

No one paid attention to them when Alex followed Anders and the others into the lounge. In fact, Alex couldn't help feeling like those already there were careful not to notice them. That was the kind of power Anders held on this ship, that no one wanted to know what the man was up to.

Anders took a device Alex didn't recognize out of a cabinet, a boxy thing about a foot wide and half that deep with an empty cavity on the top portion, six inches deep. Anders slowly emptied the box of chips in it, and it immediately made noises.

Some sort of sorting machine, Alex realized, and it was confirmed when, a few seconds after the top was empty, the front opened and six stacks of chips were presented to them.

"It's as close to an even split as I can manage without having to go through the ship to transfer money around. The captain would find out about that, and ask for a cut." Anders grabbed a stack and handed it to Alex. "Six-thousand and a few hundred."

Alex took it without hesitating. He'd decided Anders was right; he'd helped with this, just like he'd helped with the heist before, so he did deserve a cut. The column was four inches high. He had no idea how many chips that gave him, but what he did know was that he didn't have a clip to put them in. He dumped them in his pocket, noting he'd have to ask Will about getting a clip for them, and his recommendation on how to carry his money discretely when off the ship; following Milo's advice. But he'd do that later.

He wished Anders and the others a good night. What time was it anyway? Alex did feel tired, and the sun had been going down when they left the planet, but the ship probably wasn't in the same time zone.

Wincing as he walked away, he thought he should see Doc about his leg, but that was something else to be dealt with later. Right now, all he wanted was to be alone. He needed time away from others after what he'd been a part of on the planet.

He entered his room, and was relieved Will wasn't there. His friend would leave if he asked, but then he'd want explanations, and Alex didn't feel like giving them. He kept the door from closing while he checked the lock panel. With almost everyone on the ship given leave while not doing the unloading, Doc had been forced to lift her rule about Alex being escorted everywhere, but he was always worried she'd reactivate the auto-lock on the door when he wasn't looking. Just that he could access the panel told him he had control of the lock, but he still checked. Once satisfied, he let the door close and headed for his bunk.

He winced as he dropped to his knees to lift his bed. He reached in for the case next to his bag, and found nothing there. Alex stared for a moment. The Defender's case was gone. Not just that, everything other than his bag was gone.

It was an effort for Alex not to panic. Will had probably decided to clean under the bed, and moved everything elsewhere while he did that. Will could sometimes be like that, too focused on what he did to consider things like private property.

He looked under Will's bed, but that was empty too. Then he checked the entire room, even the bathroom. Nothing. He felt the panic crawling up. Where was the Defender? He couldn't have lost that; it had been a gift from Jack.

Ask Will, he told himself to hold the panic back. He'd know where he'd put it. He called up Will's name on the screen and it appeared, along with his occupation—janitor—but the location remained blank. Of course, the internal sensors were still isolated. He cursed. Why hadn't he fixed that already?

Who'd know where to find him? The only person Alex could think of was Doc. She always

seemed to know where Will was, so he hobbled his way to her.

"Where's Will?" he asked, entering, not caring that she was busy closing a cut on a woman's arm.

She looked at him over her shoulder, and nodded toward the bed next to her.

"I don't have the time, where is he?"

She looked at her work, and nodded with satisfaction. "You're good to go." She indicated the other bed again. "Sit, I need to look you over. What happened to you?"

"I don't have the time!"

She raised an eyebrow, and Alex forced himself to calm down. "I'll let you check me over after, but right now I need to talk to him. It's urgent."

"Haven't you called him?"

Alex stared at her, dumbfounded. Of course, how could he have been such an idiot? He patted his pockets, looking for his comm unit. Where was it? Asyr's lab. He'd taken it out of his jacket when he'd sat down to work. Anders had dragged him out before he'd thought to grab it. Damn it!

"Will, where are you?" Doc asked in her comm as Alex turned to rush out of the lab.

"Deck eight," Will answered. "Corridor three, aft section."

