

Chapter 06

The guard led Tristan through a series of utilitarian corridors where tired-looking technicians didn't even glance at him. Not overworked, he judged, just tired. It might be the end of the workday for this section.

A lift ride up twenty floors led him to a more inviting corridor—pale blue walls, medium brown floor, with a white ceiling. A long-stemmed plant with a purple flower grew out of the floor every twenty paces, and he saw many of them as they walked for thirty minutes through near-identical corridors, before the guard stopped by a door.

Clearly this wasn't the section his potential employer lived in; she couldn't be one to walk like this. She'd either have a direct lift, or access to a hover, since she had to live in one of the towers at the top of the ship.

"Please stand in front of the door," the guard instructed.

Tristan moved to the indicated spot, watching the guard. He was calm, bordering on bored, as he entered commands in the door's control. He'd done this so often he no longer had to think about it. Tristan kept an eye on the hand as it hung by the butt of the gun. No twitching of tension. No anticipation of violence.

The door opened.

"The door's set to recognize only you. Anyone else who wants in will have to wait for you to open it."

"Unless they have the override, like you do."

"It's a safety measure, sir."

Tristan gave him an amused smile, showing only a little teeth. "Sure it is."

"This also means you'll have to let your partner in. This suite has three bedrooms, a lounge, a food preparation unit, and an eating area. If you don't care for making your own food, there are restaurants on this floor and the next ones up and down. You can get their locations on the guest terminal." He turned. "Oh, and if your partner needs to come and go without you, you'll need to contact us so we can add him to its recognition program."

"Are there more instructions for me?" Tristan asked, still amused. Like anything would keep Alex out.

"No, sir."

Tristan entered and manually closed the door.

He stood in the warm lounge. Two plush seats and one couch were around a table with a fire pit in the middle. He stepped to it and a small fire came to life, barely generating any heat. Not the source of the warmth. He shut it off and found the room's life support controls, lowering the temperature to a more comfortable level. Was this the potential client's way of expressing her displeasure at him?

To the right of the lounge was the eating area with the food preparation counter beyond it or, if one preferred, they could use the food printer provided and have their food made for them.

There was what looked like a window showing space, but he was nowhere near the hull, so this was a screen. He tapped the control, and it changed to a woodland area with animals he didn't recognize drinking at a stream.

The frame was attached to the wall, so he tapped the screen and brought up the command board. It took him a couple of tries to find the right combination of commands, but he accessed the code and shook his head at the chaos there. Alex would do a thorough search through them when he got here, but Tristan liked to keep in practice.

He searched through the code, looking for anything that would connect to a camera and listening device. The frame had access to the rest of the ship through a narrow communication port, but he guessed that was to access a database of images for it to display.

Confident it wouldn't spy on him, he printed himself a nutrient bar and ate it as he continued his examination of their rooms.

The three bedrooms were identical, each including a bed large enough to fit three of him. The mattress was thick enough and so many covers were provided that even a human would overheat under them unless the room was set to freezing. Controls by the bed let him adjust its firmness and the angles of various sections. Why did humans need to overdo something as simple as a bed?

The walls also had frames, which he shut down, and an empty dresser which he searched, along with the room for any listening device or cameras. That he found nothing simply told him he should have gone back in his ship for the scanner.

He took the thickest bed cover off and folded it in half before laying it on the floor. It would do in place of a bedroll.

He searched the other rooms and found nothing there either. He didn't mind being spied on. It wasn't like knowing what he had planned would allow them to stop him. But he liked knowing what he was dealing with so if there came a need to blind and deafen them, he'd know how.

He took his datapad and sat in one of the two seats, sinking in. He spent some time looking for controls to adjust the firmness. Not finding any, he moved to the table and sat on the more comfortable hard chair there.

He brought up the list of items his contacts had sent to his nodes. He highlighted a few in green to show he'd gotten them, and was already studying them in the room he'd converted on his ship. In blue he highlighted what he wanted to study next. In yellow were the items where he'd read the technical manual before deciding if there was anything worth studying.

This brought up the question of what to do after this job, if he took it. The list was getting longer and longer, which wasn't a bad thing, but with spending these last years focused on molding Alex into his weapon, he hadn't spent much time researching anything.

Alex had become what Tristan wanted of him: deadly, precise, remorseless. All that was needed now was to make sure he stayed honed, and that could be accomplished with the daily fighting match. There was the question of how Alex would adapt to a quieter life after these years of near-constant fighting, but if he couldn't adjust, there were always the predators in the forest. They wouldn't be used to Alex, and he'd have to make sure they knew he wasn't their prey either.

