

Tristan placed the last of the explosives along the side and top of the delivery access before retreating and rejoining Alex, who looked up from his datapad and gave a nod. The explosion wouldn't open the access. It would happen in such a way that the guards on the other side would be disoriented, possibly injured, and they would see a failed attempt at coming in. They returned to the rendez-vous point, meeting up with the part of the infiltration team who hadn't been charged with setting up explosives.

Tristan had set careful diagrams for them to work from. He had allowed margins of errors to account for the lack of expertise. The rebels only had one person with explosive knowledge, and from the glee in the woman's eyes when Tristan explained his plan, she'd been someone wanted by the law for a proclivity to blow things up. Enough, he had taken her aside and carefully explained the dangers to her if she did anything to alter how the explosions she was setting up happened.

This wasn't about bringing the building down, or even killing the guards watching the entry points. Except for one. They were about causing chaos. While it hadn't been the intention, the method Tristan had used during the previous jobs against Karliak had created a pattern of subterfuge for the entry, and then a willingness to fight when required.

Bernie's reconnaissance of the security layout had confirmed this. The sensors were waiting for anything out of the ordinary to happen to them, and the security forces would act. This brought the active initiative back to Tristan's side.

The other explosive teams returned, and after confirming with Alex everything was still nominal, he pressed the detonator.

The first explosion came from the front of the building, a package dropped by the one delivery company the data center had cleared as safe. The destruction would include the security desk, as well as the doors, making it impossible for them to prevent entry. The alarm sounded. Forces would be ordered to change position. It would take three minutes for enough of them to reach the lobby. They would be able to take on any size intrusion. Fifty-second after the alarm sounded, a second explosion happened.

This one was on the opposite side of the building from where Tristan and the assault team stood. The detonation strong enough to blow the door in, as well as turn the permacrete that made the surrounding wall projectile shrapnel. It couldn't be enough to pierce the standard corporate security armor, except in the weak points, so the deaths should be minimal. But they would report in. The levels of dusts from the explosion, as well as from the storm, would make it impossible to know for certain where the enemy was.

New orders would go out, the tactical sounds decision was to only send a small force from those heading to guard the front to assist. The hallway was narrower, there was more cover, an overwhelming force was sufficiently unlikely to be considered an impossibility. Considering where they would have started from, how far toward the front of the building they had made it, the closest group would take thirty seconds to reach—

The third explosion happened.

This one destroyed the wall to a storage room. The sensor would report its location as this direct of an assault hadn't been considered. There were no access points near this explosion. Those making the decisions needed to reconsider their assumptions as to the type of entry that would be used, they'd have to

The fourth explosion happened.

They couldn't afford to sit and strategize. By the time the team reported the aborted entry attempt, the order for each team leader to adapt to the changing situation had gone out. Tristan didn't need Alex's nod that Bernie had confirmed things were proceeding according to the plan. Corporations wanted efficiency. That meant working out the best ways to deploy troupes, the appropriate responses to specific types of attacks.

He motioned for everyone to turn their back to the building.

That meant they became predictable.

The explosion opened a section of the wall, sending most of the debris inside, but enough of the heavier ones weren't carried away by the storm that they hit his back with enough force to shatter a breathing mask. Another motion and they were running inside.

They lost one person to a blind shot from a survivor. Ester paused only long enough to confirm they were dead, then they were moving again, reaching the door; it unlocked as they approached. Alex

opened it, took position and Tristan followed him.

With the door closed and the storm cut off, they removed their masks and storm clothing. At least this time, Tristan didn't have particulate in his fur. Eastyn had gone out and obtained effective protection against the storm.

"Tristan," Ester said, "Some of us should—"

"No," he cut her off.

Convincing Krystal the team needed to be split the way he wanted it had been the hardest part. It wasn't that she didn't trust him and Alex. It was that she kept insisting that a suicide mission wasn't something she was signing off on. She kept demanding he take extra people with them to ensure they survived. Even once he explained that Alex needed the pressure of too many security personnel to fight against, she kept insisting it was too dangerous for the two of them. It was Eastyn who had finally convinced her, showing that whatever influence one was developing on the other went in both directions.

"This is—" she raised her hands at the glare.

He'd expected this from her, ever after the explanation that Tristan and Alex were the diversion. Tristan was distinctive enough someone had reported the presence of a Samalian, so as soon as Bernie let the sensor see him and Alex, they would draw the bulk of the security, and would get them away from the target room. Their target was the initial stack room, four floors below Ester's target. Because it made sense that a second attempt would be made was the reason Krystal had told them.

A fifth explosion happened.

One more to go. The one he'd given to the one explosive expert to place, along with her initial one.

He inspected the weapon he took from a dead. A modified Karamin St-0kr. Commonly called the Stopper, by those who enjoyed it. Enough power to stop someone in reinforced tactical armor of the type Tristan had fought at the rebel's base. Its downside was that the standard power pack burned out after three uses, rendered useless by the too rapid draw for the speedy recharge demanded by those who used these types of weapons. The pack wasn't standard, but without taking it apart, Tristan couldn't know how much it would give him. He'd grabbed it because it had been the largest weapon, the only non-corporate standard one, there.

