

“Hey, Miranda? Hun?” The gruff voice came from the cockpit. “You’re gonna want to come up here.”

Miranda looked up from the adjustment she was making to the weapon’s targeting array. “What is it, Rand?”

“The hack I did in the spaceport’s security just paid off. Our target just arrived.”

She put the tool in its bag and climbed up the ladder. Rand looked over his shoulder at her, and with a smile, he pulled up a video of someone walking along a corridor.

“Are you sure?” She stood behind his chair looking at the screen. The camera had been far from their target. So, so she couldn’t make out any details, not even if the person on the screen was furry, as their target was.

“Certain. I fed the videos I got from his prison stays into my recognition program, and it used that to identify him.” He pressed a button, and multiple screens came up, matching his walking gait, his body structure, as well as multiple other indicators she couldn’t read.

She shook her head in amusement. “Alright, that’s good.” He didn’t have to show all that; she trusted him. Computers were his thing.

Rand glanced at her. “You know, I’m not entirely comfortable with the situation.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, that contact of yours is providing us with pretty much everything: the location, the decoy, even the time frame he was going to arrive in. If he was able to get all that information, he has a lot of resources, so why give it to us? Doesn’t he have people he trusts?”

Miranda shrugged. “I don’t care why he hired us. He’s paying us a lot of money to take him out of circulation.”

“So, we’re terminating him?”

She smiled. “Now now, Rand. You know me better than that.” She pressed against him, her breasts on each side of his neck, and reached for the screen. She called up folders and flipped through them until she found the one she wanted. “Why kill someone when he’s worth so much more alive?”

She reread the file as Rand did. It was a bounty on their target, Tristan. The first item on the list of reasons was the destruction of the Tetsui Station, six hundred and twenty-eight casualties. The next was the destruction of the Osagua, a cruise ship. Sixty-three dead. She quickly read through the list: half a dozen body counts higher than fifty, escaped from four prisons, multiple thefts, and destruction of property.

The last item was the value of the bounty. “Three million?” He

looked up at her. “Seriously?”

She nodded. “I already have a prison lined up to take him. One he won’t escape from.” She turned and started down the ladder. “Start getting things ready.”

“Man,” he whispered in awe, “with that kind of money, we’ll be able to retire.”

She paused at the bottom of the ladder and sighed. If he was thinking about retiring, it was time for her to find a new partner.

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Tristan looked at the warehouse and its surroundings. No obvious security, which confirmed the information from the plans he’d acquired. Not that it meant anything; most companies didn’t advertise their security measures. He took out a visor, placed it over his eyes, and cycled through the settings.

The first thing he noted was that the building was shielded. He couldn’t see inside from where he was. He wasn’t surprised; the building was used for storage, which made it an attractive target for thieves. Nothing made a thief’s job easier than being able to see where everything was before even setting foot inside the building.

He turned his view to the ground, and with the switch of a setting, the laser grid appeared. A decent security measure, if all they had to deal with were amateurs. Another setting showed three people moving around the periphery of the building. He lifted the visor and saw nothing. They were wearing stealth suits, clever. Still, not something he had to worry about. He went through all the settings and didn’t learn anything more.

This was going to be an easy job. Get in, retrieve the item, drop it where instructed, and get back to his workshop. He knew this job was counterproductive. He should have stayed at his base and continued with his research, except he had nothing left to take apart, no new ship schematics to go through, and no computer system to study. There had been nothing new for months now.

He’d been so bored that he’d found himself looking over the mercenary boards. That’s where he found this retrieval job. Something simple, quickly done, to keep him busy until something new hit the market: a weapon, maybe, or a computer. Celaran was due to put out their next model soon, weren’t they? When he got back to base, he’d find something to research that would keep him busy for years. This was the last time he would venture out without a real need for it.

Hadn’t he told himself that the last time this had happened?

He had all the information he could get from this position, so he moved to the next one: the roof of the building next door. It wasn't being used, so while the sign claimed it was protected by a security system called 'Jandof,' a scan had revealed no security. The lock didn't even slow him down. He was on the roof before he'd put his tools away. From this vantage, he looked the warehouse over again.

The roof also had a laser grid, but it wasn't as well maintained. He could spot three locations that were no longer covered. There were no cameras on the roof, as well as no guards. That was sloppy of them.

