

Miranda smiled at the people she walked by in the lobby of the apartment building. Some smiled back, but most didn't pay attention to her. She was wearing mostly casual clothing, armored pants, a reinforced shirt, and an armored jacket. She only had a small gun at her back, under the jacket. She didn't want to alarm anyone.

It had taken a few days, but she'd gotten a name for Tristan's lover: Alexander Bartholomew Crimson. With that, she was able to find out where he worked, at Luminex, as a coercionist, and where he lived. That was in this very building, and a few minutes before she arrived, her contact informed her that Tristan had just left. She'd almost asked her to track him but decided against it. Knowing where he went wouldn't help her, and he'd be back to his lover at some point.

While he was away was the perfect time for her to have her talk with Alexander. She wasn't planning on hurting him, that's why she only brought the small gun. All she wanted to do was find out details about Tristan, and use him to get the Samalian to a location of her choosing. She needed to control the environment where she would confront him if she wanted any chances of winning.

Shouts and cries made her turn and reach for her gun. A squad of security guards rushed in, pushing everyone aside. Half of them went up the stairs, leaving one to guard the door, while the others went up the elevators, two per elevator. They left two guards to prevent anyone from following.

Their black uniforms didn't have any marking, so they weren't part of the Law. Someone had pissed off a corporation big time. She'd taken a few of those contracts over the years, high pay for almost no work. Usually, it was a disgruntled employee who'd gotten lucky enough to run off with some corporate secret. Amateurs who had no idea how to cover their trail, if they even bothered trying.

A corporation would put out a bounty, and a bounty hunter would get the target and bring it back in. It was exceedingly rare they used their own people. For them to do that meant they were furious and that she, or he, had taken something crucial.

She'd have to wait. They were professionals; they would have covered all the access points, and she wouldn't be able to talk one of them into letting her pass.

It only took twenty minutes. The guards at the stairwell and elevator received a message and left. Those who had gone up didn't leave through the lobby. Either their target had escaped, and they were chasing him, or they had left through another exit with their quarry in tow.

Alexander's apartment was on the twentieth floor, and she realized

things wouldn't go her way as soon as the elevator doors opened. People were crowding the hall, loudly talking about the capture that had happened, dismay in their voice. He'd been such a quiet guy, never caused problems.

She pushed her way through them, ignoring their complaints. Her cursing started softly as she neared the door. She could already see the 'restricted' sign on the door lock. She punched the wall with a loud curse, making people stare at her.

This made no sense. He couldn't have been the one the guards had been after. Tristan worked alone, and everything she'd read on him confirmed that. He was extremely skilled, and he never used others on a job. He couldn't have needed it here. Except, it couldn't be a coincidence the man he'd been staying with had been scooped up by a corporation.

Well, there was nothing she could do about it; she'd lost her leverage against Tristan. She considered finding out which corporation had Alexander and breaking him out. Rescuing him would certainly get her close to Tristan as he obviously cared about him, but she wasn't equipped for that. She'd need a whole crew, and she didn't have the time to put one together.

She was going to have to go after Tristan herself. She was going to need bigger guns.

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Tristan stood on the top of a high-rise commercial building, looking at the ex-president's house, on the other side of the city. Immediately after leaving the human's apartment, he'd gone to his cache to pick up a few things and he'd then taken a public shuttle to the other side of the planet, to this city, to do the reconnaissance on the house. Unfortunately, a walk by showed him the whole neighborhood had high security.

This was why he was looking at it through high-power viewers, from miles away. Streets had multiple cameras, and every house had them. Approaching without being recorded would be difficult.

The house had cameras from Alient. Those not only recorded images, but body-heat patterns, density, and body language to look through disguises. It checked all those against a comprehensive list of criminals, which included him, and if even one of them matched the records, it alerted someone to do a live verification.

As good as he was, Tristan couldn't fool such a system.

Throughout the landscape around the house, he saw indications of a

sensor net. Like the cameras, a central system had to control it. If he'd seen that on another house, one not using Alient cameras, he'd think it was just for show, not connected, and maybe not even active. But here, he wasn't going to take a chance.

