

“You planning on coming?” Alex called out to the man who was speaking with Ramon by the hangar door. He’d happily leave him and the others here, but they had to play the role of working for these people and it had been made clear they had tag-alongs. The one aspect it had allowed, although Alex had to force the issue, was for Bernie to be involved in keeping an eye on the system while they were getting the job done. It wasn’t until Bernie had pointed out he would be in his ship and not with us in the hotel that he got the okay.

The man nodded to Ramon and pulled the pack over his shoulder.

“What’s the hurry?” the man said. “It’s not like any of them are going anywhere.”

“You delay a job, and you pay the price.”

“I think we’ve all paid enough to be given slack, considering the number of us you hurt.”

Alex didn’t bother replying, steeping inside the small shuttle. Ramon had been right when he said it would be tight. Half the space inside was lost to the thickness of the walls. Added protection, according to the man, in case one of the already insulated transport containers ruptured.

Another thing it didn’t have was place to sit.

“He was the last one,” he told Tristan, standing behind the pilot. This time, the Samalian was letting someone else pilot so that as soon as they had the target and they were in, they could move. The plan was to go in and out undetected, but with how often the plan had to be changed partway, Tristan had taken advantage of the extra pilot.

“Get us moving,” Tristan told the pilot.

The shuttle shuddered as it lifted. Then they were in motion.

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“To be certain there are no mistakes,” Tristan said as they were approaching the hotel. “Me, Alex and Ester are team one. Robert, Maxim, and Helen, you are team two. Team one is going for the target.”

“Of course you are,” someone muttered.

“Team two will move in position to intercept the target if they are somehow alerted to what is happening. Corporate procedures will be to extricate them from the situation via the shuttle that is on the roof. Team two’s job will be to separate the target from the others being evacuated and meet back with us at the exit point. From there, will we retreat to this shuttle and fly to the temporary base to proceed with extracting the codes that will give your leadership control over this section of Karliak, taking this planet out from under their control.”

“Why isn’t Krystal or Ramon here?” Ester asked. “I thought we needed to have the person who’ll get the code present to do the transfer. Wasn’t that the point of Kaleb going to the station with you?”

Tristan looked at Alex, since it was his department. “Kaleb’s presence wasn’t needed. The codes can be held in a properly prepared slate and then transferred. He just wanted to be certain nothing would go wrong.” The explanation skirted the truth, but because it involved high corporate processes, the odds of anyone among the rebels would know how things were to happen were low. Most people only know the stuff the vids showed about that level of corporate anything, and the vids weren’t interested in portraying truth, just excitement.

“And something did,” the man with the pack said.

“Something always does,” Tristan replied. “That’s why every job has contingencies. For this one, that’s you.”

“Don’t worry,” the man said. “If you screw up, we’re going to be there to make sure things go our way.”

Alex kept from replying. The man was purposely being annoying. There had been more tolerance towards aliens among the rebels than Alex expected, but the few bigots had no problems making their positions known.

“We’re about to land,” the pilot said.

“As soon as we do, team two, head for the far service entrance. Alex and Bernie had already coerced that and the access we will use. Remember, the building will be on high alert. The security present will react aggressively to anything and anyone out of the ordinary. Trying to reason with them will only result in you being killed, not captured, and the job jeopardized. Stealth is how this mission will be accomplished. Alex will be actively hiding us from the system, and Bernie will be monitoring for any

indication they are onto us, but that will not protect you from being seen by the people patrolling the halls. Do not be seen. Mask on.”

For someone who hated having to explain how a job was to go, Tristan had formed a mask of someone he certainly know how to go about it.

The shuttle landed, and they were out. Team two was out and vanishing into the flying dust. He, Tristan and Ester ran for the other side of the hotel, where the door unlocked on scanning them.

The narrow hall was deserted, and the storage cabinet unlocked, letting them store their masks and overcoats for when they left.

“Bernie,” Alex said, taking his datapad out and looking over the information.

“All is nominal,” the Asharan answered. “The hotel’s system is not bothered by your presence.”

