

“How sure are you about this?” Jacoby asked, looking through binoculars.

Tristan had trouble standing still. He wanted to run at the building, kick the door open and get things going, but he was supposed to be calm and rested.

His father smirked, but at least he stayed silent.

Tristan was thankful Alex was preoccupied. If not for that, he'd notice how Tristan couldn't keep himself from looking around, or how hurriedly he'd set up the sheets into a bedroll the night before. He'd been too busy rummaging through the room for the second case of stimulant he'd gotten to do a proper job. He'd found it under the bed just as he'd heard Alex's steps getting closer to the door.

He hadn't been able to talk Alex out of using the sedative. He should have been angry that Alex wouldn't trust him, but he'd been too busy figuring out how he'd get through this. Then Alex had injected him and instead of leaving, he'd watched, forcing Tristan to fake being sedated while fighting the effect.

As soon as Alex was out of the room, he'd scrambled for the case, grabbed it, and gave himself a dose of stimulant, then a second one to be safe.

The hours after that hadn't been pleasant, as the drugs fought each other and left him in a waking state where the dreams still came, where he was assaulted, torn apart. Mocked by his dead brother. Much of it was what he'd suffered on the Sayatoga. Fortunately, it only happened while he slept now, and he could fight that.

When that passed, he'd paced by the door to listen to the movement on the other side, ready to get back to his roll when Alex came to check on him.

When someone did check, it was Jacoby, and Tristan didn't even bother adjusting his breathing while lying down. The man wasn't observant enough for it to be worthwhile.

Alex was done talking, and they were heading toward the building. He'd probably explained how he'd told the computer not to see them, how it was going to let them into the building without problems, and how it would keep the guards from coming close to them. Jacoby seemed to Tristan like the kind of man who needed a lot of reassuring.

Alex glanced in his direction, and Tristan made sure he acted calm, composed, in control. Well, he was in control, that wasn't an act. He just wished they would hurry up. Why couldn't they just run to the building, instead of skulking about?

His father opened his mouth and Tristan glared at him. He'd promised to stay quiet. Tristan couldn't afford any distraction if he was going to make Alex think he'd slept. If he couldn't do that, then Alex would send him back and he wouldn't be able to take part in the job. He wanted to do this job, wanted to have some fun.

They reached the last road to cross and finally they ran the rest of the way, but he had to control himself. He had to stay with Alex, not run ahead and kick the door in. This was Alex's job, so he had to go along. It should've been his job; it would go much quicker if he was in charge. They'd just run in, blow everything, and run out, but Alex wouldn't let him. They'd almost argued, but he'd gotten worried that Alex would realize how energetic he was, and think he'd taken more stims.

The door opened, and the inside was much brighter than he'd expected. His eyes adjusted immediately, but Alex and Jacoby needed longer. He almost told Alex he could handle this while they waited. He could feel himself bouncing on his feet after the short run, but that would definitely clue him in. So he forced himself to stay still and watch the equipment.

He could see vehicles vanish in the distance. There were also crates, tools, machine tools—there were a lot of things here he could use to blow it all up.

They encountered the first guard within minutes of entering, and Tristan was on him before Alex had to tell him. He made it quick. A hand on the mouth to keep him silent, and a wrenching of the neck to break it. He grinned at Alex as the body dropped. See, he could do this.

Alex hadn't been as proud as Tristan had expected. It had been quick, silent—how

it should be. So why wasn't Alex proud of him? Why did he look disappointed? Damn it, couldn't he make up his mind? He'd wanted that guard dead, hadn't he?

They moved on, and Tristan almost followed them before remembering not to leave any evidence, so he pushed the body under one of the vehicles and he caught up to them. He wanted to ask what he'd done wrong. Damn it, he was trying to make Alex happy, to fix things. Couldn't he see that?

They stopped by the first column he'd indicated on the map, but Jacoby was putting the explosives on the column itself. "It goes there." He indicated the permacrete pourer stationed next to the column.

Jacoby glanced at it, and smiled reassuringly. "We want to bring the whole thing down, not just destroy some of the machines here." He patted the column. "So this is what needs to go."

He thought about ripping the explosives out of the man's hands— maybe the hands too, for good measure. Hadn't he read the instructions he'd left for them? Didn't he know anything about how to use power supplies to intensify an explosion? He looked at Alex. This was his job after all, and they should get his permission. He'd know this was the better way.

