

"I need a break." Alex stopped and bent down, trying to catch his breath. The treadmill started beeping.

"Keep going," Will said from the one next to his. "Twenty minutes, Doc said." He was running much faster than Alex had been, and he wasn't even breathing hard.

No one else in the gym seemed to be straining as hard as Alex was.

Alex glared at him. He wanted to curse, but he didn't have the breath. He forced himself to run, and the machine stopped its beeping. At least there couldn't be too much time left, Alex thought, before glancing at the time. He still had ten minutes to go. That couldn't be right. He'd already run more than that, hadn't he?

The timer finally hit zero and Alex slowed down, then stopped, holding on the steady bars to keep standing. He couldn't be this out of shape. Someone had to have tricked him and changed the readout on the treadmill. Yes, his weight had always been high, but he'd been good about getting in plenty of walking. He hadn't had any problems keeping up with Jack in the market.

Thinking of Jack brought up Tristan, and the constant nightmares he had. To the mix of killings Alex saw every night, or committed, a new set had been added, centering on Jack becoming Tristan and Alex being in love with the monster, having sex with him.

A bottle was shoved in his face. "Drink."

Alex got in a few long gulps before it was taken away.

"Drink," Will said, "not drown." He handed Alex a towel. "Lift weights now."

Alex shook his head. "Can't do it," he panted.

The younger man rolled his eyes. "You can. Doc set it up." He poked Alex's belly. "Gotta get in shape." He thought for a moment, then grinned. "Gotta get new shape."

Alex watched Will walk away, and his body hurt just doing that. His legs and arms shook, even if those hadn't been involved in this exercise.

Will came back and grabbed his arm. Alex had no choice to follow. He had Alex lie down on a bench, placed a bar in his hands, and adjusted the display on it. Alex felt the bar gain weight, and he strained to lift it under Will's supervision.

After the full set of fifteen lifts, Will took his place. He adjusted the settings and easily did his lifts before setting it back on the holder. Alex lay back down and tried to lift it, but it wouldn't move until Will changed the settings again.

"How heavy is it for you?" Alex asked as he slowly pushed the bar up.

Will shrugged. "Doc set it."

Alex barely managed the fifteenth lift, and with Will's help put the bar back. Will retook his place, adjusted the settings, and did his set, his arms shaking for the last three.

Alex read the display, but there were no numbers on it, just Will's name. "Does Doc do that for everyone on the crew?" Alex asked.

"Just those who need to be forced."

Alex raised an eyebrow, and Will shrugged again.

"Don't like sweating," the younger man said.

They moved to a different machine and did leg exercises on it, then back to the arms, the right one, then the left. After that it was different exercises for his legs, and so on, for so long that Alex felt his body was ready to fall apart by the time they were done.

By the time each exercise was over, more muscles hurt, or at least, Alex thought they were muscles. He hadn't known his chest had muscles there. He realized he hadn't known much

about how his body worked. He might have picked up a thing or two if he'd spent time admiring a human guy's bodies, but they'd never piqued his interest.

Maybe he should ask Doc for a course. He grinned; he might as well surprise her again while he was at it.

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Doc's mouth had dropped when Alex showed up and asked for the exercise regimen.

"You're volunteering?" she asked dubiously. Alex told her about the altercation in the dining hall and she sighed. "What have I told you about going places alone?"

"I can't have Will accompany me everywhere," he'd replied.

"Then get someone else. You're a target, and Anders isn't one to give up."

"Who? It isn't like I know anyone else. You're certainly too busy to do it." Alex had noticed there was always someone with an injury waiting to see Doc.

She'd given him a look that said he wasn't very bright.

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"Now food," Will said after they were showered and dressed.

Alex shook his head. "I can't, I just want to sleep."

"Need food." Again, Will dragged Alex around. He sat him at a table and came back with two trays.

Almost before they started eating, a woman sat next to Alex. "Hey, Will," she said. "Who's your friend?"

"Ana, that's Crimson."

She offered him her hand. "Pleasure." Ana was small and wiry. "So, you're the one who saved our asses. Perry mentions you every chance he gets."

