

Alex watched the fighter ship vanished in the distance, pissed.

He understood Tristan's reason, the practical ones, for leaving him behind. The fighter didn't have space for a second person. He could tell that just by watching Tristan sit in it. And Alex couldn't jump in one of the others and follow. His expertise in flying ships ended at telling the computer where he wanted to go. He wasn't even sure he'd know how to get one of the other antique to turn on.

He still hated being left behind.

Reminding himself splitting up happened on missions all the time didn't help. Telling himself Tristan would be back also didn't help. That was only true if he survived to return, and while Alex knew Tristan couldn't be beaten, this was the second miscalculation his Samalian had done which had affected the job. He hadn't known about the hangar for the antique ships, or that there would be books.

Or that it would be impossible for Tristan to destroy those books.

Alex was tempted to go back and empty his blaster in as many of them as he could just for that.

And even the truth behind the reason for most of the mistakes didn't help.

They'd rush the job.

Fuck, this wasn't even a job. It was Alex's need to kill someone, and Hart had been the most convenient target, if not the closest one. Without Will's mercenaries having information for him once they left the sanctuary, Tristan would probably have found them a proper job, researched it properly, and then let Alex loose on the targets.

Instead, it had been one discovery after the other on arrival without taking the time to study their consequences.

He walked out of the hangar and threw the first item he could pick up against the wall. The long vase shattered, sending shards in all directions.

Alex didn't feel any better, but he realized what he did was futile. He put the other vase back on its display and walked through the others. They all had the same elongated look to them that probably meant something. Paintings hung on the walls or in the air over another display.

It was impossible not to see something that had to be artistically valuable, no matter where he looked.

If Alex cared for any of them, it would make waiting for Tristan's return easier.

When had he lost his appreciation for beauty?

No. When had his definition of beauty changed to mean something deadly? Had it been at Tristan's hands, or before that?

He wanted to scream. He should. It wasn't like there would be any witness to this

loss of control. But he'd know. And keeping control was what this entire endeavor was about.

So all he had to do was not destroy anything while he waited and he'd demonstrate some control over his impulses, right?

He wanted to go home.

The absurdity of the thought made him laugh.

How many times had Tristan asked to go home while Alex forced him to go through building that wall? How often had Jacoby said they might as well, and look for some other solution? One that fit the retired merc's mind set?

And now it was Alex's turn to want to abandon this hardship and go home.

He took a breath, then another.

He was better than that.

Tristan had made him strong enough to endure much more.

He had spent years patiently looking for Tristan in the hopes of rescuing a figment of his imagination. Then years enduring how he was treated because he'd rather be with the monster he had grown to love than alone.

He could be patient some more, now that he had nearly everything he'd ever wanted, and he was the problem. The issue that needed resolved to keep him from destroying the life he wanted.

Patience would be easier to have if he had something to do. Unfortunately, to make sure no one could gain control of the room, there were not computer to coerce. They were either shielded beyond more measures than Alex knew about, or, and considering Hart's love of old things, there probably weren't any within the panic room.

Regardless of why, it meant all Alex had to keep him occupied were his thoughts, and those weren't things he felt would be conducive to—

The 'click' was loud enough it made it through Alex's musing, and he had his pistol in hand, a knife in the other, searching for where it had come from. The following sound was the his of a pneumatic system being forced, and he followed it back to where he and Tristan had entered.

He made out grunting now, and when he saw the door, cracked open, there were shoulders in the opening and hands, pushing them further apart.

Something else they'd missed in rushing here. Either Tristan breaking in had compromised the lock further, or, in opening the hangar, Hart had lessened the overall security of the panic room.

He aimed and a shoulder. His pistol was powerful enough it should make it through the jacket. It didn't look overly armored. It would cause the others to back away, and even if the door didn't close, there wasn't enough space for them to enter. He'd shoot any who tried until they gave up. They wouldn't use explosives, since their job was to protect Hart and his things.

It would be easy to hold them out.

It would be boring.

He shook his head and raised the pistol again. That didn't matter. What was important was ensuring he was secure. That had been Tristan's implied order in saying this room would be safe for him to wait in. Shooting them when they couldn't defend themselves was

the practical thing to do.

And it was what Alex would do.

“One of them there!”

