

The boy was shaking, clinging to him. Tristan glanced around the beam giving them cover from the mark's soldiers. He hadn't seen the mark since the explosion he'd triggered, but he could hear him giving orders and screaming obscenities.

How many guards? There was no way to know. The mark had brought seven—two had been vaporized by the explosions and he'd killed a third, so that left four, but Alex had only noticed the reinforcements when they were almost here. He could have missed any number of them entering the warehouse.

Go with the known. Tristan had learned that one traveling through space. So four military soldiers who'd shoot him and the boy the moment they saw him. Very bad odds.

He grinned. When did the universe ever give him good odds?

He took a breath to prepare himself. He cranked up the power on the Harken to the max. He needed to go through their armor. Unfortunately, it only gave him a half-dozen shots. With the bad visibility? He was confident he could take out two of them, but he couldn't let any of them shoot him. One shot would kill him.

He saw motion in the distance, a beam of light, away from where he knew the soldiers to be. Some of the soldiers Alex had missed? No, their helmets would have plenty of sensors to see through the dust.

He could make out a woman wearing a patched-up brown jacket. She moved cautiously, scanning around her. In her other hand, she held a gun. Behind her were more beams of lights.

Mercs he could deal with easily.

"Buddy," he whispered, "we're going to have to run while people shoot at us. Can you do that?"

The boy's eyes were filled with terror, but he nodded. Tristan squeezed his shoulder, then stood. He indicated the direction the mercs were, and the boy nodded, but grabbed Tristan's leg and held it tight.

"Buddy, I can carry you if you prefer."

The boy shook his head and released Tristan's legs.

Tristan took off for the mercs, making sure to go no faster than the boy could handle while taking a circuitous path. One of the mercs' beams passed over them.

"There!"

Shots erupted where he and the boy had been.

"Don't shoot!" a woman yelled. "You idiots might hit the kid." Everyone froze.

Tristan stopped and fired three times. Three of the mercs dropped, a hole in each chest. One of the other mercs fired against orders and missed.

A shot came from the other direction, and the mercs' leader went down. Tristan fired at those people twice as he ran, and stopped behind a column. The brightness of the blast and the ease with which the leader went down told him the shooters had been holding Harkens. More shots, and he heard permacrete explode under the blast. One of them had boosted the power.

He saw a form on the floor and pulled it to him. A merc in dusty armor, but it had a hole in the back. Tristan turned him over. The merc wasn't human. Pale gray skin, with ridges where his eyes should have been. He didn't recognize the species.

What he did recognize was the four-gun harness the merc had on. He hastily put it on and looked the guns over. Tamerzan Destroyers—clumsy, too big for anything, but it was what he had. The merc also had grenades clipped to his belt. Irshkom's breaching grenades. He eyed the wall in the distance. If he could get close to it, he could make his own door.

He listened to the people moving about, taking the boy's hand in his and readying to run for the wall.

It exploded.

Tristan pulled the boy to him and turned his back to the explosion. He felt the burning on his back as superheated permacrete which hadn't had time to cool hit him. He ground his teeth and did his best to ignore the pain.

Daylight came through the hole in the wall, and he saw a large group of mercs pour inside the building.

"Buddy?" he asked the boy.

His eyes were still filled with terror, but again he nodded. Tristan gave the boy a smile, impressed with his tenacity. He'd been forced to work with plenty of mercs who had turned

into whimpering messes with half the fear the boy had in his eyes.

He ran toward the opening, staying low and keeping the boy by him. He lobbed a grenade in its direction and moved behind a column, holding the boy to him. He fired in the dark to keep the mercs and soldiers guessing.

The explosion was loud and bright. Breaching grenades weren't made for it, but they were still great for killing a large number of people. He kept the boy's face pressed in his side as body parts fell around them.

He ran for the opening, shooting anyone that still moved. When the gun stopped working, he dropped it with a curse for bad manufacturing and took out another. The fifth body he ran by had an intact gun. He picked it up, a Similik Disruptor. It wasn't a good fit for the holster on the harness, but it stayed in place.

Outside, his eyes quickly adjusted to the brightness. Ships were flying around, firing at buildings and each other. Everyone wanted to be the person to claim the bounty, or enact their revenge against the man behind all this. Tristan didn't care who wanted what, he was just happy for the added chaos.

