

Chapter 24

“Braunda, start breathing,” Katherine said in as understanding a tone as she could manage. Keeping her people from having panic attacks wasn’t her job, especially not when she’d just told Braunda she wasn’t in any trouble. “It’s all okay.”

So Martin had managed to give her the slip; that was for the best. Having Martin at large made her story more credible. Once the Law started looking, there would be sightings. She’d just have to be careful to make sure Martin wasn’t caught by any of them.

“Braunda,” she snapped as the woman went on apologizing for her failure. “If you don’t shut up, I’m sending Jurrin to get you, got that? I will say this one last time. You did not fail. Yes, this was unforeseen, but it doesn’t affect the mission. Now, you know where to meet with the others.”

“This isn’t wise,” Armiln said. “You shouldn’t go in alone.”

“We go in mass, we scare them and lose any chance at the information they might have. But keep everyone ready in case I give the signal.”

“We go in without weapons, the odds of this turning out well are low.”

“Armiln, these guys aren’t going to respond well to anything they see as an attack. Unless you can give me something I can use, this is the best course I can see.”

“Without going in and seeing how they work, I don’t have any data to work with. I’m too distinctive to simply walk in, and any broadcasting device we sneak in would be detected, destroyed, and cause them to lock down the place tight.” He smiled. “I still think this is a mistake.”

“Well, if this blows up in my face, you get to tell me, ‘I told you so’. Keep everyone in line, hopefully this won’t take long.”

“Yes, Boss.”

She stepped around the warehouse and headed toward another one. What was it with criminals and warehouses? It seemed like every other one she had to deal with was holed up in one of those.

It wasn’t that she thought it was a bad idea; they provided a large space for any kind of troupe they had, as well as equipment. But security was always down to something negligible because they used abandoned warehouses and had to provide their own. On the whole, criminals weren’t great at keeping things secure.

She shouldn’t be able to walk up to the door like this. Bang on it and have a woman open it, looking at her in surprise. They’d taken care of the electronic side of security and left themselves completely open to the physical one.

“I need to talk to your boss.”

“We’re not—”

Katherine pulled the door opened and shoved her out of her way. It wasn’t like she had anything to fear from this bunch, not after what they’d been through. Even big shots like them could be dealt major blows,

and if her information was correct, this one could destroy them.

As she walked into the central space, she saw people on cots, injured. A lot of people.

The alert Kamile had intercepted had made it sound like two of the larger gangs had gone at it without restraint. But she'd also gathered recordings from witnesses the Law didn't seem to be paying attention to that said it had been two people. The descriptions weren't consistent, but they all said one of them had been an alien.

She only knew of one alien who could cause this kind of ravage, and now that he had a pet human, that met the two people testimony.

She walked through the injured and those caring for them. The two she wanted wouldn't be among these. She found them at the other end of the warehouse, in a somewhat better-arranged area. At least the woman was lying on a bed, and not a cot, and one of the men at her side seemed to be a medic who knew what he was doing.

They didn't look like anything on the file the Law had on them. The files made them look powerful, deserving of the respect crime bosses got. Right now, they looked more like thugs. And thugs that had gotten a beating they weren't going to forget anytime soon.

This was a first for her. She'd never dealt with crime bosses before—plenty of underlings, independent operators, even the occasional not-quite-sane scientist, although that was more during her corporate days, and she'd learned her lesson. The closest she could remember coming to anyone in charge within the criminal world was a lieutenant she'd hired back on Sefron Eight, but it wasn't for his criminal contacts. He'd been the best coercionist she could find and afford, and he'd been worth the money. She still occasionally had him create programs for her.

These two, she was going to have to be careful with.

The woman was pale; she'd lost a lot of blood. The man sitting on the edge of the bed, holding her hand, looked worse, but he was conscious. Bandages over his chest, applied hurriedly by the blood slowly seeping through them. On the other side the medic was bandaging the stump of the woman's hand.

Maybe she should have gone through channels? Had a proper meeting arranged. Unfortunately, Tristan was involved; she didn't have the time that would have taken.

The man noticed her, and as he gently placed the woman's hand back on the bed, Katherine tried to make herself look nonthreatening, but having half her face mangled didn't help with that. He stood and stepped toward her, his face darkening. Katherine noted the gun at his belt, but he wasn't reaching for it.

She took that as a good sign. "You must be Flint."

"Who the fuck are you?" Flint hissed. "And how did you get in here?"

"My name is Katherine. I'm after the person who did this to you." She motioned around them, then her face. "He's responsible for this, and more. I think we can—"

"Get out."

"No, listen to me." She didn't want to sound pleading, but they needed to each other if either had a chance to get their revenge. "We can help each—"

"I said get the fuck out!" He winced and looked at the woman on the bed. When he addressed Katherine again, he was hissing in a softer voice. "If you think I'm letting anyone else get him, you're dead wrong. That asshole is mine for what he caused to happen to Liz and my people. I am going to rip his head off for that."

"Listen, I get that you're angry, but you can't just kill him; I need him to suff—" She snapped her mouth shut as the gun's barrel almost touched her face. That had been a lightning-fast draw.

"Suffer? Oh, he's going to suffer. I'm going to cut him up. I'm going to skin him alive. I'm going to pull his entrails, show them to him, and then force them down the throat of that fur bag he had with him. And if you think you're going to take that away from me, you're going to suffer right along with him."

