

I stood up. There was no use to dismiss it. After all, cybernetic implants solved the morning drowsiness by controlling the hormones partially. Some subtle technological advancements had great use.

I had a good reason to wake up this early. I chewed up a highly nutritive bar of artificially pleasant taste and grabbed the prepared backpack. Two bytes of kilograms rested comfortably on the electronically enforced shoulders. I tightened the elastic metal of the straps.

"I'd better not drop 'em", thought I. Truly, having all of those explosives casually slide down would have been a waste. Naturally, that would also call down the mission failure and provide a delightfully bright death. But the explosives were expensive and good enough to be something to care about.

Now I had to take them to the rendezvous point with the next carrier, then wander off and wait for Jack to pick me up. Unfortunately, the sabotage was important enough to keep things most secret.

"My, my," I thought. "We have the best innovations, and yet a big boom cannot just happen." I grinned. "But that's a good start for something new. It neatly breaks the old."

Naturally, the walk from my temporary apartment was short. The longer one guy carries a powerhouse, the more chance he has to be found out.

I shrugged and whistled the notes of the classic pop song's chorus. "Gotta hit the club someday again. Though it'd better not end up in the massive fight like it did the last time." I let that slip my mind, whistling all the while.

Craden was perfectly on time. I checked the chronometer. I was a bit late.

I spoke first. "Yo. Did I miss any fun?"

"No, not really," he replied indifferently.

I threw him the package.

"Oof!"

I smiled. "I wonder what that might be. Happy birthday, Crade."

"Yeah, whatever." He tilted forward and took off.

I added "Say hi to ma!", heard an unclear "Ah, shut-" and hit the road myself.

Alcohol was no option, so I too the mediocre hot synthetic drink and sat at a free table in the cafe to chill out.

I could not just doze off and I was too bored to sit and check chat logs. There was too much time to waste, but, fortunately, the arcade machines in the corner section were not crowded. Some youngsters were jumping around there as their buddies laughed, teasing them for playing bad.

As I approached the station they occupied, the playing boy swore violently and left the game in anger. I put what was left of my drink on the table nearby.

"Yo, kiddo, look how it's done." I paid the fee for one play and connected, as the kid barked "Real, old fart?"

I sneered. "I'm, like, ten years older than you."

I hit the game start. Immediately, my vision threw me into some sort of an arena. In front of me appeared a lean angry man. He roared something incomprehensible and cracked his knuckles. He spoke with strong accent, "You dead."

Fighter games were my routine. "Piece 'a cake!"

As the bell rang, I started moving. I jumped to the side and watched the opponent's moves. After a bit of evasion and feints I generally understood that he does not use legs. That gave me all that I needed to attack his torso from below. I landed a side kick and heard a low-quality hit sound. Something poked me from behind and I jumped sideways instinctively. I checked quickly, but there was nothing where that came from. Then I head a smack. My health point bar shrunk a bit and kids giggled.

"Why doncha gimme some space, boys?" I gave some lazy jabs to the air around to scare off the disturber. "Ya don't wanna get in the way of these," I added. I heard slightly more friendly laughs and charged at the raging and slow computer program. Without much trying, I halved his health bar.

"Click 'im like a truck, dude-illo!" came from somewhere behind. I felt like commenting on not exactly catching the drift but I paid attention to the game. I knocked the fighter out of balance and got a "K.O." sign floating before me. I decided to call it quits on that.

I looked at the kids as I logged out of the game.

"Ya know how these games work, right?" I spotted their different expressions and continued: "They read how you move, not only how you think you move. So, next time, practice on a punchbag a bit. That's how it's done."

I walked away as the lads returned to teasing one another.

That pretty much satisfied my need for activity. I had the luck – my drink was where I left it.

Rest of the time I spent on the char, awaiting the time to leave.

I arrived to the rendezvous early and Jack met that with a smile. I always thought a neat brush of mustache would fit this big and sturdy kindhearted driver. And he always denied that.

"Hop in, boy," he said in a manner of a witty parent, "I see you've been waiting."

I entered his speeder, closed the door and squeezed his mighty hand. "I know better than to lie to you, pops."

"Attaboy!" he turned to the steering wheel and started the liftoff, but I sat close, so I could see his warm expression full well. "Well, get comfy, 'cause we got a long way there."

I silently growled in disapproval. Jack kept smiling.

"Do you ever slow down, boy? Seems like you are fine with the pace of life when the whole world runs in sweat to spare a second."

I shrugged. "I always do what comes right. If there's nothing to do, I don't know what to... do."

