

The medical bay was loud when Alex entered, helped by Zephyr, who had managed to go through everything without getting a single serious injury. All the beds were occupied, and chairs had been brought in. Zephyr lowered Alex in one.

“Will the lot of you shut the hell up!” Doc yelled. “There’s only one of me, and I’m going to decide who gets treated first.” She turned. “Zeph, you look okay. You’re going to help me.”

“Doc, I’m not—”

“I don’t care. Someone decided it was a good idea to send you lot in there without help, and didn’t tell me so I didn’t know to keep my helpers in here. Unless you’re injured, you’re helping.”

Alex almost laughed when he saw the man reach for a knife.

“If you injure yourself,” Doc said, “I’m going to hurt you.”

Zephyr sighed in resignation and moved deeper into the room.

Doc came to Alex, quickly looking at his bandaged cheek and the cuts on his arms, chest, and legs. She glared at him. “Nothing’s bleeding right now, so I’m keeping you for last.”

“Maybe I should come back later then.”

“Move, and I’m going to tie you down.”

“Can I at least get something to—”

She shoved a datapad in his hands. “Keep busy with that.”

“Yes, Mom,” he whispered. With nothing else to do, he made himself as comfortable as his injuries let him and returned to what he spent most of his downtime doing: reading Tristan’s files.

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The room was mostly silent. Half the beds were still occupied, but the men and women on them were resting quietly. Alex was seated on one as Doc finished cleaning the cut on his cheek.

When she turned to get something out of a cabinet, Alex grabbed the metal tray on the mobile table and used the shiny back as a mirror. It was distorted, but he thought he could see the white of bone.

“Use that,” she said, handing him a mirror.

In it he could see the cut, which started at the top of his left cheek and went down and to the outside of his face. The bone at the top was exposed and everything looked wet, although there was no bleeding.

He winced. How had that not sent him screaming in pain? He’d barely felt the knife cut him.

“If you’re done admiring it, I’m going to close it.”

Alex nodded, and put the mirror down and closed his eyes. He didn’t want to see what she did. He felt her pull the skin together and apply something that stung. In under a minute, she stepped away.

“It’s going to leave a nasty scar.” She applied another bandage over it. “I’m not set up for clean sutures, but it won’t be much work for you to get it removed before you get to your guy.”

Would he get it removed? Alex wondered. Shouldn’t he have a reminder of what violence caused? His body had a lot more cuts, but they weren’t as deep as this one. He didn’t know if they’d leave significant marks, and this one was where he’d see it anytime he looked in a mirror.

He deserved to be—

He screamed in pain. “What’s that for?” he yelled at her. She was gripping his leg, fingers in a few cuts and squeezing.

“Do I have your attention? Or are you still daydreaming?”

“You didn’t have to do that. Damn it!” he cursed as she began to squeeze again. “I’m paying attention.”

“Good.” She let go of his leg and picked up more disinfectant and cleaning pads. “Then explain to me, what’s your fucking problem?”

“What?”

“Don’t act stupid with me, Alex. I want to know what’s going through that thing you call a brain. Ever since you’ve joined Anders’s gang, you’ve ended up here every few days.”

“That’s just training.” Alex gasped as she cleaned a long but shallow cut.

“I don’t remember Ana, Jen, or Louis ever sending you to me.”

“Maybe they weren’t taking it seriously enough,” he grumbled.

He saw the hand reach for his other leg and batted it away. “Damn it, what’s your problem?”

“My problem is this apparent death wish you have.”

“What are you talking about? I don’t have a death wish.”

“Yeah? What do you call working for Anders?”

“I work for him so he won’t have a reason to kill me anymore.”

She looked at him, mouth hanging open. She closed it. “What do you think this was?” she indicated his injuries.

It took Alex a moment to realize what she meant. “You think he took me on the job so I’d die?”

“It’s the best way for him to get rid of you.”

“You’re wrong. If that was his goal, he wouldn’t have told Terry and Zeph to train me as well as they did.”

“Really?”

“Hey, you said it yourself. They keep sending me in here because of how hard they’re pushing me.”

She smiled at him, and shook her head in amusement.

“What?”

“Do you really think that’s Anders’s doing?”

“Why else would they do it?” Alex asked, growing unsure.

She didn’t answer, focusing on cleaning the rest of his cuts. When she was done, she gave him a shot.

“Generalized painkiller,” she said. “Your body suffered a lot of small traumas; it’s going to let you rest. Get some food in you first. I’ll tell Carmina to have larger portions ready for you. If you want another shot tomorrow so you can celebrate with the rest of us, come see me, but after that you’ll have to endure it. I’m not having you turn into a junkie.”

“Don’t worry, I should feel the pain. I want to remember what I did.”

“You better not start hurting yourself because you think you need to be punished.”

Alex shook his head. “That’s not it. This is the first time I’ve known what it’s like to hurt someone else, to get hurt. The previous times were too…” he searched for the right word. “Easy. They just died and I didn’t feel it.”

“Alex.”

"It's Crimson, Doc. Alex, he couldn't survive in this place."

She sighed. "Just go eat and rest."