Alex bolted. By the time he reached the eighth floor, he was cursing at the pain, and he had to slow to a walk. His panic wanted him to go back to running, but Alex didn't think falling down would get him the Defender back any faster.

He heard the cleaner before he reached the corridor, and again he felt the urge to run. He even took a rapid step, but his leg almost buckled. He made it to the intersection, saw Will in the distance, and yelled his name.

On the third one, his friend noticed and shut the machine down. Alex motioned for him to come closer; he didn't think he could walk the distance.

"Where's my case?" Alex asked when Will was still a dozen steps away.

The younger man gave him a quizzical expression.

"It was under my bed."

Will shook his head. "My stuff. Took it."

Alex grabbed him by the collar and shoved him against the wall. "My case was in there."

"Just your bag." Will was looking at him, worried.

Good, Alex thought. If he thought he could get away with stealing, he was mistaken. He leaned in closer.

"It was next to my bag," Alex growled.

Will started shaking his head, then paused. A moment later his face turned pale. He broke out of Alex's grip and ran.

Alex chased after him, cursing himself for ever trusting the man. Pain lanced up his leg, but he ignored it as best as he could. By the time he reached the intersection Will had turned into, the young man was already turning the other one. With a curse Alex kept going, reminding himself this was a closed system; there was nowhere for the man to run.

Except they were docked.

He redoubled his effort, and when he turned the next corner, he saw Will in the lift, holding the door and urging Alex to hurry. He did, but was cautious when he entered it, watching for some sort of trap.

"Talk to Lea," Will said, "now."

“Why?”

“Too much stuff. Mine. Get good money here. Took everything. Lea sells it.” He looked at Alex. “Forgot the case. Forgot it yours. Stuff going out now.”

“So you didn’t do it on purpose?”

Will shook his head. “Always alone before. Find stuff, put it there too. I forgot case yours.”

Alex closed his eyes and leaned against the wall. He had no idea if Will was telling the truth. He was a pirate, so taking other people’s stuff was what he did, but he chose to believe his friend had made a mistake. He had too few of those here to throw it away on something like suspicion.

“Can’t you call Lea?”

“Busy, never talk when selling.”

When the doors opened, Will took off, only to stop when he noticed Alex wasn’t with him.

Alex was still leaning against the wall. “Go, I’ll catch up in a moment.”

Will ran off.

He was seeing Doc as soon as this was resolved. He should have let her see to him when he’d been there. He couldn’t believe how painful his leg had become. He forced himself to go after the young man, but only made it halfway there before Will was running back in his direction.

“Stuff gone. Get ground-side.”

With a curse, Alex turned and sped up after him. He saw Anders further along the hall and called to him. “We’re going down for a bit; make sure the ship doesn’t leave until we’re back.” He didn’t give the man time to ask questions, and continued past him.

He caught up to Will next to an open panel on the wall. Before Alex could ask, Will pressed an injector in his leg. Alex couldn’t move away fast enough.

“Painkiller,” Will said, handing the injector to him, then ran off.

Alex checked the warnings. For humans, local application, no side effects. He put some weight on his leg and the pain was muffled. As he started after Will, it continued to recede until he didn’t feel anything and could run.

He had a strong suspicion that Doc wouldn’t be happy with him when he finally did see her.

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They didn’t land in the same port Anders had taken him to. This one had a few more shuttles on it, and people were coming and going, moving crates by hand or on hover-carts. The buildings were the same gray material, but many of them went up to four-stories in height.

Will consulted his comm a few times as he led Alex thought the buildings, until they came to one that reminded Alex of a warehouse from his father’s company.

“Harligon,” Will said. “Lea’s guy.” He pushed the door and Alex followed him into a disaster of a place.

The room was filled with tables placed haphazardly and filled with things. The walls were lined with shelves containing more objects. He followed Will around tables until they reached the back, where a wrinkled old man was seated behind a counter.

He looked up at him. “If you don’t find what you want in there, it isn’t for sale.”

