"No."

Alex stared at the man seated behind the desk. "Didn't you listen to anything I said?"

"I did. You said you had to transfer control of life support to the engineering computer. That was months ago, and nothing has gone wrong with it."

"That system's insane. It's connected to most of the hall controls and it's been using that to try to get people to kill themselves."

"Ghost stories show up on every ship. Idiosyncrasies in systems that people don't expect, minor defects. Boredom and paranoia."

"Sir, this isn't any of that." Alex went to the captain's desk and turned the display on. Before the man could protest, Alex removed the interface and showed him the underlying code. He didn't have to do much more than that for the danger the code posed to become visible, now that he knew what to look for. "See?"

"Mister Crimson, all I see are a bunch of lines of programming. I wouldn't know what they did if the user's file came with it. You're the computer-talker, not me." The captain turned the display off.

"Damn it!"

The man raised an eyebrow.

"I'm sorry." Alex moved back to sit in one of the chairs opposite the captain. "Look, you say I'm the expert, so why won't you believe me? It's just a question of time before everything unravels. My guess is that the engineering system hasn't figured out what the life support system's for yet, but the moment it does, it's going to use it against the crew. It actively wants you dead."

"There are a few problems with what you're saying. You are attributing a personality where all that exists are system glitches." Alex opened his mouth, but a glare from the captain kept him from interrupting. "I'm willing to admit there are problems with this ship. It's old and has been through a lot without the maintenance it deserves, but computers don't want things, even if I believed it could think like I do. How can it not know what life support does? It's in the name."

Alex waited a moment to make sure he was done. "The name is a human convention; it doesn't show up in the code. From the system's side, it's just commands and controls. And it doesn't know what life is. Engineering doesn't have anything to do with maintaining life, so there aren't any explicit descriptions. The safeguards are just things not to do, or what-if statements as to when to do something, but it's removed them."

He took a breath. "As for not wanting things. Computers aren't dumb machines. You don't see it because they act through the interface, and yours has been so partitioned that yeah, until I started healing the core system, the intelligence of what you interacted with could be argued, but yes, computers want things. It's in their base code. They want to perform their function, they want for their programs to run smoothly. They don't want to feel pain."

The captain smirked.

"It's not pain like we feel it, but that's how it registers to them when their code gets corrupted, and believe me, they will not shut up about it once it starts."

Alex straightened. "Turn your display on."

"Why?"

"Just do it." Alex took out the earpiece from his pocket.

"Mister Crimson, I'm not in the habit of taking orders from a passenger, even if he helped make me a lot of money."

"You want proof computers can think? That they want things? Turn it on, and put this in your ear. You'll get your evidence."

The captain took the earpiece from Alex, looked it over. The small plug-shaped item wasn't impressive, and the blood on it didn't help. The man pulled out a cloth from a pocket, dabbed it in his drink, and cleaned the blood off. He turned the display on. The interface was back, and he put the device in his ear.

"Now what?" he asked.

Alex didn't say anything. The earpiece was attuned to the system, so it wouldn't take more than a second for...

The captain frowned. "What is this? I'm Meron Corvoy, the captain of this ship. Who is this?"

The interface was replaced with a long scroll of code.

"Is this a joke?" the captain asked, eying Alex. "Fine, if you're really the computer, prove it."

The display turned off.

"What just happened?" the captain asked.

"The core processor isn't currently connected to anything that can do much. So, shutting itself down is the only thing it can really do."

Someone banged on the door.

The captain opened it from his desk.

Murray poked in, a panicked expression on his face. "We have a problem; nothing's working. We lost maneuvering controls, communication, weapons. Everything, Captain. It just winked out; none of the boards are responding."

The captain went to reply, but his display came back on.

Someone from the bridge yelled. "Systems are back up!"

Murray looked over his shoulder, then back to the captain. "I-I'm sorry sir, I guess it was nothing then."

"It's alright, Mister Murray. Go back to your post."

The door closed. "Isn't maneuvering something controlled by engineering?" the captain asked. "I'm not talking to you." He took the earpiece out.

Alex tried not to smile. "The main processor is in the bridge; it's the interface between it and all other systems. When it shut itself down, the bridge stopped working. The engines kept going, but you lost control of them."

The captain rubbed his eyes. "Alright. Let's say I believe you. I still can't simply let you shut down engineering. You might have forgotten about it, but we stole a ship's cargo not three days ago. They're still chasing us. We have a good lead on them, and it's getting wider, but they are after us. If I take away our ability to change course, to put some of the stellar rocks in our path to confuse them, they'll catch us and then you won't make it to Samalia."

"Sir, we still might not make it. It's just a question of time be—"

"Before the engineering computer figures out how to murder all of us, yes. I was listening. But I still can't let you take it offline. It's going to be a couple of weeks before I'm confident they'll have given up the chase. You can do it then.

"Weeks? I'm not sure—"

"Mister Crimson, this is my ship. If you hadn't contributed so much to this latest job, I wouldn't have sat here listening to you. I'd have sent you back to your cabin. You're a passenger, not part of my crew. I don't have to be this courteous to you. In a few weeks, I'll have Murray find a quiet and safe place for us to hide while you do what you need to do. Is that

understood?"

Alex had the irrational urge to scream, "you'll be sorry", to the man's face, wrench the earpiece out of his hand, and storm off. Instead, he nodded and stood.

"I hope we have that kind of time, sir." He extended his hand, and the captain handed him the earpiece.

"If you're so worried about this, isn't there anything you can do in the meantime? To prepare, if nothing else?"

"I'll have the Kaldarys setup, but that shouldn't take more than two days. I can't do much more. The moment I try to wrestle the life support away from it, the engineering system is going to go on the attack and things are going to get bad on the ship until it's resolved." Alex turned.

"Mister Crimson."

He turned back.

"I hope you understand that this doesn't mean I don't respect you or your capabilities, but I have to deal with what I believe is the more important threat."

Alex nodded. "I don't think you understand how much of a threat the engineering system is, sir. And I don't know how to demonstrate that, short of showing it what life support is for and unleashing it. That wouldn't solve anything. I'll see if there's anything else I can do to prepare, and I'll deal with it once you tell me I can."

* * * * *

It actually took four days for Asyr, with the help of two other engineers, to replace all the consoles with the new Kaldarys. Because of what he knew he'd have to do, Alex didn't simply upgrade the main console, but also the two auxiliary ones. He'd need backup on this.

He then realized that the entire lab was connected to the ship's power, which was controlled by the engineering processor. So it took a week for them to set up a power generator dedicated to it.

When they were done, Alex heard about the crewman who had almost died when he accidentally ruptured one of the power generator's coolant lines and breathed in the cooling mix. It had happened three days before. Since there, the repair crews had been chasing an unexplained fault in the life support system that caused it to randomly dump the same mix in halls and rooms.

Alex didn't need to look at the code to know what was going on. He told the captain, who didn't believe him, so he sat at the console, waiting for the one event the captain wouldn't be able to ignore.

Powerless to do anything about it, Alex waited for someone to die.