

Absolute silence fell in the large room.

The captain looked around. "Well? Don't you all speak at once."

"Sampson tried to rape the new guy," a woman said, "who shot him."

The captain's hard-soled boots clacked loudly on the metal floor as he approached Alex. He crouched and took the gun out of his hand.

"Where did you get that?"

"On...the floor." He indicated the spot with his good hand, then cradled his other one.

The captain sighed, eyed Alex again, then stood. "Okay. Looks like the sorry lot of you are getting a promotion."

Cheers rang and Alex looked around, confused. Someone grabbed his arm and pulled him up. It was Will.

"Sorry I wasn't there. They blocked me. Got the captain instead."

The captain leaned in. When he spoke, his voice was low enough it didn't carry far. "Will, get the doc to look at his hand. When it's healed, I want you to teach him how to defend himself. I can't have him die before I drop him off."

The younger man nodded.

The captain straightened, and his voice was at a normal tone when he continued. "And keep scrubbing the decks and walls. I like the job you've been doing."

Will grinned. "Sure thing, Captain."

Alex followed as Will guided him, too stunned to resist or pay attention to where they were going. The events replayed themselves in his mind. The man, Sampson, coming on to him. He shuddered at the remembered threats. Being hit, the gun. The flash of light, then the body.

A bright light made him squint, and brought him back to the present. He was in a clean, large, brightly lit room with a handful of beds against the back wall. There was a desk on their left with a woman wearing a clean white lab coat coming to her feet behind it.

"What happened to him?" she asked, while Alex continued looking around.

On the opposite wall there was a long sink, with a table on wheels.

"He killed Sampson," Will said as if it was a normal thing, "And he hurt his hand."

The words brought the flash of light back, then the man was standing there, a hole in his chest. For a moment his face showed surprise, then it went slack as he crumpled to the floor.

Alex's stomach turned and he lunged for the sink. He grabbed onto it as he threw up.

"His first kill I take it?" the woman asked. "He doesn't look like the captain's usual recruits."

"He's a passenger," Will answered.

"And he killed the lug? Why?"

"It's Sampson. Wasn't gonna take no for an answer."

Alex felt a hand on his shoulder. "Are you done?" she asked softly.

He waited a moment, to see if his stomach had anything else to eject, then nodded. She handed him a cloth and he wiped his mouth.

"I'm Doc, what's your name?" She led him to the closest bed and had him sit on it.

"Alex," he replied, his voice weak. "Alexander Crimson."

She was tall, a couple of inches taller than he was. Dark-skinned, close-cropped hair, and muscles. She had to be more muscular than the women he'd seen in the lounge. Under the coat she wore a tight white shirt that hugged her ample breasts.

It took him a moment to pull his gaze away from them—her, and he noticed Will was eying them—her, too.

She pointed to the hand he was cradling again. "What happened?"

"I twisted my wrist."

"Sampson did that to you?" She took a portable scanner from a cupboard and gently put his hand in hers.

He shook his head, closing his eyes, trying to keep the image of the man with the hole in his chest from forming. "No," he whispered. "It happened when my hand fell on the gun."

The flash of light from the gun as he pulled the trigger when Sampson startled him.

"A gun?" She paused. "Someone left a gun lying around?"

Alex shrugged. Warmth filled his wrist and he opened his eyes. She was waving a device over it, and as he watched, the pain receded. "What's that?"

"General purpose mender. It stops pain and helps wounds heal." It took another minute before the pain went away. She put the device in a pocket and took cloth strips out of another, wrapping that around Alex's wrist. When she was done, it tightened to the point he couldn't move his hand anymore.

"I want you to keep this on for two days. You should be fine by then. You're lucky; the last time that lug hurt someone it took weeks to get all the bones straightened and healed."

"I killed him," he whispered, more to himself. His stomach twisted again, but then settled.

She shrugged. "It was Sampson. It isn't like anyone's going to miss him."

He looked at her in dismay. "I killed him. You can't just wave that aside."

"Sure I can. He was a bully and an asshole. It was just a question of time until someone cut his air. I'm just surprised it was someone like you."

Will grabbed Alex's arm. "Come on, gotta let Doc do her thing."

"Remember," she called as they left, "keep the band on for two days, then come see me."

Once the door closed, Alex stopped. Will pulled gently, but he didn't move.

