

Alex didn't know how it had happened. He didn't entirely care, there was fighting and letting his anger and frustration loose on those Karliak security forces, and that was the important thing, but the fact that the explosion had taken the halls support, and that he was in freefall into the lobby spoke to either a miscalculation on Tristan's part, or the intervention of another third party. Only five explosions had been part of plan and Alex couldn't imagine anyone left in the ragtag group of rebel with an agenda that didn't align with what Tristan had convinced their leader was best for them.

They'd bought that the two of them were to be the distraction, while the actual job was to get the data their employer wanted. It was still there, as of when he and Bernie had been in the system. The Asharan had been good at keeping the Karliak coercionist off them while Alex got as much of the data relating to that new secret as he could, while the fighting kept the coercionist from noticing the programs he had sniffing about for any changes to the stacks containing the target information.

Of course, this meant that job had just gone sideways, again.

Their employer might start questioning their efficiency, the way people kept interfering.

He landed on something lumpy and moving, planted a knife into it as he rolled off since the only thing moving down here would be Karliak security. He put his mask on, felt it seal, then cycle to clear out anything foreign inside before pushing scrubbed air back in.

Alex opened his eyes as he got to his feet.

Others were standing, black forms within the low visibility of the storm, making it inside the building through the no-longer existing face of the building. Less visible behind them, another one, taller, holding someone by the neck and he fired into the crowd.

He'd known Tristan would be fine, but making him out let the worry dissipate.

Alex deflected the arm raising the gun between them, then sliced the front open. He grabbed the knife at the belt and turned, forcing another to step back. At the front of the open lobby, by the brighter light from outside, he made out more forms entering.

Those would be the interlopers.

He planted the knife into the Karliak security's neck as they tried to flank him.

Those they'd deal with after.

He grabbed a knife in each hand, vibro-edge and mono, and threw himself at the thickest mass of security, slashing and stabbing, replacing a dropped knife with one from his harness or from their belts. He felt the edge slice across his shoulder blade, moving forward even before the cut registered and lessening its depth. He planted an elbow in a mask, cracked it, but also sent a sharp pain up his arm that made him drop that knife.

He had another before full sensation returned in his hand. He slipped under a punch, aside from someone grappling for him. Both ended with a knife in them, and one less at their belt before they were on the ground. The laser edge he threw before he thought better of it, and its light extinguished itself once it left his hand, the returning blast burned his arm and Alex ran at them, weaving to keep them from aiming properly and to cut other security and replace his knives.

When he reached the shooter, the knives in his hands glowed.

He used his gun to parry, and Alex cut through it. Then the woman stepped out of reach. Alex followed, twisting to avoid a shot and setting the knife to remain active before throwing it where it had come from.

Motion and he stabbed, yanked up and reached for the knife there. His mouth hurt from smiling, but he had too much fun to care. He grabbed the arm swinging for him, liberated the knife they held, and broke it on their armor.

What kind of security armed themselves with a plasteel edge?

Then the question was gone with the other knife in their chest, and a hard yank to the side. He didn't bother with their belt, taking replacement knives from his harness. Laser and mono-edge. He'd lost track of the shooter, but it didn't matter—a knife into someone, a replacement from their belt, vibro-edge—there were so many to take her place.

The chuckle started softly, naturally, at how much fun this was. Alex, the knives, and death. No care about how the job was basically ruined again, about where Tristan was or if he was okay, not that there ever was doubt of that. His Samalian might act oddly at times now, but he'd always be okay. It was

a certainly of the universe, Tristan would be fine.

But that thought didn't last. There was too much death to be handed. It wasn't even in anger anymore. That was forgotten as the chuckle intensified. There was no frustration either, except the momentary one of a knife missing its intended target, but a few more swing and that was resolved. This was bliss, if Alex ever felt it. Mindless, laughing, death distributing bliss.

And because they had no idea what they were up against, the force that Alex represented at the moment, the people kept coming at him, trying to apply to him what he brought onto them.

Samalians had no forces representing death, Alex realized, somewhere at the back of his mind, where the laughter hadn't reached yet. Maybe that would change when he returned there and the statue they made for it would bear his face.

The laughter reached that part, and Alex was no more.

Death moved, cutting, stabbing, punching, kicking and taking, always taking. And he laughed. Knives changed, who they were planted into changed. Pains flared then were gone, and the laughter continued. It continued even after no one came at him. After he was alone within the moving sand storm.

But without killing, the joy diminished. Searching through the sand for someone else to share himself with, but he was alone, and alone. Joy couldn't last.

Then a sound and he turned, his smile broadening again. It had been a voice calling out. He could make out a shape.

Yes! He laughed and rushed to bring death again. He made her out better, a uniform with bright colors trying to pierce through the storm's visual interference; tall, lanky, curvy. She waved, making herself more noticeable. He was almost close enough to stab, plant a knife into her where he was again. He raised his arm so she wouldn't have time to prepare herself, brought it down as something dark blurred between them.

The knife went in deep, but she didn't scream. An intake of air, a deep voice gasp, and Alex was looking into a Samalian face, trying to understand where Tristan had come from. How he could have been so wrong about who was before him

The joy was gone. There was no laughter to be had now.

"I love you," Tristan said, before crumbling forward.