

Chapter 68: This Is My Job 1

My current set of targets was playing it exceedingly safe, which had made hunting them down difficult. I'd been tracking them for almost a week, compared to the typical day or two that I'd needed since starting this mission.

Of course, the difficulty I was having with this group might be due to sleep deprivation. In the four months since an accumulation of radiation had nearly killed me, I'd slept for a couple of hours each night, crashing for longer spells when my body and mind had absolutely required it.

The lack of rest hadn't been conducive for the healing process, I was aware. I was reminded of it every time I was left shivering for minutes at a time, but fortunately, instances of that had started falling off in the last month.

And of course, there was the other thing, but I didn't want to think about that right now.

Given this, why was I pushing myself so hard? Why not spend some time catching up on my rest?

The reason for it was simple: the fickleness of the human mind. Any day now, I'd get a message from Talira where she'd order me to tackle another mission. The *shukusenth* would have decided to let my targets drift through Lutov, unaddressed, and I couldn't let that happen. They were a clear and present danger to the homeland and my family. What if they used what they knew to create a new neurotoxin? Considering how difficult creating our current antidote had been, I wasn't sure we could do it again. So, I'd scrambled to eliminate these people and the danger they presented, struggling to finish the mission before the *shukusenth* lost interest in it.

"That's paranoid, LV, and you know it."

Never looking away from the set of tracks I was following, I irritably waved at the vague outline of a person that was standing at the edge of my vision. They weren't real, a hallucination produced by my sleep deprivation, but knowing that didn't help me with ignoring them. Fortunately, they didn't show up much, and when they did appear, they quickly vanished.

Today, they followed me as I moved along, and I was vaguely curious about why they were doing that, even as I batted said curiosity down. It was supremely unhelpful in my current circumstances.

Frowning, I stopped short, cocking my head at the set of tracks beneath my feet. Even muddled by the rain as they were, they were clearly leading into a copse of woods ahead, which would abandon the tendency this group had had of sticking to open ground.

I disliked inconsistencies like this. A change in a target's behavior usually meant they were getting desperate, and desperate people did stupid things, especially after they'd been backed into a corner. Given that, would entering this copse be a trap?

“Paaaar-aa-noooid!” my hallucination sang.

If it was a trap, I was walking into it. I didn't have time to continue tracking these targets, and besides, they would have to be extraordinarily lucky to hurt me, given the difference in our training.

And if they did manage that, it might be for the best.

Shaking myself, I shoved that thought into a box, one that was holding so many others like it, before palming a knife. I might be springing this trap, but I wouldn't do it unprepared.

Taking a deep breath, I headed into the trees. They'd done a good job with this snare, if it was one. With the rain, my array was having a hard time with pinpointing possible targets, save for by heat signature, but several blobs of warmth here were confusing even that sensor. I wouldn't know where my targets were coming from.

Shielding themselves like this was a precaution that, to my continual surprise, most fugitives didn't take, but this wasn't the first time I'd encountered it. I knew what to look for if I was to protect myself. So, when the attack came, I was already ducking. Several energy bolts—from standard pistols, most likely—and... had that been a weighted net? A *net* soared over my head.

Before those attacks had hit the ground or trees, I'd thrown my knife toward the source of one of them while drawing another weapon, and a moment later, something thumped into the soil. The second knife went flying while my rifle filled my waiting hand, and I raised it, squeezing the trigger without aiming. Then, I was off with House Kolb speed, taking four lengthened steps so I could grab the last man standing by the arm. When I twisted my hold, he hissed, releasing his pistol, and kicking at his legs, I forced him to his knees.

Maybe fourteen seconds had passed.

Slowly clapping, my hallucination said, “Impressive. I always knew I was right to fear you, LV, but here, I see why.”

And again, I *ignored* them.

The man in front of me had started blubbering, whispering pleas between his sobs, but again, this was nothing new. Fuck, I hated this next part.

“I don't want to hurt you. You should know that,” I said, “but you have information that I need, and you'll give it to me one way or the other.”

Closing my ears to the man's frightened gasps, I scanned my surroundings, quickly locating what I needed. Then, I dragged my target to a depression in the earth where a shallow pool of water had collected. Crouching, I slapped the man, getting his attention, before grabbing his chin so he'd meet my eyes.

“Listen carefully,” I said. “For the next ten minutes, there is only one rule. You give me what I need, and I’ll stop. Do you understand?”

As usual, confusion clouded my target’s eyes.

“Ten minutes?” he asked.

Which had been expected.

“That’s how long I’ll need to break you,” I said. “I would prefer it if that proved unnecessary. Survival as an exile will be hard enough for you without a broken mind, but I will shatter you if need be. After all, I have this—”

I flashed a Puppeteer into view.

“—to get what I need if you do break. But you should have the chance to... *volunteer* information first, even if you’ll need some persuasion to do that. Violation of your array usually feels a hundred times worse than anything I can do to you. Trust me. It’s happened to me often enough that I should know.”

With tears pooling in his eyes, my target kept sniffing. It was a pathetic picture, all told, and I hated it.

“I didn’t do anything wrong,” he softly said.

Sighing, I hung my head for a moment before once more meeting his eyes.

“I know. Doesn’t change anything,” I said. “Now, where do I find the others? Where’s Sanya?”

After a beat of shock, my target screwed his face up into a brave expression that I’d come to know well. Damn it.

“I don’t-” he started.

I shoved his face into the pool of water. As I’d said, it was shallow, but that didn’t matter. People had drowned on less before.

The whole time, I watched him struggle, adjusting my hold as needed. This first part was critical. He needed to believe I’d let him choke on water, but I couldn’t hold him down for too long, or I wouldn’t have room to work with later. So, I watched his arms, straining to push him free, and felt how hard he wanted to thrash against me through my fingers in his hair. Through my knee in his back, I noted how much he was bucking to get away and hated my strength. Most of the time, it was only an asset but in this...

When my hallucination crouched opposite me, hugging their knees, it jerked my attention to them for a split second.

“Hell, you can be cruel,” they said. “I wish I’d known.”

A muffled yell yanked me back to my task, and pivoting off of my target, I hauled him upright.

While he gasped at precious air, I growled, “Tell me what I need to know. Where are the others? *Where’s Sanya?*”

For a moment, I was sure I’d done enough, but then, stubbornness crawled onto my target’s face, and I internally sighed.

“I don’t know-” he started.

I shoved him under again.

We went through a few more repeats of this. I held him down longer every time, but fortunately, my target gave up after six minutes or so, spewing every clue that he knew about the locations of other House Cerullis members. Once he was done, I put him in restraints before giving him space. He’d need time to recover before the next part, and I needed to make my report.

Talira would use this information to send House Kolb members scouting. They’d decipher how much of this information was true, giving me a winnowed list of results in a few days, and so, the search would continue. Again, this was nothing new, so mundane that it made my heart ache.

As I walked back to my target, my hallucination matched stride with me.

“What now?” they asked.

I didn’t answer because they should already know what I’d say. My mission directive left me with two options for handling this man: kill or exile him, and only one of those choices came anywhere close to acceptable for me. I’d take it, no matter how much I didn’t like it.

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