

Running naked in the forest's a bad idea. It's not the low branch smacking you in the thigh and cock that's the problem. It's getting your feet cut open as you run over a lot of sharp things in the underbrush. It's not because no one's ever been here that there aren't sharp things. Rock can break without human intervention, and if it's small enough, it doesn't need to break to lodge itself into your heel.

Tristan is going to have a time of cleaning my feet after that this. And thinking of him, that's his gun firing, so he's found whoever tripped that alarm. And there's movement.

I stop and aim. Shooting while running is a waste of time.

I move as soon as the rifle shot registers, and the trunk behind me gets a new hole and my back splinters. Waist height. Interesting. The rifle holder doesn't want me dead. That's a change.

I peer around my cover for the bounty hunter I'd aim at and see a different one. So two to flush me out, the rifleman to take me down. Let's see how that works out for them.

This time, it's the breaking of a branch that makes me turn.

The man looking at me is staring, gun pointing at the ground. "What the fuck?" it's like he's never seen another guy naked in the woods sporting a hardon from the excitement.

I shoot him in the head.

I hope he enjoyed the sight, because he's never going to see another one after that.

Downside is I've given away my positions to the other two. So three to flush me out. They are definitely taking us seriously. I run toward the rifleman, keeping low and going tree to tree for cover, because that is the one direction they can't be expecting me to head for. Who in their right mind would do that?

I have established my mind hasn't been right in a long while, right?

Motion and I stop at the tree to track it. That isn't either of the ones I've seen. Really easy to tell by the bright colored jackets they're wearing. I want to say it's an idiot's move, since they stand out against the trees, but there's the rifleman to take into account. He's going to want to be sure not to hit his allies.

It's not like he could know his target was going to be the only naked guy on this side of the forest.

So, that's orange, green and blue. Yellow's got a hole in his head.

Oh, watch there being seven of them in total. The Roy G. Biv of bounty hunters. Is that with or without the rifleman? In the distance, Tristan shoots again. Not getting closer, so he isn't going to join in these festivities.

Just means more for me.

Blue peeks around a tree and gets splinters in his face from my shot. I didn't miss. It's easier to hit a tree than that bit of a face, and splinters spread, as well as sting. If I'm lucky, and I'm not counting on that, I even blinded him in one eye.

I change location, and the rifle blows part of a trunk out, but I'm out of range of the stray. Go me.

Or not.

Trying to stop so the hand can't grab me causes my feet to slide out from under me on the leaf covered ground and I'm on my back.

“Sorry,” I tell the woman in the red jacket as she stares at my crotch. “That’s not for you.” I bring my gun on her, but she’s quicker than Yellow coat and kicks it out of my hand.

“I have him!”

I snort, rolling back to my feet. We’ll see about that. She comes at me and I dodge her punches, ignoring the music wafting from somewhere at her back. A kick in the face sends her stumbling back. I follow that with a punch to the chest, breasts or not. I’m an equal opportunity striker. She blocks even as she’s trying to breathe. Got to admire her—no, don’t have to. She’d distracting me from the rest of the rainbow approaching.

Indigo is the first one to reach me, a glance down, a leer and I punch him in the face. Serves him right for leering at a taken man. I’ll accept surprise at me, naked and hard, but that’s it. Green comes out of the tree and I side step him.

Okay, three against me is getting to be a little much. The one upside is that rifleman can’t shoot me with his rainbow so close to me.

Wait a minute. Does the fact they’re dressed as a rainbow mean more than just making them easy to identify?

When the fuck is pride?

Orange is running like a bull in my direction, the music getting stronger with his approach. I don’t move out of the way, and as he carries me toward what I expect is the tree he hopes to stun me against, I feel him up.

Get your mind out of the gutter. My hand is following the music, which wraps around me the instant my hand closes around the handle. It’s planted in the pit of his left arm, then out. His grip loosens as he staggers. I push him away with the knife across his throat, then I follow the melody under Blue’s swing. He’s already moving to avoid my stab, but the music knew that already, and the knife goes in his gut, his motion opening him up while I take the knife off his belt.

Red is next, a knife of his own, thinking it makes it a fair fight. The music is quiet enough, it’s almost like it’s letting me deal with this amateur, but I’ve already given myself over, I’m not going to stop just because—a swell and I throw the other knife to the side, and Green falls, grasping at the knife in his neck.

