

“Sayatoga,” Alex said, “This is the Red Claw, returning with supplies, awaiting landing sequence.” He’d expected to be told to come in as someone delivering a prisoner, since the Sayatoga was officially still a prison ship. But instructions had returned with supplies as the cover.

“Red Claw, this is Sayatoga Control,” a woman answered. “Your tag has been registered and acknowledged. You are in the queue for a bay, you are—please wait.”

Alex listened to their ship’s computer for any intrusion, then shook his head at Tristan. Whatever this was, it wasn’t them looking to insert programs.

“Apologies,” the woman said. “I’ve just been informed you have priority. Your bay is Delta-six-vee.” A signal reached them, highlighting the bay, and he sent the information to Tristan’s board.

“Thank you, Sayatoga. The assignment has been received and we are in motion.”

“Thoughts?” Tristan asked, maneuvering to the bay.

“Best I can figure is that someone realized who we are and are expediting things.”

“Didn’t you let him know it was us?”

Alex chuckled. “It’s not like I can call up the Sayatoga’s captain and not have whoever at SpaceGov is monitoring the communications question why. I don’t have any ID Will knows about that would have a reason to contact a prison captain. I’ve only always been Alex, or Crimson. Alex is too broad to mean anything and Crimson would send flags, considering I’m a merc who isn’t on a contract with them or has a history of doing work for prisons. I included enough hints in arranging to get their routes and be approved for a visit he would have known it was me. But I had to go through channels, so there’s no telling if he’d know about it.”

“You could have coerced your way into the Sayatoga and made sure he knew.”

“I didn’t want to be impolite.” Alex wasn’t sure he could have, and testing it might have resulted in more trouble for them. While his and Golly’s last conversation hadn’t been antagonistic, Alex had gotten the sense from the untethered AI that any history they shared, even that of Alex saving it, no longer counted for anything.

He hadn’t seen any indicating of Golly’s about the network so he was hopeful it meant the AI had taken his warning about what could happen to it if it was discovered seriously, but he was sure that the Sayatoga was one of two ships it would monitor, if not maintain a presence on, and he didn’t want to risk an antagonistic response to an intrusion, even polite one.

Golly had demonstrated how easily he could deal with Alex already, and that had been decades ago, objective. He had no idea how much an AI like that could improve itself in that time.

He shook his head when Tristan looked at him, ears canted questioningly, and the Samalian returned to piloting them into the prison ship.

This was one change that, while it served Alex, left him uncomfortable. This respect of things Alex didn't want to tell him. The old Tristan wouldn't have let him. The Alex of then wouldn't even have considered not telling him. What Alex knew, Tristan needed to be made aware of. The one time he it occurred was Katherine. And he had known he would pay for it once Tristan found out. Would have, if Tristan had been in his right mind once that was done.

Alex was...concerned what could happen if Tristan knew about Golly. And what Golly would do if Tristan tried to make it his tool. He trusted Tristan would make proper use of the power. But he doubted Golly would see it as anything more than the kind of servitude he'd experienced while tethered.

If Golly decided Tristan and Alex, by association, were its enemy, their lives would become very difficult.

To be fair, there were things Tristan wasn't telling him. Such as why he'd asked Alex to arrange the visit. It has something to do with how he thought there was something wrong with him—everything did right now—but not what.

Not that Alex had asked. A chance to see his friend was enough. Hopefully apologize for how he'd treated—used him—the last time.

The ship clang on landing and Alex set to securing their computer against intrusion, then noticed someone standing before their ship.

"Tristan, how adamant are you on completely shutting down the ship?" he nodded to the outside view and the someone standing, waiting.

Tristan was slow in answering. Flipping through views on a screen. "How... trustworthy, is your friend?"

"Will is completely trustworthy," Alex replied without hesitation. "But I can't speak to anyone else here, not even those who stayed after we rescued you."

Tristan was silent again, looking outside. Finally, he nodded and stood. "Lets go." They descended a level, then Tristan lowered the ramp. Once outside and it closed, he worked the ramps' controls, then they joined the woman. She was petite, but fit. She looked familiar, but Alex couldn't place her.

"Mister Red," she greeted him, then stammered a, "Mister C—"

"Tristan will do," he said as she worked up her courage. Did she think Claw would be insulting as a name because he had them? "Please let your mechanics know that my ship is set to detonate if it's tampered with."

"That's..." she seemed to have trouble continuing.

"I'd prefer there not be unpleasant surprises on either side," Tristan said. "This is a friendly visit, after all."

She looked at Alex, as if he could provide an explanation, and he decided she'd been part of Ander's crew. "It's standard procedure," he said.

That seemed to be enough. "If you'll follow me, the captain is waiting." She took a step to turn, then faced them again. "Right, I was told to ask if you have any weapons hidden on you despite being told not to board armed."

"If I tell you were are not armed," Tristan said. "Will you believe us?"

She opened her mouth, but closed it, her hand tilting on the side she wore her earpiece. “Seems you’re being granted special privileges,” she said, then shrugged. “If you’ll follow me?” she turned, and they followed.

“Are you okay?” Alex asked. “Is being here...”

“The only clear memories I have of the Sayatoga are that of my escape. I was unconscious when I was first put in a cryotube, and my time here with Justin as my captor has been distorted through the drugs I was fed and what believing you were dead did to me. Returning here isn’t aggravating what’s already been done to me.”

The people they passed were more varied than Alex expected. Some wore what was clearly a uniform. Gray and white. Every guard they encountered was in those colors, although some had the look of people who should be in one of the cryotube the Sayatoga used to hold its prisoners, instead of being in charge of maintaining order.

