

Two halls after leaving Alex, Tristan encountered resistance. Four shots, and they were down, a knees shot, two neck, and a chest one because that person's vest was on crooked and created the opening. Helmets kicked off and a shot in the head ensured they were dead and he moved on.

Screams drew his attention off-course. He considered ignoring them; they didn't matter to the job. Then headed toward them. Any security he left alive could get in his way when the situation was critical.

He acknowledged he was justifying and filed that away to be considered later. He'd expected all the changed to how he thought to have happened in the weeks after his decision to care about Alex, but he was finding new situations where it happened nearly every time he dealt with people.

He fired at the back of the security officers. Their armors took the heat, dissipating the blast, but got their attention. With the four of them facing him, he had more workable target points. Two were down when the third moved behind a family, grabbing a human—too tall to be a child, didn't seem quite muscular enough to be a fully developed adult. He increased the output of the Azeru past its safe maximum and fired at the man's helmeted head as he raised the Foterus to the human's head. The visor shattered under the head's super-heated explosion.

Tristan discarded the Azeru—the components wouldn't stand another shot—and walked to the last guard. The human's scream masked his approach. Or the fact they were all still watching the headless man fall back. By the time she realized he was within reach, he had her helmet off, and head shattering against the wall.

He took the Foterus out of her hand, looking for an alternative. He didn't like this weapon. The power was good, but it came at the cost of the charge. He unclipped her belt before letting her fall, putting it over his shoulder, with the power packs in front for ease of access.

"Do you know where the meeting room is?" he asked the group of humans, snapping them out of the stunned state and causing them to shy away from him. A woman held the whimpering human against her, looking at him hatefully. "They are being escorted away. If you hurry, you can join them."

"How—" an older man said. "How are we going to do that with those people running around and shooting us?"

Tristan took a Foterus from a body and offered it to the man. "Shoot them first."

"I don't know how to use that," he protested.

"Learn, or die."

Hesitation. Then the man took it.

"It's unlocked. Point at your target and press the trigger. It's a one shot per press, so you don't have to worry about how long you hold you get six shots per packs." He handed the man the belt from his shoulder. "If a press doesn't do anything, don't question it; change the pack. One of them should hand them to you as needed." Tristan knelt to take the two belts from the bodies at his feet.

"Can...can you come with us?"

"That's not my job." He hooked them together, making a bandolier, and slipped that over his arm.

"Don't you care about us?" the woman holding her child demanded.

"No." Tristan returned to the hall that would take him to the concourse.

He hadn't lied.

Which raised the question of why he had rescued them. He had been justifying. So what had changed?

He'd accomplished what he'd set to do, remove what was endangering them. He didn't feel a need to help them beyond that. Interesting.

His desire to help was segmented, and not all-encompassing, as he'd worried it might become. He'd seen many merc get themselves killed because they'd set out to help someone beyond measure for no other reasons than they needed help.

He would have to pay attention, but so long as it remained like that, limited to the immediate threat, it would be manageable.

He search the bodies he'd just dropped for different weapons. The protection detail had carried Swarths, and he'd hoped it had been the standard weapon, instead of the exception it was turning out to be. They we all armed with Foterus. He hooked a second one to his belt, because they were prone to overheating and becoming even less efficient, then made another bandolier, replacing the power packs

he'd had to drain making it this far.

The auditorium was three-quarter of the way down the concourse, and while it was currently empty, scream came from nearly every connecting corridor. Ester had said there were families living here. Like the one he'd rescued.

He decided not to care. He had a job to do. He couldn't get the information he needed if he went after each of them. He just had to find out if how he was now would listen to that command, and what to do about it if he didn't.

He passed three corridor, ignoring the screams, but at the fourth, the choice was taken from him. "Move," The command came as a man stumbled out before Tristan.

He reacted before thoughts occurred. The man was sprawled on the floor behind Tristan as he stepped before the opening. Two scared humans and a child between them, two in body armor. He threw himself at the security agents, firing without aiming. One staggered back, leaving the other to fend for himself. Tristan caught the arm as it was raised, twisted until the man dropped the Foterus with the scream of broken bones.

