

Alex's elation at knowing he'd made progress was marred by a few things. Chief among them the lack of the merc's ship. It was the reason he sat in a seat in the passenger area of the hover, Tristan at his side, instead of being in the progress of making a new his theirs.

This wasn't a situation either of them was familiar with. The researcher had insisted on flying them there as a way of thanking them for the rescue, and they had both been busy puzzling over the discrepancy to argue.

There had been a ship.

The researchers's security feed confirmed it had arrived from the south, hugging the canopy and well under their sensor array. It remained only long enough for the mercs to secure the station, then left, taking only three back on board, the same way it arrived.

The direction was opposite the sanctuary, so there would be no way either of them would have been informed, since flying so low meant they at least suspected the array had been used as a warning system for the other assault.

The size of the ship was also a concern.

Tristan identified it as a Foturo LVT. It was designed for small cargo transport, but the work needed to modify it for passenger was minimal, and it would then be able to accommodate nearly three times the numbers left at the station. It didn't mean it had full occupancy, but something a researcher had said nagged at them.

She'd overheard one of the mercs send another back to the ship, saying it wasn't safe to leave it with no one in it.

Why the worry? They already had all the researchers secured at that point, and even if they suspected they didn't, what did they expect a researcher to do? Unless they were amateurs, their security would be enough to keep anyone from taking control. Especially since among them had a been a competent coercionist.

And nothing about what Alex had seen there marked them as amateurs.

So why the concern?

Or better yet, why voice it where someone they held could overhear it? The researchers were in the common space. Half a dozen steps and a lowered voice were all it would take to ensure they weren't overheard. And again, only amateurs would say anything where prisoners would hear it.

Unless that was the point.

Which raised the question of why? What did the mercs have to gain from the subterfuge? The only way he and Tristan would do it was to spread misinformation. And here, the only conclusion he could reach was that they wanted to mercs to confirm there were only three people on the ship once it left.

Which meant there were more of them.

But why? So no one would know there was a third part to their plan.

The initial attack hadn't been so they would go rescue the researchers and fall into a trap. It was so Alex and Tristan wouldn't be at the sanctuary when those left in the ship attacked it.

They were nearly there when they reached that conclusion, and Tristan took over piloting, directing the hover to a clearing near the garden. It was within range of portable sensors, but short of jumping out, the other clearings large enough for the hover to land were too far.

Tristan gave the confused researcher instructions to head back to the station, and they made their way to the garden, where they confirmed something was off.

There was no one working in the garden.

Tristan bolted to the entrance before Alex noticed the form through the rain, and by the time he reached it, the woman was on the ground, throat ripped out. Tristan handed him the two knives and Alex added them to his harness, while his Samalian looked over the blaster, adjusted a setting, and clipped its holster to his belt.

Silently, they entered, and the only sound was that of something falling in the distance. More items fell as they followed the sound, then a pained cry came from the same direction. Too strident to be an injury from what fell. Someone scared who'd also been hurt.

Before they reached the stairs, Alex figured out the sounds were books carelessly pulled off their shelves. The mercs were after the painting Hart wanted, and that was kept in a hidden chamber within the library. Hart hadn't known that, so neither did they. By the sound, none of them had thought to bring a scanner.

They started down when a muffled voice stopped them. It came from the opposite direction, from the upper floor. As they listened, someone begged for—the details were obscure by more books hitting the ground, louder since they were closer.

Alex motioned for Tristan to head down. He'd check on those upstairs. The most likely situation was that the locals had been gathered together while the bulk of the mercs were tearing the library apart.

An affirmative tilt to his ears and Tristan continued down, while Alex started up. Only two places lent themselves to holding a large number of people. The dining area and the showers. The showers were too far from these stairs for him to hear anything other than a forced yell.

No guards in the hallway, and now he made out sniffing in the direction of the dining room. There, a glance in showed the tables had been stacked on one side, the locals and retired mercs were seated on the other, with eight mercs watching over them.

There had been two locals on their back, one with blood on their robes. He thought he'd made out anger in the retired mercs' eyes, but none of them showed signs of have resisted. Teklile hadn't been present.

