

“Can we just go home?” Tech’s words echoed Jacoby’s desire. He was all for leaving this place, and he would have expressed it as Alex finished speaking, but there was a muffled detonation and the shockwave lifted him off his feet. He was sent crashing down further in the alley they’d been in.

He coughed as debris fell around and on him, fortunately nothing large, but it quickly accumulated and when he tried to push himself to his knee, a sharp pain in his leg sent him crashing back down.

“What the fuck was that?” he cursed, getting to his back to look at his leg.

“Class-three power array,” Tech replied. Rubble shifted, and the Samalian sat up. “From Albiner, possibly Gardon.”

“How can you know that?” Jacoby saw the ragged piece of metal in his leg and cursed.

“Easy. A class-two array would have killed us at this range, a class-four wouldn’t have gotten past the wall. Those two companies are the only ones making that class of array for commercial vehicles. I’m guessing one of the larger carriers.” There was a pause. “Hey, I didn’t cause this.”

Jacoby looked up from his injury. Alex was standing over Tech, glaring at him, but the Samalian had been looking to the side instead of at Alex. He tried to see if anything there could have merited Tech’s attention, but the alley was empty.

“Shrapnel must have damaged the array,” Tech said, “which caused it to go unstable and explode.”

“Shrapnel caused by something else exploding, right?” Alex asked. “Something that exploded because of the cores you detonated, right?”

Tech looked like he was afraid to be beaten. Jacoby wasn’t happy, but other than his injuries, they were fine and the job was done, so he didn’t see a point in pushing this. “Alex, leave him be.”

“Shut up, Jacoby. Answer me, Tristan. Would that array have exploded if you hadn’t decided your way was more important than what I’d decided on?”

“Maybe?” He sounded pathetic.

Alex let out an exasperated sigh and went to rub his face, stopping to look at his grime-covered hand. “Are you okay?” he asked, sounding concerned. “Any bad injuries?”

Tech shook his head. “Bumps and bruises. You’ve given me worse during training.”

“Jacoby?” Alex asked, eyes fixed on Tech.

“Leg’s damaged, but it’s just muscle as far as I can tell. I’ll limp for a few days, but I have Heals as well as antibiotics. You two are going to want to take them if you have some. Those bumps and bruises are going to hurt in the morning.”

Tech stood and reached in his pack, pulling out a medkit.

Alex snarled. “What’s that?” He pulled another case from the pack that Tech tried to grab out of his hand.

“That’s mine.”

“Where did you get them? I know those aren’t the ones I took from you yesterday.” He opened the case. “How many did you take?”

“Just a few.”

“While in there?”

“Of course not. We were on a job.”

“How close to us getting here?”

“Alex, what are they?” Jacoby asked, unable to see the details on it while Alex waved it about.

Tech shrugged. “Just before we left.”

“How many?”

“Just two.”

“Two? These things are Samalian-strength! There’s ten cartridges missing, when did

you take those?"

"It doesn't matter."

"Today?"

"Alex, what—"

"He's stimed up. No wonder he almost killed us in there."

"That wasn't my fault! Someone tampered with my work."

"Right, because there was anyone left alive by then." Alex closed his eyes. Jacoby thought he was going to explode, but when he opened them, Alex seemed calmer. "We're not done, but we need to get out of here before LeisureTek security arrives. We'll stop by our room so Jacoby can tend his leg, then we'll go see our employer."

Alex turned and walked toward the back of the alley. Tech offered Jacoby his hand and pulled him up.

"Don't worry about Alex; it's the adrenaline. Think about it this way: now she can't claim we didn't do the job."

Tech gave him a small smile.

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"What did you do!" the priestess asked, her anger mangling her words to the point they were difficult to understand. Jacoby had expected her to be more grateful; after all, they hadn't wasted time in returning after the job. They'd only stopped long enough for him to clean and seal the wound, put a field splint over his calf, and sanitize the room. Alex hadn't even taken the time to scream at Tech.

It was a good thing she was dealing with Alex and not him.

"What you hired us to do." His tone was down to frosty, at best. He wasn't pleased about her attitude either.

"I didn't say to do that!" She pointed at the wall of her office. The building they'd destroyed was in another direction, but he didn't point that out. "Do you know how many died?"

