

“Tristan!” Alex yelled again.

Only static.

Alex cursed and checked the scanners again. That explosion had been close, but he didn't think it had done anything to damage the ship. The readout told him nothing, other than there were a lot of ships out there actively scanning.

He checked the connection to the network, that was still there. Good, whatever had disrupted the local comms hadn't been so broad as to affect the network. He made sure the cameras were still broadcasting live, and created a loop for the period of time Masters admitted he was behind all this. He wrapped it within the broadcasting ID, which would ensure every system picking it up would accept it and, if he was lucky, play it immediately.

More explosions, each one louder, and the last shook the ship. The connection with the network erupted with static. Alex fought to reestablish it. Those connections were vital for how SpaceGov and everything that off those system, so there were a lot of redundancies. It was just a question of finding the right frequency.

He ignored the fighting. He was far enough from it, only the accidental explosion would hit him. The connection stabilized, and he checked the transmission. The closest node had refused it; the static had rendered the ID illegible. He sent it again, and this time confirmed it received and bounced it everywhere. Now they had an extra layer of proof floating in the net.

He caught motion on the screen showing him the entrance to the hangar where he was hiding. People were entering this hangar. He cursed. How had they found him? Why had they bothered looking this far from where the action was happening?

He hung his head as the realization hit. He'd been in such a hurry to send out the loop of Masters's admission of guilt that when he'd sent it to the closest node, he'd forgotten the merc ships would be able to intercept it. One of them would have noticed it came from the planet and tracked it to him.

Stupid!

Well, time to take advantage of what he'd done when he'd been angry. “Computer, engage all weapons, link to scanners, and fire on anyone who doesn't match the scans of Alexander Bartholomew Crimson, Tristan, and Emil Rithal.”

He created a second loop of the admission and sent it out.

Why wasn't the ship firing on anyone? He checked, and there were people within range.

“Talk to me.”

Silence.

“Oh, come on, we're friends.” He looked through the code. “Just tell me what's going on. At least tell me why you aren't firing at them.”

Everything looked intact. The computer had cooperated the entire time he'd reprogrammed it to act as a broadcasting rig. This had been done before, it should have worked fine. He checked the screen. The mercs were being careful, moving slowly. He had time.

He sat and got himself to the weapon programs. Okay, what he'd installed there was gone; the antibodies had gotten to them. That was easily fixed. He rewrote the programs and sent them in.

They didn't reach the controls. Something that had looked like mutant antibodies had fallen on them. He went looking for where they were coming from and found the code, perfectly aligned, no play in it at all. Line after line, so well-structured they formed a wall of code churning out those antibodies.

He sent programs to stop them, but they had their own defense. He cursed. He needed to get through them if he was going to get the ship to defend itself.

A light flashed among the code. A message light. Why was there a light in the code telling him he had a message waiting for him?

He glanced away from the screen. The message light was blinking on the board. He accepted it.

“Hello, Alex,” Tristan said. He was seated at his seat. “If you thought you could hide the changes you made to my ship, you're mistaken. You are posing an interesting challenge. I should shut you out completely for what you did, but you need access to the computer to do your job. So this is my solution, to have the computer lock you out only if you attempt to take control of it away from me. This is the last time you betray me, Alex. When I get back, we will

have a talk.”

Alex stared at the blank screen. “I’m trying to save your damned ship!” He could go in and undo what Tristan had done. He had the tim—

A new light began blinking on the board. Proximity alert. The mercs were now close enough to the ship they could do damage even with low power weapons.

“If you weren’t so paranoid keeping them out of your ship, this would have been easy!”

He looked at the feed from the warehouse as he put on his gun belt. There was little to see, dust and explosions. He could make out bodies on the ground and some moving, but he couldn’t tell who was who.

He headed to the ramp and made peace with the situation. He was dead anyway, so maybe dying defending the ship would be a good way to tell Tristan “fuck you”. That Tristan was wrong about him.

Using the frame as cover, he fired on anyone who came into view. A dozen mercs, by his estimation. All he had to do was keep them out of the ship until Tristan got here. The Samalian would deal with the rest then.

Alex berated himself. Did he want to die? Or for Tristan to rescue him? He wished he could make up his own damned mind.

The hangar had little cover for the mercs to use, so bodies quickly littered the floor, but the number of advancing mercs didn’t seem to go down. In fact, the amount of fire Alex was taking seemed to be going up. Great, someone had called for reinforcements.

No matter. So long as he kept them at a distance, he was the one with the advantage. As he thought that, he noticed an arm appear by the wall he was hiding behind. Before he could react to it, something fell in the ship.

