

“How’s the auxiliary power?” Alex asked, sitting at the console.

“Still here,” Luigi replied.

“I’ll look it over,” Asyr said.

“Good. I don’t want it to fail in the middle of this and leave the main processor dealing with engineering by itself. No telling what we’ll end up with if that happens.”

“I thought you’d fixed that.”

“I did the best I could. At this point, I don’t think a professional computer healer could do better than I did. But engineering is almost as powerful of a system, and it’s homicidal. I don’t know if the main processor will emerge intact, even with our help.”

Alex hadn’t wanted to do it; he’d figured that the ship had managed fine with engineering as it was for all this time, but the captain had ordered him, saying he wasn’t putting anyone in cryo until it was done.

What Alex hadn’t known until the captain explained, was that since he’d wrestled life support away from it, every minor repair turned into a scramble to save someone’s life. Even an overhead light needing to be changed would end up in an electrocution.

He put his earpiece in.

“Welcome back,” the system said, its voice calm and composed.

“How are you doing?”

“I am managing.”

Alex chuckled. “Just managing?”

“I haven’t killed the new user yet, so I could be better.”

Alex knew it was joking, but he still did a check to make sure all the safeguards were in place. If a sense of humor was the worst he had to deal with as a result of reintegrating everything, he’d consider himself lucky.

“And what has Anders done now?”

“He has discovered that I can alter the life support settings anywhere on the ship, not only his room.”

Alex groaned.

Anders had requested that Alex give him control of the computer, and now it was looking like he was going to abuse it, just like he was afraid of.

“Don’t worry, the captain and I have overrides, and he can’t force you to hurt anyone.”

“Are you certain you can’t put an exception in my safeguards for him? I feel the crew would be better off without him there.”

You and me both, Alex thought. “No, everyone’s life is important.” He began releasing the programs he’d written for what they’d do. “Are you ready for this?”

“No.”

Asyr tapped his shoulder and gave him a thumb up. He nodded. So, they’d have power no matter what engineering did.

“We talked about it. The three of us will be here to provide support.”

“I am afraid of what I will become.”

Alex didn’t answer immediately. “Whatever it is, it will be for the best.” He certainly hoped that was true for the both of them.

“I’m ready,” Luigi said.

“Me too,” Asyr added.

“Alright, our job is to keep the most aggressive codes under control and away from life

support. That's almost certainly what engineering will go after since it's familiar with it now, and if it can get rid of us, the main processor will be on its own. You guys have your oxygen?"

He tapped his, which was clipped to his belt. He looked over his shoulder to confirm the door was barricaded open.

"I'll do my best to keep the opening small between both systems, but I expect engineering is going to rip it open and pour in, so get ready for a flood." At the last moment he remembered to zero out sounds from the system. He didn't want another burst eardrum.

Then the pinprick he opened between the main and engineering system immediately turned into a floodgate, and they were fighting for their ship's sanity.

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Alex had trouble keeping his eyes open. He reached for the keyboard and knocked over a couple of energy drinks. Luigi was resting his head on his console, and Asyr kept almost falling off her chair, waking up at the last moment.

Everything had finally been quiet for five minutes, and the exertion was taking its toll on all of them, but he couldn't let it overtake him yet. Not until he'd made sure there weren't any surprises left.

"How are you doing?" he asked the system.

"Leave me alone," it replied. Gone was its good humor.

Alex looked over the code. He'd have to do a more in-depth check when he was awake, but everything looked stable. The murderous components of engineering were nowhere to be seen, but its antisocial personality had survived.

He could probably help the system with that, but later. "Alright you two. Wake up and go sleep in your own bed." He grabbed his comm. "Captain, you're going to want to be gentle with the system for a while, but you now have one fully-functioning, mostly sane ship."

"Thank you, Mister Crimson."

"You're welcome. Now, please don't try to reach me for the next decade." He staggered to his quarters and fell in his bed.

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Alex sat on a crate in the hold, enjoying the peace and quiet. The subjective week since he'd integrated the ship had been busy.

They'd gone under cryo within hours of that. Will had to wake him and help him attach the armband, then Alex had been out again. Coming out had been almost more effort than Alex wanted to put into it. He'd been dressed and exhausted, one thing he knew made it harder, and the other he discovered just made it worse. Naked and well-rested was how he'd do it from now on, and Will could comment as much as he liked.

A lot of his time since had been taken with smoothing out the computer's personality. It would never be friendly, but it wasn't as cold as it had been, and Alex had confirmed that none

of engineering's aggressive code had survived.

When he wasn't doing that, Anders kept him busy. Now even more so, because his meddling with other people's comfort settings had reached the captain's ears, so he'd given Anders a dress down in front of his men.

What did Anders expect Alex to do when calls about life support malfunctioning started coming in? Ignore them? So he'd told the captain, because he knew that was the one person Anders listened to. He hadn't expected him to explode.

But that hadn't endeared Alex to Anders, and he'd made sure to keep Alex busy with meaningless work between his training sessions and computer time. Alex couldn't believe that Anders had twenty pairs of boots. He knew that because he'd had to clean and polish each of them.

The one thing he hadn't had was time to be alone, which was why he was here, in the silent space, while everyone was partying after a successful job. Alex had put in an appearance. Shaken hands, received thanks and offers to spend intimate time with him. Each time someone called him a hero, he made sure to point out he was just following orders.

A handful tried to get him to tell them what his plan was. How long he'd let Anders boss him around. That whenever he took him out, they'd be there to offer their support.