He shifted it to maximum power. It wasn't like he'd run out of options for replacement once the fighting started, or that he'd be the one doing the build of it.

"Take cover in the room Bernie tells you," he instructed. She was the only one with a comm to the Asharan. The only one Bernie would speak to for some reason. They had better hope she survived the fighting. Without someone to relay the information Bernie would have for them as they progress, what they were after would be impossible to obtain.

The thought he should wish them luck popped up. It was the thing humans would do—

"You two be careful," Ester said. "And good luck."

—only he found he didn't quite care enough to be human at the moment. His goal was within reach. Once this was done, he'd have Alex the way he should be. Dangerous, but under his own control again. Anything else was irrelevant.

He moved.

"Bernie is ready to let us be visible," Alex said, putting the datapad away.

"Once we are out of the stairwell, on the third floor."

Alex nodded.

This part of the plan had only been discussed between the two of them.

The one point he'd worried about was changing the route that had been successful the first time. Alex knew him well enough to see a needless change and question it, so he hadn't been sure that framing it as making themselves more noticeable this far from the route Ester would take would serve to make their job easier, would work. Alex had seemed conflicted, been on the brink of questioning something, then just nodded his agreement, and Tristan hadn't known how to feel.

Throughout this job, Alex had wavered between making decisions and mindlessly following what Tristan said. And there, it had looked like he would question an instruction, call Tristan out on something he didn't agree with. It would have potentially complicated the job, but it would be another thing Tristan

wanted to see.

A fully independent Alex.

So here they were, heading up to the third floor, to be detected, and then go toward the front, drawing the majority of the guards away from Ester and her team, forcing them to fight against ever more opponents, where he would make sure they didn't overwhelm Alex, while pushing him ever harder until they were at the right location.

The fighting started sooner than expected. The door to the third floor opened as they were on the lower landing from it. The Karamin turned the leader into a red mist that blinded the two behind them and sent the fourth member of the team backing while screaming hysterically about being under attack. Alex killed the two before they wiped at their visor, then they were in out of the stairwell and Tristan turned the last into more mist.

"Not that it matters, but Bernie just confirmed we're visible."

Tristan made the left and proceeded at a leisurely pace. He shot a door, and half that wall exploded. He touched a few components of the Karamin to test their temperature and it seemed to be handling the firing well. A fourth shot painted the floor and walls on each side and ceiling red. Behind him, Alex fired.

Tristan aimed at the group that entered their corridor from the end and hesitated. As much as he wanted to test how much the modification had improved the weapon, this was making it too easy to progress. The goal was to be overwhelmed, not ease their way to the critical point.

He discarded the Karamin and pulled out his Azeru, firing at the rushing opponents, only hitting arms and chest where they could take the shot, but forcing them to weave about and shoot without aiming.

"This corridor is going to get busy," Alex said. "I wish whatever that gun was had more charge to it."

"Karamin. And yes, it would have simplified things. How do you feel about taking this to them faster than they expect?"

"I feel really good about it. I've been needing to get up close and kill someone for a while now."

Tristan ran, causing the approaching security to slow in surprise. Before any of them raised their weapons, he was on them, getting himself in the middle of them, clawing and punching, preventing them from raising their weapons, while Alex planted a knife in one of the back, then was before them, holding to take fire from the other group.

Tristan twisted an arm until the bone snapped. Elbowed a visor hard enough, it shattered. Alex threw a knife at the other group and one of them went down.

More made it around the turn they were heading for and Tristan grabbed an opponent by the neck, snapped it and moving them to take the shots.

"Incoming." He took the Sofim out of the holster and fired, reducing their numbers, then shot the last of his current group in the head. Before they could pull their knife. Alex had that in his hand and then it was thrown before they fell to the floor.

"We can't stay here if we want thing to proceed according to the plan," Alex said.

"Then we move." Using the corpse in his hand as a shield and battering ram, Tristan ran at the group, making it to the other side before they were over the surprise of being batted aside so easily, and while they turned to focus on Tristan, Alex cut them up. Then they were around the turn and picking up the pace as more were before them.

Tristan threw the body and followed, weaving to make it harder to be hit, but he felt a burn in his shoulder. He shoved the pain down and barreled into them. Sending one into the clear wall that would let someone look down onto the lobby and outside if someone was so minded, and the lobby wasn't a disaster zone rendered nearly opaque by the storm blowing through the opened front.

Nearly there.

A glance over his shoulder showed Alex moving among his opponents, slicing and stabbing. Maneuvering some to take hits from their allies.

Tristan grabbed the gun being raised and crushed the hand holding it.

The smile was forming on Alex's face. Nowhere near manic yet, but it would get there soon enough.

He took the detonator.

A little more.

Alex moved, and people died. Soon there wouldn't be anyone left to push him, and he was nowhere near far enough, or on the right level, for that to happen.

Tristan detonated the explosive, and the outside wall was no more.

Alex didn't notice, still lost in his fight.

Then the floor shook as the central pylon the explosive had been carefully placed against was sent flying through the lobby and into the support of the hall they stood in.

Tristan smiled as the windows shattered and the floor tilted into the lobby. She had followed his instructions perfectly.

Then he, Alex, and the security force trying to kill the two of them fell onto those assembled to prevent an assault from entering the building through the no longer existing front.