

Miranda looked at the screen; the telemetry from Cooper had gone dead. The only way that could happen was if he'd died. She sighed in annoyance. Sure, it took care of having to explain why they would be going their separate ways after this job, but he'd been useful when it came to the heavy lifting and pounding targets into submission.

It also meant Tristan knew someone was after him. Hopefully, he'd think that Cooper was like most bounty hunters and worked alone, but she couldn't count on that. The last time she had used trickery to capture him. That wouldn't work this time.

She turned the screen off and walked to their room. She couldn't face Tristan directly; he was far stronger than she was. She needed leverage. She had to find the human. She had the video of the restaurant before Cooper went silent, but she didn't have the local contacts to use. It would take her a few days to find someone she could pressure into helping her.

Her next partner had to be good with computers; she couldn't afford to always depend on local contacts for that. He still had to be strong and good in bed. If she was going to have a guy on her ship, he had to be useful when they weren't in the middle of a job.

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When Jack returned to the restaurant, Alex was already sitting at a table. He kept his purchase behind his back as he approached.

Alex looked up and smiled at him. "I was wondering if you were going to make it back in time." He craned his neck, trying to see what Jack was hiding.

"No peeking," Jack said, moving to make sure Alex didn't see it. "I had trouble finding something special enough for you. I hope you didn't wait too long."

"Don't worry about it. Watching you walk made it worth it." Alex's eyes were dreamy, and Jack felt his ears grow hot. He looked at his feet. "What did you get me?" Alex asked, enthusiastically.

Jack took a breath and put the statue on the table. "This is a reproduction of a Defender. The real ones are only found in our holiest of temples, but most homes have small ones for protection." He paused and looked at it with reverence. "I don't know if their power extends this far, but this way, I know that no matter what happens to me, you'll be protected."

Alex gingerly touched it. "It's beautiful." He looked up at Jack, some sorrow in his eyes. "I'm afraid what I got you doesn't really measure up to this." He stood and moved next to the Samalian. He took out a

diamond-shaped piece of metal, an inch in length, and with Jack's permission, he applied it between his pecks, parting the fur so it wouldn't bunch under it. After a second it beeped, and Alex let go.

"It's staying in place with some sort of genetic adhesive that's now coded to your DNA. If you press the top and bottom points at the same time, it deactivates, and you can remove it. Touch the center, and you'll see what it does."

Jack did as instructed, and a hologram of Alex smiling up at him appeared before him. It was close to the statue's height, and it had been taken today as he was wearing the same clothes. Jack's breath caught in his throat, and he reached for it.

"I wanted you to have a reminder of your time with me. When you get the job, you might not be able to stay here. For all I know, you'll leave, and I'll never see you again. I'm hoping that with this you'll be able to remember me, no matter where you end up going." Alex's voice was sorrowful.

Jack took Alex's face in his hands, brought it close, and kissed him tenderly. "I will never forget you, Alex," he said, looking in his eyes. "With the Defender as my witness. I swear to you that no matter how far I go, I will remember you. If I have to leave you, I promise we will be together again. I will always love you, Alex."

Alex looked at him, eyes wet, and wrapped his arms around his neck, kissing him passionately.

"How about we go home?" Jack whispered.

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On the way back to Alex's apartment, Jack had them stop at a sensuality shop, getting him to remain outside. He returned with a bag, and wouldn't tell him what was in it.

Once in the apartment, Jack guided Alex to the shower. There he took a blindfold from the bag. "Would...would you put this on?"

Alex chuckled and put it on.

Jack hugged Alex from behind, startling him. "Are you sure you're okay with this?" he asked, uncertainty in his voice. "I don't want you to feel forced."

"I trust you," was the only reply Alex gave.

Jack kissed the nape of Alex's neck as he undid his shirt. Once it was off, he gently ran his fingers over his skin, the rough pads making Alex shiver. He didn't hurry. He explored every inch of Alex's chest and arms, causing goosebumps wherever his fingers touched.

Once he knew each curve and valley, Jack undid Alex's belt, popped

the button, and lowered the zipper. He could smell the arousal coming off him as he knelt, pulling down the pants. He had him step out of them. He took off Alex's socks and then caressed his feet. He traced the edge of his toes, his heel, and ankles. Then he slowly moved up, running his fingers up the furless calves, knees, and thighs. His fingers moved from the inside of his legs to his hips to caressing his ass. As inviting as it looked, he ignored the human's erection.

He stepped away, and Alex sighed. Jack looked at him, panting. "You should spend more time in the sun," he whispered.

