

Chapter 31

Consciousness didn't return quickly; Tristan had to fight his way through the grogginess to open his eyes. Then it was an act of pure defiance to get to his feet. He wasn't giving the universe the satisfaction of killing him while he was incapacitated.

Four walls, a ceiling, a floor, and two doors. This was a cell. It hadn't been intended as one—he could see where a bed had been cut from the floor, as well as a desk and dresser. Any room could be turned into a cell if the door had a strong lock on it.

He had trouble remembering how he'd gotten here, but since he had to fight to stay conscious, he'd been drugged. The room indicated this hadn't been a planned capture; he could still smell the melted metal the work had created.

Alex was on the floor, and before he thought about it, he was next to his human, checking for a pulse. He found it and breathed easier. Unconscious, but alive. The worst of his injuries had sealant applied to them, so their captors didn't want them dead, at least not immediately.

He explored the cell. The second door led to what had been a shower room, but only the sink and toilet remained. Everything else had been removed in a hurry, cut away from the surfaces, leaving jagged edges. Everything had been welded to the walls or floors. They were on a ship.

Alex had gotten injured when that gang had attacked, supported by well-trained mercs. There had been the explosion, he'd been blinded, and he'd chased another group of mercs who'd taken the biochemist with the formula to the virus. Then he'd been hit with an electro-stick.

That they'd taken her meant they worked for his employer's brother, his quarry. That they'd taken him and Alex meant...what? They might want to collect the bounties on top of their pay. He looked around. They had been a capture of opportunity. There had never been plans to hold prisoners.

He went back to Alex. He shook him gently. "Alex," he said softly, "you need to wake up." He hated to be gentle, but care was the price for honing such a sharp weapon. He didn't normally mind the ensuing fight, but they didn't have the time for it now. "You need to fight the drug, Alex."

A groan answered him.

"That's it." Tristan pulled him to the wall and sat him there.

"I'm going to kill them." His words were slurred, his eyes still closed. He tried to raise a hand, but he didn't have the strength yet.

"That is part of the plan. Can you stand?"

"Yes." Alex tried to move, but only flopped to the side. Tristan pulled him back so he was seated. "I'm okay," Alex hurried to say. "You don't have to worry about me."

"I never do." Tristan made his voice harsh, to hide the concern he was feeling. How much of the drug had they given him? How long ago?

“Good,” Alex replied, relief in his voice. “I’m not important.”

Tristan almost slapped him for saying that, the tightness around his heart catching him by surprise. Instead, he grabbed him by the arm and pulled him roughly. “I need you conscious, Alex, and able to fight.” He walked the human to the sink, put his head under it and activated it.

Alex gasped and Tristan held him under.

“I’m awake!” Alex said as he pulled his head up. “No need to drown me.” Tristan let him go and Alex leaned against the wall, still unsteady. He ran a hand over himself, checking all the locations where he’d have a knife—even along his belt clasp.

“They took my knives.” The undercurrent of anger in his voice made Tristan smile. “They’re dead.” He put his head back under the faucet and drank.

“I feel like those times you drugged me. Mouth dry, code in my head all scrambled.”

“Which is why I’m worried it was so hard for you to wake up. I have a tolerance, so they either used enough it could have killed you, or something unusual.” Tristan had to resort to lapping the stream of water. Like Alex, he was parched. If they’d left them a stopper for the sink, it would have been easier, but the drawback of being known to be a master killer, was that everyone thought he could use anything, even a stopper, to kill.

Alex ran a finger along one of the rough welder scars. “This isn’t a Law setup. You think those were Baran’s people? That they took us too?”

Tristan gave up trying to sate his thirst. “Yes. We’re on his ship.”

Alex looked around. “Right, the furniture’s welded in place.”

Now that he was fully conscious, Tristan could also feel the faint vibration in the floor. He did a quick search and, like Alex, they’d taken everything but his clothes.

“Any chance you took some of that enzyme before all this?” Alex asked, his fingers twitching. “I could really use something sharp to hold.”

Tristan snorted.

“I don’t have claws, okay? And knives I can throw. I’d love to see you do that with your claws.”

“You’ll get more soon enough.” Tristan grinned at him. “In the meantime, there’s something I need to take care of.” He took off his belt.

Alex rolled his eyes. “You do know that I can tell what you’re actually planning, right?” He took off his own belt.

“If you couldn’t read me when I don’t have a mask, after all these years, I wouldn’t have kept you around.” He slipped a claw under the clasp and forced it open. Alex unhooked the clasp off his belt, pocketed it and pulled the leather apart, revealing lengths of wires.

The tools in Tristan’s clasp were small, due to having to fit there, but he’d trained himself, and deftly removed the cover of the lock panel by the door.

“Can you talk to any computers?” he asked, already knowing the answer.

“They have a jammer going on. That subroutine in my implant to contact you if I’m unconscious must have activated, and they detected it.”

