

Triage

By Scribblesinink

"Stay with me, Freddy!" Jake dropped the phone and hugged his friend close as if, by holding on tightly enough, he could stave off the inevitable. "You're all right. Stay with me."

His pleas fell on deaf ears. Freddy pulled in a last, labored breath that he never blew out, and his body grew limp in Jake's grip. In the silence that followed, the operator's voice squeaked tinnily from the phone. "Hello...? Sir...? Are you still there?"

Jake didn't even hear it; his mind was busy trying to wrap itself around the truth, though his brain refused to accept what his senses told him: Freddy was dead. Had died right here on Jake's floor, leaving his blood wet and sticky on Jake's hands. Freddy, whom Jake'd known for years, who'd saved his ass more than once in Iraq. Who was more of a brother to Jake than Eric, back in Jericho....

"Jake? Did Freddy—Oh my God...!" The soft cry finally dragged Jake from his daze and back to the present.

"Anna...." He should have expected her; they'd agreed to meet up here. He jumped to his feet, attempting to block her view with his body, but it was already too late. She'd seen enough; he could tell by the horror-filled look on her face.

"Freddy!" She dropped her bag by the door and rushed over. Jake made a grab to stop her. At the very last instant, he noticed how his palms were covered in blood, and he hesitated long enough that Anna was able to push her way past him. She sank to her knees next to Freddy. "No, no, no...." She uttered a low, keening noise, her hands hovering helplessly over Freddy's corpse, not quite touching him.

Jake snatched a towel and wiped the worst of the blood from his hands, leaving dark streaks on the cloth. In the distance, a siren had started howling. Dropping the towel, he pulled Anna back to her feet. "There's no time...."

She fought Jake's grip, trying to kneel beside Freddy again. "Let me go! Please!"

"Anna, listen to me." He turned her around before making her look at him. The distant siren had been joined by a second, and they were quickly coming closer. "Freddy's gone. There's nothing you can do for him. We gotta go, before the men who did this come after us too."

She kept struggling to break free of his hold, trying to peer past him at Freddy. "No...."

"Anna, please...!" It took an effort not to shout. But if he couldn't get through to her.... He could hardly haul her out into the street after him, could he? "You've got to think about the baby."

That finally seemed to pierce through her panic and shock. "What?"

"We gotta go," Jake repeated. He had to let go of her again briefly to stuff the last of his things into his bag and zip it shut. Scooping up Anna's discarded bag, he shoved it back into her arms, grabbed her elbow, and half-pulled, half-dragged her after him. As they reached the street and Jake turned them in the direction of the bus station, an ambulance pulled up outside the building, with a police cruiser following on its heels, their red and blue lights flashing crazily. Neither the paramedics nor the cops jumping out of their vehicles and rushing through the door paid any attention to Jake or Anna as he hurried her down the street.

oOo

"We shouldn't have left him." Anna hunched miserably on the bench beside Jake, clutching her bag in her lap, as they waited for the Albuquerque bus to be called. Jake had changed out of his blood-stained T-shirt and scrubbed the dried smears from his hands as best as he could in the men's room, all the while afraid Anna might be gone by the time he was done. Much to his relief, she'd still been waiting for him when he came out.

"No, we shouldn't." He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "But we had to." He rubbed at his face wearily, before straightening and turning toward her. He reached out, hesitated, and dropped his hand back on his knee. "Freddy would understand." He spoke softly, remembering Freddy's plea to him. "He'd want you and the baby to be safe."

Anna laughed bitterly. "Great job he's done." She sniffled back a sob and caught Jake's gaze. "Who? Who did this?"

Jake shook his head. "Anna...."

"It was those guys, right? Those men that looked like soldiers, but not?" She bent forward, curling around her bag as if in pain. "God, I knew he was in trouble, but...." Drawing a shuddering breath, she tilted her head to look at Jake again. "Who are they?"

Jake sighed. "An outfit called Ravenwood." He glanced around to make sure nobody was within earshot. "They're mercenaries."

Anna mulled it over for a moment. "Why? Why would they murder Freddy?"

Jake hesitated, unsure how much to tell her. Over the PA system, a disengaged voice told them the bus for Albuquerque was ready for boarding, granting him a reprieve from having to reply right away. He helped Anna to her feet, escorting her to the bus stand. When they reached the bus, he cast another look around, but saw nothing that indicated they'd been followed, and he let out a small sigh of relief as Anna climbed into the bus ahead of him. They found seats about half-way down the aisle; he let her slip into the one next to the window while he put their bags in the overhead bin and then sat down beside her.

"Why?" she repeated the question she asked earlier. "Why kill him?" Her voice shook, but she sounded determined, and Jake realized she needed an explanation as much as she wanted one.

He waited for the bus to drive off, so the grumble of the engine would mask his words. "You were right. Ravenwood's...." He scratched his neck. "Freddy got himself involved with some really bad people."

She twisted a little in the seat to look at him, and Jake continued speaking, "They wanted us to smuggle weapons into Afghanistan for them. Stinger missiles, to sell them to the highest bidder." Much to his surprise, it felt good to be able to tell her what Hicks had told him. "When we found out.... Ravenwood's not the kind of people you say *no* to. That's why we decided to run." He paused, again remembering the knock on his door, recalling the shock of seeing Freddy stumble in, blood staining his shirt. "They must've found out and caught up with him while he was getting his stuff."

Moisture glimmered in Anna's eyes, and she brushed at a tear trickling down her cheek with the back of her hand. "And you think they'll be coming after us? After me?"

"I don't know." Jake shrugged. "If we'd stayed, the police would've detained us. Maybe even arrested us while they figured out what happened." *All I care about is Anna and my kid. Get them on that bus.* He cleared his throat. "It wasn't safe for you there." He wasn't sure how much Ravenwood knew about Freddy's personal life, but he hadn't been about to risk them going after Anna.

She gave him a long look, her expression doubtful. Finally her features softened. "Thank you." She turned away, staring out at the night, where the lights of San Diego were falling away behind them. After a while, she twisted in her seat again, back to face Jake. "What do I do now?"

She sounded so lost that, for a moment, Jake couldn't answer her. "You go on home, to

your family."

She uttered a wry noise, half laugh, half sob. "Is that even safe? Won't they... those mercenaries... won't they find me in Houston?"

"No...." Jake paused, thinking. He reckoned that once he and Anna split up, she should be all right. Ravenwood would have no more reason for going after her. "No, they won't. They'll be coming after me."

As would the San Diego police, probably; he was likely to be their prime suspect for Freddy's murder. Hicks wouldn't let it go either, for sure. Jake shifted around until he found a more comfortable position on the narrow seat, and closed his eyes, knowing he wouldn't get much sleep. He had to figure out what to do next. He'd really managed to get himself in deep trouble once again, hadn't he? And this time, Dad wouldn't be able to pull him back out....

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