Alex nodded, glancing over the code. Karliak’s additions hadn’t done much to keep him out because they weren’t native to the system. He’d been able to sneak around them and coerce the hotel directly, becoming its friend. Since Karliak’s additions all relied on the hotel’s scanners, so long as it was okay with not telling them about the new presences, and they could keep from being seen, no one would know they’d been here.

“Ester,” Tristan said. “You take the rear. If Alex needs to actively coerce for any reason, he won’t be in a position to defend himself, and it will be our job to ensure his safety. Our own depends on him remaining in control of the system, so try not to slack off.” He gave her a closed lip smile.

“Don’t worry, boss. Unlike Robert, I don’t have a problem working with you.”

“Which is why you are the only one I assigned to us from the people Ramon placed on this mission.”

Tristan opened the door, ears forward, then stepped out. Alex followed, his pad’s display always in sight.

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Three floors to go, and everything—

The Alarm sounded.

“Bernie, what’s going on?” he whispered, going over if the system had changed its mind about keeping their presence secret. They’d made it this far, having to exit into the hall two floors below when a patrol had stepped into the stairwell. Alex had coerced the lock on a door and they’d waited in the room until they were past before continuing up.

“A door lock had been triggered,” the Asharan replied. “One floor above you, opposite location.”

“How does that happen?” a query to the hotel confirmed that was where team two was.

“Someone basically had to blow up a room’s door to trigger those.”

“I do not know. I am attempting to bring an end to it, but the Karliak additions have noticed it and are reacting.”

“Team two, the target is on the move,” Tristan called. “Be ready to act.” Alex looked up from his datapad when Tristan spoke again. “Team two, acknowledge that you are ready to intercept the evacuation.”

Alex was querying the hotel before Tristan looked at him. “The hotel sees Team two on the move toward the roof.”

“And our comms be blocked?” Ester asked.

“I should be able to see that,” Alex replied, scrolling through the code. He hated working from a datapad. Even when power wasn’t required. He couldn’t get the proper field of vision with them short of bringing up the holographic display, but here wasn’t a place for that. “For Karliak to block comms, they need to insert the programs that will let the hotel continue to function, unless they dig deep enough into its code that they simply take control, both of which can’t be done without leaving evidence behind visible from the system next door.”

“The target?”

“The evacuation is in progress,” Alex replied, the system telling him how they were moving through its halls. “The Karliak people have met up and are being escorted up. They are in line with team two intercepting them.”

“We’re meeting up with them.” Tristan said, taking off at a jog which allowed Ester to keep up

with them.

“You think they’re going to need the help?” she asked.

“He thinks they’re going off plan,” Alex offered.

“Why would they do that?”

“I plan on having one of them tell me that,” Tristan replied.

“Team two has engaged,” Bernie informed him, as Tristan fired ahead and body fell to the floor. Ester fired behind them. “They are reaching the roof.”

“How is team two still alive?” Alex asked, putting the datapad away and firing.

“I do not know. The system scanners are not equipped to provide information on weapons or armor.”

“Do you guys have anything that could match corporate security? No offence, but I didn’t see any of you with the kind of shooting skill needed to hit their armor’s weak spots.”

“I know a few of Robert’s people brought stuff powerful enough Krystal had that locked up.”

“Is that who had the pack?”

“Yeah, he said he wanted to bring extra weapons, just in case.”

“The shuttle is leaving,” Bernie told him.

Alex cursed. “Karliak managed the evacuation,” he told Tristan.

“Team two?”

“I don’t know. Bernie, what can you tell me about Team two?”

“Nothing. I do not have access to the level of the system required to know who it sees.”

“Ester, do your best to keep up,” Tristan said, and took off.

Alex was surprised Ester kept up with him, as he barely kept up with Tristan.

He barely had to fire. If Tristan didn’t gun down everyone they encountered before they were too close, he set them through the walls in his rush to reach the roof.

When they reached the roof, Alex didn’t know what to make of the sight.