

Alex's opinion of Datasafe, the company who had the security contract for the building he was targeting, went up as he encountered so much security trying to get into their system that he'd need one of Tristan's computers to manage it—only for that opinion to drop right back down when he found the incoming data line from the building's security feed on the open net. All that work to keep him from getting in, and they gave him access to the feed itself. Hadn't they heard of the closed net? Of camouflaging the transmission as something else?

They'd tried to hide where it originated by running it through multiple nodes, but that only meant it took Alex an extra minute to trace it, and each node was a point where he could manipulate the data. He picked three and inserted the programs that would remove their presence from the feed. Then he went over everything, looking for indications another security company was hiding behind this one, hoping to go unnoticed.

There wasn't one.

Sloppy.

He backed out of the network, removing any trace he'd been there, and leaned back in his chair.

He saw the nutrient bar next to the terminal. Where had that come from? Jacoby was at the table, looking over four datapads there. He searched his pockets; his datapad wasn't there.

"Is that your work?" he asked the man, grabbing his datapad off the table.

Jacoby shook his head. "Not you either, then?"

The datapad contained a list of construction equipment, some highlighted with words he didn't understand next to them. The script looked like what he'd seen on the House and on other buildings in that area.

Another datapad on the table had a list of chemicals, with Tristan's writing next to them, in a mix of SpaceGov Standard and that Samalian script. Was Tristan losing his language skills? He hoped not; he was already difficult enough to handle.

"I've been in the network since you left."

"So this is Tech's work?"

"His name is Tristan, and do you know anyone else who's aware of what we're doing?" Alex let derision slip in his voice. If Jacoby was going to ask stupid questions, he was going to have to deal with being treated like an idiot.

Jacoby threw him an annoyed look, which Alex ignored. "I think he's trying to help," the man said, "but he isn't thinking clearly." He pulled a map from another datapad. Alex recognized the schematics of the target building. "I'm not sure if that's even a language, but those are structural columns." He indicated those that had an "x" beside them. "I think those marks are where he thinks the explosives should go, which shows he's out of it. We'd need three times what you ordered if we try to destroy them at a distance."

"But at least he found the structural points. It saves me having to figure those out."

Jacoby zoomed out from the building and angled it. "That's fourteen floors, all of them corporate offices of one sort or another."

Alex nodded. "We destroy the columns and it brings the entire building down. Even if that doesn't destroy the equipment there, it's going to be buried under so much debris it will meet the requirements for having completed the job."

"Alex, what about the people in there?"

Alex looked up from the map, trying to understand what Jacoby meant.

"Don't you care this is going to kill anyone working?"

"No." He went back to studying the layout. "You said you have experience with explosives. Do we need to destroy all those columns to bring down the building? Or is it Tristan being thorough?"

Jacoby didn't answer.

Alex looked up. The man was staring at him. "If collateral damage is a problem for you, I suggest you leave. Maybe you've been out of the life too long."

"I'm not leaving, but this has nothing to do with being a merc. This is about being a mass murderer. These people haven't done anything wrong."

"Neither have the Samalians the corporation is forcing into slavery, or displacing against their will."

"Is this what that's about? Saving them?"

"No, it's about doing the job. I'm just pointing out that those people aren't innocent. They enable the system that allows it to happen, not that I care if they are innocent or not. There's no way to get them out without warning LeisureTek of what we're planning. So, how about you focus and answer my question?"

Jacoby looked at the map. "It borders on overkill. But the advantage is that if one of the columns isn't destroyed by its explosive, the added stress on them ensured they'll still crumble."

Alex indicated the packs on the floor. "So those will be enough?"

"I didn't recognize all the brands, but I'm guessing Tech—"

"Tristan."

"Tristan," Jacoby continued, with exasperation in his voice, "got you in the habit of using only the best."

"Yes, but Jofdelbiro didn't carry those. We have the best of what he did have."

"In that case, we want to focus on those twelve columns, make sure they come down. If we have anything left, we weaken the four others to ensure they can't support anything."

"Can four columns support that building?"

"No, but if one remains standing, it would protect the equipment around it."

Alex nodded, picking up the fourth datapad. "Where did this come from? Did you have an extra one?"

"No, and you mean these two." Jacoby indicated the one with the map as he took his out of a pocket. "I figured you and Te—Tristan had more than one."

Alex shook his head. Had Tristan gone out? He opened the door to Tristan's room. It was a mess. The bed had been shoved against a wall, the contents of the pack spread on the floor, with Tristan on his knees, going through them as he put them back in. As he watched, Tristan became agitated, looking through what was on the floor. He grabbed the pack, upended it, scattered what fell, and relaxed as he saw something there.

Tristan noticed him and hurried to put a small case in the pack. Alex only had time to notice Samalian script on it. "I'll be ready, don't worry. I'll keep up." He growled at the empty chair. "Of course I'm fine. I just said so." He rolled his eyes. "Yes, I have it. What do you take me for?" He caught Alex looking at the chair, and his ears folded back in what Alex thought was shame.

He knew there was no one there, Alex realized. He knew it was a hallucination. That was an improvement, wasn't it? Alex crouched before him and Tristan clutched the pack tighter to his chest. Alex looked at the scar on his collarbone. The reminder of just had wrong things were.

"When did you sleep last?"

Tristan's eyes grew wider. "On the ship." He hesitated. "A little."

He'd been afraid of that. The bed was a mess, but the sheets were still on it. Tristan never slept on beds. They didn't have bedrolls, so he would have done what Alex had: folded the sheets until they approximated a bedroll and laid that on the floor. They'd been on Samalia for two full days now. His time on the medical bed had been spent sedated while his system was cleaned, and then in cryo. Neither of those were restful.