He got off the bed and stood. The painkiller did its job and the aches were far in the background. He headed out, wondering if he could get the truth out of Anders about his reasons to get Alex on this job. Was it even worth—

He stopped as the door closed behind him. Zephyr was leaning against the wall.

"I didn't expect to see you here after what Doc had you do in there."

The man shrugged.

"Did Anders send you to check on me?"

"No."

Alex waited for him to add something. When Zephyr didn't, Alex walked away, only to have the man fall into step with him.

Alex debated trying to lose him, but was there a point? He couldn't hide anywhere on the ship, not with Anders able to get the system to find him. And he didn't want to hide. What he wanted were answers. Well, Zephyr was right there.

"Zeph, did you bring me with you because Anders told you to get me killed?"

The man didn't answer immediately, and when Alex looked at him, he was thoughtful. He shrugged. "Does it matter?"

"Of course it does."

"Why? You survived."

"Really?" he asked in exasperation. "Don't you think it's reasonable for me to want to know if there's at least one person I can trust on this ship?"

Zephyr snorted. "You're on a ship crewed by all kinds of criminals, up to, and including killers. I'd think the answer to that is obvious."

"I refuse to believe that everyone here is out to get me."

"Of course not. Only those who think you're a threat want that."

"If Anders wants me dead, why are you training me so damn hard?"

"What makes you think I am?"

"I was alone against five, and I won. What was that then?"

The man gave Alex a smirk. "What makes you think I had anything to do with that?"

Alex stopped. "What do you mean?"

Zephyr turned and faced him. "Knowing how to use a knife, or a gun, or your fists isn't what makes you survive a fight. You have to want to survive it first."

"Everyone wants that."

"Bullshit. Oh, they'll say they want to, but when it comes down to it, when they're holding the knife and it's time to kill the one before them, they'll start questioning what they're doing. To win, you have to throw all that doubt out. You have to be willing to do everything and anything."

He raised his arm, showing the bandage to Alex. "You didn't give this to me because you're better than I am. You sliced me, because at that moment you wanted me dead, and I just wanted to stop you. I wasn't out to win, not until you forced me to get serious."

He looked Alex in the eyes. "You have to realize that if you didn't want to live at all costs, you wouldn't have survived your first month here."

Alex shook his head. He hadn't decided to sacrifice his morality back then. It wasn't until his conversation with Olien that he'd made the decision. Everything before that had been...what?

Luck?

“How about the bar fight? Was I supposed to get killed there then?”

Zephyr shrugged. “Again, does it matter?”

“Damn it, Zeph!”

The man sighed. “Look at it this way. If all Anders wanted out of it was a distraction, you gave him that. If he was hoping you’d die, you showed him that you’re tougher than he thought.”

“And with this job? Is it the same?”

Zephyr didn’t say anything.

Alex sighed. “Great. Doesn’t that mean that if Anders wants me dead, he’s going to move to something more direct?”

“Probably, but I’ll tell you this: if he decides to have you killed, I won’t be the one to do it.”

Alex rolled his eyes. “Why should I believe you?”

Zephyr smiled. “Good, that’s how you should think. You have no reason to trust me. But here’s why I won’t do it: you took the ship’s computer and fixed it. I talked with Asyr, so I know what you did. You took a computer system that was insane and brought it back to sanity, but that wasn’t enough for you. Then you took the rest of it, the part that was even more insane, and fixed that too. I know that if you’d done that for me, I’d get extremely angry at anyone who hurt you.”

“What?” Alex couldn’t believe what he’d just heard. “That isn’t how it works; it’s just a computer. It can’t do something unless I tell it too.”

Zephyr’s smile broadened. “So, if it did anything it’s because you programmed it that way?”

“Come on, I’d never do that.”

“And why should I believe you?”

“Because I gave Anders the authority to order the computer about.”

“Really? And you can’t override his orders?”

“Of course I can, just like the captain can, but that doesn’t mean I will.”

“And how am I supposed to believe that the guy who’s so damned good he fixed a computer no one had ever been able to fix didn’t also make arrangements to protect himself? Or so that someone who got on his nerve was to have an accident?”

Alex opened his mouth to protest, and found he couldn’t. The immensity of what Zephyr was saying sunk in. The crew respected power. People who didn’t have it feared those who did.

Alex hadn’t considered himself to have any power; that had been why he didn’t get Anders’s behavior. He’d been a passenger only along for the ride, and saving the crew that first time had been a consequence of wanting to survive.

But the thing he hadn’t realized, what Anders had to have understood before even Alex, was that Alex had gotten the computer to do what he’d wanted. And after that he’d just kept on going, getting more and more control over it.

Alex had to lean against the wall. Zephyr was watching him, his face a neutral mask. Alex tried to tell the man it had never been his intention, but he knew it wouldn’t change anything. That he had intended it or not, Alex had given himself complete control over the one thing absolutely everyone on the ship depended on for their survival.

Alex controlled the computer. Anders played at controlling it, but Alex... “Oh, fuck.”

Zephyr nodded.

Anders knew that if Alex wanted to, he could take over the ship.

He leaned his head back. "No wonder he wants me dead."