

Chapter 02

The man laughed before taking a sip from his glass—his third glass, while Alex was on his second. The stuff was strong, and while Alex had taken a detox injection on landing, there was a limit to how much it could handle. Not to mention that the drink tasted horrible.

The man put his glass on the desk and shook his head. “Come on, tell me again how you captured Tristan, and make it the truth this time.”

Alex sighed, as if finally resigning himself, and started on yet another version of the story he’d told the first time. This was the fifth rendition. He had six others, the last one being the “true one”.

“Hold up,” the man interrupted. “I thought you only had two guys on your team.”

Alex shrugged. That had been the previous version, where he’d finally admitted he hadn’t worked alone. “You really think two mercs could take him down? There were eight of us. I’m the only one who made it out in one piece.”

Alex smiled mischievously and sipped his glass. It took effort not to react to the taste. Ultimately, if this went on long enough that he had to tell his last story, they’d find out he’d actually stolen the prize from another team of mercs.

“Go on. So the eight of you finally tracked him down to the seedier part of Olum City?”

“We surrounded the building; our contact was certain where he was. The plan was to sneak in and catch him unaware, but he somehow knew we were coming and laid down a barrage of—”

“I knew it!”

Alex turned to look at the woman, as everyone else did. She held up Tristan’s belt.

“What’s got you so excited now, Viv?” the man on the other side of the desk asked.

“This.” She showed them the belt’s clasp, which she’d managed to open, revealing a compartment holding small tools. “I’m sure there’s more, but I haven’t figured out how to get to it.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t take his pants off too,” the burly man next to her said. Alex took his first opportunity to study him, as well as the rest of them. He was lean, his skin almost pure white, but with hints of a design visible through the gray shirt he wore. He also wore more guns than even Tristan was in the habit of doing—one under each arm, one at each hip, two on a harness on his chest, the butt of something large poking over his shoulder. He had a small holster at his left ankle and, almost as an afterthought, a knife strapped to his right boot.

“What am I going to do with his pants? That’s not what I’m interested in.” Viv was toned, in a brown bodysuit with an armored jacket over it. Her gigantic rifle was leaning against the wall next to her while she worked on the belt.

“Why don’t you join him down below,” the black man said, “if you’re so hot for him?” There was disdain in Charles’s voice, and Alex couldn’t tell if it was because Viv was interested in an alien, or not

interested in him. He had loose black pants, a ripped shirt, and a gun on each hip. They looked familiar, but he couldn't place them. Tristan had forced him to memorize makes and models, but none of that stuck. All Alex needed to know was which end to point at someone to kill them.

"You know, Charlie," the other woman said, leaning on the opposite side of Viv. "You should stop pining after what you can't have and accept what's offered to you." She had a gun at her hip and one under her arm, though in spite of the invitation she'd made, she looked bored. Alex thought he heard the sound of metal against metal when she moved her arms behind her. He had to fight the urge to activate his implant and listen for what part of her was computerized. An arm maybe, or a leg, since that had moved as she put her arms behind her.

The man next to her looked bulky, but it was all clothing. He was actually lean, almost thin, and instead of guns, he wore stun-sticks. When he caught Alex looking at him, he smiled menacingly.

Try harder, Alex thought. You spend five years under Tristan's tutelage, and you tell me how scary you think you look. He still looked away, after all; the young man he was shouldn't have been traumatized and broken in more ways than anyone sane could count.

The next man had medium-brown skin, long dirty hair, and bobbed his head to some music Alex didn't hear. Maybe he had a player on him? Or implant? Or it was just in his head. He cradled a rifle and had a gun at his hip.

And then there was the man seated opposite him. Old and worn. He acted relaxed, but there was an air of quiet menace to him. Alex realized that whatever these people had been when they were hired, they were nothing more than a gang now, and this man had acquired his position because he'd beaten the others into submission.

"Suitably impressed?" the man asked.

Alex had hoped to be discreet in his observation, but it hadn't been the case. Still, he had a mask to fall back on. He smiled nervously. "They look dangerous."

The man laughed.

Alex forced the smile to remain, even if it made his face feel like it was about to crack. The rejuvenation treatment he'd undergone to make his face look younger hadn't been the best. He couldn't wait for this to be over so he could have it reversed.