"You have to take me to prison."

"The brig? Why'd you wanna go there?"

"I'm a killer, that's where I belong." He remembered the gray room, his months there. He hadn't belonged in a cell then, now he did.

The younger man sighed and pulled again. "Come on."

Alex followed him through dirty corridors, then clean ones. A door opened and he entered it. Will closed it behind him.

Alex blinked at what he saw, then turned to find Will also in the room. "This is our room."

Will nodded.

"It isn't the prison."

"Sit down," the younger man said.

Alex hesitated, but he didn't know what else to do, so he sat on the edge of his bed.

Will sat opposite him on his own. "You ain't going to the brig."

"I have to. I have to be punished for what I did."

Will looked at him for a long moment. "What'd you think we do?"

"What?"

"What's the ship? What's the captain do? Buy and sell?"

Alex looked away. "I know what you are,"

Will smiled. "Good. Laws don't matter here."

"But—"

Will raised a hand to silence him. When he continued, it was slowly. "No one cares. No one

liked Sampson. Doc said he was a bully. Only reason no one did nothing was because he was Captain's favorite."

Alex thought the effort to use full sentences instead of his usual clipped ones strained Will. Then the actual words registered.

Alex put his head in his hand. "Oh my god. He's going to space me."

"Huh?"

"You said he was his favorite, and I killed him. The captain's going to space me for that."

"Nah. Ain't gonna happen. Captain don't like Sampson. No one does. Favorites' just those who been here long. Don't do no work. Don't mean he likes them."

Alex took a moment to make sense of it. "How about the others? What are they going to do to me?"

"No nothing."

Alex stared at the young man, who sighed.

"You stood up for yourself," he said slowly. "That got you respect. He'd forced himself on you. You killed him."

"I didn't mean to do that."

"Don't say that," Will stated. "Don't care about the accident that got you the gun. Matters you used it. You got balls. You say you don't want to, respect's gone."

Alex cursed. "I didn't want this. I just want to get to Samalia, save Jack."

"Universe don't care 'bout that. You let it, it crush you. Now you gotta sleep. Rest. Captain said training you's my job now."

Alex didn't feel tired, but he still stretched out on his bunk.

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Alex looked down at the man crumpled at his feet. The hole in his chest was still smoking, as was the gun he was holding. He couldn't believe he'd done it. He hadn't wanted to kill him. He wasn't a killer.

A hand squeezed his shoulder. Someone nuzzled his neck. The fur tickled him.

"Jack?"

"It's me, Alex."

Alex tried to turn, to look at his love, but he couldn't move. He couldn't take his eyes off the corpse before him."

He felt arms hold him, a warm body press against his back. Jack kissed the back of his neck. "That's good work," the alien said.

"I didn't mean to kill him."

Jack shushed him gently. "You did what you had to. He would have raped you, hurt you. Kept you from me. You do want to find me again, don't you?"

Alex nodded, tears falling down his cheeks. "More than anything in the universe."

"Then this was something you had to do. Don't worry yourself about it. You have to be strong to find me, to beat him." Jack turned him, and they kissed.

Alex moaned as their lips pressed together, as the Samalian's tongue pushed its way into his mouth. He kept looking into the deep brown eyes full of love, and watched as they became

cold.

He tried to pull away, but Tristan wouldn't let him go. He kept their lips mashed together, forced the kiss to continue, his tongue moving deep into Alex's mouth.

When he finally let him go, Tristan had a self-satisfied smirk on his face. "You're still as good a kisser as I remember."

"I never kissed you," Alex spat.

The Samalian gave him a sad smile. "Oh Alex, so deluded. Your friends told you. Your enemies told you. I told you. Jack wasn't real, it was me the whole time."

"No! I've seen your eyes. You don't know what love is." As Alex spoke, the Samalian's eyes softened, warmth filled them. "Jack?" he asked.

"No, Alex." The Samalian caressed Alex's cheek. "Jack never existed. It was always me. You see only what you want to see."

Alex pressed himself against the other body, held him tightly. "Why?"

"You know why." The arms held him, comforted him. Then pushed him away.

When Alex looked up, it was cold eyes that regarded him.

"Then Jack's somewhere in you," Alex said.

Tristan shrugged.

"You did good work." The Samalian indicated the corpse. "Not as bloody as I like, but it's your first one, so I'm not going to expect too much."

