

After more than a week of all-day meetings, requests to see a written treatment of the movie, and traveling all over the planet for possible locations, this mission was finally almost over.

Alex watched the two workers set the crates down where he indicated, then spent five minutes adjusting their position. As far as he could tell they were fine, but they fussed over each crate.

“Any chance you can pick up the pace? I have other places to be.”

One of the kids smiled at him. “You don’t want them to fall over while you fly, right?” They were both in their twenties, and by their behavior, that was objective age.

“Look, I have anchors. I can secure them while you go get the next ones.”

“Nooo,” the other one said, stretching the word like it was a mile long. Alex wasn’t sure he was working with full code. “You might damage something, and then it’d be my job.”

“How can it be your job?” Alex tried to bury his annoyance. “I paid for them and they’re in my hover. As their owner, I’m telling you I’ll deal with that.”

“Nope, sorry.”

Alex looked at the chrono on the dash. He’d given himself leeway because he’d seen how things always went wrong with loading at his father’s warehouse, but he hadn’t given himself that much time. “You know what? I don’t care if you lose your job. I’m going to help.” He headed outside.

The more muscular of the two, barely so, stood in his way. “No customers allowed inside. Company policy.”

“Then pick up the pace. I have a meeting I can’t miss!”

“We’re already going as fast as we can. You’re not helping by interrupting us.”

“Fine, just hurry up.” Alex dumped himself in the pilot’s seat and watched the chronometer. When the last batch of crates was in, he was tempted to just take off. They could complain about it while he headed to his appointment.

“All done,” the thinner one said, a smile of pride on his face. “Thank you for—”

Alex shoved them outside and closed the ramp. He should have just left. He barely had any time left, but if one crate fell over and the contents were damaged, Tristan would make him pay.

By the time he was done, he couldn’t be on time anymore. He cursed. He was going to have to break a few travel laws, and hope he wouldn’t hit delays on top of that. And the traffic slowed almost as soon as he left the loading dock.

He couldn’t do what some others were doing, zooming up to reach the long-distance travel lane. They might not care about the fine, or having their hover marked, but Alex couldn’t attract attention. And his plan called for changing the sides of the hover, and he couldn’t do that where anyone could see. He’d picked this route because of the tunnel.

The vehicles picked up speed, and he forced his way into a space here and there to gain a fraction of a second. He reached the tunnel as the traffic finally reached full speed. As soon as he was in the dark, he sent the command. The production name and colors vanished, replaced by “Secure Transport”, with the red and orange of a sunset. So secure, was their motto, that you could simply go to sleep and forget about it.

On the other side of the tunnel, he started the predictive traffic program. He didn’t like them, they were unreliable, but he didn’t have a choice. He needed to make up time. He hadn’t made up enough by the time he reached the ramp to the long-distance lane. And there he pushed the speed until the warning indicator kept flashing yellow. Everything was automated, so long as it didn’t go red, he was fine, unless one of the local Law officers happened to see him. They were allowed to force him to land for anything out of the green. He had to hope this place was like every other planet he’d been to.

He pulled a waste management uniform on over his business clothes, and then the matching transportation uniform on, never stepping away from the controls. Programs couldn’t always notice Law, so it would be his job to slow down. Garbed in the red and orange uniform, he sat down and watched the chrono as he slowly made up time.

He reached the broadcasting company at the exact appointment time. His heart was beating so fast it was a vibration. Of course, now he had to deal with a human guard.

“Any chance you can hurry? I’m almost late.” He sent the program that would insert him within the employee structure as a coercionist and validate the waste management credential

identification.

“Relax. You’re here. I’ve logged your arrival time so you’re not late. I have to do this, you know that.”

Alex kept his mouth shut and tried to slow his heartbeat. It didn’t matter if he wasn’t late. He still had to be inside the building at a specific time to be able to do what he needed.

The gate opened. “Your dock is 112, it’s on the—”

“I know, I’ve been here before. Thanks.”

He entered the company’s grounds and traveled at the slow crawl they mandated. He wasn’t going to speed here. They had no patience for rule-breakers. He searched for the other hover as he traveled to his dock. His tracking program told him it had arrived without problems, but once at the dock, it couldn’t do anything. He found 112 and backed the hover to it. The dock’s computer took over, gave the handshake, and accepted the extra program Alex had prepared.

