

Hemirtal-1

“It’s not just the devil that’s in the details,” James said into the phone as he walked. “It’s also success.” There was no one on the other end, but James enjoyed telling someone what he was doing, even if that someone didn’t exist. It wasn’t like he could afford to tell anyone real what was taking place.

“Take this job, for example. It couldn’t happen if I hadn’t paid that cute little blond to let me look through Armitage Programming’s employee records, or if I hadn’t studied my current target so carefully that I knew that if he had a flight to catch at nine-fifteen in the morning, he would leave his apartment building exactly fifty-three minutes earlier, or that at that same time, every Friday morning one of the other tenants left to go do her shopping.”

He caught the door as it opened. “Here, let me hold this for you,” he told the older lady.

“Why thank you,” she replied, smiling. “You wouldn’t imagine how difficult it is these days to come across someone with anything like common decency.”

“I’m just happy to help.” He entered the building, still watching her. “As I was saying,” he says and immediately walked into the man who’d been waiting for them to clear the entrance.

James caught him. “I am so sorry, I’m such a klutz.” He straightened him, then dusted the jacket, before the man pushed him aside.

“Just get out of my way, you’re delaying me.”

James hooked the phone between his cheek and shoulder and he looked through the wallet. “Or that he was so self-involved he wouldn’t notice me pick his pocket.” He took the identification card he found, one with Armitage Programming in black over a red-colored strip above the man’s picture. Below that was the name Michael Remington the Third. In its place, he put another card, identical, except for its inside. The security in the card was such he’d need months to find the right people to recreate it. This was easier.

He closed the wallet and ran outside, where Michael was putting his case in the trunk of a taxi.

“Sir! Is this your wallet?”

The man glared at him, noticed what he held then reached in one pocket then another. “How did you get that,” he demanded, snatching it out of James’s hand.

“I noticed it on the floor.”

Michael snorted as he looked through it. “Right.” Satisfied nothing was missing, he shouldered James aside to get into the taxi, slamming the door shut.

“Ass,” James whispered before putting the phone to his ear again. “Can you imagine that? I returned his wallet and not one once of gratitude.” He walked to the intersection and crossed with the pedestrians. “Of course, now the danger is that he’ll realize what I did before I’m finished, but it isn’t like he’s going to have to swipe into any of the company’s labs with it from Wisconsin, where the weekend vacation he won takes place. He won that after years of playing that clearing out sweepstakes. He was hoping for the multi-million dollar prize, but this isn’t a ‘ready to retire’ job, it’s a ‘I’m paying the bill’ job, so I wasn’t

investing millions. And it isn't like I could be certain he'd get out of town if I just handed him money. Now he's going to be gone until Monday morning, and even if things go slower than I plan, I'm going to be done before the end of the day today. And with that, part one is done, on to part two."

* * * * *

James now wore blue overalls with the name Fillion Electrical on the back, and a patch over his left breast proclaiming his name was Karl. He had a tablet in one hand, and a bag of tools over the other shoulder. He stepped into the large garage and a man in oil-stained overall approached.

"Can I help you?"

"I'm with Fillion," James answered, deepening his voice slightly, giving himself a more casual attitude. "I'm here to pick up our van." He looked at the tablet. "It's a twenty-two-thirty Ford Haul-All, same blue as I'm wearing with Fillion Electrical on the side."

"I know the one, I thought you guys weren't coming until Monday for it."

James shrugged. "Dunno what to tell you, I was called this morning and told to come pick it up, sent the form and all that. If you want o check it."

The mechanic glanced at the tablet James offered him. "That's fine. Stay here, I'll go get it. I can't have you walk through the garage. Insurance."

"That's fine." James looked at the man leave and studied the other mechanic. Watched how they moved, held themselves. James didn't do blue-collar jobs, but there was no telling when passing himself off as a mechanic would be handy, just like now as an electrician.

"You don't look like a Karl," someone said, and James turned. In a chair in the corner sat a girl of no more than twelve.

"Really? And what do I look like?"

"Not a what, a who." She studied him, head moving to the left and right. "You're more like a John or a James."

He didn't stiffen. He didn't how kids did it. Maybe the saying was true, and the truth did come out of babes' mouth, although he thought twelve was too old to be considered a babe, but they always did that, call him on his act.