“Been mistake,” Will said. “Need it back.”

The man narrowed his eyes. "If I got it, I paid good money for it."

"Buy back," Will replied.

The man indicated the room. "Check in there then."

"You got it a few hours ago at the most," Alex said, "and it's already in there?"

The man snorted. "Takes weeks to go through the new stuff."

"Then if I tell you what I'm looking for, you can get it."

The man barked laughter. "You think I can just walk in there and pull out one little precious thing? I get tons of stuff. I can't find what you want."

"Lea had listing," Will argued. "It's case with—" Will's mouth worked, but no words came out. With a cry of frustration, he pulled out his comm.

"It's a Samalian statue," Alex said. "A foot and a half in height. It's painted to have golden fur, and he's holding two swords."

The man's eyes registered recognition for a moment. "Do I look like I'd know something like that?"

Alex grabbed him by the collar and pulled him close, ignoring his mother's voice telling him to always treat older people with respect, or the knowledge that if anyone ever manhandled his grandparents this way, he'd break their legs. "Listen to me. You're going to go back there and get it, and don't give me crap about not knowing about it. If you don't come back with it, I am going to hurt you."

The man snorted. "You?" He looked him over. "You're just some cubicle slave out for a walk. You couldn't hurt a baby." He nodded toward Will. "Now him? Him I'd believe he could hurt me, but you? You can't even walk straight."

Alex kept hold of the old man with one hand and reached for something on the counter he hadn't even realized he'd noticed. His fingers closed on the hilt of the gold knife, and brought it to the man's neck.

"Someone in your profession should know better than to judge me by the way I look, or walk. The item in question was taken from me in error, and sold to you the same. Now, do you want to go get it for me?" He pressed the knife harder. "Or do I need to get it myself?"

"I'll do it," the man said, fear in his eyes. Alex didn't let him go immediately. He continued looking into those eyes, enjoying the man's fear of him. It felt good to be taken seriously, to have someone scared, instead of being scared.

"No Law," Will said as Alex released the man. "You do and Lea goes elsewhere."

The man nodded and took out a datapad. After a moment of working it, glancing up at Alex every so often, something whirled under the counter. A minute later, a panel opened and a familiar case appeared out of it.

Alex ran a finger along an edge, then a hand over the top. It felt right. He opened it and sighed in relief. The Defender was there. He picked it up, not only to test the weight, but to look at the felt under it. The indentation where he'd hidden his program chip was still there.

He put it back and closed the case. "That's it." He went to pick it up, but the man grabbed it.

"It's mine."

Alex growled. "No, it's mine. If you don't let go of it, I'm going to cut your hand off."

"You said you'd pay."

Alex reached into his pocket and took out four chips, dropping them on the counter.

"That's not enough," the man said.

"It's what you're getting."

“This is priceless, I can’t take—”

“It’s a reproduction. You can try conning other people, but the person who gave this to me told me it’s a reproduction.”

“No, it’s real.”

The reverence in the man’s voice made Alex pause. It couldn’t be real; Jack had told him it was a reproduction. He wouldn’t have lied about that, would he? No, but Tristan would have. Damn it, why?

“I know collectors,” the man said. “I can get millions for it. I’ll cut you in.”

Alex shoved the man away and picked up the case.

“You can’t take it! It’s priceless!”

Alex glared at the man, and seriously considered grabbing the knife again and impaling it in the man’s chest. Instead he reached into his pocket, grabbed the chips in there, and dropped them on the counter. He made sure he put all of them there.

“That’s six-thousand. Be happy with it, because you’re not getting anything more.” He turned and headed out, limping slightly as the painkiller began to wear off.

“Where?” Will asked, falling into step next to him.

It took a moment for Alex to work out what he meant. “I helped Anders with a job; that was my cut. Easy come easy go.” At least it had been put to good use.

Alex stepped out of the building to be confronted by two huge men.

“Mister Oustalo wants to have a word with you.”