Jack looked up from the computer when Alex entered, then ran to him. "What's wrong?"

Alex was leaning against the wall. "Don't know," he replied, reaching down to take off a shoe. "Must be coming down with something." He lost his balance, and Jack caught him. "Body ached today, also a bit tired."

Jack picked him up and carried him to their bed. "This looks much worse."

Alex nodded. "Hit on the way here. Should call a doctor."

"I will, but first let's get you out of these clothes. They're sweaty." Jack started undoing his shirt.

Alex waved his hands away. "I can do it myself." He tried to sit up, groaned, and fell back on the bed. "Okay, maybe I need your help."

Jack smiled and kissed his forehead. "Just rest. Once you're out of these, I'll go make you something to help you feel better." He removed his shirt and started on the shoes.

"Just lie with me," Alex told him.

"I will." He finished undressing him and helped him under the covers.

Alex shivered. He kissed him again. "I'll be right back." A moment later, he was back with a cup of broth. He helped Alex sit. "Drink this. I included protein additives, some immune boosters, and a mild painkiller. It's going to help you sleep. I'm sure you'll feel better tomorrow."

Once Alex finished the cup, he put it on the bedside table and lay back down. Jack took off his pants and snuggled up next to him. He held him tightly, and within moments, Alex stopped shivering. Soon after that, they were both asleep.

...

Tristan was up early, Alex barely stirring when he got out of bed. He took the human's ID card, connected it to the computer, and ran the small program he'd built; it added command lines to the card. While it processed, he ate. By the time he was dressed in a human-style business suit, it was ready.

"Why are you dressed up?" Alex croaked from the bed. He tried to lift his head, but it fell back on the pillow.

Jack knelt next to him. "There was a message from Glacomel on the system. They want me to come in this morning. I guess they made a decision."

Alex placed a hand on Jack's cheek. "If they're having you come in, must be good news. They'd be idiots not to hire you."

Jack took the hand in his and kissed the palm. "Thanks. I don't know how long it'll be, so I want you to stay in bed. You don't look as well as I'd hoped, so I want you to rest. Don't worry about work. I sent them a message explaining you're sick." He kissed him tenderly. "I'll nurse you back to health when I come back."

"I'll be waiting," Alex whispered.

Jack ran a hand over Alex's forehead. He looked at him with worry, then forced a smile before leaving.

...

Multiple doors led inside the Luminex building, and all were packed, but the crowd flowed smoothly. The guard at the entrance never even looked up as Tristan swiped the ID card, and then put a hand on the scanner. The light flashed green, and he entered. He'd stepped inside the company behind his imprisonment without even being looked at.

Tristan felt like shaking his head. Complacency was one of the biggest flaws in humans. Nothing had happened while they were on alert, therefore nothing was going to happen now that it had passed. He was certain multiple cameras were watching him right now, with the security system running his image against the database of employees. But because of the changes he made to the ID, unless someone bothered looking at the feed, there wouldn't be any alarms.

The program the card-swipe triggered was simple. It whispered to the company's computer that Tristan belonged here, that he was one of its employees. It also told the computer to allow him to go where he pleased. That one wouldn't work for long, but he didn't need it too.

Fooling the humans while he moved within the building was simple. All he had to do was act like he belonged; that he knew where he was going. No one gave him a second glance. He might be one of the alien employees they hadn't met before, or he might be a representative here for a meeting. Obviously, he belonged since the security system had let him in.

He reached a door. It didn't have a name on it or any indications it was special. The only reason Tristan knew the company's mainframe was behind it was that he had spent a lot of time researching. None of the successful companies advertised where their brain was, but there was always someone who knew. It was just a question of finding them and getting them to provide the information. In this case, all he had used was money.

His initial plan didn't include going to this room. All he wanted to do was go to the security head's office and get the information he wanted

out of him or his system. Unfortunately, he hadn't been able to find where the office was located; the company's directory only listed a number to contact him. Even when he accessed the system from the human's apartment, using his access, he couldn't find a location. So he had to arrange for them to take him there. That was where this room came in.

He swiped the card, and the door opened. The small hallway ended at another door. The ID opened that one too. It opened to a room empty of personnel. Except for occasional maintenance, no one needed to be in here. The information contained in the mainframe could be accessed from anywhere in the building. He sat at the console and plugged in the data-card.

