

Like every other time, the guard didn't bother looking up when Alex swiped his ID and got the green light. No wonder Tristan had just walked in and caused trouble. If the guard had bothered looking up, he would have known the alien didn't belong here.

This time it wouldn't have helped. Alex did belong here, and he wasn't going to cause any trouble, he hoped. If his plan went well, he'd leave at the end of the day with everyone else, and no one would realize what he'd done until he was off-planet.

One of the supervisors eyed him when he walked by on his way to his desk, but he didn't say anything. Alex still had the company president's protection, for now.

"You okay?" the woman to his left asked as he sat down.

"Fine. Had a check-up this morning." Since everyone knew about his time in the 'hospital' by now, he figured no one would question yet another visit.

"They're really that worried? Just what happened to you?"

He shrugged, took out the earpiece from the stand next to the monitor, and put it in his ear. Next, he slid a data chip in, having to force himself not to look around. It wasn't unusual for someone to use a data chip; they all worked on coercion programs at home. As far as anyone knew, that's just what his was for, but telling himself that didn't help much. He couldn't help feeling like everyone knew there was nothing on it, that he wouldn't pull anything from it, but put his programs from the system on the chip.

He looked up as he let the system know he was ready for an assignment, and groaned as he saw his interrogator walk down the aisle. When was she going to get fed up with this and move on to an actual criminal? Well, she wouldn't be his problem much longer.

He began the attack as soon as the target came in, but he noticed that she slowed by his cubicle. Probably glaring at his back, cursing him for something he had no part in. Maybe he should lodge a complaint against her before leaving. Thumbing his nose at her was the least he could do as a response to what she'd put him through.

The target wasn't very smart, and it only took him fifteen minutes to talk and code it into giving him the files he was after. As he packaged them, he transferred the programs he'd used to the chip, camouflaging the transfer among the other commands.

Bringing programs home was common. After all, unless he stayed late, that was the only place he could work on them. But because they were written for company use, he didn't technically own them, and while bringing one or two programs was common, he was planning on taking each and every program he'd written in his years here.

With his interrogator still paying attention to him, she would question that, and maybe even accuse him of stealing company property. And for once, she'd be right. He was cautious with the transfer, hiding some with an assignment, and others with information requests or among the standard background file movements.

He was done two hours before the end of the day, but he remained at his desk. He might have had the president's protection, but if he left after only a few hours of work it would be noticed, and today of all days he wanted to remain as unnoticed as possible, so he continued working.

When the workday ended, he took the chip out of the monitor and removed his earpiece, but didn't place that back on the holder. He kept it in his hand as he stood and joined the crowd of other coercionists heading out of the building.

The earpiece was the one piece of technology he couldn't get or recreate. It was proprietary technology, which translated computer's language into something he could understand, and

his words back into the computer's language. Lay people thought the coercionist only reprogrammed computers, but they forgot that even the simplest of systems had an AI at its center, and those had to be convinced or tricked into letting code in. Coercing could be done without talking, but it was much, much more difficult that way.

The throng of workers pushed him closer to the exit, and he looked around, trying to see if his interrogator was around. She didn't always see him out, but today would be the one time it could cause problems. The earpiece in his closed fist felt burning hot. He wondered if they had heat sensors, and if it could tell what he was holding.

The answer came when he stepped through the sensor, and it beeped. Alex had only a moment to make his decision as the guard looked up in surprise, and the other workers gasped. Even Alex couldn't recall the last time one of the sensors had gone off at the end of a day.

He bolted.

He shoved the people out of his way, and they were too surprised to resist. He eyed the doors, still held open by people leaving. If they closed, he'd be trapped. Could the doors be forced closed? It would hurt people, but he wasn't sure the company cared about that anymore.

He kept shoving, but now people complained and tried to push him back. Someone behind yelled for him to stop. A man, so she wasn't involved yet. He had no doubt she'd find out shortly. This had to be what she'd been hoping for; Alex had just incriminated himself. If she caught him, she'd be able to do anything she wanted to him.

Alex became more brutal in his shove as his anger increased. He wouldn't be stopped now. Jack depended on him. He thought he heard himself growl.

Something caught his leg, and he started going down. In a moment of panic, he almost let go of the earpiece to grab onto someone, but hands caught him and kept him from falling.

"Are you okay?" A woman asked.

Instead of answering, Alex shoved her aside. The commotion had caused the crowd by the doors to stop and turn to see what was happening, and many of the doors were allowed to close.

The crowd felt like it was fighting him now, trying to grab him, hold him back. People spoke and yelled, but he wasn't listening. Of the three doors directly ahead of him, one was now closed, and the other two were in the process of closing.

He shoved the guy before him hard, not to push him aside, but back, forcing him into the woman behind him and she into someone else. No one fell, but they had to take a step back, and the one closest to the door backed up into the doorway.

Alex moved the obstructions aside, and then pushed the man in the doorway out of the building. He didn't take the time to enjoy his freedom. He ran.

