

The Devil You Know

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The Devil You Know

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Summary

While on a mission for Section 31, Ash is attacked and ends up getting help from the last person he expects.

Notes

Written for kira_katrine in the 2021 Id Pro Quo exchange. Originally posted on AO3.

Timeline-wise, this takes place post-Season 2 for Ash and post-"Terra Firma Part 2" for Georgiou.

Ash leans against a wall, sipping from a cup of coffee as he watches the images displayed on the miniature PADD in his hand. He glances up occasionally, keeping aware of his surroundings, but no one around seems inclined to give him a second glance. The colourful robes he's wearing might stick out on Earth, and certainly in Starfleet, but on Artemis Prime they're the height of fashion and he blends right in with the mid-afternoon crowd.

He takes another sip of coffee, feeling his heart speed up as the woman on the screen stands and begins gathering her things. This is the moment they've been waiting for.

He speaks quietly, keeping his voice level. "She's starting to move. Are you in position?"

Lara's voice comes through his earpiece. "Ready and waiting, boss."

Ash glances up once more, checking his surroundings. Still nothing to be concerned about – except. He frowns inwardly, careful not to let it reach his face. There's a man over the other side of the street, tall and muscled, and while he isn't looking now, Ash can't help but feel like the guy was watching him.

A woman brushes past him, nearly spilling his coffee, and when Ash looks up again the guy has turned away and is speaking with a nearby shopkeeper. Ash frowns, weighing the possibility that he's just being paranoid, before turning his attention back to the PADD. The woman moves out of sight of the camera, and a second later he hears Lara say quietly, "Showtime."

His job done, Ash shoves the PADD into a pocket and takes a final gulp of coffee before throwing the remains into a trash chute. The plan is for him and Lara to meet at the rendezvous point - a shuttle hidden in the forest - once she's downloaded the data, but rather than head straight there he ducks into a nearby store and spends a few minutes pretending to browse before buying a small trinket and stepping back out into the street.

The guy from before is gone, but Ash keeps his wits about him as he continues down the street, not wanting to take the risk of someone following him. He takes a circuitous route towards the rendezvous point and throws in a few random turns just to be safe, but by the time he's reached the forest he's starting to believe he really was just being paranoid.

He orients himself with the help of the sun, and sets off in the direction of the shuttle.

He's been walking for a few minutes, long enough for the forest to completely surround him, when he hears a noise behind him. He turns, but it's just a bird emerging from a clump of bushes. On edge now, he continues walking, only to stop dead as a woman steps out in front of him, holding a gun.

"Outworlder," she spits, and oh, this is bad.

Ash's mind speeds through the options. The mission required him to look like an ordinary citizen, which means no weapons. He considers trying to run, but that idea is ruined when a look over his shoulder reveals the muscled man from before, a similar gun pointed straight at Ash's chest.

"I don't want any trouble," Ash tries, raising his hands warily as the man circles round to join his accomplice.

The man smiles. It isn't a pleasant smile. "Good," he says. "Turn out your pockets."

"And if I don't?"

The woman's finger twitches on the trigger. He barely has time to register the dart hitting his shoulder before agony surges through him, sending him to the ground. For a moment he can't move or think or even breathe, and then the pain is gone, leaving him shaking.

"There are five levels on this device," the woman tells him. "That was the lowest. So unless you want to make things very bad for yourself, you'll do *exactly* as we say."

Ash reaches for the dart, intending to remove it, but his fingers haven't even touched it before another wave of pain hits him, warning him away. He can only hope Lara is okay as he turns out his pockets, revealing a credit chip, his PADD, and the trinket he bought from the store. Nothing personal, nothing that could reveal his identity or purpose for being here – except the PADD, and that's designed to auto-delete its contents if used by anyone who doesn't have the correct twelve-digit encryption key.

"Good," the man says, scooping up the items. "Now. Why are you here?"

"I'm just a tourist-" Ash tries, before he's once more overcome with pain.

"That was level two," the woman tells him. "It'll only get worse from here. Who are you working with?"

"I'm here alone, I-"

It lasts longer this time, the pain all-but-unbearable. Ash vision wavers, darkening as if he's about to pass out. He's dimly aware of the woman collapsing suddenly, taking the pain with her, before everything goes black.