Instinct had Alex run down the ramp, wondering just how badly Tristan was going to hurt him for getting the ship blown up. He threw himself down as a light flashed behind him, accompanied with a high-pitch whine barely muffled by the hull.

Stun grenade.

Well, at least that meant the ship was intact. One less thing for Tristan to kill him over. He got to his feet and fired at the mercs in the distance, who were too busy looking for cover to shoot back at him.

Okay, why weren’t they shooting back? There were a lot more of them, and only one of him. Someone could get in a lucky shot. Someone like whoever was attached to the arm that had thrown the grenade in the ship.

He spun, but she was already too close for him to shoot her. He saw short blond hair, green eyes, and then she had grabbed his arm.

She twisted, forcing him to drop the gun. He moved with her to keep her from breaking his wrist. He spun, ended up on his back, pulled her down to him. He put a foot on her stomach and shoved. He leveled his other gun at her, but she hadn’t lost her balance, and she kicked it out of his hand.

He rolled away and pulled out two large knives as he moved to a crouch. Mono-edge, so her armor wouldn’t offer much protection. He looked over his shoulder and everyone was crouched, guns in his direction, but no one was firing.

Alex smiled. So they were going to resolve this his way? He stood. She pulled out a knife of her own: a slim stiletto with a glowing tip. Alex’s smiled broadened. Mono against laser. This was going to be a battle of skill, not weapons.

She came at him, he sidestepped, slashed, but she’d already rolled away. She was back on her feet and they circled each other. She had two other sheaths with stilettos in them, and Alex could make out half a dozen locations she could hide less-exotic knives.

He feigned left and slashed at her exposed side, but she blocked his knife with hers. He took a step back, and they circled again.

This was new. How had the part that wasn’t laser not been cut by his knife? Short of the laser itself, mono-edge could cut anything; even vibro-knives were weaker.

She came at him, but he blocked and used the closeness to hit her in the face with his elbow. She spat blood, snarled, lunged at him. He sidestepped, but felt pain shoot up his leg, accompanied by the smell of burning flesh. When they stepped away she was holding a second stiletto, tip glowing and with a wisp of smoke wafting up.

He put weight on his leg and found the pain minimal. Only a grazing cut. She smiled at him, a vicious thing that promised pain.

He ran at her, struck. She parried. He struck, and she blocked his arm. He kned her in the stomach and she stepped back, wheezing. He came at her again. She raised her stiletto before her, but Alex didn't slow. He sidestepped only enough so it went into his side as he planted his knife in her side, angled to go between the ribs and pierce her heart.

The stiletto burned a painful line as she fell and pulled it out, but he wouldn't bleed out and nothing vital had been hit.

The silence stretched, letting the sound of distance explosions reach them. A man stepped forward.

"Don't move."

Alex watched him. Hard face with a scar running from scalp to jaw. Gray hair so short it was almost not there. The gun he was holding, pointed at Alex's chest, was large. It looked deadly.

"You're the Samalian's accomplice. Where's the kid?"

Alex smiled. Well, this time he did deserve to be called that. He looked the mercs over. Fifteen of them, men and women in a variety of armors. They might be part of the same group, but Alex didn't think so; he didn't know of many large mercenary teams.

They were letting this man take the lead because of the authority he exuded. "You're worth more alive than dead, but believe me when I tell you I have no problem bringing back a corpse if you force my hand."

Alex smiled. "Oh, I'm dead, there's no avoiding that anymore."

"Look, kid, just hand over the knife. There's no need for you to die."

"Need? It's not need, it's just the way things are. I haven't given him a choice. He warned me over and over. But I thought I could..." Alex shrugged. "I don't know. Redeem him? Save him?"

"Kid, there's no way you can take on all of us. Put the knives down."

"You? You think you're going to kill me?" Alex chuckled, then he laughed. He shook his head. "He's going to kill me. Already has. Broke my heart a long time ago, he's just taking his sweet time finishing the job."

"Kid, don't—"

Alex threw a knife on each side of the man and he ran in his direction, pulling out two more, feeling the one in his left hand vibrate. He zigged and zagged, making it difficult to be hit. The man looked at him in disbelief.

Resignation showed on his face as he aimed. Alex threw himself as the man fired, he felt the heat on his left side, but crashed into the man, the vibro-knife going into his chest while the polycarbon one slid off the armor.

Alex rolled off him, leaving the knife in and pulling out another. He turned it on and the edge glowed. He ran, careless of the people firing at him, and slashed the closest merc. Her arm fell to the ground. He weaved and bobbed, causing some to shoot each other as he went after his next target, laughing.

He was dead, but at least he was going to have fun until that happened.