"If I tell you that my name is really Karl, that it's just a coincidence I look like a John.

"James," she corrected.

"You're not going to buy it, are you?"

She shook her head.

He sighed. "Are you with your parents waiting on your car?" he already knew it wasn't why she was here, his luck wasn't that good.

She smiled. "My dad's getting *your* van." The emphasis on the word made it clear what she thought of that too.

"Look kid, I really don't have the time to argue with you." He took a ten from his wallet. "Will this be enough to keep you quiet until Monday? I'll have it back here before that so no one but you and me will have to know."

She took the bill. "I could tell my dad, anyway."

"Give me until tomorrow, then. I just need it for today. If I don't have it back by tomorrow morning, you tell him everything."

"Shouldn't you threaten me into doing what you tell me? That's how adults treat me usually."

"Your dad?" James asked.

"No, he treats me well, just others here and in the neighborhood."

"I don't threaten kids. You don't deserve it."

"Monday morning?" she asked, carefully folding the bill before placing it in her pocket.

"At the latest."

She nodded, and a few seconds later the roar of an engine approached.

And that was part two. He could now move on to the getting inside portion of the job.

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The van handled poorly, but James knew it was because he was used to something lower to the ground, and nimbler. He didn't own a high-end sports car. For one thing in his line of work being too noticeable was a bad thing, and for another, he had better things to do with his money than spend hundreds of thousands on a car, but his twenty thirty-two GM Arrow was a good, agile model anyone with a reasonable job could afford.

He took the turn into the underground parking lot entrance wide and slow. Putting a scratch on the thing was not part of the plan, and stopped by the guard booth.

"Afternoon," he said, handing over the tablet with the work order.

"Driver's license," the man said as he took it. He looked like he was losing the battle with age. His belly stretching the uniform in a way that had to be uncomfortable.

James handed over the license in the name of Karl Marlow's, and the guard stepped back into the booth, exiting a few seconds later to return both.

"You aren't in the system. I can't let you in."

"Are you sure?" James asked. "The company's usually good about making sure everything's in order before sending us in."

"Maybe that's how it usually is, but not today. Sorry."

James entered a number on his phone, looking in the rearview mirror to make sure no one was waiting to get in. "Hey, Jenny, Karl. I'm at the work order location but seemed they don't have me. Can you confirm they sent me to the right place?"

"Working on it," the woman answered.

"That's good to know, didn't anyone check to make sure they'd be ready for me ahead of time?"

"I'm working as fast as I can, James. Armitage isn't exactly Walmart. Their security is designed to keep people like me out."

"That's why they want you doing this, isn't it?" He smiled at the guard. "Is there somewhere I can park while this is resolved?"

"I'm afraid all I can let you do is a youie so you can leave. There are a couple of

shops with parking a few blocks away. You can come back once you have things in order.”

“And it’s done,” the woman said.

“Ah, good. Jenny just got off the phone with someone here and they’re supposed to have updated your logs.”

The guard stepped into the booth, read a screen, and returned. “You’re on the list.” He offered him a clipboard. “Please sign in.”

James chuckled as he wrote Karl’s name with something of a flourish. “They’re using paper? Isn’t this like some big programming company?” He handed it back.

“They are, but at our firm, we find that old school is better. Your parking spot is 430, that’s two levels down, right by the stair.” He handed him a card. “This will give you access to the ground floor. There you’re going to go check-in, they will upgrade your pass and tell you where the electrical room is.”

“Shouldn’t you be doing that?” James asked, clipping the card to the breast pocket.

“I just handle the parking. It’s a different company that does internal security.”

“Extra layers,” the woman on the phone said, “mean extra difficulties.”

“And they know to expect me?” he asked. And many more vulnerabilities.

“Your card’s enough.” Like this one. If it had been one company, they would have known to expect someone checking in, and would have grown curious if he didn’t show up, adding steps James would have had to go through and increasing the chances something would have gone wrong.

“Thanks. I’ll see you on the way out.” He drove in the phone still to his ear. “What caused the delay? I provided you with the electronic schematics.”

“They didn’t match.”

“Are we talking ‘you’ve been given the wrong info’ here?” He slowed and looked around for anything suspicious. He’d vetted the client, but even he wasn’t infallible.

