

Chapter 32

Alex didn't notice the corridor he was led through; all he could think about was the situation. What was the plan? There was a plan. There was always a plan. Why hadn't they taken them on? It would have hurt, but he was confident they would have decimated them.

Baran then? In the chaos of such a fight, there were a lot of risks to his life, and they did need to bring him back in one piece. That would be a reason not to start anything. Then the plan was to survive this and not reveal anything. If Tristan had wanted Baran to know about the rest of the plan, he would have mentioned it.

They came to a stop. They were in a large room where—Alex stared at the view—half the ceiling, which curved to become the wall, was transparent, letting him look at the distant stars.

This was a lounge, or it had been before it was taken over by the mercenaries. The view was unobstructed, but every other wall had lockers and tables by them. At one end a makeshift food preparation area was set up, and at the other cots were arranged in rows. He counted eight rows of twenty. A hundred and sixty mercs, if they all slept here.

It baffled Alex. They had access to the comforts of a cruise ship, and they slept on cots in here? He stopped and reminded himself he wasn't one to talk. He slept on floors, even when there was a bed available. He did everything on the floor.

Still, he did have his own room.

"So," a man said, "the boss wants to know why you're here."

It was only the two of them in the middle of the lounge, where... What went in a lounge? Chairs and tables? He couldn't recall what the lounge on the one passenger ship he'd been on had been like.

The man was dressed in the same gray as everyone else here, the other mercs watching the two of them, but now he could tell it wasn't a uniform. Each was different types of clothing, different cuts to the jackets. The color was there to unify them. The man was bulky, a mix of muscle and fat. He had a sheath and a holster at his belt, but they didn't contain anything.

Alex shrugged. "To take him home, my partner said so."

The man swung and Alex caught the arm, pulled the man to him, spun, and kicked him in the back of the knee. The man dropped and Alex grabbed his head in both hands. Tristan made this look so easy, but twisting a head took a lot of—

Something exploded at his back and he flew over the man. When he crashed down, his body was twitching, out of his control. He'd felt that before, outside the building, only then he hadn't had to endure the pain.

When his body obeyed him again, he pushed himself to a seated position. He'd flown to the edge of the cleared space. That thing packed quite a punch. A man stood before him, lean and tall, from where Alex was. He held a black stick in a hand, resting it on his shoulder.

"Gotta say, those are impressive reflexes you have. Where did you train?"

"Nowhere you'd want to go." His jaw hurt.

The man chuckled. "I guess that's one secret you can keep. Although, by the time we're done with you, you're going to be happy to tell me that one too. You already know the question the boss wants answered."

"And you already know the answer. Won't matter how often you hit me with that; it's not going to change. It's an electro-stick, right?"

The man looked at it stick. "It is, good eye. But it isn't part of the interrogation. It's only here in case you break the rules."

Alex smirked. "There are rules?"

"Of course." The man actually looked offended. "In the Fifty-eighth Division there are rules for everything. Isn't that right, boys?"

"Yes, sir!" The answer was deafening. Had everyone answered at once?

"Fine," Alex said, once his ears stopped ringing. "What are those rules?"

"The only one that matters is that you don't get to hit back."

"You expect me to just sit here and take whatever beating you give me?"

"No. I expect you to be standing." He motioned with the stick.

Alex stood, his body obeying him now. Men had moved to mark the edge of the cleared space. Only men, Alex noted. At least fifty of them, and a good number of them had a stick like the man before him. If he disobeyed the rule, any one of them could inflict the reminder.

"Fine, so you bunch of sadists get to hurt me for no reason. How about we get on with it?"

"Oh no, we're not sadists." The man smiled. "We're not against inflicting a little pain; I mean, what merc doesn't? But we have standards in the Fifty-eighth; we don't let the sickos in. And how much pain you suffer is entirely up to you. The moment you tell us the truth, we stop."

Alex sighed. "Somehow, I don't think I'm that lucky. I already told you the truth; you just don't want to hear it."

"Have it your way."

The man swung and Alex stepped out of the way.

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He woke up, his body still twitching and in pain. He didn't even remember the shock, and he was among furniture. The man leaned over him.

