

Chapter 17

The landing lot facing the Telrize Complex was filled with hovers that ranged from inexpensive models to vehicles that would take everything Alex had amassed in his mercenary career to afford. For security reasons the complex didn't allow any outside vehicles within its gate, so Tristan found a spot at the far end of the lot to land and they walked to the gate, dressed in the uniform of the Telrize technicians.

The guard checked their IDs, calling in because he'd never seen them before. Alex had arranged for the system to think they'd been on the night shift until today. He looked up as a transport shuttle flew around the complex to descend where he could see the warehouse in the distance through the gate. Once allowed in, Tristan picked the closest of the few remaining ground-hovers and flew them to their first destination.

With nothing else to do, Alex studied the area. The map had made the complex feel like a small city, and as they passed restaurants, a medical clinic, gyms, and various stores, it reinforced the sense of it. All they needed to add was housing and this *would* be a city. Alex wondered if, with all the amenities beings so close at hand, it led some managers to encourage their employees to sleep at the office, to ensure as little time was lost as possible.

Their destination was a seven-story-tall building made of nondescript metal, glass, and permacrete, like all those around it. The only distinctive mark on it was the number 327; large over the double-door entrance.

Tristan eased the hover into one of the free spots, and Alex looked around at the deserted road. Everyone was in their office at this time of the day. He followed Tristan to the door, where he swiped his ID.

The door didn't slide out of their way. The reader even flashed red and gave the standard refusal buzzer. He looked at Alex.

"The ID's valid," Alex said, "and it's a workday. You shouldn't need to scan your ID." He looked in. "I can see a security desk, but not the guard."

Tristan pulled tools out of his bag. "Keep an eye out."

Alex leaned back against wall. "I can imagine that with the security at the gate they don't feel the need to put too many other guards in the buildings, but this one, with one of their storage mainframes, should have one at all time. Luminex had eight guards in the lobby, and they raised that to twelve in the morning and evening, when most employees came and went."

"I remember," Tristan said. "It didn't do them any good."

"Never does, I've come to realize. Anyone determined enough will get in regardless of the security. Some places simply need someone extremely determined rather than passingly so."

The reader made a pleasant beep, and the door slid open. Tristan placed the cover back on it. Alex moved to step through, but Tristan grabbed his arm, his nose wrinkling. He finished securing the cover and poked his head through the door, sniffing, then taking a deeper breath.

"It's okay." He walked through and Alex followed him.

With the door closed behind him, he smelled it: the faint chemical smell. Not a cleaner, but something he'd expect to smell in a hospital, not a data processing center. He headed for the counter while Tristan worked on the internal lock.

"I have two downed guards." He went around the counter, and bent down to check for pulses. It looked like they'd slid out of their chairs when... "They're alive. Unconscious." He looked at the screens, still displaying the internal security they'd been looking at before the gas had affected them. Every screen he looked at showed him a similar scene: people unconscious on the floor or slumped in chairs. "The entire building was gassed. I'm not seeing anyone conscious."

"There's going to be a team moving around. Find them."

Alex made contact with the system, instructing it to look for any motion in the security feed. Fortunately, since he was talking to it from the security console one of the guards had been logged into, it obeyed immediately, bringing up three cameras looking at the same group.

"I have a team of four." He called up the location of the cameras. "On this floor, at the back." He watched two enter an office. A screen flicked with the new camera feed. A camera in the office? Even Luminex hadn't been that paranoid, as far as he knew. They looked around, exited, moved on to the next office. "They're doing a door to door search."

"They don't know where the stacks are." Tristan was in front of the desk.

"How? It took me less than ten minutes to get through the security and locate it."

Tristan smiled, and Alex's heart skipped a beat. "They don't have you. That gives us the advantage."

"Do you want me to lock down the lifts? I gave myself control of the system when I first got in."

"You didn't mention that."

Alex looked at Tristan. He pointed to the console. "Computer." To himself. "Me. I figured what I'd do was obvious enough not to need to mention it."

"It's about telling me all the information, Alex. Don't assume I'll know everything you—"

"Tristan, you know things I'm planning to do and haven't told you yet. I'll make sure to tell you everything from now on. Am I locking them down?"

"No, it will tip them someone else is here, or that someone woke up. At best that'll put them on their guard, at worst, they have more of what they used to gas the building and will release more of it." Tristan headed for the stairs.

Alex told the system to deactivate those alarms and to keep an audio sensor on him at all time, then followed Tristan. On the fourth floor, Tristan cracked the door open and placed an ear to the opening while Alex looked at the security feed on his datapad. Tristan glanced at him.

"All clear. They've made it through six more offices. At this rate they'll still be on the ground floor when we leave."

