

Alex stepped aside and stopped. Three men and a woman were standing in their way.

“What do we have here?” the man in the lead said. All four of them had a gun holstered at their hip. The man looked at Alex and dismissed him. “Some guy walking his pet furball.”

Alex glanced over his shoulder, and three more were taking position a dozen paces back. Two women and a man. He remembered seeing them looking in shop windows. Now that he thought about it, he remembered seeing them a lot. Just like they were following them.

Not paranoid after all.

“I wish you’d paid attention to the posting,” the man said. “We have a strict ‘no pets’ policy here. We’re going to have to confiscate it. Step aside.”

Alex glanced at Tristan. As usual, he was calm. Did anything ever unnerve him?

“You get this warning once.” Tristan’s ears pivoted back. “Get out of my way.”

Alex looked over his shoulder. The three there moved to the side, to see around him and Tristan; they were waiting for their cue. Beyond them people were gathering. Great, they were about to become the local entertainment.

“I don’t think so.” The man didn’t have the amused expression of someone about to have fun. His expression was calculating. “The payout on your head is just too bloody good.”

Tristan didn’t reply or do anything. Alex turned without waiting for instructions. Tristan could beat him, but he’d cover the rear. What payout did the man mean? It couldn’t be the bounty; that had been claimed close to two decades ago, and Tristan was still officially imprisoned.

Alex watched the lone man there take his gun out, and he had to keep himself from grabbing a knife and throwing it. If he started this fight when Tristan might think of a way to avoid it, he was definitely going to suffer for it.

The man raised it, and only then did Alex throw a knife. By the time it embedded itself in the man’s shoulder, Alex was halfway toward the women. He wanted to be close before they got over the surprise. Guns lost their effectiveness in close quarters; it was why Alex preferred knives. Reach and close combat capability.

He had one in his hand and swiped at both, forcing them off balance. The one on the left had managed to pull out her gun and tried to pummel him with it. He blocked and slashed her unprotected stomach.

The jacket offered some resistance, but he’d grabbed two vibro knives because he couldn’t know how well-armored they’d be; there was little those knives couldn’t cut through. He left a red line on her flesh. Not as deep as he’d hoped; none of her insides came spilling out.

He saw the motion from the side of his eye and ducked, putting distance between himself and the woman now wielding a knife with a shimmering edge. She had a vibro-blade too. Good for her. Alex smiled. Vibro versus vibro was a stalemate. What he should do was exchange one for a laser-edged blade. He had four on his person, but as he considered his options, he watched her swipe at him, and do so clumsily.

There was a class of mercs—nothing more than thugs, really—who thought that the bigger the gun, or the more advanced the knife, the less skill they needed with it.

She was one of those. Alex didn’t need to switch knives. All he probably had to do was stay out of her way long enough and she’d cut her own head off.

Sounds of motion—Tristan was fighting. Time was something he didn’t have. He maneuvered himself to get under her clumsy guard.

More motion, closer. He spun in time for something to stab him in the arm instead of the back. He slashed, bit through armor, and the man backed off. Alex cursed himself as he took a step toward the man. He’d forgotten about him, dismissed him. Stupid.

Before he could shove a knife in the man’s heart, the woman came at him. He dodged, spun, forced her back with a slash, looked for the man. He was scrambling away, getting up and through the crowd. She mistook the glance for distraction and ran at Alex, barely stopping herself in time so his knife cut her jacket rather than her.

He sidestepped, and over her shoulder Tristan was breaking the neck of one of his attackers. There was another man, unmoving at his feet.

She glanced at Alex’s bleeding shoulder and the arm hanging at his side. Alex was still clutching the knife, but not doing anything with it. He saw her reach the wrong conclusion, the one only an amateur would reach. The one that said two arms are better than one. Even if

his arm had been out of commission, it was a wrong one to reach.

She grinned and charged.

Thugs. Nothing more than thugs. He used his injured arm to deflect the strike and planted the other knife in her stomach. Her surprised expression was mixed with incomprehension. He let her fall down, widening the wound. Too much blood flowed for her attempt to hug the wound close to do any good.

The other woman growled and was careful in her approach. She had an arm over the cut, staunching the flow, and a knife in her other hand. She stepped back when Alex stepped forward. She moved the knife before her, flipped it in her hand, apparently equating being flashy with being skilled.

Alex barely stifled the sigh. Amateurs, the lot of them. Where had they received their training? Watching vids?

The edge of her blade didn't shimmer, and it lacked the ridges at the tip and guard where the laser would be contained. Alex put away one of his knives. Might as well conserve power; who knew what other idiots would cause problems while here. Just to see what she would do, he put away the other knife, leaving himself unarmed, hands opened and raised.

