

“Show me your hands.”

I kept my voice low, while casually giving the command. Hands that raced across the keyboard froze. Realization struck, brilliant blue eyes glanced up at me. Fear flooded her gaze, when locked to mine. Ecstasy burnt through my veins, made me feel alive, made me feel I could cast the whole world into terror. Hands trembled softly before me, her eyes darted in a triangle between the gun in my hand, the desk and my eyes. A faint glimmer of hope in those beautiful blue eyes. Hope should be crushed, hope made people do stupid things. Her eyes whipped to the edge of the desk, the panic button close at hand.

“Move!” I bit at her. “Look at that desk one more time and I’ll give you stumps to push bloody buttons with.”

Despite the command, her eyes darted back and forth between the gun in my hand and the desk. A smile starting to split my face in two, but I quickly suppressed it. If it had shown on my face, she was too busy finding a way out to notice. The gun was for show, nothing more than another tool to get the job done. I always liked the effect a weapon had on people, a way to channel their fear and hope. Her gaze rested on the gun again, I casually pointed the barrel towards her. Her fingers were long, elegant and sparsely decorated with modest, classy jewellery.

“I’m a man of my word.” I whispered. “If you insist, I would gladly take a pair of fingers for my collection”

She whimpered and would have jumped if she could, the seat already pushed against the wall that kept our cubicle private. Her hands moved uncomfortable, unsure which fingers to clutch. Losing a body part was an ever-effective threat. Again, I suppressed a smile. She believed. Good thing she did. It was amazing what people would do for a chance to save their hides. Not for the first time, the ambivalence of such situations struck me as odd.. The joy derived from her panic tempered by her raw desire to survive. But I liked it better when they didn’t believe, the shock would be heavier, more... tangible and more desperate. Fear, desperation and uncertainty, this triad of emotions could send me over the clouds; over the rainbow for that matter.

“The boxroom. Is it available right now?”

I tried to keep the pleasure and anxiety from my voice. She had to believe I wouldn’t care a second if I had to kill her. To be honest, I wouldn’t. But only after I finished what I came for. I checked the system myself before I came, so her nod was unsurprising.

She reminded me of Anna. She captured my heart, then spurned me. She realized I was different before I did and made sure I knew what my place was. Oh, how she wriggled and begged when I put my fingers around her throat. I remember.. I let the thought go, I needed a clear mind to pull this off.

I glanced outside the cubicle, inspecting the people in the bank. Most of them were elderly, almost anyone else would be at work this time of the day. Expensive, inadequate security personnel were replaced by security systems, meant to hold and detain. Countless hours had I spend, simulating, trying to find the balance between scary, intimidating and systems parameters. If the system marked me as a threat, the

cubicle would forcefully accompany me till the police arrives. Each cubicle a separate hermetically closed detention cube, the police force would take their time to process the cube. None had ever escaped one.

“Ok. Let’s go.” I motioned with the gun. “Walk at a normal pace and do not stop.”

I readjusted the hood to cover my entire face, the gaping holes that were my eyes would be enough for anyone to cry out. I did not want to kill people for their natural responses. I came here to put an end to the atrocities I committed. Not to add random people to the lists.

“Remember what I said about your beautiful fingers?”

I stood behind, prodded her with the gun and she took off as in trance. A solid, steady step without the air of self-confidence she radiated when she entered the cubicle. I didn’t care, when her colleagues would be able to ask about her behaviour, I would be long gone. I cared about the security systems that would pick up on unusual behaviour. The faster we got there, the lesser the chance it would be able to pick up anything out of the ordinary. The boxroom would be safe. No prying cameras, no other visitors. Just me, the clerk and lockboxes that I desired.

The massive, wooden doors to the right indicated we had arrived at the boxroom. The clerk fumbled nervously with the keys to open the doors, but managed to open the boxroom. She glanced over her shoulder nervously, before stepping out of the supervision of the cameras into the room. I followed on her footsteps and closed the door carefully behind me and instructed her to leave the keys and initiate the system.

The room we just entered was lavish. Meant for the rich and powerful, it was filled with comfortable seats, all in green and yellow, the colors of the bank. A huge, dark wood table occupied the middle of the room. Different kinds of instruments were gathered in the middle of the table. Scales, magnifying glasses and other instruments I did not know the origins nor purpose of. Another table in the corner held pitchers with wine, liquors and other drinks. One side of the room harbored three huge windows with a view on the Amstel river. I poured myself a whiskey from the crystal bottle and sat down in a cushioned armchair.

I took off the hood, exposed the monstrosity of my features. She gasped, she had seen a mere glimpse of who I was before. Now she realized those eyes that looked empty, were exactly that. My gray skin looked raw, as if burned and scratched, blue bruises all over my face. She gasped, eyes grew big as they flashed across my face, and my skin, but avoided the void that was my eyes. As if locking my eyes would mean instant death. Despite myself, I threw her a smile with my filed, reddish teeth.

The shock on her face was more than satisfying and I could not contain the barking laugh that escaped my lips.

“I need you to pull the following boxes from the system.”

The scrawny piece of paper contained a series of numbers, all lockboxes that were not mine. All possibly containing information of the whereabouts of my only friend. All belonged to the richest and most influential people in the country. My friend was taken to make sure I would not just leave. Well friend, you could say we shared a bond of mutual respect and superficial comradeship I never experienced before. In addition, he was a non-registered shapeshifter like me. One of the few free men of this age. And just leaving was out of the question, I could not leave one of my kin to the mercy of my former allies.

