

[note: a slight alteration to the previous chapter is that Tristan has them keep their masks on their person because there is a possibility they will need to step onto the roof in the process of getting the target and he is too much of a planner to not prepare for it]

Tristan opened his eyes once his mask was against his face, looking over the scene as he attached it and the filtering extension over his nose. Bodies, too many of them, and no shuttle. One was Robert, dead, his chest riddled with the burns of a high power electrified arc. The Swarth 265 was a popular sidearm among corporate security who came over from the military. He stepped into the particulate storm, ignoring how it got into his fur. That was a problem for later. Right now, he needed to work out what had happened.

Eight security agents were dead. The holes in their chest too large for the weapons Team Two had carried. To go through corporate armor, they had to use the types of weapons only available to the military and those willing to break laws to get them. SpaceGov was not gentle on anyone who stole from its military. This lined up with Ester saying Krystal confiscating high-powered weapons and locking them up, but not how they had them for the mission. She would not have allowed this.

“Tristan,” Alex said, next to Robert and holding a rifle. A Katoraf Obliterator. Tristan was impressed. Getting the one he’d taken apart had been expensive. He nodded. It would do the kind of damage he saw on the security. But there would have been more than one to get them all.

“Guys?” Ester called, propping someone to a sitting position. “Isn’t this our target?” She placed fingers against her neck. “She’s alive.”

“Where’s the rest of Team two?” Alex asked, while Tristan looked over the bodies. Six executives, each unconscious; soon to be dead if they stayed out in this storm and their protection detail, already there. There should be seven executives.

“Okay,” Ester said. “Are we believing Team two did this kind of damage and then took the wrong person?”

Tristan shook his head.

“When?” Alex asked, then, “Bernie lost them about the time they stepped out here. As best as it can tell, they disrupted the local scanners.”

“How did they do that?” Ester asked.

“Considering they didn’t have a coercionist with them, tech,” Alex replied. “Karliak was plugged into the hotel’s scanners, and those aren’t that hard to disrupt.”

“Where did they go?”

“Bernie’s trying to find out. He wasn’t connected to anything set to see outside of the hotel.”

“So, are we taking her and continuing as planned?” Ester asked.

Tristan nodded. His job was still workable, and the pieces were on their way. The one aspect he wasn’t pleased with is that with the overall Karliak security divided, he couldn’t be certain it would be enough to push Alex over the edge.

“Are you sure?” The tone made Tristan look at Alex. “Bernie pinged the shuttle through the atmospheric sensors and unless they change course, they are heading directly to the resort.”

“Isn’t that dangerous?” Ester asked.

Alex chuckled. “Astronomically. They just attacked Karliak personnel. That isn’t going unanswered.” Tristan raised a finger. “They took one of them? They’re dead. Corporations don’t bother with stunning when they’re retrieving one of their own.”

Ester ran for the door and Alex caught her arm.

“Let go, we need to go warn them.”

“Won’t happen,” Alex replied. “This job was under void, remember? They can’t even acknowledge the signal, let alone listen to it without revealing their involvement.”

“They are about to be attacked. How much more revealed does it get?” she demanded, wrenching her arm out, but not running.

“But they don’t know that. Unless Team two was stupid enough to contact them to announce they were coming in without the person the job was about, they won’t know about it until the door blow up.” Alex thought about it. “I don’t think they’ll just bomb the whole complex, the sense I got of the executives

when I read the information over was that they mattered to Karliak, so whoever it is they took the plan will be to get them alive, then raze the place down.”

“Then why aren’t we moving already? We need to go help them?”

Alex looked at Tristan.

“What?” she demanded. “How the fuck is this something you need to think over? There are families there!”

Tristan tapped his mask and motioned to the inside of the hotel. He couldn’t take part in the discussion out here. With the door closed behind him and fighting the urge to shake himself, since Ester already had her mask off, Tristan took his off.

“What is the plan?” Alex asked.

Stick to his plan, and if there wasn’t enough security to push Alex? Karliak would be more focussed on the rebel after this. So the best move was to remain with them, make use of the corporate focus to create the fight he needed.

“Our employer is at the resort,” he said. It was true both from Alex and Ester’s point of view. And protecting their employer was standard practice among mercenaries. Ands Tristan didn’t abandon one without them screwing him over first.

“I hope he’s smart enough to stay out of the fray then,” Alex said, arming himself, and hurried down the stairs. Tristan followed Ester.

As soon as they stepped out of the stairs, Alex fired, then crossed to the other side. Ester crouched in the doorway, and Tristan leaned over her, firing at the security personnel who had been running in their direction. Alex was looking at his datapad.

“These guys are the only ones who were heading this way,” he said. “As far as I can see, which is no longer everything, since Karliak has their coercionists taking the hotel back, everyone else has left.”

“Don’t get careless,” Tristan told Ester. “Incomplete information needs to be taken as inaccurate.”

She glanced at Alex, who shrugged. “He’s right. You make inflexible plans based on incomplete data, and you die.”

“You die anytime a plan lacks flexibility,” Tristan added, motioning for them to start moving.

The lack of reliability was demonstrated when a group of four stepped into the stairwell. Their surprise meant Karliak wasn’t aware of their presence, and that they died before they could inform anyone.

Alex put his datapad away. “No point in bothering.”

They didn’t bother with their overcoats, putting their masks on as they reached the door, then hurrying to the shuttle.

“Get us to the resort as far as possible,” Tristan ordered as soon as the hatch was closed, then he sneezed on the remaining particulates in the air. Again, he fought the urge to shake himself. He’d fill the small shuttle with everything caught in his fur. “Ester,” he said, leaning against the wall, “is there any chance your people have more of the kind of firepower Robert and his team had?”

“I don’t know. There weren’t numbers involved when I was told about Krystal confiscating Robert’s stash.”

“You can’t be thinking they stand a chance against a corporate retrieval team,” Alex said.

“That isn’t what they are dealing with here. This is a generalized security response. If there’s a retrieval team on the planet, it will be a couple of hours before they can act. But no, they can’t escape this intact, but the rebels are putting themselves in an unexpected position that is to their advantage. If they can keep the security forces from retrieving the executive long enough, negotiating will become Karliak’s best recourse, especially once they realize they are the only one left alive.”

“What?” Ester asked, looking at them in horror.

“We left them exposed to this storm,” Alex said. “By now, their lungs are filled with sand.”

“We didn’t you bring them inside?” she demanded.

“Why didn’t you?” Tristan replied.

“I— I didn’t—”

“You have lived here your entire life,” he said. “You know what happens to someone who isn’t wearing a mask.”

“Why weren’t they?” she asked.

“They might have been lost when they were attacked. They might not have planned appropriately. The plan might have been for them to hold their breath the length of the run to the shuttle. Why isn’t relevant. You also left them there to die.”

“My priorities were my friends!”

“And they were not our priorities,” Tristan said. “ETA?”

“An hour,” the pilot replied. “This thing isn’t designed for speed.”

“That isn’t good, is it?” Ester asked.

“No, it isn’t. While they are limited to what is available on the planet, Karliak will have availed themselves of the best. The fighting will be well underway by the time we arrive.”

“What are our priorities?” Alex asked.

“Saving everyone!”

“That isn’t happening,” Tristan replied. “Locating and securing our employers takes priority.” Then he added, since Ester was there. “Once they are secured, we can work on ensuring as many still living rebels make it out alive.”

“Where are we going to take them?” Ester asked.

“You’d be the one who knows that, wouldn’t you?” Alex asked. “You’re a local.”

“To the planet. Not this area.”

“Eastyn will know of a place,” Tristan said.