From the positions of the emitters he saw, the whole house was covered. He would have to be closer to see if there were any dead spots, but he didn't expect it. Triggering the sensor would warn someone, maybe even trigger an audio alarm. He'd need another walk by to see who the manufacturer was so he could determine how to bypass that.

Tristan focused the viewer on the door, then the lock, and frowned.

He didn't recognize it.

How could he not recognize a lock? He'd taken them all apart. The housing was one piece and, from where he was, he couldn't see how it was removed. He took a picture of it and sent that to his tablet. He instructed it to do a visual search, and within moments the search canceled itself.

He queried the tablet. One of the first things he'd done when he bought it was to install programs to increase the tablet's intelligence and give it a self-preservation instinct. It informed him it had detected sniffer programs hanging around the search results for the image.

That meant he had to use public terminals. Alone on the rooftop, he screamed. This was what came of being out of date on security systems. He was going to hurt this man, hurt him very badly.

It took him three days to find the information he needed, spread over a hundred public terminals over two cities, requiring more changes of clothing, posture, and height than he could count. If sniffer programs were present, it meant they would track any query and investigate. He could make sure to avoid cameras, but he also had to ensure no one could give a consistent description of him, let alone mention his fur.

The lock was from Tytanial. He knew that company; they made the best locks in the universe. This particular one had come on the market four years ago, and they guaranteed no one could bypass it.

The basic part of the lock was just a numbered keypad, but having the right code wasn't sufficient as each key had a sensor that read fingertip details: fingerprints, heat pattern, and capillary distribution. Two out of the three had to match those of the authorized users. The casing could only be removed by entering a code on the keypad, which created the same problem.

Without taking the time to find one of those locks and take it apart, he couldn't bypass it. For the moment, Tytanial's claim would remain.

To burn off some of his anger, he took another walk by the house, recording the sensor net. The net was from Gernuos, an excellent system, and there were no dead-zones in it. Still, that was a system he'd studied. He knew how to get around it.

It shouldn't have surprised him that ultimately, he'd have to depend on human error to get in the house. That was always the most reliable way to do it. He went back to his rooftop to observe the house some more.

The man left the house each day, and he took transit to the next city.

He went to an office building and spent the day there.

Tristan followed him once, getting close enough that he could have killed him right there, or captured him and dragged him to a dark room where he could deliver all the pain this man deserved. The temptation was strong, but he wanted the satisfaction of showing him he wasn't safe in his own home.

The man always locked the house when he was at the office, with one exception: twice a week, he let in an older female as he left for work. She cleaned the house. Tristan could watch her work through the windows. After watching her for two weeks, he knew she routinely opened a window when she started cleaning the upper floor. She only closed it once the entire level was clean, two hours later.

He knew how he was getting in.

He timed his next walk by to coincide with the man leaving the house and intercepted the shutdown and activation code for the sensor net, as well as the frequency it used. The next day, he hid a small emitter near the house. The Gernuos's one flaw was that it had a memory. If an identical event happened often enough, it remembered the pattern and stopped paying attention to it. He set the emitter to shut down the sensor net every day for one minute, at one-thirty in the afternoon. That put it about thirty minutes after she opened the window.

The first three times it happened, a security officer showed up. On the fourth one, a technician came to verify the system. He didn't find anything wrong. He even scanned the area, looking for an external trigger, but the emitter was on standby by then and didn't register. A technician came again for the fifth and sixth time. On the seventh, no one showed up. By the tenth day, Tristan was confident the sensor had incorporated the shutdown as part of its regular use.

Getting around the cameras required a little more work. He had to shut down the whole neighborhood so none of them could catch sight of him, so he was dealing with more than one company's equipment.

The odds were many of those cameras were of inferior quality, maybe

not even connected to a central system. After all, in a place where everyone else had great security, it was easy to count on that to keep you safe. Still, he had to base how to deal with it on his target's system.

