

## Chapter 16

Tristan picked this motel because it was far from anything important, so there wouldn't be enough business to warrant full security suites. He'd confirmed with a portable scanner the only recordings being made were cameras. And Alex had gone in the motel's system, making sure it wouldn't bother remembering them.

Tristan walked through the half-empty lot and watched in the motel's large windows for anyone new paying too much attention to him or the building. The only people he saw were the same assortment who had been there when they'd landed: vagrants, dealers in illicit substances, muggers, and would-be criminals. No one who didn't belong.

This motel hadn't been his first choice. Normally he preferred staying on the other side of the planet to ensure no one could connect him to his target, but once Tristan destroyed both of them, he then had to ensure his client's brother would find him. It made more sense to stay close to where he expected him to show up eventually.

He paused at the door, listening for any out of place sounds. The shower was running in his room. A vid was playing two doors down, something sexual. Two women argued past that room. No sounds from the rooms in the other direction. Alex would tell him if anyone suspicious had taken up residence while he'd been away.

He let the door close behind him, looking for any signs things had been disturbed. The nutrient packages he'd crumpled and left on the dresser were the same. Alex's shirt he'd dropped on the floor and moved with the door when he opened it was still where it had been. He picked it up and placed it on Alex's pack. It was surprising how often such a low-tech alarm had told him someone was in his room, when they'd placed it back on the handle, thinking it had fallen from it.

The room wasn't impressive: a bed, a desk with a computer Alex sneered at, the dresser, and the shower room. The strict minimum someone needed, minus the food. There was a restaurant across the lot for that.

Tristan was moving toward the shower before he even considered what he was doing. He glanced at the computer in passing. It had lists, but he didn't bother pausing to see of what. He wanted to see his human.

The door slid open with a hiss and Tristan stopped. Had Alex heard?

Why did that thought bother him?

The shower was in the far corner from the door, without one of its own to block the view. Alex had his back to him, rinsing the cleanser out of his hair. The muscles on his scarred arms and back bulged as he moved. The definition on them had grown sharper over the years to the point where Tristan could trace each muscle, if he'd wanted. He hadn't limited his training to fighting—strength had been part of it too, and Tristan was proud of what Alex had become. He had sculpted the human into something deadly.

There was a faint scent on the humid air. Alex had taken care of his need while showering. That was fine. Tristan could still satisfy his—to touch him, feel him against his fur, to press into—

Alex stiffened as Tristan took a step.

He stopped and forced his face neutral. What was going on with him? He'd used the human only days ago.

Alex glanced over his shoulder and the tension left his body. "I'm almost done with the search. What I found is on my datapad. You can take a look."

Tristan nodded, not trusting himself to speak. He stepped out of the room and paced, trying to force his thoughts on the job and away from Alex's body—the strong legs, deadly arms, firm ass.

He grabbed the sound-dampener he acquired from the pack, took it out of the package, and read the back off it. It was an Orvanal Sound-stop. A stupid name, but a decent product. It was the best he'd been able to find in the time he'd given himself to acquire what they'd need.

He looked at each component, both to confirm they were in good condition and to distract himself from Alex, naked in the shower. He mentally ran through the specs of each part and regained control over himself. It only took him a minute to have cataloged all of them, but his body no longer showed any indications of how he'd been affected by the sight in the shower.

He took out his datapad and copied the information Alex had found. Both of them were Tolera's Omacron D, top of the line. Almost as powerful as their Granmier computer line. With Alex needing something to act as a base to coerce systems, Tristan no longer settled for just getting their pad from the best manufacturer; he went for their best, so that Alex could coerce on the go when needed.

The shower stopped. Alex walked out, drying himself. He felt the desire to look away from the information on his datapad. He silently cursed himself for getting Alex in the habit of staying naked until he needed to head out. Why had he done that? Right, because it had made Alex uncomfortable. He'd done it as a way of exerting power over Alex. How the universe had to be laughing at him right now.

He should tell him to hurry up and dress, but that would let him know his nudity affected Tristan, and not only wouldn't he give Alex that kind of power, he wasn't going to let Alex's nudity affect him.

Once dry he did dress. He dropped the towel at the door before opening it and stepping outside. Tristan brought his body back under control by reading some more. A few minutes later Alex was back with food. He looked at the towel, then around the room, not looking at Tristan for any confirmation that things were or weren't safe. He placed the food on the table and threw the towel in the cleaner hamper.

They ate in silence, and once they were done, Alex motioned he wanted to talk. Tristan activated the sound-dampener.

"I've already confirmed that the Telrize complex doesn't export any of its information to an outside site whole-stack, so we don't have to worry about the virus' data is on being duplicated elsewhere." He tapped his datapad resting on the table, and a hologram of a building appeared. He highlighted the fourth floor. "This is where the mainframe is." He took out the floor and tapped a room. "It's composed of eighty-one stacks. On-site I'll be able to locate the vault and release a program to chew it up."

"We're frying all the stacks. It hides what we were after from the Law," Tristan continued, now in the habit of explaining his thoughts to Alex. "And it lets the mark know he isn't the only one after the virus. This sends the message that as far as he can tell, we are now the only ones who have what he wants. If he wants to get it, he'll have to deal with us."

