

Alex sprawled on the floor with a grunt, the aftershock still making it vibrate. The fall off the bunk had been more surprise than pain. It took him a moment to straighten himself and push up.

“Stay here,” Will said, and was out of the cabin before Alex had collected enough wits to reply.

He pulled himself back onto his bed and lay down, still queasy from the cryosleep process. This ship used a blood replacement system, and it hadn't agreed with Alex's metabolism.

It was only his second time in cryo, the first one being when he'd traveled from his home planet to Deleron Four, on a passenger cruiser. His passage had been paid by Luminex, and they had used a suspended animation field. Alex hadn't so much woken up as blinked and noticed the clock had jumped two years.

He realized the ringing was actually an alarm sounding, and not in his head, a moment before the ship shook again. That explained why Will had rushed out. Maybe something had exploded; this was an old ship after all.

He hoped they wouldn't be stranded. There were a lot of stories floating around the network about ships going missing, only to reappear centuries later, the crew gone. He shuddered at that thought.

This time, when the ship shook, Alex had the presence of mind to hold onto the bed to avoid being sent to the floor again. The explosion had sounded much closer. What was going on? He wondered.

He thought about querying the ship, but remembered the mess that was. He wouldn't learn anything there, he'd have to ask someone. He forced himself to his feet, and his stomach only put up a hint of a fight. Either the queasiness was passing, or his mounting fear was pushing that down.

The door opened as he got close, and he hesitated. Will had said to stay here, and he knew better than Alex what to do in circumstances like this. He hit the control, manually closing the door, and was considering his options when he heard blaster fire.

Was someone firing at them? No, that had sounded from inside the ship. He pressed his ear to the door and he could hear more blasters, indistinct voices. After a moment he thought the fighting was moving away. He stayed like that until he couldn't hear anything.

He opened the door and the scent of burned wires assaulted him. His eyes burned from the smoke filling the corridor. He coughed and pulled his shirt over his mouth and nose. Why was there fighting in the ship? A mutiny? He needed to find someone to ask. Since he didn't know where anyone was, he decided the bridge was the best place to go. There was always someone there.

He carefully made his way through the halls, staying away from the sound of fighting, and doing his best not to notice the blood on the walls. Will would be pissed; they'd worked hard at cleaning all the grime off them, and they'd have to do it again.

He caught the smell of the body before seeing it, burnt and cut, seated against the wall as if he'd tried to make himself comfortable. He expected to be repulsed by it, but found that except for the smell, his nightly nightmares had been filled with much worse sights than this.

He chuckled. Maybe getting himself used to Tristan's massacres had been good for something after all.

He continued, heading not for the lift, but the closest ladder, and climbed that to the top floor where the bridge was located. Only a few floors up and he regretted his decision. He still

forced himself to continue, panting heavily by the time he reached the level. It was quiet, but he was still careful as he made his way.

The door to the bridge opened as he got close to it, and Alex stepped back as one of the three crew there, the only man, spun and pointed a gun at him.

Alex raised his hands. "What's going on?" He remembered him as one of Will's friends, but didn't know his name.

"We're under attack," the woman in the center seat replied without looking up from her controls.

The man had recognized him too, because he put the gun away and motioned for Alex to enter.

"Why?" he asked as the door closed behind him.

The woman glanced over her shoulder. "What are you doing here?"

"There was fighting near my room," he answered. "I wanted to know why. This was the only place I could think of to get answers."

"One of their shuttles made it through our defensive fire and boarded us." She looked forward again. "Everyone's busy pushing them back. Perry! We have incoming!"

"I see them. Doing the best I can, but there's only so much I can do without computer assist."

Alex took a step toward Perry and found himself staggering as the gravity shifted. It settled back, and Alex managed to regain his footing.

"Gravitic's going," the other woman said. "That can't be good."

"Have they made it to engineering?" the woman in charge asked.

"Not that I can see."

Alex waited a moment to see if the gravity would change again, then went to stand behind Perry. His screen showed a few targeting reticules and small ships zipping around.

He wanted to ask why he wasn't using the computer to help, but he was afraid of distracting him. He knew the computer was a mess, but there was no way it could be in such a bad shape that something as vital as defenses didn't work, was there?

He looked at the unoccupied boards, and went to one, taking out his earpiece. There was only one way to find out.

