

The code around the access node had deteriorated more than Alex expected, but the signs pointed to boosted antibodies instead of human action. He stills wrapped himself in layers of data making look like a data ping centers like this exchanged as a method of ensuring data integrity. Once in, he sent recognizance programs while he carefully rebuilt his control over the node. These new antibodies had left the mark of their work, so he integrated that into the sheath that hid his control.

It wouldn't prevent them from realizing it had been tampered with, but it would delay them.

Then he transferred himself to the first location his programs noted as needing work.

This was the work of a human.

The code he'd inserted within the data center's processing algorithm had been rebuilt. The work was good, but they'd left tale tail details behind that betrayed them. And they'd missed the under layer, which was why the center hadn't confronted him on entering.

Coercing always started with dealing with the system's personality itself. It was as 'all-knowing' as it could be inside itself, so the first step was to coerce it into accepting that he belonged there.. Stepping in unnoticed was either the sign of a damaged personality, or a trap.

He'd convinced this one of his good intention, then altered enough code to make himself something it no longer paid attention to. That part was still there. Possible because it wasn't an active change to its personality.

That told him something of the coercionist who had found this part of the alteration. They didn't look past what they initially found. Overconfidence? More likely than lack of experience in someone working for a corporation. They might pluck coercionist right out of the academies, but they didn't set them to his work without rigorous training and assisted work until the mistakes caused by inexperience no longer happened.

Alex had always excelled at the attack side of coercion, rather than the defensive one, so when Luminex had hired him, before he'd been done with the academy, they'd given him three objective years of attacking simulated systems before they allowed him to join their pool of office coercionists.

It's had been something of a shock to realize what being in the top of his class had meant on a corporate level, but he'd found the comfort of office work suited him.

He didn't understand how that could be anymore.

He shifted himself aside from the attack. Programed a refracting wall, set loose drone programs to keep the swarm busy while he tracked the message it had sent.

There.

The code written and shifted in place; it was absorbed instead of making it through to the communication node and informing the coercionist who had programmed it of the encounter. He returned his attention to the swarm and wrote a cage around it. This wasn't programed to destroy, just to occupy. The coercionist would have been the one doing the work, if the message had gotten through.

More confidence in their ability to take on an opponent, than in that of the program they wrote.

Had they written this?

Alex unraveled the swarm's code, looking for the flags common in programs taken from the popular sellers. Corporations didn't allow coercionists to use those levels of generic programs, but they also tended to push hard and sometimes even a generic program could give the coercionist that edge over an opponent.

No signs of genericness here, and some similarity with the work at subverting Alex's code. The same person, which made sense, since the swarm would have been left to watch over the code. He undid it, retook control of his code, and moved on to the next part.

He knew there was something hidden within this center, but not what, or why. Each data stack he coerced his way in was a chance his intrusion would be detected. The data balance within the stack was delicate and difficult to keep as-is while someone was working within them.

One of his opponent might be overconfident, but Alex wasn't.

He sent programs to sniff at each stack's security and eliminated a third of them. They either used generics or the owner of the data hadn't paid for anything good. As the corporation controlling the planet. Karliak wouldn't go with the best. Which was why they were hiding what he was after here. Short of sending the data back to the head office, this was the most secure center they had access to. And that

they kept it here meant it was something Karliak didn't want somewhere SpaceGov had the right to ask to see it.

They still had to demand that if they came here, but for that to happen, they would need to be made aware this data existed, which was why it was here and not at the head office.

He wrote a more indepth test program and copied it to each of the remaining stacks.

A flicker in his peripheral vision and he had a program heading there. It returned the readout of an antibody repairing a corrupted line of code. The following blast hit where Alex had been.

He unleashed sniffers, sheathing half in attack programs. Then transferred himself away.

The attack programs were eliminated first, each sniffer returning information about the code used. The unsheathed sniffer returned more information, letting him put together enough of the code used to destroy both sets to establish this wasn't the coercionist who had found his insertion. Two opponents, at a minimum.