He had to get home, change, grab his bag and the case, and make it to the port for a shuttle to the station. Each point was a place where he could be locked in if they realized that's where he was. He'd already taken care of his apartment. The system controlling the building was, well, dumb. Alex had only needed a couple of hours to change some of its personality and code so it wouldn't want to force-lock any of the apartments, or the doors leading outside. A coercionist could undo his work with ease, but it would give him the time he needed to get out.

He ran past the first transit stop. He wasn't going to make it so easy on his pursuers as to take the direct line back to his place. He'd checked, and he could get there with only a few minutes delay by taking the line going toward the city center, leaving at the market and getting on the eastbound line there.

Alex was panting as he reached the stop just as the transit tube pulled in. He sat down, his legs and sides hurting, but smiled. He'd gotten away, for now, but he really should have tried getting back in shape before this.

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He was cautious approaching his building. He didn't see anything that looked like someone keeping an eye out for him, but he had to be honest with himself and admit he had no idea what that would look like.

He entered the building, and everything looked and felt normal. He knew he should take the stairs, but fifteen flights were daunting, so he risked the elevator, knowing he hadn't thought to arrange things so they couldn't be controlled.

He knew the three who got in with him by sight: an older couple who had worked at Luminex, from the snippets of conversation he'd caught over the years, and a student who the company was sending to a specialized school for one thing or another.

The student stepped off on the eleventh floor, and the couple continued on after Alex exited on his floor. Everything looked fine there too.

Once in his apartment, he took a moment to catch his breath. He hadn't realized how exhausting being on the run was. Vids made it look so easy.

He forced himself to move. He couldn't be locked in his apartment, but if he didn't hurry, the doors leaving the building could be surrounded, which would be as good as if they were locked.

He pulled off his clothes on his way to the bedroom, not caring where they fell. Now was no longer the time to care about neatness, only expediency. He put on loose pants made of a shimmering material. He thought the things were gaudy, but they were all the rage with the kids these days. Something about being bright and 'out there', whatever that meant.

He was putting on a gray shirt when a voice resounded through his apartment.

"Alexander," a man said.

Alex looked around, both for who had spoken and for something to use to defend himself. He'd grabbed a shoe, and only then recognized Emerill's voice. He looked out of the bedroom and into the living room. The screen was off, but it had to be where the voice had come from.

He didn't say anything as he gave his heart a moment to calm down, before letting go of his weapon and getting back to dressing. He threw a hooded jacket over the shirt, in the same material as the pants.

"Alexander, why are you doing this?"

The shoes were black. The sales person had explained why, even though he hadn't asked, but he hadn't paid attention.

"Please, Alex, talk to me. Why did you steal from me after everything I did to make your return smooth?"

"Right," Alex replied sarcastically, "like you actually give a damn what happens to me." The shoes formed to his feet as soon as they were on. "Do you even know what your company did to me? For absolutely no reason?"

"I do. I had a long talk with Katherine."

Alex frowned, trying to place the name. “Who?”

“The head of security Tristan murdered was her husband.”

“I had nothing to do with that!”

“I know. You were a victim, like so many people Tristan leaves in his wake. That’s why I did what I did for you. We’re a family, it’s my duty to—”

“Bullshit! You don’t care about me. Your vaunted company only cares that we do our job. The moment it thinks we’re going to be a problem, it removes us. You think I haven’t heard about the other people disappearing? You think the others don’t realize only the troublemakers stop coming to work?”

“That was the previous president. I don’t allow—”

“No. Tell yourself that if you want, but that’s how your company works. So long as we’re useful, we’re family, but the moment one of the higher ups no longer likes what we’re doing, they—” Alex cursed. He didn’t have the time to engage in conversation.

He left the bedroom, grabbed his backpack with his clothing and the few possessions that mattered to him, as well as the case containing the Defender.

He headed for the door.

“Alex, if you leave like this, I won’t be able to protect you anymore. You won’t be able to come back to work.”

“You think I even want to go back there?”

“Why, Alex? Just tell me why you’re doing this.”

Alex paused at the door, hand near the release. He didn’t have time for this, he repeated to himself.

“I’ve delayed them,” Emerill said as if he’d read his mind. “We have a few more minutes.”

“There are two reasons,” he said, realizing he wanted to explain it to the man. “The first one is that I don’t feel safe in your company anymore. I haven’t since the first day I came back, and that woman, Katherine, kept showing up to watch me.”

“I didn’t know. I wish you had told me.”

Alex shrugged. “The second is that I have to go rescue Jack.”

“Alex, you know there is no Jack. You read Tristan’s files. It’s what he does. He becomes someone else so he can use the people around him.”

“No.” Alex made his voice firm. “I refuse to believe that. There is no way that monster could be as kind and loving as Jack was.”

“You... Alex, this course you are embarking on, it will only lead to your death. Tristan will not welcome you.”

“I don’t care. Don’t you get it? Without Jack, I have no reason to live anymore.”

The silence stretched for a long moment.

“Take the far-left elevator to the basement,” Emerill said. “The third door on the right when you exit will open onto a corridor that connects to the neighboring building. Security doesn’t know about it. You’ll be able to exit it without any of them noticing. I hope you come to your senses before you find Tristan, Alex.” The silence that followed had the finality of a closed connection.