“Didn’t I tell you not to bother with that?” The panel was off, and he looked through the wires.

“You said that you wouldn’t come to my rescue, but you still need to know if I’ve been captured so you’ll know not to wait for me, and you’ll know if someone tries to impersonate me.”

“You think anyone could fool me?” He found the right wires. “Hand me the putty.”

“No, but why take the chance? I happen to know there are machines out there that can pluck information out of my brain.”

Tristan cut wires and used the putty to reattach them in the order he needed. “I never did find anything about that.” As he worked, the smell of burned flesh and fur drifted out of the panel.

“It was at Luminex. From what I remember of that session, it sounded like it was some sort of underground project. What would you do with one of those, anyway?”

“I’d find out your deepest desires,” Tristan answered, more focused on what he was doing than saying. There wasn’t much space within the panel to work with, and if he accidentally pulled the wrong wire, he might let the guards know what he was doing.

“You already know all of them,” Alex answered. “You are most of them.”

“The universe always holds something back.” He secured the wire to the contact with more of the putty and looked his work over.

“I’m not the universe. I could never keep anything from you.” He stepped before the door as Tristan closed the cover. “That’s how you turned me into your killer, after all.”

Tristan tapped the open command, and the door opened. Alex was through and fighting. Tristan followed him. One guard was already on the ground, gasping for breath. Another was backing up, trying to put distance between him and Alex, but Alex wasn't giving him the chance, pressing and striking at vital points.

The third guard was so focused on the fighting as he pulled out his gun he never noticed Tristan. He broke the guard's neck and took the Edeku out of his hand, turning it over. He didn't like this manufacturer; they'd gone for cheap over good. And this was the Z4P, not even the better of their line. The only thing this model had going for it was that it looked fancy. The gun of the poser, the wannabe gunman.

He aimed it at the gasping man, just as a knife lodged itself in his throat. Alex was dragging his opponent into the room. That man had the hilt of a knife protruding from under his jaw.

Alex looked at the weapon Tristan was holding, pulled a Kentric from the man's holster, and handed that to him. At least one of them had a decent weapon. He grabbed the other two by a leg and pulled them in.

Alex wiped the blood off the knives and attached their sheath to his belt. When Alex straightened, he was more relaxed. The holster for the Kentric DZ-21 went under Tristan's arm. The Brazely Enforcer went at his hip.

"We need the layout of the ship."

Alex took a datapad from one of the guards and when to work.

"What's the encryption like?" Tristan asked, doing a visual check of the Enforcer. It was a decent weapon, but it hadn't been maintained. There was grime everywhere. He pulled the power pack and cleaned it.

Alex snorted. "What encryption? You should see the stash of po—" He looked at Tristan. "Never mind, it wouldn't interest you. Got it?"

He held the datapad flat and pulled up the ship's map. There were a lot of corridors and rooms. A green dot slowly pulsed on the third level from the bottom.

"This is a lot bigger than I expected," Alex said. "I thought she said Baran left with a yacht."

"He changed ship." The number of rooms meant this had been a cruise ship at one time. Lounges lined the hull on multiple levels. It had been too long since he'd gone through the layout of any cruise ship—something else to add to his list of things to do once he got back home—but he thought this could be a Gentry, or a Century. It was definitely from Kaplan. They were the biggest cruise manufacturer and the oldest, and it would be simple for Baran to find an old, retired ship and buy it.

"Engineering is here." Alex indicated a large room one level below them, closer to the stern of the ship.

"Unless you can bypass the jammer, going there will not do any good. Is there an engineer's schematic of the ship on there?"

Alex shook his head.

With that, he could have confirmed which model this was and worked out a way to take control away from his quarry. "The bridge will have all the controls we need, as well as our quarry. It will also have fewer people there. Cruise ships are built to require minimal supervision so the staff can see to the passengers. Our quarry, three crew members at most, to watch over the systems. So long as we don't advertise our approach, we'll be able to take over the ship without trouble."

Alex smiled and pulled out a knife. "Quick and silent death. I can do that."

Tristan zoomed in until he could see the maintenance accesses, although on this map they were marked as emergency accesses. They might not be able to make it the ten levels to the bridge, but it would be more discreet than using the lifts and constantly killing people. Eventually his quarry would notice they were missing.

He looked at the blood in the corridor around their door. Nothing to be done about it. He headed for the closest access and he sent Alex in ahead while he looked at the tight crawlspace.

These hadn't been designed for someone like him. He pushed his discomfort aside and entered it. It only felt like he'd get stuck anytime the walls scraped his shoulders. He named each component he came across, down to their design number, as a distraction.

They made it up two levels and toward the bow before they had to exit. Definitely an older model, back from before they decided interconnecting all the maintenance crawlspaces was worth losing a few rooms in the redesign.