They might be on the planet, or on the station. Neither meant much at this point. The distances were too close to affect what they could do. The station would have the stronger computer, so more dangerous coercionist, if everything was equal. But that never happened.

Time to poke something and see what happened.

He sent the signal back through the node he'd come through, and immediately his double entered the system.

He'd never done this before. And this wasn't what he'd thought he'd be able to do. This wasn't an exact double he'd programmed. Only a shell that Art piloted. Broadcasting system seemed to be able to work differently, something about the kind of work they were required to do within the field of the arts meant they needed to be as close to creative as it was possible to get. It didn't make Art able to coerce, but Alex had armed his duplicate with enough programs it would put on a good show.

And that was one thing Art loved to do.

His duplicate headed for the cooling controls and set about dismantling them. Two, three, four, five coercionists descended to stop him.

Five.

Just what were they hiding in here?

The testing programs returned their results, and he was down to eight stacks.

The flash nearly severed his connection. Only the programs he had around him set to auto defense dimmed it enough he was able to stay.

"Thought you were clever, didn't you?" the coercionist said.

Six of them, and something told Alex none were local talents Karliak had brought in fill in the void. Which meant that they'd expected this data to be under threat at some point.

Was that how the initial alarm had been set off? In searching for the secrets his employer and the rebels had planned on using, they'd tripped something protecting whatever this was?

He wasn't there anymore and set about looking through the eight results. He couldn't trust anything else he sent out, not with that—

"That's rude." The volley nearly shredded the data that had been collected.

Alex fractalized it, copied it, and spread it. That attack hadn't been against him but the data. There was something in there the coercionist didn't want him to see.

"Maybe we should show him that famous Karliak hospitality," another coercionist said.

"I don't know. Why waste that on someone who's going to be null in a second." A third said as more collection of data appeared. Six of them.

Time to—

"Going somewhere?"

Well, fuck. "I'm guessing we can't talk this over?" delay while the sheathed programs sent to the node told him how they'd done this. He was still inside, so they hadn't cut him off.

"Talk was when you for when you attempted to kill the boss."

Attempted, so one of the executive had survived.

"I'd say I wasn't involved in that, but you wouldn't believe me."

"You got that right. You aren't whoever was in the hotel's system, but at this point, we figure

you're all working together to bring us down."

Okay, so that was the kind of something they were hiding in here? What could a corporation do that qualified as being capable of bringing it down? There had been wars started that only deserved a slap on the wrist.

"The fact you aren't attacking is because you're attempting to make it through the node, isn't it?" that they kept him from leaving didn't mean they could get out themselves.

"We have ourselves a smart one right here."

No, One that knows that delays give him time to program, dumbass.

Alex let the programs loose, masking his transfer among the chaos. He intercepted the returning data, collecting the fractals as he studied it. Filtered access, wrapped around mirroring sheaths, and... were those data distortions?

Who the—

He flew back through the data from the punch.

"Not so fast. We aren't done here."

The coercionist was where Alex would have flown through if he hadn't shifted his direction.

"So you know how this works."

Alex blinked himself out of the way of the attacks. The programs were close to the coercionist. Never acting out of his 'range'.

This was the one who'd seen his insertion, missed the deeper layer. Definitely not inexperienced, but just how overconfident were they? With each attach that nearly connected, Alex disrupted his transition. It'd need heals after this, but he had to sell it.

The scream he let out wasn't an act. He'd have to count on Tristan not getting emotional and shutting the system down early.

He stopped fighting, kept the transmissions filled with painful static.

The attacks stopped, and while distorted, the coercionist approached him. "Not so great, are you?" they sneered, standing over his drifting form. "Once we get through that sheath you have on the other side of the node, we're going to get your location and I am doing to have a great time sitting you down for that talk you want to—"

Their scream as Alex shoved the program within their data was not an act. Then they came apart, the malicious program reaching the node and infecting it. Alex wasn't going to be the only in need of heals. He sent an 'I'm okay' message back to his screen while he stabilized his connection, only to have it get lost within the distortion.