He picked the spot for his arrival and setup the harpoon, an old Leberi he'd acquired just before coming here. He waited until the guards were as far as they were going to get, folded his ears back against the noise of the propellant, and fired.

The point pierced the wall.

He placed the harpoon against the post next to him, and it anchored in place. He tightened the thin line, which was almost invisible to him, and would be impossible for the guards to see against the night sky. He hooked the propulsor on the line, then waited. When the guards cycled to the far point, he crossed the gap. He stopped when he was over his chosen spot, and dropped down.

Being able to see the grid had made it simple for him to navigate, find a hole large enough to step in, and carefully move to the door. It had the most basic lock, old and rusted. Old enough, Tristan couldn't identify who had designed it. He popped the cover and looked it over. He rubbed the rust off and found the word 'Firnom' etched. He had never come across that name before. He smiled; he'd have something to research when he got back to base.

The lock bypassed, he looked down the stairwell. Clear, no camera, no grid, and no sensors. Again, that was sloppy. The door at the bottom of the steps wasn't locked and had no security.

He shook his head. The company who owned the building had fallen into the same trap most did, only putting security on the outside accesses.

As he scanned the corridor, he noticed there were multiple roll doors with biometric locks, which were only there to give the impression of security.

He picked up two bodies, through the walls, three storage lockers down from where he was. He moved silently, the signatures only telling him one of the bodies was against the far wall, on the floor. The other was standing. As he got close, he heard whimpering.

He put his muzzle close to the door and breathed in. The scent was human, a male, and a female. He took out a small camera, linked it to

the visor, and put it on the floor, pushing it the gap until it could look inside.

The form against the wall was the female, her clothing in tatters. She was the one whimpering.

The male was standing. He had his back to Tristan. The man was tall, wide-shouldered, and had shaggy black hair. He wore reinforced work pants, and his jacket was a military design. He didn't have any visible weapons.

The room was bare, except for them. The item he was looking for wasn't there, and the man didn't match the description of the thief. They weren't important.

But the woman was in distress. Rescuing her would cost him time, but she might know something, which could save time. The building was large, and the item might be in any one of the storage lockers.

He extended his claws, pulled the roll-door up, and headed for the man.

The woman gasped at seeing him.

The man turned, pulled out a large knife from his belt, and swung it at Tristan. He dodged, swiped back, and was blocked. They exchanged a few blows, none of them connecting. The man frowned; he clearly hadn't expected someone who knew how to fight.

Tristan blocked the next swing and punched the man in the stomach, staggering him back. The woman quickly scuttled aside to avoid being stepped on.

With a yell, the man charged him, knife first. Tristan moved aside, grabbed his attacker's wrist, and twisted it. It snapped. The man screamed as the knife fell. Tristan used the man's momentum to spin him and send him head first into the wall. While he was stunned, Tristan wrapped an arm around his neck and was about to snap it when he remembered the woman.

Killing the man would be more expedient, but it would make her wary. He tightened his arm until the man passed out, then he let him drop to the floor. He pulled electrical wires from his bag and used that to tie him up.

He went to the woman and cut her bonds with a claw. He noticed a bundle in the center of the wall, where she had been sprawled before. He thought about getting it for her, but she could take care of that herself.

Before he could say anything, she wrapped her arms around his neck.

"Thank you! Oh, gods be praised, thank you. I was so scared. I didn't think I'd get out of here alive."

Tristan forced himself not to react. His first instinct was to throw her

off him, but he had rescued her, so he had to act with some compassion. He put his arms around her. "You're welcome. You're going to be safe now." He released her and had to untangle her arms from him. He took a step back. Her clothes were so tattered that she might as well be naked. "Did he abuse you?" he asked because he felt a show of concern would make her trust him.

She looked down at herself and, with a look of surprise, tried to cover up as best as she could. "He hit me and pushed me around." That was evident by her bruises. "But no, he didn't get to do that to me." She looked at him, gratefulness on her face. "You stopped him before that."

He nodded at her, and then remembered that humans considered nudity a problem. He went to the man and took off his jacket, having to untie his hands to accomplish it. The man didn't stir.

"How long have you been here?" he asked, handing it to her. "Around an hour, I think."

They had arrived just before he started checking the place over.

He pulled out a holo. "On your way in, did you see something that looked like this?" She looked at it, then shook her head. This had been a waste of time after all. He almost left but remembered that she would expect him to do more, now that he had saved her. "I want you to stay here. I'll contact the authorities."