Tristan didn't take the time to catch his breath. As soon as he was out, they were moving. They encountered two mercs on the way to the next access. Alex killed one before the surprise could register on the man's face, and put his body in the closest cabin. Tristan had his arm around the other merc's neck, choking him as he groped for his gun—another DZ-21. He put this one under his other arm. Alex added two knives to his belt.

Tristan went first at the next access, to prove to the universe he wasn't scared of the narrow crawlspaces. They made it up three levels.

It took two more changes of access until they reached the top level, and they had to kill three guards at their door, two pairs—doing patrols?—and a lone merc on his way to something no longer important. The minimum crew required to operate such a cruise ship was between twenty and thirty, depending on the model. So thirty, plus the team that had been planetside. He hadn't been able to tell how many there were, so he estimated ten—forty total.

This meant that even if he wanted to protect himself, the planetside team was what he'd have to work with. The three guards had to have been part of that. The other five he couldn't be sure, so seven potential guards with his quarry, if he expected trouble.

They reached the bridge without encountering anyone. The panel indicated the door was unlocked. He stood before it, a gun in each hand and Alex at his shoulder. He tapped the command, raised his guns, and took a step forward.

Only to stop in the doorway.

The bridge was filled with mercs, shoulder to shoulder, one row on their knees guns drawn, the other behind them rifles at the shoulder. A quick count put them at above thirty mercs, all in gray armor.

The only one who didn't fit was the man seated in the captain's chair. "You took your sweet time getting here."

Alex raised an eyebrow. Tristan shook his head. An attack now was suicide.

"Did you really think you could move about my ship without me knowing about it?" The man looked enough like the hologram his employer had shown him to be recognizable.

"Baran."

The man stood. "So you know my name."

He no longer had that relaxed expression, or the short auburn hair. In the holo his quarry had looked like what he had been—a wealthy, happy man. He'd lost the layer of fat that had covered his muscles; he looked close to gaunt and his white uniform with gold trim hung loose. His eyes were hard as he studied Tristan and Alex.

"And who might you be, that you know me?"

"Your sister hired me to bring you back home."

He raised a thin eyebrow. "Really? Dear Dalia wants me to come home? Funny, I don't remember her calling me about that."

"Could be because you've blocked her?" Alex asked.

He glanced at Alex, then back to Tristan. It was always this way when they were together. People dismissed Alex as insignificant, the lesser threat. Tristan had wanted it that way.

"How about you try again. What were you doing at that lab? Why were you after my biochemist?"

"As a way of getting to you."

"Get to me?" The act of surprise was pathetic. "Right, to bring me home. You could have tried calling."

"My job isn't to ask you to go home. It's to take you there regardless of whatever your other plans are."

"So you know I have plans." He smiled and sat. "Of course you do. After all, you're here to keep me from achieving them, aren't you? Out of curiosity, why aren't you simply killing me right now? You have two guns."

Tristan looked at all the other mercs in the room. "Because I didn't come here to die. And your sister wants you returned alive—paid for it."

"That would imply that without that, you would just kill me."

Tristan smiled, showing teeth, and the man recoiled. "She did hire me because I have a reputation for not leaving anyone alive. But I gave her the option to make sure at least one person lived. She picked you."

"But you said she wanted me to come home." The man was such a bad actor, Tristan wondered why he bothered.

"It would be why she picked you to be the sole survivor." Footsteps approached in the distance. Tristan glanced in that direction. More mercs approaching. A lot of them.

Tristan had been off in his estimation. His quarry had planned for an assault. He'd known his sister would send someone to stop him. There were already up to fifty mercs in the bridge and corridor, how many more did he have in reserve? Using the size of the ship, he could be dealing with hundreds.

The man leaned on an elbow. "You know, I don't believe you. You aren't a very good liar, are you?"

Alex snickered.

The man looked at him and again dismissed him.

“I’m going to tell you why you’re really here. Oh, I have no doubt you spoke with my dear sister. Ever since she found out what I know she’s been obsessed with getting it before me. She hired you to steal it. She was always jealous of me and my family. Now that they’re gone, she wants to take the only thing I have left.”

“You mean killing the mercenaries who killed them?”

“Yes.” The anger stretched the word into a hiss.

“You can do that once I take you back. I really don’t care what happens afterward, you’re simply not doing it now.”

“You will not stop me!” The man was on his feet, face red. “You will tell me the truth! Why are you here?”

“I already told—”

“Not you.” His quarry smoothed down his jacket as he calmed himself. “I have no doubt you can withstand any interrogation, but him?” He looked at Alex. “You are going to tell me everything I want to know. I am certain of it.”

Fear froze Tristan, and he couldn’t react as four men surrounded Alex and began taking the knives off him. Alex looked at him, waiting for a signal, but Tristan couldn’t give it. This was beyond not having the advantage.

He didn’t say anything out loud as they escorted Alex away, but mentally he ordered Alex to survive this. If he didn’t, Tristan was going to kill him himself.

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