"Hah!" Jack gave a hearty laugh. "A man of action, no second thought!"

"You got that right, pops."

Jack frowned a little. "But, tell me, boy. Do you ever think twice? At least sometimes? Why did you even join our team?"

"I'm just in for any commotion that likes and needs a bomber like me. Any revolution would do, too."

"But why? What do you fight for? A better tomorrow?"

"C'mon, Jack, I'm not that young."

"Money, then?"

"That's right, you guys pay enough and just this bit more."

"But no money can save your risky ass when it'll be too late."

"Look, Jack. Blowing things up is the only thing I'm good at."

"But don't you worry at all that you can get blown up yourself one fine day?"

I chuckled. "Look, I was nearly killed so many times, I stopped counting. As long as I can get adrenaline, and then beer, I don't mind." I turned to face him. "I heard people say one hobby is all a man needs. I've got my hobby – making things go boom."

"Boy, you got a load of screws loose and a pair short circuits on top!"

I broke into honest laughter and Jack joined me.

I looked at the traffic through the front viewport. "I'd say you're a funny guy, Jack, if you were not so worried."

"I'd say you're a nice guy, boy, if you weren't batshit crazy."

"in the world that's insane I feel right at home." It was true. I had nothing to strive for, nothing to value. All I could do is have fun. "I heard people say that if you overthink things, it only gets worse. Something about ignorance, I guess."

Jack picked a melancholic tone. "That's right, boy. This is where you have it better than anyone."

Discussion faded out. Jack was a noticeably pessimistic man – such dialogues happened now and then. He often sighed and questioned the things that had no answer, but he never complained. He was not someone to whine. He was not madly brave, sure. But he had much more inner strength when it came

to overcoming things. No matter what, he never gave up on anything or anyone. And if there actually was no saving the situation, Jack accepted it. But only when he knew that he can't do anything at all. Common failures didn't stop him. And this is why I envied Jack.

It has gotten awkwardly silent and boring. I shifted a bit to sit more comfortably. I aimlessly looked out of the window, then leaned against the seat fully and accessed the cybernetics in me to load some music. They nicely simulated the sounds as if I enjoyed the live concert – if there was no crowd and my ears were perfect. Nodding to the beat, I spent the rest of the road this way.

“Aight, son. Do your thing and don’t get hurt.” Jack’s voice got me out of the trance. We arrived at some fancy upper street. It was not all shiny, but it was much cleaner than my place. It was too clean: there was nothing but simple buildings on the moderately empty streets.

I stepped out on the bleak pavement. “Thanks, pops.”

“Come see me again once it’s all over, boy. I can’t wait to hear new tales from you.” He waved his hand, then reconsidered, and remembered to stretch it out. “Gimme a tight one, boy. For your luck.” I accepted his strong handshake. “It’s always with me, pops. ‘Cuz I’m still alive.”

He smiled, closed the door and fled away, slowly.

Now my mission began, officially and for real.

I casually walked to the smaller, typical buildings that were mostly filled with apartments for rent. As a virtual heads-up display instructed me, I turned around, went to the left, into the thin slit between the huge buildings – they did seem small from the distance, and they surely were smaller than the piece of important infrastructure that was my target. But I went inside the dark gap between the houses and met a silent, featureless man. He spoke the password question. I told him the keyword. He stepped away and left me my backpack, immediately doing where I came from. My path lay through the street backsides. I navigated among the structures that started looking more and more cheap and ever less maintained as I walked to the adjacent district.

After a short while, I reached the elevator to the lower city level. I stepped in and took my ride, seeing the rough contrast between seemingly bad overworld and hopelessly decayed underworld. But my route did not end here. I left the cabin and sped to the specified location. The road was just as short as it was above.

When I arrived, I was facing a warehouse. Near the entrance stood the woman I was informed of. Seeing from close distance, I could tell – she was not much of a cyborg, possibly all-human. She was every bit a stereotypical office lady: clean clothes, name badge, glasses over emotionless eyes and brown hair put in a bun.

She gave me a fast irritated glance. I raised an eyebrow. We exchanged the passwords.

She did not waste a moment and approached the facility. “You surely took your time. Hurry.”

Her voice did not portray any emotional weight and I wanted to get on her nerves just enough to learn at least something real about her. But it was an undercover mission. I was a technician and she was responsible for managing the maintenance, and, unlike me, she actually worked here for some time. She used her key card to open the door and went inside. Her heels hit the floor regularly fast. I scurried into the corridor after her. I paid no attention to the identical hallways and people passing by. They paid no attention no attention as well. It seemed that all went as planned.