"I didn't think you cared about humans dying."

"My people live behind the building. Did you think? How many are dead because of you?"

"You hired us to destroy that equipment," Alex seethed. "Just exactly how did you think that was going to happen? Did you think we'd take them each apart piece by piece?"

"I could have done that," Tech offered hopefully, and was ignored.

"I don't know! Not that!" She looked dejected.

"And why's that? You said you heard about Tristan, that everyone has. Where in that did it say he's in the habit of keeping collateral damage to a minimum? He's the guy who blew up a space station to kill one person. You knew exactly what you'd get when you told us what you wanted." He closed the case and took it off the desk. "Stop complaining. We did the job, now tell me where the Defender needs to go."

Jacoby caught Tech shrugging, then open his muzzle to speak to the empty space next to him, only to notice Jacoby and close it. Maybe Alex was right, and the stims were getting to the Samalian, not that Jacoby had heard of them causing hallucinations.

She dropped in her seat, resigned, chastised, but her voice still contained anger through the reverence. "Artists make the representations as someone important to them, to their community, who matches the Aspect. His fur marks him as being from the Sacaban Plain region. Only the southern regions put that curve at the tip of the sword. There are many communities there, but your people always return to one, because of the legend of Wathen."

She put her datapad on the desk and a map was on it, with coordinates marked and highlighted.

Jacoby entered the coordinates in his pad and matched them to the planetary map. "That's pretty far. We're looking at going orbital to get there in anything close to a few

hours.”

Alex shook his head, consulting his own pad. “We can’t use the shuttle; it’s been at the hotel for too long. Its information has spread through every vehicular system by now. If we take the tag out, that’ll be noticed.”

“I can get us a new shuttle,” Tech offered, still with hope in his tone. Alex glared at him and he slouched. “I just want to help,” he grumbled.

“And if we want to go orbital,” Alex continued, “we need to register our flight path with the station. I don’t want to give anyone a chance to figure out where we’re going.”

“You’re talking about taking a hover the entire way?”

Alex nodded.

Jacoby had his pad calculate the linear distance. “Even with the best hover, if we stay under the sensor line, we’re looking at over a week of traveling. That town is basically on the other side of the planet from here.”

“We’ll want something large then, like the shuttle. I don’t want to make any unnecessary stops.”

“The bigger you go, the slower they get,” Jacoby said.

“That’s fine,” Alex replied. “We’re going to need the space.”

Jacoby looked from Alex to Tech. Yeah, Alex might strangle him if they had to be in the same space too long.

“Do you need to discuss this here?” the priestess demanded.

“In a hurry to get rid of us?” Jacoby asked, looking through the list of available hovers.

“Yes. It will be better if you left before security comes to ask me what I know of the destruction.”

“You hired us,” Tech offered.

“They don’t know that, and there isn’t any proof. You’re just tourists visiting an archaic place of worship. You even have a Samalian guide.” Jacoby dusted himself off and permacrete dust flew. “Dirty tourists.”

“We didn’t take the time to wash up.”

“We’ll do that away from here,” Alex said. “Thank you for the information.” He turned and left, Tech on his heels.

Jacoby took his time putting his pad away, watching her. “You know he doesn’t take well to betrayals, right?”

She leveled his gaze on him. “You have my word, I will not tell anyone you were here.”

He nodded and stood. “Just remember that I know about this place too. I’m not fond of betrayals myself.”

“I gave you my word,” she replied, annoyed. “Even if it’s meaningless for humans, it’s important to us. Or do you need me to make the promise over the Defender?”

Jacoby shrugged as he left. “Wouldn’t mean anything to me. I don’t believe in any of that crap.” He walked as fast as his limp let him, but Alex was already outside by the time he rejoined them.

They stayed to the back alleys until they reached one of the towers, and Alex had them in through a back door, and up more stairs than Jacoby was happy with before they left those for a deserted corridor, and then went inside an apartment.

Tech headed for the shower, and Jacoby expected Alex to join him. He’d found that sex was one of the best ways to resolve problems. Alex sat at the computer and was talking to it.

When Tech came out, naked and fur damp, Alex didn’t move, so Jacoby took his turn, staying under the hot water until all his muscles had relaxed. When done he made sure the sealant was intact, put the splint back on, and got dressed.

