

Chapter 13

“We’re here, Boss.”

Katherine looked over the pilot’s head, at the desolate landscape leading to the mountain range.

The pilot lowered the ship until they were a quarter of a mile over the surface. “Welcome to TKSDP-254, yet another lovely world ruined by an ever-so-persistent mining company, and then abandoned.” He flicked a switch and the view-screen zoomed on an open hangar. “Or in this case, to house a lonely prison. I bid you welcome to Down Below, a third-class prison barely managed by the people who ruined this world.”

She looked at the open hangar and didn’t like the situation. “Do a full fly-over, Brad, and scan the prison and surrounding area.” She touched the ruined right side of her face, and for an instant felt the heat of the explosion, heard its roar, saw Tristan, holding the detonator, mocking her. “How does a place like this manage to score Tristan? Are you sure about this?” She looked at her comm officer.

The woman there shrugged. “The contact’s reliable. Every time he’s given us information it panned out; we just get there too late. This time he claims his source didn’t just give descriptions, he used the names ‘Alex’ and ‘Tristan’, so who knows. Maybe they don’t know who they have? The Sayatoga still claims Tristan is there.”

“Like any prison could hold him,” Katherine grumbled. She’d seen him herself, so she knew he wasn’t on the Sayatoga, no matter what they claimed. And the number of tips she’d received and confirmed as being Tristan had gone up over the last seven or eight years. It had given her plenty of chances to catch up to him and make him pay for everything he’d done to her, for killing her husband back at Luminex. They just kept showing up too late.

“Carlie!” she yelled, leaning out of the cockpit’s doorway. None of the soldiers in the wide room looked up. A woman at the other end looked up from the repair she was making in the floor. “Has that contact of yours gotten back to you? We need that engine if we’re ever going to catch up to Tristan. We definitely need to get it before he finds out about it.”

“Sorry, Boss. He’s still chasing the rumor. I did warn you that it might be all it is.”

Katherine let the woman go on with her work. She needed a faster engine, something no one had yet. If that breakthrough wasn’t real, she’d have to get a ship in a higher class. At the very least a military-grade troupe carrier, instead of this refitted cargo-hauler. She couldn’t afford that. She’d had to focus on jobs not relating to Tristan recently to be able to pay her people and maintain the ship.

She rejoined the pilot. “Brad?”

“Scan’s going, but prisons don’t like giving out their secrets. A place like this doesn’t deserve them, but it still has good anti-scanning measures.” He tapped on his console and behind him, in the center of the cockpit, the image of a large cave system appeared. “This is using resonance scans; those anti-measures aren’t good against that. So we can see that the lazy bastards who own the place didn’t even bother building

anything. That's just the leftover tunnels from all the borers they used. It's also almost half a mile under the hangar. And to top it all, I can't get any resolution, so a human-sized tunnel won't show up, not that anyone could dig their way out of there."

"Don't put anything past Tristan," Katherine said, studying the image. "Where's everyone? Shouldn't there be people there?"

"Just like I can't see a human-sized tunnel, I can't see a human, or a Samalian for that matter. I'd need to get through the anti-measures for any kind of life readings, and those things won't let that through. Not that I would see much through all that rock, anyway."

The ship came to a stop facing the hangar.

"What's the word, Boss?" Brad asked.

She looked at the caves again, then dismissed the image. "Take us in."

The ship moved slowly. She'd hired Brad because he'd been one of the few pilots who'd managed to keep his ship intact during the debacle on Artus. He liked to be careful. The fact that he'd come to rescue her and the few of her people who had survived the explosion had also played a part in her decision.

She let out the curse before they crossed the threshold. "We're too late." The wreckage of two ships could only be his handy work. She wanted to hit something, but controlled her anger. Putting holes in walls wouldn't help anyone, least of all her.

She studied the scene as Brad took them in for the landing. The explosions were centered on the two ships. The pattern of the debris indicated they had exploded and there were no burn marks on the walls, so this hadn't been a firefight. Tristan had destroyed them to what? Keep anyone from chasing him? From also escaping?

She noticed that a few of the forty or so lockers were opened as Kamile got her attention. "Someone's contacting us."

"Hello, incoming ship," a man said in a jovial tone. "I can't read your ID, but I hope you're Katherine Silt's ship. If that isn't you, just turn around; I'm not accepting visitors at this time."

Katherine caught Brad looking at the others and mouthing, "Silt?" None of them knew that name. She hadn't used it since the day she'd walked away from Luminex. It was a too painful reminder of Thomas, of his loss, even after all these years.

It took a few seconds for her chest to loosen so she could breathe. "This is Katherine," she answered, her voice hard. "Who are you, and where is Tristan?"

"Oh, perfect. I am Martin Asinsky, you can call me Marty. We can discuss Tristan in person. Now, just so you don't get it into that pretty head that you can just storm in and force me to talk, there's only one way to my command center, and I've lined it with enough explosives to bring down the mountain on you. So it's only going to be you, Miss Silt. I see anyone else and I'm blowing—"

"That isn't going to happen, Martin."

"Marty, please."

"I don't know you, Martin, and you claim to have been a prisoner here, so I'm not inclined to trust you. I'm going to have my people with me."