* * *

Ash is brought awake by a sharp slap across his cheek, the pain quickly dwarfed by the throbbing ache throughout the rest of his body. He groans and opens his eyes, blinking up at the person above him. He doesn't think it's one of his attackers, but it takes him a second to focus.

"Get *up*, Tyler," the figure snaps. "Unless you'd rather I leave you behind."

The image resolves, turning into someone he recognises, and Ash stares up at her, unable to form any thought other than *What the hell did they shoot me with?*

Because bending over him, wearing a familiar 'you're an idiot' expression, is former Terran Emperor Philippa Georgiou.

"You..." Ash splutters, struggling to sit up. He reaches out and wraps his fingers around her wrist, half-surprised to find her solid under his touch.

"*Don't* touch me," she orders, yanking her arm away. "And get up. We need to get out of here."

She moves back as Ash struggles to his feet, leaning heavily against a tree as a wave of dizziness threatens to overwhelm him. The dart is still embedded in his shoulder and he wraps his fingers around it and yanks it out, tossing it away. His attackers are lying on the ground, unconscious or possibly- no, he can see the man's chest moving. Just unconscious. "What did you do to them?" Maybe not the most pertinent question right now, but it's hard to concentrate.

"Heavy stun," Georgiou – or at least someone who's doing a very good impression of her – tells him impatiently. "They'll be out for hours. You might want to remove that tracking device from your shoulder while you're at it."

Ash feels at his shoulders, discovering a thumbnail-sized device attached to the back of his robe. His mind flashes back to the woman who brushed past him on the sidewalk - he can't be sure it was the same woman currently lying unconscious in front of him, but he'd be shocked if it wasn't.

Georgiou, meanwhile, has picked up one of the guns, studying it with interest. "We had weapons like this in my universe. Crude, but enormously effective." She tosses it towards him and begins going through the unconscious man's pockets. "The after-effects should wear off in an hour or two."

"An hour?"

She nods, moving on to the woman after stripping the man of his belongings. "You're lucky they didn't make it to the highest level. People have been known to have gone mad from the pain." She sounds disturbingly approving.

Ash picks up the gun, turning it over in his hand. The residual pain in his body is enough to tell him he isn't dreaming, but part of him still feels like pinching himself to make sure. "How are you here? We were told-" He breaks off, something twisting in his stomach. "Is Michael...?"

Expression flashes in Georgiou's eyes, too fast for him to identify. "Still in the 32nd century with the others. I came back alone."

Ash shoves down the tiny flicker of disappointment and tries to focus. "Why? *How*?" Everyone involved had always been very clear that it was a one-way trip.

"Do you want to talk, or do you want to get out of here?" she snaps. "I assume you have transport around here somewhere."

"Uh," Ash says, trying to get his bearings. "Yeah. It's this way."

Every part of his body aches, his head pounding unpleasantly with each step, and he has to pause occasionally to steady himself against a tree. He tries to concentrate – the mission. He has to complete the mission.

A quick check of his ear shows the comm system is still there and still working, thankfully. Keeping an eye on Georgiou, he gives Lara a head's up on the attack and warns her to be careful. She doesn't respond verbally, but he does get a quick signal back indicating she's heard him and everything's okay on her end.

"So," Ash says, after a few minutes. Talking takes more energy than he can really spare right now, but there's no way he can wait until they reach the shuttle to have his questions answered. "Are you going to tell me why you came back? Or how?"

"A very annoying man in a hat," Georgiou replies, which answers precisely nothing. "And it was the only way to save my life. The 32nd century did not agree with me."

"What about the others?"

She waves a hand impatiently. "*They* are fine, or were when I left. *I*, on the other hand, was dragged out of my own universe, and then my own time, and the combined strain threatened to kill me."

"So they sent you back here?"

She gives a huff of annoyance. "Obviously."

"To Artemis Prime?" He can't imagine why they'd pick here, out of all the planets in the universe.

"No. I arrived on Tellar. I came here to find you."

"Me? Why?" He doesn't bother asking *how* she found him; knowing Georgiou he's better off not knowing.

She taps the gun against her side thoughtfully. "I did some research when I arrived, to find out when I was and how much had changed. Imagine my surprise when I found that *you* had been made head of Section 31." She glances sidelong at him. "Who did you threaten to make that happen?"

