

Captured

Commander Crag Prothule groaned as consciousness returned to him. He tried to lift his hands to massage away the dull headache that throbbed behind his eyes, but quickly realized that his hands were shackled behind his back.

He forced his eyes open, and they were immediately assaulted by brilliant light which forced him to squeeze them shut once more. But the person who had nudged him awake did not allow him to retreat to the comforting darkness of unconsciousness. "Wakey-wakey, Collective-scum."

The words were punctuated with a sudden sharp pain in his stomach, as an unseen boot impacted against his abdomen with a dull thud. He groaned again, and tried to roll over, but was instead hauled roughly to his feet.

He was forced to open his eyes once more as he was shoved unceremoniously out of the small cell he had awakened in. The narrow hallway was lined with doors equipped with shock-bars. Though Crag could see through the bars, the light in the cells made his vision blur. Instead, he focused his attention on the ground in front of him as he struggled to get his headache in check.

As he looked down, he noticed that the bars of the cell across from his had been deactivated. He could hear the voice of Jean Tureau, his second in command, cursing their captors. Crag was prodded forward by what felt like the barrel of a blaster rifle, but not before he heard a heavy thud coming from Jean's cell, and his curses abruptly ceased. A quick glance behind him showed the sniper's limp form being dragged out of the cell.

Silence fell heavily over the narrow hallway, broken only by the steady thud of their footsteps as they made their way through the maze-like corridors. Crag kept his head lowered, but as his vision cleared he began to take note of his surroundings.

Gradually, the details began to come together. They were aboard a ship, and the distant hum of heavy engines told him that it was in flight. His escorts wore uniforms that marked them as members of the Arconan Expeditionary Force. So, he and his team had been captured by members of the Dark Brotherhood.

The Commander's thoughts raced as he considered the implications of his situation. He and his men were hostages. What were their intentions? Did they mean to torture them for information? Execute them? Or perhaps they hoped to trade him and his men for some of the Force-users that the Collective held prisoner? He did not have enough information. Though he wanted desperately to fight back against his guards, he had to also think about his men. He had to wait, to bide his time, comply with his captors, and search for a way to free himself and his men.

At last, they arrived at what appeared to be a medical bay. The room had a sterile appearance to it, and the faint smell of chemicals and cleaning agents filled the air. Several metal tables

stood in the center of the room, their presence made more unnerving by the fact that each was outfitted by study restraints.

The sight of the room nearly caused Crag's resolve to falter. He had heard stories of the torments suffered by other members of the Collective at the hands of the Brotherhood. But though his stomach felt as if it was full of butterflies, he refused to let his anxiety show on his face.

You've trained for this, he told himself sternly as he forced his nervousness away. He and his men were elite members of their faction. They specialized in scouting and initial skirmishes with the enemy, often without the benefit of backup. Of course, they had known the risks, and all had undergone training to resist torture and interrogation. As commander of the team, it was his duty to set an example for his men, even if the only one present was not conscious.

Though he played the role of the passive prisoner, his eyes constantly moved around the room, searching for anything he could use as a weapon. Even a scalpel would do. But his guards were diligent to keep him well away from the tables that bore the medical equipment. He was led to one of the tables and secured to it by one of the guards, even as the second one kept his blaster rifled trained steadily on him. The second pair of guards were similarly securing Jean, using the same level of caution despite the fact that the man was still unconscious. Once both members of the Collective were securely restrained, the guards filed out without a word.

Silence filled the room. Crag focused on breathing slowly and deeply as he steeled himself for what was to come. He would not break. He would not dishonor himself in front of Jean. This became a mantra that he repeated over and over to himself.

After what felt like hours, the quiet was broken by a quiet groan. Crag turned his head to see Jean shifting in his restraints and blinking his eyes blearily at the bright light.

"All right there, Jean?"

"Com'n'dr?" Jean slurred. "Izzat you? What's happening?"

"Nothing good," Crag replied, craning his head to get a better look at his companion. "What do you remember?"

A long silence followed as Jean screwed his face up in a look of concentration. When he spoke again, his words had lost much of their slur. "We were out on a foray... and there was some sort of gas... I saw Sully go down, and Targent too..."

