

Tom's Story 01

Tom greeted Jasmine as he got in. She smiled at him and offered him a package of cookies. Normally she only handed those to people as they headed out on jobs, but since he spent his day in the office, she made an exception for the jaguar. He thanked her, while his waistline complained. Even with hitting the gym three times a week he'd had to buy pants one size larger. Ania kept teasing him about it, although right now she was much larger than he was with their first child.

He opened and closed his fist, then shook it, as he walked by his office. He liked starting the day by checking in with everyone. He looked at his hand which was trembling lightly. He closed it again, tightened it into a fist and opened it. He shook it again and then ignored it. Maybe he'd pinched a nerve in the night.

Before he made the turn that opened up into the large room where everyone had desks he stopped. He felt the dread at the pit of his stomach he'd learn to recognize from years of having to rely on his guts to stay alive. His subconscious was telling him he was in danger.

Except that made no sense. He was in his work place, he was a trained fighter, as was everyone here, even if it had been over two years since he'd been in a fight. If someone attempted anything, he would be taken down before he could even think of moving. Was his stomach just upset? Stress over Ania's pregnancy?

He shook his head and forced himself to ignore the feeling. He entered the room and nodded to Armand and Kaylee who were getting their gears ready. Which in their case meant tactical armor, two guns each and two machetes. They were one of the company's expert retrieval team and they loved getting down and dirty with their targets.

He scanned the room. Everyone was getting busy, either with paperwork or setting up for their job. The dread in his stomach intensified. He looked the room over again for anything out of place. There was one thing, someone in an expensive business suit was standing next to Patrick's desk. He had his back to him, but by the fur on his head he was another tiger, and from Patrick's body language they were talking.

Patrick looked away from the person he was talking to and noticed Tom. He smiled and waved him over. The jaguar couldn't move. He knew this was ridiculous, and yet he couldn't get his legs to move. He realized he was shaking. Patrick said something to the other tiger, and he turned.

Tom's mind screamed danger and he went hyper vigilant. The hand at his hip was ready to grasp the non-existent gun that would have been there if he was still in the field. Why weren't anyone else reacting? Couldn't they see that guy was dangerous? He was probably armed.

Why was he thinking that? Why was he panicking?

And then the tiger leveled his blue eyes on him.
Tom's mind went blank from sheer fright.

* * * * *

Years before.

Tomas Bracha spent a month and a half observing the target. He'd been given his name so he could do the research, and he'd been told that below the cool and collected businessman exterior was a terrorist. The tiger was a traitor to his country, trafficking in biologicals and weapons of mass destruction. Tomas had the honor of being the one selected to remove this stain on his country.

Nothing in the research he did supported the claims of his superiors, but he wasn't surprised. The media was easily bought and controlled by those who had money. This tiger own multiple TV stations, a movie studio and half a dozen news organization. It was no surprise that as far as the public was concerned, he was a shining example of all that was good in America.

In tracking the tiger, Tom reached the conclusion that this building was where he would kill him. Of all those the tiger spent time in, it was the easiest one to access, not that it meant much. There was security at the door, inside the lobby, cameras in the halls, stairwells as well as on the roof, among the gardens and green spaces there.

It had taken him a week to decide on this building. Then it took a month for the electronics team to find a way inside the building's security mainframe and gain access to the camera feeds. It was their job to keep him from showing up on the cameras.

It was his job to find a way in. That took him a week, he was lucky. the building had a bank of twelve elevators, and they happen to be due for maintenance. Getting a uniform and forging a badge from that company was easy. When thirteen men entered the lobby instead of the twelve who had exited the van no one noticed.

He followed the first group. They were going to the twentieth floor to do the maintenance on the four elevators that serviced the first to twentieth floor. As they all exited the elevator he stayed to the rear and timed his steps with the countdown on his watch. When it reached zero he was by the door to the stairs and quickly entered them.

The countdown on his watch was the only indication for when the security systems hiccuped. The electronics team couldn't talk to him, radio waves were monitors, and if they tried to piggy back on the system, the larger bandwidth would be noticed. So they sent small burst that updated his watch with the countdown until the next security event. Right now he had five minutes to make it to the door leading to the roof. The cameras were looped to show an empty stairwell.