Alex went in as soon as Jacoby was out, and in that short time he felt the tension in the air. Tech was at the computer, acting like everything was fine.

He searched through the apartment's system until he found the building's access authorization.

"Tech, I'm going to grab our stuff from the shuttle, and clean it out. No point in leaving anything in it." He paused at the door. "Are you and Alex going to be okay while I'm out?"

Tech smiled. "We'll be fine. This is just a misunderstanding. You'll see. We're going to be fine."

Jacoby nodded. "I have no doubt." He exited the building without any trouble, and found the shuttle where they'd left it, in the hotel's lot. He did a check of it for any security, and when he was confident it was safe, he went to it, gathered their packs, and gave the inside a quick scrub down.

Getting back into the tower was uneventful; one of the residents opening the door for him so he didn't even have to use the access code. He entered the apartment and found himself with a knife at his throat.

"Where have you been?" Alex growled. "Where's Tristan?"

"Relax," Jacoby replied. "I went for our stuff, and I told—" Tech wasn't in the room. "He was here when I left."

"You left him unsupervised?" Alex looked and sounded like he could murder someone.

Jacoby carefully inched away since he was the only available target.

When Alex didn't make any attempt to stab him, he relaxed a little. "He's a grown adult, Alex. He doesn't need to be watched all the time. And you were here, I didn't see the harm."

Alex shook himself. "You didn't see the harm? Weren't you there when he ran off on his own and brought down a building?"

"I was there." He dropped the packs on the couch. "I have the limp to prove it."

"Then how could you even think getting those was more important than watching him?"

Jacoby sigh and sat. "Because we've all been through trauma. So he's erratic at the moment; treating him like a kid isn't going to help solve anything. What he needs is for you to hold him, not push him away."

Alex put the knife away. "You have no fucking idea what you're talking about. He isn't erratic, he's broken. He's probably out there getting more stims. You saw what he did when he was on them."

"What do you expect, Alex?" Jacoby so didn't want to play referee for those two. "After months of drug-induced torture, you'd have nightmares too. Give him comfort, sleep in the same fucking bed as him, hold him."

"We sleep on the floor."

"Then sleep on the fucking floor together. I thought you loved him. This is beyond 'tough love' and into—"

Alex laughed. "You have no idea what 'tough love' is. And don't even think you get to comment on if I love him or how I love him. You haven't earned the right. Just think about what's going to happen if he loses it and kills everyone in this building."

"Alex you're worrying too much. He won't—"

"You know, for someone who told me he researched who Tristan is, you're pretty delusional about what he's capable of."

"Alex." Jacoby did his best to make his tone conciliatory. "T—" The door opened and Alex spun, knife in-hand.

Tech froze, looking from one to the other. He tapped the panel without looking and the door closed.

"Where have you been?" Alex demanded, his expression going from anger, to fear, to relief, and then blank.

Tech's face went through a series of expressions, but Jacoby couldn't read them.

When he spoke, his tone was even. "Out."

"Out? Just like that? What could have been so important you thought vanishing was a good idea? Do you have any idea how scared I was?"

"I left you a message." He tapped the door's control again.

"Alex," Tech's voice came, "I'll be back shortly. I'm going to take care of our transportation issue."

Alex looked too shocked to say anything.

"See?" Tech smiled proudly. "I can do something right."

Alex's mood darkened. "What else did you get?"

"Nothing," Tech replied, defensively.

"You expect me to believe you went out and didn't buy more stims?"

Tech crossed his arms. "Do I look like I have stims on me?" His tone was darkening too.

"He has you there," Jacoby said.

"Shut up!" both of them replied in a near-identical tone.

"You don't look tired," Alex said.

Tech rolled his eyes. "You've seen me go for days without sleep, even without stims."

"Which you have."

"Damn it, Alex, I'm fine. I swear."

Jacoby watched them glare at each other. He sighed. He'd been yelled at already, but he couldn't let this go on. "What did you get?"

"A Portilo Esperansa," Tech replied, any darkness in his voice replaced with pride.

"No idea what that is."

Tech frowned at him. "I thought you knew hovers."

"I know how to get one to fly, I never bothered with the names."