Alex's breathing calmed. "How can you tell?"

"Human skin gets darker in the sun, right?"

"I see you've been doing some reading." Alex smiled.

"I haven't had much to do. You're at work most of the time." Jack took off his pants, then the projector off his chest.

"What about you? Does your fur turn black in the sun?"

"No, it gets pale." He moved closer to Alex just enough so his fur could caress his skin. Alex gasped lightly and shivered.

Jack turned the shower on. It only took a moment for it to reach the preset temperature. He moved Alex under the jet, and he yelped.

"Sorry," Jack whispered. The water was warmer than he preferred but colder than Alex did. It was a temperature they both agreed was manageable when they showered together.

He got them wet, then turned the water off. He reached into the bag and pulled out a bar of soap. He waved it under Alex's nose.

Alex breathed in the smell. "This is wonderful, what it is?"

"It's a soap made to excite the senses."

Alex smiled. "You're the only thing I need to stimulate my senses."

Jack kissed him. "This is supposed to be something special." He lathered the soap into the human's skin, Alex enjoying the smell. It reminded Tristan of an early morning back home with wet earth and dew-covered leaves.

Alex shivered and moaned, as the chemicals in the soap played around with his nerve receptors. Jack did his whole body, leaving one part for last. He lathered his hands and spread it over Alex's groin. He rubbed it in the fur there, then over his penis. Alex shuddered, and Jack had to hold him up. He smiled as a moan escaped Alex's lips.

"Ah, fuck," he said in a long breath. "This is good stuff." He gasped as Jack's hand went over a particularly sensitive area. "Be careful. The way you're going, I'm going to make one hell of a mess."

"Later," Jack whispered. He took his hand off his lover and gave him time to regain control of his legs. He handed him the soap and placed Alex's hands on his chest. He dug his fingers into Jack's fur for a

moment, then lathered him up.

Tristan prepared himself for the assault, but his eyes still went wide. Hot and cold fought over his chest and needles of pleasure prickled his skin, at the same time making him think it was pain. This was nothing like the prickling he'd felt on his hands as he lathered the human. He growled and had to hold on to the wall to stay standing.

The sensations came at random; he couldn't control them. He looked at Alex and, at that moment, hated him for taking away his control. He wanted to shove Alex away and rinse this stuff off him.

"Jack? Are you okay?"

For a moment, Tristan didn't remember who Jack was. He noted the concern in the human's voice and remembered. He forced the mask back on. Jack liked to feel, he didn't mind not being in control, and he enjoyed these kinds of out-of-control sensations.

He forced his body to relax. "Yeah, I am. I was just surprised by how strong this is."

"It's great, isn't it?"

"That's one word for it," Tristan said.

Alex continued to lather him, taking his time. Unlike on the human's body, where the suds were a pale blue, in Tristan's fur they turned pink. Alex didn't see that as he was taking full advantage of the blindness to explore Jack's body, massaging the soap in the fur and feeling those hard muscle shudder as the soap showered Tristan with sensations.

When Alex soaped up Tristan's groin, the Samalian slammed a hand against the wall and cursed in his native tongue, glaring at the human. Alex was smiling, but if he knew what Tristan was saying, the smile wouldn't last.

Tristan's control was wrenched away from him again as he felt himself get hard. It didn't matter to him that it had been part of the plan; he wasn't the one making it happen. The pleasure he was feeling was so intense that he didn't know if he could stop himself from reaching orgasm.

Alex released him and, while the sensations were still there, without the hands moving over him, they weren't as intense. Tristan panted, forcing his control back shred by shred.

Alex offered him the soap and Tristan looked at it with hate. He had just enough control over himself not to swat it out of Alex's hand. He took it and put it in the bag, promising himself to destroy it as soon as he could.

He turned the water on, and the sensations were washed away. He sighed in relief, his body finally feeling like it was his again. He put Jack back in place, and he pulled Alex up, holding him under the water.

When there was no longer any pink in the water running down the drain, Jack held Alex against him. He let the water run over both of them. "I love you," he whispered in Alex's ear, and then demonstrated it to him.

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Even this late, the Ilomare Square Market was open. Tristan only saw a closed booth here and there. The traffic was much lighter, which made moving while holding the large box on his shoulder easier.

The human was sleeping. Their love-making had tired him out, he'd made sure of that. First in the shower, and then multiple time on his bed. To ensure he would sleep through the night, he'd laced his last drink with a sleeping agent. There was no danger of him waking up before Tristan was done.