The decision made, he brought up the technical manual for the Gunther C32 Carbine. Someone had dug out the old manufacturer and this was their first offering. He lost himself in the reading, sending out queries for more information as needed, using one of his identities firmly established in the weapon analysis industry.

When he was done with that, he added the carbine to his green list and made contact with a handful of mercenaries he could trust to acquire those items and have them shipped to him through a series of automated switches, renaming and readdressing them so that it would make it impossible for anyone to know their final destination.

The door opened and Alex entered. It closed without him having to hit the button and he stood there, head canted in the way Tristan had learned to identify with him listening to a computer. His mouth moved and Tristan could almost make out the words. Alex was practicing subvocalizing.

If Alex only needed to speak, it meant he'd already put in code to give himself voice authority on some functions, like the door. He should be angry; that was coercion, and he'd specifically told him not to do that here. But it was a minor thing, and the control he exerted over the computer made Alex more comfortable.

And, in a strange way, it made their bond tighter. Alex thought it had become a game between them—push a little, get scolded. He never went so far that Tristan had to do more than growl, and Tristan did enjoy those moments of banter. They had a quality to them he couldn't identify, but that felt natural.

Alex had his face back on, including the scar, and Tristan felt something relax. He knew it meant nothing. Alex had been his weapon even with that fake face, but now he looked right. He wasn't the young would-be bounty hunter he'd played. Tristan hadn't liked the role, especially the face, but the job had called for it. Alex wasn't young. He was mature, dependable, and, most importantly, deadly.

"I've overridden the comm system; they can't use it to listen in." He waited, and Tristan gave Alex his "I know what you did" look, but then he smiled, letting teeth show. Alex liked that. The hint of a threat in the play. "It does mean you'll have to activate it manually if you need to call out. I'm not hearing any other computers, so they aren't spying on us."

He headed to the counter and Tristan watched him move. Relaxed, but ready for anything. Tristan considered attacking him, giving them a solid sparring match, getting their blood hot, their bodies sweaty. But then they'd have to clean the blood off the floor and walls.

"Have you eaten?" Alex asked as the fabricator came on by itself. Tristan nodded. "Do you think they actually trust us? Seems stupid to only rely on the comm system to spy on us. Do you think they don't believe who you claim to be? Aren't taking you seriously?"

"She knows." Tristan placed the datapad on the table, face down. "She researched me thoroughly before contacting me."

"Then this is what? Her not wanting to offend you?" Tristan kept his amusement from showing. Alex didn't like their client, not after she'd tried, oh so subtly, to convince Tristan to get into her bed.

The fabricator beeped.

"She does want me to take on this new job."

Alex took a plate with a sandwich and two glasses of water on it. He set one glass in front of Tristan and sat. Tristan looked at the glass and raised an eyebrow.

"What?"

"I didn't ask for one."

"You need to stay hydrated."

"Alex."

Alex sighed. "You said that you ate. Which means you printed a nutrient bar and ate that while checking out the rooms. Knowing you, as soon as you were done with that, you sat here and began reading. You tend to forget things like drinking when you are in research mode."

Alex took his sandwich and smiled. "I can't have my lord and master keel over due to dehydration, can I?"

Tristan tapped a claw on the surface and eyed the sandwich.

"You know I'll throw it back in and print a nutrient bar if you tell me to."

"You do this to irritate me," Tristan said, putting a slight growl in his voice.

Alex's smile broadened. "Maybe." He took a bite of the sandwich.

The give and take, this comfortable exchange of threats and defiance. He should put a stop to it. He drank the water. But it made Alex comfortable, bonded him tighter.

"You have the scar back."

Alex finished chewing. "It was part of the file. Easier to just have it put back on fully."

Tristan nodded. The change of face had been in part because the scar was too distinctive. Even with a younger face, one of the guards might have recognized it as being Crimson's, who was known to be an associate of Tristan. It would have complicated matters.

"This is just a hunt. It isn't like it matters if I have it or not."

As was often the case, Alex wasn't thinking far enough ahead. This job might take them places a mask would be required. But realistically, if that became the case, it could be removed then. Tristan studied Alex's face as he ate, and decided he hoped it wouldn't come to that.

Alex didn't look right without the scar. A weapon should look like he'd been used. Not look like he was falling apart, but a few scratches, tool marks. A scar. Without it, Alex looked like a knife hanging on the wall, like those he kept in his room. There was definitely a sense that one could be taken down and used to do damage, but a scarred weapon told you it had happened.