"Really? So you don't know anything about vacation hovers?"

Jacoby snorted. "Why would I want to know something about those?"

"Because you might have to travel across a planet for days, and you'll want to do it in comfort instead of being cramped?" He made it a question, but it was clear Tech thought the reason was obvious.

"Where is it?" Alex asked, sounding like he didn't want to be left out of the conversation.

"In the apartment's assigned spot."

Jacoby stood and winced as his leg stretched. "I'm going to check it out."

"I'm going with you!" Tech exclaimed.

Jacoby looked at Alex.

"I'm coming too." He didn't sound happy. "I'm done leaving you to watch over him."

Jacoby rolled his eyes, but didn't bother commenting.

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"I thought you said it was in the apartment's assigned spot?" Jacoby asked on looking at the monstrosity that was before him.

"It is." Tech pointed to the plaque in the ceiling, with the apartment number etched onto it. It was perfectly centered over the hover, which was large enough it took over every other spot around it.

Hovers were pushed into other spots, and in the travel lane. The next time someone came down here, there would be quite the commotion. As much as he looked, he couldn't see any scraping on those hovers.

"How did you move them?" he asked.

"I pushed them out of the way."

"I don't hear any alarms."

Tech rolled his eyes. "I got in them and disabled that first."

“You got in them, did enough work within the electronics so the alarm wouldn’t sound, and you pushed them? Why not just start them?”

Tech shrugged. He placed a foot against the closest one and pushed it. “They aren’t heavy.”

Alex cursed. “We need to leave. The moment someone sees this, security is going to be all over this place.”

Jacoby opened the side door. “I can move it outside while you two put the hovers in their spots.”

“It won’t do any good; the controls are a mess. One look and security’s here.”

Jacoby started saying it couldn’t be that bad, but saw wires dangling out and panels on the floor. “What did you do to it?”

“I took out the tag and override systems. Everything else is fine.”

Alex was looking at him, eyebrow raised, and Jacoby got the message.

Tech wasn’t fine.

“Make sure it’s good to go,” Alex said. “We’ll be back with our stuff.”

Good to go? Jacoby wondered if it would even power up. Normally he’d trust any work Tech did, but he wouldn’t leave wires and covers lying about. Tech usually took however long was required to do the work properly.

This wasn’t like him at all.

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They were a day out of the city, by the edge of a forest. Jacoby hadn’t been willing to fly any further with the way the hover handled, and with how Alex was tearing up the insides, looking for the stims he was certain Tech had hidden.

He also needed sleep, or to take stims of his own before he could keep going. Tech had removed not only the tag, but anything that would let the corporation track them, which meant the hover wasn’t talking to the navigation satellites, so no automated navigation.

“I didn’t get any,” Tech pleaded in the back. He still hadn’t slept, as far as Jacoby knew. When Alex told him to, he’d turned on the forcefield to partition the back into one of the small bedrooms, then frosted it, but Jacoby had been able to see him sitting or walking. Alex had offered to take over the piloting, but Jacoby didn’t trust his skill with the state the hover’s controls were in.

“Don’t lie to me!”

Jacoby tried to ignore them as he did his best to repair the damage Tech had caused.

“I’m not lying. You said no stims, so I didn’t get more.”

He wished they’d do their arguing in one of the rooms—those could be soundproofed—but then Alex wouldn’t be able to tear open every panel in the hover.

“I know you’ve hidden them. I’m going to find them, and when I do, I’m going to make you watch as I throw them in the disposal, one by one!”

“I’m going outside,” Tech grumbled.

“No, I want you to stay where you can’t cause any problems!”

“There’s nothing here for me to cause problems with! Just trees and grass! What? You think I hid a case of stims among the trees?”

Jacoby pulled his head out of the opening to watch Alex, and by his expression, he had thought exactly that. Then the absurdity registered, but he didn’t find it funny.

“Fine! Get out of here. That way I know you won’t move them when I have my back turned.”

“There are no stims!” Tech yelled as he left the hover. Alex noticed Jacoby. “You have a problem?”

Jacoby snorted. “I have plenty of them. This isn’t one of mine.”

Tech had problems. He might’ve been delusional at times, but he was beginning to

realize Alex had his own delusions.

