

He hadn't wanted to.

Alex clung to that thought as hard as he clung to the hard, furry body resting against him.

He hadn't wanted to hurt him.

He'd lost himself into the fighting. Hard light constructs weren't the same as fighting people, but they had the advantage of pushing him harder than anyone, short of Tristan, could. And he had rejoiced in it. He'd let go of worry. They weren't alive, so Tristan wouldn't complain. He'd let go of fear. Tristan would see he was fine, and they'd go home. They'd move on to living their lives together, away from humans.

He'd embraced the joy of cutting his opponents, mostly ignoring how they broke into light instead of pouring blood when he cut them deep.

The motion had come from the side, away from the mass of enemy. Sufficiently out of the pattern to pull at his attention. Then the man's golden skin registered, the mohawk, which might have been shorter than the last time he'd seen him.

He was moving as Zephyr waved at him. Alex realized what he was going to do as the man's eyes widen.

Alex didn't want to kill him. But the man was a threat. He was someone who had defeated him, once, a long time ago, and the possibility he might do it again could not be allowed to remain.

Alex didn't want to kill Zephyr, but a part of him clamored he had to, and it was the part in control. He screamed to stop, but all that left his lips was laughter.

Zephyr was good. He held knives before Alex had reached him. Blocked, parried and avoided more slices. But most weren't good enough when he couldn't manage any hits of his own that mattered. Alex hardly felt the stabs and cut amidst the good time he had.

He didn't want to kill the man who had helped him survive his time on the Golly, but he was going to. It was clear, when the man staggered, taking the knife in his side with him. It didn't matter. Alex had another one in hand, one he would end him with.

Then he fought another opponent.

Darkness with stars.

He didn't matter.

Only winning did. There might have been words. Only sounds before their final silence.

Then his hand was immobilized. Pulled, and he staggered. Before he could regain his footing, something came at him.

A flash of pain.

The realization Tristan had kept him from doing something horrible.

Then, darkness.

Alex hadn't wanted to kill Zephyr. A man who could be counted as good among pirates. But if not for Tristan, against stepping between him and someone who didn't deserve his knives, he would have.

"Didn't want to," he muttered over and over into the fur.

The arms tightened around him. Comfort, instead of bringing the pain Alex felt he deserved.

Alex wanted to go home. He wanted to hide from what he'd done. He wanted to go back to believing he was fine. That he killed when Tristan told him. That he wasn't out of control.

"I'm sorry." He clung harder. "I should have listened. I should have done what you said."

"It's alright, Alex."

"No." Alex pushed, but the arms wouldn't release him. "I defied you. You told me there was something wrong with me and I—"

"I will fix this." The look was filled with confidence Alex didn't think he deserved. He was flawed. Tristan had honed him to perfection, and he'd become flawed. He shouldn't be fixed. He should be discarded.

He clung again, afraid that in spite of the promises Tristan had given him. He would do just that.

"I'm not leaving you," the Samalian whispered. "I am not stopping when you wouldn't let my protest, my defiance, stop you from looking for a way to fix what was wrong with me."

"What if I can't be fixed?"

The tightening arms told him that was something Tristan feared too. "Then we will find a way to live with it."

A weight lifted from Alex's mental shoulders. Regardless of what happened, Tristan would keep him.

He continued to hold on to his Samalian, and thought he might drift to sleep, when a door chime sounded. He looked around in surprise. The room was large. The bed faced a desk. Dresser on one wall with an open way. Living quarters.

They didn't have this on their ship.

The chime came again.

"It's going to be the ship's captain," Tristan said. "You hurt one of his people. I got him to give you twelve hours."

Twelve? He couldn't have been here that long. He didn't remember sleeping. Tristan had said hurt, not killed.

It wasn't the relief Alex expected, but knowing Zephyr was alive helped.

"The lock isn't going to stop him," Alex said.

"If you tell me you aren't ready, I will stop him if it won't."

Alex placed a hand on Tristan's arm. "Will's a friend. We owe him enough not to forget that."

"We were the one worrying I'd see too many people as no longer my enemies."

"I was afraid you weren't you, anymore. I get that who you are isn't the hard monster

of before, but that you're still you. You'll see those who need to be our enemies as such. Not everyone."

"Do you want to see him?" Tristan asked, as the chime came a third time. Alex nodded, and Tristan went to open the door.

He sat, and pulled his legs off the side of the bed, then stopped, finding he didn't have the energy to make it to one of the seats around the low table on the other end of the room.

Will stepped into the room and gave Alex a smile that reminded him of their early days. Will showing him around the Golly, explaining how things worked with an enthusiasm Alex couldn't understand. The man before him had seemed so young back then.

"I'm sorry," Alex said. "Whatever you need me to do, I'll fix this."

The smile vanished, and Will looked older. Looked the captain he was.

"Alone," he said.

"I'm not leaving you alone with him," Tristan said. Tone as neutral as finality allowed. "He calls you a friend, but I know what friends are capable, when they've been wronged."

The look Will gave Tristan had none of the worry Alex felt it should have .

"Not friends. Crew."

"And I won't leave you alone if you feel crew is more—"

"I'm crew," Alex said. "I'm still part of his crew."

"You left them decades ago, objective."

"It doesn't matter. They took me in, and Will won't let me go just because I left. The worse he might do is throw me in the brig for what I did to Zephyr."

"I will break him out," Tristan said.

Alex snorted. "I'm capable of breaking myself out of a ship's brig." It would take Golly himself to keep that from happening.

"No brig," Will said.

"Because you are Alex's friend, I won't threaten you." He turned to the door.

"Tristan." Alex grabbed the pants off the floor and threw them at the Samalian.

"Humans tend to be sensitive about seeing naked men, even alien ones, when they look so close to them."