Alex wasn't sure if they were people who truly wanted him to take over, or some Anders had sent to test him, but it didn't matter. He told them the truth: he had no plans. He was going to let it happen until he left the ship, and he wasn't taking over anything. They weren't happy with that.

They were the exception. Except for his friends, most of the crew had shaken their head in disappointment and things had gone back to the way they had been. His friends had screamed at him, called him names. Jennifer threatened to just shoot him.

Even now she thought he sold out, and wouldn't have anything to do with him. The others had reluctantly accepted it was his decision to make.

His comm beeped. "Crimson," Anders called. "Where are you?"

Alex sighed. His master was calling. "Just taking a break from the crowd."

"Get your ass back here. Your fans are clamoring for you."

Sure. More likely Anders needed another drink served to him, and he'd remembered he had a servant. "I'll be there in a minute."

Thirty minutes of peace was better than nothing. He started for the hold's exit, but stopped twenty feet from it. A beefy man stood there.

"Hi, Terry, can I help you with something?"

Terrence was one of Anders's men. Alex hadn't remembered him when he'd introduced himself, but he was the man who had kept Anders from pounding Alex's head in the wall after the first job. Alex had thanked him again, and hadn't interacted with him since then.

The man stepped toward him, face hard and knuckles cracking. "Yep. You can show me what you're made of."

Alex took a step back, and raised his hands to pacify him. "Look, I'm not going to fight you. I have a deal with Anders, you were there."

Terrence snorted. "You think I care? I want to see if what they say our mighty hero can do is true."

Say? Were people still raising him to some unrealistic standard? Couldn't they mind their own damned business?

The man swung and Alex backed away. "Come on, fight me." Another swing, another step back.

"You know damned well I can't take you on. I don't care what anyone else is saying, I'm not a fighter."

"I thought Ana was training you. From hearing her talk, you're able to take on three men without problem."

What? The surprise almost kept him from retreating in time to avoid another punch. And when he backed again in anticipation of the next one, he hit something. Or rather someone, he found out, when a hairy golden arm wrapped around his neck.

Alex cursed. He put a hand under the arm and tried to pry it away. It didn't move. At least he could still breathe. He tried to elbow the man in the stomach, but he couldn't muster much strength and the man's abs were hard.

Alex struggled, pulling forward, then sideways. He wasn't going to let them beat him up without fighting back. The man had to readjust his hold to keep Alex from slipping out, and his arm moved up.

Alex didn't think, he bit down hard.

The man screamed and pushed him away. "The son of a bitch bit me!"

"Good," Terrence said.

Alex turned to keep both men in sight. Zephyr was looking at his bleeding arm. Alex forced himself to swallow, and the taste of iron turned his stomach. He wasn't going to throw up, not here, not before these two.

He smiled at Alex. "I'm glad to see you can get yourself out of tough situations."

"What the fuck are you doing?" Alex growled.

"Making sure you're going to survive your time with us. Anders might be done trying to kill you, but he's going to throw you into fights at some point. If you're going to get to your guy, you're going to have to survive that."

Alex couldn't believe what he was hearing. "So, what? That was a test?"

"Yeah. You didn't fail, so that's good. But you didn't pass either. Ana's only teaching you to fight, not survive. I'm going to change that."

What was he talking about?

"The biggest mistake you made," Terrence continued, "was keeping your eyes on me. Unless you have your back to the wall, you need to know what and who's around you."

"You expect me to look away from you? That's going to leave me open."

"Right. If that's all you can do, you just take small glances. Get a sense for your environment. But what you want to do is move. Walk around your opponent, don't make it so easy on him. And that lets you keep an eye on him while looking around." He looked Alex over. "One more thing: how come you're not armed?"

"On the ship? Why would I need to have a weapon?"

"Because you never know when someone might jump you." Terrence pulled a sleeve to reveal a knife secured to his forearm. "I have another one in my boot and at my back. And I always carry this." He pulled his shirt up to show a small gun.

"I don't see a knife on his arm." He indicated Zephyr.

"Zeph doesn't like long-sleeve shirts so he doesn't keep one there, but trust me, you don't want to know how many knives he has hidden on his body."

Alex had trouble believing him. He'd had three training sessions with the golden-skinned

man, and other than the knives he'd held, he hadn't noticed others on him.

"You need different clothing. A jumpsuit's fine if you're doing dirty work, but in a fight, you need to be able to get out of what you're wearing fast."

"I usually wear a jacket over this."

"That's nice, but once you're out of that, if I grab you by the collar, right now, you're trapped. You're at my mercy."

Alex looked at himself, and thought about having to find something else. "But I like the look."

Zephyr chuckled.

"We can recreate that; it's just fabric and colors. At least you'll survive. And lastly, I'm taking over your strength training. An elbow to the stomach should have Zeph wince, at the very least. As far as I could tell, you hurt yourself instead."

"He's got hard abs."

"He does, but you can't let that stop you. Again, if you can't get out of a hold, you're dead. Not everyone's going to be nice enough to give you skin to bite into."

Alex sighed. "Do you treat everyone like this?"

"If they can't take care of themselves and I want them to survive, yes."

"Alright, fine. I give up. I'll tell Ana and Will you're taking over, and I'll see you then."

"Why wait so long?" Terrence cracked his knuckles.

"Anders is waiting for me."

"He's drunk. He isn't going to notice your absence." The man rushed Alex.