Alex smiled and took a mono-edge blade in each hand. After those at the station, these eight would be simple to deal with.

The mercs were spread through the center of the room, looking to the side at their captives. It meant their attention weren't on the entryway, but Alex couldn't count on

complete surprise.

So he went with speed.

He made it close enough to the nearest merc before they registered he was there that he sliced through the man's neck armor as he turned to face him. He ducked under the spray of blood and threw the other knife at another merc, but she dodged it as she raised her rifle.

"Down!" someone among the locals ordered as he rushed her. Blaster fire erupted, and the locals screamed. His jacket took the blunt of those that hit, and the one that hit where it was open stung, instead of burning a hole.

He grinned. They'd set them to minimal power because they didn't want to kill anyone by accident and hadn't thought to change it against him. It wouldn't last, but it gave him a few seconds to cause damage.

She arched her back to avoid his slash, then used her rifle to block the next one, and the mono-edge sliced it in half. She used one to bat his thrust aside, and he twisted to avoid the one that came down like a club.

Then he dropped before the motion coming at him from the side connected. A knife went in that man's stomach, but slide off the armor. He dropped the polycarbon knife and grabbed another from his harness as he pivoted on a foot, slashing her leg open and taking in his surroundings.

The locals were on face down on the floor, the retired mercs over some of them, but the merc had let go of their rifles and taken up knives.

He smiled. It had been a long time since he'd faced competent fighters outside of Tristan. Hopefully, these would give him a decent workout.

Concern flitted through his mind at how lightly he was taking this, but was dismissed. He'd taken on a dozen and had retained control. This was just going to be fun.

A cut at his back brought his attention back. Not deep, since he could still walk, but wetness spread under his jacket. Best not have this happen again.

He blocked the swing with his blade and sparks flew as the field that kept the back of the laser edge from damaging the generator component took on more pressure from the other laser edge than they were designed to take. That was easily resolved.

He let go of it as he stepped aside and planted his other knife in the merc's side.

A punch made him step back as he pulled two more knives off his harness and he grinned. Someone was an idiot to being a fist to a knife fight. He sliced the fists as he dodged them. The polycarbon knife not having an effect, while the vibro-edge only left scratches on the cloves.

Alex sighed, he really hated when these new tech got in the way of his fun. He went for the arms instead and those sliced up nicely, spreading blood over him and his opponent. Then he faces someone else, trying to distract him from two others, but he ducked and weaved under the swings and around the thrust.

He ignored the cuts they gave him. This was just too fun.

Part of him thought he should be worried about the chuckle that escaped his lips, but worrying was for later. Now was for killing.

A slice opened his cheek, but his knife was in that woman's chest, the confusion in her eyes eliciting a laugh from him. He ducked another swing and stood, laughing at the

chunk of his hair that flew away at the motion. An elbow in that man's sternum stunned him, and hurt, but who cared about pain, when it let him plant the knife in his neck and pull it out to a shower of blood.

It glimmered in the light, and Alex laughed.

He caught a thrust in his forearm and gave the woman a reproachful look that might have been marred by the toothy grin he sported. At least it's what he figured when her expression showed more fear than penitence [wrong word]. Or it was the knife he pulled up, opening her from stomach to neck. The dead could be funny that way.

And he laughed as she fell back. He turned to find his knife already planted under a man's jaw and laughed at what the man could have been thinking to just plant himself on it like that.

He pulled it out and looked for someone else to have fun with, and not finding anyone, the laughter subdued, and picked right up as a new challenger stepped up. Skinny and not even armed. It wouldn't be that fun of a fight, but Alex didn't care. He spun his knives, ready to show him who—

He pivoted, grinning at the guile of the team. Thinking the one could distract him from the other, especially when it was such a blunt attempt, just running at him, screaming. What did he think he was going to accomplish?

Other than get the two knives in the chest he received.

And then Alex was being carried, the man refusing to stop even as the life left his eyes. And then Alex's back impacted something that shattered, and they were falling.

The impact on the mushy wet earth with a body atop him stole Alex's breath, and as he looked into Tristan's fan lifeless eyes, the reality of what had happened kept it from returning.