"We were attacked," Crag supplied.

“Yeah... yeah, that’s right. I saw Sully go down, and Mikey too. And...” Jean’s words trailed off as his memories returned. “I woke up and there were these two guys standing over me. I tried to punch one and then...”

“Yeah, you’re gonna have a hell of a shiner tomorrow,” Crag said with a ghost of a smile, relieved that there didn’t appear to be much in way of brain damage.

Jean looked around, slowly taking in his surroundings. “Seven hells, Commander. We’ve been captured?” His voice was edged with panic.

“Seems that way,” Crag replied.

“Awww, hell. Aww, hell! Commander, what’re we gonna do? We’re gonna die, aren’t we? Those bastards are gonna kill us!”

Jean’s breathing was coming more and more rapidly. Crag could practically feel the man’s mounting panic. “Listen here, soldier!” He snapped, trying to break Jean’s train of thought. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the man’s spine straighten as years of training came to the fore. “They might kill us, they might not. They might be just trying to scare us. So here’s what you’re gonna do. You’re gonna keep your ears and your eyes open, and your mouth shut. Don’t tell ‘em a damned thing, but stay alert for a way to get out of this. You got it?”

“Yes, sir,” Jean replied, almost out of reflex. His voice had lost its panicky edge, but there was still a tremulous quality to it.

Crag thought about saying something more, some empty platitudes about how they were going to get through this. But he held his tongue. Jean wasn’t stupid; he knew damned well that they probably weren’t going to survive. Instead, he let the silence lapse between them, allowing Jean to steel himself for what was to come.

After what seemed like an eternity, the blast doors slid open and two people entered the room. They were conferring with each other quietly in a language that Crag did not recognize.

They were an unusual pair: A curvy redhead in an expensive-looking dress and a slender Chiss in a medic’s uniform. Crag studied them both intently, watching as the woman moved to recline in a chair near the door as she produced a datapad from the folds of her cloak. The Chiss, meanwhile, pulled a penlight from one of his pockets and moved to stand in front of the Commander.

“How are we feeling?” the Chiss asked with a note of false sincerity in his voice as he shone the small flashlight into Crag’s face. The Commander bit back a retort and only glared into his captor’s crimson eyes. If the Chiss was unnerved by Crag’s ferocious expression, he did not show it. He pressed on. “Do you have a headache? Photosensitivity? These are all side effects

of the gas we used to disable you and your team and should pass within a few hours. Though it was interesting to note that it had a remarkably adverse effect on the Kiffar members of your team. I am looking forward to performing autopsies on them to determine what went wrong.”

Crag felt his jaw tighten and saw Jean give a start out of the corner of his eye. Sully and Targent had both been Kiffar.

“You made that gas?” Crag asked tightly.

“Indeed I did. I must say, I impressed myself with the finished product. It turned out to be much more effective than I had anticipated. Not bad for something I concocted only a few hours notice,” the Chiss replied with a self-satisfied chuckle.

“I’m gonna wipe that smirk off your face, schutta-son,” Crag growled.

“Ahh yes. You are the commander of those men, correct? No doubt you feel some measure of paternalistic affection for them. Well, you may take comfort in knowing that their deaths contributed to the advancement of scientific knowledge.”

Crag started to reply but was cut off by the redhead. “Darling, you are being remarkably chatty. I thought the whole reason for this exercise was to get *them* to talk.”

Hearing her words, the Commander clamped his jaws shut as he tried to master his temper. But he could not stop himself from glaring his hatred and defiance at the Chiss.

But the medic did not look unnerved. He sighed and shook his head as he moved toward one of the tables. “Really, my dear, try to have some appreciation for the moment. The scientific body of knowledge has been advanced, and only two people died in the process. An acceptable price for a successful experiment.” As he spoke, he selected a brown bottle from the table and began to draw up a syringe full of the yellowish substance it contained.

“If you say so, darling,” the woman replied as she rolled her eyes at the Chiss’s back. “Even still, perhaps we should move on. I do believe these men are becoming bored with your gloating. I certainly am.”