Alex couldn't reply. Another woman sat next to Ana and placed two trays down. "Hey, Hun," she said, giving Ana a light kiss.

"Pat, meet Crimson," Ana said. "He's the guy Perry keeps talking about."

Pat was a little taller and heavier-built than Ana.

Two more women then joined them, sitting on each side of Will: Asyr, and a sour-looking one.

"Don't worry about Jen, she always looks like this when she has to be up this early."

Alex raised an eyebrow; it was almost noon.

Asyr looked at the other woman over Will's head. "Smile love, you get to protect someone from Anders. Who knows, you might actually get to kick his ass."

Jen glared at Asyr, but Alex thought he saw her lips quirk up.

"Protect?" he asked.

Will grinned. "Doc set it up."

Alex looked at the women. "Of course she did."

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Alex fell on his bed.

"You rest," Will said. "I gotta work."

Alex didn't reply. Five minutes, he told himself. He'd give his body five minutes to recuperate from the morning's exercise and the food, then he'd get to work himself. He had to get the computer fixed.

When he opened his eyes, the chronometer said an hour had passed. He groaned as he sat up, but while his body was sore, he actually felt capable of moving now. He headed for the door, only to find it wouldn't open. The controls indicated it was locked.

He called Will. "Something's wrong with the door. It's locked and I can't unlock it."

"Busy, get someone else." The connection was ended.

Okay, Alex thought, *but who?* He didn't know who to contact to fix the door; the only other person he knew was Doc. As he pulled up her contact information, he saw he had new people on his list: Patricia, Ana, Jennifer, and Asyr. That must have happened while they ate.

"What's the problem?" Doc answered before Alex could say anything, and she sounded annoyed. "If you can move, get yourself to me. If you can't, but can talk, get someone to bring you to me. I'm not crossing the ship for anything less than life or death."

"It's Alex."

"Crimson." Her tone lightened. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm sore, but I'm okay. Sorry to disturb you, but I'm locked in my room and I don't know who to get to fix that."

"Oh, it isn't broken." Now she sounded amused.

Alex tried it again, but it remained locked. "Well, it isn't responding."

"I know, I had Asyr adjust the lock. Will is the only one who can open the door from the inside."

Alex looked around the room, feeling his stomach tighten. "Are you telling me I'm a prisoner now?" Anger bubbled up.

"Oh no, but I don't trust you to use your escorts. I trust you met them? Asyr mentioned they had lunch with you."

"I did, but I don't need—"

"Crimson, Anders is pissed at you. That means he and his cronies are going to look for any opportunity to hurt you. They aren't going to do anything openly since you're a passenger, but on this ship, it's easy to pass something off as an accident. Since I happen to like you, I want you to stay whole. Now, you have their contacts. If you check, each will tell you when they're free. I picked them because their schedules never completely overlap."

"This is ridiculous," Alex grumbled.

"Maybe, but it's going to keep you alive to reach your destination."

"Fine." He ended the call, cursing loudly. He wasn't a child; he was perfectly capable of taking care of himself. And he'd show Doc.

He grabbed his earpiece and went to the terminal. Getting past the interface to the underlying code was simple. All he had to do was find the door controls, and he'd be out.

After five minutes, he rested his head against the screen and cursed again. The door wasn't

part of the system the terminal could access. All the compartmentalization meant he couldn't get himself out of this. He'd have to fix this as soon as he could, right after all the life-critical systems.

With a sigh, he checked the list of bodyguards. Will and Pat were marked as busy. Since he'd be going to her lab, he contacted Asyr. She showed up a few minutes later, all smiles.

Alex didn't speak to her on the way there. As far as he was concerned, she was as much to blame for him being under house arrest as Doc. He sat at the console and set to work. He expected her to leave, but she sat at one of the assistant's station.

He glared at her back. This was just great. She didn't even trust him to be alone in her lab. Was she afraid he'd leave without telling her? He looked at the door. Was she going to lock him in here too?

He forced himself to calm down and focus on the work. The computer didn't sound any different, which in this case was a good thing. Normally complex systems like a ship's computer had multiple subroutines that saw to their health. Those could fix minor damage, caused either by an intrusion or through code mutation.