"Dangerous," the man said with a chuckle. "Kid, you probably don't even know what the word means." For a moment, the man lost all his jovialness as he studied Alex.

Alex fought the urge to move his hand off the desk, to get them close to his hidden knives. This hadn't blown up in his face yet, he told himself.

And the man was smiling again. "So, let's get back to your story." He added two fingers of alcohol to their glass.

"It isn't a story," Alex replied, making himself sound hurt. "It's what actually happened."

"Sure it is." He took a sip. "Let me tell you something, kid. If you ever decide to leave the life, become a storyteller. You have the talent for it."

Alex sighed and forced some of the alcohol down. "Look, what does it matter how I caught him? I'm the one who brought him here, so I'm the one who gets to collect the bounty, right? I just want my money so I can pay off what I owe."

"Right, the bounty. See, there's a problem with that." The man tapped the desk. When nothing happened, he pounded on it twice and the display appeared. He typed.

Alex couldn't help himself. He gave the mental signal and activated the implant. He heard computers—the one in the cybernetic limb of the woman, the ones in the black man's chest, the multiple datapads around the room—more than there were people—and the complex's computer.

Alex felt himself relax with the computerized background noise. Now that he had the implant, he'd keep it on all the time if not for the danger that the implant might send what he said to the computers and reveal what he could do. Even now he itched to talk. To have a conversation with the computer, convince it to do what he wanted.

But that wouldn't happen. The computer talked, but not in a language Alex understood. It was so old his implant couldn't make sense of what it said. If he wanted to have a conversation with it, he'd have to look at the code and create a translation matrix. He hadn't had to do that since the courses in school. Just like the language people spoke, computer language was standardized by SpaceGov, and it made sure it didn't change.

"There we go," the man said, reminding Alex there were people around him. Reluctantly he shut down the implant. The man tapped a list and highlighted an entry. "Tristan is currently held on the Sayatoga Prison ship. Been there for a few decades, according to this."

Alex rolled his eyes. "Come on, everyone knows those things aren't accurate. Prisoners are always escaping, and no prison wants to admit to that." He took out his datapad and brought up a bounty, along with the pictures of Tristan that had been released at the same time. "Twelve years ago, Tristan was wanted for kidnapping. It was all over the net. Was he in that prison when that happened?"

"There's no name on that bounty, kid. Don't try to pull one on me, okay? I'm too damn old for games."

"It isn't a game. Look at the pictures, that's who I brought you. That's Tristan."

The man took a breath. "Kid, I'm going to give you the benefit of the doubt here and believe that you actually think that's Tristan you brought me. And I'm believing that in spite of that constantly changing story you're telling me, so don't push it, okay?"

Alex leaned back, acting mollified.

The man tapped the list, canceling the highlighted entry with the touch. "This isn't the public listing; this list only circulates among prison wardens. Even this bunch doesn't see it unless I bring it out. This list doesn't lie, because no prison wants to poach someone else's prisoner. If it had said that Tristan was loose, I'd have paid you good money and then contacted them. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"He was identified as the kidnapper," Alex said, sounding hopeful rather than confident.

"Mis-identified. Look, maybe you got yourself the kidnapper. I doubt it, but let's go with that; at least it gives us a crime to work with. What I can tell you, without a doubt, is that it isn't Tristan. And that Tristan wasn't the kidnapper. We got the confirmation he was still in prison not long after that ended. This is just some other one of his species that happen to look like him."

"Do a DNA scan?" Alex pleaded. "It's Tristan, I swear. It has to be him. You don't understand, I need the money."

"Kid, look around. Does anything here look like it can do that?" He sighed and crossed his arm. "Here's the thing. Checking his DNA should have been the second thing you did after capturing him, and I'm guessing you did do it. You found out it wasn't him, and you concocted this whole act to try to get more money out of me."

Alex looked around. "You think I'm trying to con you? With them around?"

The man's lips became a tight line. "You think I can't tell when someone's got his face redone? You really think this 'I'm a brand new bounty hunter, take pity on me' act is going to work?"

Alex slumped, not acting. If they didn't believe that, he didn't have a script to work off anymore. What was he supposed to do now? The plan was for him to wait while they were distracted by the moving lift. It wasn't like any of them were going to come out of this alive, so what did it matter if he started this now, rather than when he got the signal?