"Fine," Martin replied begrudgingly. "You can bring two. Any more and I—"

"No."

"Look, I'm the one with all the pieces here. I get to dictate what's—"

"If Tristan is really here, like you claim, me and two others won't be enough to restrain him. You don't sound like you'll be much help either." The silence didn't help her confidence that Tristan was here. He was gone, she just knew it. She fought the tightness in her chest. Her husband's killer had slipped through her fingers again. "I'm bringing a dozen. If you're not happy with that, say so and I'll turn around. Like you said, you're not here waiting for visitors."

The silence stretched. She was about to signal Brad to turn the ship around when there was a sigh.

"It's okay. You can bring them."

"Good." She motioned for Kamile to end the connection.

"That was a quick flip on his part," Brad commented as he landed the ship where, if Katherine judged the space in the hangar correctly, Tristan's ship had been. "Who doesn't even try to talk you down? Twelve is too much. I would have insisted on eight." He glanced at her. "I think you're right, and we missed him."

"Again." She considered telling him to take them away, and by the way Brad was looking at her, he expected the order. If she had anything else, any hint of where Tristan might be, she would, without hesitation.

The last she'd heard of Tristan was an objective year and a half ago, when he was identified tearing up a

path through a criminal cartel on Low Darkel. Sixty-eight dead. The only survivors had been the boys and girls they'd held as prisoners, sex slaves in various stage of training. Then nothing. She'd used her history doing security for Luminex to get details from the Law, and found that the criminals had been mostly cut, instead of shot or blown up. It wasn't Tristan's usual method, but since Artus, he'd been changing things up, almost as if he knew she'd survived and he was trying to throw her off his trail.

"Kamile, Brad. You two are staying with the ship—keep her warm and ready to go. Kamile, monitor comms. This might be a trap, and I want to know the instant something pops up. Gods know I've pissed off enough people over the years."

"What good merc doesn't?" Brad asked. "She'll be toasty and pointing to the void."

She patted his shoulder and exited the cockpit. "Carlie, you're staying. You can keep working on what you're fixing, but keep a gun handy. If things flip, I want you ready to act."

She looked at the others. "Jurran, I need you in front. The idiot warned me he lined the corridor with explosives, so I need you to find and disarm them."

He stood. "Yes, Boss," he said as he headed for a locker. The others moved out of his way without thought, used to the bulky Frenian moving about. He took off his jacket and revealed the large, bony, almost stone-like plates covering his body, as he put on a harness with tools on it.

She hadn't looked to hire him when she'd rebuilt her team after Artus. His boyfriend was who she'd been interested in. "Armiln, anything?"

The man who looked up at her from his datapad could almost pass for human, but his skin was too sickly green, his eyes too wide, the pupils too purple, and his feature too sharp. Someone could easily achieve that look with cosmetic surgery, but who would want to?

"Sorry, Boss. Without information, I can't make any prediction."

"I can predict this place is a cesspit of crime," Braunda said, making many chuckle.

"Well." Armiln smiled at her. "If you needed me to tell you that, I question your qualifications to be part of this unit."

"Jurran?" the woman called. "Can I get your permission to pound your boyfriend into the wall?"

"No," the Frenian answered, putting his jacket over the tool harness. "Pounding him is my job, and I only do that in the mattress."

The man seated by Braunda, who was reassembling his rifle, snorted. "Well, at least there's one person here who's getting some."

"Two," Armiln corrected. "He can't pound me if I'm not there."

"Alright," Katherine said, "enough chitchat. Get ready, and plan for a massacre. Each and every one of you has seen what Tristan is capable of." She pointed to her face. "This is what happens when you underestimate him."

She left them to get ready and climbed the ladder to her quarters, the old captain's ready room she'd converted. She headed for the locker containing her combat clothes. As with every time before, she told herself she should have made the bed when getting up. Thomas was always on her to make the bed.

She cursed herself as her breath caught and she staggered. Why had she thought about him? The ache in her heart was so strong, part of her wanted to crawl into the bed and have a good cry. But it passed. She was able to breathe again.

She threw the light pants and shirt at the washer cabinet, missed, and told herself she'd deal with that after. She dug through her closet until she found the armored pants and a lightly armored shirt. She put that on, then a heavy armored jacket over that. Then she had to go searching for the matching glove to the one she wore over her artificial hand. She finally found it in a corner, under a box of datachips she'd bought...when? She couldn't even remember what they contained.

She came down the ladder wearing her gun belt, and had a knife at her boot. Jurran and Armiln were close together, talking and smiling at each other in a way she remembered doing with Thomas. She clenched her teeth as the pain his memory brought came and passed. She didn't understand them. She didn't understand interspecies relationships. She couldn't imagine getting close to someone who...well, wasn't human.

But she'd come across enough of them among mercs she'd had to let go of that prejudice. Too many qualified mercs had odd tastes, it was just the way things were. For some it was drugs—although she'd had to drop anyone who was *too* interested in drugs—and some it was partners. She'd decided that so long as the job got done, she wouldn't care.