He still had two minutes when he reached the door. He'd taken his time climbing the forty stories. He took off the

maintenance uniform and under it he had gardener's clothes. He took out the straw hat from where it was folded at the small of his back. He fluffed it back into form and put it on his head. The uniform was bundled under his arm.

The watch reached zero, the lock on the door clicked and he was outside, heading to the closest garden. He dropped to his knees with his back to the camera over the door. He glanced around; no one in the garden, as he'd hoped. The only person visible was a woman sunning herself on a chair in the green space two hundred yards away. His observation of the roof had shown that only the gardener worked it, and today he was being detained.

He dug a hole between the tomato plants and buried the uniform in it, then looked at his watch. It was blank. Okay, he hadn't expected that. He discreetly looked around. The woman was still sunning herself. Canine, good muscle definition, but no mass. Just for show, no bleach line he noted with a smile. The tool shack stood alone in the middle of the roof. When he went for it he would be noticed, but he was the gardener so that wouldn't be suspicious, and as a common laborer no one would really pay attention to what he was doing, so as long as no one was looking right at him when he disappeared in the shack people would just assume he'd left.

He checked his watch again, still blank. What was going on? He occupied himself by looking busy moving the earth around.

"Emilio?" a woman called. He didn't turn, it had to be the woman sunning herself. Emilio was the gardener's name.

He kept digging in the dirt as she moved closer.

"Emilio?" She tapped his shoulder.

Tom turned just enough to show he acknowledged her, but made sure his face never showed to the camera. He tipped his hat and greeted her in Spanish.

"Oh, You're not Emilio." She finally saw the spots visible where the gloves didn't quite reach his sleeve. Emilio was a beagle. Now that she was close he could see she was a golden sheppard, and naked. "Do you know if the apricots will be ripe soon?"

Tom said he didn't know in Spanish, then added "no habla English"

"Apricot," she said, enunciating each syllables. "When?"

He shrugged and noticed the timer on his watch was counting down. He couldn't see where it was at. He tried to look at it, but she grabbed his muzzle and turn his head to look at her. He stopped the movement just before the camera could get a clear view of his profile.

"Look, it's bad enough they've managed to hire the one man in San Francisco who doesn't speak English, you're not going to ignore me when I'm talking to you."

Tom told her exactly what he thought of her, but in Spanish, and keeping his tone even. Exasperated she let go of

him and stormed off back to her chair.

He looked at his watch. He had thirty seconds. He headed for the shack, hurrying, but trying to look casual. If he missed it he had to hope they had eyes on him and would realized they needed to do it again.

He hated not being able to talk with his team.

He put a hand on the handle as the lock click. He pulled the door opened and closed behind him. He breathed a sigh of relief. Now he was here for the long haul. He'd planned his assault for eleven at night. That would ensure his target was sleeping, and the guards bored.

He didn't worry about them for his approach, but he hadn't been able to get any blueprints of the tiger's apartment, or information on the security systems inside. His electronics team hadn't been able to find anything on their end. as far as they could tell, the apartment wasn't connected to the building's security. Except that made no sense, so it had to be something too sophisticated for them to find. Not common, but also not unheard of, especially with the kind of contacts the tiger had. You could always count on criminals to out think security companies.

He lay down and slept.

* * * * *

The vibration from his watch woke him. Everything was silent. He checked the countdown. He had thirty minutes until the door unlocked. He took off the gardener's clothes, which left him in a black bodysuit. He ate a nutrition bar, a tasteless cake of protein, glucose, carbs, and what ever else his body needed to function. He didn't like them, but on a mission it was the only thing he ate. He couldn't afford to be sluggish because a meal sat in his stomach.

He stretched and did the basic exercise he could do in the shed's limited space. The bodysuit moved and stretched with him, but the polymer could stop small arms fire. It had saved his life on more than one mission.

At the two minute mark he put the suit's mask on and made sure the knife at his left calf was secured. He would have liked to bring in a gun, but the security sensors at he entrance would have detected it, even if he'd used one of the old models, without any electronic components in them. For the same reason he didn't have any of the sense enhancing gear he preferred using.

His watch hit zero and the locked clicked. He was out the door and quickly made it to the door to the stairwell. He only had to wait five seconds and that one clicked too. He only went down one flight, his target's apartment was on the top floor, taking up the north west corner.

He waited by the door. His watch counting down from a minute. When it reached thirty-three seconds it reset to a minute. The guard must have lingered on the floor. The lock

clicked and he was in.

