

Alex stared at the bottom of his glass. There was movement in his peripheral vision, then someone refilled it.

"I see you've made your choice."

Alex looked up, and the golden-furred Samalian leaned back against the counter where bottles were lined up.

"Why is it you only show up in bars?"

He shrugged. "You tell me. It's your dream."

"Right," Alex replied sourly. "I guess you're here to tell me I'm making a monumental mistake? Throwing my life away?"

"I told you before. I'm not here to judge you, just—"

"To tell me hard truths, yeah, yeah." He sipped the drink. It wasn't as strong as he'd expected, and had a smokiness to it that was vaguely familiar. "So, lay it on me then."

"This is going to have consequences."

Alex rolled his eyes. "Tell me something I don't know."

The Samalian shook his head. "You don't know the depth of them. You think they're like these clothes you bought. Something you'll be able to take off and forget about once you're done here."

"You're being pessimistic. No one outside this ship knows what I've done, and they're not going to hold it over me."

"I'm the realist. If you have to live with it the rest of your life, is it going to have been worth it?"

"I'm doing this for Jack," Alex replied without hesitation. "So yes, whatever I have to do, it's going to be worth it."

Someone sat next to Alex. Fur so dark the brown could have been black, with white speckled over it. Alex felt his hopes rise, but then the Samalian spoke.

"You, give me a drink, strongest stuff you have. I'm celebrating." Tristan turned to Alex and smiled. "Don't listen to him, he just doesn't know what's best for you. I, for one, totally approve of your decision."

"Go away. I didn't do it for you."

Tristan took a long swallow of the glass before him. "Good stuff, keep it coming." He turned and leaned against the bar. "If you did this for that Jack of yours, isn't it funny how I'm the one here and not him?"

Alex looked at the Samalian behind the bar. "I don't hear you contradicting him."

"Hard truths, Alex. Hard truths."

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Alex opened his eyes and cursed silently. He was starting to prefer the nightmares over those weird dreams. At least with the nightmares he knew what to expect by now.

Will was already gone, so Alex got up, showered, and dressed in the gray jumpsuit he'd bought after his talk with the captain. It was for engineers and had many pockets in it. With it he put on a black jacket, trimmed in red. He'd liked the red, figured it fit his pirate name, and the fabric was reinforced.

Dressed, he headed to the computer lab, to get back to the work he'd been neglecting. He began by going over Asyr's fight against the coercionist. He was on the second viewing when she entered, dressed in her red and gold jacket over a pink shirt and black slacks.

"You did really good," he said as she stood there, stunned. He indicated the display.

She ignored that and hugged him tightly. "I'm so glad you're out of your room."

It took Alex a moment to get over the surprise, then he returned the hug. "Me too."

She took a step back, blushing. "I mean, Will told me you were out, but he said you'd joined the crew so I thought he was joking."

"He wasn't joking." He watched for her reaction, but she only nodded. If his decision affected her, she didn't show it. "It's only until we reach Samalia. I'm out after that." He turned to face the display. "How about you run me through what you did?"

"Oh, I just did what you told me. I looked for patterns, and used that against her. She used a lot of walls and hunting programs." She indicated codes moving toward them, and then away. "Those are some I reprogrammed to hunt her. She didn't see them coming, so while she was busy with them I cloaked myself, got around her wall, and blocked the connection point she was using."

She chuckled. "It was kind of fun. I mean I didn't do much, not really. It's nothing compared to what you did; you took on an entire ship. I can't even imagine how you managed that. And then you just blew it up. You're going to have to show me—"

"Asyr, please stop." Alex had to close his eyes and fight not to throw up. "I don't want to hear about that." All those deaths. He was responsible for them.

"Why not?"

The question was so casual it enraged Alex, and he almost struck her. How could she even ask that? It was obvious why. He brought his shaking under control, and reminded himself she came from a different world. For her, killing seemed to be normal.

"I didn't want to kill them." He rested his elbow on the console and looked at the recording. It had looped and showed the start of their fight again. "I just wanted to keep them from catching us. Their death shouldn't be celebrated."