A group of mercs moved along the side of the warehouse. The woman at the lead saw him, pointed, yelled something lost in the distance, and they all ran in his direction.

He took out the detonator and set it to the frequency of all the explosives in the warehouse. If he remembered, there was one close to where the group was. He hit the switch.

The wall ballooned outward, and then she and her mercs disappeared in the explosions. He listened as the other explosives detonated. Dust and debris burst out of the hole he and the boy had exited through, bringing the fighting in the area to a stop.

Tristan picked up the boy and ran. He needed to put as much distance as he could between him and the warehouse before the dust cloud settled.

He fired at anyone in his path, replacing the crappy guns he had to use with better ones as he picked them off bodies. He even found an Azeru Z-234. It was larger than his usual, but it fit well in his hand.

Anytime he was close to a body, he kept the boy's face against his chest to keep him from seeing the dead. Now was not the time to find out what the boy's limits were. Tristan needed the boy functional until he was certain all this was over.

He had to move slowly once outside the dust cloud, hiding from people who stopped fighting each other the moment they noticed him. He cut through buildings, hoping to avoid more fighting, but the mercs were everywhere.

Just how many of them had shown up for this?

Alex had said something about the level of the bounty bringing out even the amateurs, and Tristan hadn't taken him seriously. Now he had to admit there might have been validity to that. At least the lack of skill demonstrated around him played in his favor.

For the boy's benefit, he didn't make sure everyone he shot was dead. The boy had been willing to accept bad things had to be done to survive, but this might be pushing it.

As he approached the hangar where his ship was hidden, the majority of the ships in the air flew away, all in the same direction. In the distance, he made out an engine trail through the atmosphere. If the mark had survived the explosion, he hoped that was him, taking off to be hunted past the edge of the universe.

Let the man who'd tried to make Tristan a hunted man see how he enjoyed the role.

Many of the mercs still on the ground were too busy running for their ships to bother with Tristan. With the mass moving in one direction, they'd decided that was where they needed to be. This meant that by the time Tristan was ready to leave, there might not be anyone left to get in his way.

Glancing in the hangar, he was surprised at the number of bodies on the floor between him and the ship. A cluster of them were still fighting by the ship. His ship looked in good shape; he could only see a few new burn marks.

Staying against the wall, he guided the boy around the hangar. He kept his gun pointed at the cluster of fighters. If one of them noticed him, they might all decide that whatever this vendetta was, it was less important than getting him.

A woman fell, and Tristan saw Alex, before the gap was closed by another fighter. He'd had a knife in each hand, was covered in cuts, but he was still holding off the fighters. Nine of them.

Tristan stopped, planning on evening the odds, but another man fell, and he caught sight of the gleeful expression Alex had. Tristan lowered his gun. He didn't know what this was, but if Alex was enjoying himself so much, he could take the time to deal with the boy first.

He went around the hangar, and to the ramp once the ship blocked him from the fighters. From the ramp itself he could see Alex, who was down to six opponents.

"Buddy," he told the boy, "I need you to go to your room, lock the door, and don't open it for anyone, okay? When it's safe, me or Alex will open it."

"Is he going to be okay?"

Tristan watched as Alex took down a woman. "I think he will be." He gave the boy a light push. "Go in, lock the door."

Tristan turned and watched Alex, wondering where that level of skill came from. He looked around, and everyone had died of a knife wound. Most still had the knife that had killed them embedded in them.

He'd fought with the human, and while he'd shown himself to be an excellent fighter, he'd never demonstrated anything that would let him take on all these opponents. Anger surged at the thought Alex had kept something from him.

He walked toward the fight as a man fell to the ground, blood pouring from his cut throat. One of the fighters decided he'd had enough and ran, only to end up with a knife in his back. Alex hadn't even looked where he'd thrown the knife. He'd been busy fighting the last two opponents, a man and a woman. And now only the woman was left, and she fell, clutching her throat.

"I'm impressed." Tristan took a step toward Alex. "But I'm also—"

He backed off as Alex's knife almost sliced his throat open. Alex moved with him, slicing and stabbing. Tristan dodged the attacks.

"Alex, stop this now."