Tristan hurried down the corridor until he reached a plain door.

"The lock is independent of the system," Alex said when he didn't find it within the computer.

Tristan took tools out and spent slightly longer than usual getting it to respond. When the door opened, the cold air made their breath mist. Alex began shivering.

"I should have brought a jacket." He headed in.

The mainframe stacks were black columns five-feet in height with lights blinking down the uneven surface, letting the experts know the essentials about the status of the data. If he looked at it the right way, they could almost be buildings, with the blinking lights windows where people walked, hiding the light.

Tristan handed him two of the four disrupters and set them on top of the stack at each corner. One of them was enough to turn all eighty-one of the stacks into useless lumps of plastic and polycarbonate wafers, but this was Tristan, and if there was one thing he wanted, it was the certainty nothing would survive the destruction he caused. He'd set them with a three-hour delay, ensuring they were nowhere near here when they went off.

"Make a change to yours. Add a trigger setting. Any change in temperature, give it a ten-minute delay before that becomes active."

Alex had to search through its options manually to find that one; there was no intelligence in it to talk with. Tristan was waiting by the door when Alex placed the first one on top of the stack. The second one went faster, and they exited. Tristan spent time working on the lock, before closing it. It blinked and indicated it was locked.

They headed for the stairs

"So that's why it took longer," Alex said. "I thought it was just one of the better locks."

"I don't want them knowing we were there. They might decide to take care in entering, and it's possible they could keep the disrupters from triggering."

Alex checked his datapad as Tristan reached for the door. He motioned for Tristan to stop. "They're in the stairwell," he whispered. He watched them climb from the ground to the second floor. He waited a few seconds after they exited it and the door closed before nodding.

They silently went down. Alex headed to the counter. "Do you want me to set an alarm for them to trigger? Any delays will work in our favor."

"I don't want the Law to get involved. It's just going to complicate things. Have you left the trail leading back to you?"

"Doing that now. It's going to send them to a handful of motel and communication stations over the city, eventually leading them to where you decide the meeting will happen."

"Meeting?"

"Yes, meeting. You and him in an out of the way place, lots of explosions, dead bodies all around."

"You call that a meeting?"

"Well, you kept referring to arranging a meeting with Masters, and that's how that one turned out. It sort of set the pattern."

Tristan shook his head, and Alex couldn't tell if he was amused or exasperated.

"How do you think they got in?" Alex asked at they left the building.

"There's bound to be holes in the security grid."

Alex eyed him. "You didn't check?"

"I have you to get me in, so why waste the time?"

Alex didn't say anything as he sat in the hover and Tristan got them to the warehouse. This wasn't the first time Tristan had relied on Alex to get him through security, and he felt pride at that, but this was the first time Tristan had acknowledged it. That felt even better, but the fact that he hadn't also done his own check worried Alex. Tristan was normally so thorough.

The warehouse came into view, and kept on coming until it was all Alex could see—one giant wall at least four-hundred feet tall. There were no visible points of entry Alex could see as they rode along it. Tristan stopped the hover two buildings past it, and they walked back to it, slipping between a building and the warehouse.

They walked well past the point where Alex lost sight of the building, and as far as he could tell, there was nothing different about the section Tristan stopped at. Tristan ran his hand against the wall, and hooked a claw between a joint barely visible.

"I'm not going to ask how you knew about that," Alex said as Tristan pulled a cover off, revealing circuits. "There was nothing anywhere about any kind of access panels."

Tristan used tools within the panel. "Remember when you said you didn't know any criminals who would have the patience to bother going through a physical inspection without a certainty of a payout?" He pulled out a circuit from within the panel.

"Yes."

Tristan did something else, and a section of the wall recessed and slid out of the way. "I do."

Alex was too stunned to reply. He just looked into the doorway. It was a few feet deep, then it opened up to the inside of the warehouse. Tristan placed the cover back and it was seamless. He went in and Alex followed.

Cavernous didn't begin to describe the space they were in. It was the sound of it, because the only lights were the occasional ones from fliers and gliders carrying items back and forth. The light coming from behind them vanished as the door closed.

The darkness was near-total. A softly glowing sign announced, "*Emergency Exit.*"

"Is that a joke?" Alex asked. "Do they think the carriers will have a need to rush out of here?"

"Those date back from when there was an anti-robot uprising here a few centuries ago. Maybe six or seven. Humans worked here, and they needed ways to leave when things went wrong."

"And they just left them when they returned to using only machines?"

Tristan shrugged. "Cheaper than sealing them all. And as you said, what carrier is going to rush out of here in a panic?"

"Okay, how are we going to find what we're after? I hadn't counted on this being totally dark."

