

Mitch Alonzo felt particularly good as he entered the old building that housed his office. He had a successful business that provided him with what he considered important: money and women. He'd just spent time with one of his favorite women and spent money on her.

That the women he saw were hookers, or that his money came from setting up mercs with jobs, which were dubious at best, didn't bother him at all. No, Mitch wasn't the kind of man to let small things like that bother him.

He waved to the priest as he walked by, and continued whistling as he went up two more floors, to his own office. Yet again, Mitch had bested the system.

Life was good.

Mitch checked his datapad as he reached his door. The sensors on the lock and the door told him things were as he had left them when he left for his visit. He entered his office, closed the door, and his whistling went falsetto, then died, as he saw who was sitting in the chair behind his desk.

"Tr... Tristan, what are you doing here?" He looked around, trying to figure out how he'd gotten in. The window didn't open from the outside, and the door hadn't been tampered with. He couldn't have appeared in, could he? He did a quick inventory of his office, to see if anything had been disturbed. The desk, cabinets, and frames were wood, real wood, and old. He didn't see anything out of place.

The alien gave him a broad, open-mouthed smile; the showing teeth didn't make Mitch feel any better. "I'd heard you'd gone legit, and I was in the area, so I thought I'd drop by my old cellmate. How have you been doing?"

"I'm... I'm okay," he replied, swallowing hard. He'd met Tristan over twenty subjective years ago. They'd shared a cell.

He didn't know how long it had been for the alien. Because of cryosleep, anyone that traveled in space had a different sense of time. They'd been in the same cell for only six months, but that had been enough for him to learn to fear, and hate, his cellmate, who could act oh-so-nice and friendly until you had something he wanted.

Tristan tapped the monitor. "I didn't know setting up work for mercs was such a lucrative business."

Mitch wasn't surprised he'd gotten into his system. Even with all the security blocks in there, Tristan had always been good with technology. He could make it do whatever he wanted.

Mitch knew why he was here. Tristan wasn't the kind of person who only 'dropped by,' but he wasn't worried. Not about that, at least. There was nothing in his system that would betray his involvement. Still, he

had to at least suspect. Otherwise, he wouldn't be here.

"Well." Mitch fidgeted. He'd never been good at keeping his nerves from showing. "Seemed like a natural thing to do. I know people who know people. You know how it goes."

Tristan nodded.

Mitch went to the shelves. He took the bottle and glass. A drink would help him steady his nerves. "So," he asked, pouring the drink. "You said you were in the area. What brought you around here?"

"Work, actually." Tristan picked up the old datapad on the desk.

"Please be careful with that," Mitch said, almost dropping the bottle as he reached for the pad, and then thought better of it. Tristan turned it around, studying it. "It's four-hundred years old. It cost me a fortune to get the original parts to repair it."

"It works?" Tristan asked, surprise in his voice.

"Yes. It can't do much, but it works."

Tristan nodded and put it down. Mitch breathed a little easier.

"And I'm looking for something, something stolen." The alien looked at him. "You know how it goes."

Mitch took a long swallow of his drink. "You might want to try the Iloomare Square. Lots of stolen stuff makes its way there."

"Is that so?" Tristan stood, and Mitch tried to figure out if he'd imagined the knowing look the alien gave him. "Thanks for the information. I'll take a look there."

Mitch shied away from him as he passed by, expecting to be hit.

Instead, Tristan left his office without another glance at him.

He ran to his desk and checked his computer. He didn't find any sign Tristan had tampered with, or infected it, but he couldn't be certain, not with him.

He sat there for a moment, glass forgotten in his hand, trying to decide what to do. He didn't know why he wasn't already dead. He'd seen Tristan kill other inmates without hesitation, just because they stood in his way. Now he was here, after him.

Fuck this, Mitch thought. This shouldn't be his problem; he'd only been the middleman. He took a card from a small box he kept in a locked drawer in his desk. He didn't keep any of his important clients' information in his system.

He punched the number on it, and a moment later his old vid screen showed a logo saying 'Luminex.'

"Welcome to Luminex Corporation," said a soft woman's voice. "Illuminating the universe's way to a brighter future. How may I direct your call?"

"Sander Harkson."

“One moment please.” Some music Mitch didn’t like replaced the voice. “We are sorry, there is no one matching the name you provided in the Luminex directory. Would you like to try someone else?”

He cursed silently. “Just let me talk to whoever’s in charge of security.”

“One moment please.” The music came back.

“Thomas Silt speaking.” A man’s face appeared on the screen: square jaw, clean-shaven, gray eyes, and short, cropped, black hair.

“He’s free,” Mitch blurted.

“Who’s free?” Thomas was studying him.

“Tristan, who else?”

The man frowned. “Who’s Tristan? Who are you? And what does this have to do with Luminex?”

Mitch sighed in exasperation. “Look through your fucking system. My name is Mitch Alonzo, and you guys hired me to set Tristan up. Well, he escaped.”

The man was silent, looking to the side, while Mitch talked. His frown deepened, his eyes moving right to left repetitively. “How do you know he escaped?”

“He fucking showed up at my office! That’s how!”

Thomas looked at him in disbelief. “And the only thing you could think to do was call us?”

“Hey, you guys hired me. There’s no way I’m dealing with him on my own!” Mitch screamed at the screen, but it had gone blank. He slammed his hand on the desk, making the glass bounce out of his hand and slosh alcohol over the keyboard. With a curse, he quickly dabbed at it then called back.

