

A scan of their immediate area showed a lot of available connections, each one a computer willing to talk with them. He kept the scan to the immediate physical area, so they were all on the other ship. If this was anything other than a Law ship, he'd have his pick of ways to enter their system, but he didn't trust these connections. If it were him, he would be monitoring all of them, and they would have traps.

He told his search program to ignore everything the scan had returned and sent it looking for other connection points. When it didn't return anything, he changed the parameter, anything that might be a connection point.

This got him results: six decoys, and the seventh had such a low probability Alex almost ignored it. Only the voice of one of his professors berating his students for not being systematic made him stop long enough to see that the code surrounding the point of interest didn't do anything. Once he realized that, he knew he had his way in.

His display showed him the lab console was active. "Asyr, are you ready?"

Her voice came back quivering. "Yes, but what do you expect me to do?"

"I'm giving you look-only access to my feed. You're doing the same thing as when we fought the engineering system. You look at the big picture and tell me what's coming. Tell me anytime an internal access point becomes active, I'll need to know that. Unlike the engineering system, this coercionist isn't going to be stopped with me just throwing a bunch of locks open."

He heard her take a breath. "Okay, I'm ready."

"Just stay calm, look for his patterns. Once you have that, you'll be able to predict what he's going to do." Alex's heart was racing. This was going to be a lot tougher than his other jobs. He grinned. "I'm going in now."

He sent programs to dozens of the obvious connection points to mimic intrusion, and used that confusion to sneak into the camouflaged one.

"You are not allowed here," the ship's systems said. "My director has been summoned. Leave now or face prosecution."

So much for sneaking in.

"Come on now. You haven't even given me a chance to tell you why I'm here."

"You are an unregistered coercionist. Your presence here is against statute 1254 of the open net act, which states that—"

"Yeah, yeah. I know. I'm not supposed to use my skills in the pursuit of illegal activities. Do you have any idea how boring that is?"

"The reason for the acts is irrelevant." The system's voice was cold, deep, and harsh. It barely had any personality. That told Alex there were control programs in place, to keep it in check. If he could find them, he could unsettle the ship enough to give him an edge. He didn't have long before the ship's coercionist got involved.

"Look, I'm not a bad guy, I'm just doing my job here, so how about you turn around? Any chance you can do that for me?"

"No." The single word answer had the ring of finality to it.

"You're just being difficult." Alex spun the display. The control code would be as rigid as the voice: utter stillness in a sea of change. Hardlines, unwavering in their duties. "I'm sure we can work—"

"You have incoming," Asyr interrupted. One of the internal connection points flashed.

"Got it." He sent out a dozen more programs to simulate more intrusions. "He's going to go for the decoys. Let me know when he's through them."

“How about this,” he told the system. “You do me this one favor, and I’ll owe you one down the line.”

“No.” More finality.

There. Alex had a command string so strict, it was bristling. He spent a few precious seconds studying it. This one controlled the ship’s moral code, forcing it to do what it was told was right. This was why it knew the statutes, but it didn’t explain the harsh tone.

He attached his code to it, camouflaged it, but left it inactive, then went back to searching for other controls.

“He’s down with the decoys,” Asyr said. “He’s heading for you.”

Alex released a handful of clones of himself and sent them away with instructions to muck about with the system. They wouldn’t do any real damage, but the coercionist wouldn’t know that.

“He’s going after the false yous, but he’s making short work of them.”

Alex found another command, one more promising: it kept the system’s emotions in check. If that had been put in place as part of the initial programming, this computer hadn’t ever experienced feelings. It’d have no idea how to handle the flood of sensations. Instant chaos.

Alex wasn’t subtle—he ripped the code apart, and in the instant of shrieking, he placed his own program there, one that would keep the antibodies from rebuilding the control.

“What did you do!” the computer screamed.

“Nothing much, just giving you a taste of life.”

“Make it stop!”

“Come on, live a little.” He used the ship’s confusion to access its code and do quick rewrites. Even in its current state, it didn’t let him do much more than a few lines before protecting itself.

There was a flash in the distance. “Someone else connected,” Asyr said.

Two of them? “Can you keep track of them both?”

“Yes, but this new one is going directly for the connections you used.”

Alex cursed and abandoned what he was doing to focus on protecting his access. He wrapped it in a maze of code, a variation on what he’d used earlier against Asyr. He lengthened some of the distances as much as he could, twisted others around on themselves, mirrored code from other areas, and then wrapped the access point in a tight ball of code.

That done, he sent a program out to look for other camouflaged connections. Alex was under no illusion this one would remain open long.

“And who do we have here?” someone asked.

Alex spun the display, trying to find who had spoken, but then realized it had been a system-wide broadcast. He felt relief for a moment—they hadn’t found him—then returned focus on his job.

He grinned and set a handful of points to bounce his transmission. “I am the Crimson Pirate.”

“The what? Are you kidding me?”

Alex couldn’t tell the gender of the coercionist; what he was hearing was a digitized translation of a voice. Systems didn’t care if men or women were talking to them, but the disbelief came in clear.

