

Alex checked the charge on his weapon, then changed it to a fully charge one.

“Land away from the resort,” Tristan told the pilot.

“That’s going to make harder to reach it,” the pilot replied. “No one’s been cleaning the silt off the streets for a couple of years. It’s all going to be soft dunes ready to swallow you.”

“We traveled in those conditions,” the Samalian replied. “We know how to handle it.”

Knowing how didn’t mean it was enjoyable, Alex thought. At least this wouldn’t be nearly a day of trudging through the stuff that it had taken to reach a city after the crash and ambush.

“Where will the leadership hole up?” he asked Ester to get her mind the immediate problem. “That room you took us to, or some secure bunker?”

“That room, probably,” she replied, her voice trembling. “It’s not like we planned on being assaulted.”

“Then you made a tactical error,” Tristan said. “You took on a corporation. There was always going to be a form of retaliation before you reached a point where they’d be willing to listen to you. If you survive it.”

“I’m about to land,” the pilot said. “I’m staying. I’ll be ready to take off the moment you’re back with them.”

Tristan didn’t reply, and Alex didn’t think this shuttle was the escape plan.

The landing was gentle, then the shuttle shifted sideways before straightening with the pilot cursing. “Okay, I can’t rely on this thing’s scanners to know how solid the silt is. I’m going to hover while you exit, then I’ll look for the closest place that can support this. I’ll have my scanners looking for you. I’ll message and direct you.

“Masks on,” Tristan instructed, looking annoyed as he put his own. Then his expression was covered, other than the almost baring of the teeth he did when he barely tolerated the situation he was in, but couldn’t change it. Alex wasn’t sure Tristan realized he had gained that tell over the last months.

“Comm check,” Tristan instructed as Ester reached for the hatch’s controls..

“I wanna go home,” Alex said. “I mean it. When you took this job, this was not what I was envisioning.”

“I’ll make it up to you,” Tristan replied.

“My comm works,” Ester said, as Alex mulled over Tristan’s words. Not some variation of do the job and stop complaining, but a ‘I’m sorry’.

He swallowed the annoyance. He had a job to do, and it wasn’t the time to get morose about things changing. In fact, it was fucking time he stopped acting like they hadn’t. The caring Tristan wasn’t only the one when they were home, or between active times on a job. It was who Alex had. A version much closer to the one he’d wanted at the start of all this. So how about he stopped complaining and was happy about it?

And if it didn’t last?

“What’s wrong?” Ester asked.

Great, that growl had escaped him. “Nothing,” he replied harshly. “Just dealing with stuff. And now’s not the time to talk about it, Tristan,” he said before his Samalian could voice the concern he knew he was feeling.

“When this is done, then.”

Alex found the direct acceptance of the situation relaxing. Then the hatch opened and sand filled the shuttle.

\* \* \* \* \*

Alex made out the Karliak security shuttle by the band of light traveling its side. It vanished once it reach the other side of the nose and reappeared two second later. Seemed Karliak liked being sure everyone knew when their security forces were out and about.

“Are we taking them out?” he asked, then looked at Tristan, who shook his head. So the focus was on the rescue before the takedown. He readied himself for a response as they reached the back, but the hatch was closed.

The hangar doors were open, blasted off.

Inside, he shot the one guarding the door exiting into the resort, while Tristan took down the ones

standing over the restrained mechanics. They'd surrendered, smart.

"Are you guys okay?" Ester asked as she undid their restraints, her voice raised to carry through her mask.

He headed for the door and took the two knives off the dead security officer as he listened to the lock. Someone was in there. He heard the echoes of the fight between them and Bernie through the connection linking the lock to the rest of the resort. He couldn't tell who had the upper hand.

The knives secured, he took his datapad out and instructed the lock to release. Most of his code within the resort's system was intact, so Bernie had gone in right behind or before the Karliak coercionist.

Ester joined him and Tristan, with four mechanic in tow.

"They should stay here," he told her.

"Not with those shuttles out there. For all we know, they still have people in them and they're going to see the dead and take it out on them."

She wasn't wrong. "Then, the instant we're inside, they need to find a place to hide. We can't afford to have to protect them. We're going to be busy staying alive."

The mechanics nodded.

"Ready?" he asked Tristan, who nodded. He told the door to open and rushed in, firing at anyone he made out in the flickering lights who wore a uniform. The gust of sand announced their entry, but was dense enough to make them difficult to see. When it ended, with the door closing, the mechanics were already running along the wall. Alex shot someone taking aim at the mechanics, then removed his mask.

"How about we never come to this planet again after this?" he asked, then choked on the sand that flew out of Tristan's fur as he shook himself.

Then the Samalian removed his mask. "It's going to take a lot to convince me to return." He fired down the hall, then was running.

