

Chapter 28

She couldn't have tracked him here; Alex would have known if she'd even gotten close to any of his IDs. After the last time, he scanned himself after every fight; he had programs hovering around his IDs just in case she somehow sniffed him out.

Her face gave him pause. Something had happened to her since the last time he'd seen her, but the body armor, the body language, it was her. He knew it.

Tristan was going to kill him for this. Three people Alex had left alive were here, working together. There was no way Tristan was going to forgive him for that.

He glanced at Tristan, who was attaching explosives to the fabricator. Maybe he hadn't seen her? He couldn't hope Tristan didn't know what she looked like. After he'd told him about her, Tristan had researched her thoroughly.

Motion at the edge of his vision. He fired as he turned. The person fell, and someone else came around the side of the fabricator and he shot her too. He turned and fired at the man on the other side. He missed, having to avoid shooting Tristan by accident, but still sent them back.

"How big of an explosion?" Alex fired left and right, more trying to keep everyone back than trying to kill them.

Tristan stood and covered the right. "Big enough you don't want to stay here when I run."

"Tell me when." Alex fired at the next person to come from the left, leaving a hole in his chest.

"Now."

Alex spun and ran after Tristan, firing behind to keep anyone from shooting him in the back. Tristan put a shoulder against someone in heavy armor, lifting them off their feet, using them as a battering ram through the others.

Alex fired with one hand and cut anyone who got close with the other. They weren't making him work hard for their deaths; it felt like they were determined to commit suicide the way they were all trying to reach him.

"Down."

Tristan's voice had been soft, but the command sent Alex to a crouch. He'd expected shots over his head as the crowd tried to reach him. Instead the explosion sent people flying into him, and he was buried under them.

He shouldered them off him, stabbing anyone still moving, but that made those out of his reach notice and come at him. They died too, but a few managed to cut him.

He grabbed the gun at someone's belt and fired to force the others back. He saw Katherine, far enough the explosion hadn't bothered her. She was screaming in her comm. Definitely not happy right now.

Alex smiled. He could take her misery away. He aimed at her, but was tackled before he fired. The gun

and knife flew out of his hand. He kicked the person off and got to his feet.

Flint was already on his. "You are so dead." He grinned as he grabbed a knife from his belt and threw it at Alex's feet.

Alex looked around. A circle had formed around the two of them. Beyond, Tristan was fighting armored people—Katherine's.

"Pick it up!" Flint's face was livid.

Alex took it. It was well-balanced, no electronics he could see, and it was too light. Mono-edge if he was lucky. Just a plain knife if Flint wanted the advantage.

Alex flung it with all his strength at the back of a man in armor trying to sneak up on Tristan.

He looked at Flint as the man fell, the knife in his spine. "You seriously want to fight me with a knife?" Flint was missing half his hair, his face covered in blood and soot. The outer layer of his clothing had burned off, revealing the plating. "Don't you know how deadly I am with one of them? I'll have you cut to ribbons before you can even move."

"I don't care if I die anymore. Can you say the same?"

Alex laughed. "Really? I've accepted I'm dead for so long I don't even think about it anymore. I enjoy the time I have left instead. You should do the same."

"What's there to enjoy?" Flint screamed Alex. "You and that monster of yours blew up Liz!"

"I see." Alex took a vibro-knife from his harness. "I'd offer condolences, but this is about ending your pain, not lessening it."

Alex covered the distance between them in three steps and slashed, but didn't try to connect. He wanted to judge Flint's skill before he committed himself to the fight. He also needed time to figure out how to deal with the mob of people around him. The instant he killed Flint, they would fall on him. And there was Katherine to keep in mind.

He smiled. He did love a hopeless situation.

Flint threw himself at Alex, slashing left and right. Flint was pouring everything he had in this, fully intent on killing him. Alex parried and dodged. Flint was heading for a short-lived disappointment. In this short attack he'd demonstrated he had neither the skill nor the will to win.

That meant Alex could take control of the fight and guide where it went.

He fought back only hard enough to keep Flint on his toes, let him think he had a chance. He tried to push their fighting past the circle, or force them to move the circle where he wanted, but while he could control what Flint would do, it seemed he couldn't use this to control the crowd. He sighed. He'd hoped to give Flint a good death. Now he was going to have to humiliate him. He shut off the knife.

When Flint came at him again, he grabbed his arm, pulled him close, turned, and pressed his knife to the man's throat. And now to find out if he'd interpreted the fact no one in the crowd had shot him yet correctly.

He turned to show everyone the situation their leader was in. "Trust me when I say that if you shoot me, I'll cut his throat before I die."

"What are you waiting for? Kill him!" Flint's voice was raw.

"It isn't going to happen, Flint. They know that if I cut your throat, you're not surviving that. Unless you brought a fully staffed hospital with you, you're a goner."