“More like someone didn’t do there do diligence. Armitage upgraded their security two weeks before you contacted me. Knowing how you work, that’s when you took the contract.”

It had been the day before. But he’d promised himself a day of rest before a new job and stuck to it.

“Your client had probably been setting this up for a while and never checked if there had been changes. I didn’t see anything while I was in there that shows them to be on alert.”

“Thanks.”

“It’s what you pay me for. The new number will be in your inbox in five minutes.” The call ended.

And now on to part four.

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James now wore a lab coat over a gray suit as he climbed the stairs and counted the doors. For some reason, they hadn’t put the floor number on the doors. He exited on the seventh floor and headed for office 22, where Michael Remington the Third worked out of. Every employee had their own office to ensure privacy and security. Armitage worked on many contracts, some of which had defense ties. As far as his research showed, Mister the

Third didn't work on anything of that kind. That would have required an entirely different setup to get into his office.

He swiped the card at the reader for door twenty-two and received a buzz and red light. Frowning, he swiped it again, with the same result. He looked at the card, in case it had changed since he'd taken in, but no, it was the right one. As a pickpocket, he was cautious of anyone getting close to him, but he also knew someone more skilled was just around the corner.

He swiped it again, and again the red light and buzz.

"Is there a problem?" a woman asked, heading his way. She wore a lab coat over a pinstripe suit and skirt. The only item breaking the ensemble was the pair of white running shoes she wore.

James smiled, deftly moving the card so he held it covering Micheal's face. "Seems someone locked me out of my office."

She glanced at the card. "I'm guessing you're new here."

"I—no." He looked for some way to maneuver her out of—

"Don't worry about it. We've all done it in our first week. Your card's for the seventh floor."

"This is the seventh floor."

"It's the sixth."

"I counted the doors as I walked up the stairs."

She nodded. "But I'm guessing you didn't get the significance of Armitage being a European company during your orientation."

James looked at her, not masking his confusion. Not only hadn't he been to any orientation, but he couldn't see how the parent company being from overseas had any bearing on this not being the seventh floor.

"In Europe, the ground floor is floor zero."

James understood. "So floor one was what I thought was two, and so on. Whose bright idea was it to not mark the doors then?"

She chuckled. "I can't tell you that. Are you going to be okay?"

"Now that you've set me straight."

"I'm glad." She walked away and James watched her for a second before heading back for the stairs. It was a shame he wouldn't be back this way. She had a nice walk.

One floor up, office twenty-two unlocked with the swipe of the card. The office looked more like something out of a country club than a twenty-first-century state-of-the-art company. The desk was heavy and wood, something dark he couldn't identify—James was a metal and glass kind of guy, with a swivel chair wrapped in padded leather. Bookcases lined two walls, also in dark wood. And had books on programming on them, along with pictures and a badminton trophy. Nothing in his research had indicated Michael played badminton.

He sat and appreciated the choice of the chair. It was plush and comfortable. If Michael spent hours typing at this computer, this was a nice chair to do it in. Unlike the office, the computer was state-of-the art. Some designs without a brand name on them.

Probably proprietary technology from Armitage directly. The way things went in the information world, he was surprised the client hadn't asked him to bring the whole computer instead of only the specific files.

The client had provided the names of the files, where on the company servers they would be, and Jenny had designed the program that would do the work. James inserted the thumb drive and sat back.

James was a people person. He was the one clients went to when they needed something acquired. He only did information and items. People he left for others. He didn't ask questions beyond what he needed to get the job done, and he didn't look at what he took when it was information. He didn't want to know.

Ninety-five percent of his clients were corporations looking to acquire something a competitor created, or in certain cases was stolen from them, and in one memorable case that James had stolen and was then hired to retrieve.

The drive beeped, telling him it was done, and he pulled it out of the computer as an alarm sounded.

What were the odds someone else had triggered the alarm just as he was pulling it out?

He headed for the door. People were walking toward the elevators and stairs. Quickly he stepped out of the office and joined in the flow.

"Do you know what's going on?" someone asked.

"Isn't this the fire alarm?" another answered.

"No, this is something else. I was here for the fire drill last month."

"I heard it's a terrorist attack."

"Really? The alarm came on five seconds ago and you already heard something?"

Ahead, the elevators became visible, along with two security guards checking IDs. The crowd was backing up. So it would take time before the group James was with would reach them, but he didn't care to reach the guards at all.

