"What does Zack's death have to do with engineering?" Anders asked, picking up on the least-relevant part, Alex thought.

"It's what killed him," Alex answered as he indicated where the two men Anders had brought with him were to sit.

"I thought it was a faulty valve or something. Filled his room with poison."

"And locked him in there. The door locks are also part of the systems the engineering processor controls."

"Doors jam all the time, doesn't mean—"

"Anders," Alex snapped. "I don't have the time for this. Once it's all over I'll spend the hours needed answering all your questions, but right now I need you out of here."

The man bristled, and Alex took a breath.

"Look, I'm grateful you found me two programmers, but now I need to show them what I expect of them. That's going to take longer than I'd like, and someone else might die during that time, so I really need to get back to work. You have your oxygen?"

Anders unclipped a canister at his back and showed it to Alex.

"Good. If you want to do something to help, go around and make sure no one is in a room that can be locked and that everyone has their oxygen. I have no way to know what the processor will do once I start, so everyone needs to be prepared."

Alex thought he saw anger in the man's eyes for a moment, but he nodded and left.

"I don't know how much I'll be able to help," The man seated to the left of where Alex was standing said. "I tried to tell Anders, but I don't really know code. I dabble in game building, that's about it."

"Dennis, right?"

"Dennis Armitage."

Alex thought for a moment. "You can read code?"

"Sure. Anyone can do that if they spend long enough looking at it."

Alex moved to the central console; his console. The one he'd upgraded with four Kaldary systems connected together that gave him almost as much power as what the core processor had. The auxiliary stations only had one since they only acted as backup. Alex had added a third station, a temporary one, behind his.

"I'm giving you watch-only access. Your job is going to keep track of what life support does. Try to predict where it's going to dump coolant and make sure no one's there."

"You weren't kidding? Zack's death wasn't an accident?"

"Dennis, I already told Anders we don't have the time. You can sit in on the explanation later. Get familiar with the code."

"Luigi?" he turned to the other man.

"Yep."

"How are your programming skills?"

"Rusty. Haven't used them in years, but I went through the full course. Had to quit weeks before the end of year."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Alex said, setting up the man's console for full access. "Family emergency?"

Asyr snorted. "He burned down the teacher's house."

Alex looked up.

"She deserved it; she was just a pretentious bitch."

"You burned down her house because you didn't like her?" Alex couldn't believe the length someone could do to be—

"I killed the bitch. Burning down her house was just so the others would know not to mess with me."

Alex gasped, then decided this was a subject best ignored. "I'm sending you my program arsenal. Get comfortable with them, because your job is going to be to protect anything I change; the system is going to do its best to undo my work. You have a headset, it's the best I can do for you."

He turned to the woman seated behind him. "Asyr, you know your job?"

"Shadow you, watch your back. Keep the system from attacking your connection directly."

"If you see anything coming you can't deal with, tell me. This isn't a test, it's our lives. That goes for both of you too. If you can't handle something, for whatever reason, shout. I wish I'd thought to ask Anders to find you two earlier, because we really need weeks to figure out how to work together, but this is the situation we're in."

He leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. He thought about asking the universe for help, but his mother's words came to him then. "*The universe doesn't give a damn about you. You don't matter to it, so you better learned to handle your own problems.*'"

Well, he was going to handle this.

"Will, where are you?" he called on the comm.

"Coming," was the answer, and a moment later his friend entered the room with energy bars and drinks for everyone.

"Will, your job is to keep us stocked with bars and drinks. There's no way to know how long this is going to last. We could get lucky and be out of here in an hour, or we could be here for two days. We won't be able to leave our stations until this is all done, so I hope none of us are wearing their best pants."

"Will do." Will answered.

"Days?" Dennis asked.

"Potentially. Once this starts, we can't stop."

"I better go deal with something."

Alex nodded. "Hurry up."

The man ran out.

"Oxygen," Will said, indicating the canister at Alex's feet.

"Thanks." He saw that Asyr and Luigi had theirs, and noted for Dennis to grab his as he came back a few minutes later.

He took out his earpiece and placed it down on the console. He wouldn't be using it this time. He hadn't done code-only coercion since leaving school. His teachers had always joked that Alex would prefer talking a system into submission than coding it there, but he couldn't talk to this system. Doc had healed his eardrum, but Alex had no doubt he'd suffer the same fate if he tried again. He didn't know if it was a defense mechanism or just a sign of its insanity, but that scream would still be there, he was sure of it.

"Okay, get ready people. We're about to go to war."

"I'm ready," Asyr answered.

"There," Luigi replied.

Alex looked at Dennis. The man seemed to feel the gaze and turned. "Do I have a choice?"

"Not really, sorry."

The man nodded, squared his shoulders, and faced his display. "I'm ready then."

Alex sent a thought to Jack, wherever he was, and cursed silently when his face had Tristan's hard eyes in his mind. He pushed that away. He couldn't afford the distraction. If he survived this, he'd see Jack eventually, and deal with Tristan.

He began coding.

His plan was to isolate life support again. It had been simple enough to do the first time, but then that processor hadn't been using it as a weapon. This wouldn't be so easy. He worked slowly, trying his best not to attract the engineering processor's attention while he looked for life support components.

He wished he could have brought the core processor into this, and a fourth backup would have been good, but the engineering systems were the second most powerful on the ship, and if those two talked, Alex wasn't confident the core processor could keep from being overwhelmed by the insanity.

Hours passed while he tagged pieces of code as belonging to life support. The engineering processor had completely dismantled it, spread the code about. It kept everything working, but Alex couldn't fix this by quickly walling-off chunk of code.

"There are a lot of antibodies about," Asyr said.