Tristan pressed something in his hands. A Visor, by the shape. He put them on, and instantly the

inside was as bright as if all the lights were on.

Alex whistled. "That's impressive. I didn't know this level of clarity could be achieved." Now he could see how big the space was as it vanished in the distance. The ceiling was forty, or maybe fifty-feet high.

"Arcon doesn't advertise this model. It's exclusively for the military, and only their elite forces."

"So of course you not only know about it, but you know where to get some. Bought or acquired?"

"Bought. Time didn't allow for anything else."

"Can I point out a slight flaw in the plan?"

"If it's actually a flaw."

"Remember when you worked out the timeframe for this job and you came up with being in and out in three hours?"

"You said there are only nine locations the fabricator can be in."

"Yes, nine possibilities on twelve floors like this. I did say it wasn't realistic to expect to be done in three. When I tried to elaborate, you told me you knew what you were doing. Like with getting us in here, I thought you had a trick ready to use. Do you?"

Tristan didn't answer. To Alex it sounded like he was grumbling under his breath. "Where is the closest one?" he finally snapped.

Alex took out his datapad and thought better than turning it on while wearing the visor. He raised them over his head, the darkness feeling even more absolute after the brightness. He consulted the datapad.

"The closest stop on this floor is in that direction, quite a ways." He adjusted the brightness settings until he barely saw it. With the visor on, it was still almost too bright. When he looked up, Tristan was a few hundred steps away.

Alex put the pad away and ran to catch up to him.

Tristan had known what he was doing; he always knew. This was games he played on Alex. Tricks to test him. They weren't as common as they had been at the start, when Tristan would have Alex so confused he had trouble remembering his own name. In fact, it had been close to a year since the last one. He'd just have to be on his guard.

He cursed as he jumped out of the way of a ground-locked hover that came barreling at them, carrying crates on its flat body. Of course it didn't know they were there, since they didn't broadcast anything like an ID it would recognize. It stopped at a rack of crates, added those it carried, turned and zoomed past them, vanishing in the distance in the direction there were going.

Grinning, Alex switched on his implant. He wasn't walking all the way there. He listened to the rare code floating about—the carriers talking to the system. He took out his pad and connected to the closest one, overriding its current orders and having it come to heel next to him. It didn't even fight him, that was how dumb of a system it was.

He sat on it, held onto the guard rail, and told it to go. He caught up to Tristan in two seconds, actually stopping ahead of him. Tristan raised an eyebrow.

"Unless you insist on walking, this is going to be faster."

The visor was so sharp that he saw the annoyance on Tristan's face before it was gone. Tristan stepped on and sat as the hover sped forward. The carrier wasn't made to carry people, and unless they held onto the rail, they slid about.

Tristan gave him a location ID number to go to and Alex instructed the hover. There, Tristan looked through the crates and broke the top off. He took out a cylindrical container and put that in his tool bag.

To reach the first dead zone, he gave the carrier the location ID next to it. It stopped and, unsurprisingly enough, the location was empty, with enough dust to show it had been years since anything had been there.

Their next stop was two floors up, so he got the hover to take them to an emergency ladder. They would have to climb up, unless he was willing to risk boarding one of the flying carriers, which were the only ones able to move between floors.

On that floor he commandeered another ground-hover, and Tristan had him make three stops for various components before they reached the next dead zone.

While they rode, Tristan mixed the canister's content with three smaller ones. He ended up with a lumpy paste that he used to fill the smaller canisters. The excess went back in the larger one, which he left taped to the hover's rail when he got off.

"That isn't going to blow up, is it?"

"Not unless the hover manages to run a current through it."

This dead zone location had large crates, opened with bars so the animals it had contained could breathe. That wasn't needed anymore. They were all dead, had been for a long time. He didn't see any feeding system, so their stay here should have been short. The ship receiving them would have put them under cryo immediately.

A quick check told him that like in any cage with more than one animal, there had been violence, and the winner ate the loser. He couldn't imagine the noise that would have made. Even if there had been only a handful of humans in the warehouse, one would have heard and this could have been avoided.

Tristan looked at the scene with a grim expression.

On the floor above, Tristan got more electronic components, and he assembled what Alex could recognize as a detonator after the number he'd seen Tristan build over the years.

They went up one more floor to another dead zone spot—empty. He was about to get back on the hover when a bright light shone in the distance. He turned to tell Tristan, but the Samalian put a finger to his lips. Then Alex heard it, the sound of conversation; faint in the distance. Tristan indicated the hover before heading in the voices' direction. Alex released it and followed him. Alex hid between crates, taking off the visor as the light became too bright to stand.

"How far?" a man asked.

"A little further, on the left," a woman replied.