On this ship, they had to be sequestered somewhere else, if they even did the work they were supposed to anymore. With the level of insanity that permeated it, there was no way to know.

He was silent as he worked, except for a few queries to check the computer's responses. He normally was more vocal; a good part of coercion involved talking to the system, making friends with it, distracting it so he could slip in code, but this one was in no state to hold conversations.

At least it wasn't fighting him too much. It knew he was there to help, but every so often it got an attack of paranoia, and Alex found himself in a fight to keep it from undoing his work and making things much worse. That the attacks weren't as frequent anymore comforted him, since he was certain his betrayal was what had triggered them.

"What did you just do?" Asyr asked, and Alex nearly jumped out of his chair.

He glared at her while he caught his breath. *Oh, he thought, just you let the smile appear, I dare you, Asyr. You better keep those quivering lips from forming it or you are going to regret it.*

The smile didn't form, and when he noticed she was fixed on the screen, he thought he had imagined it.

"I repositioned some of the code, to see if it will reduce the amount of pain it's in."

"You can do that? Just move code around? Doesn't that screw up the programming?"

"It depends on the code. Some are dependent on their location, but most are modular. Sometimes I can even change the entire phrasing without altering what it does. And since the computer's personality is formed by how the code interacts, making those changes will change its personality."

She gave him a blank stare.

"You are familiar with the Core Computer Personality Theorem, right?"

She shook her head.

Alex frowned. How could she not know that? It was part of the first course programmers went through. "Where did you learn programming?"

"Here."

He looked around. "Here? Who taught you?"

"I did."

Alex stared at her. How had she managed to learn anything usable from the mess that was this computer? How did someone even learn on their own? Computers were far too complex to just sit at a terminal and figure them out.

He turned back to the screen and gave her the basics, demonstrating what he meant as he worked.

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There was a knock on the door, but he ignored it. Will was off working, and Alex hadn't planned on going anywhere. He was busy trying to access his vault without raising any of the alarms he expected Luminex Security had put around it.

Everyone had a vault, a space on the network where they could store valuable information, or mementos of their past. They came with basic security, but anyone who knew anything about coding upgraded the security on it.

He knew he'd put some of his old textbooks in there, and he wanted to retrieve them for Asyr. She'd showed a lot of interest in learning, and those texts would help her more than just following along with what he did. Unfortunately, she couldn't just go and get them on the net. Programming was well-guarded by the corporations and the schools.

The knock came again.

"You have to open the door yourself!" he yelled. "I can't do it."

The door opened, and Ana stepped through. "I know, I didn't want to barge in."

"Okay. What can I do for you?"

"You can follow me. Will said you don't know how to fight. Getting in shape is a good start, but it isn't going to be any good if you can't throw a punch."

"He's teaching me."

"I'm better." She studied him. "Is that what you normally wear?"

Alex looked at himself. He was wearing denim pants and a shirt. "Yeah."

"Do you have anything looser? I can work with this, but you'll want something with more range of motion."

"I have dress pants."

She pointed to the bathroom. "Go change."

Alex came back a moment later wearing black pants he'd gotten for the most recent company function. They were a little tight. Somehow he'd expected them to be looser, considering the exercise and diet. He'd had to have lost weight by now, so why weren't the pants looser?

She nodded, and led him to the room where he and Will had sparred. She took position in the center of the mat and motioned for him to join her.

An hour later, Alex had discovered that Ana was an expert hand-to-hand fighter. The petite woman could send him to the floor without so much as putting her hair out of place. When she was done, she escorted him back to his room, where he crashed and promised himself he wasn't getting out of it until he reached Samalia.

Two hours later, Jennifer entered his room, pulled him out of bed, and dragged him to a shooting range. He protested that he didn't need this. He had no intention of ever using one of those things again. She didn't listen. She pointed to the gun on the counter and told him to

pick it up before she shoved it where the sun didn't shine.

After that hour was done, Alex comforted himself with the fact that at least only one part of his body hurt: his ears. Jennifer either growled at him or screamed. For someone who was supposed to want to do this, she didn't act like it.