He couldn't go to each security company and disable the cameras they controlled individually from there. Even if he could do that without anyone noticing the sabotage, he simply didn't have that kind of time to get them all done.

He also couldn't infiltrate their system. Alient checked their integrity multiple times a day. He couldn't install a transmitter near their system, to insert an infection, as they did random visual checks on all their equipment and locations near the company. There was a reason Alient was a top-of-the-line system.

The one thing they had to rely on, which was out of their control, was power. They and all other security companies were connected to the power grid. They all had backups for exactly the kind of situation Tristan was going to create, but those took a few seconds to engage, and the systems then needed a few minutes to come fully back up.

It took Tristan another three weeks to get what he needed and put everything in place.

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He was in a shadowed corner in front of the house, in the one blind spot the street camera had. His target had left hours ago, and the woman was now opening the window.

Almost thirty minutes later, the timer on his pad reached zero. Three different power junctions, in three cities, exploded. A moment later, the sensor net shut down.

Tristan ran. He jumped the fence, crossed the yard, leaped on the awning, pulled himself through the window, and rolled into the room.

The net came back up.

The room was empty. He listened; the female was working in a different room. He wanted to avoid killing her. It would raise suspicion if she weren't there to be let out when the man returned. He wanted his quarry completely unaware of the invasion until he struck.

All he needed to avoid her was patience. He knew she cleaned the ground floor before starting on the second. He waited until she went in a room on the other side of the house from the stairs and silently went down them.

The scent of detergent in the air confirmed she had cleaned this level. He quietly looked through the rooms until he found the study. A good-sized room, with a solid-looking wooden desk, shelves with

framed pictures of what was probably his family, small statues, and other items that were meaningless to Tristan.

He looked through the desk, depleting the power pack in the Azeru hidden under a drawer, and disconnecting the alarm trigger. The computer was a good-quality Tomika. He turned it on, and it requested an access code. He could get through that, but the amount of time it would require, compared with how little he expected to find in it, didn't make it worthwhile.

His search of the rest of the room didn't reveal anything. No other hidden weapons, no secret compartments. This man didn't keep secrets in this place. Tristan sat in one of the comfortable chairs and waited.

A few hours later, the entry door opened. There was some talking, too faint for Tristan to understand, and it closed. Footsteps walked in front of the closed study door, up the stairs, and into one of the rooms. When he was moving again, the man was wearing different shoes. He came down the stairs, slid the study door opened, took a step in, and froze.

Tristan gave him a vicious smile.

Emerill glared at him. "What are you doing here?" He walked to his desk.

Tristan kept the smile vicious, but he was surprised at the reaction. He'd expected fear. Instead, he'd gotten surprise, and controlled surprise at that. This man wasn't worried about finding him in his home; he simply seemed...annoyed?

"I thought you said I'd never have to see you again. You got what you wanted." He looked over his shoulder as he took out a decanter. "Get out of my house."

Tristan's smile faltered, but the man didn't see it. He was pouring himself a drink. Why wasn't he afraid, or even worried, just a little? This man had arranged to have Tristan imprisoned, stolen ten years of his life. He couldn't think this was going to end well for him.

He hadn't expected him to panic, to reach for the useless gun in fear. That man had run a multi-planetary corporation, he'd know how to keep control of himself, but why was he acting like they knew each other?

The man sat. "Fine. What do you want now?" He breathed in the drink's aroma, looking over the rim at Tristan. He frowned, put the glass down, and leaned forward. "You're not him." Perplexed, he straightened and lowered his right hand behind the desk. "Who are you?"

"My name is Tristan." He kept his voice neutral, and his anger in

check. There was something else going on here.

The man thought it over, then shook his head. “What do you want?”

“I want to know why you arranged to have me imprisoned.”

The man studied him as he sipped his drink. “I’ve never seen you before, so I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Tristan flicked a data chip on the desk. The man looked at it for a moment, then started his computer. He flipped it over his finger a few times, studying it, before inserting it into the reader.