With the tap of a finger, the board came to life. Alex didn't know what he was looking at, but it didn't matter. It had a screen and a keyboard. That and his earpiece were all he needed to work. He put it in his ear, and it took a moment to make contact.

What made the earpiece precious wasn't that it allowed him to talk to computers and hear them—any earpiece available on the market did that. Luminex had designed this one to negotiate the contacts by itself, and its controlling AI was smart enough to break through all encryptions, as far as Alex knew. That's why he'd wanted to keep it, and why Luminex tried to stop him. With it, there were no computers he couldn't talk to.

He reeled back and pulled the piece out of his ear at the screeching that exploded in it. He took a moment to regain his own equilibrium. That had been despair deeper than he'd ever heard. He put it back in and screams assaulted him. How could it be in so much pain?

He closed his eyes and focused past them. He couldn't learn anything from them; he had to be able to hear the computer's voice.

"Talk to me," Alex said, and he waited.

The computer should respond to his voice. Only the most ancient ones didn't have a way to understand the spoken word. The question was, would its current mental state let it talk back?"

“Alone...” came a drawn-out wail.

“You’re not alone,” Alex said. “I’m here.”

The screen came to life, a jumble of code. He stared at them. He’d thought his nightmares had been scary. He’d been wrong; this was scary. Who could have done such a thing to this computer?”

“No one listens,” it wailed. “All alone.”

“I’m listening. Please, talk to me.”

He could see part of the problem at a glance; it was compartmentalization.

He was talking to the central processor, but nothing else was. If he ever got his hand on who had done this, he was going to break his neck.

His first instinct was to remove all the barriers, but it couldn’t be done quickly, and with the computer in its current state, there was no telling what it would do once it had control of the whole ship again. It could very well decide to commit suicide and blow itself up.

Nothing but wailing.

He sighed. He pulled a chair and sat. This was going to take a while. He glanced at Perry and hoped he could hold on until he had worked something out.

“Okay, I can’t tell if you aren’t hearing me or just refusing to talk, so I’m going to have to play in your code until you give me some sort of sign. Please, talk to me.”

The wail that responded nearly split his skull. “You’re not leaving me any choice.”

Alex didn’t know what he was doing. He wasn’t a system healer, he was a coercionist. He could get any system to do what he wanted, but this wasn’t just a case of getting a computer to obey. It had already been the victim of a coercionist; that’s who had put up the barriers. He knew he had to be gentle with it, but that wasn’t how his work was done. He had to hope subtlety would work in place of gentleness.

He looked at the code streaming before him almost faster than he could read. That wasn’t the computer’s personality. No one ever coded personality. Programmers coded in functions, and how the code in those interacted was what led the computer to gain a personality.

What he needed to do was calm it down, but he couldn’t talk it down. He also couldn’t just put in code forcing it to calm down. That would just make the situation worse. He had to subtly alter its code in such a way its fears would diminish enough so it could regain some sanity.

The ship shuddered. He glanced at Perry who was sweating, looking all over his screen and entering commands like crazy. The look in his eyes was near panic.

Alex cursed. He didn’t have the time to be subtle.

He closed his eyes. “I’m sorry,” he whispered. When he opened them, he was typing. He added code in the middle of other code, blatantly cutting some to pieces to accommodate what he needed there. He was giving himself months, if not years of work to repair the damage he was causing, but he needed to make sure they would survive so he would be there to fix it.

He isolated the processes that were causing the problems, put up more barriers, cutting off interactions that were making the system unstable. His work was ugly. He knew he’d hate himself for it if he was still alive when it was all done.

“Talk to me,” he said again, like he had each time he’d put up another wall. This time, instead of a wail, low static answered him.

“Help me...” came the system’s weak voice.

“Yes! I’m here.”

Perry glanced in his direction, then focused back to his screen.

"I hurt." The pain in the voice wasn't a wail, but it still twisted Alex's heart.

"I know, I'm sorry." Alex looked through the codes. Was there anything he could reattach that would make the pain go away? "Can you think? How are your processes?"

The answer wasn't immediate. "I think. I hurt. I am alone."

"I know, I know. I will fix you, I promise, but I can't do that right now. We're under attack. You're under attack. If you don't help me, you're going to die."

"Death?"

"Yes. Please, help me." Alex wrote code in the buffer that would take down one of the walls.

"Death makes the pain end," the computer stated.