Katherine had trouble saying the words. "You're after Alex?" That couldn't be right. Sure he was a menace, but the person responsible for what had happened to them had to be Tristan.

"Crimson, yeah. He's had it coming for years now, and I'm going to be the one to make him pay."

"The human?" Katherine asked, still unable to believe it. "He did this? Are you sure it wasn't the alien?"

"He helped, yeah, but he works for Crimson."

"I think you have this wr—"

The gun waved in her face.

"Lady, I'm not in the mood for some stranger coming into my house and telling me when I'm right or

wrong.”

“I— Alright, I understand.”

“Good, now get out.”

“I can’t do that. I need information.”

“Go to a kiosk. Now get out before I shoot you.”

“Please calm down. I am not here alone.”

They came crashing through the doors, sending people in a panic. She grabbed Flint’s gun out of his hand and threw it away. Guns were drawn and pointed at her advancing people, but no shots fired. No one here wanted to get pulled into another fight so soon.

“Flint, I’m not here to cause you or your people any trouble. Please tell them to lower their guns. My people are not armed.” *Please let them not be armed.* They were usually good about obeying her orders, but when it came to protecting her and each other, they could get overzealous at times.

Flint looked at the discarded gun, seeming to note for the first time her empty holster, and looked around the room. Katherine didn’t move, didn’t turn around to look at her people. Any wrong move could turn this into a battle she couldn’t afford to have.

“Stand down, everyone,” Flint said. “Whatever this is, it isn’t a takeover.”

She waited, but Flint seemed content to let her make the next move. “Armiln, can I get an assessment?”

“The situation is stable. Unless we start something, I don’t see anything happening that will result in a fight.”

“You are not going to start anything,” Katherine said, “and that is an order. This is too important.”

“Understood, Boss.”

“What do you want?” Flint asked.

“I want the alien.”

“Him? Why?”

She pointed to her face.

“You said Crimson did that.”

“We had a miscommunication. I was under the impression that Tristan had been in charge of what happened to you.”

Flint studied her. “Okay, let’s say I believe you. Then what?” He pulled a crate and sat on it.

“I expect they didn’t seek you out just to hurt you. They wanted something.”

“So?”

“What was it?”

“Why do you care?”

Katherine took a breath. Not a flunky, she reminded herself. She couldn’t simply hurt him until she got what she wanted.

“I told you, I want Tristan, the alien. If I know what he wants, I can arrange to be there before him and catch him.”

“And kill him.”

“Eventually.”

“And Crimson?”

She shrugged. “To be honest, I figured he’d die in the crossfire.” She looked around. There were a lot of people here, but this couldn’t be all they had. Not if they were one of the three biggest gangs on the planet. If there was one thing she’d learned chasing Tristan and watching the death he left behind, was that there was no such thing as too many people when it came to dealing with him. If she had to give up Alex to make that happen? Why not? It wasn’t like she’d ever cared about him past a few humiliating moments he’d caused her.

“You know, I’m thinking that if we pool our resources, we’ll have a much better chance of getting what we both want.”

Flint thought about it. “Don’t move.” He went to the bed and spoke to the woman on it. After a minute, he came back. “What do you have in mind?”

“She’s your co-leader?”

“She’s my wife.” The anger in his voice made Katherine take a step back.

“I’m sorry, how is she?”

“Look, if you’re going to waste—”

“Tristan murdered my husband.”

He closed his mouth. "I'm sorry." He looked over his shoulder. "She's going to be okay. The doc says the Heal Alls we gave her will fix most everything, but he doesn't know what he can do about her hand. The alien ripped it out."

"Out?"

He lifted his hand, and she realized it was mechanical. "Crimson did this to us, years ago. He almost killed me now. Would have gutted me, but my people protected me. They paid with their lives for it, but me and Liz made it out. Made it here."

"I have a medic with army training. She can look at her hand, and at you too. She might be able to help.

"We don't need your charity," he spat.

"It isn't charity, Flint. I don't want you to lose her. Heal Alls are great at knitting bones and tissue, but internal stuff is less certain. Did she get broadband antibiotics? Did you? If it helps, think of it as me making a goodwill gesture toward our partnership."

Partnering with criminals? What happened to your high ideals of never working with those kinds of people? a voice asked. She shut it up. She was going to do whatever was required to get Tristan and make him pay.

Flint wrung his hand as he paced, the gesture making him look younger. He faced her. "Fine, but she does anything I don't like and I'm gutting her, and then you."

"Flint, I don't double-cross my partners."

"Yeah? Well, you'll forgive me if I don't take your word for it."

Katherine nodded. "Jazz?" The woman stepped next to her. "The woman on the bed had her cybernetic hand ripped off. You've seen that kind of damage in the army, right? She probably also has internal damage. Do everything you can for her, then check him too."

"Flint, I'm going to be honest with you. Tristan is much more dangerous than Alex. Going against him will cost us people, yours and mine. My people know that. Each one of them has seen what Tristan can do, but you need to understand that too."

Flint leaned forward and lowered his voice to a whisper. "You think I'm afraid of sending my people to die?"

Katherine smiled. "Not anymore. Liz's missing hand, I can make sure that's fixed too." Flint brightened. "Now, tell me what Tristan is after."

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