He pulled him to intercept the shot from his partner, then threw him at her.

"There's—" one of the captive started, as Tristan heard the blow coming from the smaller corridor to his left. In time to move, but not in time to avoid it completely.

The mechanical fist sent him tumbling to the other side, wincing as he stood. The security office who stepped out wore thicker armor. Something based on the Josgrey design, that had been popular a century before, Objective. The loudness of the upgrading components had been the reason for the loss of popularity, and they were replaced by more efficient designs.

It whirred as they took a step and Tristan dodge the punch.

What had made them successful was the surface alloy. It would take multiple blast without any of the heat dissipation soaking through. It made shooting it with anything less than ship grade weapons a waste of time. Tristan stepped back to avoid the swing, then under the overextended arm in an attempt to unbalance his opponent, but the body resisted without having to move its legs. The punch send Tristan rolling on the floor, ended in his back at the feet of the other security agent, grinning at him as she—

He kicked her leg out from under her, was up, taking the Foterus out of her hand, along with the blade at her belt. He shot her in the face point blank and her head ceased to be.

The Josgrey had been upgraded, in an attempt to boost its appeal, with a gyroscopic stability module. The manufacturer had gone with the best design available, knowing anything less would simply come across as what it was, an act of desperation from a dying company. Short of shutting down the power to the armor, Tristan had never found a way to overcome it when fighting hand to hand.

The officer inside didn't let the casual killing of their associate faze them. They ran at Tristan, each step accompanied by the whirling of the components that would let them run as fast as a most publicly available hover, if they had enough space. They didn't have that here, but Tristan still backed until he was in the concourse. They could build enough momentum that an impact would shatter even Samalian bones.

The only flaw the Josgrey had Tristan could exploit were the joints, but the manufacturer has understood that and made them of interlocking and inter-covering plates leaving gaps that needed a blade with the thinnest edge if he wanted a chance to slip it between them. He activated the vibro-edge.

Tristan would have to make do with what he had.

He ran at the armored officer, ducking under the swing and slashing at the knee, barely leaving a scratch.

"Really? You bring a knife to an armor fight? You know anything about what I'm wearing?"

Tristan now knew the man inside it didn't know the armor's limitation, and that the design he had hadn't come with integrity sensors. It was a significant design flaw, but many significant things were taken out when an organization looked to save money on something designed to keep what they considered the lowest of their investment alive.

Another pass and another scratch on the knee joint. The third resulted in Tristan arching away from the kick he hadn't managed to dodge.

"I'm guessing they didn't bring you into this for your brains. What were you, one of their sex

toys?”

It was an interesting detail to Tristan that nearly anytime a human attempted to guess as to why another of their kind might want him around; it involved sex. He pushed the pain away and ran at the officer, reversing his hold on the knife. He jumped as the leg twitched and planted the knife into the elbow joint as it was raised to intercept him.

The following punch cracked ribs as he flew off, but he managed to hold on to the knife and smelled blood.

“Son of a bitch! How the fuck did you do that?”

Vibro-edge could pierce the armor, but it needed the level of force that was rarely possible in a close combat fight. The elbow was locked in the bent position.

Pushing the pain was more difficult since it spiked with each step, but he needed to push. The one concrete advantage he had over his opponent was control. He could cause the officer to lose it and make himself vulnerable.

“I am going to make you fucking pay for that.”

The steps clang with force as he ran toward Tristan, building momentum. Tristan smiled, baring his teeth. He considered turning the blade off and licking the blood as a show of superiority, but he couldn't afford the delay.

And he had something else going for him.

Momentum.

His opponent's.

Tristan didn't get out of the way and the impact hurt. As did the armored officer falling on top of him. The groan escaped as he pushed him off, the blade's pommel out of the chest the only part of it visible.

Losing control of their emotions led to no longer thinking about things like how much strength their momentum would impart to the object they collided with.