Tristan grabbed the pants and left the room with them still in this hand.

"He'll put them on," Alex said. "Probably. Samalians aren't all that bothered with being naked, and Tristan isn't as happy as he let on, so he might want to make others uncomfortable as a way of lashing out." He motioned to the seats as he stood. "You want to sit?"

Will sat, then raised an eyebrow as Alex sat opposite him. "Pants?"

"Right." He found his on the other side of the bed.

"Used to care," Will said.

Alex remembered sharing the small cabin. How Will was at ease with his body while Alex... "I used to care about a lot of things."

"Things change," Will said.

Alex dropped into the seat. "Yeah, they do. How is he?"

"Alive."

Alex winced. Intended or not, Will's succinctness has a brutality to it that hit deep this time. "I'm sorry. I—" what could he say, other than make excuses?

Will nodded. "Jack?"

Alex stared, and Will nodded to the door.

Alex laughed. "No. He isn't Jack. He never was. Jack was a figment of my imagination. It was always Tristan. He just acted and called himself Jack. And I was desperate enough for anyone to love me, that I believed it all."

"Others?"

Alex shook his head. "I can't connect with humans on that level. I never could. I'm a xenophile."

Will nodded.

Alex had always been surprised at the man's ease of accepting things almost everyone else considered wrong. He'd just nodded when Alex had told him the holo of the Samalian was the man he loved. And now, an admission he could only love aliens was met with that same nod.

"Happy?"

"Yes," Alex said before he even thought about it, and was met with a raised eyebrow. "About that. Me and him. I'm happy. It's been crazy, and I'm sure I was insane a few times among that. Might still be, but I'm happy about loving him. He loves me back."

"Can kill for you."

"Has done it. I've kill for him."

"Mercs."

Alex chuckled. "I don't think that word's intense enough for what we are."

Will motioned up. "His file."

It made sense the Sayatoga would have Tristan's criminal history. They had held him for some. Had hunted him for yet more. "It's true, if that's what you're wondering."

Will shook his head. "You know." A statement.

"Yeah. My boss, back at Luminex, gave me a copy. I think he thought knowing the kind of person had used me would let me put the even behind me and get back to work. Or maybe he hoped I'd be better. I don't know anymore. My view on corporations has become dark since leaving it. All it did was make me determine from saving Jack from the monster who had taken him from me."

"Taken?"

"It's the lie I told myself, and sometimes I believed it. Jack had been real, used by Tristan to get to me. Other times, I understood it was just Tristan putting on an act. Then, I convinced myself that no one could be that convincing if they didn't feel something at their core, and that became the Jack I was going to rescue. I was going to show Tristan he wasn't really such a monster."

"Worked?"

Alex shook his head. "He made me the monster." He sighed. "If I told you half the things he made me do, you'd kick me out. If I told you just how little I care anymore about all the people I killed. You'd call the law on me."

"Crew."

"You wouldn't keep someone like me around if you knew all the—"

“Anders.”

“You weren’t the one keeping him around. And Meron was happy to send him my way, knowing full well that whatever happened, Anders wasn’t returning to him.”

“Take over?”

Alex laughed. “You tried to give me the ship, remember?”

“Not give. Yours.”

“I’m no captain. I don’t care enough about people to be in charge of them. You do. You care about all of them. If they do right by you, you do right by them. Me...well, look at what I did to Zephyr.”

They fell silent.

“Why?” Will asked.

“Because he was there,” Alex said, and the raised eyebrow said Will felt it was as insufficient as Alex did. “Because I’d lost myself in the fighting, and when I saw him, I remembered he’d beaten me. That Anders had ordered him to kill me. That even when we rescued Tristan, I never knew for sure Zephyr was on my side. The only promise he made me was that if he was going to kill me, it would be face to face. That, and he wouldn’t do it, because he saw death in my eyes. It’s something from where he’s from,” he added as the questioning look. “How on his planet some people revered for not seeing people as living beings, but as the corpses they were going to be. He said they’d revere me if I went there. But when I saw him, I had to kill him. I didn’t want to, but I had to.”

“Control?”

Alex laughed. “I wish. What do you think Tristan spent the first years I was with him doing? He taught me to control every emotion I have until I didn’t feel anything.”

“Not control.”

“I don’t know what that is, if it isn’t that.”

Will thought. “Repression.”

“That takes control. So if that was going to do it, I’d be there already.”

Will shook his head.

“Look. Tristan is a master at control. He’s the most controlled person I’ve ever met. He was before we rescued him, and he still is. If control was how this was going to be fixed, we’d already be done.”

“Manipulate.”

“What?”

Will tried a few times to say something, then look at Alex with despair. If he had any idea what his friend was trying to say, Alex would keep him from having to explain.

The sigh was accompanied by a long, closed eyes silence. Alex didn’t like putting his friend through this strain.

“Your man,” he said, each word measured. “Taught you to obey him. He manipulated you into doing what he wants. He controls you. That isn’t the same as knowing how to control yourself.”

“No, you have it wrong. All our training has been about me learning.”

“He stopped you.”

Alex opened his mouth, then had to close it. How many times had Tristan stepped in front of him so he would be kept from killing someone? Even before the guard on Samalia,

before Tristan breaking. As much as Tristan had molded him into a weapon, it was always one under his control. Tristan had taught him precision. But had he ever taught him to know when to stop? If there was no one there to stop him?

Had that been on purpose, so Alex would always need Tristan there? Or was it that Tristan was so used to being in control of himself he couldn't imagine how someone wouldn't be? That he had no idea how to show someone to exert that self control?

Tristan said he wanted to fix the problem with Alex, and Alex believed him.

What Alex wondered about was if Tristan even knew how to go about fixing his problem.