

Chapter 22

Tristan looked at the guns in dismay. Not because they were out, but because they were pointed at Alex. He couldn't remember a time when he had been a secondary concern, especially when not wearing a mask making him seem harmless.

She called him Crimson, so their history was merc-related. Neither she nor the man had fired yet, so they had something else in mind than outright killing him. He looked at Alex.

Alex sighed. "The guy's name is Flint. I have no idea what her name is, and before you say it, yes I was stupid to leave them alive. I thought I was being a nice guy and teaching them a life lesson."

Tristan rolled his eyes.

She cleared her throat.

"I know," Alex continued, "but in my defense, I was new at this. I thought of myself as a nice guy, and really, what were the odds I'd come back here? You knew I'd been here before, didn't you? You could have said something."

"Stop ignoring us!" the man yelled, stepping next to the woman and waving his gun about.

"Sorry," Alex replied, "but I'm in the habit of dealing with the bigger threats first."

"We're the ones with the guns," the man said.

"And don't worry," she added, "these are our guns. You're not going to blow them up in our hands this time."

"How did you manage to blow up their guns?" Tristan asked, still focused on Alex instead of them, and they didn't like that.

Alex shrugged. "I paid them for a job."

"The list that led you to me."

Alex nodded, then looked up. "Of course you'd remember that one little detail I mentioned. Well, I couldn't very well go into the Law station armed, so I gave each of them one of my guns for safe keeping."

"You had two?"

"Flint hinted at having someone when we first talk, so it was reasonable to assume there'd be two of them, so yes, I had two guns."

"What if there had been three of them?"

"With two down, even back then I could deal with a third. Anyway, when I came back they tried to double-cross me. Threatened me with my own guns. You know about my time with the pirates. I did learn to protect myself and do some planning ahead."

"What if they'd used their own guns?"

Alex shrugged. "Then they would have been a distraction. I could take them. I did try to talk them out

of it, but they wouldn't see reason. If I remember right, it was mostly her. Flint did try to talk her down, but in the end, he was in love with her, and I'm proof of just how far someone can go for love. So I detonated both guns, taking their hands in the explosion.

"Hey!" the man yelled. "I still love her, or haven't you noticed I'm right here!"

"It's okay, Hun." She sounded calm, and was studying the two of them. "I think I know what they're doing. They're trying to rile us up so we'll make a mistake."

"Is this discussion about them?" Tristan asked as the man made an effort to calm himself.

"I'm still concerned you're going to blow up, so no."

"Ah, ah, very funny," the woman said. "That little act isn't going to work."

Alex raised an eyebrow. "Act?"

"You'll be happy to know your little life lesson worked. Oh, we've double-crossed plenty of people to get where we are, but we were smart enough not to use their guns."

"Wait, that's what you took from what I did?" Alex asked.

"Sure, what else was there?" She transferred the gun to her other hand and waved the metal fingers at him. "And look, we have matching accessories."

The man did the same.

Tristan looked at them, both holding their guns in their off hands, having trouble keeping them pointed at him and Alex. The idiots had basically disarmed themselves, to what? Preen? It was a good thing he still had need of them, otherwise they'd have died now.

"Very pretty," Alex said. "It explains 'The Silver Hand' as a gang name. I'd wondered what that had to do with everyone wearing green and white. Any reason no one else is sporting a shiny metal hand? You don't want the competition?"

"Do you have any idea how expensive cybernetics are?" the man snapped. "We're running a business. Our colors are enough for anyone to know who we are."

Alex nodded. "You're still money-driven, that's good. People appreciate consistency. It means they know how to deal with you."

She glared at Alex. "Is that a threat?"

"You're the ones with all the guns. How could I even think of threatening you?" He turned to Tristan. "Are we in the habit of threatening people?"

He shrugged. "Sometimes it's worth it."

"When you do it, maybe. Look at you. Even without showing your fangs or claws, people start shaking when you look them in the eyes."

Tristan smiled and looked Alex in the eyes. He was enjoying watching him drive the two leaders to distraction.

"I don't shake for the same reason, but as nice as that is, I should get back to these two before Flint blows through a code-stop." He looked at the woman again. "Where was I? Right, branding. It's a good thing to have. It tells people what to expect. In your case, it's bring the cred chips. And bring a lot, I expect, if they're serious about dealing with you, and want to get out of it alive, am I right?"

She nodded. "So that's what this is about. You think you can buy your way out of this."

Alex laughed, and Tristan had to watch him. A genuine laugh. He'd never heard him laugh like that in their years as partners, and the memory of him laughing while he was pretending to be Jack was so old he'd forgotten how delightful of a sound it was.

When he was done, he wiped his eyes. "Lady, I wouldn't waste one credit on you and your boyfriend."