We stopped in the energetics room. She approached a computer terminal, spent about a minute with it. Then she said, “Now. Begin. We’re in and out.”

I didn’t have anything on my mind an I didn’t know whether I still had to keep the secrecy.

I set the explosive charges in several minutes. I took the backpack with extra charges in my hands and nodded to the woman. We left without a delay.

In one of the corridor elements my partner’s card did not open the door. She stopped, frowned, tried again. Then she hurriedly tried to return to the door we came from.

"Intruders, lay down your weapons and do not move. In case of your opposition we are authorized to use lethal force." That voice came from somewhere in the corridor. Apparently, speakers were installed somewhere here.

"Damn it." The woman cussed and raised her hands.

I was surprised. "Wait a minute. You surrender?"

"We are in the enemy territory. We have no chance."

"Oh, I don't think so." now I was just disappointed. I had no plan, but I had to act. Say, which way out of here is the shortest?"

"We're far from exit. Why would you ask?"

I ignored her commentary completely. "But which one?"

"Left. Don't you have the map?" She tilted her dark brows in confusion.

I snapped my fingers. "Damn right." I ran through the simulated schematic, then noticed something.

"Hold on," I projected the holographic map and pointed a finger on a place near our location. "Right here, behind this wall here – isn't that a parking hangar?"

"It is." She frowned furthermore. "What's on your mind, hothead?"

"Hot head? I kinda like that." I turned off the projector and opened the backpack. "You won't miss it, don't worry."

I grabbed a charge and she cautiously walked away, saying, "I'd like to stay in one piece."

I quickly set the bombs on the wall and ran in her direction. I stopped a pair of meters away from her and said, "Better close your ears."

I triumphantly activated the selected packs. As I did that, I noticed that some previously activated ones were being turned off.

A loud explosion echoed in the hallway and blew a soft wind onto me.

The hole in the wall looked good and emitted smoke violently.

"Look at me now, Jack. All I needed was some experience and luck."

"You mean you DIDN'T KNOW whether it would've worked?"

I heard her, but I also heard approaching footsteps.

I said, "We're going in there."

I grabbed her hand and lead her to the opening. I jumped in first, leaving her behind. The smoke mostly dissipated already, and now I started seeing vehicles and troops. The good and the bad.

I helped the woman in. She looked around in panic, but then pulled me to the side with great force. She dropped us both to the floor, close to a column of some kind. Deadly energy bolts started flying in our general direction. She produced a blaster out of her long shoe and fired back. She sat on the floor and sent shots with surprising concentration in the moments she left the cover before leaning back. Her hairstyle now had a few locks loose.

I voiced my surprise, "You had a gun all along!"

She looked at me and said, "Can you get us a taxi?"

"Well, yeah. I can hotwire some speeder."

"Then do it!" She rose and I followed. "I hope you have more experience than luck this time, otherwise we might not make it."

We dashed out and rand for whatever vehicle was the closest. I noticed a group of enemies dangerously close. That fired me up. I pulled out a detonator and murmured, "Watch me now!"

Troopers scattered. My partner sent a widely spread barrage as she ran, pinning down the enemies. The time it took them to regroup was all we needed to reach the speeder. We hid behind it and I started working to get in. I tried to inspect the door, but instead I took the very first idea I could think of and punched out the window. Alarm started; I struggled to open the door. This has proven itself difficult, so I just relied on cybernetics and tore it out. I jumped inside and took care of the control.

I shouted, "Get in!" and started revving up. She was clearly disgusted at how I mangled the device, but she squeezed inside without a complaint.

Running all the checks, I noticed more charges going offline. “Crap. They’re deactivating the bombs.” I punched in the throttle and entered a storm of blaster shots. With a door hole exposing me, I had no other option but to rush out before I get shot.

I said, “I’m blowing the charges as soon as I can.” Then I added, “We gotta hang on until we’re out of the parking.”

The woman said nothing. In a flash, she took her blaster firmly and smashed its handle against the window on her side, crushing it. She leaned out of the breach and returned to shooting. Her resolve was very impressive.

I gained the minimal safe distance and fired off the left charges. Our vehicle shot out of the hangar as the wall of the building rumbled ominously.

“HAH! We made it! Phew, that was fun.” I looked at my partner. She was wiping her glasses calmly.

“Hey, you’re pretty hot stuff. What’s your name? Uh... the real name, not what’s on the badge.”

She looked unimpressed. “Why would you ask?”