She didn't even take the time to consider why someone with eight visible knives would bother doing that. She ran at him in anger.

Alex waited until it was too late for her to stop, then pulled a knife from the harness as he lowered his arms. He blocked with one and stabbed her three times with the other before stepping away.

He'd stopped her, and she looked at him, trying to understand what had happened. She looked down. Blood flowed from the new wounds in her stomach, chest, and shoulder. Alex missed her heart, but that wound was bubbling.

She tried to roar, her face twisting in anger, but her step forward took her down to a knee. All emotions left her face before she tipped to the side and fell to the floor.

Alex looked at the crowd and it shied back. The man was gone, not just hiding among them waiting for a chance. The other woman was still alive, but too busy keeping herself from bleeding out to be a problem.

Tristan had three bodies at his feet, and held the fourth attacker by the arm, twisting hard enough Alex winced in sympathy. Beyond them, a man was taking aim with a rifle. Alex threw his knife.

He'd aimed for the stomach, because thugs kept forgetting that needed to be protected too, but his throw was high. The blade still buried itself to the hilt, doubling the man over. Someone in dirty rags grabbed the dropped rifle and ran off with it.

Tristan dropped his attacker and the man fell, limp.

Tristan looked the crowd over, and it backed up multiple steps. He looked at the dead woman, then the one still breathing. "Kill her."

Alex opened his mouth to protest. It was one thing to kill in the heat of the moment, defending himself. But he didn't kill in cold blood.

Tristan leveled his gaze on him, and Alex could feel his leg twitch under that cold, calculating gaze. Tristan had set the rules. He'd given Alex an out.

*You agreed to them, Alex*, he told himself, clamping down on the revulsion. He took out a knife, and it vibrated as his palm closed fully on the grip. He knelt next to her.

She looked at him, beyond terrified. She tried to move away, but her hand not busy slowing the blood loss was too slick with it to get purchase. Her legs were too weak to do anything. All he had to do was wait, and she'd die.

But that wasn't what Tristan had ordered.

He looked her in the eyes.

Back when he decided on knives over guns, someone asked him if he was planning on looking everyone he killed in the eyes. The question had been derisive, but he'd answered it as honestly as he could. Yes, he would. He was going to see the suffering he inflicted. He would never let his victims be anonymous to him.

He'd been naïve back then, thinking he could keep himself from becoming immured to the pain he'd inflict. Looking everyone in the eyes wasn't practical when you were fighting to stay alive, and after the first few hundred dead, you'd have to stop caring or you'd die with them.

But this wasn't a fight for his life, not anymore. This was cold, calculated. It wasn't the first time he'd done this, but it was the first time at someone else's order, when he wasn't angry, when he wasn't taking some form of revenge.

He knew he could do it. He also knew he could walk away, right now. Tristan might beat him, but he didn't think he'd kill him. He'd just leave him here for the scavengers to pick clean. Still, he would be able to tell himself he hadn't crossed a line. He'd kept himself from becoming a monster.

*You're already a monster, his father's voice said from far away. An abomination for fornicating with those things. Stop lying to yourself.*

Alex plunged the knife in her heart without breaking eye-contact. He watched the pain fade away, her eyes glazing over. Felt her body relax. She was gone.

He was already a monster before this. He'd made himself one to find Tristan. Why had he thought that once he found Tristan he would be able to leave this behind? The truth was that he didn't even want to leave it behind. If he set the monster aside, there might not be anyone left.

And a monster didn't show weakness. He set his face in a hard mask and stood.

Tristan watched him. If he had an opinion, he kept it to himself. He glanced at Alex's shoulder. "What happened?"

Alex looked at his injury. The wound was small, and through the armored part of his jacket, but the bleeding had stopped. "The man who was with these two caught me by surprise. He ran off in the crowd."

Tristan looked it over again and this time people began leaving. "Is the gunman dead?"

Gunman? Oh. Alex looked down the corridor. The man was gone. "No, I was more preoccupied with keeping him from firing than making sure he was dead."

"I know."

Alex didn't wince. He wouldn't wince. He was a monster, but if thinking of Tristan's—of their safety before murder was going to get him beaten, then fine. Tristan studied him before turning and striding for where the gunman had been.

"You're not...angry?" Alex asked, catching up to him.

Tristan stopped by the small pool of blood and looked in the direction of the drops. "No. I need one of them alive to find out why they attacked me." He followed the blood trail.

"What if I had killed him?"

"Then I would have questioned the woman."

Alex opened his mouth, then closed it. Of course he'd already noticed the missing man. Tristan noticed everything.