

Chapter 33

Derek's eyes swept through the empty building. Wood floors, no furniture, gabled ceiling. Simple, sturdy construction. He spotted the lift, built into the back right-hand corner of the room. Its gleaming metal door stood in stark contrast with the rest of the rustic interior.

He hesitated for a brief moment and then approached. Touching the call button, he took a breath.

"I'm heading into the lift," he said into his open com.

His stomach plunged as the car dropped. Reece's ground-penetrating radar had revealed an extensive underground structure and established that the farmhouse was one of two points of entry. The other was located a couple of miles away, somewhere inside a Kythiran military base.

The fact that Trident likely had someone in the local military on their payroll made the whole team twitchy. Derek could be walking into a data storage facility with a skeleton crew, or a full-scale hidden operations center. He prayed it was the former.

When the lift stopped, he already had his gun up and ready. The door slid open. A single person greeted him, just as the courier had promised.

"Hands where I can see them," Derek said, stepping out of the lift.

The man raised his eyebrows and his hands, but otherwise kept his composure.

"Very slowly, put your weapon on the ground and kick it over to me." The courier hadn't seen a weapon, but there was no way this guy didn't have one.

Dark, curious eyes bored into Derek's. Slowly, the man reached around to his back and pulled out his sidearm. He squatted, placed it on the ground, and kicked it over to Derek.

With one hand, Derek fished a set of restraints from his pocket and tossed them over. "Put these on," he ordered.

The man complied. His cold gaze didn't falter. "You'll never get out of here," he warned.

"We'll see," Derek answered. He approached the man cautiously, staying just out of his physical reach. Even restrained, Derek knew he was still a threat. "I need access to the main data files. And obviously, I'd like us to avoid detection."

"Follow me. We'll take the long way around."

Derek followed through quiet, artificially lit corridors. They stopped in front of another metal door. Another panel and retinal scanner.

The prisoner stepped forward, but Derek pressed the gun against his skull. "How many people are inside?"

The man looked over his shoulder and gave Derek an appraising look. "Two analysts."

Derek couldn't hesitate. "Do it," he ordered.

As soon as the door slid open, Derek shoved the man inside with such force that he stumbled to the ground. Derek's eyes darted around the room. Two startled bodies jumped up from their chairs. With a steady hand, he shot first one, then the other. They crumpled to the ground.

He turned back to his prisoner. "Stay down until I tell you to move."

From the way the man studied him, Derek could tell he was reassessing, calculating. "You're a field agent," his prisoner said.

Derek didn't acknowledge him. Gun still up, he shook off his pack and lowered it to the ground. With one hand, he pulled out a tablet and thin cable. He briefly wished Drew were here. He needed a second set of eyes and hands, but he hadn't been willing to risk anyone else.

"Get up. Sit at one of the workstations."

The man did as he was told. With his hands still cuffed in front of him, he grabbed the body that had fallen backward over the chair, tossed it to the ground, and then took a seat.

“What next, boss?” he asked, the whisper of a grin curling his lips.

“I’m going to take off the restraints, and you’re going to copy some files for me.”

“Sure thing.”

Derek unlocked the restraints, still one-handed, and kept the gun trained on his opponent’s temple.

“Take the tablet and connect it.”

Briefly, Derek thought he’d have to shoot his prisoner as soon as they entered the room, but he was counting on the fact the other man wanted to know what he was after. If the Trident operative made his move too soon, he might lose the opportunity to gather valuable intel in real time. So, the man was letting things play out a little longer. It’s what Derek would do in his position.

“It’s connected. I have access to the mainframe.”

“On the tablet, there’s a list. Search by those keywords only and copy the related files onto the tablet.”

Reece knew there would be volumes of data to sift through, so he’d wisely created a list of names including members of the Alliance General Council, Security Council, Inter-Planetary Oversight Division, and upper-level military. If any of those officials had files from Trident’s black site associated with them, they were likely suspect.

The operative keyed in the list of names, glancing once at Derek with dawning understanding in his eyes.

“The program is cross-referencing and downloading now. I’ll let you know when it’s finished.”

Derek watched data scroll across the screen. By the number of hits, he knew they’d found what they were looking for. As the files downloaded onto Derek’s tablet, the operative turned slightly in his chair, hands folded in his lap.

“Are you Alliance Intelligence? I was too for a while. You’d probably have more fun working for us. You’d make more money too. And I like your style,” he said, looking back and forth between the two bodies.

“Shut up.”

“Sure.” He swiveled back to face the screens.

Seconds ticked by. Derek stayed frozen in place until the screen stopped blinking.

“There you go. All the files we have on the big, bad government officials.”

“Disconnect the tablet and then back away from the workstation.”

Before Derek could react, the operative’s fingers connected with the keyboard. Just a few strokes, but it was enough. In the distance, an alarm began to blare.

“Fuck.”

He could hear the grin in the other man’s voice before he turned around. “I told you you’d never get out of here.”

A second security door slid into place over the first.

“Reece?” Derek knew his voice sounded more desperate than he intended.

“I’ve got everything,” Reece said into his ear.

Derek breathed a small sigh of relief and turned back to the operative. “Even if I don’t get out of here, the files already have.”

The operative's face shifted from surprise to anger in a matter of seconds. Derek's brief moment of satisfaction transformed just as quickly when the other man sprang from his chair, knocked the gun from Derek's grasp, and tackled him to the ground.

Flat on his back and struggling to pull air into his lungs, he missed his chance to deflect the first punch. It came fast, connecting solidly with his jaw. The metallic taste of blood filled his mouth.

When his opponent drew back for another swing, Derek rolled hard to the right, throwing the other man off. He kicked upward and felt his boot meet with a kneecap. Scrambling to his hands and knees, Derek lunged for his gun, only to be tackled again. This time the operative rolled Derek over and put both hands around his neck.

Derek's first instinct was to grab at the hands, pry the fingers loose. Black spots dappled his vision. The grip around his neck wouldn't budge. He had no leverage to punch or kick. Forcing his mind to calm, he reached up and dug his thumbs into the other man's eyes.

It took longer than Derek expected for the hands to loosen. When they did, he pushed away hard and crawled toward his gun. Nauseous and dizzy, he blinked to clear his vision. Grabbing his gun, he stumbled to his feet and turned toward his opponent.

His first shot went slightly wide, hitting the operative's shoulder. Derek moved closer, steadier with each step. The next shot blew a hole straight through the man's chest.

"Derek!"

Frantic voices echoed in his head.

"What the hell is happening in there?"

He backed up into the wall and let himself slide to the ground. As the adrenaline fled from his body, he began to shake.

“He triggered an alarm. I’m trapped in the server room.”

“We’ll figure a way to get you out of there,” Drew said, the pitch of his voice an octave higher than usual.

“No, you won’t.”

“We’re not leaving you,” Drew insisted.

“Yes, you are. That’s an order. There is no way you can get me out of here. But you can get those files to Minister Bonnaire.”

“Don’t make me do this,” Drew pleaded.

“Finish the mission, Drew.”

The silence on the other end of the com stretched for several heartbeats.

“Don’t fucking die, Derek. We’ll find you. Whatever it takes,” Drew promised.

Picking the tiny communication device from his temple, Derek crushed it in his fingers. Then, placing his gun on the ground in front of him, he leaned his head back onto the cold metal door and waited.