He carefully walked along the hall, listening for any sounds. Even at this late hour it was possible someone would come out of these luxury apartments, but all was quiet.

He turned the corner and saw the door. It was the only one along the wall, and instead of the standard thumbprint lock all the other doors had, it had a massive box next to the door. It was from Stainless Locks, and to unlock the door he would need the access card, and the hand's biometric print. The company claimed it was impossible to crack it.

It had taken his team two days.

Unfortunately, the way they did it was by changing a memory chip on the processing board so it would accept the card he had and his print. He had spent two weeks practicing on the lock they had procured, and he now had it down to just over one minute.

Time wasn't much of a factor at this point. He had twenty minutes before a guard was schedule to walk this floor again. he would be in and out in that time.

He pressed the casing on its side to unhook the internal latch and pulled. It didn't come off. He tried again, same result. He looked the lock over, it was the same model. He pressed again, and he felt the cover give slightly, but when he pulled it didn't move.

He ran a hand along the sides, over and under it. That's where he felt it. He bent down to look under the case. two small screws were holding it in place. That hadn't been on the lock they had obtained. A modification his target had made himself? one implemented by whoever handled his security?

Those questions were irrelevant. He needed to unscrew them to take the cover off. the only tool he had was small pincer to remove and replace the chip.

The display on his watch blinked, catching his attention and a three minute countdown started. Why had they started a countdown? this lock was off they security server, he didn't need to coordinate anything with them. It had to be the guard. He was coming back early, far too early.

Tom took the large knife out of his sheath and put the point in the screw. It wasn't a standard screw head. The depression didn't have any edges for the blade to catch, but his polymer knife was hard. unless the screw was made of a hardened metal, this would work.

He hit the end of the pummel and the tip sank in the screw a quarter inch. He carefully turned. He had to be careful, if he stripped the head he probably wouldn't be able to do this again, the edge of the blade was scraping the casing. any deeper and that would hold his knife in place.

The screw turned, it was longer than he expected. When it was out he had two minutes left. He took the other screw out the same way. One minute ten second. he pocketed the screws and the

cover was off. He moved the boards apart and located the one he needed. forty five seconds.

Stop looking at the timer, Bracha.

With the pincer he took the chip out, and put the replacement in. he closed the case and it clicked in place. Ten seconds. He put his gloved hand, which had the palm print matching the one on the chip embedded on it, on the reader and inserted the card

The elevator dinged at end of the hall.

Another second, then the door unlocked.

He went in, and silently closed the door.

Tom rested his head on the door and gave himself ten second to catch his breath while listening for sounds. The only thing he heard was the light hiss of the air circulation system, and the guard's steps walking by the door.

He turned and studied the entry way. The wall on his left was twenty feet long, with a door right next to him an another one ten feet further. The wall on his right was three time the length. The floor was a polished black stone with veins of gold, copper and silver. He wasn't worried about making noises as he walk. the sole of his shoes were cushioned.

He opened the door, a closet with three jackets, two pair of shoes and a pair of wool insulated boots. The next door was a small bathroom, what one of his ex girlfriends liked to call a powder room. He inched against the wall, and peeked around the corner when he reached the end, and immediately pulled back.

The tiger was standing in front of the glass wall, looking outside. He was naked. This wasn't what he had planned on. His plan had been to surprise him in bed, render him unconscious and use something from is medicine cabinet to over doze him. A man like him was bound to have a veritable pharmacy in there.

He cautiously peeked around again. The large living room was dimly lit and sparse. At the far end, on his left was a large white leather couch with a glass coffee table before it. in the wall was an unlit fireplace. after that a large empty space, where the tiger was currently standing. Further on the right was a dinning table, then an island and beyond that the kitchen.

The tiger wasn't looking in his direction, but with the darkness outside the glass acted like a mirror. For a moment Tom thought it might be a statue there, instead of a person. He was completely still, even his tail didn't move. Only the slight motion of his ribcage indicated he was alive.

Tom didn't have any cover. His options were to rush him, or sneak as close as possible staying in the tiger's blind side and avoiding getting his reflection noticed. He wanted to subdue him. Once in was unconscious he could drag him to the bedroom and proceed with his plan. The man looked fit, but with his training Tom could take him down easily.

