

The human across the desk from Tristan was short for the species and lacked the physical attributes that were usually required to achieve and maintain positions of power among groups like the one Will Williams came from, and now controlled.

Alex had explained the man hadn't helped expecting to be rewarded with control of the Sayatoga. It hadn't even been Alex's plan. Simply a consequence of Anders's actions. That man's attempt at taking over the Sayatoga had resulted in Will being placed in charge of it, somewhat against his will, if Tristan had understood the implications of what Alex had and hadn't said. It had happened before Tristan killed Anders, but been cemented afterward.

That he still maintained the position after the objective years since Tristan had been on the ship spoke to other strength. From what he'd observed, he did so through a trait Tristan would have quickly dismissed as nothing more than a mask before.

He cared. And in caring, he engendered loyalty. His woman, as Alex referred to her, was the first evidence of that, then how the bridge crew had acted. There was an ease among them that only came from knowledge they had the support of those in charge. That errors would not be an immediate demotion or removal.

Such a state could be manufactured. But it was complicated to maintain for long.

"Explain," Will said. Casual tone, but with finality. Not an order, but he wouldn't say more.

"I need information about Alex."

"Him?"

"Yes, about Alex."

Will shook his head.

Tristan studied the man. Alex had warned him William was succinct, but hadn't elaborated, other than to say he didn't seem to have a choice. There were no signs of deceit yet, but such a ploy was too much of a tactical advantage for Tristan to dismiss it as anything more yet.

But he still needed his answers. Which meant that unless he was able to get him to break his mask, Tristan had to decipher meaning from the simple answers he'd get. In his case, there was only one other possibility.

"I can't ask him directly. How reliable his answers would be is in question."

"Lie?"

"The question if he knows the answers would be truthful or not."

Will tapped the side of his head. "Damaged?"

Tristan curled his initial response. Alex had no brain damage, that had been confirmed by the required scans before he received his implant, but there could be a deeper meaning to the question.

“I’m trying to how and when a trauma occurred that caused the damage I’m looking to cure him of.”

The raised eyebrow didn’t warrant a response.

In the silence, the door chimed and Will tapped the desk.

“Sorry, Will,” a woman said from the doorway. Not his woman. When she’d spoken, she sat at the internal communication board. “But I’ve got D-34 demanding he be shifted to the main security crew.” Letter and number were how the Sayatoga filled their prisoners. Tristan had been C-10.

“Channel,” Will said.

“I’m not sure if you remember, but the last time Harmster dealt with someone not happy with their assignment. She had them in infirmary for two weeks.”

Will sighed. “Aliana deal.”

“You want to tell her that?”

The smile on Will’s face was tired. “I deal.”

“I’ll let them know.”

“Hate ship,” the man grumbled.

“I’m sure someone will be happy to take over for you.”

The narrowed eyes look Will gave Tristan spoke of someone daring him to go through with a threat. The reaction didn’t line up with a man stating his hate for the ship, and Tristan couldn’t come up with a variation on the meaning that would explain the reaction.

“What can you tell me of Alex’s time on the Golly’s Yacht?”

“On crew.”

“I’m aware Alex eventually joined the crew. I need to know of any traumatic event that might have happened. Anders hated Alex. What did he do to him during his stay?”

The pained expression as Will massaged his temple was that of someone asked to reveal secrets they’d sworn to take to their death. Tristan didn’t react, but paid close attention.

“Anders hated Alex,” Will said, the words slow and measured. “Tried to kill him. Failed. Alex left fine.” When he closed his mouth, his breathing was controlled, as if he was trying to not show he was out of breath.

“I doubt Alex was fine after someone tried to kill him,” Tristan stated, remembering the man Alex had been in his time at Luminex.

“Left crew,” Will said, exasperation tinging the words.

That he’d left the crew was self evident, and the exasperation spoke of Tristan misunderstanding something. An easy enough feat, when added words didn’t add clarity. Anders had hated Alex. Clear and known. Alex had already told him of the attempts by Anders. Which left. “Alex didn’t leave the Golly’s Yacht fine,” he stated. “The next thing Alex did was plan an assault on a law station. The man that joined the ship would not have been capable of conceiving of such plan, let alone executing it.”