Alex looked about and saw what she had: something had noticed his tagging. They weren't swarming it, so they didn't consider that a threat, but if they noticed *him*, all bets were off.

He tried to come up with a quick way to resolve this once he'd tagged every part of the system, but he couldn't. He'd have to build the wall and then transfer the code there.

"Luigi, find a quiet part of the network and wall it off. There should be a program to help with that."

"Yep, got it. Working on it."

"Everything's good here," Dennis said.

That won't last long, Alex thought.

"Wall's up."

Alex had to make a choice. He could continue tagging and hope the antibodies wouldn't become aware of him until he had everything, but if they did become aware, the system would know what he was targeting and act to keep that out of his reach. Or he could start moving what he considered the critical parts behind the wall now, and hope it would sufficiently reduce the processor's ability to hurt them enough so they could keep going.

"Something's happening," Asyr said.

No choice now. He sent the coolant controls behind the wall and left quick and dirty code behind in the hopes that could fool the antibodies for a while.

"It's got your connection!" Asyr yelled.

With a curse, Alex went on the defensive, taking down the barricade that was coming up around him.

Dennis spoke, but in soft, calm tones. Alex tuned him out. Luigi cursed, but no alarm there either.

"It's blocking other connections!"

"Mine's still good," Luigi said, "but fuck, I don't know how long that's going to last."

Alex was discovering that human voices weren't the same as system sounds. He'd trained to work through the later, but this was proving a strain. He wanted to tell them to shut up, but they needed to communicate with him and each other, so he'd have to learn how to deal with

it.

The best way was to give them less to talk about, so he had to make himself the larger problem. He could do this. The system was fast, but it was still just a system, bound by its programming. Alex didn't have any programming dictating his actions. He could do the unexpected.

With a malicious grin, he unleashed every program he'd ever designed on the system, then used the confusion to attack the processor itself.

Forget cutting it up, forget dumbing it down. Alex was going to alter its personality directly, impose his will on the damn thing.

He heard someone laughing. He thought it sounded a little unhinged.

He was the one laughing.

There was banging on the door.

"Put your masks on," Dennis said.

Alex looked to his feet, but the canister wasn't there. Had he kicked it away? He didn't have the time to worry about it. The system had figured out where they were. It couldn't cut the power, he'd seen to that, so it was going to cut off their air.

How long did he have? A quick glance around told him the other three had theirs on, so one person, in a room this size. There was enough air for a while, right? Was that enough?

How the hell was he supposed to know?

He gave up on the system and went after the door lock; that was what the banging was, Will on the other side of the door. If he could open it, they'd have air.

He found it quickly, wrapped in layer after layer of code designed to keep him out, but in doing that, the system had shone a spotlight on it.

Alex dove in, dissecting code with abandon. The banging intensified, but Alex didn't care. Strands of code flew about. He was getting through.

"Yes!" He was in.

But there was nothing.

Alex stared at the empty space, not a single line of code. He'd been tricked.

How much air had he used to get through that? He didn't know. He forced himself to go back on the hunt. It had to be around there somewhere. He searched, and found nothing. He glanced at the earpiece and thought about putting it on just so he could scream his frustration at the system.

What happened when you ran out of air? The thought popped up unbidden. Was it like drowning? Would he convulse? It was a good thing he didn't know how close he was to that; it made it easier to ignore.

He almost stopped coding when something slipped over his face. Dennis smiled at him. "Luigi said you're more important than me. He's right. Things have gone to shit everywhere on the ship. I might as well just sit back and wait for you to save us." He clipped the canister to Alex's belt.

Alex nodded. He no longer had to worry about suffocating, in the short run at least. The oxygen canister gave him twelve hours of air, but without a refill he was back to being in trouble. He'd counted on Will to bring them fresh ones.

He cursed, he needed to unlock that door. He couldn't just let the system beat him, he had—

Unlock.

That was code.

He wrote a quick search program with parameters to look for any code that locked something, and he made it so it would look at every code, even hidden ones. Then he copied his replicator program a dozen time and gave it that code. Within seconds, thousands of search programs were loose in the system.

He wrote another program and set it aside.

As he expected, the antibodies went after his search programs, but he knew how to put that to a stop. He went back to attacking the processor. Let it try to stop the search when something more dangerous was going on.

"You just try and hide the lock from me, you bastard," he growled.

As he fought to change code faster than the antibodies could fix them, he saw something change color in the distance. One of his search programs had found something: another dot of color, in a different section, then another, and more of them, all over the place.

There were a lot of locks on this ship.

He continued paying attention as he attacked the processor, and the rate of change in color slowed as there remained fewer and fewer locks to find. When it stopped, Alex waited ten seconds to make sure there was nothing left. He gave his second program to the replicator, and watched it spread. It was a simple program, one line of code that translated to 'unlock'.

He heard people burst into the room, and gave up on his attack against the processor to go back to finding and walling off the life support code. He saw Jennifer go to Dennis, and Will passed in his field of vision, quickly vanishing. Voices he didn't recognize complained, but he ignored them. He was on the clock now more than ever. He'd unlocked the oxygen, but what else had he unlocked? Had he released the coolant ship-wide?

There was a reason a ship like this usually had specialized programmers. Alex had no idea what kind of damage his actions might have caused, again. He just had to hope the captain would still like him when this was all over. He really didn't want to be spaced.

Alex knew time passed, because someone changed his oxygen canister. His progress was slow; the system fought hard to keep control of each of the life support code segments Alex went after, but Alex consistently won those fights.

Alex didn't realize he was done until Asyr pulled his hands away from the board. He looked up at her, she nodded, and exhaustion took him away.