"Jefferson, how's security?"

"Still unaware. My programs are intercepting the signal before it reaches their office and looping it. I'm just keeping an eye on things to make sure the antibodies don't get to it."

Alex peeked around the crate. A team of six were heading in his direction, shining high-powered lights before them and occasionally up and around. No wonder he'd seen them coming from so far away.

They walked by him and he silently followed them, matching his steps with the click clack of their hard soles. Not a group that expected to encounter anyone. They stopped and shone their lights at the dead zone he and Tristan had been at.

"That's three," the man in charge said with an annoyed sigh. He took out a comm unit. "Bronson, tell me you found it."

"Nothing resembling a fabricator at any of the spots you told us to check." The voice on the comm sounded older.

"Aswaygo? Anything?"

"Still one to go. Be there in five."

The man cursed. "Jefferson, are you certain there's only these nine places where it can be?"

"I'm going off the information the boss acquired. If that wasn't accurate, you can't blame me."

The man sighed. "I'm not looking to assign blame, I'm asking for your opinion. You're the coercionist, you're the one who knows this stuff."

"Yes," Jefferson replied. "These nine places are the only ones."

More cursing.

Tristan caught his attention. He motioned at the woman furthest back and ran a finger across her throat, then pointed at his feet.

Alex nodded and silently moved among the crates until he was behind her. He took the knife from his boot. They were all polycarbon models, the only type he could slip through scanners. He couldn't wait for someone to come up with something more advanced that would fool them.

He moved. He had a hand over her mouth at the same time he stabbed her in the neck, severing her spine. He held her up, listening for any indications someone had heard. When no one raised their voice, he threw her over his shoulder, careless of the blood dripping down his uniform, and brought her to Tristan's feet.

The Samalian went through her belongings—a rifle clipped to her vest and two handhelds. He looked them over, undid the holsters, and handed those to Alex. He added them to his belt. She had various chips in her pocket—data and credit—along with an old model datapad and a comm unit, turned off.

She had no ID. No indications who she was working for, but he knew they worked for Baran. Who else would be looking for the fabricator?

"Marc," the leader's comm said, "this stop's empty too."

The man cursed.

Tristan looked unhappy with her possessions. He pocketed the chips and unclipped the rifle, thoughtful.

When Tristan looked up, Alex indicated the mercs and ran a finger across his throat with a raised

eyebrow. It would be simple enough to kill them all.

The leader spoke in soft tones with one of the other men—Jefferson, maybe? He couldn't make out the words.

Tristan shook his head.

Alex raised his eyebrow higher. If they weren't killing them, what was the plan?

"All right, we're doing another sweep. Considering how much the boss is paying us, I'm not going back before I am certain that what he wants isn't here. Jefferson, do your magic and find out what happened to it, if it's not here. I want us to spread one per row and keep an eye out for— Where's Anita?"

Tristan motioned for them to leave. Alex didn't argue. They made it four rows down before the shout came.

"Anita's dead! Someone cut her spine!"

"Fan out, shoot on sight. We're supposed to be the only ones in here, so whoever they are, they're competition. Probably whoever fried the stacks. Aswaygo, Bronson, be on your guard; we have company. Shoot on sight. Take one alive if possible, but do not put yourself at risk. I'm not losing anyone else."

Alex took control of the nearest hover and they climbed on. When there were in complete darkness again, he put the visor back on.

"They haven't found it," Alex whispered. "Do you think they missed it?"

Tristan shook his head. "They're pros. The leader is ex-military, two of them were Law. If they say it isn't here, it isn't."

"So Olirian screwed up and it still got shipped?"

"We're still alive, so no."

"The only other possibility is that someone got to it first."

Tristan nodded grimly.

Alex thought over what he'd done—the ease with which he'd gotten in, the other coercionist's words confirming the security had been weak. The company had become lax, relying on automation to provide the security. As good as he and Tristan were, others could have gotten in.

And ignoring those who knew about the virus, there was only one group of people who might see an industrial fabricator and decide they could make good money off it, especially if they realized it had been purposely built for biochemical production.

"They're going to come to the same conclusion," Alex said.

"They're doing a second sweep, so that gives us time."

"I need to ask. The guy who told you about the entrance. Can he have told anyone else?"

"I'll ask him, but I don't expect he did. If one person was willing to do the needed work to find a way in, possibly work out the blind spots, others were too."

"Finding out which gang has it isn't going to be easy. The number of them who deal drugs has to be in the thousands."

Tristan smiled. "I know people to ask."

Alex raised an eyebrow.

"I've been here before, and you're forgetting a detail: we're looking for a gang who's been able to offer designer drugs at cut-rate prices recently. Of those, there can't be many."

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