Tristan watched him as he read the files. There was surprise, doubt, annoyance, and then understanding. Finally, he leaned back in his seat. He leveled a grim expression on Tristan. “So, you’re one of his victims too.”

If he hadn’t watched him as he read, Tristan would think he was trying to lay the blame at someone else’s feet, but the information had been new to him.

“Who’s victim?”

“He’s a Samalian, like you. For years he was my secretary. I thought I could trust him, but then I discovered he’d been using my company’s resources to fund illegal operations, under my name.” He nodded to the computer. “This was obviously one of them.”

Tristan thought about it for a moment, then he laughed in surprise. He stopped it almost as soon as it started. “Justin,” he growled. It made sense, Justin always preferred manipulating others into doing his dirty work, setting up layers after layers of insulation between himself and the operation. He also hated Tristan enough to arrange the imprisonment, and he was sufficiently overconfident to think he wouldn’t be able to escape.

But it had been a genius move to make Emerill the one in charge of it. If Tristan did escape, that’s who would receive the reprisal. If he hadn’t controlled his anger or this man hadn’t remained as calm as he had, he would be dead, and Tristan wouldn’t know there had been someone else behind it.

“You know him?” That seem to surprise Emerill.

Tristan nodded. “What did he do to you?” It wouldn’t change anything, but he was curious as to what his brother had done here.

“He stole my company,” Emerill snarled. “When I confronted him about what he’d done, he didn’t even deny it. He told me, instead, that if I retired gracefully and ceded the company to him, none of ‘my’ evil actions would come to light. I couldn’t think of a way to prove I wasn’t behind them, so I had no choice. I figured the board would oppose him and throw him out, but that didn’t happen. I’m guessing he had something on them too.” He took a long swallow.

Tristan studied the man. He wasn't afraid. He didn't see Tristan as his enemy, or even someone to worry about. They were just two of Justin's victims. It was dangerous for him to think that way; he should still be afraid. But Tristan had something more important to deal with right now.

"Where is he?"

The man shrugged. "As far as I know, he's still running my company."

Tristan thought about it for a moment. He didn't care about the man owing him, but since this was Justin, his vendetta was no longer against Luminex. "Do you want your company back?"

The man looked at him. "Why would you do that?"

"I'm going to take him down. I have no interest in your company so, once I'm done, I can send you the information proving you weren't behind the operations."

"There's nothing. I looked. I had experts look for it."

"There is. Justin always documents what he does. It's brought him down before."

"He's going to destroy it. The moment he realizes what you're after, it's going to be gone."

Tristan chuckled. "Oh, he won't know I'm after that because I'm not. I don't particularly care about what he did to you, but I'm going to be in his office, at his computer. I'm going to have to dig through it, for my own purposes, so finding that for you won't be much more work."

The human finished his drink thoughtfully. "What's it going to cost me?"

Tristan smiled. He liked people who knew how this worked. "Every credit he stole while running the company."

He was silent. Tristan didn't pressure him for an answer. Like he said, he didn't care. If the human refused, he was still going after his brother, and Luminex would end up in the hands of whoever was cunning enough to get it.

Finally, the human nodded.

Tristan stood. "I'll be in contact with you soon."

"Wait," Emerill said before Tristan reached the door. He joined him, holding a black access card. "This is going to help you."

"What is it?"

"It's a master pass to the building. It's going to unlock every door you encounter."

"Justin will have deactivated it."

"He doesn't know about it. No one does. I had it made as the building was finished. I always figured it was a good idea to have an escape plan, in case of a hostile takeover. I kept it when he ousted me. I told

myself I was going to use it to get back in, to find the evidence I needed to get my company back, but I never had the nerve.”

Tristan took it and turned it over in his hand. This would certainly make things easier.

“I’ll deactivate the security system,” Emerill said.

“No, I want it to register my presence here. I want the alarms to sound. I want Justin to know I’m coming for him.” And he wanted Miranda to know. A plan was forming, one that would resolve both problems.