

## Chapter 26

By the look of it, this was a housing building. It was even in good enough condition that if Tristan didn't know what it was actually used for, he could think the occasional person coming and going was a tenant. Of course, even without the information he'd acquired, the hours he and Alex had spent on the roof of the opposing building, noting how anyone who went in only stayed a few minutes before leaving, would have told him this was something else.

"How many people are we dealing with?" Alex asked.

"Based on the information I collected, the leader, two enforcers, and a coercionist."

"That isn't much of a gang."

"You don't need a lot of people to use a fabricator."

"Do we kill them? Or are we using them to draw out Baran?"

"They stay alive until you confirm those idiots haven't released the virus."

"If they have?"

"Then I'll test just how much stress the virus can handle, then I'm going back to the old man and he had better be healed, because he will have to make me a cure."

"Somehow I don't think that woman's going to be happy with you if you just barge in."

"I don't care. She wants to die, that's her decision. I am not giving the universe that satisfaction." The woman he'd watch go in exited the building. "What's the status of the surrounding area?"

Alex checked his datapad. "Still clear. I have the city's cameras over three blocks around us on a randomized cycle; we won't show up. My program hasn't registered anyone matching the uniform Baran's people were wearing. Also no one in green and white."

Tristan nodded. He'd done a circuit of the neighborhood and confirmed no one had been hiding, waiting for him. Things hadn't changed since then, good. He headed down, then crossed the road to the building. Alex fell in step behind him.

The door opened at the press of a button. On the other side was what humans would consider a cozy lobby with a man pretending to be half asleep in one of the seats. He was good—hardly tensed as they entered, his hand not even twitching toward the gun in the holster under his arm.

He did look up when Tristan walked by him. "Can I help you?" The voice was hard, meant to mean "stop right there".

"No."

The man started standing, then grunted back in the chair from Alex's punch. The man reached for his bleeding nose, but Alex punched him in the stomach then across the jaw, leaving him unmoving.

"Bring him."

Tristan stopped in front of the lift's doors. He ran a finger down the seam and slammed the point of a knife in it. He worked it until they moved apart enough he could slide the knife up. It caught on the manual emergency unlock. He applied strength until it moved up and clicked.

The doors opened, revealing that the back of the lift's cage had been cut away and the wall removed, forming a passage leading further into the building.

It wasn't on the plans Alex had found, which included the ordinance condemning it. It had been hidden in the thin space of code between public access and the fully automated system layer, so that no one casually looking would come across it, but the automated city systems would still register it as condemned, so not order any inspection. It was a short-term solution, even if it looked like the coercionist who had done the job thought it was long-term.

Alex had unearthed hidden purchases, as well as the removal of equipment. The new owners had made sure the building was sound, while getting rid of anything they didn't need or want. The timing told him this group owned the building—weeks since the fabricator had been stolen and days since his informant had told him it had been sold to this group. Alex had been right; the thieves had been after quick profits instead of using it.

The thieves hadn't realized how profitable the fabricator could be, but the buyer had, considering the money he'd invested in the building, not to say what he'd paid for it. They'd made themselves a quiet little base of operations from which to amass a fortune.

Too bad for them, they weren't going to get to enjoy any of it.

The corridor led to a large room with the fabricator on one side, tables in the middle, and coolers on the other side. A woman got out of her chair, reaching under her jacket for a gun. Tristan punched her hard enough to send her staggering back.

"Her too."

The noise attracted the attention of the three other people in the room. Tristan sighed. His informant hadn't been accurate. If he were still alive, Tristan would have to go back and impress on him the need for precision.

"Unless it's missed your notice," he said in a serious but calm tone, "you're in trouble. If one of you pulls a weapon, they die. You work with me and you get to live through this."

A man in a light brown suit stood. "You got no business getting in here and roughing up my employees." His suit fit him perfectly. His black hair was trimmed short, almost to military standard. The leader. Someone who thought himself as being more corporate than a drug supplier.

Tristan smiled. "No one's been roughed up yet." He added a little teeth to the smile. "Until limbs get broken, or ripped out, you can be sure I'm being gentle with you. Now, unless you want me to start getting rough, you're going to tell your employees to go sit in front of the coolers." He motioned for Alex to drop his packages there.

"I want some assurance that you're not going to hurt anyone. Whoever your boss is, I haven't done anything to piss them off. I've worked out with Dorfetyr what I'm allowed to make, where I'm allowed to sell it, and his cut of my profits. If this is a takeover, you really need to take this up with him."

Tristan crossed his arms over his chest. "You haven't told anyone to sit down. If you're under the impression this is a negotiation, let me explain that I do that by ripping out limbs. You're the closest to me, so let me know if negotiating is really your intention."

The coercionist got up from behind the computer and headed to the cooler. The woman in the lab coat by the table simply looked at what was happening, confused. The man before Tristan tried to glare him down. Tristan smiled broadly, with a full showing of sharp teeth. It had the same effect on this man as it did with any humans faced by such a predatory grin.

He flinched and backed away. "Mary, join Etienne. Don't make a fuss. I'm sure we can come to some sort of arrangement without anyone losing limbs."