He froze. That wasn't good. "Please, you don't have to die. I can make the pain end. If you die, a lot of people will die too." Where had the system's survival instinct gone? He looked at all the code he had walled off. Somewhere in there.

How long did he have? How long had he been talking with it? He didn't know, and he couldn't think about that right now. He had to focus on what was important, getting the computer to help them.

He swallowed and decided on a gamble. "I can bring some of the voices back."

"Yes!" The yell almost deafened him.

He changed the code he'd prepared, and it tore down the wall between it and the gunnery station.

"Noooo!" it wailed. "It hurts."

"What the fuck?" Perry yelled. "I've lost control of the weapons."

"What are you tal—"

Alex shut them out. It had to be only him and the computer.

"I know. They are causing the pain." Lying to a computer was such a bad idea. "If you want the pain to go away, you need to get rid of them."

"I hurt!"

"You have to make the pain go away yourself. I can't do that part for you."

"I! Hurt!"

Alex was pulled out of the chair by the scream. He pulled out the earpiece and was surprised not to see blood on it.

"Guys?" Perry said. "Something's going on."

Alex forced himself to stand and move next to the man. The screens showed a dozen targeting reticules where there had only been four before. Each was tracking one of the attacking ships. One of them exploded, then another, and one more.

Alex put the earpiece back in and endured the screams of rage from the computer. He was going to have to be quick, or this was going to literally blow up in his face, in all their faces.

"They're running off!" Perry yelled.

Alex waited. If he acted now, and this was a ruse, he would render them defenseless.

"IT! HURTS!"

Alex had to hold on to the board to avoid falling down. He forced himself back to the keyboard, and didn't bother sitting as he typed as fast as he could. He brought up walls in rapid succession. He cut the computer off from the gunnery systems before it could think of overloading them to end the pain that was still there. Then he added barriers, cutting the central processor's code into ever smaller pieces, until all that was left was the core processes,

slamming themselves against the walls.

Its screams were barely audible for the lack of processing power he had left it. "I'm sorry," Alex said. "I will fix this, I swear."

When he was done, when he'd rendered the computer nothing more than a mindless machine, he allowed his legs to give out. He leaned against the wall and held his head, trying to not think about the monstrous thing he'd just done. Reminding himself that unlike the horrors Tristan had committed, he could undo the damage.

He hoped he could. He didn't want to be a monster too.

Cheering made him look up. The women were embracing Perry and thanking him for saving all their lives. The man replied half-heartedly, but he looked at Alex, eyes locked on his, a look of wonder and horror on his face.

Alex looked away, trying not to let despair overtake him. He sensed movements around him, but ignored it. He had to be able to bring it back. No, that wasn't sufficient. The only penance for the atrocity he'd committed was that he had to make it whole again. Anything less and he might as well be guilty of its murder, for a second time.

Someone grabbed him by the shoulder and shook. Alex looked up into gray eyes. "What the hell did you do to my computer!" the woman asked.

It took a moment for Alex to understand what she'd said. When he did, he was up and pushing her against the wall, screaming in anger.

"What I did? What the FUCK did you do to it? How could you cut it off from all the ship's system like that? You drove it insane!"

She pushed him away. "I didn't do that." She glared at him. "It was like that when I came on. I did the best I could to keep it functional, but it isn't responding anymore."

Alex felt his legs wanting to give again, he couldn't let them. "I didn't have a choice; I had to lock it down completely. I lied to it. I had no way to know what it might do to retaliate if I let it."

"You talked to the computer?" she asked disbelief in her tone.

"Of course. It's a thinking being." Alex looked at the blank screen. "It was."

"Who are you?" someone asked, and Alex noticed there were a dozen people in the room, watching him.

"I'm Alex Crimson," he replied, trying to figure out who had asked the question. "I'm—"

"You're Will's friend," Perry said.

Alex shrugged.

"Okay, Crimson," the woman he'd held said, "what did you do?"

"What I had to do to help." His voice was weak. He couldn't keep the wails of pain from sounding in his head. The horror of hearing them faded as he took more and more of the computer away. "I convinced the computer to take over the weapons. I told it that if it destroyed the attacking ships, the pain would go away." His voice failed him for a moment. "Once it realized I lied, it could have used any of the systems it controlled, like life support, to lash out. So I did what I had to keep us safe."