He slipped into a corridor with a sign for a restroom. No one questioned him, so he kept going. On approaching it, he glanced over his shoulder. The group had passed the corridor, and he took out his phone to access his email. He needed to call Jenny to get a way out. His phone had no signal.

He cursed. In this day and age, there was only one reason a phone didn't have a signal. The signal was blocked.

"Are you sure?" a woman asked, authority in her voice.

James hurried. He couldn't go back to the office. If this was about him, they'd check there. He needed to get out of sight until things quieted down. If he could out-wait them, he'd be able to make his way outside. He swiped the card at the locks he passed. Each would have a dedicated card, but there had to be some sort of common room. Something with multiple exits.

"What did you hear?" a man asked. They were some ways behind him, around the last turn at least.

"Someone's gotten in and accessed one of the computers."

“Really? In this company, how the hell can they even tell someone’s not accessing the computer they should?”

James slowed, this might tell him who this was about. If it wasn’t him, he could play lost employee and get out.

“Luck, in this case. One of the programmers made this a long weekend, but he called in about something, and while he was on the phone, someone noted his computer was active. Before they could terminate that connection, it ended, so they sounded the alarm.”

James picked up speed. Definitely about him. Of all the rotten luck. Why couldn’t have Michael Remington the Third done the normal thing and not call the company while on vacation?

The lock beep and turned green.

In the distance, a door opened and closed. “Empty,” the man said.

He entered the room and closed the door.

He looked for another way out and cursed. He was in some sort of storage room. Large, but with only one exit. He opened the door and heard footsteps. He closed it. They were too close. He didn’t even want to risk poking his head out in case they were in this corridor. The door had locked, but had the system registered he’d swipe the card?

Dumb question.

The shelves had large containers and crates. The first two were hammered shut. The third was filled with some computer parts and the fourth was...

It was metal, smooth with a few electronic readouts. Wires ran behind it to the wall. At least one was power, based on the lights blinking, eight feet in length four wide. The bottom more square than round, while the top was the reverse.

He could make out conversation approaching.

He searched the side for a way to open or unlock it. There was a seam, so it had—It beeped as the hand holding the ID passed over a bare patch, then there was a click, a hiss and the top began lifting. James grabbed it and helped it along, happy it didn’t resist.

The inside was a black foam mattress in the bottom, with a variety of electronic devices inside the cover. No window, so that was good, but no obvious air vent either, not so good. Suffocating wasn’t on his agenda.

“And I’m telling you, he’s cheating on me.”

James climbed in. He had to hope leaving it open a crack would be enough. The foam slowly gave under his weight. Good quality memory foam, he decided as he stretched on it. He lowered the cover as the lock outside beeped. He noted the mechanical latch inside the cover. Why would someone lock themselves in this coffin?

He had the barest crack as someone entered the room.

“No one,” the man said.

“We need to check the room.”

“Come on, look, there’s no one.”

“He could be in one of the crates.”

“And he could have swiped the lock, pushed the door open, and kept going, hoping we’d take the time to inspect things. There isn’t another way out, there’s no one stupid

enough to lock himself in here.”

Good, James thought, just what he wanted—

“And that, if nothing else, is why we’re going to check. This guy isn’t escaping while I’m on watch.”

“Fine, but I’m telling you, we’re wasting our time.”

“You check that crate I’m going to check whatever that is.”

Cursing, James closed the cover completely, then pushed the latch in place, keeping a finger on it. He didn’t want to lose track of it in the utter darkness. Their voices became muffled to the point of inaudibility. The casket was jostled and something pricked his shoulder. He bit back the surprise and moved away from whatever was poking out as much as he could, but the foam was holding him in place.

It was rather comfortable; he decided. He’d have to investigate who made it and see about getting some for his bed. He relaxed as the coffin shook more and he thought he hears someone say something about it being jammed. Good, once they were gone, he’d get out and just wait.

Or he could take a nap.

A nap sounded good.

Lights appeared before him. Pinpricks, distant stars that moved until they formed shapes.

Oh, James realized, they were words.

Welcome Player.

Please relax as the readings are taken.

You are about to embark on a great journey.

Welcome to the world of Hemirtal.

Go forth and make a name for yourself.