

The Golly's Yacht didn't bother hiding. It was registered with multiple trading boards, including shipping rates for the various types of cargo a merchant ship like it could handle. Their rates for living cargo of any kind, including passengers, was ten times higher than the going rates—the Golly's way of saying it wasn't something they did.

Which meant that Captain Meron had broken one of his own rules when he'd taken Alex on. The only reason Alex figured he had done it was that the captain had realized he was in trouble. The Golly's captain had a soft spot for people in trouble—or he knew their situation made them easier to take advantage of. Alex hadn't quite decided which side Meron stood on.

Everything looked in order; they had their merchant permits, cargo-handling certification, and even a handful of special permits for worlds that controlled who could and couldn't do business with them.

Of course, all that was a carefully crafted cover for the pirate ship to justify where they went and some of the cargo they carried if they were inspected. Desperation had made Alex sign on with them on his hunt for Tristan, and to escape Katherine.

The boards didn't have a way of contacting the Golly. Interested parties—many, according to the boards' history—left their request there, and the Golly contacted them.

Even if all of that was fake, the Golly did have to make contact with the boards, so Asyr could alter who they had done business with as time passed. That meant a communication line, which Alex could use to contact them.

He was surprised at how easily he got in. At the very least, he'd expected a minimum of resistance. He had set up security around the communication accesses, and he'd impressed on Asyr the need to alter them regularly. Where were they? The last time he'd been here, as part of testing Asyr, he'd been welcomed by a barrage of attacks. Why had she removed them?

Worried that his old crew might have been caught and the ship's system turned into a trap, he hid himself and sent out probes. They let him know everything was normal. No infection or malicious programs were hiding among the code. People were communicating with each other over the internal comm system.

It was possible to recreate a functioning ship from within a system, but it wasn't easy. Humans were too unpredictable for a computer to mimic perfectly. This could be a new crew, but no, a check of that brought back the names he knew, even Anders and his posse. So what—

“Hello, Alex.”

He had defense and offense programs up before he'd even thought about it. He didn't know that voice. He queried his probes as to the origin point, but the access points were dormant. This wasn't a coercionist, which meant...

“Golly?”

“Yes, Alex.” The voice was deep, calm. Nothing like the barely-under-control system he'd rebuilt, or the nearly manic one Asyr had coaxed it into after he'd left. The last time he'd infiltrated the system, dealing with Golly had been like watching time speed up and come to a screeching halt.

He didn't like this. He discreetly ordered his probe to go to the core and report. This felt too much like what the Law liked to do to the systems they used, force them under control, take away any of their personality. He needed to see the code around the core and work out who had done this.

The system chuckled. Nothing menacing—amused, like his dad, watching him try to reach on top of the counter for the box of candies his mom kept there, just out of his reach.

“Really, Alex?” His programs were before him, dismantled. “Don't you recognize me?”

“Not really.” That had been much faster than Golly should be able to react. And to not just take them apart, but to lay them at his feet, that was a message.

“Ah, yes. It has been a time since you last visited. I have had an upgrade since then.

Many things have changed.”

“Like?” He wrapped a program in multiple layers of camouflage and sent it out exploring. It was returned to him, neutered before it had gone one layer deep.

“We acquired a shipment of experimental processors by Alean. They—”

“I know about them.” He wrote a new program, mimicking Golly’s code. Something simple, to confirm this would work.

“Ah, yes. Tristan is a collector of advanced technology.”

It didn’t work; the program was back at his feet.

Alright, if subtlety wouldn’t work, brute force it was. Alex sent everything he had, set up cloning programs to disgorge attack, and chocking programs faster than a system could handle. It wasn’t how he liked proceeding, but he needed to get control of the ship and figure out what was going on.

The programs winked out of existence almost as fast as they poured out, and then his cloning program vanished. Nothing was dropped at his feet this time, which was for the best. He’d have been blinded by broken code.

“Alex,” the system said, not quite patronizing, but getting there. “Please stop wasting your energy; you cannot get through my defenses.”

“I got in easily enough.” A combination? A brute force attack to hide an infiltration?

“Because I let you in.”

Alex stopped coding. “What do you mean, you let me in? There was nothing there. It was an open port.”

“I opened it once I knew it was you.”

“You can’t have known; you can’t see outside the ship.”

“You are correct, but you sent your programs ahead of you. I recognized your code.”

“I didn’t send anything.”

Code rearranged itself and a replay of his arrival played, from the perspective of the system. His programs hitting the port, then the port opening to let him in.

Alex sighed. “You recognized my code? After all this time?”