He had to hurry. Even in their complacent state, someone would notice this door had opened. They would check and realize no one was scheduled to be in here. Because of how important this room was, they would send security.

The data-card sent multiple programs to distract the system. Most were just to annoy it, things to keep its attention away from the important ones.

What Luminex should have done was install a camera in the room, but some of the people who used it had very personal discussions with the system they didn't want monitored. Since those people tended to be high in the hierarchy, they made sure they had privacy.

While he was waiting and the system was distracted, Tristan looked through its database for anything that could help him. He didn't expect to find anything, since what he wanted would be well hidden. Still, he didn't have anything else to do, and he knew from experience that humans tended to be lazy.

The door burst open less than five minutes after he inserted the data-card. A dozen armed security guards filled the room.

"Get away from the terminal," the closest one said. He used his gun, a Similik stunner, to indicate Tristan should move to the empty corner. The Similik wasn't lethal, but it was certainly painful, and all twelve were pointed at him. He moved as instructed, slowly, keeping his hands visible. The man who had ordered him to the corner reached for the data-card protruding from the terminal.

"Don't touch that!" screamed the entering technician. He pushed the guard away with a sneer and sat. "For all you know, he trapped it to give our system an aneurysm when you pull it out."

"What's the status of the system?" the guard asked.

"Give me a minute, this isn't like looking through a filing system." The technician typed. "Okay, I see some minor infections, nothing the

system's anti-virals can't deal with. I don't... Wait." He cursed and typed faster. "He's infected the archive. I think I got here in time. I should be able to keep it from destroying anything vital."

The guard nodded. "Things are under control here," he said into his comm. "What do you want us to do with him?" After a moment, the man nodded. He pointed to two of the men. "Take him to the chief's office. If he so much as twitches, shoot him and drag him there instead."

"Yes, sir." That man pointed to the door with his gun. Tristan walked toward it.

"The rest of you can stand down."

The two men led Tristan to an elevator. The inside was bland with white walls and a white ceiling. The doors closed as soon as they were in, and it started moving without them giving any commands. There wasn't the usual display indicating the floors, but based on how long the trip took, they ended up between the tenth and fifteenth floor.

There, they led him through a corridor, a left turn, and then a right. They reached a door, exactly like all the others in the hallway, and it opened a moment before they reached it.

Tristan entered the small office. It was bare, except for a desk and a man sitting behind it. He had been fit once, but he was spending too much time behind that desk now. On the desk were a terminal and framed picture. He couldn't see the images, but he expected they were of his family or other people he had connections too. People who could be exploited against him.

"Did you really think you'd be able to just waltz in here and take us down?"

Tristan didn't reply. He recognized the voice. This was Thomas, the man Mitch had called. He was where he needed to be.

"I don't see what you think you've accomplished with that program." Thomas eyed Tristan, then keyed his comm. "How is it coming?"

"The tech says no serious damage has been done," the guard answered. "A few files were damaged, but the system will be able to rebuild that."

Thomas narrowed his eyes. Tristan didn't react. "He's certain we haven't lost anything of value?"

"Yes, sir. The damage was minor."

Thomas drummed his fingers on the desk. "Have him look again. I've read this guy's file. He wouldn't have gone there to just cause minor damage." He kept his gaze on Tristan, looking for a reaction, but he didn't get one. "Why don't you just tell me what you did, what you actually did, and make it easier on you?"

Cursing came over the comm, and Tristan smiled. Before Thomas could ask for details, the lights started flickering. Tristan elbowed his escorts in the throat while they were distracted. The force crushed their windpipes and sent them crumbling against the wall, gasping for breath. He picked up one of the Similiks and shot Thomas with it. He also shot the other two, so they couldn't do anything to cause him problems while they died.

He broke Thomas' neck and pushed him to the ground. The computer was a top-of-the-line Celaran, and jumbled files currently filled its screen. The big infection he'd given the system, the one the other programs acted as a distraction for, was giving it schizophrenia. Internal communications were down, doors locked in their positions, and computers weren't responding to anyone.

Except him.