The blaster shot caught Alex in the shoulder, and he jumped over a display case for cover. He looked over the damage to his armored jacket while chiding himself. He’d spent too long thinking about when he should be doing. He should just have done it.

The polyweave fabric had been burned away and the armoring under it was partially vaporized at the impact point, but the energy had been quickly dissipated.

Or had that been what he’d intended the entire time? Distract himself until the situation happened despite of what he knew he should have done?

“Be careful of the displays,” a woman ordered. “Mister Hart is going to have your entrails if he finds out one of you damaged his collection.”

Alex wondered if that was a figure of speech, or if Hart really punished people by eating their insides?

He stood and fired three shots, then lowered himself.

One body dropped, another’s breathing was labored.

He checked the power pack’s charge. At this power level, he had a dozen shots. He checked his belt. And two extra packs. While technically this model recharged itself, it wasn’t in a time frame that helped in the middle of a fight.

And he didn’t know how many opponents he was dealing with. The tower was big, so as many as he and Tristan had killed, there might be a lot more on their way.

He stood and dropped back down as shots erupted. He looked around the case and hurried to the next one when the view from the entrance was blocked. He listened in on the conversation to ensure no one was heading to his new firing spot, then stood and shot three more times.

He saw two drop before the others returned fire.

“Spread out,” the woman ordered. “Stay low. He can’t shoot you if—”

Alex stood and shot her three times before dropping. He preferred the chaotic environment of a lot of people without clear instructions.

It was easier to kill in those conditions.

And he needed to kill them if he was going to survive. A glance over the case showed everyone was down. A head popped up and vanished immediately on noticing him. He move closer by two cases and found himself face to face with a guard.

He batted the blaster aside, then stabbed, but the man caught his wrist. Alex punched him, then had a knee on the fallen man’s chest, knife up and—

He hesitated.

Did he have to kill, or did he want to kill?

There were other methods of ending fights. Killing didn’t have to be the—

The shot missed his head, and Alex rolled behind a case, blindly throwing the knife at the shooter. Then he leaned over and fired three times. The shooter fell back, half her face gone. The man he’d been over had used the opportunity to find his own cover.

Alex cursed himself. The middle of a fight wasn’t the time to question his methods.

Killing his opponents meant they never came back to make his life difficult. It was one of Tristan’s first lesson and one that had remained true to this day.

Motion and he fired. Only two shots, then the pack charge light blinked red. He changed it. One left. Two dozen shots, then all he had were his knives. Hart hadn't skimmed on equipping his security forces. The guns were bio-locked, and Alex didn't have the knowhow to bypass that.

He holstered it. It was best to keep it for situation where it was the only effective weapon. He peered around his cover, knife in each hand, then hurried for the guard who was crossing further down.

And killing with knives was so much more satisfying.

Across her throat before more than a gurgle escaped, then in her hand to keep her from shooting him during her death throw. He looked around another case, then pulled back just before the other guard fired. Her shot caused another to peek around his cover, and Alex threw his knife. That man pulled back fast enough to avoid it, and Alex took the one from the woman he'd killed before jumping on top of the case, and across, to drop on the person hiding there, both knives in her back. A jerk up ensured she was dead, and he added the two knives she had to his harness.

That was how it needed to be. No questioning why, or if there were alternatives. Only killing, so he'd survive.

He ran past cases, staying low, blaster shots missed him and books exploded. Alex was annoyed at himself for how satisfying that felt. A guard stepped crouched before him, then froze in surprise and Alex barreled into her, forearm against her throat, then pressing as she hit the other case.

She looked at him, eyes wide with fear, and Alex hesitated. She was clearly in over her head. She'd probably thought this would be an easy job. Hart was just paranoid and—

Pain lanced in his side and with a curse, Alex brought his knife down, opening her from throat to hip.

He had to fucking stop.

He kept her knife in place as he leaned against the other case. He took a sealant patch out and applied it as soon as he pulled the knife out. At least it had been polycarbon, so the where it had entered him was the only damage he suffered. The Heals he'd taken after they crashed into the tower would still be effective, so the damage would be dealt with.

So long as he kept his stupidity from killing him. Tristan would be pissed if he died because he kept hesitating.

He took a breath, winces as it pulled on the injury, and made up his mind. He was going to kill everyone in the panic room, and he was going to fucking enjoy it.