The signal didn’t connect. How could they drop him like that? If it hadn’t been for him, they wouldn’t have known Tristan was coming for them next.

His mind ground to a standstill. He sat down. What had he done? This was why Tristan hadn’t killed him. He had wanted him to make that call, and he’d done exactly that. He knew who had hired him now, which meant Tristan didn’t need him anymore.

He ran for the door in fear but stopped himself before his hand touched the handle. No, not the door. Tristan would have rigged it. He looked around for another way out. The window was out of the question, it was too obvious. He tried to think. There had to be another way out of his office, something no one would think about.

He spied the ventilation grill. It wasn’t very large, but then again, Mitch wasn’t a large man, something he’d paid for often in prison. It would be a tight fit, but at least it would be safe. Someone of Tristan’s

size would never think of something this small.

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“And the only thing you could think to do was call us?”

“Hey, you guys hired me, there’s...” His pad stopped playing the conversation once the connection terminated.

Tristan sat on one of the benches lining the opposite side of the street from Mitch’s building. He traced the call while they talked and had been surprised to find the company was located right here, on Deleron Four. There wouldn’t be any need to arrange transportation to another system and give Luminex more time to prepare. He could start planning his assault right now.

Tristan looked up as the windows to Mitch’s office blew out. His ears folded back at the explosion, and he made himself wince.

The elderly woman walking by gasped at the sound and took a step back, turning to look at the building. She tripped, and Tristan caught her.

“Oh dear god,” she said, her hand going to her mouth. “What happened?” Her eyes were wide, and she was looking around frantically.

Tristan recognized the signs as the start of a panic. He noticed that everyone was running away. If he wanted to blend in, he shouldn’t stay here. He stood, still holding her arm. Should he let go of her and just run? Everyone seemed to be doing that. But having her by his side could help his camouflage.

“We should leave,” he told her, gently pulling at her.

She looked at him, eyes wild, gasped, and pulled away. A woman running by almost knocked her down, and he caught her again.

“Ma’am, please calm down.” He blocked a man who ran close to them, pushing him into others. He pulled her close to him and forced her away from the commotion.

“What are you? What caused the explosion? Is everyone going to be alright?”

Tristan had trouble not glaring at her. Those were useless questions, but at least she was talking and calming. “I’m Samalian.” Hopefully talking to her would keep her manageable. “I don’t know, and I hope so. Just remain calm. We will be out of the area soon, then we’ll be safe.”

Sirens sounded in the distance, getting closer. He didn’t worry about them, but it would still be good not to be around. He would stand out, and police would notice him. It was best if he avoided that. She was

still shaking when they were a few blocks away, but her gaze was clearer, and she was steady on her feet.

“Will you be alright?” he asked.

His voice startled her. Maybe she wasn’t as calm as he thought. “I... I think so. I’m...”

He didn’t let her finish. He couldn’t abandon her in her state, they were near a small restaurant, and people would notice. He guided her there and helped her sit at one of the outdoor tables.

“Sit here for a time. It’s safe here, and the emergency personnel are taking care of the building. I’m sure they will rescue everyone they can.” He could leave her now. He moved away, but she didn’t let go of his hand.

“Thank you, young...man?”

Tristan locked down his annoyance and gave her a closed-mouthed smile. “I am male, yes.” He noticed how she was dressed: dirty clothes, ripped in places, and hastily-mended. Without turning his head, he noted how everyone else was dressed: elegant and expensive clothing. He had brought her out of her element.

That wasn’t his concern. He also noted she was a little gaunt. Had she eaten recently? Would the people around notice him more if he left her here, or if he saw to her? He sat down at the table and brought up the menu. “Do you want to eat something?”

“Oh, I couldn’t.”

“Please, I insist. You’ve had a shock. Some food will help you settle down.”

“I couldn’t pay you back.”

“It’s alright. I just want you to feel better.” If she stayed here once he left, the people around might stay focused on her, and not pay attention to where he went.

“Alright, just something small.” She picked a sandwich and tea.

Tristan took the money chip he’d bought, and then modified to randomly use one of the multiple accounts he had hidden within the galactic banking system, and paid for her meal.

“Aren’t you eating too?”

“Unfortunately I can’t stay. I have an appointment I can’t miss.”

“Oh.” She looked down, saddened. Tristan saw her force a smile before looking up. “Thank you for helping me.”

He gave her another closed-mouth smile and then left. When he was out of sight, he leaned against a building and looked at his pad. The timer read zero, but with helping the woman, he had no idea how long ago it reached it. Had Mitch been the coward he remembered and stood in fear, unable to decide what to do? Dying when the explosive

went off? Or had he summoned what little courage he had and triggered them attempting to escape? It didn't matter. Mitch was dead. One of the people in the chain directly responsible for his imprisonment had paid.

He quickly looked through the folder of contacts he'd copied from Mitch's computer. The man had been good at finding people and angles to use on them.

A name caught his attention: Miranda Sunstar. It wasn't a surprise, Mitch would have been how she'd known where to find him. What was there, which he hadn't found before, was a contact number. A quick search on the universal communication network showed it was a valid number. He would have to see what and who was behind it when he had a good system to work with.

No one else on the list was of interest at this point, so he did a quick search on Luminex, trying to determine why they had come after him. They were involved in a variety of fields: communication, travel, as well as general research, to mention a few, but he didn't see anything there he'd dealt with in his career. He'd remember if he had taken something of theirs, either for himself or under contract.

That meant he'd have to get inside the building and access the security files they had on him. That should tell him why they had stolen ten years of his life.