

Alex blinked, trying to register what happened. He'd been coercing the stubborn system, then its voice vanished in a screeching of light. Now he looked at a destroyed screen, a section melted, the other shattered by an explosion, sparks flickering to life and dying.

Had he done that? Had he unknowingly tripped some sort of suicide function? A.I.s couldn't commit suicide, but he could think of a few ways to set a program to activate a small explosive in the terminal in case...what? Six other terminals could access this system in the room, so blowing up one didn't help anything. And the melt was inward, indicating the blast had come from the side.

As he turned to follow the provenance, he fully broke from coercion and sound returned.

A woman picked up a body in a black, heavy armor. A military model of some sort. The other thing that registered was the absence of Tristan. He moved without thought, knife in-hand. She noticed him too late. He batted the rifle aside and stabbed her, only to have his blade slide over her skin, leaving a clean gash in her shirt. He blocked the rifle, which she decided made a better club this close.

Armoring the skin was an oddly rare procedure, considering how life-saving it was, and this was the second person he'd encountered since arriving to Samalia that had it. He hadn't done it, because the reports he'd read talked about how it changed tactile sensations, and he hadn't been willing to give up the little of Tristan's touch he got.

He punched her, wiping the smirk off her face, and she took a step back. Alex pulled the rifle out of her hand and she reached for her empty holster. Annoyed, she glanced around.

There had been a fight here, Alex realized. Bodies had been dragged away, leaving trails of blood. Most were clean, narrow with sharp lines, but a large one looked like it had been made with a brush, or fur. Near where it began was a gun Alex recognized as the one Tristan had taken from him.

"Where is he?" he asked as she pulled a knife.

She smiled and shrugged, making a show of flicking the knife on. An almost imperceptible whine came from it.

"Don't play games," he growled. "I don't have the time. Where is Tristan?"

Her eyes flicked up.

Intentional or not, he had his answer. He ran, and she lowered herself to receive him. He threw his knife at her face, used the distraction to grab her wrist, twisted it, and made her knife slip from her grasp.

It didn't immediately shut off, so she'd altered it. Vibro-blades were designed to stop the moment they were let go, but so many people threw them that adding a delay was common. He caught it mid-fall and slammed it in her stomach.

He leaned in as he pulled it upward. "It isn't a good idea to carry weapons that can go through your own armor."

She pushed him away, stronger than he expected, but she slipped on her own blood. She scrambled as he crouched to slash at her throat. It cost him time, but never, ever, leave an opponent alive. Especially not one who'd taken part in hurting Tristan, in taking him from Alex.

He picked up Tristan's gun and exited the room. The power was low on the gun. How many shots? One, two? It didn't matter. He only needed one to get himself a new gun from one of the excited voices coming closer.

No, they came from deeper within the building, while the blood trail went in the opposite direction. With a snarl at not getting to kill them, he hurried after the blood trail, exchanging guns with a dead security guard.

He entered the stairwell and ran up. The voices cut away with the door closing. He listened ahead, found the lock, and ordered it open. He slammed his elbow into the door, leaving the stairwell as a cacophony of boots entered it from below.

With a quick command, he locked the door behind him, telling it to ignore any instructions to unlock, and fired at the back of the closest mercenary. He took his gun

and brought down four other lightly armored mercs before the rest registered his presence and turned.

The numbers registered—over a dozen with various guns, and a few more in the shuttle’s doorway, pulling Tristan in. He ran, and a barrage of gunfire responded, forcing him to change direction and take shelter behind an antenna.

The door to the stairwell exploded off its frame, and corporate guards disgorged out of it. They saw the mercs and fired at them, giving Alex the distraction he needed. He fired at the men pulling Tristan in, but the heavy armor took the hits.

With a curse, Alex ran for the shuttle, firing at it, and anyone in his way. The man fully in the shuttle yanked on Tristan and yelled to someone deeper in. The shuttle took off, making the other man lose his balance and fall over the side.

Alex fired at the vanishing shuttle, and kept firing even once he no longer saw it. He’d lost Tristan.

Despair tried to pull him down, and he buried it with anger.

No, he hadn’t lost Tristan; Tristan had been taken from him. Those bastards had taken him away again, and just when he’d gotten him back, gotten to feel his touch.

