

Chapter 41

Alex dropped the guns; he wanted this fight to be fun. If he was going to finally get rid of her, he was going to do it in his preferred way. He pulled two vibro-blades and smiled.

Tristan had pushed him, not hard, but enough to indicate he needed them apart. It had worked out well because he'd caught sight of Katherine between the bodies. Tristan hadn't brought her up since Alex had told him she was here, and he figured that removing her before the Samalian realized it could earn him a reprieve.

Now he ran at her, avoiding her shots as well as that of the people around her. Either they had horrible aim, or he moved too fast for them to track. That was what it felt like when he let go of everything and gave himself over to his knives—like the world moved slower. He threw a knife at the large woman on Katherine's left. He had another out as a gray-armored merc ran at him, and Alex cut him up and let him fall, leaving the knife in the merc and grabbing the one at his hip in the process.

It was an illusion; it had to be. Time was immutable, but they still missed him as he zigged and zagged. He felt the mono-edge bite into another gray-armor, and blood sprayed across his face. He threw his other knife at the man on Katherine's right. Like the woman, he clutched at the pommel, staggering back.

In these times, he felt free. He didn't worry about anything around him. About what Tristan would do to him. All that mattered were his knives and the people they would kill together. Men fell around him and ceased to matter the instant he let go of that knife.

The laughter started full. The joy at letting everything go completely. He wasn't Alex anymore; he was the knives. The weapon Tristan had forged. He welcomed the laughter, an old friend over for a visit after years apart.

He hadn't kept it at bay; it simply hadn't been needed, honed as sharply as he had been, or Tristan hadn't let it come, ending their training at the moment when it would appear.

Men dropped, and he added knives to his belt, his pockets, as he slowly moved toward his target. He wished he'd found his harness so he could clip more to that. Someone else's harness would have done, but the only harness he'd come across was a gun harness. How was it that no one understood just how amazing, how powerful knives were?

She ran at him, finally tired of waiting for him to reach her. He let her come, continuing to kill anyone coming close to him. He spun, stabbed a man in the chest, the vibro-blade sinking easily through his armor. He let go, grabbed the man's knife, and spun back to face her.

She was a lot closer. He slashed at her. His knife cut through the fabric of her sleeve, then slid against metal. He extended his other arm and let the man's momentum slam it in his chest. Right, he remembered her having a metal arm now. And of course the knife he'd be holding would be neither mono nor vibro-edge.

She swung at him, fist in a black glove. He turned, took the knife off her belt, and threw it at the man

that had run after her. If she wasn't going to use it against him, he'd put it to good use in that man's face.

She yelled something. It was loud, full of anger, but the words were meaningless to him. He dodged her other swing, took a knife off his belt, and planted it in the gut of the man in gray armor that had been trying to sneak up on him. He took the man's knife as he turned both of them so the dying man took the fist in the back of his head, speeding up his demise.

He pushed the body at her, used the distraction to rearm himself. There was no one close to him, except her. He was in the middle of a large circle, facing one opponent.

She smiled at him, but not in a pleased way. Her mangled face made that expression impossible. It was a vicious smile that promised pain. She flexed her metal arm, making a fist. Did he have a vibro-knife anywhere on him? He wondered for an instant, then the concern fled. He had knives in his hands. Nothing else mattered.

She had a knife in her other hand, and he could see the near-imperceptible vibration of the edge. She slashed at him. He stepped out of the way; she moved so slowly. A flash of motion at the corner of his eyes. He turned, planted the knife in the throat of the brave man who came to her rescue. He took a knife out of his belt, felt the weight, the switch, then turned it on and watched the edge glow. He slashed as she tried to make use of the distraction.

She spoke—no, screamed; at least her mouth moved. Her face was contorted—well, the half that could move—but none of the sounds were the ones he wanted to hear, so he didn't hear them. She slashed, stalled, moved her mouth. He laughed and tried to kill her.

She was slow and didn't know how to wield a knife, but she knew how to use her metal arm to protect herself—taking the glowing blade and deflecting it before it could do more than scar the surface.

More motion out the corner of his eye, but it wasn't gray armor—it was orange and green. Her mouth moved, and the man stopped. She wouldn't let him kill that man.

Fine, that meant he could focus all his attention on her.

He moved around her, slowly, steadily. When she came at him, he dodged her clumsy attempts and pressed her, forcing her back. Eventually she backed before he began pressing, her eyes going from anger to speculation, then understanding.

He saw it in how she squared her shoulders, set her foot down as she backed up again. He saw how she thought she'd taken his measure, finally understood what she was up against. She believed she knew how to best him with that knowledge.

He welcomed the attempt; he welcomed any and all challenges, but she was wrong in her assessment, whatever it was. They always were. There was only one person in the universe who knew him, really knew him. And he was the only one allowed to kill him.

* * *