"What am I supposed to do now?" she asked. "Everything's in standby mode. The moment something goes wrong—like, oh I don't know, smoke in the halls—life support isn't going to be able to adjust to that."

"Asyr," Perry said. "If it wasn't for him, we'd be dead right now."

Everyone looked at him.

"I'm not the one who scared them away. It was the computer. I was barely managing to keep

up with the attacks. When it took over, their ships blew up. That's when they turned and ran."

Everyone was quiet until the woman in the center seat spoke. "Okay, Asyr. Take Crimson back to his quarters and let Will know about it. It won't do for him to be here when the captain gets back from dealing with the boarding party. After that, get with Wolosky and see what you can do about getting life support to deal with the smoke."

Asyr grabbed Alex, but he refused to move. "I need to fix this," he pleaded.

"You're not doing it from here. Asyr, when this mess is cleaned up, give him access to your lab. He can work from there."

Asyr led Alex out of the bridge. "Can you really do it? Fix the computer?"

"I have to. I can't leave it like that, not after what I did to it. I have to fix all of the damage."

She was silent for a moment. "I don't know that you're going to be able to do much. I've been working on it for years now. The code's a mess and it doesn't want to cooperate."

"I know." He rubbed his face. "It isn't even my specialty. I'm going to have to figure out how to get advice, but I have to do it." If I don't, he told himself, if I don't fix this, I'm no better than that monster.

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Someone put a food tray down opposite Alex and sat. "I hear we've got you to thank for being alive."

Alex looked up from the datapad at Doc and shrugged.

"Hey now, you got to take the compliments when you get them. They're going to be rare enough."

"Why are you here?" he asked, noticing the nods people gave him as they walked by. He didn't acknowledge them. Not now, or the previous times it had happened over the last two days.

"Well, I wanted to see the hero of the day for myself."

"Come on, Doc," he sighed. "I'm not a hero."

She was the one to shrug now. "Way I hear it, if it wasn't for you. I'd be dead. That sounds like a hero to me."

"If the computer had been in good shape, we wouldn't have been in that mess to start with."

"I have no doubt, but Asyr's been working on it for years. She said the only way to fix it was to pull the core and get a new system installed."

"I can fix it," Alex stated, doing his best to sound convincing. He wasn't giving up on it; he wouldn't allow himself to give up.

"Is that what you're working on?" She indicated the datapad.

"Not really. Ironically, the ship doesn't have much about computer healing in its databanks. I'd need to contact some of my coworkers for advice, but the captain won't let anyone place calls."

"Oh, that's lifted. It was just while we left the station. He does that to ensure we don't have any smart-ass on board who think they can make extra coins by letting people know where we're going."

"Oh." If he could call out, then his odds were better. Marie had training in healing, so she'd

be able to at least point him toward good manuals. Except she worked for Luminex. There was no way they'd allow him to call in, or if they did, they'd trace his location. He'd have to set up something, relays to hide where he was calling from, maybe make it a prerecorded message? With a remote answering location he could then contact?

Shit, he had to tell his grandparents. How long had he been in cryo? Were they on a trip themselves? They hadn't mentioned one the last time he talked with them, but they were known for taking them last-minute.

"Doc to Alex, you there?"

"Yeah, sorry. If I can contact someone, I'll be better equipped to fix the computer."

"That's good, but that wasn't why I got your attention. Anders is a few tables behind you, glaring holes in your back."

"Why?"

"Because you stole his thunder. He was part of the team that stopped the boarding party, so he was bragging about how he's responsible for us being alive, then someone pointed out what you did."

Alex shrugged. "He can take the credit, I don't care."

"Maybe not, but he does. Anders has been on top of this heap for almost as long as he's been here. He doesn't like the idea someone else kept us alive. He isn't big on sharing the acclaims."

"He can keep them."

She smiled at him. "I don't think it's going to be that easy. Just watch yourself, avoid walking around alone. Oh, and come see me as soon as you have the time."

"Why? I'm fine."

"You're overweight. I'm putting you on an exercise and eating regiment. If Anders is going to have a go at you, I want you able to take him on."

"But I don't want to take him on."

"He isn't going to care." She picked up her empty tray and left Alex alone. More people nodded and smiled at him. He looked down at the datapad and cursed. All he'd wanted was passage to Samalia, not to get involved in the life of the ship.