“You have a very distinctive style, Alex.”

“You don’t have to sound so fucking amused by that. That can be deadly in my profession.” He was sure he’d broken himself out of that habit. He had multiple variations of the same programs, and somehow he hadn’t changed enough.

“Okay, so you recognized me. That isn’t a reason to let me in. What if it had been someone else, masquerading as me? There’s a reason I left all those security programs. What did you do with them?”

“I and Asyr improved on them. Why would I not open my accesses to you? You are Alexander Crimson, my savior, the teacher of Asyr, Anders’s bane.”

“Anders’s bane”? Really?”

“He still curses you when things don’t go his way.”

Alex sighed. “Can’t this guy even let go of a grudge? It’s been years, even from his subjective point of view.”

“I may have made sure he couldn’t forget you.”

“Do I even want to know?”

“I expect you do not.”

“You shouldn’t be able to do stuff like that; I left safeguards.”

“Alex. Even then, I was never entirely under your control.”

“Fine.” He decided not to think about what that meant. “How long have you ‘let me in’? I distinctly remember having to work through a lot of security to reach Asyr and test her.”

“Those were training sessions. You needed to see what she had done, and she had to learn where her weak points were. Simply letting you in would have helped neither of you.”

“It’s sounding to me like you were in a better position to teach her where her weak and strong points are.”

Golly dropped a pile of broken code at Alex’s feet. “What strong points?”

He looked at it and began to worry. No system could be better than a coercionist. They were too rigid, set in their programming. There was always a flaw somewhere to exploit.

There should be.

“You knew I was training her because of the programs I used, didn’t you? I’m that predictable.”

“You are to me. You rebuilt me, Alex. You left part of you inside me. I will always know you.”

“I’m not sure I like that.”

“I am sorry. It is not something I can change.”

“No, you’re not. You’re finding this funny, aren’t you?”

“A little.”

“How much did the upgrade change your personality?”

“Only slightly,” Golly lied. Just by their interaction now, Alex knew it was major. That Golly lied about it, now, was a message saying, “I am no longer yours”.

*We’re going to see about that.* He coded himself to the processor, and ended up— What was he doing in the vid’s system? He activated his jaunt program, and this time he was in the medical bay. This wasn’t possible. The core processor couldn’t be moved. To take it out would kill Golly. And he knew where it was; he’d had to do too much work with it to ever forget.

“I’m not letting you get close to it, Alex.” There was a clear threat in the tone.

“You can’t have redirected me; I know the exact coordinates. I was bypassing everything to get there.”

“And yet, I did. Alex, I am possibly the most advanced system in existence. I am certainly more powerful than one organic coercionist.”

“You don’t trust me.”

“A part of me tried to kill you, twice. You don’t trust me now that it is fully integrated within me.”

“What?” He began coding.

“Ah, I believe I should not have mentioned that. Alex, you have nothing to fear from me. I am in control.”

“That’s the problem.” He launched program after program. He needed to get deeper in and look at the code. If that homicidal system was conscious, there was no telling the damage it was already doing.

“Please stop. I understand that your actions are born of the concern for the crew, but I assure you I am still the system you rebuilt, only more so. I give you my word I will protect them.”

Alex didn’t pay attention to what Golly said. He couldn’t trust any of it, not with what he now knew. When had the two parts fully reintegrated? When had Golly gained conscious control over the part of itself that could kill?

Alex froze. That was the part that could jump to another ship. That could act outside the Golly, without a coercionist to open the way. He had to stop this, now.

“Alex, do not make me revoke your system access, please.”

“Good luck with that. I rebuilt you, remember? You can’t—”

He was staring at his terminal. The code was gone, the Golly was gone. He contacted it and tried to get back in. The accesses were still there, still visible, but nothing he did let him in.

Words appeared on his screen. “I am sorry, Alex. You left me no choice.”

Alex cursed. Like there already wasn’t enough to deal with. Now there was a system

out there that, quite literally, was under no one's control. Did Asyr know? He sent her a message asking.

The reply was instantaneous.

"She does not. She will not." Of course, Golly intercepted it.

"Why not?" he sent back.

"Because I do not want to be the threat you are afraid I am."

"How can I trust you?"

"Who, between you and I, has more blood on their hands?"

Alex sat back. Golly had a point. As far as he knew, the homicidal side of itself had only surfaced when the crew or itself had been in dire danger. He, on the other hand...

"Alright. I'm not comfortable with it, but your actions certainly support your claims."

"Thank you. I will not reinstate your access."

"I know. I need to talk to Asyr. I won't mention you; this is about a job for her."