Tristan got to his feet and had to clamp down on the pain hard. He wasn't done. The damage wasn't life threatening, but he hoped there was not another one of those among the officers he'd encounter on his way to his target.

“Your leaders are evacuating,” he told the humans, cautiously stepping onto the concourse. “If you hurry to the meeting room, you can join in the first wave.” No point in mentioning it was most likely the only one. These didn't question what he said, or how they're reach it. They helped the older human who had moved to the wall up and hurried away.

Tristan returned to the corridor and searched the dead humans until he found the medical pouch. There was little he could use out of them, especially not the heal-all [need to check if I established the formulation was species specific] but painkillers would help, even if he had to take nearly all they had for them to have an effect.

When had he started forgetting to pack his emergency kits before any jobs?

\* \* \* \* \*

He ripped the bend doors out of his way, and even through the painkillers, his body protested. He had more from those he'd killed getting here, but he didn't want to overdo it.

The auditorium, converted into an engineer's research lab, was a mess. The damaged doors had been an indication Karliak's security had made it here before him, so the odds he'd get his answers were low. But even with Ramon dead, or taken, good engineers documented everything.

For everything he thought of the man, Tristan had gotten the sense he was good when it came to in the lab engineering.

He made it to the data station—it was intact. Karliak was after people, not information—when the cough made him draw the Foterus. He followed it to the overturn desk and instruments. He pulled them off, and the man buried under them screamed.

“Don't hurt me! I surrender!”

Tristan snorted. “It's too late for that, Ramon.”

“Oh, it's you. You need to get me out of here and to a medic.”

Tristan crouched next to him. Ramon was bleeding from a large gash in his side. “You his when

they burst in. Smart. You should have used something that couldn't move, or fallen on you." His left leg was at an unnatural angle.

"Yeah, well, I didn't have time to think."

"That's what planning is for." The wheeze in his voice was slight, but there. His lungs were damaged.

"Whatever." He offered Tristan a hand. "You're here, so help me up and get me to safety."

"What instructions did you give Robert?"

"What?"

"Before we left for the job. Alex was you and Robert speak. What did you tell him to do?"

"To do a good job, of course."

Tristan shook his head. "The weapons he handed to his team, you took them out of the lockup Krystal put them in."

"I wanted to make sure they—"

"You gave them their own job and armed them accordingly," Tristan said. "I explained what it would be, that stealth was the only way to accomplish the job with a minimal of things that could go wrong."

Ramon snorted, then groaned. "You weren't looking at all the parameters. Your target was wrong, for own thing. That woman with the code wouldn't have done us any good."

"It's who you and the others agreed was important."

"It's who they agreed. They never listen to me. I gave them the data. They just don't care."

"So you altered the job without telling anyone."

"You said that with anything going wrong, they would be evacuated. I gave Robert an isolation bag along with his weapons, that can block the tracker Karliak puts into their executives."

"And then you had them use the shuttle on the roof for their escape. A Karliak shuttle."

"I gave them a program that would scramble any tracking that was attempted."

Tristan nodded. "This is what happens when you don't listen to the expert, Ramon."

"I didn't screw this up. I gave them everything they needed to come back clean."

"And if you had told me what you planned, I would have pointed out that no corporation relies exclusively on the tracker they implant or on their shuttles talking with local networks. Both are too easy to deal with. At a minimum, that shuttle had six hard-wired trackers broadcasting on individual frequencies. Your team led Karliak here. You gave the orders, so you are responsible for what is happening." He stood.

"Fine, okay, is that what you want to hear? I screwed up. I'm sorry. Take me to Krystal and her boyfriend, and I'll beg forgiveness."

"No."

The human stared at him, confused. "What..."

"I'm not taking you anywhere."

"You can't leave me here."

"Yes, I can."

"I'm—I'm going to die. I have internal injuries. I need a medic."

"Yes, you will." Tristan turned and headed for the door.

"You can't do this to me!"

Tristan smiled. "Yes, I can."