“Crew change,” Will said with a shrug. “Warn him.”

Tristan closed his mouth on the reply. A mask or not, letting his anger shape this conversation would not lead to answers. “You aren’t saying you warned him the crew would change.” A nod. “But the changing of the crew has—” a shake of the head. What could the

warning have been about, if not the changing crew. That the crew had caused the change?

“Him,” Will said. And looked as if that one word held answers.

They were talking about Alex, so the insistence couldn't be simply a reminder. That Will had warned him was, again, self evident, so couldn't point to that. And he'd already negated that the crew had changed him.

“I need you to elaborate.”

The cry was stifled, but the wide eyes spoke of fear utterly disproportionate to the request.

He tapped the desk hard enough Tristan wouldn't have been surprised if the surface cracked. “Come.”

A second later, the door opened. “You need me to throw him out?” Will's woman said. The door closed.

Will shook his head. “His man.”

“I'm not letting him bring you to that state, no matter what you think you owe Crimson.” She took position next to Will, while Tristan was still trying to work out how she could have gotten enough from the two words to make that statement and not have Will contradict her. Even factoring the familiarity that came from being lovers, such a vague statement couldn't have been enough.

He studied both. They looked human, and while Alex was the know who knew aliens, if there was a species that looked enough like humans to pass as one, Tristan would have known about it simply to ensure he could tell them apart. So this wasn't some communication system that relied on other than sound and body language.

“Alex's time,” Will said, taking her hand in his.

“You sure you want me? I wasn't there. Murray's got to know more than I do.”

“Said all,” Will replied.

“But hearing about it from you isn't the same as having been there.”

“Trust you.”

Murray was the pilot. The one who'd been terrified of seeing Alex. He had been on the Golly's Yacht, and there had been one incident the man might have been responsible for that almost killed Alex. He had been someone following Anders's orders, so Tristan placed the blame on the dead man, not the lackey. But it did imply anything the man said would be unreliable.

“Okay.” She looked at Tristan. “I'll answer your questions as best I can, but I wasn't part of the crew when Crimson was there. All I have is what Will, and the others, told me about his time there.”

Second hand was not reliable, but Will was there to supplement the information and she'd understand what he said.

“Alex has suffered a trauma that has caused him to develop an uncontrolled killer instinct. I'm looking for the event that caused it so I can work out how to cure him.”

“I thought you mercs were all about the killing,” she said mockingly.

“It's the uncontrolled aspect I need resolved. Alex poses a danger to everyone around him if he can't gain control.”

“Well, no one's told me of anything traumatic happening to him while he was there.”

“Sampson?” Will asked.

“Why would killing that rapist be—” she stopped at the narrowing of Tristan’s eyes. Alex had never mentioned being raped.

“Sampson was the first guy Crimson killed on the crew. The only one. Most of the stories have him doing that in cold blood because Sampson insulted him, but—” Will shook his head “—I trust Will’s version over anyone else’s. Anders convinced Sampson Alex had questioned his manhood, and Sampson decided to prove it by raping him. Alex put distance between them and somehow got his hands on a gun. Sampson taunted him, and it ended with Alex killing the man.”

“Accident,” Will said.

That would matter back then. But could that be it? “Alex wasn’t raped?”

“It never got that far.”

“Not happy,” Will said.

“Alex’s biggest problem with the whole thing was how everyone else just accepted it happened. He wanted someone to punish him for what he’d done.”

Tristan nodded. Alex took responsibility for his actions. He’d accepted his punishments willingly when he broke one of Tristan’s rules. Usually broke them known how painful they would be, but still did it if he felt the justification sufficiently valid? It was how Alex had ended up handing himself over completely to Tristan.

“And that is the most traumatic incident to have happened to Alex on that ship?” It couldn’t be enough. If it had. Alex would have been utterly broken by the harshness of living among pirates and becoming one.

“In that same vein, there was a fight in a bar Anders had set up planning for Alex to die in it. Alex walked out of it with only a limp.”

Again, not enough.

“Nothing of note, even for living among pirates, happened?” Tristan asked.

“Nothing that would be of note if it happened to anyone else,” she said. “Pirates live eventful lives, and he was one of them.”

“Zeph,” Will said.

“Oh, yeah.” She smiled. “That would qualify.”

