

“This thing looks like one of the researcher’s hovers,” the man said as Tristan looked through the wires for added components. “So, is it?”

Tristan looked in the space between his chest and the top of the opening in the control panel. The man was too far to be kicked. Ignoring him was an option, but he’d trekked through the jungle to confront him. Silence wouldn’t cause him to leave.

“It is a Setory Z-E 453, like the ones the closest research station has logged as theirs. I haven’t found any trackers or altered tags that indicates the mercenary did their research and acquired the model to full the acolytes into believing that is where they came from.”

“How about power output?” Maraco asked. “I don’t know one merc whose happy to keep that at the manufacturer settings. We’re always in need of more, to get ourselves out of tight spots.”

“The output is above that set by Setory,” Tristan replied, returning to his search. “But not significantly so. Until I look at the generator and capacitors, I can’t know for sure, but it matches the power drift the 453 is known for.”

“How do you know how much a hover power’s output drifts by?”

“Research.” He pulled himself out, satisfied nothing had been added there. “Why are you here?” He reattached the cover and moved on to the next section.

“To find out why you’re doing this. You have to know Teklile isn’t going to pay you.”

“I don’t need to be paid.” On his back, he pulled himself into the void purposely left there because of how often boards on ship, shuttle, and hovers needed to be worked on. At a glance, he found eight indications work had been done, but all old, and each one repair work.

“I don’t buy it. You’re not doing this out of goodness of your heart, because you don’t have one.”

Tristan paused in looking over one of the repairs as his heart tightened at the image of Alex, gunned down by the Law after losing control in a public space. He reminded himself they were here to keep that from happening, and that he didn’t owe the man answers.

“You can’t tell me this is because of your man. From what I can see, he’s enjoying these little interruptions, the attack cau—” the man jumped back as how forcefully Tristan pulled himself out.

“I can,” Tristan snapped before he regained control of himself. “Without knowing how far within the escalation this attack is, I can’t properly plan for this place to remain standing, and as I told you when you sought me out before, Alex needs it to get better.”

Tristan had thought he could use it to, once he learned able the meditation, but after

three attempts to get the Source to answer his questions, he was doubting this venue.

“He seems fine to me. Effective, deadly. He hasn’t lost it on anyone the way you seem afraid he will.”

“This environment is too controlled for his murderous side to be triggered. Nothing here affects things he cares about.” He let a slow breath out. “Now. How about you let me get on with this work? Before I feel the need to evict you from this hover forcefully?”

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Tristan found Teklile in the infirmary, his leg in a regeneration cast. That one shut to make it into the sanctuary had burned half the man’s leg off. If the shooter had been more skilled, the acolytes would be in need of a new leader.

“One of the merc probably has a more recent design on their ship,” he mentioned, looking at the century old cast.

“And many have offered,” Teklile replied. “This will do the work, that it takes most of a day, instead of an hour, isn’t such an issue.”

“Three,” Tristan said, looking the medical table’s reading over. “Regenerating bone isn’t fast even with the current commercially available models.”

“Then there’s even less of a reason for me to make use of them,” the man smiled broadly.

“This will not end until Carter Hart gets what he’s after,” Tristan said. “The longer it takes, the more destructive the attacks will be. Unless the mercs take up the defense, the attack after Alex and I leave will be the one to make it through. And depending what the escalation level is at that point. Carter Hart might tell that team to blow up the mountain on their way out.”

“I appreciate that it is how you see things,” the man replied in the calm tone of someone who hadn’t been at the receiving end of a stray blaster bolt. “But once Mister Hart exits cryo and has my messages, I am certain—”

“He isn’t under cryo.”

“It hasn’t been a year since he left.”

“This team wasn’t some random mercenaries taking a job off one of the boards. They were specialists. It took them this long to make it here from their base of operation.”

“Then he most have hired them before going under,” Teklile replied. “In that initial fit of anger.”

“They didn’t come here with their ship. Which means they knew about the sensor array I established as an advanced warning.” One of the previous team had to have detected the anomaly in the sensor distribution and passed it along, either not understanding or not caring about what it meant.

“And they must have told these—”

“The only contact the previous teams had was with the boards, and only one person can act on that information. Carter Hart has to be awake to tell this team what to expect.”

“Maybe his assistant program accessed those boards and—”

“The boards don’t let computer access them. It’s too easy for someone to take control. All the authorizations have to be given by people.”

“Maybe it’s simply a coincidence they acted in a way that didn’t trigger them.”

Tristan looked at the readouts to an indication the man had a mental condition that

made him incapable of admitting to a reality outside of his beliefs. At least, Hea'Las's beliefs had included a reason that made sense to her as part of her refusal to leave.

The Source would protect them.

And it had. In the form of him, Alex, and Jacoby.

This man simply held on to an irrational belief Carter Hart was a nice person who hadn't had the time yet to get over his anger.

"Assaulting a corporate research station to steal one of their hovers isn't something that happens by coincidence. It was a plan. A calculated one."

"Are they okay?"

"Is who okay?" Tristan asked, confused by the question.

"The researchers."

"They were attacked by mercenaries. I don't expect they are okay. Probably alive, since killing corporate employees isn't something mercs do without care, but not okay."

"Shouldn't you go look in on them?"

"What?" Was the man looking to hire him?

"If they were attacked, shouldn't you go make sure they're okay?"

"No. They're their corporation's problem. The worse you have to worry about is a security division questioning you. Tell them what happened. I doubt we'll be here by the time they find out."

"If it's going to take that long, doesn't it make sense for you to go check to make sure they are okay? I expect that someone was left behind to make sure they didn't try to warn us about what was about to happen."

Tristan stared. "Are you hiring me to mount a rescue?"

"What, no." The man chuckled. "I'm just pointing out you should go check on them, make sure they're okay."

"I think..." His mind had difficulty assembling the words. "I think there's something you don't understand, Teklile. I don't care about them. I'm not responsible for the situation they find themselves in, so I am not interested in acting on their behalf."

"I don't believe you," the man replied flatly. "You're a living being and so are they. We are all living beings in a vast and uncaring universe. We're all connected by caring for one another."

Tristan left.

The man was delusional. This went beyond thinking people were good at their cores when it was the rare person who was. Everyone was connected? By the emotion of caring? Even the Source didn't claim that. By his people's beliefs, they were all from the Source and they were all traveling on its surface, but there was nothing in them about having to care about everyone in the universe.

The fingers that had been rolling the sphere between them closed into a fist with it in the middle.

Someone should pound Teklile's head in until he saw reason. Tristan was of mind to be the one to do it.

He ground his teeth and scented the air for someone, then followed it.

He found Alex at an open gallery with an outcropping of stone covering half of it, building pyres with acolytes.

“Alex,” he barked, “we need to go.”

Alex was at his side without asking for permission. “Where are we going?”

“The research station. I need to hit someone, and they’ll have left people there to keep things under control and possibly monitor the situation.”