Alex shook his head. "We're doing it this way."

If he wasn't worried about Alex picking up on his state, he'd have thrown his hands in the air in exasperation. Instead, he kept his mouth shut to avoid arguing.

There was a pair of guards heading to the next location and Tristan dispatched them quickly, although he got carried away and ripped one of the throats out, instead of doing a clean kill. Alex shook his head again as Tristan put both bodies out of the way, and wiped the blood he'd gotten on himself off.

At the next column, he pointed to the large excavator next to it.

"No," Alex said, as he handed the explosive to Jacoby. Alex couldn't be this dense. He'd seen him turn powerpacks into bombs. This was the same, just bigger.

With the next guard they encountered, he smashed the man's head into the floor. He shouldn't have done that, he knew it, but breaking necks was getting boring. He wanted to have fun. At the next column, he took the explosive out of the pack and started securing it to the equipment transporter.

"Damn it, Tristan," Alex cursed as he took the explosive away. "We're destroying the building, not the equipment. You're here to kill the guards, not get in our way."

He tried not to react, but found himself growling. He was going to give it away if he wasn't careful.

"Don't you growl at me, Tristan," Alex growled back. "We're doing this to make you better."

He was fine! He let out a huff and threw his hands in the air.

His father was laughing. Tristan made sure Alex and Jacoby were busy setting up their bomb and he glared at him.

The next pair of guards showed up. One fought back, and it took a few extra seconds to kill him. When he looked for the other one, he was already dead, a knife in his back. It was supposed to be his job to kill them, not Alex's. Tristan stared.

Alex didn't even acknowledge him. He took the knife out, wiped it, and they kept going. Well, if that was going to be how it went, why was he even bothering sticking by them?

He headed through the equipment, grabbing the first portable tool kit he found, clipping it to his belt, then calibrators, sensors, and a bunch of wires. He was going to show Alex he didn't need explosives to get the job done.

"I guess it's fine for me to talk now?" his father asked.

"No." He headed for the other side of the building, both because he didn't want Alex to show up and complain, and because one of the larger transporters was there.

"Explain to me again why you're letting that human lead you around like you're his

pet?"

He ran.

"This isn't going to work," his father said, keeping up with him. "It's not going to explode, and you're going to start crying again."

He shouldered the guard that stepped out from behind the crate, slammed him on the floor, then snapped his neck. He looked at his father, who'd kept well away, and lobbed the body at his feet.

"If you don't shut up, that's going to be you."

"Sure." His father smirked. "Because you haven't already tried it a few hundred times. I'm still here."

"That was because of the drugs and you know it! This isn't the same, this is real—" He cursed, almost forgetting again. He had to remind himself that his father wasn't there. This was a hallucination. "I will get rid of you."

"Sure, keep telling yourself that."

Tristan crossed his arms. "How about you come closer, if you're so sure you'll survive?"

His father sighed, a sound Tristan remembered well. His father had never been happy with anything he did. "Boy, don't you have a job to do?"

"Right!" He turned and hurried toward his destination, trying to put his father out of his mind. Trying to forget how, every time he'd mastered what his father taught him, he had to go and change the rules. He could kill an animal with a knife? Not good enough, he had to do it with his claws. Then he had to do it without them. Even on the day his father hadn't been able to find anything new he claimed Tristan had to learn, he'd wanted to change the rules.

"I couldn't let you leave," his father said.

"We've already gone over that," Tristan sighed. "You had nothing left to teach me."

"I didn't train you, so you'd abandon me, boy."

"Then you should have taken your own lessons to heart, Father. Don't depend on anyone."

"You mean, like you don't depend on that human?"

Tristan rounded on his father, gun in-hand, in his face. "Do not ever say something like that about Alex."

His father smirked. "Kind of touchy about him, for someone who doesn't depend on anyone. What did I teach you, boy?"

Tristan looked at the gun, at what he was contemplating doing. Remembered the Samalian before him wasn't real.

"Well?"

"Attachments only tie you down so the universe can find you more easily."

"Then what are you doing with him?"

Sounds of footsteps approaching. A guard rounded a stack of crates. He shot her in the throat before she realized he was there. "I'm not attached to him. He's mine, that's all." He put the Azeru away.

His father snorted and Tristan went back to ignoring him, focusing instead on assembling the parts he'd gathered. His father was going down the list of the ways Tristan had been a disappointment, but he didn't care. He'd endured his father's disappointment for so long it meant nothing.