"We don't bother with those here," she said.

Alex sighed. "Fine, whatever you call money here."

"Rublon," Tristan offered.

Alex stared. "Rublon? Where do they get those names?"

"You're getting sidetracked," the man said. "You just said you wanted us to kill you."

"No, Flint. I said I wasn't going to waste a cr—a rublon on you two. Not the same thing."

"Sounds the same to me."

"How about you get on with whatever this is, so me and my partner can get back to the job. As much as I appreciate reminiscing, we kind of have to get what we're after before the competition."

The woman approached Alex, actually got herself within reach of him. "I get the feeling you're not taking this seriously." She rested the muzzle of her gun on Alex's chest, and Tristan had to fight the urge to bat it away.

“Lady—”

“My name is Liz.”

“Fine. Liz, I am taking you and Flint with exactly the amount of seriousness the two of you deserve.”

“He’s insulting us,” the man said, “isn’t he, Hun?”

“Yes. I told you, he’s trying to unnerve us. It won’t work.”

“Look,” Alex said, “if you wanted me dead, your enforcers would have tried it back at the bar. If you have something to say, I’m listening.”

“Fine.” She turned her back to him and walked away. The man fell in step with her.

Tristan watched Alex tense, waiting for the smallest signal to take them out. He didn’t give it. Not yet.

The man and woman stopped just before reaching the crowd and turned.

“You thought you’d humiliated us when you blew our hands off and stole my hover,” the man said.

“Well, we picked ourselves up. You gave us something we hadn’t planned on, hadn’t even realized we needed. You gave us notoriety. We were the couple that stuck together so much we suffered together. And we promised the same for anyone who’d stand with us.”

The crowd nodded.

“I’m glad I helped,” Alex said, his tone amused, but his body was ready to fight. “Since you just said none of this would have happened without me, should I ask for a form of consult—”

“Shut up!”

Alex smiled at the man.

“We built a gang. With them we took out our rivals. We incorporated those willing to work for us, killed the rest. We grew and—”

Alex was impatiently looking at his chrono.

“Do you think this is a joke?” the woman asked.

Alex opened his mouth and Tristan suppressed a smile. Did that man actually think either of them took this seriously? Hadn’t Alex’s behavior made that clear?

Alex closed his mouth and turned to Tristan. “I did say we were in a hurry, right? I mean, I don’t think I used those exact words, but my meaning was clear, right?”

Tristan shrugged.

Alex looked at the couple. “Look, if there’s a point, can we jump to it?”

“The point is that we’ve been watching you,” the woman snarled. “You might think you’ve been cleverly hiding your tail, but we’ve been following you all over the universe for most of a decade, so don’t think that—”

Alex raised a hand.

She sighed. “What?”

“I just want to clarify something. The trail you’ve been following? It wasn’t mine. See, I have this program floating in the net—well, it’s really more than one, but they—”

“Get to the point,” she ordered.

“Touchy, aren’t you? Point is that I’m never where reports say I am. Anytime someone files a report on me, be it someone on the street recognizing me and reporting it, or the Law filing something about a crime attributed to me, the program goes in and alters the location.

The man snorted.

“Don’t believe me? Then how come you didn’t know I was on this planet? How come you weren’t informed I was on my way here? I know I was identified as the one responsible at that massacre. I also know our ship was identified, which means there’s a bunch of programs keeping an eye on it.”

“Alex,” Tristan growled. “How is it you didn’t tell me that?”

“Because, they don’t know where we went. The programs extrapolated our course, reported our most likely destinations, and my program went in and changed that. By the time I followed them in and erased all information about the ship, the Law was looking in twenty different places, other than where we were going.”

“You know,” the woman said, “for someone who claims to be in a hurry, you like to take your time explaining things.”

“Sorry, I just thought you’d like to know that you aren’t anywhere near as smart as you think you are.” Alex crossed his arms over his chest.

“That’s it,” the man said, stepping forward. “I’m killing him. I’m not letting him insult us like that.”

She joined him, but placed a hand on his gun and lowered it. “Patience, Hun. We’ll get to that, and considering that Crimson is in such a hurry, it’s going to be soon.”

She walked to Alex, stopped three paces away. Still too close. At that distance, Alex didn't even need a knife to kill her. "Here's the bottom line: we rose to the top. We're one of the three gangs controlling anything the government or corporations don't. All those little gangs you've been talking to? They work for one of us. It's good to let the Law think there's a lot of us keeping each other in check. Makes them feel more secure, but it's all us. Nothing happens on this planet without us knowing about it."

Finally.

"So," Tristan said, "if there was an unexplained influx of high-end drugs, you'd know about it."

"Of course we do," the man answered.

"And you'd know who is behind it?"