A scar told you he was dangerous.

"You think this thing about going after her brother is real? Seems to me it would be easier to just put a bounty on his head. Cheaper too."

"It's real, but there's more to it than she said." This was something else Alex enjoyed—talking about the job. Sometimes it was so he could work out details by himself, but this felt like simple conversation. Alex

knew the answers to the questions, he simply wanted to talk.

Alex raised an eyebrow as he ate.

"The old man. She already implied that his rescue was part of this."

"Her comment about the research? I thought the rescue was just because he's her grandfather and she didn't want to see him rot in there any longer." Alex took another bite.

"He was there for thirty-two objective years. Why wait this long? People on ships like this don't go into cryo, so it isn't like she couldn't do it. As soon as she gained control of her family's finances, she had the resources to have him broken out."

Alex shrugged. "So she doesn't care about him?"

"I won't claim to know how she feels about him."

Alex eyed him over the rest of his sandwich, but Tristan didn't elaborate.

"The research will have an impact on hunting her brother, either on how to go about it, or where to find him."

"She could be lying."

"She isn't."

"You're not infallible."

Tristan smiled. "She isn't."

"She's hot for you." Alex wasn't obviously looking at him, focusing on finishing his sandwich. His tone was neutral. On the surface, it was simply Alex stating something he'd noticed. Of course there was more to it.

"I know."

Alex couldn't control the momentary tension in his body. Alex wasn't entirely sure where he fell within Tristan's life, Tristan made sure of that. He didn't want him to grow too comfortable; that would lead to him growing bolder. Alex knew his place as his weapon, but it wasn't all he wanted, and Tristan gave him just enough of a hint there might be something there that Alex kept going.

Alex now had enough control over himself that slight tension had been the only indication he wasn't entirely happy with the situation.

Alex took the plate and his glass to dispose of, and leaned against the counter. "Do you think this is just about getting you?"

Tristan watched him and waited. He wanted to see where Alex was going with it.

Alex sighed. "I think she wants you as her...whatever she calls the guys in her bed."

The jealousy in his voice wasn't surprising. Alex had grown possessive over the last two years. Tristan hadn't done anything, other than keeping Alex off-balance, to foster it. He hadn't responded to any of the advances he'd gotten. He hadn't used sex in any of the jobs. Until Alex did something because of his jealousy, he would let it pass.

But this wasn't something he needed to let grow this time. "She only wants to bed me. She can have anything and anyone she wants. I am exotic, a criminal, and deadly." He smiled at Alex. "I think you know the kind of effect that combination can have on someone. She would have me once and set me aside, having satisfied her curiosity. Having shown how fearless she was for spending a night with me. I have no interest in bedding her. I am not interested in giving her the satisfaction."

He watched for Alex's reactions. They were subtle, Tristan had taught him that, but he could still read him. Annoyance that Tristan had worked out all of that. Some relief that he wouldn't go to her. Fear it was just to placate him.

"She isn't the job, Alex. Bedding her gains us nothing." He decided to give him more this time. "If I need relief, I'll go with someone I trust."

The tension in his jaw went away. His shoulders relaxed. Alex's nod was barely perceptible. "I'm going to head to bed. The downside of good cryo is that time doesn't pass. I've been asleep for months and it feels like I haven't slept for two days."

"Subjectively, you haven't slept in twenty-eight hours."

"Which is why I'm going to do it now."

"My room is that one," he pointed to it.

Alex walked by him then paused. He turned and took something out of a pocket. "May I?" he asked, showing the metal object he was holding: diamond-shaped, flattened on one side.

Tristan looked at it, remembered Alex putting it on him all those years ago, his internal debates over keeping it, until it became just another part of him. He nodded, and Alex stepped closer. He parted the fur on Tristan's collarbone and placed the diamond there, his fingers lingering before stepping away.

Tristan moved a hand to it, caressing Alex's arm, and the human relaxed even more. Alex looked forward to the moments Tristan touched him. It was one of the easier ways to control him, to stoke his emotions.

Tristan watched him, his back, his legs, his shoulders, his ass. He liked watching Alex move. The power he demonstrated when he fought and killed could be intoxicating, but even just watching him walk made him feel good. Not that he'd give into that. He didn't need the relief, he just enjoyed it when he took it. When he used it to tighten the bond with Alex.

If he did that too often, Alex would get used to it, he would start expecting it, maybe even demanding it. Alex would make *him* wait.

He drained the rest of his water and picked up his datapad. Reading would distract him from Alex until he decided he needed to sleep.

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