

## Chapter 37

Alex read the code and relaxed. This was what he did best—this and killing—but this was what he'd always loved.

He set aside Tristan's odd behavior. He set aside the memory of the sting at his neck. He tried very hard to set aside what had almost happened outside this room, and he hoped that Tristan would have worked out what was bothering him by the time Alex was done.

"Alright," he said, almost subvocalizing. "Tell me what I want to hear."

"Get out of here."

Alex raised an eyebrow. That had almost sounded human. Had there been an accent?

"Not going to happen." He sent recon programs out. Another thing he appreciated about the implant was that it had ample memory for him to store his programs. He no longer had to worry about losing the data chip where he'd kept them.

"Really? You're saying you won't do what I tell you to? Can you see how shocked I am? I really am."

"Okay, just who programmed you and why did they make you sarcastic? That doesn't fit you."

"How do you know what fits me? Did you design me? I don't think so. So how about you keep your opinions to yourself and just do your job?"

"You actually want me to get through your defenses?" His programs returned an overview of the system. There were a few surprises in there.

The computer snorted, and Alex was so surprised he lost track of what he was looking for. "I would love to see you try."

"I'm more of a doer than a trier." There were more connections than he'd expected. He'd been looking for the ship's coercionist, but what he found were three people in the system.

The core also didn't look like he'd expected. Because cores were built and programmed at the factories, they were a center of stability amidst a constantly changing code. Cores couldn't be changed. Programmers added to them to alter how they behaved, and it was what coercionists like him worked with.

This core had nothing stable about it. It reminded him a little of the Golly's core, which had been driven so insane by being compartmentalized it had figured out how to alter itself.

This wasn't the same. This core hadn't modified itself, someone had gone in and done it. Alex was impressed in spite of himself. Whoever that was, he'd done the impossible.

"I'm waiting here."

"You're pretty impatient."

"Do you have any idea how fast I process? I have been waiting here for an eternity while you peek at my core—that's pretty rude, by the way—and looked at what the others are doing."

“Who are they?”

Another snort. “What am I, your servant? Not yet. Not ever. You have plenty of programs polluting my code, why don’t you use that and figure it out for yourself?”

Alex smiled. “It’s kind of interesting how much you want me to attack you.”

“I told you, I’m—”

“Lying, yes, I’ve figured out that much.” He launched another volley of programs, node-sniffers, process-evaluators, tag-grabbers.

“I’m a computer, I can’t lie.”

“That’s only true of sane computers.” Alex looked through his list of programs. What else could he add that would stress the system? He began cataloging them,

“What are you trying to insinuate?” The system paused. “Why aren’t you attacking me already?”

“Because you want it too much. Whoever altered you didn’t do a full job, did he? He didn’t give you the ability to initiate a response. Something has to happen to trigger it. Right now, you’re stuck in some sort of hyper-vigilant mode. You know there are threats in your system. Me, them, but you can’t act on it because we haven’t done anything. So I’m wondering, just how much pressure can you take?” He released every surveillance program he had, every version of his old camouflage program, everything that wasn’t an attack program.

“Stop it! Attack me! I’m the one you want! I’m the threat! I’m going to cut life support! I’ll open the ship to the void!”

“Go ahead. Wait, why haven’t you done that already, if you can?” Alex began rearranging his programs around the core. He could still stress it while getting them to do another job.

“Please, stop. I can’t take this anymore. What are you doing?”

Alex duplicated them a few thousand times to cover the hole still existing. “Oh, this? Nothing for you to concern yourself with. I realized that one of them could turn around and give you the attention you crave. I’m giving you a nice defense perimeter. Imagine that, you’ve insulted me all this time and I am still going to protect your core.”

“Stop! I can’t take this!” the system’s voice stretched.

He kept adding defense and sentry programs. Its voice became thinner and thinner as it had to pay attention to everything. Unlike normal, unmodified systems, it couldn’t tag something as non-threatening and file it away. He kept cloning programs and adding them to the perimeter.

The voice lost its personality as it pleaded with him. Then it broke up into unintelligible static.

“You have fun with that. When it’s all over, I might come back and give you that fight you’ve been wanting.” He’d done something he didn’t think anyone had ever done before. He’d managed to remove the target system from the equation to deal with the coercionists.

Alex launched a probing attack against the three coercionists. It had been a long time since he’d played Disconnect against multiple opponents. It rarely happened outside of school, and there it had been an exercise. Professor Monteroy had wanted to get them to think outside the terms of system and coercionists as ally.

His recon programs had linked their locations in the system to the real-world equivalent. One was on the bridge, one in engineering, and one in the medical bay—the one he and Tristan had been in not too long ago. Had Mary gotten free? Was she also a coercionist?

He took control of one of the screens and saw a woman at the terminal. She was dressed more like a corporate coercionist than anyone he’d seen on the ship; her beige suit certainly didn’t fit in with the gray everyone was wearing. Mary was visible at the edge of the camera’s field, still taped to the medical bed.

So this was one of the new arrivals. A corporate team would be a nice diversion. Maybe in his hurry to get Salvation, Baran had pissed off one of them.

With them becoming aware of him, the fight turned from two against one to two against two, only to shift a moment later as the coercionist in the medical bay joined forces with the ship’s coercionist.

“Really? I was trying to help you.” Didn’t she know it was smart to join forces against a common enemy? They could betray each other after that in peace and comfort.

And of course, the moment she attacked him, the two others decided she was no longer the enemy, so it was three against one. The swarm of programs that came at him would have kicked him right out if he already didn’t have more programs in the system than the three of them combined. He borrowed from the perimeter and had them intercept the swarm.

