

The assault caught the rebel by surprise since it came before Tristan could call out the warning. They came from around the building and out of openings, firing badly. It became evident to Alex that whoever they were; they were not corporate security made up to look like some vagrant army.

He and Tristan provided cover fire for rebels as they headed for the cover of a building. Instead of staying together, they scattered so that only three were with them. Alex saw two groups of two take cover on behind a fallen portion of wall and one of three make it inside a building. The large form of Kaleb's boyfriend told him where that one was, unless he'd gotten on his nerves, too.

"We're going to have to rescue all of them, won't we?" He asked. Tristan gave him a shrug that could mean anything. Without being able to speak unless he wanted to choke on the sand, and his ears under the hood, Alex had little to work out what the Samalian meant. Still, the job only included one death, even if this provided the perfect excuse for all of them to be killed.

"You three stay here," he instructed, then added. "And don't take for granted an attack can only come from over there. Have someone watching the rear. We'll get the others back here as quickly as we can."

He looked at Tristan, who nodded, then Alex ran into the open, shooting at any flash that came from deeper into the wind born sand. Tristan did the same, and by the time Alex reached the fallen wall, their attackers had stopped firing.

"You two, when I tell you, run for that building. The others are behind it."

"But they're going to shoot us," one of them exclaimed.

"You're welcome to stay here while I go get others, then. I'm sure these people will be happy to ignore you, considering the first thing they did was open fire on us."

The other grabbed him and pulled him along, remaining low while Alex stood and turned, firing where he last saw some gunfire. Tristan was edging to one of the other buildings, another group hurrying to join the others. He'd have seen where more of them had gone to.

Alex headed for where he expected to find Kaleb. Draw him out under the pretense of taking him to the others, ensure they were shot at in the way and he had a valid explanation for completing the job without being blamed for it.

He was halfway there when the air darkened as the wind picked up. With a curse, he turned to run, only to have smaller shadows rushing at him within the darkening storm. He fired once and already knew it was futile. There was so much sand in the wind it absorb most of the shot's energy.

It meant his assailant had to same limitation. They had to get close for their shots to be effective. He holstered the gun. He'd be able to see them well enough before that happened. He took two knives out and felt the vibration as they activated. He threw one at the approaching form and had another in hand. Mono-edge. He rushed the next form, and a flash missed him. Then he was by them, slashing through the loose cloth they wore. They swore, stepping away, and he pressed, then dodged someone else's swing before he was aware of it. The vibroblade in the arm. He took theirs before they dropped it and threw it at his previous target.

He hardly felt the punch in his side through the armor in his jacket, and didn't bother striking back. He ripped the mask off their face and shoved them away, stepping back to block another attack. Then open their stomach.

The wind slowed again, and a semblance of visibility returned as three rushed him, and more stood behind. A dozen, if he had to guess, guns raised, so he ducked between his attackers. They didn't fire, so they cared about each other at least that much.

Alex smiled. Time to take advantage of that. He slashed at the one before him, ducking under another attack, missing the swing, but letting the knife go to plant itself into one of the watcher's chest. He had another knife in hand as he elbowed the one behind him. He dropped as gunfire started in the apparent opening, only for someone to yell before they'd shot one of their associates.

Oh well, he'd have to do most of the work.

He jumped to his feet, planting a knife in the side of the one before him and feeling at their waist until—there. He turned and threw that knife in the crowd, then used his assailant to take the reflexive shot. He had another knife in hand as he ran for the crowd. He flung the corpse, then slashed at the closest person.

Out of the corner of his eyes there was a series of flashes of gunfire from inside a building, but he put it out of his mind immediately. This was more fun.

He punched someone, and a mask flew off. He grabbed the knife off a belt and use it against its owner. Someone cut him, and he had a knife in their throat. People yelled, guns were raised and Alex dropped as he noticed they were all scattering. The shots went over his head, but gave them time to run off and disappear into the storm. He took a step to give chase, but a presence registered behind him. He turned and only stopped himself in time from slashing at Tristan's midsection.

"You need to stop doing that," Alex told him, looking around. Bodies all covered in cloths, so none of theirs. "Are they all back there?" Tristan shook his head.

"Kaleb's over there." He headed for the building. The sand covered everything. There was even a thin layer of it over the two bodies in what had to have been a lobby.