Alex straightened; this was a bust anyway. He might as well move this on to the next part. As he considered how he was going to take them on, he noticed the control panel light up. He didn't hear the lift, but that constituted it coming on. Tristan always did have good timing.

Just as the first sound of the lift moving came, Alex threw himself over the desk onto the man there. He had a polycarbon knife out from his sleeve and into the man's neck before the two of them hit the ground. He took the man's gun—a slim thing—as well as the knife at his belt. He clipped that to his own.

He grabbed the man by the collar and stood, using his body as a shield to take the shots coming at him. He shot Viv first. He told himself it was because her rifle was the most dangerous weapon here, but he knew that the real reason was the way she'd manhandled Tristan. No one got to touch him that way.

There was a lull in the firing as they realized all they were doing was putting holes in their dead boss. Alex dropped him against the lift so he'd protect the controls, and readied himself for the coming fight.

Five against one in a closed room. All he had was a gun and a few knives. Anyone in this situation would expect to die, but he wasn't anyone. He was Alex fucking Crimson; he survived Tristan on a daily basis. He was easily worth a dozen of them.

He ducked under the desk, put his shoulder against it, and stood, sending it flying at Charles. He fired at the white man, but only caught him in the shoulder. He ducked and weaved, firing where he'd last seen them standing. He felt burns in his back and arms, but the light armor in his clothes took the brunt of the blasts.

His gun stopped—out of power or just a piece of crap, Alex didn't bother trying to figure out. He dropped it and pulled out a knife, caught motion, and slashed. A foot caught him in the side and he flew across the room. He hit the wall and dropped as it was peppered with shots. Specks of super-heated metal and rock fell on him. He could smell his hair and flesh burning.

He threw himself at the closest person, a man, lots of guns, darker skin. He felt a graze against his shoulder, then he was close enough to bury his knife in the man's chest six times, leaving him gasping, then

slumping. Alex caught him and shoved him against the next person. Male, thick clothing, thin.

He saw her in his peripheral vision just before she kicked him, and he let himself drop. The foot went over him. He rolled and sliced the tendon of her other leg. She screamed as she fell.

He was back up. The thin man was freeing himself. Alex slammed his knife in the man's ear, the only unarmored spot. He left it there and grabbed the one at the man's belt. With a quick motion, the woman's throat was opened.

He turned and faced the white man and Charles. He grinned at them, and they looked at him in horror. The white man had his gun pointed at Alex, but his hand was shaking so badly he couldn't hit anything. Charles looked around the room, then at Alex, who was burned and bloody, but still standing and grinning. He turned and ran for the door. He slammed into it, a knife between his shoulder blade planted all the way to the handle.

Alex fixed his gaze on the white man. He walked to him, unafraid; the terror in the man's eyes told him he couldn't do anything. No one ever expected to confront someone determined to survive such a firefight. They'd trained to take on prisoners, murderers, any kind of criminal who'd want to escape this place.

What they hadn't planned on was death walking in and taking them out. The man tried to fire as Alex put a hand on the gun and pushed it down. Only then did the finger connect, and a series of blasts fired. Alex didn't react to them. He gently twisted the gun out of the man's hand and, without bothering to look, fired at Charles's head, putting him out of his misery.

He dropped the gun and took the knife off his belt, the one he'd taken from the man in charge. It had a good weight to it. Possible vibro or laser. He didn't bother checking.

"P-Please, I just work here," the man pleaded.

"No one left alive," Alex said. "Those are my orders."

"I'll leave, I'll run, no one will ever know." The man had lost control of himself. Alex could smell it.

"He'll know."

Kill or be killed. That was the lesson he'd learned over the years, and Tristan had made sure he knew that being killed was not acceptable, so today he was doing the killing.

Like he did every day.

He pulled the knife out of the man's chest, and the lifeless body fell to the floor.

Alex looked at the carnage he'd wrought, and now that the moment was done, he felt a hint of revulsion. It was old, more a memory than something concrete. Still, with it came the wish he'd been out of control, that he could blame this on having been pushed over the edge. But he'd been conscious of what he was doing the entire time. Each time he killed one of them, it had been a conscious decision—an easy one.

Tristan had seen to it.

Sparks attracted his attention. The man he'd put in front of the lift's control panel had fallen over and the panel was gone, leaving a hole with sparking wires.

He sighed. Tristan wasn't going to be happy about that.

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