeys. At least he used to."

The captain picked up his glass, saw it was empty, and put it down. "Look, let me explain something about my ship. All pirate ships, really. Everyone on it is wanted for one thing or another. Take Will. Believe it or not, he's wanted by three different governments, and that was before I took him in. They all count on me to keep them safe. I keep other pirates off our back because I have a reputation for being merciless to anyone who goes after one of mine. But they also count on me to keep the Law and whoever else is after them from catching him. While we were docked to unload the cargo for Harligon, two teams of bounty hunters attacked us. We repelled them because Anders gave orders, and they were obeyed."

"Sir, you have to know I didn't start any of this."

He sighed. "I know. But it's still the situation we're dealing with."

Alex nodded. "Sir, can I ask, what's Will's story? You said three governments are after him, why?"

"I don't know the details. Even Will doesn't."

"He said you rescued him."

The captain nodded. "He was twelve, filthy, and being worked to death by his...crewmates is the word I have to use. Torturers is a better term. They were lashing him, forcing him to push a crate even Evans couldn't move. I was just going to tell them to stop, but before I could, one of them pulled out a stun-staff set so high that when it touched Will, the shock sent him flying at my feet. The lot of them laughed."

"Did you leave anyone of them alive?"

His tone was grim. "No." Then he chuckled. "I carried Will back to my ship and we had to cut that stay short. I kept him in the ship for the next subjective year. Doc looked after him, and even Anders took care of him."

He indicated he wanted another drink when the waiter walked by.

"Must have been a decade objective before I allowed him off the ship, and within ten minutes someone kidnapped him. Anders and his team brought Will back. We're still banned from that

station on threats of being shot on sight. But yeah, I'd do that with anyone of my crew. Including you. I'll protect you from any outside threat, but I can't do anything for you internally."

The waiter placed the drink, got paid, and stayed there until the captain glared at him.

"Look," he continued once the waiter had left. "The honest truth is that if Anders kills you, it's going to be an inconvenience for me, but it's going to start a war among the crew. I can't have that. Hell, just him trying could spark things off."

"Sir, I don't know what I can do. I told Anders more than once I don't want to take his place on the ship. Everyone knows I'm leaving once we reach Samalia, so I don't even understand why he's worried."

"Mister Crimson, this is probably the one thing I can't fix. You need to either get the people who look up to you under control, or convince Anders you're not a threat. Anything less and you'll be in danger." He downed his drink and smiled. "Aren't you happy you decided to join my crew?"

Alex tightened his lips to keep from responding. Yeah, this was turning out to be such a great idea.