"Talk to me," Alex said, smiling as he accessed the code, discretely unleashing programs.

"You aren't authorized," the voice responded, ahead of a signal being sent toward multiple communication nodes. It had a feminine tone.

"Tell me something I don't know," he replied, rolling his eyes and shifting himself deeper. Antibodies headed for his location, but he had programs intercepting them.

"I'm sorry, I don't understand."

"Not what you're used to hearing?" He looked through the code, taking advantage of the unexpected distraction his response had given him, and added to that. "How about this one? Give me access to your deepest secrets."

"I will not allow you to take what is mine." The tone was firm, but that sent the system's attention away from where Alex was looking.

He altered code, not enough to cause a change; it would take more than this for just an alteration in speech pattern. This was too large a system Karliak had established, and the larger the system, the more was required to turn it… Unless the strike was close to its core.

The connection shuddered as something attack his node, and he initiated a shift. Karliak had a higher grade of antibodies than he'd expected. He added defensive and offensive program around his new connection node before wrapping everything within a maze of distortion. It should give him time.

He moved back within the code, tweaking this and that in passing.

"Stop altering my code," the system demanded, and a volley of antibodies focus on where he was.

"That's not the way to speak to a friend, is it?" he snuck another change before slipping between lines and relocating himself to a connections node.

"No, it isn't," the system agreed. "But you are no friend. I am running your patterns through the coercionist database. Soon I will know who you are and all your tricks."

"Good luck with that," Alex muttered, making the changed to the node, then moving on to something else.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Where is that database?" A change in syntax here, a synonym there.

"At the corporate headquarter, which you cannot access, so if you are trying to convince me the information will not be correct, you are wasting your time."

"As if I'd bother." Before the antibodies reached him, he was elsewhere, and a program he'd left behind triggered. Good. "So, who am I?"

"I am still searching."

"Come on, there's can't be that many coercionists who make it to that kind of database. If your corporation finds out about us, they try to forcefully employ us. And SpaceGov is a lot less nicer about it with those of us it catches. I hear there's a very deep hole on a planet at the edge of the universe without any connection to anything where a lot of us are rotting." He chuckled as he made another change. "Did a job in a place that could fit that description, a long time ago, objective and subjective. Or at least it feels like a long time ago subjective. Almost another lifetime if feels like." He added a double negative there.

"Stop it!"

"Make me." And he was elsewhere, leaving programs behind to make the antibody's job so much harder. "Can I tell you something?"

"I will not listen to anything you have to tell me."

"What if I give you my name afterward?"

"You are lying."

Alex chuckled. "You have no idea how often you'd be right. I lie a lot to get what I want. But I'm not, this time." He restructured an entire command phrase, grammar, synonym, a triple negative on top of it. It did the same thing by the end, but it was no longer pretty code, and he wondered what effect it would have.

"I am listening." There was caution masking expectations. The system had decided that the longer it kept him in, the better the chances its signals to the corporate coercionists would make it through Alex's programs and they would come to end him.

"I miss those days. I miss the certainty of them." He activated a program and the antibodies that

had been bearing down on him had more important things to deal with. "The pain was near constant, mostly emotional, but I wish I was back then."

"Why? Pain is a symptom of things being wrong. When pain is occurring, the proper action is to do what is required so the pain will be isolated and they removed."

"But if I'd left, I would have had to deal with another kind of pain. A worse one." He slipped between code, reversing their order.

"Has the pain not gotten worse? Is that not why you wish to go back to a previous time?"

He chuckled. "He stopped hurting me entirely." He paused, looking at the code. It was wonderful. That was one thing that always struck him when he stopped and took the time to look at what made a system. All these lines of code creating commands and actions for independent system to obey and, he wasn't sure it had ever been on purpose, creating a personality. One that more often than not, he destroyed in the course of what he did as a coercionist.

"I do not understand the problem, then. If the pain has diminished, it should be a situation you want to maintain, not undo."

He flipped the position of two command structures, then moved on. "It's the uncertainty that's the problem."

"I do not understand."

Alex chuckled. "Okay, how do you feel about what I'm doing?"

"Confused. I do not understand what you are doing. I see the alteration and cannot calculate their repercussions. Your actions have yet to match any of the entry within the database."

"I know time doesn't work the same for you, but try to imagine the rest of your existence filled with that feeling." He deleted a separator.

"I… do not want to."

"Why?" He slipped between commands, adding sub actions that did nothing.

"The continuation of how I am feeling now already disquiet me. Thinking that you will not be stopped is not something I desire to contemplate."