The ramp lowered, and the sounds of the warehouse filled the hover. He ignored them and hurried across the floor. Normally hover pilots weren’t allowed out of their hovers, but one of the programs it had accepted was a notification he needed to see one of the supervisors because there was an error with the order. That meant none of the automated systems would stop him, and walking with conviction meant the workers had better things to do than get in his way.

He found the exit and pulled out his pad. The status of all the other programs he had waiting in the city came back green. He didn’t like doing things this way, and hadn’t been able to do a dry run. All he had to work off were reports on security companies’ response times, and when were those ever accurate? The office he needed to go to was further down the corridor.

The lights dimmed. Good, still no one. He was by a disposal bin when they went out fully. He was out of the transport uniform and now was a waste management employee. He was allowed throughout most of the non-secured floors. The lights came back on. This one would register as an overload in a junction at the edge of the city, one that the power company would check and decide it was just a glitch.

He looked at the chrono on the pad as he pushed through the door. He needed to hurry up; he couldn’t be on this side of that door when the next phase happened. He rushed through the halls hoping no one would stop him.

The door was in view, but too far. It opened just as the lights went out. He pulled off the uniform as he ran, almost tripping and hitting someone.

“Hey!”

“Sorry.” He heard the door closed behind him. The light was on and the uniform was in another disposal bin. Now he looked like any other cubicle jockey. He assumed the same confused expression everyone else was wearing. This was the administrative department. Only people who were authorized were here, so no one bothered looking at him.

One group in an office wasn’t relaxing. This hadn’t been a glitch. This was the power junction right outside the gate; all their programs would reach the only conclusion they could: this was an attack.

An alarm sounded. “All non-essential personnel go to outside meeting zones and report to your supervisor. Security teams one through eight, go to your assigned meeting point. Nine through twelve, take position at all entrances.”

Silence.

*Come on. There’s one other thing you have to do. Don’t be dumb. What does a hard power crash do to a computer? Why is it a preferred method of coercionists to bypass security?*

“Anti-coercion team, take position at the mainframe, this is not a drill. I repeat, this is not a drill.”

The instructions repeated, and Alex was running against the flow along with three others. One of them frowned at him, but Alex couldn’t care. The team couldn’t be so small everyone knew everyone else.

Within a dozen steps it was only the three of them left, then more joined them. They reached an opened door and entered. “Pick a station!” a woman said. “Grab your earpiece and start listening to the system.”

“What do you know?” Young man. Confident.

“Nothing yet, just that we’re under attack. The system rebooted and the security programs still haven’t come back. This is just a safeguard. It’s doubtful they—”

The mainframe went dark. Everyone stared at it. Alex did too, but he was also coding. This was the time to fill his terminal's buffer.

"Stop gawking, people! You have a job to do!"

"But the 'frame's down." A woman. "What can we do?"

"Just remember your training." The young man again. "Your terminal still works, so listen for the connection signal."

"Exactly, and those of you who know how to code blind, start now."

Alex smiled. Code blind. He'd never heard that expression. Back in school they called what he was doing coding in the void.

The mainframe lit up and the large room became a frenzy of activity. The buffer emptied itself within the mainframe, his program starting its own hunt, hiding as a program looking for malicious infections.

He spoke to the system, but unlike everyone, he kept his tone low. If someone overheard him, that would be problematic. He was deep within the mainframe when the security programs became active. They were confused with all the other activities. They had to validate every other coercionist within the system. He had time.

A program sent him a tone. He couldn't have them light up, not in this crowd; someone would come investigate. It had found something promising.

Alex cursed. One of the security programs was on his trail. He should have had more time. He sent a command to lock his program in place and spoke. "Bedtime."

The mainframe was dark again.

"How are they doing that!" An older woman. "Did someone miss a node?"

"All those I had were clean."

"Same here."

"Here too."

"You, what about yours?"

Alex coded, with the speed the security programs reacted he needed to add buffers and delays.

"I asked you a question." Someone grabbed his shoulder.

Alex jumped and his hand dropped to his belt. "Don't do that!" Good thing he hadn't worn an easily accessible knife.

"Well? Were the communication nodes clean?"

"I don't know, that's not my job. I'm on deep scrubbing, making sure they don't use the downtime to insert programs under the security's radar."