He had no doubt some of them were, but he trusted they met Will’s requirements for being part of his crew.

The others could be mercs, with the eclectic clothing and easy-going attitude, or pirates like Will used to be. The ships in the bay were varied enough some had to be mercs, here for whatever Will now offered, the other would be Will’s crew who had less corporate leanings.

Nothing he heard of the Sayatoga’s system hinted of Golly being here, and Alex had trouble not establishing an active contact. There had to be some of his old codes in there. Possible enough, he could move about without—

Bad idea.

Even if Golly wasn’t here at the moment. The AI would have removed any code Alex had left behind. It would have been sufficiently protective of Will to leave programs, especially coded to stop Alex.

It made the walk to the lift, then the bridge, feel even longer than it had to be.

The only person to react to their arrival was the man in the pilot’s seat, and Alex thought Murray might die right there when he looked over his shoulder and saw him.

“Alex,” the short man who stood from the captain’s chair greeted him. His expression was guarded. The muscular woman at his side crossed her arms over her chest, eyes locked on him. Her expression was outright hostile.

“Will, it’s good to see you.”

“You, you?” Will asked, and Alex thought he heard concern in the tone. Then he was trying to work out what he might mean. Will raised his hand as his woman took a breath. He wasn’t going to make it easy on him, it seemed.

Alex supposed he deserved that.

“I’m me,” he said. “I’m better.” He didn’t look at Tristan, didn’t try to make him believe it. “I’m sorry for how I treated you and your crew. I should have been upfront about what my plan was, instead of going behind your back about Anders.”

“Stupid,” Will said, and Alex burst out laughing.

“Yeah, not my smartest plan.”

“Private,” Will said, motioning to a door in the wall to their left. “Sit,” he told his woman.

“Will,” she protested.

“All good,” he said, and smiled. “Crew.” He nodded to him, and Alex found his throat tightening.

She sat as Will led them to the door.

“Alright people,” she announced. “Fun time’s over. Back to work, and Murray, get some color back. I’m pretty sure if he still wanted you dead, it would have happened already.”

Alex tried to remember what he might have done, or said that led Murray to think he mattered enough he’d want to kill him.

The captain’s ready-room was on the smaller side, the desk, seating and—

Will hugged him tightly. “Hate this,” he said in a casual tone.

Alex hesitated, then hugged him back. “I’m sure Captain—” he blanked on Will’s old captain. “I’m sure he’ll take you back if you ask him.”

Will snorted. “Not much.” He let Alex go and sat behind the desk. It took a bottle and splashed a dark amber liquid into three glasses as Alex and Tristan sat on the other side. Alex glance at Tristan, who nodded, before taking the glass and sipping the content, the alcohol burning his throat. Alex ignored the way Will’s gaze was fixed on him.

“Better,” Will said.

Did the drink make this better? Were things better? Did Alex think Will was better? There had been a time he could make out the meaning from those single words his friend said. He was sure of it.

“I am,” he said. “We’re still going through stuff, but once that’s resolved, we’ll be heading home.”

“Home?”

“We’re building a place on Samalia. We interrupted that to deal with this. He did not glance at Tristan.”

“Visit?”

“Of course you’ll be welcome to visit.”

Will shook his head.

“Oh, the reason for us being here.”

Will nodded, and Alex looked at Tristan.

“I need information about Alex past, his time on the Golly’s Yacht, as part of your previous captain’s crew.”

“That’s why we’re here?” Alex exclaimed. “I couldn’t have told you whatever you’re trying to find out.”

“You can only tell me what you remember. I need an outside source.”

Alex stood, but swallowed the anger. This wasn’t about hurting him. “How about I leave the two of you to talk then?” he headed for the door, but stopped before crossing into its sensor range. As entertaining as it might be to watch these two communicate, it could also cause problems. “Be patient with him,” he said, then left the room, unsure which one of them needed the warning the most.

“I need someplace to burn off energy,” he told Will’s woman.

The look she gave him was no warmer than before. Had he done something to her? More likely, this was about how he’d treated Will. He remembered her being highly protective.

“We have gyms with sparring. I’m sure that’s going to be enough for you,” she said.

“Yeah, right,” someone said and when Alex looked in that direction, Murray and hunched in on himself.

“What was that, Murray?” she demanded.

“Nothing.”

“No, that was definitely something.”

The pilot turned in his chair and visibly did not look at Alex. “He’s a killer. Anyone that goes up against him is going to end up either so badly hurt they aren’t going to be of use or dead. I don’t even want to think what one of the customers going up against him will result in.”

“And do you have a solution to go with that flattering opinion of your captain’s friend?”

“Throw him against the holos.”

“That’s booked. Do you have any idea how much trouble it’s going to cause if we have to reschedule all of them?”

“Less than the infirmary being full, or explaining the deaths,” Murry replied.

“The holographic room is still running?” Alex remembered it well. Remembered nearly killing Barstone in it.

“Yeah,” she replied. “One of the main reason for everyone to visit. It’s about the only place some can see a sun through an atmosphere without the Law falling on them faster than the temperature.”

He didn’t question the reference. “But it can still do combat?” He also remembered copies of himself attacking him, Tristan and Zephyr. Opponents who got better each time they defeated a wave. Opponents who could be made to look like anyone he wanted.

“Yes, some will book it for specialized training, the kind of stuff you can’t—”

“I’ll cover whatever the costs are for me to go in now,” he said. Against those, Alex could unleash all the anger he had at the moment and not have to worry about Tristan going on about how there was a problem with him. “And if you want to make more money, charge for them to watch the broadcast, because I can promise you a show none of them will have seen before.”