The name was familiar. He had been part of the group Alex had assembled. The golden skinned man in the holographic room.

“Alex cut him,” she said.

“I don’t see how that is of note. Alex is excellent with knives.”

“That was before he got training. It’s actually why Zeph decided to train him. No one had ever cut him before. He’d the best knife man I’ve even met.”

Tristan considered it. “How did Alex manage the feat if it was before he received training?” there was only so much innate talent allowed, and defeating someone defined as ‘the best’ by his teammates was not one of them. Not even landing one cut.

“The way Zeph recounted the incident, he found Alex—”

“Left him.”

“Right. So, this was another attempt on Anders’s part to get Alex killed. Zeph worked for him. Anders convinced the captain that Alex should be on at least one job so he’d know what he was protecting the others from with what he did to computers and since it was an easy job, the captain agreed. He paired him with Zeph, and they got separated—” Will

snorted “—or so he says. When he found Alex again, he was in a room taking on three of the ship’s guards with a knife and three others already dead. When the last one fell, Zeph called to him, and Alex rounded and attacked him, all the while wearing that maniacal grin on his face. Like this was the best time he’d ever had. Zeph punched some sense into him, but not before getting a cut on his arm.”

The event was too familiar. Tristan had brought Alex down that first time, but with more difficulty than it should have required. Alex had been laughing, having the time of his life. He’d been in the combat fugue then, which meant he had been in it when taking on those guards and then Zephyr. Innate talent couldn’t account for scoring a cut against an expert, but adding that to the hyper awareness Alex gained while in the fugue state, did.

Alex had possessed it back then. Which meant that unless he was willing to accept the incident with Sampson had been traumatic enough to cause it, the trigger had happened before he joined the pirates.

He couldn’t imagine Alex’s time at Luminex bringing about a trauma that would create the state, which meant it had occurred even further back. Alex had been hired out of school, so that was how far he needed to look.

That meant contacting Alex’s grandparents. Tristan wasn’t sure he could convince him to allow that.

“Thank you.” He stood.

“That was the answer you wanted?” she asked.

“No, but it tells me they aren’t with his time on that ship.”

“So, now what?”

“Now, I’ll go watch Alex fight, then we will leave.”

“Stay,” Will said. “Eat.”

“We have supplies on our ship.”

“How about having company?” she asked.

Tristan’s first thought was they needed something from him or Alex. Most likely Alex, as they didn’t have a previous working relationship with him. Then he remembered that while not gregarious the way Samalians were, humans were social. Will hadn’t seen Alex since the job, and that hadn’t been much of a social time, so the last time they were social would have been on the Golly’s Yacht.

“I’ll ask Alex. If he’s interested, we will stay long enough to share a meal.” He turned and left the captain’s ready room.

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Tristan was in sight of the holographic room when the alarm sounded. When he’d queried a panel for the route to it, he’d had to indicate which of the accesses he wanted. He’d grumbled about wanting to see Alex as he requested the closest one. The route he’d received had seemed longer than what his recollection of where the room was on the Sayatoga said it should be, but that was the less trustworthy of the two.

He ran for the door before the request for security came, stating it was needed in the holographic room.

Despite the locked, in use, light, the door opened before he reached for the panel to grant himself access. He didn’t question such a broad alert override and ran in. Alex was within the circle of light barely two dozen feet before him, slashing at a golden skin man

with a terrified expression and unable to block any. Blood covered the floor and Tristan could smell the fear from the entrance.

“Alex!” He ran at them, reaching for the knife coming down at the man’s chest, only to have it turn and almost open Tristan’s chest instead. The punch that should have knocked Alex out turned into a glancing blow as he lightly stepped aside.

There was no recognition in the human’s gray eyes this time. Tristan was simply another body waiting to happen.

Security entered while Tristan attempted and failed to subdue Alex, gaining shallow cuts in the process. He continued while medical looked over the man he’d fallen due to blood loss. But knew he needed to bring this to an end when one of the guards raised a Pisteron in their direction.

Those did not have a setting low enough it didn’t kill, and they were aiming for a center-of-mass shot.

Tristan caught Alex’s knife hand by letting the knife go through his palm and pulled him off balance before punching him hard enough to knock him out.