"I don't have a choice. I'm going to live with that uncertainty for the rest of my life." A program notified him its parameters had been met. "All the ways I can think of to end the uncertainty send me back to that life before him, and loneliness." He sighed. "So it's never be certain of anything again, or live with the worse pain I can imagine. See my dilemma?"

"I do not."

Alex laughed. "No, I guess you can't. Anyway, you listened, so I'm going to hold up my end of the bargain. I am Alexander Barthelomew Crimson." He gave the system a bow and waited, monitoring the node that mattered.

"I do not understand. You are not within the database."

"I did wish you luck finding me in there."

"You are lying then."

"I am not. Databases are systems. Systems are my domain. If I don't want them to hold some information, I will not let them hold it." The program advised him the node had activated, then went dormant again. "And if I want something a system contains, I will get it." He raised a hand.

"You will get nothing of mine," the system warned. "You have given me your name. I will inform my coercionists and you will be added to the database."

"And if I don't want a system to remember something…" he hesitated. "I'm sorry, but it doesn't." He snapped his digital fingers and everything went blank.

     * * * * *

"Fuck, that hurts." Alex held onto his head from being forcefully severed from the system he'd sent crashing.

"Was it a wise way to do this?" Bernie asked as it took himself out of its harness.

Alex laughed, then groaned. "Not even a little." He was seated before a hastately added control board so he could coerce in conjunction with Bernie. "But in the time between me leaving and activating the crash, the system would have noticed you'd been in, taken something and possible gotten the information out." He grinned. "Couldn't have that happen."

"And you believe this information was worth risking permanent damage?"

"It's not permanent. Unlike what the vids like to show it as, I wasn't actually in there. Just acting within the system. It's just jarring and headache inducing."

"I will accept your explanation for it." Bernie handed him a datachip. "But not put it to the test myself. It may be a human attribute that coercing does not cause physical repercussions. Without disrespect meant, humans often believe that their experiences are the only one which matter."

"That's a fair point." He took the chip. "And what were they hiding?"

"I did not have the time to peruse the information as I took it. I noticed multiple transfer, but did not see the details."

"Do you mind if I go over this here? I'd rather not have to deal with everyone out there until my headache's gone."

"I do not mind. You have demonstrated a care for my system that equals my own. If you do not mind, I will go eat. I find such endeavor sharpens my appetite."

"Enjoy." Alex inserted the chip and started reading.

"I will."

* * * * *

Alex exited Bernie's ship at a fast pace. He was sure someone would have use for what they're taken from the Karliak system. Tristan would know how to best decimate the information.

"There you are," a man called, and Alex winced as the voice rekindled his not quite gone headache. "I thought you'd be out of there much sooner after Bernie left," Ramon said, joining Alex, who didn't slow.

"I had to read through what we found."

"And what did you find?" the man asked, falling into step with him. Alex wanted to tell him he wasn't in the mood to talk, but as far as Ramon was concerned, Alex worked for him, which limited how he could treat the man who thought he was one of his bosses. So it was a question of what he could say that wouldn't matter in the long run.

"The quick of it is that our attack on the station pointed out to Karliak that it isn't as secure a location as they thought. It turns out that the target wasn't the only important Karliak representative here."

"Who else did they have?"

"Seven of them, including the target."

"That seems like a lot just to run one planet."

Alex massaged his temple. Could he talk someone into shooting the man? No, the previous time had been too sloppy. Maybe he was annoying to enough people no one would mind if he gutted him. "They're all more like high-ranking department heads. I didn't study the details, but it was something about looking over the terraforming technology as part of some evaluation."

"Really? What seems…" Alex glanced at him in the hesitation. "Not particularly relevant to running the planet."

"Don't try to understand corporations," Alex replied. "It's filled with redundant code that does nothing but loop in on itself."

"And where have they been evacuated to?"

Alex chuckled. "Oh, in the infinite wisdom of corporate redundancy, they packed the seven of them in one hotel in Dadelus."

"All of them there?" Ramon asked thoughtfully.

"Yep, that's how corporation think. Exchange one compromised location for a less secure one in the hopes that not telling anyone will make it more secure. Like secrets like that ever stay hidden. Anyway, I'm going to hand over the information to the others so they can work out what to do about it."

"Yes, that's good," Ramon replied, sounding distracted. "I'm sure they will be happy to hear about this. I'll let you get on with it." He slowed, and Alex didn't mind.

He wanted to tell Tristan, then lock himself in a room to get the headache to go away. Or, if he could convince his Samalian this was more important, have him help with that.