"Right, I forgot that rule. No dodging, no parrying, nothing that keeps the impact from happening. You do that, you get zapped. Nice thing about this model is that it's designed to hurt, not kill. I could put it against you all day and you'll hate it, but you'd live. You wouldn't even get seriously hurt, except for your vocal cords. You would probably destroy those with all the screaming you'd do. I think that's why the royals, back home on Aderon, love these so much."

"No dodging," Alex rasped, "got it. You want to kick me while I'm down? Since I'm already here, I mean."

The man smiled. "Now, how sporting would that be? Come on. You can talk back, so you can get up." The man motioned and, stifling the groans, Alex stood, then followed the directions back to the center of the lounge.

"Here's how this is going to work. One of these fine gentlemen is going to step forward and ask you a question. You lie, he hits you. The only places that are off limits are the throat and balls."

Alex raised an eyebrow.

"I told you, we have standards."

"You know, this would be a lot easier if you attached a few sensors to me to tell if I'm lying or not."

"Yeah, I know, but where's the fun in that?"

A man Alex's height stepped forward. He was dark-skinned with graying wire-brush hair and beard. "Why are you here?" He had a deep voice.

"To take Baran home."

The punch made his head snap to the side.

Alex worked his jaw open, shut, and sideways. "Really? You call that a punch?" he told the man retreating back.

Another man stepped forward, short but thick. "Why are you here?"

"To date your father."

The man punched him in the stomach.

Alex straightened. He smirked. "Who taught you how to hit? Your dad?"

The hit to the face sent him sideways, but he managed to keep his balance.

He shook his head. "No, not impressing me at all. My lover hits me harder than that."

Another man stepped forward. Another question, and another irreverent answer. A punch and a comment on how weak it was. Alex counted them until fifteen, then he lost the number after a particularly hard hit, and didn't bother trying to get it back. He even went back to answering the truth, but he never stopped insulting their strength.

To be fair to them, he thought they could have broken just about anyone other than him and Tristan with this method. They did hit hard, but pain was a familiar companion for Alex. Tristan had seen to it over the last five years.

Alex's face was bloody, and he hurt everywhere when he motioned for the approaching man to stop. He swallowed, more blood than spit. He looked for the lanky one always ready to use the stick and he approached.

"Ready to finally tell me why you're here?"

Alex smiled. "I don't know, are you ready to get serious about this? I'm getting bored."

"Excuse me?" The man stared at him.

"You have all these guys and not one of them can throw a punch. I'm thinking you're not really trying."

"Is there something wrong with you?"

Alex laughed. "Where should I start? When this is all over, remind me to tell you about my love life. You are not—"

Stars exploded around him as he hit the ground. "I thought the stick was off limits?" he asked, rubbing his head where it had hit him.

"I didn't zap you."

"Fair point." He got to his feet and wobbled a little.

"Was that hard enough for you?" There was an edge of anger in the man's voice.

Alex shrugged. "It was okay? The fact you have to use a tool makes me think that like the rest of them, you can't actually hit worth shit."

The man stared at Alex in disbelief. He shook himself and backed away. "Alright, I guess we need to change tactics. McGree, Mahuinen, hold him. Everyone else, feel free to tenderize him."

Two meaty sets of hands grabbed his arms. Alex looked at two of the biggest humans he'd ever seen. "How come you didn't hit me? I think you, at least, would pack a real punch."

The hitting began anew.

They didn't bother with questions, and Alex laughed. He rated each hit, at first out loud for all to hear, then mentally when he couldn't speak anymore. He was aware the hitting stopped when someone grabbed his hair and pulled his head up.

"Ready to talk?" It was the lanky stick-wielder.

Alex looked at him and yawned. "Oh? Did we start? Sorry, I think I fell asleep." His head fell down. He was particularly proud of that of that one. It really showed how— His scream covered the sound of the breaking bone.

"Are you feeling funny now?" Another hit with the stick. He screamed again as another bone broke. "Well? Is this enough to keep you awake?" The man was seething as he hit Alex's arm again. "You really think you're so tough?"