A little sleep on the ship, how many months before that in a drug-induced craze? How restful had that been? Tristan could function with little sleep, but after all that? He couldn't be this alert.

Alex motioned for him to hand over the pack. Not without help.

Tristan clutched it tighter.

“Don’t force me to wrench it out of your hands.”

“Alex, I—” Resignation as he handed it over.

The case in it had the universal symbol for stimulants among the Samalian writing. I contained injector cartridges. Two of them were missing.

“Are you insane?” he asked, his tone cold with anger even as he realized the stupidity of the question.

“I—”

“After everything I went through to get you out of there, to make sure your system was clean, you go and put more drugs into it?” Tristan looked at him, terrified. “Answer me!”

He jerked and backed away. “I dream when I sleep.”

Alex waved with the case. “And you think this is a good idea? Where’s the injector?” Tristan’s gaze flicked to the floor and Alex saw it. He pocketed it.

“Alex, I need them.”

“They’re just dreams,” he snapped, sending Tristan against the wall.

“You don’t understand, they come.”

“They aren’t real!”

“I know!” Tristan pulled his knees to himself and wrapped his arms around them. He looked at the empty chair. “I know, Alex. It doesn’t help. I can’t stop them by myself.”

Alex closed his eyes and forced himself to remember Tristan was broken, that they were here to fix him. Yelling wouldn’t help, but it felt like nothing helped. “When did you get them?” he asked, calmly.

“Last night, after the House.”

They’d returned to the shuttle, flown here, and Jacoby had gotten them accommodations. Alex had gone in the net to gather information as Jacoby had gone to bed. It would have been then, while he was unaware of what went on around him.

“Did you kill anyone?”

Tristan shook his head, as if the admission shamed him.

“We’re almost done here. Soon you’ll be yourself again, but until then, you need to rest, Tristan. Maybe once you’re rested, you’ll stop hallucinating.”

“Of course he knows you’re not real,” Tristan told the chair. “I do too.” He glanced at Alex, then closed his eyes. When he spoke, he was pained. “I just forgot, okay? If you’d shut up, I’d be able to think and I’d remember you aren’t real.”

“With sleep, you’ll be able to think properly.”

“But the dreams...”

Alex glared at him, making him look away. He wanted to go to him, hug him, offer him comfort. Give him anything he needed so his pain would go away. He buried that desire under cold anger. To do that to him would be to admit his Tristan didn’t exist anymore, and he wasn’t ready to do that. He’d never be. His Tristan didn’t want comfort, he was hard, strong. He wouldn’t become that again by being coddled.

Tristan nodded. “Alright, I’ll sleep.”

Alex stood and headed out the room, closing the door. He wanted to trust him. “Tell me you have sedatives in your pack, powerful stuff,” he spoke softly.

Jacoby looked at the door. “Whatever the medic left of what she brought for him is in your pack. What’s wrong with him? I mean, other than talking to himself?”

“He’s taking stims.” He took his pack off the table and searched through it.

“Again?”

It took a moment for Alex to remember all the stim vials that had littered the ship when he’d woken up on Terion Two. He found three cases he hadn’t put in his pack. When had those ended up there? Had Mary put them in when he’d left her alone to get

her payment?

“He’s only had two doses since last night, so I’m hoping one of this will be enough to get him more stable. This is going to give us time to finalize the plan, because we’re not moving until he’s properly rested.”

“If you’re dosing him, why not do the job while he’s out?”

“Because I don’t know how long this is going to keep him under. He’s built a tolerance to a bunch of drugs over his life, so nothing affects him as hard as they should.”

He pulled the door open, expecting to find Tristan on the other side listening to them, not lying on folded sheets on the floor, by the bed. He looked up as Alex closed the door.

He watched warily as Alex approached and crouched.

“What’s that?” Tristan asked, indicating the injector in Alex’s hand. “A sedative, to help you fall asleep. It isn’t ideal, but it’ll ensure you get some rest.”

“I don’t need it, Alex. I’m going to sleep, see, I’m all set up.” He indicated the sheets under him.

Alex nodded. “You said you’re afraid of sleeping. This is going to ensure it happens quickly.”

“I thought you didn’t want me to use drugs anymore?”

“This isn’t the same and you know it.”

Tristan snorted. “You don’t trust me.”

Alex smiled. “You know that isn’t true.”

“Then just let me do this myself.”

“We don’t have the time. There’s a job to do, and I need you rested for it. Give me your arm.”

“You don’t have to—”

“Tristan, give me your arm,” he ordered. He softened his tone as he placed the injector against the inside of Tristan’s elbow. “This isn’t about trust. It’s about ensuring the job gets done properly.” Once the vial was empty, he pocketed it.

Tristan snorted, rubbing the spot. “If you trusted me, you wouldn’t have done this.” His speech was already slurring.

Alex watched him and fought the desire to lie next to him. To bury his face in his fur and sleep with him. He stood. To do that would be to lie to himself. It wasn’t what he’d have when his Tristan was back, so he shouldn’t make it any harder on himself.

When Tristan’s breathing slowed, he stood and left.

He looked at the datapad on the table, trying to go over everything that still needed to be done before the job.

“You should go to bed too,” Jacoby said. “This can wait until you’ve slept.”

Alex started to protest, but Jacoby was right. Dealing with Tristan had taken more than he’d expected. A few hours of sleep and he’d get back to work.