He rushed him. He wanted the element of surprise to

unbalance his target. He wanted this over as quickly as possible without a chance of him alerting anyone.

As soon as he became visible in the glass the tiger turned. There was no surprise on his face, no concern, there was no emotions there at all in those vivid blue eyes. Tom didn't think on that. He swung as soon as he was close. He couldn't choke him unconscious anymore so he wanted to knock him out.

The tiger blocked the blow, took a step back and swung at Tom's throat, hand open, claws out. Tom threw himself back just in time, regained his footing and rushed him again. He feigned a punch but stopped short and kicked the tiger instead. His foot clipped the tiger's side, sending him spinning, but instead of falling over he dropped low as he continued turning. His foot shot out and Tom jumped over it. when he landed the tiger was standing before him and elbow coming at Tom's face.

He took a step back, but somehow there was a leg at his ankle. He tripped, rolled and came back up, holding his knife. This guy wasn't just some businessman. His movement were precise, efficient. He had been trained.

Tom came at him, slashing back and forth. The tiger stepped back. Good, he had him on the defensive. Once the table blocked him Tom would finish him. The overdose hadn't been part of his orders, that was just how Tom liked doing things, clean. That wasn't going to be possible anymore. Blood was going to be spilled.

Tom pressed him, and the tiger retreated, step by step. When they got close to the table the tiger surprised Tom by stepping to the side and then back, avoiding getting trapped. he'd never looked anywhere but at Tom and he'd still known where it was. This guy had planned for an attack here. He'd memorized where everything was.

Tom kept pressing him. Eventually he was going to run out of space, and then this would end, but the tiger surprised him again. when he side stepped the island he reached down and his hand came back with a dish towel. He held it before him with both hands and changed his stance.

Tom could read in his body language the tiger was done backing up. He lunged and swung. The tiger used the towel like a bar to deflect his arm. then his foot shot out, and Tom had to jump to the side.

The tiger used the opening that created to go around Tom. He tried to wrap the towel around his neck, but the jaguar dropped and roll. When he stood he realized he was the one against the wall now.

He couldn't stay there. Without maneuvering room he was at a disadvantage. He slashed at the tiger and stepped to the left, but the tiger dodged, moved to block him. He had to force him away. he slashed back and forth quickly and the tiger backed up. Finally. He pushed, the knife tip coming close a time or two to cutting flesh.

With a couple of steps Tom went around him. The movement surprised the tiger, and Tom felt like he was in control of the situation again. The tiger looked around quickly, searching for something.

Tom used his distraction to lunge at him, but before his foot left the floor to move forward the tiger's blue eyes were on him. He'd been setup. He couldn't stop the motion. the towel wrapped around his wrist and yanked up over the tiger's shoulder.

Tom tried to pull away, but his arm was held in place, and a moment later the tiger had a hand on his neck, the claws digging in the back.

Tom punched the tiger in the side with his free fist. once, twice, three time. On the fourth the pain finally registered in the tiger's face. He punched him twice more before the tiger shoved him away, but he didn't release the towel from around his wrist.

Tom bit back the yell of pain that shot in his shoulder as his body came to a sudden stop. The knife fell to the floor and he couldn't feel his hand. His arm came loose and he stumbled back, fighting to keep his balance. Through that he kept looking at the tiger, who folded the towel and placed it on the island's counter. He didn't show any of the pain he had to feel.

Tom regained his footing a moment before the tiger reached him and raised his arm to block the blow. He needed a weapon, he couldn't win this fight one handed. He didn't know where his knife ended at, and there was nothing to grasp. the table was bare, as was the island and the kitchen counter behind the tiger. No, it wasn't, there was the knife block in the corner. If he could reach it he'd regain the advantage.

The tiger smiled. It was the first show of emotion from him, but it didn't reach those eyes. They remained cold.

Tom feinted a punch and then side stepped the tiger, making a run for the knives. An arm clothe-lined him, wrapping around his neck and pulling him back against the tiger. The arm tightened around his neck. He tried to pull it away, but he didn't have the strength. He switched to elbowing the tiger in the side as hard as he could.

The arm kept getting tighter, strangling him. No! He couldn't fail his mission! He couldn't let his country down in such a way! He had to break out. He couldn't let this criminal win.

He tried to breath, but no air came.

His blows became weaker.

Stars appeared before him.

He was sorry for being a failure.

Darkness claimed him.