

In only took a few days for Alex to realize the rumors about the ship were true. The boxes under his bed had brought to life what the woman who had guided him to this ship had said to him: *"Some people say they're actually pirates"*. He'd immediately told himself that Will could simply be a collector, except he'd hoped to sell them.

Then there was Anders, the people with him, and the way he'd looked at Alex. There had been a hunger for violence in his eyes, a viciousness. He'd tried to tell himself Anders was just one of those people his mother had told him about. Bad people using their skills to help others. He'd tried to convince himself they were security. Merchant ships needed muscles to protect them from pirates.

The universe was a scary place, his mother had said over and over when he was young, when he'd told her he would explore all of it. She'd taken hold of his shoulders, fixed her gaze on him, and shook her head.

"There are monsters out there, Alexander. With claws and scales, or pitch-black skin and glowing eyes, but some look just like you and me. So you need to stay here, close to home so we can protect you."

As he'd grown older, Alex had realized his mother meant aliens, but unlike her he didn't see them as monsters. He thought they were wonderful, so when a family moved to their area, he befriended them against his parents' wishes.

Then came the day his father caught him in bed with the oldest of that family, both exploring their differences and their similarities as their bodies awakened to desires Alex had never felt before. Alex became the monster. His father kicked him out, and no one in the house defended him, not his mother, brothers, or sisters. They all called him a monster.

And if not for Alex's grandparents, he might have believed it.

Alex was willing to give Anders and his people the benefit of the doubt. They clearly were not nice people, but that didn't mean they were criminals.

It was the weapons that forced him to accept what they really were. A few nights after they left Deleron Four, Will had taken him to the room Alex thought of as the lounge to relax, and while the young man had quickly vanished among the others, Alex had stayed at the periphery, unsure of himself. He'd found more lockers, as well as crates stacked next to them, and one was partially opened. Curious, he lifted the top, then dropped it. It had been full of guns.

He moved away, terrified someone had noticed him, but no one fell on him. There were fifty crates, far more than needed to protect a ship. Who needed so many weapons? And the answer had been clear.

He'd known then that he hadn't believed the woman. He also knew that if they hadn't been in space, he would have run off the ship. Grabbed the Defender and left. And right behind that thought was the realization that escaping the ship wouldn't have helped him with his...what? Mission? Quest?

This was the only ship he'd found going to Samalia, and Station Security had been looking for him. He had to be on this ship if he wanted to rescue Jack.

So it was a pirate ship. It wasn't like he was part of the crew. They wouldn't force him to take part in anything, would they? He resolved to keep his head down, and went back to his room.

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"I'm sorry you got stuck doing this," Alex told Will again as he scrubbed the corridor's wall.

"I'm not. My idea."

Will had found him in their room days before saying the captain had ordered them to clean the ship. Alex hadn't argued.

"What do you mean, your idea?"

"I hate dirt. Captain wants you busy, so I tell him you'll clean the ship." He grinned at Alex and he pushed the cleaner back and forth on the floor. "And this is better listening to Meloy. First girlfriend story is boring and he always tells it. You're better company."

"I am?" Alex couldn't imagine how he could be interesting to someone who traveled the stars.

"Yeah. You've seen cities. I just see stations. Sometimes ports. Captain doesn't let many loose. Says we're going to cause trouble. Just stations for us."

Alex had a moment of surprise. "It isn't like I've seen many of them, just two. Where I grew up and back on Deleron Four, where I worked."

"How was that?"

Alex shrugged. "Where I grew up wasn't much of a city. Mostly farmland with houses here and there. My dad worked for one of the transport companies."

They didn't look up as steps came closer. The crew didn't care what they did; they walked right through their clean floor, leaving boot marks all over it.

The person stopped. "Well, well, well. So that's what the captain's got you doing?"

Alex looked over his shoulder. Anders was leaning against the wall.

"I can't believe he hired a fucking maid."

"What d'you want Anders?" Will didn't look up from the cleaner as he spoke. It bumped against the wall and he had to strain to control it.