"I'm going to get Jack back."

Tristan shrugged.

"Do you hear me? I don't care what I have to do. I'm going to get him back."

The Samalian smiled. "If you keep doing things like that," he pointed to the body, "you might even have a chance of succeeding." He leaned in and whispered in his ear. "Come find me, and see who it is you really want."

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Alex opened his eyes with a start. He curled into a ball and cried silently. It couldn't be true. His Jack couldn't be Tristan, he refused to believe it. He couldn't have been fooled so easily.

He fought sleep, terrified of having another dream like that one, but sleep won, like it always did. Fortunately, it didn't bring any dreams this time.

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Three days later Alex was in a room twice the size of theirs. The younger man had dragged him here against Alex's protests, saying it was the captain's orders. He stood there as Will showed him how to block blows.

There was a snort from the doorway. Anders leaned against the frame. "You think he's going to learn anything that way?"

"Fuck off, Anders. Don't bother Crimson." Will jabbed lightly at Alex. He wanted to ask why

he'd called him by his last name, but he knew that if he dropped his guard, Will would poke him hard. It was only with his fingers, but it was still painful.

"He helped fix my problem, so I thought I'd pay him back and show him how a real fight goes." Anders shoved Will aside.

Alex didn't have the time to protest. Anders swung at him. Alex's arm barely went up in time to take the blow and he staggered to the side. A jab forced him to back up, then another.

"Stop backing up, Fatso." A jab, another step back. "You're supposed to learn how to fight, so hit me."

Alex backed against the wall and Anders continued to hit him. The man wasn't trying very hard, if what Will had told him about Anders was true, but that didn't stop the blows from hurting his arms.

"Fuck off, Anders," Will said, but he kept his distance.

"Come on, I'm not even hurting him. I'm just helping him learn something."

Alex could see the vicious grin on the man's face, and he had no doubt that if he dropped his arms, the blows wouldn't stop. He glanced to Will, but even if the young man looked worried, he didn't look like he'd help.

Alex only had himself. He couldn't count on others to help. No, that wasn't true. He realized Will had already given him the solution. He just had to use it.

He told himself to just do it, just hit the man and be done with it, but that proved harder than expected. Even with Anders hitting him, he had a hard time moving.

He knew he'd have to move fast and hit hard. If he hesitated Anders would see it coming, block it, and then he'd pound Alex to a pulp. He wished he could close his eyes. He didn't want to watch himself commit an act of violence, but he needed to see where he aimed. This was something he had to do, Jack's soft voice told him.

He calmed his breathing as best as he could. He imagined the movement, precise and decisive. Then he told himself to strike.

Nothing happened.

"What's the matter, Fatso? You killed Sampson and you can't even defend yourself against me? How are you going to survive on this ship if all you do is take the hits?"

Having Sampson's death shoved in his face made his stomach twist, but not in revulsion. This time it was anger. He hadn't meant to do that. He wasn't that kind of person. He didn't care what the Tristan of his dream said, he wouldn't be that kind of person.

Anders's grin widened.

Fuck him, Alex thought. *Fuck them both. They're just bullies.* Alex kicked out, and his foot impacted right between Anders's legs.

The man crumpled to the floor holding his crotch, gasping. Alex lowered his arms and moved away. Will was looking at him, eyes wide in surprise.

"You fucker," Anders wheezed. "You told him to do that."

"Yep. First day here. Glad he remembered." Will crouched next to Anders. "You set up Sampson?"

"Of course I did." Anders's voice was steadier. "He was starting to think he could order me around."

It took a moment for Alex to understand what that meant. "He was going to rape me."

"And that would have pissed the boss off big time. If he didn't just space him, at least he'd have knocked Sampson down a few pegs. But hey, you killed him, so that worked out in my

favor too.”

“I ought to kick your balls,” Will said. “Crimson’s a passenger.”

“That’s bullshit and you know it. If he’s a passenger, how come the boss is having you teach him how to fight?”

“Smarter than me. You gonna do stupid stuff again?”

Anders laughed. “Keep Fatso in his place and I won’t have to do anything. He stood, gingerly adjusted himself, and left, walking funny.

“I don’t like him,” Alex said, surprised at the menace in his voice, and at the realization that he wanted to hurt that man. Hurt him a lot.