"No one," Ash replies. He knows she's just screwing with him, but he's dealt with enough hostility and suspicion that the accusation still stings. "Cornwell's dead, Leland's dead-" He pauses, frowning. "He is dead?"

"Extremely," she informs him.

Ash nods, and continues, "You were gone" -he hopes Command wouldn't have actually put her in charge, but it isn't like they haven't done worse- "and most of the other agents were killed by Control. I was just the last man standing."

"Obviously," she murmurs, but there's no bite to it. "And are you enjoying the role?"

Ash gives a huff, somewhere between laughter and exhaustion. "Enjoying isn't the word I'd use."

In the trance of putting one foot in front of the other, it takes him a few seconds to realise they've arrived at the rendezvous point. The shuttle is concealed under an overhang, its stealth covering blending in with the scenery around it. It isn't invisible, if you know where to look, but it's hidden enough that anyone not paying attention could walk straight past it.

Ash runs his hand over the side, and the door recognises his palm-print and unlocks, sliding upwards as the stairs unfurl and drop down. He steadies himself against the wall as he steps inside, moving forwards until he can drop down gratefully into a seat. He's shaking all over, exhaustion pulling at him and threatening to drag him under.

He leans his head back against the seat, letting his eyes drift shut, only to be brought back to reality when Georgiou smacks his shoulder sharply and barks, "Wake up and drink this."

She shoves something into his hands, a tube Ash vaguely recognises from the medkit. He brings it up to his face, squinting at the label. "Glucose?"

"Helps the agoniser effects wear off quicker, or at least it did in my universe."

Ash snorts. "Figured you would've been on the other end of the torture devices."

She shrugs, swinging the gun on one finger. "Everyone has to start somewhere." She gestures at the tube and adds, "*Drink*, Tyler. If I wanted to kill you you'd be dead by now."

Ash supposes he can't really argue with that. He pulls off the cap and downs the contents in one long swallow, then jabs himself with a painkiller as Georgiou takes a seat at the front of the shuttle.

"Not bad," she says, running a hand over the controls. "So where am I taking us?"

"You are not taking us anywhere," Ash tells her. "Besides, I can't leave without Lara."

"Lara?"

"My co-conspirator. We've been planning this for months, trying to bring down a group suspected of smuggling illegal weapons into the Federation."

"Weapons like this?" Georgiou points the gun at the ceiling lazily. Ash grimaces.

"Among others." He stretches a little, trying to find a position that doesn't make him ache. "And Artemis Prime's strict weapons-control policy provides the perfect cover."

Any further conversation is interrupted by Lara's voice in his ear. "Got a situation here, boss."

Ash comes to attention instantly, straightening up in spite of the pain. "Tell me."

"I've got the records, but getting out's gonna be an issue. There's security on every exit. Something must have spooked 'em."

Ash thinks quickly. "You're at the warehouse?"

"Yeah, holed up in one of the offices. I'm safe for now, but eventually someone's gonna start asking questions."

"Can you make it to the roof?"

"Yeah, I guess. You have a plan?"

"Working on it," Ash tells her. He taps his ear, muting the inbuilt microphone, and addresses Georgiou. "I need the PADD you took when you searched the guy."

"What PADD?"

Ash gives her a look, and she smirks and hands it over. Hastily, he unlocks it and pulls up blueprints of the warehouse, as well as a map of the city, before tapping his ear again. "What's your exact location?"

"I'm on the second floor, near the back. Room 224."

Ash nods. "Okay, looks like there's a staircase just outside that should lead you to the roof. Try to stay out of sight, and I'll be there as soon as I can."

"Got it."

The line goes silent, and Ash heads for the pilot's seat. Or tries to, more accurately, as a wave of dizziness hits him the instant he stands. His vision wavers, darkening at the edges, and he falls back into his seat, trying not to pass out.

"Oh dear," Georgiou says, sounding not at all sympathetic. "Guess I'll be flying after all."

Ash glares at her. "You're not authorised."

"Well, somebody has to rescue your little friend, and it's not going to be you given you can't even stand up without help."

Ash clenches his hands into fists, unable to stop them shaking. He hates to admit it, but she might have a point. "Fine," he says. "I'll send you the coordinates."