Alex's disappointment, on the other hand. What would his human think of him running off like this? He slowed, worked out where Alex should be based on the established plan, and turned in that direction, only to stop and curse. He had nothing to apologize for. Alex had clearly felt he didn't need him there, not following his plan, not letting him kill that guard himself.

Let him manage on his own. It didn't matter to Tristan.

His father snickered.

He was halfway through assembling a second item when he reached his target.

The crane had every extendable component retracted, which was the only way it could enter through the vehicle access. When in use, it could fly at almost a mile in height, while lifting this building. To do that, it needed a powerful core, and if one of those exploded, it could take out half this side of the building.

The trick was giving himself the time to be far from it when it exploded. What he'd made would ensure that.

"Explain this to me."

Tristan sighed as he removed the plating over the core.

"Boy, you keep complaining I don't get what you're doing. Well, this is me trying. Stop bitching and impress me."

"You aren't real." Tristan placed the section on the floor.

"Doesn't mean I'm not interested."

Tristan glared at his father, who looked back with a tilted ear.

"All power cores need to be regulated in how they release the power, because too much power and you burn out the attached components. But it's even more important with more powerful cores; with more power comes the risk of more damage. Instead of burning up a coupling, it explodes."

He disconnected the power conduits attached to the crane. "And it's also true in reverse. When a core is being recharged, the power going in needs to be monitored and regulated." He began taking out the regulator attached to the core assembly. "It isn't so much in how fast the power goes in, but in how much." He placed the regulator on a table. "It's what that's for. It regulates how much power goes in to keep the core from overloading and going critical." He connected the one he'd constructed. "The one I made works basically the same way, except that instead of making sure the core can't go critical, it's going to keep it just at the edge until it receives the signal to give it that extra burst of energy that will make it overload."

He took out the partially completed device. "This is the detonator. It's going to send the signal. All those I make are going to be on the same frequency so that with one button, they all blow up." He put the detonator back in the pack. "The only thing that's going to be left of this building is a crater large enough to bury the station in."

He put the cover back in place and sealed it. "This is going to show Alex I'm fine. Those drugs are out of my system, and I can handle the nightmares. We can leave and go back to the way things were, the way they should be."

He looked at his father who, of course, didn't look impressed. "You didn't understand anything I said, did you?"

His father nodded. "I understood perfectly. This isn't about a job. It's about that human and how you care what he thinks of you."

"No, it isn't," Tristan growled.

"Whatever you say, boy."

He grabbed the regulator. Modifying it would be easier than building one from scratch. He finished the detonator and the regulator by the time he reached his second target: a permacrete extruder, basically an overpowered fabricator with only one recipe in it and a lot of base materials. The output of this model could bury this city in permacrete in a couple of days with only a few stops to refill their reservoirs. Its core was nowhere near as powerful as the crane, but still superior in explosive potential to what Alex and Jacoby had brought.

His father cleared his throat and Tristan turned, pulling out the Azeru. He fired at the approaching, smiling guard. He was about to speak when Tristan shot him.

So typical. Tell a human no one can be in a place, and instead of coming weapon drawn, he had to first talk. He would probably have pointed out Tristan shouldn't be here.

He looked at his father. "Why did you draw my attention to him? If he'd seen me

tamper with the extruder, he might have shot first.”

“I may be pissed at you, boy, but that doesn’t mean I want you dead.”

Tristan had trouble believing that, but the dead guard did support his father’s claim. He exchanged the regulator, put the plating back on, and moved to the next one.

Two dead guards later and he’d modified an equipment carrier. A guard after that and he was working on a second permacrete extruder.

“You know,” he said as he worked, “you could at least be impressed at how easily I killed them.”

“Why? Why should I be impressed when you do things right? When you give me a reason to be impressed, I will be.”

He wouldn’t be, Tristan knew. He shouldn’t even try.

The next piece of equipment gave him pause. The inventory of the depot had marked it as a high-power cutter. He’d looked up the model, and had found it could cut through ten feet of permacrete at three feet a minute. Because of that, he’d expected something large—something that needed to be transported on a carrier, not something he could put on his shoulder and walk away with.

Could the power core for something this small be large enough to cause the explosion he needed? He looked at the column it rested next to and shrugged. He was here, he might as well make use of it.

The regulator he’d modified was too large to fit properly in the casing, so he couldn’t put the plate back on. Hopefully no one would notice.