He wasn’t letting this happen this time. They weren’t leaving this planet without a fight.

He turned to face the mercs and guards firing at each other. If he had to kill everyone here to get to Tristan, he would. No one was going to prevent him from rescuing his Samalian. He fired indiscriminately, drawing their attention to him.

Before they could return his fire, a hover appeared over the edge of the building, dropped on the roof, and skidded into the guards. Jacoby exited, firing at the mercs.

Alex didn’t question what he was doing here, or how he’d taken a hover this high. A hover was something that flew, that could chase the shuttle, follow them. Rescue Tristan.

He headed for it, killing with gun and knife. He felt the hit of blasts, some absorbed by the light armor, others searing his flesh, but he didn’t care.

Jacoby shot those around Alex, opening a passage for him. “Where’s T—Tristan?” he called.

Alex heard the hesitation, the question, didn’t answer.

“You’re in a bad shape, Alex. Are you going to be okay?”

Alex walked by him and entered the hover.

“Alex?” Jacoby entered while Alex ran the ignition sequences, bypassing as many of the checks as he could force the hover’s system to ignore.

“What happened?”

Alex continued the sequence.

“Okay, be that way.”

Jacoby entered a command, and the hover died.

Alex stood, knife in-hand, holding it so tight he thought he could feel the handle crack. “Start it up.”

“Not until you tell me what’s going on? Where’s Tech? Who are those mercs?”

“Power up the hover, Jacoby,” Alex growled, “or I swear to anything you believe in that I am going to gut you.”

Jacoby grinned. “And who’s going to power it up, then? That’s a hard shutdown, not something you can coerce.” He took a breath. “Just tell me what happened.”

“They took him!” Alex spat.

“Who?”

“Those mercs, who else?” Alex ground his teeth. He didn’t have the time for this. “I have to go after them.”

“That wasn’t so hard, was it?” Jacoby entered commands. “I don’t know what it is with you two and this need to do everything your way, but when you have friends, you keep them in the loop so they can help.” The hover came back on, and Jacoby faced Alex. “I want you to understand something. We rescue him and then we go home. What you two

do after that is your own business, but you are going to come back and explain wh—”

Alex punched Jacoby as hard as he could. The man could consider himself lucky he hadn't slammed the knife in his throat. A respect for Tristan's wishes. The last fucking time this man got, with getting in his way. Alex planted a foot on Jacoby's stomach and shoved him off the hover, then closed the hatch.

He cursed as he had to go through the entire sequence again, but he was at least able to run the scanner at the same time. He needed to find the shuttle before they were out of range. Of course, the smartest thing for them to do was to go up and into space, but if they weren't working for the corporation, it was possible they couldn't get through the detection field, which meant they needed to reach another city with a port. That gave Alex time to catch up to them.

The hover lifted off the roof.

An alarm came on, informing him he was too high. Of course he was too fucking high, but Jacoby had made it up here, so there was a way to make it down there.

He ran a program to dismiss anything on the scanner that registered as a hover, while he brought up the city map— No, it was already up, so he was right; that was part of how Jacoby had made it. And there was his answer: the path the hover took was superimposed over it.

How Jacoby got the hover to make it up each building was beyond Alex, but he had his way down.

The scanner registered nothing. No shuttles were in range, and, burying the panic, Alex told it to look for everything. More hovers than he could count came up, within the travel lane over the city, but one was within the city's air-space, heading away from this building in a straight line.

This meant he couldn't follow the path Jacoby took, since that would cause too much delay, but he knew what he needed to do, and there were plenty of buildings he could use as steps down in this city-sized stairwell.

He turned the hover, catching sight of Jacoby on his knees, hands behind his head, an army of corporate security pointing guns at him. The man in the lead, rifle in-hand, looked up as he glided over the roof, picking up speed, but then focused on Jacoby again. It seemed he didn't care about this hover or who was in it.

Alex smiled. Didn't LeisureTek think Jacoby was the mastermind behind the terrorists? The lead guard brought the butt of the rifle into Jacoby's face.

Yep, that would support it.

Alex smiled as he flew off the edge of the roof toward a lower one. Jacoby had just gotten what he deserved. That should teach him to meddle in his and Tristan's affairs.