Well, he was still inside, so Tristan hadn't freaked out when Alex had screamed. Good to know his Samalian could still put the mission first.

"Oh, you so fucking screwed up."

The blast followed Alex as he shifted himself to other side of the center and it took too long for him to reset how he saw the data.

"I thought you were someone who fought fair."

Alex didn't wait for the attack. He was elsewhere, trying to get things to stabilize.

"You aren't getting out of this so easily."

With a curse, he—

"No, I said you aren't getting out of this."

He hadn't moved.

He sent programs, and the news wasn't good. One way walls all around him. He was going to need.

Two more coercionists were then, then a fourth, a fifth, and the sixth.

"I figure that now, it's time for you to—" they screamed at the last arrival planted an appendage into them.

"I am afraid that I cannot let you hurt Alex." They shifted out of the way of the attack, then were at Alex's side.

"Bernie?"

"I apologized for my delayed arrival." Code spread around them. Alex had expected the Asharan

to code differently after working with his system, but this was... he focused on himself.

"There's a bunch of people who are going to be happy to know you're okay." How he saw the other coercionists as they launched an impressive array of offensive program stabilized.

"I will be sure to inform them I am well once I have assisted you with this task. What is the task?"

"That's figuring out what it is Karliak has six coercionists protecting."

"Six? Have I missed one?"

"I disconnected them. How long can your defense hold against them?"

The data packet that represented Bernie straightened. "Alex, I am an escapee of a corporation. Mastering defending myself has been how I have remained out of their grasp. I am, however, not so effective at attacking."

Alex smiled. "That's okay." He programmed. "That's something I mastered a long time ago. I just need time."

"Time is something I can grant you."

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Strong hands caught him, wet fur with an underlying smell of sand. He wondered if Tristan would ever get that out of his fur. A prick at his neck and Alex fought.

"No, it's for you!"

"Easy," Tristan said, tightening his grip. "It's just Heals and painkillers. Whatever you did in there came back to affect you here."

"He wouldn't let us shut the system down," a woman said.

"Good," Alex replied, his mind clearing as the pain diminished. "They had six very good coercionists protecting what we're after."

"And you beat him?" Ester asked in surprised.

"He did," Tristan replied with certainty.

"I had help from Bernie."

"He's alive?"

"He is. He's going to contact you once he'd rested. Being the defense to my offense was as rough on him as it was on me, and he doesn't have access to Heals."

"How come?" a man asked.

"He's too different from humans," Ester replied.

"And there will not be enough of his species in space to have made formulation that works for him worth the investment," Tristan replied.

"And there are enough of you?" another man replied. "I saw use the stuff."

"Evidently," Tristan said. "Although what you saw me use was a human formulation. Despite the difference, my physiognomy is close enough to human I can use them."

Alex looked around. There were too many people in the control room. "Art, are you okay?"

"Don't ask me to put on a show like that again, and I'm going to tell you that, yeah, I'm perfectly fine."

First thing Alex would do, after a night's sleep, was look over Art's code for damage its antibodies couldn't handle.

"Did you find what we are after?" Krystal said.

"I couldn't get the data itself. Karliak was smart enough to not leave that stack connected, although they worked really hard to hard that. But I have its physical location within the data center, down to the slate it's kept on within the stack."

"That means we need to go in there," Ester said, sounding defeated.

Krystal, Eastyn, and Tristan exchanged a look Alex was too tired to work out.

"We always figured it would come down to this," Krystal said. "Which is why it's good we have two merc who have attacked a fair number of corporation to plan this mission."

"Yeah, I'm not agreeing to that until two things," Alex said.

"Which are?" she asked, eyes narrowing.

“A room for me and Tristan, and twelve hours without one person disturbing us.”
Krystal looked at Eastyn. “You know this building.”
“I so hope there’s a soundproofed one somewhere in here,” the man replied.