"I want to know what that's doing on the ship."

"Captain said Crimson's good. Go ask him."

Alex watched from one to the other, hoping he could vanish.

"Can't your fat friend talk for himself?"

"Yeah, but you ain't worth talking to. So I talk." Will was now pushing the cleaner forward along the edge of the wall, leaving a pale gray path.

"I ought to break your neck."

Will sighed and stopped the cleaner. He turned to look at Anders. "Captain don't let you." He crossed his arms over his chest. "But you try anyway, I get to kick your balls again."

"That was a lucky kick," Anders growled.

Will shrugged. "Maybe I get lucky a fifth time."

With a snarl, the man turned and stomped off.

When Anders vanished around a corner, Alex turned to Will. "Are you saying you actually kicked him in the balls?"

"I said I did."

"I thought you were joking."

Will shook his head. "Never joke about kicking balls."

An hour later they were done with the corridor. Will beamed as he looked at the pale gray floors and walls. He took off a glove and ran a finger along it. "Nice."

It had taken most of the morning to clean it from one intersection to the other. *Five-hundred feet*, Alex thought. The grime had been coated on so thick in places he'd had to scrape the stuff off before the cleaning agent could work.

“How come no one cleaned this off before?”

“No time. Always busy.”

“Shouldn’t you be doing something else, then?”

“Nah. Captain set me to watch you. Said to keep you busy.” He indicated the corridor. “Keeping you busy. I hate dirt,” he grumbled. “Food time.”

The dining hall was only a quarter full. Each time Alex had come here with Will since being on the ship it had been the same, which led him to think there were no set meal times. At least Will hadn’t gone by any, and whenever they showed up, someone was there with food ready.

And it wasn’t slop, like in the adventure vids he’d watched as a kid. There was real food: various kind of steaks, vegetables, fruits, and even desserts like cakes and cookies. The food was simple, but good.

The food was laid out on shelves for them to pick, and Alex grabbed plates of meats for himself and Will, putting them on their tray. He added vegetables and desserts. He’d quickly noticed his young friend didn’t pay attention to the food; he only had eyes for Carlina, the head cook. If the woman didn’t know of Will’s interest, she was blind. It was so bad, the first meal Alex had he saw Will put gravy on his cake and eat it. That’s when he began picking the food for both of them.

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Alex looked over another clean hall. Will was on his knees scrubbing a small stain. He had no idea how much of the ship they’d cleaned over the last three weeks; he still didn’t know what the layout was. He’d only ventured out of their room alone a few times, and each time he’d gotten lost. The terminals located near each intersection didn’t help. Instead of giving him a map, gibberish appeared.

When Will had finally found him, he’d explained the computer was crazy. Alex hadn’t believed him, so he’d taken out his earpiece and connected to the terminal next to their room. What he’d found was a closed-off system, wailing incoherently. He’d wondered if it was only this system, or the whole computer that was cut to pieces and compartmentalized.

Alex had tried to help it, to give it back a semblance of sanity, but he quickly realized that while he was capable of causing that kind of damage, fixing it, healing a system cut off from the rest of itself was beyond him. And he didn’t have much time to devote to it with cleaning the ship.

Once that was done, he’d see about learning how to help it. If he could contact some of his coworkers at Luminex without giving away his location, they might be able to help.

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Alex strained to control the cleaner as it tried to pull out of his grip. It bucked and he almost lost hold of it as it then lunged forward in the intersection, nearly running over the person crossing it.

“Sorry!” Alex said, pulling it back. He looked up and almost lost his grip on the cleaner again. “Sorry, Captain. This thing has a mind of its own.” In the five weeks since being on the ship, this was his first time running into the man, and it had almost been literal.

The captain looked down the hall, and Alex followed his gaze. Will was fighting with a stubborn patch of grime.

“Captain,” he said without stopping.

The man looked back the way he’d come; they hadn’t gotten to that corridor yet. He nodded, and continued on his way.