

The explosion was either directly under the room and a half a dozen floors away, Tristan thought, or further off and not so many floors distant. He looked up. The roof was right above them, the stairwell on the opposite side. Security had no reason to blow that up; they had the codes. Unless...

He typed away, keeping an eye on the timer for when he'd have to reenter the authorization code. At least the delay was a few minutes, enough to do something between each entry, but it also meant that if someone was paying attention, they could realize what Alex was planning and—He let the breath out. The antenna was still functional. This wasn't security preventing the broadcast.

Then who? Jacoby? Had he gone to the roof instead of leaving? And did he carry explosives? Tristan hadn't noticed him pocket anything from his armor to the suit, but there had been a naked Alex, so he'd been distracted. Did they have the bad luck of doing this just as a rival corporation attempted a takeover?

No, the universe wasn't that nasty, he understood that now.

The rebels. They were the most likely party. The priestess might have decided to finally take the fight to the corporation to stop the constant harassment. Regardless, this would give security something other than he and Alex to deal with.

He looked up as something slammed against the door. Or maybe not.

The door opened, and Tristan fired without checking who it was. Security-uniformed people backed in, four of them, firing out of the room. Tristan shot the fourth as she realized the danger on this side and the door closed.

For them to have to retreat in here meant the new assault force was heading this way, had caught them just as they reached the door. It didn't mean they were heading for this room. He looked up, considered cursing the universe, decided to wait until he saw how this turned out.

He hated the room—no cover. All the systems were against the wall. What they needed to do was leave, but Alex wasn't done. He could physically pull his human away from the terminal, force him to become aware of what was happening, and order him to drop all this. Alex would do it, he would obey, but this soon in their new dynamic, and without having the time to explain his reasoning, all it would do was reinforce that Tristan hadn't really changed.

There would come a day when Tristan could give an order and explain it after they'd reached safety, and Alex would take it in stride, but it wasn't now. Now he just had to make sure Alex had the time to finish what he was doing and then take part in the fight, if there was anyone left for him to kill. He reentered the authorization code, and the five-minute timer restarted.

That would be plenty of time; he was just going up against a bunch of Samalians with guns and no training. He had a moment of surprise at realizing he had no problem killing Samalians, and the door opened.

He fired at the entering form before noticing heavy armor.

Or maybe not rebels.

He cranked the power on the gun as high as it went. The armored figure turned a helmeted head in his direction, and he could see more behind this one.

Instead of firing at him, the armored merc holstered his gun. Had security hired outside help for this? He looked at the dead guards. They'd been fleeing these people, so no. The armored merc stepped in his direction.

Tristan couldn't shoot him; this was Empirion armor. Even the joints had a coating that made just about any gun useless against it. Time to switch tactics.

Tristan raised his hands, flipping the gun so he was holding it by the barrel. A bludgeon against an unarmored opponent, just a sign of surrender in this situation.

"Feel free to take what you want. Should be clear I'm not security. Me and my partner are just here doing a job." Alex hadn't reacted to any of this, too deep in his coercion.

The head turned in Alex's direction, then back to Tristan. This was not a good sign. He couldn't see the face, read the thought process, but there had been nowhere near enough time in that glance to evaluate the kind of threat Alex posed.

Two more armored mercs entered the room, followed by half a dozen other mercs in mismatched light and medium armor. Well, that answered that. Alex wouldn't be a threat.

As the merc faced Tristan again, light glinted on the smooth surface of the visor. No, not smooth, there was a crack in the bottom left corner.

Tristan smiled. Someone had been careless when buying this armor, or during a previous fight, or didn't realize how much of a flaw that small crack was. Of course, who would know that the polymer used to make the visor lost almost all integrity at the location where even the tiniest flaw occurred? The shot had to be perfect. The rest of the visor could take as much damage as the armor, but that one spot?

Well, it wasn't like anyone would know that. Tristan's smile broadened.

The merc took a step toward Tristan, who took a step back. "Look, I told you, we won't get in your way. Just let my partner keep working. You take what you want, and we all leave here happy, right?" Like you're after anything here other than me. He considered cursing the universe again as he backed into a console. He was out of space.

The merc stopped when he was close enough to grab Tristan. Tristan kept smiling. When the merc reached for his arm, Tristan lowered it, flipping the gun and pressing the barrel against the crack.

The merc paused.

Tristan should've fired, but he could imagine the quizzical expression on the person in the armor. "You really should have gone after someone else."

The merc took a step back as Tristan fired. The crack became a hole, the rest of the visor spider-webbing with more cracks. Blood dripped from the hole as the merc tipped back and fell over.

The other mercs stood in place, looking at their dead comrade. Tristan shot three of the unarmored ones, his shots going through their light armor as if it was clothing. He reduced the power, knowing he couldn't afford to drain it. The two armored mercs were coming at him. He slid against the consoles, away from Alex, killing two more before the light on the gun switched to yellow. He was below a quarter power.

It didn't matter; he'd changed the odds in his favor. Four left, plenty of guns lying around for him to use. He could keep them occupied until Alex finished and help—

More mercs entered the room.

You and I are going to have a discussion after this, he promised the universe.

The first of the unarmored merc reached him, and got his throat ripped out as a reward. He reached for the man's gun, but the body was pulled away as two more replaced him. He punched one, but the other jumped on him, the woman's weight staggering him. He brought the gun between them and fired until she dropped.

The indicator was now red. He had one, maybe two shots left in this gun, unless he dropped the power so low it wouldn't even serve to light the dark.

Before he could reach for one, another merc jumped on him, and another one. They weren't bothering to fight him; they were going to pile up on him. With a roar he threw one off, only to have pain erupt in his knee, making him lose his balance. He tightened his grip on the gun. No matter what, he couldn't lose that.

It was too late for him. He'd known it the moment the mercs flooded the room, but they wanted him alive, which meant he still had a chance. They should have killed him.

He ignored the stars when his head hit the floor. His pain wasn't important. He found Alex, still working, still unaware of what was happening around him. Tristan smiled. His Alex, doing one of the things he did best. He remembered being angry that he couldn't stay aware of what was happening around him in those times, but now? Tristan just admired him.

And took solace in the carnage his human would unleash when he was made aware of what was going on.

He tried to raise his arm, but there were three of them on it. No, they were not going to take this from him. He screamed as he lifted it off the ground, the mercs screaming in kind, but out of panic.

An armored fist hit his face, but Tristan ignored the stars. Just a little more. Come on, only a few inches; it was all he needed. He was hit again, and his arm dropped.

No! He pushed back the gray trying to cloud his sight and focused on his arm, his aim. Only a little more. He saw the fist coming and had no more choice.

He fired.

He didn't even feel the impact as everything went black.