"Oh, I can't believe it's you," Someone said, and Alex had his gun out as someone stood from behind an overturned table. "I thought it was more of them back to finish me off." He recognized the voice, his comrade from the station.

He looked at the bodies. "What happened here?" Had he done this? Alex had certainly fed the anger enough he might be able to hurt Kaleb, but the boyfriend?

"Spence dragged us in here when the shooting started. Kaleb was bitching the whole time about being manhandled. Even if that's what kept him from being shot out there." He motioned to the back. "When it slowed out there, a bunch of them came at us. Spence fired at them, but I..." he looked away. "I hid. Then someone yelled, and they ran off the way they came."

He looked at all the scuff marks in the sand from at least seven people. So the job had taken care of itself. That was convenient. He turned to Tristan, but the Samalian was back outside, heading for the bodies.

"You survived," Alex told the other man. "That's what mattered. What happened to them isn't your fault. You don't have to feel guilty about any of it." He put a hand on his shoulders. "Come on, I'll take you to the others."

As they stepped out, Tristan was returning, holding something in his hand. "Keep going. If they were still around, they'd have fired at this point. That building. You can tell the others it's safe to come out."

Tristan motioned inside, and Alex followed him. He walked past the bodies and to the footsteps coming and going from the back. He handed Alex what he held. A boot with thick threads for soles.

He looked at the nearly smooth footprints all over the floor and took his datapad out, using it to change his comm's frequency and showing it to Tristan, who did the same.

"He did this?" Alex asked.

Tristan nodded, then canted his head. The ear twitching was missing, but Alex could read the 'are you surprised?'

"He was the job," Alex countered, and Tristan motioned to him and back. "Bullshit. How often have you tricked someone into killing for you? Outright got them to do it? This isn't any different."

Tristan pointed to Spence's body.

"Collateral—"

The Samalian's hand was up, the severity in his eyes marred by frustration. Tristan wanted to speak, tell him why this wasn't the same.

Justify, Alex told himself, knowing it wasn't true. There was never collateral damage when Tristan arranged something. All the deaths were part of his plan. This one had been clear, Kaleb was the only target, and because of Alex's attempt at manipulating someone into doing the job, there was an extra death.

"Fine, I screwed up." He walked past, but Tristan grabbed his arm. Instead of anger, there was concern in his eyes, and Alex looked away. He hated that look. He didn't deserve it. He'd screwed up the plan. Gently, Tristan got him to look at him again, then he pressed his forehead against Alex, and he fought to push away.

Another Samalian gesture. Once signifying understanding and acceptance. It was more complex to them, but that was the closest Rig'Irik had come to describing it to Alex. Languages carried meaning

that didn't cross over.

"What do you want me to do?"

Tristan canted his head.

"To make this right."

A shake of the head.

"You don't get to let me screw up like this and just be okay with it."

Tristan ran a hand over the transparent portion of his mask, then looked at Alex in frustration. He took out his datapad and typed, then show it to Alex.

Deal with this later?

Job to finish.

Need to bring everyone back.

He motioned to the two bodies.

"Them too?"

Tristan nodded.

"What do we tell the others?"

Tristan shook his head.

"We let him tell his story, and the other make what they want of it?"

Tristan nodded.

"Okay. I'll wrap these two, and we can get moving." He took the large mantles the attackers wore off two of them. He had no idea why they wore that over tight clothing. It seemed to him all it would do was trap the sand inside. Once Kaleb and Spence were wrapped and dragged them to the others.

"Is it true?" One of them asked. "Kaleb's dead?"

"Shot in the confusion," Alex said, as Tristan took Spence and threw him over his shoulder. Alex did the same with Kaleb. He felt the other man's eyes on him, but didn't acknowledge it. Did he hold Alex responsible? Did he know how Alex had played into his own dislike for the businessman to encourage him? Alex wasn't skilled at manipulating people, so he might. But Spence was not on him. He could see how the man would have felt it was necessary, but that only spoke of poor planning. There were ways to separate them, so only one death was required.

Tristan waved to get his attention, and Alex forced himself to the now. "Okay, we're moving out."

"How far are we?" someone asked.

"No, idea," Alex replied. "So make sure to pace yourself."

Alex quickly discovered what the threads on the attackers' boots were for as his feet kept sliding in the shifting sand anytime it was over an inch deep.