"Yes," the man answered, exasperated.

"So, who is it?"

"It's the—"

"Shut up, Flint!"

He looked at the woman. "What?"

"Don't you get it? That's what they're after; that information is their job." She looked at Tristan.

"You're his partner, right?"

Did she think Alex was the one in charge? He nodded. Arguing over that at this point would be a waste.

"How about this, then? I tell you who's behind the influx and you walk out of here. I mean, you don't have to split the payment, so that's to your advantage, right? We keep Crim—"

"No." The intensity of his denial surprised Tristan as much as the woman. Even Alex was looking at him. He'd planned on acting like he considered her proposal, because that was what the situation called for, but the idea of leaving Alex here with them? No. Alex was his.

"Are you sure? I'm making a reasonable offer. There are plenty of mercs like this one, I'm sure you—"

"I. Said. No." This time he forced the emphasis. He'd played it that way, so he would continue. She didn't like the answer. This was done. They wouldn't get the necessary information here.

Alex was still looking at him, so he gave the tiniest nod.

Before his head was up again Alex was running, not at her, but at the man. She'd taken a step to the side, thinking she was the target, and stepped closer to Tristan. He grabbed the gun and her hand and wrench both out of her arm.

She screamed. He backhanded her.

He untangled the Fisiky Slim out of the hand's fingers and fired at the enforcers. They had armor, but thugs like them liked to snarl and throw insults, which meant no helmets.

Three of them were dead before anyone reacted, and before they moved, Tristan was running at the four left. He downed two more before rifles were raised and he threw himself in the crowd.

He fired at people as he bowled them over. He dropped the Fisiky as he rolled and picked up a Brazely from someone's belt, killing him in the motion. He should have kept the Fisiky; it still had a few shots in it.

Instead of working together, the crowd panicked. They hadn't planned for their target to be in the middle of them. They preferred acting at a distance. He killed some of them and changed guns. Gunther, Saewer, another Brazely. Didn't anyone have a decent weapon in this crowd? Beams aimed for him took down the people around him. A good weapon, finally, in the hands of an amateur.

One of the enforcers.

Unlike the crowd, they weren't trying to get away. The two of them moved as Tristan did, trying to find a clearer shot than he was giving them. He made sure to move with the chaos of the crowd, and since the enforcers were moving with him, it meant they'd left the dead ones unattended.

The crowd thinned as he moved, and the enforcer's shot came ever so close to hitting him. Still, it was clear the armor and rifles had been given based on how mean they were, not how skilled, because they were taking care of most of the crowd for him.

An armored body came into view and he lunged at it. He grabbed the rifle, rolled to a crouch, and pulled it to him, pulling the dead body it was still attached to along. He aimed and pressed the trigger.

Nothing happened.

He grabbed the body and pulled it up in front of him, letting it take the few shots that would have hit him. The rifle was locked to its owner, DNA or palm print. A gang enforcer had bothered locking his weapons. So many mercs never bothered doing that, and he couldn't bypass that while under fire.

The other bodies were too far, as was the gun he'd dropped to grab the rifle. He could either move to

another body or use his shield to rush his shooters.

Then everything went quiet.

Not totally silent; he heard moans and cries. He looked over his shoulder and Alex was standing between the two dead enforcers, covered in blood.

Tristan stood. Alex watched him, eyes slightly wild, breathing hard, but smiling. "Alex?"

Alex looked around, chuckling, looking for someone else to kill, so Tristan took a step forward. Alex's head snapped to lock on him. The chuckling paused, but he still grinned. "Alex?" he called again. He could take him, even in this state; he'd demonstrated that often enough, and like the predators on his land, Alex had learned not to attack him, but unlike the predators, Alex could be unpredictable.

"Alex, did you leave anyone alive?"

"You didn't train me for that." He looked left and right, the chuckling returning.

He needed to force Alex to think; he didn't want to have to knock him out. The Law would be coming. "How about the man you went after?"

Alex frowned. "I...I don't know." Instead of regaining focus, he started looking around again. Tristan stepped forward to gain his attention.

He'd researched what happened to Alex, and the experts called it a Combat Fugue—a hyper-alert state where he seemed to become capable of inhuman feats of fighting. Tristan thought of it in a simpler way. Alex became a predator, returned to a pure state of survival.

Over the years he'd trained Alex to thread the line, and mostly Alex did it, but sometimes, like now, he faced so many people that he couldn't remain on that edge, and tipped over to become a pure predator.

"Alex, tell me what happened." He needed Alex to be himself again, because he didn't want to have to fight the coming Law. He didn't need that kind of aggravation if he was going to complete this job.

