

wooden stairway leading upward. The overlay indicated (just as Johnson's guy had said) that the office was up there.

"What I don't get," Spaz spoke up in a stage whisper, "is how come we have to plant the stuff first and *then* steal the data. That's ass-backwards, especially with a layout like this."

I thought about that for a minute. This was why we kept Spaz around, despite his desperate need for a personality transplant. "You know, he's right," I said.

"That's what Johnson wanted," Zumi pointed out. "He was very clear—"

"No, his *stunky* was very clear," Locke interrupted. "I don't see him paying our fee, do you?"

"Fuck his assistant," I growled. "They aren't paying us to be stupid." And stupid it would be—if anybody caught us, I'd rather be in the middle of a warehouse with lots of cover than stuck in an office babysitting a hacker while he sucked data out of an offline computer system. I made a decision. "Files first, then truck." I thought about splitting up to do it faster, but splitting up could get you dead in a hurry if anything went south.

We hustled it up the stairs. They creaked under our weight, especially Zumi's, and we were all sure the guard was going to raise the alarm any second. Locke kept an eye out when he got to the top and caught the guy coming around a corner—a middle-aged ork carrying a flashlight. One spell later and the ork got a ticket to dreamland.

The office door was locked but it might as well not have been. Ten seconds later we were inside the office, a small and cluttered little cube full of boxes, chairs and old datafaxes. Spaz sat down at the desk and started doing his thing to hack into the terminal holding the files. Zumi kept watch on the stairs outside while I paced nervously, holding my H&K at the ready. This was too easy. Yeah, jobs went easy sometimes. It *did* happen. Just not very often. "Desmo? Everything still okay?"

No answer, just a slight crackle of static.

I froze. *Just a glitch. That's all.*

"Desmo? You there? Speak up, *omae*."

Nothing.

The hairs on the back of my neck were starting to crawl.

Spaz was oblivious, his mind plugged into another world, but Locke caught my nervousness and amplified it. He threw himself into another chair and slumped.

I went to the door. "Zumi? See anything?"

"Nothing here," she said.

But now Locke was back. "Fuck!" he growled. "We've got six guys coming in fast from the back, and we're not talking more rest-home refugees like our guard."

*It'll be easy. Yeah, right.* "Spaz!" I barked, smacking the hacker a good one on the shoulder.

"What?" he whined. "I've almost—"

"Abort!" I yelled. And louder: "Zumi! Incoming!" I

glanced quickly around the office: no windows, just the one way out. This wasn't good. "Come on! We don't want to get trapped in here."

We got out of the office before we saw them down on the warehouse floor, spreading out and taking positions behind crates. I knew we were sitting ducks up here—the walkway's flimsy wooden railing wouldn't even provide minimal cover. As if to punctuate this fact a round tore through the wall to my right, the gun's report echoing like thunder. "Down!" I yelled, my own SMG chattering a staccato *budda-budda-budda* as I returned fire. "Get cover!" I vaulted over the railing and miraculously didn't get hit by a volley of rounds as I rolled behind a crate on the ground floor. I heard the railing splinter above me as Zumi tried to do the same thing—she lost her balance and hit the ground hard, but her armor took some of the impact and then she was gone, hidden behind another crate.

"Locke? Spaz?" I still had the warehouse's layout on my overlay, and my mind spun fast trying to come up with a way we could get out of here without having to take out all six of these guys. "You guys okay?"

"Just peachy," Locke said. "I'm invisible, so don't shoot me."

"I'm still upstairs." Spaz's voice shook. "Damn it, Tag, you see why I don't want to—"

"Shut up, Spaz." Then I forgot about him as one of the guys poked his head out from behind a crate and I unloaded on him, pleased to hear a scream and then the clatter of a gun hitting the ground. "One down!"

"Tag, I'm hooked in to the cameras." Spaz had apparently recovered at least some of his courage. Little ghostly red X's—5 of them—appeared on my overlay.

I didn't pause for reflection. Yanking a flash grenade from my belt I chucked it over top of a pile of boxes and ducked as its charge lit up the place like the sun for a fraction of a second. A second after that I heard the unmistakable sound of another grenade (the regular bang-bang variety) going off on the other side of the warehouse and grinned: Zumi had the same overlay I did, and she hadn't wasted any time either. "Good one, Zumi!" I cheered. "Spaz, get your ass down here—we're aborting. Objective is now to get everybody out alive."

One of the X's disappeared from the map. "Damn it—heads up, guys—camera lost him!"

I slowed, advancing with caution down a narrow crate-canyon. As I was about to slip around a corner, my thermovision picked up a heat-trace reflecting off one of the trucks at the end of the row. Instinctively I dived sideways and rolled, giving thanks for my wired reflexes as another volley hit right where I'd been. "Everybody, try to head toward the big roll-up door over there! Spaz, get it open!" The X's were moving again.

It was about then that everything started going to hell in earnest. A thump and a cry of pain behind me told me that Spaz had finally gotten himself down off the catwalk—the hard way, from the sound of things. "You hurt?"

"It's my ankle!" The X's wavered, then stopped moving.

*As I was about to slip around a corner, my thermovision picked up a heat-trace reflecting off one of the trucks at the end of the row.*