The human kept attacking. Tristan searched Alex's face for a clue to explain why he'd chosen now to do this, but he still had that same gleeful expression as the rest of the fight. It was almost maniacal.

With a growl, Tristan unsheathed his claws and swiped at Alex. He felt pain up his arm as Alex moved faster than he'd expected, avoiding the strike and cutting him. Tristan slashed with both hands, but Alex stepped around them as if Tristan was taking his time. Only a few strikes connected, and Alex didn't notice them.

Tristan collected cuts on his chest and arms in his attempt to get Alex to stop. "Enough! Stop this, Alex."

When Alex didn't listen, Tristan decided he was putting an end to this, permanently. No one attacked him like this and lived. He caught the next attack with his arm, letting the blade sink into his muscle before wrenching it out of Alex's hand.

He aimed his counter strike at Alex's throat, but at the last moment he closed his hand in a fist, and pulled enough strength to avoid crushing the windpipe.

Alex stumbled back, fell, and gasped for breath, but he kept moving, reaching for the closest knife he could find, one in a woman's throat. Tristan slammed his foot on the hand before it reached the knife and felt bones break under it.

The pain was finally enough for Alex and he screamed.

When he looked up at him, the mania was gone from his eyes, replaced by abject terror. Tristan raised his foot and Alex scooted away, holding his hand to his chest.

"I'm sorry! I didn't mean— I was— I can't—"

"What is this?" Tristan pulled the knife out of his arm.

"I can— I can't—" Alex back himself against one of the landing legs of the ship. He kept trying to form words, but the terror had stolen his voice.

Tristan reached down for him, and Alex shrieked in terror. Tristan wanted to slam him against the hull for this. For going from a killing machine to this whimpering mess, but he forced himself down. He wouldn't understand what happened here with an unconscious, or dead, Alex.

He squeezed the breath out of Alex until the lack of it forced him to settle down. He loosened his grip and turned. He swept the massacre with a hand. "How? I've pushed you. I know what you're capable of. You should have died here. How did you fight them off? What

else are you keeping from me?"

The fear in Alex's eyes turned to anger. He kicked Tristan in the stomach, catching him in one of the deeper cuts. Tristan dropped him, and had to fight not to double over in pain.

Alex stayed crouched, rubbing his neck. "You think I want this? I did everything I could to keep this from happening."

Tristan straightened. He wasn't going to show weakness in front of a human. "I saw you fight. I saw your face. You loved it."

"No!" Alex was on his feet, shaking. "I hate it. Don't you get it? I am not like you. I don't enjoy killing!"

Tristan smiled. "You think I enjoy killing?"

"I've seen your files," Alex growled. "I've seen the massacres you've committed. Only someone who loves killing does that."

Tristan looked around at all the dead bodies. "Everyone I killed was a necessary death." His tone was even. He didn't care if Alex understood, but at the very least he would disabuse him of this misconception.

"Blowing up a station full of people? Families and kids? That was necessary? How the fuck is that necessary?"

"To send a message to someone who tried to have me killed, and destroyed the town I lived in."

"You didn't kill him?"

"I wanted him to suffer." He couldn't keep the hate from his voice. He'd spent a decade establishing his identity there, and Justin had sent mercenaries to lay waste to the place.

Alex stared at him. He could see his mind working, trying to fit all the pieces in a form that reinforced the image of Tristan as a monster he'd build and hung his rightfulness on.

"You're right," Tristan said, calm again. "We are nothing alike. I kill to ensure my survival. It's needed, but I never take pleasure in it." He indicated the bodies. "You revel in the act of killing."

Alex shook, the anger in his eyes turning into rage. Tristan prepared himself for the attack, but instead, Alex's eyes rolled back and he crumbled to the ground.

Tristan watched him, trying to understand what had happened. Was this a trick? He knew Alex could be cunning, but this? He approached cautiously, but the human remained still. He checked him—Alex was unconscious. His wounds had finally taken their tolls.

Tristan lay down next to him, and with no one to observe him, he curled up and groaned in pain. It had been a long time since a human had hurt him this badly. He chuckled at the absurdity of it. Alex had hurt him worse than the Butcher of Kraven Claw.

He looked at the human's face. "I really should leave you here to die, Alex."