

Alex approached the form cautiously until he saw enough of them through the snow to tell they had their back to him. He crossed the remaining distance quickly, placed a hand over their mouth to keep them from crying out, then cut their throat open. The hand could have an unnecessary; sound barely traveled with the heavy snow. But it let him lower the body on their back so he could search them. He found the gun, along with more of the bullets, and pocketed both. No heals, a few chemical light-sticks and dried meats. He pocketed that too.

Of the five slavers he'd encountered, four had carried guns. He didn't think everyone who went outside armed themselves since they didn't find guns in the barrack. He figured that for as unprepared as they were for mercs like him and Tristan; they took their security seriously. Maybe they had large predators to contend with. It could explain the abundance of dried meat in the storage building. Or there were attempts to rescue the locals.

That one seem less likely. Alex had the sense there were no locals anywhere near here, other than those in the pen.

He moved on.

Their estimation was of twenty-five slavers throughout the camp. Getting all of them would be difficult in this weather, but if they cut the number by more than fifteen, they'd be able to handle any resistance when it came time to free the locals.

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There were two of them ahead of him. The forms were too indistinct to tell much, but Alex made out the extended arm, pointing at the ground. The way they turned, trying to make out anything through the thick snow. Alex had been like that often enough in his life. Gun at the ready, searching for the approaching enemy.

It told him they had come across a body. With how thick the snow was, they wouldn't know where the other slavers were anymore than Alex, so passing word along was unlikely.

One turned, raising the gun as Alex came within striking range, and he struck that with his free hand, instead of trying to get closer. The gun disappeared in the snow. He kicked the slaver into the other, and when one stood, the other searched through the accumulated snow.

His attempt to kick that one was blocked by the other, who came at him slashing, forcing Alex to shift his focus. He blocked the attack, turning to put his opponent between him and the other slaver in case they found the gun they dropped. He caught the next thrust and twisted the arm until the knife fell out of it. The slaver's other hand landed on his head and pulled, but the hood didn't come off since it was part of the cloak under Alex's clothing.

He slammed his knife under the man's jaw since he'd been good enough to get this close to him in the process.

The body slammed into him to the sound of a detonation. Then he was on his back, pushing the weight away and moving to a crouch. He pulled a knife from his harness and waited. He couldn't see the slaver, so they couldn't see him, but they both had a general idea where the other was. He didn't know how used to the weather and its effect on the sounds the slaver was, but Alex didn't trust himself to hear them move.

He heard the muffles scream turn into a gurgling. Then a body fall.

"Alex?" Tristan asked.

“I’m here.” He stood and approached. “How many have you killed?”

“Everyone in the towers and three more, nine in total.”

“Eight for me. Which puts us above fifteen. Do we wait here for anyone else the gun shot attracted, or get the hoods for the locals and make our way to the pens?”

“The pens. When they find the bodies, they will either head for the barrack to rally those, or to the pen to keep anyone from freeing them.”

“You think we can follow one of them to the barrack? I am utterly lost in this snow.”

“It should be somewhere in that direction.”

“Then you lead the way.”

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Alex stepped over the dead body, carrying two boxes of hoods. He had no idea if they need all that and the two Tristan had, but there had been a lot of locals in the pen.

They didn’t encounter anyone on the way, but when Alex made out the people standing before the pen, much further than he’d expected to be able to, he realized the snow fall was ending, and so was their cover.

The gun shot confirmed it and Alex ran for the nearest building. Tristan had the guns and bullets. He’d kept two spares, because he didn’t trust they wouldn’t fail, and had left the others behind. He fired from a building on the other side of the path they’d been walking and attracted the attention.

Alex placed the boxes down and made his way around the building until he was on the left of the pen. Six crouched slaver, three dead ones. Nine in total. Unless someone was still roaming, their estimation had been on point.

A slaver fell back against the pen’s fence. The impact had been in the torso. Tristan was keeping his aim low to ensure no missed shots made it to the barn, where the locals were hiding, hopefully. He couldn’t make out any outside, but the visibility wasn’t such he could see all the way to the barn.

The slavers returned fire, and Alex rushed them. He cut two throats before they realized he was there. He had a knife in another throat, one in a chest, and one in a stomach before the other turned to make him the priority. A gunshot and that slaver fell, his shoulder exploding in a mist of blood.

Alex made sure they were all dead while Tristan reached him. Two had controllers for the pain collars. And one had a rustic key, which he used to open the lock on the pen’s gate.

By the time they were halfway to the barn, the snow no longer impeded their vision, and they saw the locals gathered before it, looking at them fearfully.

When they were only a dozen feet away, Tristan dropped a box and opened the other, spilling the hoods over it. He then crushed both controllers, making sure they saw the pieces falling out of his hands. Alex moved to the side with him, and Tristan motioned to the open gate and the dead slavers behind that, but none of the locals moved.

“Yeah,” Alex said. “I don’t think they understand what you’re trying to tell them.”

“Understand,” a voice came from the assembled locals, “I understand.”

Alex had a knife out, and Tristan a hand on the gun at his belt. Could a slaver be hiding among the locals?

The words had been halting, as if they lacked practice.

The slavers parted, and one of them stepped forward. She was definitely a local. The eyes were just too far apart not to look right.

“You understand Standard?” Tristan asked, not sounding suspicious.

“Sacred. Understand Sacred words.”

“Oh, it can’t have gone over well to have those slavers speaking a language they consider sacred,” Alex whispered.

“Desecrate,” the woman spat.

“Right, and they have good heading.”

“I ask Ancient held,” she said.

“Not again,” Alex muttered.

“Ancient answer.” She said something in a language Alex didn’t recognize and didn’t sound exactly like how the locals spoke further south. If Tristan was right and they had all come from the crashed Sovereign ship, enough time had passed to not only create a new language, but for that language to split in different dialect.

She motioned to the pile of hoods, but the others didn’t move. Tristan put a hand on Alex’s chest and urged him to step away with him.

“Stay,” she said, sounding scared. “Thanks. You come. We give thanks.”

“Tristan,” Alex muttered as a few of the locals grabbed handful of hoods and distributed them. “We don’t want to do that.”

“They know the area, Alex. She can answer questions about what we are after.”

“Then how about you ask them now and we move on?”

“I don’t think this place is conducive to that. If we go along with how they want to thank us, she will be more receptive to answering our questions.”

“Tell me this isn’t that—” Alex bit off the rest before his anger made it out. After a couple of breath he tried again. “Tell me this isn’t the Source telling you to go with them.”

Tristan closed his eyes. “No,” he finally said. “This is my decision, but I think it’s the right one.”

Alex sighed and, once again, couldn’t shake the sense his Samalian wasn’t entirely in charge at the moment.