“Would you think that system needs ten fingers to be operated?”

I wondered out loud, the clerk winced. Then dashed for the paper on the table, licking her lips avidly while she heatedly started pounding the keys of the system. For a few seconds, a sense of invincibility, of pure power washed through me, but it faded quickly as I reminded myself what she'd done. She jumped in a satisfying manner, but the measuring looks she gave me before, did not stroke with her earlier behaviour. I decided to let it go for now, but would observe her meticulously. Disposing of her would be easy, getting the lock boxes however, would become tricky. Only a fool made things harder than necessary.

While the clerk stacked the incoming boxes next to the dispenser, I dreamed what it would be like to finally be free. Not only free in form and shape, but free of bonds and obligations. Once I had taken the direction I was heading now, I had known more freedom than I ever had. But freedom? I wanted to make my own decisions, not follow orders.

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“Get me these!”

I slapped her ass to add to her confusion. The way she opened her lips with her teeth, indicated hysteria lurked in the back of her mind. She fingered the dingy, flimsy scrap of paper, covered in my scribble writing. The paper listed lock boxes of the richest, most influential clients of the bank. Pay, all of them would. I would make sure of that. She gaped, her eyes focused on the list of names and lock boxes. The gun waved in front of her face and she swallowed laboriously. Triumph, only small and insignificant made my blood rage slightly.

“Hurry!”

Weeks, maybe months, I dreamt about this moment. The grand finale of my schemes, of my work, hopefully my poverty. When I started this career, they promised me money. Lots of money. I never had any, the promise sounded sweet, the deal even sweeter. They knew I liked fear, fear in the sense that I liked it. Knew, I thrived on it and promised me an endless river of human emotions, a never drying well, a never ending dream. It had turned out to be a never-ending nightmare. One that pulled you in, no matter how awake and wary you were. Although I liked, no loved, feeding off others fear, uncertainty and insecurity, I had never intended to permanently harm anyone. I loved to see the chaos, inner strife, anything that made people as confused as I felt. Never intended to be a killer, a cold blooded destroyer. Yet, here I was.

Mere minutes later, twenty of the lock boxes I required laid in front of me. Keys, I scoffed at the idea. Didn't need keys anyway. Only provided a false sense of security. A sense of safety.

I was young, could barely control the growth of beard when I learned how to open locks. Not out of bad intentions. I just never liked to be kept out of secrets. Knowing people's secrets, I could pressure people, manipulate and embarrass others on command.

The gun, put down next to the lock boxes. Her eyes flashed, the gun no longer in my hand, she thought me less dangerous. A mad giggle rose from my throat, I concealed it by coughing violently. Locking her

eyes, I smiled. Disdained, I noticed she no longer really responded to my smiles. I used it too much, knew it lost effect. I made an effort not to look at the gun. Left it out of my vision, hoped she would take the bait. Relaxed in the deep, soft chairs of the boxroom.

I focused on the lock boxes, opening them in rapid fashion. None of them resistant to the changing nature of my finger. Most of the boxes contained jewelry and valuable documents. Some contained storage devices. I pocketed the storage devices, those would probably prove more valuable than anything else.

One lock box held my mind more than others, the owner, the man of the promises. Had forced me down a path I was not eager to take. Made me soil my soul and a puppet to his wishes.

The lid of the box did not go off easy. As if someone had stuck edges with gum, gave way, but did not come off. I had to pry my finger between the edges, use it as leverage. A clean, white envelope fell out as the lid came off, the addressee faced the ground. Nothing else, only the envelope and a screaming emptiness. I stared at the box, a sense of doom crept up on me, made me shiver from the base of my skull. The ground fell from under my feet, nothing to hold on to. All I could do was fall, careful preparation, all for nothing. How long I stared, I am not sure. The clerk had stopped her heavy breathing and was staring at me intently by the time I came to my senses. Well, senses. An endless rage, an unlimited need to destroy, to burn.

My trembling hands plucked the envelope from the ground. The addressee was me, my name written in a neat, curled handwriting. The envelope ripped easy, my hands tearing the paper with burning anger. My eyes flashed across the paper, seeing, but not reading. My trembling hand shook the paper with such force, I could not make out a single word. I wanted to howl with anger, with frustration.

“Not reading it, does not make it false.”

A cold almost quivering voice from my right bit at me, anger barely hidden.

“I thought you would see through me in seconds. They told me you were complacent, arrogant and scary. I only see complacency and arrogance.”

Amusement now replaced the anger in her voice, the tone almost as if mocking.

I turned my head, the clerk from the front desk gone. Instead, a tall dark-haired girl stood there. Black jeans, black leather jacket, reddish hair in a ponytail. A derogative look on her face.

“I like what you did to yourself. Very scary.” She laughed.

I looked around for another option. She must be a shapeshifter to, in contract of him. How had they known? How had she known when to be here. I never shared any plans, never shared.. well anything. Frantically, I searched for a reason, something that had given me away. I found none. I had to admit, they were better than I was. I didn't move, didn't lift a finger. This girl, I thought it wryly, was of no threat to me. This girl..

Cocking of a gun brought me to reality, the barrel cold against the burning skin on my temple.

“You should have known better than to steal from the triad.”