"You too," Tristan told him. This time the man didn't protest or try to assert some form of dominance. Tristan motioned Alex to the fabricator before joining his five prisoners and crouching before them.

He looked at them, each to be a corpse in a few minutes—not that they knew that—and smiled gently. "Here's how it's going to go. When those two wake up, you are going to control them. If I need to put them down again, it will be permanent."

The man in the suit nodded.

"First off, this isn't a takeover. I'm not here to make you disappear or use you to teach a lesson to whomever that name you mentioned his."

The statement caused the two men to relax. The woman was still confused by it all. Tristan loved hope;

it was such a powerful weapon, such a deadly one.

"I am here for answers to questions. So I will ask a question, and you will answer it. If I believe you, we move on to the next one. If I don't, I hurt someone until I get an answer I believe. Now, since I need you to be able to answer me, you're not the one I'll hurt. So keep that in mind when you consider lying to me. You will be responsible for how much pain your employees suffer. Is that clear?"

The man nodded, as did the other two.

The guard Alex punched groaned and stirred. Immediately the man in the suit was talking to him. Tristan remained silent until he was done. The guard was awake and glaring death, but otherwise not moving.

"Very good. First question: how did you become aware of the fabricator?"

"That's what you're after?" Their leader looked over Tristan's shoulder. "Hey! What are you doing? Get away from that."

Tristan gave an exaggerated sigh. "You're going to want to focus, unless you want someone to lose a limb. You don't want that to happen, trust me. I've seen it before; it isn't pleasant."

The man pulled his legs to him.

"Not you, don't worry. I told you. One of them. What I'm after really shouldn't matter to you, unless I decide it's a limb, then it's going to matter a great deal, so how about we try not to get to that point?"

"I got a tip," the coercionist said.

"Etienne!"

"Hey, your limbs might be safe, but not mine, and I believe him when he says he's going to rip them out." He had a different accent from the man in the suit, who was definitely a local. It was faint, so he'd been here for a while.

Tristan fixed his gaze on the coercionist. "You were informed the fabricator was in the warehouse?"

"No, I don't know anything about any warehouse. A girl I know told me there'd been this big score by the Razer's Back. Something I might be interested in. As usual she was kind of vague, so I had to make my way inside their computer. Those things are a mess."

"That's how you found out about the fabricator?"

"That's not *a* fabricator, that's *the* fabricator. They'd just started examining it, looking for an ID so they could figure out how much to ask for it. They'd taken pictures and I could tell immediately that was a custom job. I know some about those from working with Zack. As they took more and more pictures, I could tell that was a marvel. I told Zack, and the moment they made it available—at a ridiculously low price because they had no idea what they had—we got it."

"Then," their leader continued, "I had to figure out if he'd gotten me to buy junk or something actually worthwhile. You can't imagine how stressed I was. If this thing didn't pan out I had no idea how I'd repay Dor —"

"Focus," Tristan said.

"Right. I brought portable power and got it running. Etienne cracked it in no time, but he knows nothing about chemistry. Still, it did work, and it's a giant fabricator, so I'd be able to recoup my—"

"We have a problem," Alex called.

"They printed it?" Tristan called without turning.

"No, the formula's gone."

"Erased?"

"Extracted."

Tristan looked at the coercionist.

"Don't look at me. What am I going to do with that stuff? The code I work with his digital, not organic."

"Can the Razer's Back have taken it out?"

"No way," the man said, "I was in their system. I'd know if they had."

Tristan saw the chemist flinch, and Alex crouched before her.

"Mary, right?" he asked.

She nodded.

"How'd you get mixed up in this? We were only expecting these four." She flinched when he touched the side of her head. "You should answer me. If my partner needs to ask the question, pain usually follows." His fingers prodded through her long auburn hair.

"I-I've known Zack for a while. Not as part of this; we were at university together. I'm a biochemist. He called me so I could look over the formulas that came with the fabricator. Etienne had worked out it was all

organic. There was nothing in there Zack could use or be interested in—just a couple of really exotic things even I didn't get. It was all I was expecting to do, but Zack asked me to stay on; he figured that I could make him some custom stuff, make him stand out among the other dealers."

"You were looking for ways around the limits put on you," Tristan told the man.

He shrugged. "Hey, if he doesn't know what it is, he can't keep me from selling it."

"Why did you remove what was in its memory?"

"It—" Tristan caught her glancing at him out the corner of his eye. "We needed the space for our own recipes."

"Processing enhancer?" Alex asked. Tristan looked at her. Alex had parted her hair on the side to reveal a rectangular section where it was missing.

She gave a small smile. "How did you know?"

"A few of the students at my school got expelled for having them. They weren't allowed."

"They didn't mind here. I had to go into debt to get it, but it made all the difference. With it I could have passed all my classes, if not for—"

"How much memory came with it?" Alex interrupted.

"Oh, a lot. I was able to get all the material for my classes in without—" She paled as what she'd admitted registered.

Alex tapped the patch of skin. "It's in here, isn't it?"

She opened her mouth, but before she could say anything, the lights went out.

Then explosions lit the room.

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