She shrugged, pulled a chair from the closest station, and sat. "They knew the danger when they came after us. If you hadn't done it, we would have shot them down."

"But I should have been better than that. I should have found a way to disable the ship, let them float in space while we got away. What I do is supposed to ensure fewer people get hurt, not more."

"You know it's going to happen again, right?" Alex looked away. "You're part of the crew now, so you're going to end up in a position where it's going to be them or you."

"It doesn't mean I have to look forward to it." He forced himself to look at her. "I take it you've killed before?"

She chuckled. "How do you think I ended up here?"

Alex raised an eyebrow.

"I was a kid, twelve, maybe thirteen."

"You killed someone at that age? Why?"

"He took me from my family. Stole me, really. He was king, so it was his right, but I didn't want to go. He took me to his castle and forced me to have sex with him."

Alex gawked.

"I fought him, screamed, but he didn't care. I was his property, like everyone on the planet."

At first he kept me locked in a room with nothing but the bed and a hole for me to do my business in. He'd show up daily to use me. I stopped fighting him when I realized the only way I'd get out was if he thought I'd grown to enjoy it. So after a while he started bringing me out, dressing me, and showing me to his nobles. His child wife.

Asyr shuddered and was silent for a time. "At one of the meals I managed to take a knife, and when he took me to his chambers afterward to do his husbandly duties on me. I gutted him. He screamed, so the guards rushed in and I was able to escape in the confusion. I made it to the port and sneaked onto a ship."

"What did they do when they found you?"

"We were in space by then, so they couldn't do much. They could have spaced me, but I was just a kid, so they couldn't bring themselves to do that. They passed me off to another ship as soon as they could."

"This one?"

She shook her head. "Different pirate ship. The guys who'd bought me figured they'd get to have fun, but the captain's wife found out about it and took me in. She protected me, taught me. A few years later there was a mutiny. I barely made it out before they sealed the ship."

"What happened to them?"

She shrugged. "Last I hear they'd gotten in trouble with a corporation, so they're probably dead. I managed to survive on my own for a while before bounty hunters found me. They were going to bring me back to the king's family. I gave them the slip, and ran into the captain. You probably don't know it, but he hates bounty hunters. There wasn't much left of them by the time we left the station. He's been protecting me ever since."

"I'm sorry," Alex said.

She smiled. "Nothing you did, but life isn't pretty, or clean. You take the compliments where you get them, and you do what you can to be happy. And you make sure the rest doesn't stick to you. You're lucky; no one knows what you did. You're not going to have anyone hunting you. When you leave, you'll be clean. For the rest of us, this is all we have."

Alex nodded, her argument feeling familiar.

"Wait, they're still hunting you? After all this time? It's got to have been decades ago, objectively."

"The family still wants me. They're never going to forget what I did."

Alex nodded. "I still can't rejoice over killing those people."

"That's not what I'm saying. I'm alive because of you. Most of us are alive because of what you did, and that's worth celebrating. We're all happy you're with us. Well, most of us. Anders is still pissed at you."

Alex sighed. "I know, and now that I'm part of the crew, Anders can do whatever he wants to me. The captain can't stop him. I didn't even know he'd been keeping Anders in check when I was a passenger."

"Anders can't just kill you. If he attacks you, we're going to know and make him pay. But he can see to it you have an accident. We'll know it's him, but without proof it's going to be tough to just take him out and not have the captain skin us for it."

Alex had a moment of shock at the extent Asyr was willing to go for him. The captain had told him about it, but Alex hadn't believed him. And she made it sound like there were a lot of them willing to take on Anders for his sake.

He shook his head. He couldn't allow that. He didn't want to be responsible for those deaths,

because he had no illusions about it. If fighting erupted, people would die, on both sides. Resolving this wasn't just about saving his life anymore; it was about all their lives.

How had he managed to find himself in this situation? All he'd wanted was to reach Samalia. He looked at the display, replaying Asyr's fight again. If Anders was a computer system, this would be so easy to fix. Go in, change his code, change the parameters, make it so the man would want to look out for him instead of wanting him dead.

He straightened. Why not? That might actually work.