“Right, because a half-assed job never gets found out,” his father offered—his version of an encouragement. Tristan placed it closer to the column and moved on to the next one.

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He was halfway around the perimeter of the building, killing another guard, when he realized he’d lost track of the number of them he’d killed, but there had been enough he was wondering if there was a fabricator somewhere, just spitting them out.

With this one dead, he went back to exchanging the regulator on the hover. It wasn’t one of the planned targets—he’d already handled those on this side—so now he was modifying every vehicle he came across. After all, overkill was never a bad thing.

A distant explosion made him look up. As far as he could tell, it had come from the other side of the building, but not one of Alex’s; he wouldn’t hear those at this distance, nor would it have created the shockwave that was approaching.

He turned his back to the incoming wall of dust and closed his eyes. One of his explosions? Had someone tampered with his work? He snarled. When he caught them, he was going to rip them to pieces. No one touched his work; it was precise and delicate.

“Keep telling yourself that, boy.”

He wanted to tell his father to shut up, but the dust was still flying. When the wave passed, he opened his eyes to glare at him, but he wasn’t there. Instead, someone was approaching through the settling dust.

Not guards. He recognized one of them, even as a silhouette. He was intimately familiar with that body.

“Alex!” he called, the joy he felt disproportionate to the little time they’d been apart. He stepped toward the human, only to be stopped by the anger in his eyes.

“What the fuck are you doing?”

“I-I’m getting the job done.” Why was Alex angry?

“Really? By setting off those explosions while we’re still inside? What are you trying to do? Kill us?”

“Alex, that wasn’t me.” He took out the detonator, terrified it had activated by accident. It was still turned off. “I didn’t send the signal.”

There was a second explosion, less powerful, from a smaller core, from a smaller vehicle. Like an extruder. Tristan swallowed.

“Didn’t I say that you’d screw up, boy? Didn’t I say just that?” His father was cackling.

“Why couldn’t you just follow along like I told you to?”

“I don’t have to do anything you tell me!” Tristan yelled back. “I am fucking fed up with you always telling me what to do. I’m in charge. I made you, you’re my weapon. You do what I tell you, not the other way around. Stop acting like you think I can’t do anything right!”

“What are you talking about? I don’t—”

“Alex!” Jacoby ran from behind a carrier. “We need to get out of here now! Those two explosions sent a signal out. Our explosives are about to go off.”

“That can’t be right,” Tristan said. “They’re just power cores.” Jacoby stopped and stared. “You blew up power cores?”

“Of course. They’re here, why not use them? I’ve destroyed plenty of ships that way.”

“Then how come you forgot that those things send out an energy wave as they detonate? Don’t you know anything about power core energy storage? You don’t detonate one of those around electronics because it scrambles them!”

Tristan started to protest, but it came back to him now. “Oh.” How had he not remembered that? He looked around. “Ho-oh.”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?” Jacoby asked.

“How many cores did you set to explode?” Alex asked. He sounded tired.

“Nine, maybe ten?” He tried to remember the exact number, but he’d had too much fun making the modifications, working with his hands.

“Run!” Jacoby was off.

Another wall of dust was approaching, but it wasn’t what sent him running, or the fear of being buried under the building. It was the way Alex looked at him.

He outpaced Jacoby, and was the first one to reach the door, sending it exploding outward as he put his shoulder to it. He didn’t care about the pain, he focused on the fact Alex wouldn’t have to worry about the exit being blocked.

He heard other explosions within the building. It wasn’t just the cores he’d modified that were exploding. The energy wave would disrupt every regulator in range, and that explosion would affect more regulators until everything with a core had been destroyed.

He turned when he reached the other side of the road, and his view was obstructed by the dust. Where was Alex? Hadn’t he made it out?

He took a step, and two forms became visible through the dust. Alex and Jacoby. Tristan breathed again. He was safe. His racing heart slowed, until he saw their expressions.

Alex wasn’t angry. Tristan wished he was; anger would be preferable to this. Jacoby was angry, but he didn’t matter. He fought not to run.

“I’m sorry,” he said, pleading. “I was trying to help. I just wanted to show you that I know what I’m doing. I’m better, I swear. Please, can we just go home?”

Even with the sounds of a building crashing down behind them, Tristan heard the words clearly. Heard the disappointment in them.

“Why couldn’t you just do what I told you?”