He so couldn't wait for this job to be over with. Then he could sedate both of them and get them back home, and they could both get treatment.

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"We're here!" Jacoby yelled in relief. He couldn't wait to land this thing and get out, away from all the tension.

Just over two weeks with Alex and Tech constantly about to come to blows was enough to drive anyone to jump out of the hover. That, and boredom. There was little to do when flying a hover. They were designed so you set the destination and let it fly you, but without the self-navigation, someone had to stay at the controls and ensure it kept to the course.

The town didn't look like much. The buildings were small and close together, creating narrow channels leading to a large, open center. He couldn't see anyone among them, but in the field beyond the buildings there were animals.

"There's been a fight," Tech said, startling Jacoby. Last he'd seen Tech, he was in his room, trying to stay awake. He looked exhausted. Alex had forced him to spend the nights in his room, which was when he took over sitting at the controls while Jacoby slept.

Tech was pointing at patches of brown among the deep green grass, and he realized those were the result of shooting. He searched for any indication of more fighting, but the field was the only place it had happened.

"They were caused by a high-powered mounted gun," Tech said.

"A mounted gun?" Jacoby asked. "Shouldn't you be able to tell the model and year it was made?"

Tech yawned and wobbled a little, as he shook his head. "There are sixteen manufacturers who produce mounted weapons that can cause this kind of damage to the ground, and that's without taking into account all the ways other weapons can be modified, or forced to use a powerpack with a larger charge than it's designed for. The possibilities jump to the hundreds then."

Jacoby stared at him. "I was making a joke. Are you saying you tested all the guns that can do something like that?"

Tech shook his head. "I had to rely on reports from other researchers; bringing in mounted weapons would have drawn too much attention to myself." He smiled. "I tested a few, in the field, but I was never in a position to run a proper analysis when that was happening."

Alex joined them and looked at Tech, the worry on his face easy to read, until he noticed Jacoby watching, then his face became an expressionless mask.

The arguments over the stims had stopped less than a day after they'd resumed course, when Tech nodded off while reading and woke up screaming. Even Alex had to admit he wasn't taking them. Tech still did everything he could not to sleep, but Alex couldn't keep him from drinking coffee.

Jacoby noticed motion in the field, people hurrying the animals to a square building—a barn of some sort.

"Get us over there." Alex pointed to a mound far on the other side of the town.

As they approached, they saw it was actually a partially destroyed building. There was definitely a curve to the quarter of it that was still standing, with the imprint of a circle in stone that marked what had been the periphery of the building. Tarps were stretched over the broken sides.

As he flew around, Samalians were hurrying inside the structure. "Something tells me we won't get a warm reception."

"They were attacked," Alex said. "They have no reasons to think we won't do the same." He indicated a spot a few-hundred yards away, closer to the treeline than the building. "Land us there."

“I’d be more comfortable landing next to the building. It’ll be faster to get back in and leave if they decide to attack us.”

“I want to make it clear to them we’re not here to cause trouble. It’s going to give them time to observe us. The guns stay in the hovers.”

“What if they attack us?” Tech’s yawn mangled the last word.

“We subdue without harming them. We’re here for their help, so it’s our job to convince them we aren’t their enemies.”

“They’re probably our enemies.” Tech undid his gun belt and dropped it on the counter. He looked Alex over. “Does that mean you’re taking off your harness? Or is showing them you have more knives than they have claws meant to inspire confidence?”

Grumbling, Alex headed to the other room and returned wearing only a shirt, and looking uncomfortable.

Jacoby set the hover down facing the building. A handful of people had walked to the side to watch. “Alex, I’m staying here. If you don’t want them to think we’re a threat, it’s best if there’s as few of us as possible. I also want to keep the hover warmed up in case this turns ugly and we need to run.

Tech snorted.

“That’s fine,” Alex said, adjusting his jacket and patting himself down.

Jacoby could barely make out the places he had knives. “How long do you think this will take?”

“I don’t know. We’re far from any cities, so I don’t even know if one of them speaks Standard. After that it’ll depend how long it takes to convince them we’re not a threat.” He took the case. “My gut feeling is that you should settle in for the duration. Take a nap.”

“I’m good.”

Alex looked at Tech. “Don’t start anything,” he warned, and exited.