The Chiss tsked quietly but did not look particularly annoyed. He turned back to the restrained men and studied them both in turn. “I suppose we must. The sooner we get started, the sooner I can move on to those Kiffar.” A slow grin spread across his face as he approached Crag. “Since you seem to be the more talkative one, we will start with you. Now, this might hurt a little.”

As it turned out, it hurt more than a little. The question session that followed was agonizing. Every few minutes brought fresh agony and more questions, and Crag struggled under the onslaught. His only respite was when the Chiss turned his attention to Jean. He was grateful for

those brief moments that were free of pain, but his subordinate's screams of pain tainted his relief with guilt.

It was impossible to tell how long the interrogation session lasted, but Crag and Jean were finally dragged back to their cells. As they moved down the narrow hallway, Crag glanced in each of the cells in turn, and what he saw confirmed what he learned before the questioning started. All of his men were accounted for; all except the two Kiffar.

But there was no respite to be had in the cells. The brilliant light remained on at all hours. That, combined with intermittent high-pitched noises and periodic shocks delivered through the floor prevented sleep from coming. Even if they could sleep, the cells were too small to allow a full-grown man to lay down with any semblance of comfort.

Without any way to sleep, time ceased to have any real meaning. The haze of exhaustion was broken only by the periodic shocks, occasional meals consisting of some sort of weak stew, and the interrogation sessions.

Two by two, the Collective prisoners were escorted for questioning. Crag himself was brought back for questioning three more times after the first session. It was always the same: the Chiss injecting him with strange drugs and chemicals and asking frequent questions, while the redhead reclined nearby, looking bored and occasionally making notes on her datapad.

At first, Crag was determined to hold out, to resist questioning even if it killed him. But his first encounter quickly made him realize that his efforts would ultimately be futile. He tried everything he could think of: spitting insults at his captors to make them angry enough to kill him, retreating within his mind, turning his thoughts to the example he had to set for his men. Nothing was effective, and every answer he blurted out to forestall more agony brought a fresh wave of shame as he dishonored himself in front of his squad. It was cold comfort to realize that he was only doing marginally better than his men.

Just when he thought he could not take any more, when death would be a welcome release, the lights went out. The cells were plunged into darkness, leaving only colored spots dancing in front of his eyes. He peered at the door and saw that the shock bars had been deactivated as well. Further investigation proved it was the same with all of the cells. Crag peered out cautiously and saw that one or two of his men were doing the same.

"Commander?" Turnell hissed, his voice raspy from thirst and screaming. "What's happening?"

"I... I don't know..." Crag replied hesitantly. Was this a trick? Was there a squad of soldiers waiting to shoot them if they tried to escape? At this point, would death be that bad? Decision made, he straightened and emerged from his cell. "But I know an opportunity when I see one. Get the men up. We're leaving."

All the hallways were dark, empty and eerily silent. The Collective soldiers moved slowly, partly from caution and partly because exhaustion and soreness hampered their movements. They reached the hangar with little incident; after that, it was a simple matter of stealing a ship to get home. Perhaps it was sheer mental fatigue or some Force-user trick, but none of them noticed the redhead following behind them, observing their escape with keen interest and a wicked smile.

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“Are you frakkin’ nuts? What do you mean you let them escape?!” Qyreia demanded. Her frustration was clear even through the small holographic image that she was communicating through.

“There is no need to shout, my hearing is perfectly fine,” Rhyllance replied coolly. “And I meant exactly what I said. We retrieved as much useful information as I could, and then we let them go. They were remarkably helpful, given the right impetus.”

“Yeah, I’m still unclear on that. Why in the hell would you just let them go?” Q snapped.

“Because they will be so much more useful to us out in the field, darling,” Lucine spoke up. “Rhyllance’s drug cocktails and the sleep deprivation made their minds much more malleable. I had time to layer so many suggestions within their subconscious that, once they return to their base, they will basically act on my orders without realizing it.”

“Of course, it would have simply been easier to install one of my control chips. Faster too,” the Chiss said.

“But a chip can easily be found, and I have no doubt they will be subjected to rigorous tests when they return. No one will be able to see what I did on any scan,” Lucine replied with a toss of her auburn curls. “For all intents and purposes, they are mine now. I must admit, I am so looking forward to seeing them in action when we attack their base.”