"Flint," Alex began, the chuckling dying out. "He was the bigger threat. I left you Liz." He blinked, shook his head. When he opened his eyes, they were more focused. "I reached him, slashed his gun-arm. He fell." He frowned. When he looked at Tristan, he was fully back. "No, I didn't kill him. The crowd fell on me, to protect him. I had to deal with them and..." He looked around "I did."

Tristan walked to where the discussion had happened. He found where he'd left the woman to arm himself. She'd left a trail of blood, which he followed to the back, through a door to living quarters, to another door leading outside. The blood ended there. There were two sets of footprints in it.

He returned inside. Alex was searching through the bodies by the stage. "I can't find Flint's body."

"They had a hover waiting in the back. Both of them fled in it."

"Sorry."

"This isn't something I blame you for. Enemies escape sometimes. We'll deal with them when the job's over, but you really should have killed them that first time."

"I know. I wasn't kidding when I said I thought I was being nice by letting them live. Even after a year with pirates, I still thought myself one of the good guys. The years it took me to find you disabused me of most of that. You took care of the rest."

There was no resignation in his voice, not anymore. None of the signs that, even if he'd agreed to what Tristan had done to him, he'd wished things had gone differently. It had taken a few years, but Alex had come to terms that this was the life he'd chosen for himself.

"Is the Law on the way?" Tristan asked.

Alex closed his eyes and spoke softly. "No. As far as the programs I have floating in the local area can tell, no one's called this in."

"It won't last. Clean yourself and your clothes in the shower."

"I've killed whoever was left alive, but none of the doors I found can be locked. They open outward, so no way to force them to stay shut, short of welding them."

"So long as the Law doesn't come, we'll be fine. I can deal with any of the gangs who decide to come in to check the status of the fight."

Alex undressed, and Tristan found himself watching him. The blood on his skin wasn't all his; he'd been covered in so much of it, it seeped through his clothing. Alex moved to the living quarters and Tristan followed him, picking up his clothes.

When he stepped under the water it ran red for a long time, and Tristan watched him. He wanted to join him, to celebrate this victory, spend the rest of the energy running through him on Alex. To take him and make him his again.

He almost did, and cursed himself for it. He needed to remain alert, to stay on guard. Their safety was

more important than his relief. He could take care of that once he was back in their room. He left the clothes by the shower room and headed out to prepare himself in case someone came back.

He grabbed one of the rifles and sat on the stage, by the garish seats on it. He took tools out of his bag and began working on it. Disabling the print-lock was simple. He grabbed a second rifle and began taking this one apart, to have something to do to keep himself from thinking about Alex's naked body, of moving on top of him, of hearing him moan, asking, begging for more. Of thr—

"I'm done."

Tristan looked up. Alex was dressed in his own clothes, mostly clean of blood and still damp. The rifle he'd had in his hand was down to its individual components. Just how long had he been lost in his thoughts?

"The Law?"

"Still not on their way. I think they had some sort of arrangement with them. If they were as powerful as they claimed, it'd make sense."

"You keep watch." He headed for the shower, taking off his pants, not caring if Alex saw his excitement.

The water was already cooled to his liking after Alex's shower. He considered turning up the heat, to burn off his excitement, but he wanted to be excited. He deserved it; this had been a good fight.

He heard Alex and glanced over his shoulder. He was leaning against the door frame, watching him. There was want in his eyes, intense desire.

Good. Alex should want him. He should look forward to being used again, to being claimed.

He focused on washing—himself, his pants, the shirt, and jacket. The faster he was done, the faster they would be back in their room. He wrung out his clothes and put them on.

Dressed, they exited from the back, and kept an eye on their followers. They tried to be discreet, but he saw the green and white flash of color. He didn't hurry. They weren't a danger; they were staying too far away.

Once they reached the transit system, Tristan had them make a detour. There was a bar they needed to visit, and someone to make pay for this turning badly. That went quickly; no one there offered any significant resistance.

Afterward, it was simple to lose the few pursuers not deterred by the carnage. They jumped from one line to the other, doing quick exits right before the doors closed. It told them they'd been made, but he didn't mind that. The chase and evasion kept his blood pumping after the killings, kept him excited, even though it took them hours more to get back to their room.

"I'll start packing," Alex said as he entered the unlock code.

No, you won't, Tristan thought as he followed Alex inside. *You are going on the be—*

There was someone else in the room.

The man was sitting in the seat the by the door to the shower. His mind reeled at seeing him there. Not that someone had entered his room and he hadn't noticed the signs, but of who was sitting there.

He'd gained weight since the last time Tristan had seen him, but he still recognized the man, how he looked and how he smelled. Without meaning to, Tristan fell back into the little he remembered of the mask he'd worn for the month he'd spent living with him.

"Vic?"

"Hello, Simon," Victor replied, raising the gun that had been resting on his lap.

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