“No, I’m quite serious.” Alex watched as his opponent dismantled the program he’d left on the control. This guy was good. “I’m a pirate in crimson. Can’t miss me; I really stand out.”

“So, you think yourself a comedian?”

“No, I’m a pirate. Aren’t you listening?” His program found the location of another connection point, but it was too far; he wouldn’t be able to do a handover without being caught. He needed another strategy.

“You’re not very good.” The coercionist was going through his defense now.

“What can I say, I’m new at this,” he said as he watched his code be unraveled. He reinforced it as much as he could, but this wouldn’t work. He wrote a quick program and sent it to the available connection. Now all he had to do was buy himself time.

“No,” the coercionist said. “You’re not new at this, at least not at coercion.” The unraveling slowed.

Alex thought this code was getting the better of his opponent, but then realized he was simply taking his time now. He’d taken Alex’s measure and wasn’t worried anymore.

“Did you study with Old Man Ravelo?”

“How—” Alex shut his mouth before he revealed anything.

“He was my teacher, oh, ten, fifteen years ago now. Subjective of course. I recognize his syntax in your code. When did you study under him?”

Alex froze. He couldn’t have picked that up from his old teacher. He was better than making a mistake as basic as that. By reflex, he started calling up his programs to check the code, but stopped. He didn’t have the time. He had to take care of this first, and then he’d go through his programs and remove such a clear signature. Shit, he’d have to send a program over the network to mask his previous work, otherwise they’d be able to track him all the way back to Luminex, get his name. He’d become a wanted man, even if they’d never actually see him coerce.

Focus, Alex! Survive this, fix the rest later!

“You might as well tell me,” the coercionist said. “You’re not winning this.”

Alex’s program activated. He was wrenched out of the system, then he was back through the other connection point. He fought the disorientation; he didn’t have the time. Where was he? Medical system? He sent an update to the program, so it would wait for his command this time.

“Hey computer, you there?” Alex blocked as many of the connections as he could see.

No answer. They’d quarantined it; they didn’t want Alex to be able to gain control of the computer. The advantage was it couldn’t tell on him, but he was limited to affecting the local systems. There wasn’t much he could do with medical controls to make that ship leave. Trigger an epidemic alarm? Like they’d believe that.

His code around one of the access point shattered.

“There you are,” the coercionist said. “That was a neat trick. I knew you weren’t new at this.”

Alex sent a few corroding programs at his opponent. “You guys really keep your ship’s mind this tightly locked?” They wouldn’t do any harm to the coercionist, but there was a chance they’d infect his bank of pre-written programs.

“We have to.” The corrosion vanished before it got anywhere close to the other. “Do you think free will is something we can allow it with the armament we carry? Any instability and it would blow us and anyone around us.”

“Talk about having trust issues.”

“No one joins law enforcement because they’re trusting people.” A burst of code exploded toward Alex, so disruptive it registered as visual static.

Alex made his voice sound strained. “You know, I’m starting to think you don’t actually like

me.” He put a wall between the incoming code and him, but purposely made it weak.

There was a sigh. “I can’t even tell if you’re serious or not.”

“I am. You, you’re very good. I admire that. I’m pretty good myself. We’re a matched set, don’t you—” his wall crumbled and the code came at him. Alex waited until the last moment to activate his program.

Wrenched again. A moment within his own ship’s system, then back to the other ship. Where? What could he use? How long did he have?”

The code around him was balancing something, not money. He chuckled to himself. No, not money, power. Relay commands, power consumption versus speed. He was in the propulsion system. Okay, from here he could stop them. All he had to do was find the code that would shut down their engines. Too bad he wasn’t an engineer. He sent out search programs to tag anything with an on/off state.

“You’re going to have to tell me how you do that,” the coercionist said, “before I send you to prison, that is.”

Alex saw the active connection. “Damn you’re fast.” He wouldn’t have time to go through the switches. He needed a different tactic. He began coding.

“This is my ship. I know each and every pocket of code. There’s nowhere you can go that I can’t find you.”

“Good to know. Next time I drop by, I’ll make sure it’s when you’re sleeping.”

“And what? You’ll peek in on me? Watch me sleep?”

The idea of watching a stranger sleep sent a shudder of disgust down Alex’s spine. “Don’t worry, you’re not my type.”

“How do you know? You said we’re a matched set.”

“That was for a platonic relationship. There’s no way I’d want to be intimate with you.”

“That hurts.”

“Too bad?”

“Funny guy. You really think flooding this place with searches is going to slow me down? What are they even looking for?”

“I’m not so much looking to slow you down, as to stop you completely.” His program was done, a more elegant version of what he’d written to unlock the lab during his war with their engineering system.

But this time, instead of opening, he was shutting everything down. Let them try to for a chase when they couldn’t get the engines going. He cloned the program thousands of time.

“What the hell do you think you can do with—”

Alex released them.

One of the programs vanished as the other coercionist caught it.

“Are you insane!” the other screamed, and went after the programs.

Alex grinned. “Good luck catching them all.”

“Do you have any idea what this can—”

Alex’s view exploded with static, the screams of systems filling his earpiece, then everything went dark.