He took the long way back to the alley, discreetly looking around, using the reflective surfaces around him. He only entered it once he was certain no one was following him. He stopped two paces in, put the box down, and pulled a portable scanner from it. If the merc had a partner, it was entirely possible they had booby-trapped the body or taken it away, which would simplify his night.

He scanned for organics first and confirmed the body was still there. Next, a scan for electronic transmission, which would indicate a sensor, returned nothing. Then, an electrical scan. This one was more difficult as there were wires in the wall and enough devices close by to create static. He narrowed the focus as much as he could. He couldn't see any spikes from the wiring in the wall, so nothing drawing power in the alley. The only power close to the body was something small, the battery from the merc's gun. Finally, he scanned for chemicals. He didn't expect there to be any mechanical explosives as the merc had been intent on taking him alive, but he hadn't stayed alive this long by taking chances. The scan confirmed the alley was clear.

He pulled the body out from the pile of garbage and searched it: a cred card, but no IDs. That meant he had an ID chip and probably more implants. His hardened flesh and boosted muscles certainly supported that idea. He could get more information out of him if he pulled out whatever chips he had, but he didn't have the equipment needed to get anything out of them and, really, what could he learn? The merc's name? If he had partners? Their identities? He didn't have any information that would really change his plans because he already worked under the assumption he had at least one partner so it wouldn't be worth the extra time and energy.

From the box, he pulled out black full-body coveralls, which he put on, then a large mono-edge knife. He would have preferred using a laser-edge since that would cauterize the cuts as he made them, but the light generated could attract attention.

The mono-edge would get the job done; the edge was so thin it sliced through molecules, allowing it to cut almost anything. Toughened skin and muscles wouldn't be any trouble.

He cut the body at the joints. No point in making his job more difficult than it had to be. Ligaments couldn't take as much reinforcement, otherwise they lost the needed flexibility to function. Once in pieces, the body fit nicely in the box. The knife went in after, then the jumpsuit, which he removed carefully, making sure not to get any of the blood on himself. The scanner attached to his belt, which left him with the gun.

Once he closed the box, he was going to seal it. He couldn't afford the chance that blood might leak out. If he put the gun in, he'd lose it. It was the safest thing to do as the box was shielded. While the gun was small enough to fit in his pocket and he wasn't planning on going anywhere that would scan for it, there was always a possibility he'd walk by a law officer with an active scanner.

He had to play it safe, he reminded himself. He couldn't afford to draw attention to himself right now, not when he was so close to finding out who was behind his imprisonment. But this was an unknown design, it might be unique. What could he learn from studying it? With a sigh, he put it in a pocket. He'd deal with any problems that it might cause.

He looked up at the sky. He wished he was back at his base where it was quiet, with only him and his tools. Soon, he told himself. Once this was over, he'd go back and never leave its safety. This was enough excitement to last him the rest of his life.

With the box back on his shoulder, he walked out of the market, called an automated transport, and directed it to an industrial sector outside the city. He'd looked for a government foundry because he knew the security would be much lower there.

But . . .

He took the gun out.

Weapon-scanning had to be the most basic security for a place like that. Even if they were now fully automated, machinery could still be damaged.

He had the transport detour so he could drop it at his cache. That was the only place he could keep the gun, anyway. He couldn't bring it to the human's apartment, and it wouldn't cause enough of a delay to

matter.

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He stood before the complex while the transport flew away. He knew there was a time when people worked in places like these. The walkway he was standing on was proof of that. He could also see catwalks running between buildings. It spoke to how old this complex was because it had been centuries since having living workers in such dangerous places had been outlawed.

If this had been a corporate complex, Tristan wouldn't have bothered with it. Each machine would have been fitted with a security program and enough personality to make its own decisions. But this building was government-run. The machines would have just the minimum personality needed to do their jobs, and whatever security system was installed would be the cheapest one available when the complex was built.

It took him less than five minutes to bypass the gate security. Inside the complex, the machines rolled and flew by, ignoring him. The cameras were visible and rare. There were enough blind spots he could have flown the transport in.

The foundry building was locked. It took him a little longer to get the door open, but it didn't stop him. The heat hit him like a fist. He took a step back as he hadn't expected that. He had known it would be hot—after all, the number of death caused by the heat in places like these was why the laws had been passed—but this place could be Gerinian's playground.

He forced himself to go in and walk the hundred paces until he stood at the edge of a large pit, half a mile deep. The heat came from it, and the bottom was glowing bright yellow-white. Gerinian's eyes would be that color, he imagined. The color of molten metal. He threw the box in and left.