The stick hit it again, but there was no spike of pain—just the uniform mind-numbing scream of it, or maybe that was his voice? He fell to the floor and his screaming might have gone up a notch.

Eventually he ran out of breath, and he all he could do was stay still to avoid jostling his arm. In the quiet he heard a voice, a woman's voice.

"Let go of me."

"Lady, if you don't shut up, I'm going to hit you."

Alex growled and forced his eyes open. The lanky man was holding a woman by the arm, shaking her. Alex tried to get his arm under him, but the pain made him whimper. Mentally, he cursed himself for such a show of weakness. Tristan would throw him away for it.

He tried again, gritting his teeth. He made it to a knee when his arm shifted and he screamed, falling down.

"What have you done to him?"

“What I’ve been told to.”

“Who told you to torture him?”

“Who do you think? Now go perform your magic on him.”

A shadow fell over him. She grunted, and when she spoke, she sounded closer. “What do you expect me to do? He’s... Holies, what happened?”

He forced an eye open. She looked familiar. “Are you okay?” he managed to whisper. She stared at him. “Did he hit you?”

“What? No, but I’d say he hit you a lot. Holies, what did they do to your arm?”

“You don’t hit a woman.”

“What do you mean?”

“My grandma taught me that. You never hit a woman.”

She laughed, but it didn’t sound quite right to him. “I think you might be in the wrong line of work with thinking like that.”

“Mercs aren’t women, they’re mercs. You’re not a merc, right?”

She shook her head.

“You’re not Law either, right? Really shouldn’t hit a woman, even if she’s Law, but they don’t always give me a choice.”

Now her laughter sounded amused. “No, I’m certainly not Law. You shouldn’t speak; you’re in really bad shape.”

“I’m okay. If he hurt you, you tell me and I’ll kill him.”

“Alright. Stay still.”

He felt her hand on his arm, then he might have blacked out. When he heard her voice again, she was further.

“His arm is almost certainly destroyed beyond anything I have access to here can repair. He sounds like he’s suffering from a major concussion, and I can’t even begin to guess at the internal damage he might have. The only thing I can do for him is give him some powerful painkillers so the shock won’t kill him, put him on one of the basic med beds, and pray to the Holies he survives.”

“He isn’t getting any painkillers. He can take a little pain, he said so himself.”

“Look, I have no idea what you’re trying to accomplish here, but this man is going to die if you keep hitting him.”

“How sure of that are you?”

“As certain as the mix you’re breathing currently is mostly composed of nitrogen.”

“Huh? It’s air.”

“Never mind. I am entirely certain that if you keep hitting him, he will die. Right now, I’m pretty sure he’s still going to die.”

“Fine. Garrett, take her back.”

“Wait! You can’t continue this. Didn’t you hear what I said?”

“Lady, I don’t give a damn what you’re saying.”

“You can’t be that much of a bast—”

The sound of a hand hitting flesh snapped Alex’s eyes open. The woman—her name was Mary—looked beyond surprised. Her cheek was red with the imprint of a hand. The lanky man was raising his hand again.

“I told you I don’t give a damn.”

The woman tried to move away, but a bulky man held her.

“Good. Garrett, take her away from here. She’s making me want to slap her around some more, and the boss is going to be pissed if I damage her.”

The man who held Mary let go of her and guided her away. He seemed to be speaking to her in quiet tones.

The lanky man approached, and Alex glared at him.

“Hey, you’re conscious.” He looked over his shoulder and raised his voice. “I told you he was tough.” He crouched. “How many kicks before you start feeling it, do you think?”

“I’m going to kill you.” Alex didn’t know if he’d said it out loud, but the moment he was healed enough to move, he was finding that lanky bastard and slowly gutting him.

The man sighed. “I really want to continue this, see if you’re really as tough as you act, but I can’t have you die. The boss is really strict about who gets to die. Until he gives the order to kill you, you need to stay alive.” He took the stick and smiled. “Hey, this means I get to break one of my own rules. Talk about fun.” He

pressed it against Alex's side and fire erupted through him.

"Don't worry," the man said over Alex's scream. "I can do this all day long."

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