"How is he going to find us? He's an amateur."

"His family runs a city. He supervised multiple departments; he will have surrounded himself with qualified people."

"Alright, but that's still not going to help him. When I get done with a system, there's nothing there for anyone to find."

Tristan nodded, keeping his gaze fixed on Alex.

"You want me to leave threads he can use to find us."

"It's what the job calls for."

Alex sighed. "You know I hate doing shoddy work."

"I'm confident you'll survive."

Alex snorted. "I will, but my pride won't if it ever gets out someone was able to track me down using my code."

"Have you been able to locate the fabricator?"

"No, but that's because there's nothing about it in the system. Olirian was thorough about that. What I did find are nine dead zones by overlaying the index over the physical map and matching each location ID."

"Only nine?"

Alex nodded.

“How were they created?”

“One we know was Olirian. The others I’m guessing system glitches. It isn’t common, but not unheard of. A power spike shocks the system while an item is in transition and it drops the tag, item, and location. Most of the time when the hover arrives for the pickup it sends an alert, and the system can retrieve the information from a backup, but if too much time passes, that’s been overwritten with the current version and the system treats it as an ordering error.”

“How easy is it for someone else to find out what you did?”

Alex raised an eyebrow and looked at the chrono on the wall. “You were gone for just over six hours for your shopping. It took me fifteen minutes to find the mainframe. Five to get into the warehouse’s system. The rest was the tedious work of looking through all the locations in the warehouse to match them with the index. And I wrote a program to help with that; that took a minute or two.”

Tristan nodded. “So anyone dedicated enough could.”

“Sure, but I don’t know any criminals who’d do that without knowing there’s a payout at the end.”

Tristan didn’t comment. Alex wasn’t as knowledgeable about the lengths humans were willing to go to as he was.

Alex tapped the screen and the hologram vanished, replaced by two personnel files. “This is what I’m working on. I’ll insert us into the complex’s technical staff. They have a handful of aliens working there, so you won’t stand out just because of the way you look.” Alex smiled and looked him over. Tristan motioned for him to continue. “I’m giving us the qualifications for mainframe work, in case anyone asks why we’re in the stacks. You *are* qualified for mainframe work, right?”

“Alex,” Tristan warned.

Alex grinned. “I’ll also have a work order in the system to justify our presence.” He lost the smile. “The problem is that I can’t find any reason to take us inside the warehouse. Anything that moves, flies, or rolls goes out of it to the maintenance bay next to the warehouse. The mainframe is housed in a different building. I also can’t locate who handles the security inside the warehouse. It isn’t the company that handles the complex, I have confirmed that. I haven’t given up on it, but it’s looking like not only can’t I use that for IDs, but I can’t tell you what the security routes will be like. It’s going to be tough to justify our presence to anyone we encounter there.”

“We don’t bother explaining anything. If we encounter someone, we kill them.” Not that it would happen; Alex had forgotten a detail. He began doing his own search as Alex talked.

“That’s...going to be a lot of bodies, potentially. It’s a big place. If even one of them is found before we’re done, we’ll have to deal with the Law on top of whoever Baran will have looking for the fabricator.”

“There won’t be anyone there. The old man said the place was fully automated.”

“Sure, all the movement of items is handled by machines, but there’s still a need for security.”

Tristan sent the information he’d found to Alex’s pad, and the warehouse appeared with various locations highlighted, as well as their coverage. At a glance, the warehouse was fully covered by their security.

“That’s a sensor net from Furten.”

“Are they any good?”

Tristan shrugged. “Nowhere near the best, but for something this big, no one but SpaceGov and the largest corporations can afford the best. They’re good enough.”

“Let me guess, the sensor net is monitored off-site, data flows through the net.”

Tristan nodded.

“Then it’s worthless. I can have a program intercept the data before it reaches whatever security firm handles that and scrub us out of it in real time.”

“I’m counting on it.”

“But they can’t rely on just that; that’s the kind of coercion I was doing in my first year of school. There are enough instructions about that on the net for anyone to learn how to do it.”

“Their choices are: use a top of the line system and charge appropriately—and in the industrial bracket they are situated no one would pay those prices; get an okay system and work hard to convince anyone it’s much better than it is, so no criminal will bother trying to beat it; or pay hundreds of guards to have a physical presence inside the warehouse, which again raises the price out of their typical client’s reach.”

Alex sighed. “It always comes down to greed, doesn’t it?”

“Everything does.”

“You’re not greedy. I’m not.”

Tristan locked eyes with Alex. Without looking away, he ran a finger along the underside of Alex's furless arm. He felt the goosebumps immediately. Alex's breathing increased and a mix of need and pain flashed in his eyes before he pulled the arm away.

"Not everyone is greedy for money."

Alex looked away and whispered, "I hate you."

Tristan smiled, bringing up a research file to read. "No, you don't."

Alex headed for the shower, and Tristan could smell how the touch affected him. That was good. Unfortunately, now Tristan had trouble reading the file, distracted by what he imagined Alex was doing.

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