"You think I'm afraid to die?"

"I know you're not. But what you're afraid of, or not, doesn't matter. *They're* afraid you'll die. See Flint, you sort of screwed up. You didn't build a criminal empire, you built a fucking family. You and your girlfriend made people care about you. You gave them a place to belong, a place to be safe. You should see the things they say about the Silver Hands on the net. Oh, they aren't loud, they're too smart for that, but have you wondered why so many people joined your empire? Everyone's been recruiting for you."

Alex turned slowly, making sure none of them forgot the situation. "Now they're forced to watch the last of their leaders humiliated. I'm sure they'll avenge you if you die. I'm good, and I'm going to have a fun time killing as many of them as I can, but you'll be avenged. That's if you die. They don't want you to. They're afraid of what's going to happen to them if you die."

Alex addressed the crowd. "That gives me control. You don't want me to kill him, so you have to do what I want. And what I want is for you to make a fucking way between me and my partner." He could still hear the fighting going on.

"He's going to kill me the moment you let him through!"

Alex growled low in Flint's ear. "Trust me, I really should kill you. My partner is going to make me

regret not doing it, but that's fine, because I'm going to be with him. I'm going to let you in on something that's going to put this in perspective. I'm telling you because even if you survive this debacle of yours, you won't be able to use the information."

Alex tried to see the fight, but he'd have to let go of Flint, so he reassured himself that any screams coming from that side meant Tristan was alive.

"You should be honored. You're the first one to hear me say this. I haven't even admitted it to myself until now, but that was just stubbornness on my part. My actions have made what I feel so fucking clear. I love him. Enough that I've sacrificed everything for him. If letting you go to be with him again means I have to take a beating, that's fine by me. But you want to know what the kicker is? He doesn't give a fuck about me. See? You can't use how I feel about him against him, because it's one-sided. You can try to use him to get to me, I guess, but how many of Katherine's men has he killed already? How do you compare to them?"

He looked at the crowd. "You need to make your choice now. Flint wants you to kill me. I want you to get out of my way. He lives, or he dies. Your choice."

There was a ripple through the crowd—anger, fear, resignation. They parted. Alex walked slowly between them, turning Flint in the direction of anyone who took a step toward him. Tristan was down to four opponents. Dead bodies spread around him. Katherine was nowhere to be seen—unconscious? Dead? He couldn't worry about her.

One of his opponents went down, joining the sea of Flint's people and the few armored men on the floor. How many people had Flint decided to sacrifice for this? Alex turned and walked backward to make sure the crowd knew he was still in charge.

Things fell silent behind him and Alex's heart froze. He spun and looked at Tristan, standing, fur matted with blood and his face impassive. Alex's heart start beating again.

"Are you ready for another fight?" he asked as once he was close to Tristan. "Because the moment I slice his throat open, they're falling on us." He turned as Flint began fighting him. "I thought you wanted to die. I'm going to give you that, just—" He felt Tristan against his back. Heard him growl, his head next to him. It wasn't for him, he knew it, but his growl resonated deep inside him.

The crowd took a step back.

Alex readied himself. He tensed, and two canisters flew over them, bounced on the floor, and came to a stop at the crowd's feet.

Tristan grabbed Alex and pulled him down. He felt the blade bite into Flint's flesh, but he lost his grip. He made himself as small as he could and felt Tristan press around him. Alex covered his ears, closed his eyes, and felt Tristan's hands over them.

Even with that, the flash of light registered. The concussive force sent them skidding across the floor. When they stopped moving, Alex got to his feet, pulling out knives. Tristan was on all-fours, blinking.

"Are those Baran's men?" Alex thought he'd yelled, but he barely heard his voice. The men in gray armor were around what was left of the fabricator, clearly unhappy. One of them had the drug dealer by the collar. Alex couldn't hear what looked like a loud argument. The man in the armor was shaking the other who pointed at something—no, someone.

One of the mercs grabbed her off the floor and threw her over his shoulder.

"They've got the biochemist!"

"I can't see!" Tristan growled. He looked around, eyes tearing up, blinking. "Where are they?"

Alex grabbed his arm and pulled him up. "On the left! They're leaving through that hole!" He pulled Tristan along as he tried to run. "If Baran gets her, he can rebuild the virus! She has the formula in her implant!"

As soon as they were outside, Tristan fired at the group. His shots went wide, but the mercs still scattered.

"Protect the package." Alex barely heard that, but by the body language, the man had to be yelling.

"You're not getting her," Tristan growled.

"What's your interest in her?" the man in gray armor asked. It sounded fainter, but he didn't seem to be screaming. Hopefully his hearing was coming back.

Tristan shot in the man's direction but wasn't even close.

"Hand me the gun, I can see."

Alex took it and aimed just as he felt something press against his back. There was a flash of pain, then he was in the air. He was unconscious before he hit the ground.