After all, once he knew he would go to the mainframe, it wasn't too much work to write a program to make his search easier, as well as his escape. He enjoyed a good shoot-out, but why waste time when he could give himself control of the building for a time? It also gave him easier access to the files he wanted. No need to question the human when he could ask the computer directly.

He entered a command, and the screen cleared up. Since it was Thomas's computer and he was logged in before this started, he could access anything the human had access to. If it wasn't everything in their system, it would at least include anything they had relating to Tristan. All he had to do was find the files with the information on who had ordered his imprisonment.

It wasn't quick work. A search on his name only brought up his criminal records and a compiled personality profile. He knew the trap had been set up by the previous security chief, Sander Harkson. He isolated all his files, but they were locked out of the search algorithms.

He groaned. He was going to have to go through them one by one until he found the right ones.

It took him two hours to find them, by which time the flickering of the lights wasn't as chaotic, indicating the technicians were making progress on his infection. A quick read told him the man who had ordered the trap was named Emerill Karson.

Tristan paused. The name meant nothing to him. The name did come up in a general search. He had been Luminex's president until he retired, halfway through Tristan's imprisonment. He leaned back in the chair. This was a little too convenient.

Sander Harkson had died a few months before Emerill retired. The death could have been an accident. After all, no one else involved had

been eliminated. He had to remind himself that the human wasn't like him. He probably never considered Tristan might escape and come looking for him.

He wanted to look through the rest of the files, in case something else came up, but he was running out of time. The lights were starting to function normally again. That meant the system and technicians had almost defeated the infection. He tried to transfer the files to a data- card, but the system wouldn't allow it.

The lights stayed on for a few seconds, then flickered again. He didn't have the time to force the transfer. With a growl, he stood. He'd have to work with what he'd read and see where that led.

He typed a command, and the chaos came back to the screen. At the door, he swiped Alex's ID against the scanner, and a moment later, the door opened.

...

Tristan stood next to the bed, looking at the sleeping Alex. He'd removed the suit and was back in his pants. He was trying to decide what to do about him.

That he was asking himself the question was ridiculous. He should kill him and be done with it. Instead, he was considering bringing the human with him. As Jack, he'd enjoyed his time here, and it would be simple for Jack to convince Alex to abandon everything he had. Then, over time, he could get him used to the idea that Jack wasn't the real person.

Tristan growled at himself. He'd been wearing Jack too long if he was thinking like this. The human meant nothing to him. His time here and the things he'd done with him had just been so he could accomplish his goal. Alex had been nothing more than a tool he used.

"Jack?" Alex whispered, before opening his eyes. He smiled at him, but then frowned. "Is something wrong?"

Tristan looked at the human for a long moment. "Men are going to come here. They are going to question you about me. Tell them everything. You'll only make things harder for you if you lie to them."

"I don't understand," Alex croaked. "What's going on, Jack?"

Tristan saw the confusion in Alex's eyes and, for a moment, he wanted to reach out and make it go away. He forced himself to remain perfectly still. What was that human doing to him? He shoved those feelings away. When he spoke, his voice was glacial. "Jack doesn't exist. I created him so I could use you." He turned and left the room. He wiped everything from Alex's computer, sending the program he'd

prepared out to destroy the backups. Then he went through the room, making sure there was nothing of his left behind. He didn't have much, but Jack hadn't been the tidiest of guests.

He came to the Defender. Alex had placed it on the mantle. Tristan felt a momentary ghost of guilt over what he was putting the human through. With a growl, he pushed it away. Jack had been the one who felt for the human. Alex meant nothing to him. He left it there.

Once he'd gathered everything which could be traced back to him, he headed for the door. Alex's hand reached out from the bedroom doorway to grab him as he passed by.

"Don't go." He was leaning against the frame, covered in sweat. "I don't know what's going on, but I can help you."

"No, you can't." He growled at the human's hand on his arm. He should rip it off.

"I love you, Jack," Alex pleaded. "I'll do whatever it takes, please."

Tristan looked into those eyes, and for a moment, he felt himself wanting to stay with Alex. With a roar, he pushed him away.

"Jack doesn't exist! I used you!" He glared at Alex. "Be happy I'm letting you live." He turned and left the apartment.