Georgiou actually isn't a bad pilot, extracting the shuttle skilfully from beneath the overhang, and it isn't long before they're coming up on the warehouse. The plan is simple; swoop in, grab Lara, and get away as fast as possible.

She appears from behind an air vent as they approach, waving her arms frantically as she sprints towards them. Georgiou sets the shuttle down, the doors opening automatically, and Ash reaches out to pull Lara in as she reaches them.

She's barely through the doors before Georgiou sets off again, pulling the shuttle into a steep ascent that nearly sends Lara flying. She straps herself hastily into a seat, and turns to Ash. "I didn't think we had any other agents running this mission."

"We don't," Ash tells her.

"Yet," Georgiou puts in, and Ash frowns.

"Lara, this is-"

"Captain Georgiou," Lara interrupts, looking stunned. "I thought you were dead."

"Not dead," Georgiou tells her. "Merely... away."

"Undercover?"

Georgiou flicks a look at Ash, looking amused. "Something like that."

"Do you have the files?" Ash breaks in, wanting to cut the conversation off before Lara starts questioning Georgiou on her 'undercover work'.

"Oh, yeah, hang on." Lara digs into a pocket and pulls out a data chip. "It's all here. Who, what, where, when, and a little how."

"Great," Ash says, taking the chip and weighing it in his palm. For a second the pain and exhaustion seems to disappear, washed away on a wave of accomplishment and relief. This information won't be everything, of course, but with a little luck it'll be enough to bring the smugglers down and make the Federation a little safer.

It might not be a huge victory, in the scheme of things, but he'll take it.

* * *

It isn't until they're several light years away from Artemis Prime that Ash fully allows himself to relax and accept that no one is following them. It'll be a few more hours before they reach Starbase 16, so Lara makes herself comfortable and falls asleep, head resting against the back of her seat. Ash eyes her enviously; the events of the day have left him exhausted, but he knows there's no way he'll be able to sleep until this is over.

He rises, shaking out the residual ache from his muscles, and moves to join Georgiou at the front of the shuttle.

"Thanks," he says awkwardly, as she turns to look at him. "I couldn't have done it without you."

"I know," she says bluntly, barely sparing him a glance.

A dozen possible responses pass through Ash's mind, but in the end he just sighs and drops down into the seat beside her. He stares out at the stars for a moment, feeling tired and adrift.

"Are they happy, in the future?" he asks quietly. *Is she happy?*

Georgiou tilts her head, considering. "It is very different," she says. "But they are adjusting."

He glances at her out of the corner of his eye. "And what about you?" he asks. "What are you going to do now?"

Georgiou gives him the 'you're an idiot' expression again. "I would have thought that was obvious," she says. "Or did you think I tracked you down for the fun of it?"

Ash stares at her. "You don't- You can't be saying you want to work for me."

"*With* you," she corrects. She shrugs and adds, "It isn't as if you don't need the help."

Ash supposes he can't really argue with that, given the circumstances. Still, there's help and *help*. "It won't be like it was before," he tells her. "The Section 31 you worked for is gone. There are a lot more rules now, checks and balances." He smiles a little and adds, "More white in the grey."

"I know," Georgiou replies. "That is why I'm offering. I want-" she seems to hesitate for a moment, before continuing firmly, "I want to help."

"Why?"

She shrugs. "Perhaps you Federation do-gooders are rubbing off on me." The words are dismissive, almost mocking, but with an undertone that makes Ash think they might not be entirely false.

Not for the first time, he finds himself wondering just what the hell happened to her in the future.

"Say I did agree to this," he begins cautiously. "You'd have to follow our rules. You can't kill anyone. Or torture them. Or even threaten to torture them."

"Done."

"And you'd have to obey my orders."

"The ones that make sense." She leans back in her seat, studying him. "So, do we have a deal?"

The words 'deal with the devil' come to Ash's mind, but he can't deny she is smart, and skilled, and resourceful, and a bunch of other things that made Leland or Control or whoever recruit her in the first place. If she's genuine about wanting to help, she'd be a major asset to him.

And if not, at least this is a devil he knows.

"I'd have to clear it with Starfleet," he hedges. "But if they agree, then yes. We have a deal."

Georgiou smiles, slow and sharp. "Excellent," she purrs. "Oh, this is going to be fun."

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