"Is...Am I going to be safe?"

"I tied him back up," Tristan said but saw that didn't calm her. He picked up the knife from the floor and handed it to her. "Here, if he moves, use that on him."

She looked at him with shock, before forcing her face to a semblance of neutrality. "I...Okay."

Tristan turned and left. Starting with where he'd come in, he unlocked every locker and searched them for the item. He went through the entire floor without finding it. He went down a floor, and there, in the fourth locker, he found a well-setup workroom instead of a pile of containers. On the workbench, he saw the item he was looking for.

He went to it but stopped a few steps short. His ears shook in worry before he stilled them. Something didn't feel right. On the walls were tools, various scanners, multiple types of saws, and automated lock crackers. Everything was clean and neat, and on the table was the item. No tools around it, no indications it had been worked on.

Why was it there? Just like that? Where anyone who might break in could see it? No thief who knew what he was doing would leave an item on display like this in such an unsecured place unless that was the point.

He crouched and checked the floor. No plates. He scanned the room. No sensor triggers. It was safe to approach. He examined the item, and it showed no signs of tampering: no plates underneath, and no wires leading to something to stun him. He smelled it and his muzzle wrinkled in disgust. There was a distinct scent of iridan. Someone had put a contact poison on it.

Why would anyone do that? Right, this was a setup. Someone was after him. It didn't surprise him, but it did annoy him. He went through the list of people he'd interacted with the previous times he'd ventured out, those left alive, and he couldn't think of any who'd want to track him down like this. He wasn't in the habit of leaving anyone alive who could cause him trouble in the future.

He also had to remember that there was a price on his head, but this felt too elaborate to be the work of bounty hunters. They tended to be predators of opportunity, not trap-layers.

He caught motion in the corner of his eye. He stood and spun, claws out. The woman in the doorway took a step back.

He forced his irritation down. "I told you to stay in the room," he managed to say in an even voice.

"I'm sorry, I was afraid."

Tristan went to comment but stopped. Something was wrong. He quickly looked her over. Jacket, tattered clothing, knife in hand... held in a comfortable grip. This wasn't someone who was wary of a weapon. She held a switch in her other hand.

His mind flashed to when she had wrapped her arms around his neck. He reached back, but the electricity hit him before he could reach that far. He fell down, twitching. She had been very good; he hadn't picked up on her act, and very few people could fool him like that. He focused and forced his hand to reach behind him. He needed to take off whatever she'd put on him.

"Still conscious?" Her voice was melodious, confident, and held a hint of surprise. "And able to move. I'm impressed. I was told you were tough, but I have to admit I hadn't expected that."

He felt something solid against his finger. Just a little more, and he'd be able to— The shock hit him harder, and this time, after the world exploded to white, it faded to black.

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Miranda put the restraints on Tristan, then injected him with a drug that was going to keep him unconscious for hours, at least long enough to bring him back to the ship and put him under cryo. She rolled him

on his back and crouched next to him.

She ran a finger along his wide muzzle, then ran a hand through his deep brown fur. She'd never had an alien for a partner. From the file she'd been provided, she knew he was capable with computers, and a good pilot. Those were things she always liked in her partners. That he was strong, able to fight, as demonstrated by him taking down Rand, and able to get into places were good bonuses.

She sighed. "If only the bounty on you wasn't so appealing, I might have given you a try." One of the triangular ears on the top of his head twitched. Maybe he was trying to tell her he'd rather that than the prison ship.

She stood, and went back to the locker where she had been held 'captive.' She stood next to Rand's unconscious form and looked down at him. This would have been so much easier, and cleaner, if Tristan had killed him; she hadn't expected Rand to survive the fight. Tristan didn't normally leave attackers alive. Now she was going to have to deal with his histrionics when she told him she wasn't retiring, and that they were going their separate ways.

She'd also have to pay him his share.

He'd known from the start that she wasn't going to retire until she died. He'd even agreed with it, back then, but it seemed that ten years had changed his mind. Maybe she should just leave him tied up for someone to find.

She sighed and untied him. No, that wasn't how she worked. She wasn't going to cheat him out of his share.

"I'm not having sex with my next partner," she told the unconscious man. "You hear that? You men just can't stay detached if you put your dick inside your partner."

She shook him. "Come on, Rand, wake up. We have him; time to leave."