"What's with the light?" Ester asked. "They can't have hit the power. That's deep under the resort. It's independent."

"Bernie's holding back a coercionist. The lights are reactions to their fight affecting the system. They're someone in or around the power distribution commands. Hopefully Bernie is familiar enough with the system he can keep them away from anything problematic." He shot twice in the passing corridor, taking down those who had rifles at prisoners.

"What could a coercionist do? This is just a resort." She fired behind them.

"That independent power source you mentioned," Alex said, throwing a knife at the officer's back as he grabbed a child. "It's controlled by the system. It doesn't take much to overload it and turn this place into a crater."

"How do you know that? And there's no way they'd do that; there are families living here."

"You might have missed who the man I just killed was reaching for," Alex replied. "As for how I know? I'm a coercionist if I go into a system. I make sure I can control it. Whatever that businessman planned for this place, secure wasn't it."

Tristan shouldered a door open, and they entered what was left of the room Alex had first met the rebel leaders in. The central table was sliced into two, one wall had collapsed. Half the ceiling was gone, showing the supports and wiring.

Their employer wasn't here.

The shot came nowhere near them, and Alex almost killed the injured woman peering over a piece of permacrete. Only the lack of a uniform kept him from firing back.

"Sopha," Ester called, running in her direction. "What happened?"

"...held off best we could," the woman was saying when Alex was close enough to hear her weak voice. "Broke in, explosives. Krystal and the other one were taken."

"Where?" Tristan asked.

"There." She pointed to a door in the intact wall.

"That leads to the meeting boards," Ester called as Alex ran after Tristan.

The lights flickered off as Alex entered the corridor, and angry cursing came from ahead. A man gave instructions to end this now.

The lights came on as Alex slowed. The system wasn't going to survive this sane. He could tell

this much from what he heard. Bernie and the Karliak coercionist were rampaging through its code with abandon.

“Good,” the man said, then the sound of a fist hitting flesh.

“Stop hitting her,” Eastyn said, voice hard. “She doesn’t know anything. She’s just an assistant.”

“Then you’ll care what I do to her.”

“Do I look like I give a fuck? I’m telling you your wasting your time. Unless this is just some excuse to get off on you masochistic urges.”

A fist hit flesh again, and the pained cry was Eastyn’s

Tristan ran in, firing. Alex followed and nearly collided with the officer, trying to step behind the Samalian. A quick slash as he stumbled, and the woman’s throat was opened. He regained his footing in time to duck under the butt of a rifle, then the vibro-edge was planted in the man’s chest. Not the same caliber of armor as what the protection detail had worn. The kind of hit those had taken should have given his knife some resistance.

Alex threw it at another man taking aim at Tristan while he fought the one who had been by Krystal and Eastyn. It went in the chest. Then he had another one in hand and planted in the last officer standing. Alex turn and aimed, just as Tristan got an arm around his opponent’s neck and snapped it.

“You have no idea how happy I am you got here in time,” Eastyn said, sounding terrified. Alex raised an eyebrow. It had been an act? He hadn’t known there was someone out there even close to Tristan when it came to acting.

“Where is Ramon?” Krystal asked, then spit blood. Her face was in bad shape, but while the pain was visible, so was her anger.

“I expected him to have taken refuge with you,” Tristan replied, undoing their restraints.

“We need to get out,” Eastyn said. “Take as many as we can and run.”

“Not without Ramon,” she said. “I won’t abandon anyone who can be rescued.”

“Where is he?” Tristan asked.

“He was in his lab when we were attacked,” she replied. “It’s on the other side of the resort. Kaleb gave him the auditorium to do his work. He probably locked the doors and hoped they’re shot by him.” There was annoyance in her voice.

“I’ll get him,” Tristan said. “Eastyn, do you have somewhere these people can hide?”

“All of them?” the man asked in surprise. “Maybe? It might be cramped, but—”

“Good, take as many as you can there. Remember, they’ll all need masks to be outside. Alex, go with them. Make sure they make it to Eastyn’s hide out. I’ll contact you as soon as I have Ramon.”

Alex grabbed the Samalian’s arm before the thoughts finished registering through the anger and fear. “What the fuck is this about?” he demanded, his voice low. “You’re rescuing that guy?”

Tristan leaned forward. “I’m getting answers as to what happened during the job. Ramon was the one who didn’t agree, then was all in. Something happened. I want to know what.”

Alex relaxed.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m—” he bit off the protest. Tristan was honest with him. It was time he returned the favor when he wasn’t using it to slash. “I’m scared. Too much is different about how you do things.”

Tristan kissed his forehead. “We’ll adjust, Alex. All this, it’s for you.”

“I could have done without all the sand,” he replied bitterly, then shared a chuckle with his Samalian. And then Tristan left him to see to the survival of a bunch of people who should be meaningless to both of them.