Red thrusts and swings wildly, playing into the music, and I step in sync with it. The knife comes close enough he might think he’s getting the better of me, when in reality, the music is setting him off for this. With his next thrust, I move and open his wrist lengthwise, taking the knife out of his weakening hand. It goes in his chest, and the underlying beat of the music is moving me out of the way of the gunshot.

Seems someone’s had enough of this dance.

Too bad for Indigo. It’s not over until the music says it’s over. I move with his attempt to aim; the song knowing his intent well before he makes it. Then the ballet is personal as I’m in his space, but this waltz doesn’t start with me taking his hand, but reaching behind him in an embrace and pulling the knife from the sheath as he raises the gun to my head.

I smile at him and sever his spine.

I throw the knife in Violet’s chest, and instead of softening, the music ripples and takes me out of the way of the bullet. I’m running, following the distortion in the music. Another ripple as the rifleman fires and I’m no longer in the path of the bullet.

I see them now, a silhouette arm resting on a boulder, rifle on a tripod, adjusting the

aim. This time I move as soon as the ripple starts and another tree explodes splinter-shrapnel into my back. He gets off another shot that misses, of course, before abandoning his post. I'm close enough to make out the yellow and green back of his jacket, the motorcycle ahead of her, and the boulder between us.

The music crescendos into its final bars as I throw the knife. He moves, there's a gunshot, then a flash of light as what should have been his final notes shatter with the knife.

I don't let the silence slow me. If he reaches that bike, he's getting away and I am not having that. I grab the rifle off the boulder, check there a bullet in the chamber and put it to my shoulder. He's sitting on the bike as I line up the shot, then there's dirt and leave in the air as he spins the back wheel without moving.

Too bad. I already know where you are.

The asshole darts out to the side of the cloud as I reach the trigger's pressure and I miss. I take aim again, but he's darting between the trees. Who the fuck is he? Zach Osborne? My shots have the same effect his did. Trunks explode and send splinters out. Only, with him on a bike, he's nowhere close to the blast radius.

I try for a last shot, but give up. Too many trees between us now.

Well, I survived. Better get back before Tristan feels he needs to come looking.

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"I swear," I say, as Tristan pulls another splinter out of my back. "That guy pulled your trick of not listening to the music and just fucking shot the knife out of the air." I look at him over my shoulder. "No one but you's supposed to be able to pull off that kind of thing."

"You got cocky."

"I didn't. I listened to the music. And before you bring it up, no, I did not just give in to it. I stayed away from the knives until there were too many of them."

"You are making progress." He pulls my cheeks apart and I expect a reward. I wince as he pulls something out of the flesh instead.

"Do I even what to know how that got in there?" Emil asks.

"Too close to the tree when the rifle bullet hit it," I answer. "He was shooting to incapacitate, not kill. They were all fighting to capture me until I'd taken too many of them out."

"It was the same for me."

"I wish you'd woken me," Emil says. "I could have helped."

"And it would have been appreciated," I say, wincing again from another splinter being pulled out.

"They must be on the FBI's contract instead of the black market bounty hunter board."

"Could be both," Emil says. "Deliver you to the FBI, then arrange to have you eliminated in their custody."

"Or the reverse," I say.

"The FBI wants us alive, Alex."

"But it's a lot easier to screw over criminals than the FBI. Whoever is behind the contract wants us dead or alive. I'm sure they'd preferred us dead, but if they deliver us alive, get paid, then steal us and hand us over to the FBI, it's twice the paycheck."

"Doesn't not wanting you only dead imply there's someone emotionally involved?"

Emil asks. "They want to enact a painful revenge or something?"

"It's more likely that Eduardo Aleman has arranged for an executioner to take care of it if we are handed over alive," Tristan says. "We were thorough in eliminating anyone within his organization who might have a stake into our death. The two people left with a connection to Aleman weren't involved in his criminal organization."

"Doesn't mean his wife and kid don't want you dead," he counters.

"She'd have to know we were involved," I say. "The official story is that he died in the shootout at the police station. There are no mention of him being 'terminated' without prejudice by yours truly."

"And if it turns out that she is behind the bounty," Tristan says. "We will take care of that, then."