"What's your name? I don't remember you."

"Archibald. I'm usually on the night time crew, but Melisa Crowner has a thing, so she asked me to cover her shift."

The mainframe lit up. "Go go go!" She left him to walk around.

He searched for the tone. *Come on, you're smarter than the rest. I made you show me—there.* With a wall of programs around him he plunged toward the tone. Yes. It was the archive of broadcasting IDs. He couldn't use an active one; that would create a conflict and probably shut down anyone using it. And he needed to make sure the one he picked wouldn't then be assigned to someone else, but he couldn't remove it.

He wrote a revolving door program. Any of the mainframe's programs that would attempt to interact with the one he picked would go in and come right back out, convinced everything had been perfect.

Now he did something that was risky. He didn't have a datachip. He couldn't put one in, this area was too secure. The only place he had where he could store data was his earpiece, but it wasn't made to carry data long-term. The moment he took it out, it would clear all its buffers. He had to hope everyone was too busy to notice him.

With it stored, he extracted himself from the system, removing any trace in the process. He looked at the time. Too long. Too damned long, but it couldn't be helped. Now for the unknown.

He headed for the door.

"Where do you think you're going?" the woman asked.

“Bathroom,” he replied without stopping. The door didn’t open.

“We’re not done here.”

Alex turned. She wore similar clothes to everyone else here. Slacks, shirt, a jacket. When there wasn’t an emergency, she probably did coercion too.

“Lady, maybe you missed it in everything going to hell, but whoever designed this room never thought to put in a bathroom.”

“Why didn’t you go ahead of time?”

“Oh, excuse me. Was I the only one who didn’t get the memo we were going to be under attack today?” He raised his voice. “Did your memos give the time of the unplanned attack so that we could do a bathroom break before all this happened?” Chattering and laughter sounded around the room. If nothing else, he was giving them a way to break the tension.

“No one leaves until we’ve confirmed the mainframe is clean.”

“So you need me to stay in here? No matter what?”

“Yes!” She was getting angry. That was okay, anger he could work with.

“Fine. What corner is designated for pissing? Are all the protections in place to make sure the mainframe doesn’t get wet? When I need to take a dump. Is that the same corner or a different one?”

The coercionists closest to them stopped working and exchanged worried glances.

“Get back to work!”

“What, they don’t have a right to weigh in on this? They’re stuck in here too.”

She pointed to the door, and the lock turned green. “You have five minutes. If you’re not back, I’m sending security after you.”

“No worries, ma’am.”

He was out and walking quickly. He took out his datapad and started it up. He’d had to shut it down so they wouldn’t know he had it. Once the earpiece acknowledged it transferred the broadcasting ID to it, he finally breathed easier.

He contacted the hover and told it to get ready for a departure. It replied it was still waiting to be loaded. Why hadn’t anyone loaded it?

He accessed the camera network and cursed. Every loader in the warehouse was at a standstill. He placed a call to the company, having it think it came from the city.

“Routing.”

“Hi, Edward Finland. I’m with waste pickup. Our operator contacted me to say no one’s working. He’s on a schedule, any way you can tell whoever handles this to stop sleeping?”

“I’m sorry, sir. We’ve had an emergency. It’s procedure to shut down all loaders until it’s resolved.”

“What do you mean, shut down? What kind of emergency requires waste pickup to be stopped? Have the AI’s decided to form a dance troupe?”

“Sir.” Her voice was exasperated. “I can’t answer that. Once security decides it’s safe, everything will start up again.”

Alex disconnected. This was why he wanted dry runs; there had been no mention of a full shutdown. The loaders were automated. They should have kept going, picking up the broadcasting rig, thinking it was waste, and putting it in his hover.

Now he’d have to sit and wait.

He headed for the lobby. He couldn’t walk through the building during an emergency, but at least no one cared where he went if he was outside. It would be a long walk around the building, but it looked like he had time.

He had his ID out when he opened the door, the one that identified him as Georges Pantor, and that the system had already noted had come in for a meeting earlier in the day.

He handed it to the guard. He scanned it, handed it back, and Alex turned to head for the door as a woman entered, accompanied by a group of men.

She fixed her gaze on him and smiled. “Alexander Bartholomew Crimson, it is such a pleasure to see you again.”