

“Spaz—”

“Working on it!” The hacker’s voice was bright with fear and pain.

I hurried back toward where he’d been, poking my head out behind crates to check for somebody to shoot. All I saw was Zumi, sneaking as quietly as a troll could sneak. She’d unslung her assault rifle from her back now, so she—

Automatic weapon fire chattered, and Zumi’s head exploded in a rain of bone and horns and brains. Just like that. No scream, no nothing. Her body dropped, her gun clattering to the floor.

“You fucking *bastards!*” I screamed, bringing my own gun around and unleashing a deadly hailstorm of rounds into her shooter, who’d been in the process of trying to drop back down from his vantage point high up on a crate. He cried out and fell.

Fuck! “Locke, you got any tricks? Zumi’s dead—” Off to my left, I could see the big door starting to slowly trundle its way upward.

“Maybe.” The mage’s voice sounded tense. “Get the kid. I’ll see if I can cover us on the way out.”

*Four of them, three of us.* I had my cybereyes cycling through the spectra—low-light, thermo, ultrasound—and my SMG in constant motion as I backed toward Spaz’s last known position. The X’s started moving on the overlay again, so I chucked another grenade and ran the other way as the explosion took out several crates and at least one of the bad guys. I wondered why they weren’t doing the same thing and thanked whatever deity had switchboard duty that night for small favors. The door was almost all the way up now. *Three of them, three of us.*

“Get over here,” Locke called. “Near the door. Stay low.”

We did as he told us, pausing a few seconds for me to reload behind a crate. A few seconds too long—a sudden *crack* and my arm lit up with pain as a lucky shot tore through my armored jacket into the meat of my bicep, spinning me around in a spray of blood. Spaz looked near-panicked. “Tag?”

“I’m all right,” I growled through gritted teeth. I’d have to be all right. We didn’t have any other option right now.

By some miracle we made it to the door—but of course our attackers knew that was exactly where we were heading, so that was bad. The three remaining ones clustered behind cover, and I knew if we ran out there it would be crossfire suicide. “Locke—?”

He didn’t answer, but suddenly the air between us shimmered as a large figure carved of living fire appeared in the empty space. “Sic ‘em!” the mage cried.

That turned the tide. All three of them unloaded their SMGs into the elemental, but they might as well have been shooting slingshots for all the good it did them. The fiery form surged forward, doing its best to envelop them in its burning grasp. Crates around them were starting to catch fire. “Now let’s get the hell out of here!” Locke yelled.

We didn’t wait around to see what happened to the guards, the warehouse, or the truck. My only regret was that we’d had to leave Zumi’s body behind.

“Fuck, fuck, *fuck!*” I slammed my fist down on the dashboard of Desmo’s van hard enough to dent it. “What went wrong, people?”

“Somebody was on to us,” Locke growled from the front seat, where he was trying to get me to hold still long enough to heal my arm.

“Damn skippy,” Spaz agreed. He was in the back, looking uncomfortable having to sit next to Desmo’s dead body. We’d found the dwarf in the driver’s seat of the van when we got back, the neat red hole drilled through his forehead matching the not-so-neat hole through the back of his skull, and done the best we could to lay him out and clean up. Spaz was actually driving the van from back there, so my spot in the pilot’s seat was just for show.

“Johnson?”

The elf shook his head. “He checked out. And what would he get from this? I told you, he had to want this job to succeed. What would he get for screwing up his own job?” He sighed, indicating Desmo’s commlink on the seat next to him. “Looks like the only reason those guys attacked us inside instead of lying in wait out here was ‘cause they got spooked. Des’s drone spotted them, but they jammed his signal and cacked him before he could get a message out to us. They probably weren’t sure, which was why they moved in.”

I sighed, bowing my head in frustration. Two of my team were dead. *It’ll be easy.* Yeah, right. Famous fucking last words. “Okay,” I said at last. “When we get back, our first job is figuring out who the hell sold us out. Call in whatever favors you can and I’ll do the same. I want answers, and I want ‘em now. Somebody’s going down for this.”

For once, Locke didn’t have a smartass remark.

In the end it was a joygirl and our own resident hacker that cracked the thing for us.

The joygirl was a longtime friend of mine named Tiffany (we went back as far as my corp days before my identity went bye-bye in the Crash, and not many people could say that). I’d sent out the holopics of Johnson and his assistant that Spaz had snapped at the meet to several contacts with a promise of a payoff to anybody who could give me dirt on them, and her reply came back less than an hour later. “Hey, sugar,” she said. “I don’t know anything about the dwarf, but I’ve seen the human. He goes by Artie, and he’s a real piece of—work.”

“You—uh—provided services for him?” I don’t know why the thought made me a little queasy, but it did.

“No—I’m not his type, and he’s not mine. Word is he likes it rough—and he likes it rough with metas.”

“So he’s a meta lover?” That would make sense, given that he worked for a dwarf.

“That’s not the way I hear it. More like he—takes out his aggressions on them, you know? Ever since word got around the area, he’s havin’ a hard time findin’ anybody who’ll let him touch ‘em.”

Interesting ... very interesting. “Thanks, Tiff. You’ve been a real help.” I slotted her the promised payment, along with a little extra for old time’s sake.

Tiff grinned. “Thanks a lot, sugar—it’s been a slow month.”