He leaned against the door, trying not to pass out. There was a slight breeze, and he found himself shivering in it. That was done. The intense heat would destroy anything organic and melt whatever implants he had. After a minute's rest, he left the complex.

Another transport took him back to his cache, where he took what he'd need for this next part. From there it was a long, but quiet, walk to Harry's laboratory. He was only attacked twice, and he dispatched them, leaving the bodies in the alley. He didn't want to take the time to make examples of them.

He stood in the open doorway, looking up the stairs, scanner in

hand. He hadn't seen where the scanning plates were on his previous visits, so he had to locate and neutralize them. He checked for an active scan mechanism and got nothing. That was odd; there had to be a scanner. The holes in the wall were proof of a delivery system that needed a trigger. It couldn't be passive. That would only activate on energy readings, and therefore be useless most of the time.

He adjusted the scanner to look for energy readings. As well hidden as the plates were, they had to use power. He got readings from behind the holes, quietly waiting to deliver whatever Harry had concocted to kill anyone trying to get in without his consent.

No other readings on the walls or ceiling. Okay, he knew there was something here. There was no way Harry would have the delivery system unconnected to a trigger. The holes weren't visible enough to act as a bluff. He scanned the stairwell again and was about to change the setting when he noticed a slight readout in the stairs themselves.

He increased the sensitivity and confirmed there was energy there. He went through the other settings but got nothing. Just that faint energy under the stairs, waiting. It had to be pressure plates, as anything else would have registered on one of the settings. Tristan was impressed. In this day and age of sophisticated technology, no one would think to look for that. If Harry had thought to mask the batteries on the triggers, even he wouldn't have discovered them.

Now, how did they talk? The two possibilities were a broadcast signal or embedded wires in the stairs and walls. The broadcast was simple to take care of. He took out a signal neutralizer, gave it a range of twenty meters, set it for a blanket coverage, and turned it on.

The wires he couldn't detect unless energy was traveling through them, which would trigger the system. He crouched and studied the stairs. He could see marks where they had been pried off, which told him Harry hadn't been too concerned about the quality of the work. He looked at the wall. Even with all the debris, pockmarks, and time-caused damage, he couldn't see any indication of wires running between the trigger and delivery system.

He sighed and stood. He didn't know enough about Harry to be certain, but he didn't think he would have bothered with the work needed to hide wires. That meant the broadcast system was the only one there, probably.

He hated guessing.

He moved back as much as he could, covered his mouth and nose, and put a foot on the step. He pressed down. Nothing happened. He moved closer and pressed harder. Nothing, not even a sound.

These were good-quality triggers. The last time he'd dealt with

pressure plates, back on Tetsui, they had clicked. He wanted to take one of them out, see how these were different. Unfortunately, doing that would alert Harry. When he was back to base, he'd have to acquire multiple designs. He didn't want to be surprised by pressure plates again.

The lock on the door was from Juriken Industries. These were good, better than most, actually. It would discourage most passing thieves. It took Tristan ten minutes to unlock it.

He scanned the reception area. Nothing. He went to the hallway, but there was nothing there either, not even pressure plates. Harry was comfortable with the system he had in the stairwell, and he had to admit it was reasonably good. The door to the lab had another JI lock.

Once inside, he went directly to the decontamination chamber. It was a sealed unit where only one of the doors opened at a time. The decontamination cycle took twenty seconds—he'd found himself counting it during his visits. While the cycle was running, both doors locked, and the cycle had to run in both directions. Harry wouldn't want to bring any contaminants inside his lab.

The chamber was made of the same transparent alloy as the walls of the genetic laboratory. It was able to withstand explosions of a much higher yield than what he was going to use to kill Harry.

He removed the floor inside the chamber, as it was the only place with enough space for the explosive. The trigger went in the door control, set to activate ten seconds after the open/close cycle.

With the chamber set up, he moved to Harry's computer to find out who he had betrayed him too. It didn't have any security, and he didn't even have to resurrect the call list. There it was, the number he'd called right after his first visit. A number he'd seen before, in Mitch's contact list. The number for Miranda Sunstar.

Well, he wasn't going to have to go looking for her, she was hunting him. She had to be that merc's partner. He hoped she showed herself; he wanted to make her pay for the part she'd played in his lost ten years.

Tristan sprayed a biological enzyme as he left the laboratory, resetting the locks. The enzyme would destroy any trace he'd been here. Then he headed back to the human's apartment. Jack had to be there before he woke up.