And he’d been so busy with that, he almost missed the sniffer program until too late. She’d let the

other two attack him for that? Well, it was clever of her. They kept him busy, which meant he wasn't in a position to send an attack back along its trail to her.

"Oh, you have got to be kidding me." He ordered scattered programs to intercept the sniffer. If she wasn't as interested in blasting him out of the system as the two others, it meant she didn't see him as an enemy. And if he wasn't her enemy or her ally, then he was her target. She was after him, not Baran.

How many people did he know who were after him, and potentially still alive? "Katherine, I swear, if you're behind this I am going to end you, because if I don't, Tristan is going to kill me."

He shifted his attack to the real threat, leaving only enough on the two others to keep them from being able to mount solid attacks. They worked well together, but really, they were nothing but amateurs.

She, on the other hand. She was good. She vanished from her location. She already had a transit program in the system. Impressive. Those were bulky and slow to get going, along with being disorienting. Alex had stopped bothering with them once he'd figured out how to whip up a jaunt program on the fly.

She'd clearly overcome the flaws as she sent another volley at him the moment she reappeared. Okay, she was really good. She was also sending more sniffers his way.

With a scream, one of the two coercionists vanished from the system. It hadn't sounded pleasant, but it was to his advantage.

Barely.

Instead of panicking at the loss of his partner, the other coercionist redoubled his effort. Okay, an amateur, but a good one. The woman in the medical bay didn't miss a beat in her attacks and attempts at finding out where he was.

Then he was kicked out.

What had happened? Neither of them had been even close to overpowering him, and she certainly hadn't found his location. He typed, trying to get back in, but the system wasn't responding. He hadn't been kicked out, the system had been shut down.

He was about to give up when the system came back. He jumped in, deploying defensive and offensive programs. If this had been part of the ship's coercionist's tactics, he wanted to be ready.

Nothing.

He looked about and saw nothing. Well, not nothing, there was always code running in the background, keeping basic stuff going, but his flood of programs were gone, as were the other coercionist's programs—and more importantly, the core.

This had been a full-on reboot of the system. Someone was scared. They'd brought it back to keep the ship running, but they'd cut off access to the core, which meant Alex couldn't coerce anything of use.

Well, until he found it again.

He could force his way to wherever it was. The only reason he hadn't bothered from the entertainment terminal was that this had that connection, so there had been no point. Now nothing did. His recon program came back. Okay, not only had they cut off the core, but they'd hidden the terminals that could still talk to it.

Too bad for them, they'd forgotten that those little programs that kept things like the lights going and the air circulating. They still had to talk to the core. They couldn't be fully cut off unless someone wanted a truly insane computer.

No one in their right mind wanted to go through what he had to fix Golly's systems. Of course here, if it happened and Baran survived, he'd just replace the computer. He was rich enough.

Alex tagged the temperature-balancing program, the room's communication interface, and one of the room's power-management programs. Disparate enough that there shouldn't have many points in common.

In fact, there was only one. He prepared his programs to attack it when a second presence appeared in the system. She immediately sent a mix of attacks, sniffers, and trackers at him.

"Lady, what is your problem?" He sent his voice over the system.

"I have a job to do, and you're it."

"I didn't do anything to you; I've never even seen you before now. What is this about?" Like he didn't already know.

"I don't care about you. My job is finding your partner. My boss wants to have some final words with him. She isn't letting him get away this time."

Alex sighed. Tristan was going to kill him, there was just no avoiding it. This was definitely Katherine, again. Maybe he hadn't noticed her planetside, but there was no way they wouldn't run into each other here. He'd deal with that when the day came. For now, he had a mission to finish.

His programs intercepted hers.

He could take her out. She was good, but not that good, though what was the point? Then he'd have to force his way through whatever security would protect the core, then deal with it. It would be so happy to take him on after the way he'd twisted its code.

If he was going to have to fight that hard, he wanted it to be in person, where he could feel his knives sink into flesh. Hear them scream. And he knew where the last terminal was, anyway. The only place that made sense, since the bridge's coercionist had been taken out by force. He disconnected.

His nose itched, and he sneezed. Something burned while he was busy. He rubbed his eyes and saw burn marks on the wall. Not just the wall, but around the desk. He looked down, the floor too. All the way around him.

He expected bodies, blood. But Tristan was the only one there, glaring at him.

"Well?" he growled. Great, now he was angrier.

"I didn't take control of the core."

Only his ears reacted to that news, tilting forward. But somehow, Tristan managed to convey how displeased he was that way.

"They rebooted the system and cut all access to the core."

"And you couldn't make a way in?"

Alex was too tired to let the derision get to him. And considering Tristan was going to kill him anyway, that took away the sting.

"I could have, but I know where the only access to it is: engineering. At this point, it's easier to just take over that place." He stood, fixed his eyes on Tristan. "And more satisfying." Tristan didn't look away, and Alex enjoyed peering into those cold, angry eyes.

"Engineering? Not the bridge?"

"Something happened there. The coercionist posted there was forcefully taken out."

Tristan nodded. "The new people have taken over the bridge. If control has been transferred to engineering, then we're going to find the quarry there."

Here it came. "About those new people. They had a coercionist in too." Tristan's eyes became even harder, and now Alex wished he could look away. "They're not here for Baran, they're here for you." He swallowed. "It's Katherine."

With a snarl, Tristan turned and stormed out of the room. There, he fired a shot by the door and kept going. Alex ran after him. The men on the floor had multiple new holes in them. Alex didn't pause to wonder why, he kept running.

Ahead of him, Tristan was grumbling. "It isn't going to kill me. I don't care what it throws at me. I'm going to kill everyone before I let it win."

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