

Chapter 20

Tristan attracted stares as he walked back to the motel. This one was on the other side of the city—still not a great part of it, but the population was higher, and clearly not one of them had ever seen an alien before. It would have been safer to change cities, maybe just go to a better area, but the people he knew didn't live there. And until he knew where the fabricator had ended up, he didn't want to get too far from the complex; there might still be a need to go back.

He'd covered himself, bought a jacket on the way back to hide most of his fur. Without pulling the hood over his head, it did nothing to hide his alien-ness, but that would cut down on what he could see and hear, and right now followers were what he was worried about.

He was on the fourth circuit, and he couldn't wait to get in the room and take a cool shower. He'd confirmed that no one was watching the motel, and now he was confident he'd lost anyone his contacts had put on him in the hopes of finding out where he was staying, and possibly coming in large numbers to catch him.

That was always the danger when dealing with criminals. Their greed could at times override their self-preservation instinct.

He entered the single room and threw the jacket off with a sigh of relief. The room was already cool. It had taken a long time, but he'd gotten Alex comfortable with a more reasonable temperature range.

Alex was at the desk, coercing his way into the security company that had the Telrize contract. He hadn't reacted to Tristan's entrance. He hadn't reached for one of his knives. He wasn't even aware Tristan had returned.

Tristan didn't like that aspect to Alex's coercing: it left him vulnerable. He'd tried to fix it, to force him to stay aware of his surroundings, but for Alex to coerce to his full potential, he had to give it all his attention. Tristan had been forced to make a choice. He could have a master coercer at his disposal, or a just a decent one aware of what was happening around him.

Tristan didn't keep anything that didn't work to the full extent of its capabilities.

Alex said something as he typed. A question, by the tone, but too low for Tristan to make out. Not for him then. Unlike the earpiece he used to use, the implant picked up bone vibrations, so Alex no longer needed to speak loud enough to be heard. He could even sub-vocalize, but Alex hadn't mastered that yet.

Tristan grabbed his shower, making it cooler. He didn't wish to be human, but their lack of fur did make adapting to temperatures easier. When he was dried and dressed, Alex was still working. He took a nutrient bar from his pack and sat with his datapad. There was nothing else to do until Alex was done.

Instead, he watched his human type and speak. His hands moved almost too fast for Tristan to keep track, but he knew the motions, so he could make out the commands he was entering.

He was an expert coder himself, having learned it because of how dependent the universe was on

computers. So he could do anything Alex did. It was the sheer speed at which his human could do it that astonished him. With the combination of code and voice, Alex could talk a system into letting him do anything to it.

He'd even managed to wrestle control of Tristan's own computer at one time. Alex had learned never to do that again, and now that the frustration has passed, Tristan was able to admire just how impressive that was.

Alex wasn't the first coercionist Tristan had made use of. For as good as he was, there were times he'd needed someone else, if only so they could take the fall for it. He'd watched them work, code, and talk, and Tristan had never been impressed. They weren't that much faster than he was, the end result not that much better. So he'd grown unimpressed with coercionists.

What Alex did by comparison wasn't just coercion. He talked his way into the system's mind, turning it around making it his friend, his slave. The only word Tristan had found to express what that was like was "magic".

Alex had also changed Tristan's thoughts about computers. He'd always believed they needed to be treated as code, rather than personality, but watching Alex work had shown him there was more to them.

He'd gotten Alex to explain what he did, how he perceived systems, what he used to decide what would be voice and what would be code. Tristan had concluded that what Alex did with systems was much like what he himself did with people. Tristan had learned a large amount of human psychology to be able to gain useful insights into them. Alex had learned the same, but for systems.

That told him he could learn to do that. Possibly it wouldn't even take long; Tristan was a fast learner, and he had a coding base. If he wanted to, he could get rid of Alex.

If he'd made this realization early in their partnership, he would have, but he'd spent these last years shaping Alex, honing his edge to a lethal level. He'd made Alex a weapon and used him against the universe. To get rid of him now would deprive him of that weapon.

How long would it take him until he reached Alex's level of skill? How much research would he have to sacrifice to devote to learning to coerce? There was a thrill in learning, but it wasn't the one he got out of dissecting a new weapon or security system to find out how to make the best use of it. How to beat it.

Tristan smiled. They did make a good pair. He could take apart and rebuild anything physical, Alex could do the equivalent to the system residing inside computers. Tristan could manipulate people. Alex systems. If they had to kill someone? They both could do it without prejudice.

He kept watching Alex, instead of reading, his finger rubbing the metal diamond on his collarbone as he did so. There was something calming in having him there, in watching him do something he was so good at he barely had to think about it. In a way, it was like pitting Alex against an insurmountable number of opponents and watching him take them apart. He loved watching him do that.

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When Alex grew silent, Tristan reached in the pack. He pulled a water bottle and lobbed it across the room. Alex caught it without looking away from the screen, his eyes moving, and he finished confirming everything was as he wanted it. When Alex put the bottle down, half drained, Tristan lobbed a nutrient bar.

This time Alex looked away from the screen. "Thanks." Tristan gave him the time to eat and drink.

Alex threw the empty bottle in the recycler. The nutrient bar's wrapper hit the wall and ended up on the floor.

"Okay, so we missed them by a month. The good news is that based on what I can make out from their clothing, they aren't mercs."

Tristan didn't comment. He'd known before they each began their search what they would be. Alex had also reached that conclusion, but this was how Alex's mind worked. He talked through everything he'd found, all the angles of the problem. It used to drive Tristan insane with the constant talking. Now? Well, now it was just how Alex was.

"I didn't find any indications something resembling what our fabricator would have to be was sold on the black market, or is being offered. That means it's still here, locally."

Tristan nodded in acknowledgment. That was an angle he hadn't considered—that after acquiring it, the gang would have sold it off for profit. He thought too much in the long term. He and Alex working a problem together missed very little.

"How did they get in?"

Alex typed, and the vid screen in the room came on, showing the inside of the warehouse. Light appeared, blinding the camera's light-intensification program.

"Basically the same way we did, just by a different access—this one is on the north wall." The light level dropped as people entered the building, then waited in groups. The door closed, bringing the darkness

back. The camera adjusted, and they were looking at thirty people. Lights came on, but those weren't as bright, so they could still see them.

Tristan squinted. "Why are they fuzzy? I can't make them out properly."

"I had to reconstruct their presence from the artifacts left by the coercionist's program. It's rather basic. I wonder how it is no one noticed what they were doing."

He entered a command and the screen split in four. "They split into more than four groups, but there's no point in following all of them. There's only one group we're interested in, but this is to show how they proceeded. They're heading directly to the dead zones, so coercionist—maybe out of pure boredom—went through the index and matched it to the physical map, and reached the same conclusion I did. Then they sold the information to them. I doubt any gangs on this planet, or anywhere, has a coercionist talented enough to reach the index."

Another command, and they were back to one screen. Tristan straightened as what could only be a fabricator was centered on it. "This goes to show just how even a smart system can be setup dumbly. If they'd run the security feed through the system, instead of exporting it directly to the security firm, it would have known there was something there."

"And we'd be dead," Tristan said. The people the old man had worked with hadn't been kidding around in their desire to infect the entire universe. The fabricator had to be forty-feet in length, ten high. This angle didn't let him see the depth, but most of that would be the component chemicals; a biological fabricator could fit in the palm of his hand. The only guiding factor was that it needed to be large enough so the assembled product could rest on the receiving plate, and that was only making a virus.

"Yes, there is that, so we should count ourselves lucky they never bothered. And before you say it, yes I am pissed at myself it never occurred to me to do a visual check of the warehouse through the security feed."

Tristan didn't reply. How likely was it the chemicals were still in the fabricator? Long-term storage wasn't what they were designed for, so most of them had leakage. Over thirty years all he needed was one of the tanks to have emptied itself to ensure he was safe. For the time being, at least.

"Any indications they acquired whatever would be needed to make the virus?"

"Unless you came across a list of what those components are while you were out, I can't tell you. What I can tell you is that there's been an increase in purchasing of base chemicals by a dozen companies planetwide. There's also been an increase in the theft of the same chemicals. The reasonable assumption is that the companies have to buy more to fill what they lost to theft, except that the orders for those chemicals came first, and they matched what was stolen down to the ounce."

"Those companies are in league with the gang."

"Or gangs. Like I said, this is planetwide. It would be hard for one gang to coordinate it all. But yes, they buy, then claim theft. The insurance pays them back for the loss, and they pocket what the gangs pay them. There's also been a drop in the price of a handful of high-end drugs, which implies an increase in the supply."

"Or a drop in manufacturing cost. Either of those points to the fabricator having been converted from a virus to a drug-maker. Can you work out who stole the chemicals?"

"Not with anything resembling certainty. The Law's systems here are self-contained—I mean to a paranoid level. They don't even leave a connection open for the rest of the Law in the universe to talk with them. It's like they're terrified the sun's going to drop on them if they leave even the tiniest connection open. Who does that?"

Tristan studied Alex. Did he really not know? Didn't he remember infiltrating the Law office? What he'd forced Tristan to do once he found out?

"What?" Alex asked.

Tristan just smiled.

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