She reached the closed ramp, and everyone formed up behind her, Jurran and Armiln first in line. She opened the ramp and took a slow breath. That first breath of clean, unrecycled air was always worth appreciating. Then she stepped down, stopping at the bottom.

She indicated the closest of the wrecks. "What happened there?"

Jurran walked by them, heading for the closest door.

Armiln looked at it, his gaze growing distant. "A small explosive was used to breach the power core, that's the explosion that destroyed the ships. Tristan has shown a familiarity with enough ships that it's safe to extrapolate that he knew how to cause this explosion. I can't be certain it's him, but I put the probability above ninety percent.

She smiled at him. "The small-mindedness of the Law cost them one of the best investigators they could have had."

"To be fair to them, it was one officer's small-mindedness, and my temper, that forced me to flee."

Katherine had sought him out because he was what was commonly called a Whisperer. He was a Porfedian who could look at everything around him and conclude what had happened, and what could happen. He'd left his planet because of his peculiar tastes in partners, and joined the Law because he wanted to help. Unfortunately, he'd been forced to deal with the Law's xenophobia one time too many, and ended up killing his trainer.

"What's your thought on Tristan being here?"

He looked around, taking in the entirety of the hangar. "Being here? Low. There are recent skidmarks under the Enforcer, which indicates there was a ship there. It landed and took off within a day. The way some of the debris is scattered indicates they bounced off something that was where we've landed, so the third ship was here when the other two were destroyed. I'm confident Tristan was here—blowing up ships is something of a trademark with him—but he left. Most probably the destruction was to remove chances of pursuit."

"Martin said Tristan was a prisoner."

"Which implies someone delivered him. You indicated he has worked with a partner."

"Alex."

"Who, based on what you told me, was trusted enough to acquire items on Tristan's behalf. Tristan isn't known for trusting anyone, so this makes it likely that's who he worked with here."

"But Alex is also wanted. How does he get in, deliver Tristan, and not get caught at the same time?"

Armiln shrugged. "Nothing here helps with that."

She headed for the door, looked in, and stared as the Frenian worked on the closest bomb. "He put them in the open?"

Jurran glanced at her. "This is really simple. Not even amateur stuff. Remote detonator on a single frequency, no contingency for if that's jammed. Nothing to keep me from just picking it up, other than the fact there's a camera watching me work. So if he doesn't like what I do, he can try to blow me up." He looked at Armiln. "Don't worry, I'm already jamming the signal. This is a design you get off the net when you don't know what you're doing. Do you want me to disable them permanently?"

Katherine looked at the corridor, tunnel really. Four, five-hundred feet, maybe ten bombs along the length? She couldn't be certain with the distance and low light. "Can he tell you're jamming his signal?"

Jurran looked at his datapad. "If he can, he hasn't panicked and started punching the button hoping doing it often will allow it to get stronger than the jammer. Trust me, people who have no idea how these work have stupid ideas about what should work."

"Then leave the jammer here. You can pick it up when we leave. Whatever he has planned, these won't be a problem by then."

The Frenian nodded, and left a small device by the bomb.

She walked to the other door. When it didn't open she looked around, found the camera, and looked into it. "You're the one who wanted me here."

"They don't do sound," Jurran said.

The door opened and a short, sort of skinny man stood in the middle of the room, pointing a gun at her. He wore something that might have been overalls at some point, but someone had gone all tailor on them and turned them into a shirt, pants, and a jacket.

He flinched when he looked at her face. "Just you. The others stay out there or I blow you all up." He raised the hand holding the detonator. He was trembling.

She considered forcing his hand, just to see his expression when nothing happened, but she wasn't here for an authority contest. She motioned for the others to remain on that side of the door, and entered, staying by the threshold.

"The door stays open," she said as he backed up and reached for a console.

The room had been cleaned, but she could see the burn marks on the wall, the destroyed control

boards. Something was boarded up opposite her. A lot of amateur welding and hull sealant had been applied. That had to be how the prisoners were sent down.

"Where's Tristan?" she asked.

Martin began lowering his gun, and raised it again. "Before I tell you anything, I want your word that you're taking me out of here. I want off this planet, that's the payment for the information I have."

She crossed her arm over her chest. She wanted to lean back, for more of an air of nonchalance, but the door was open and she wasn't moving. She wasn't exposing her people to the possibility of this man firing at them to make a point.

"I'm not promising anything until I know what what you're offering."

"That isn't how this works," Martin said in exasperation. She decided he was one of those people who needed to be in control. Who thrived on knowing more than everyone else, or at least letting them think that. She'd met so many of them in her time at Luminex. She always dealt with them the same way: by not playing their game.

She turned.

"No!"

In three steps she was in front of him, startling him and getting him to put a hand on the console when he backed against it. His gun hand.

She slammed her hand over the gun. "Tristan isn't here, is he?"

Martin gulped. She closed her hand around the gun, taking care not to include his fingers, and squeezed until it made a cracking sound. With a shriek, he let go and threw himself to the side.

After a second, he looked up from under his arms. "Are you crazy? It could have exploded!"

"Was Tristan ever here?"

Martin hesitated. She reached down and grabbed him by the collar and pulled him to his feet.

"I swear, if you made me waste my time, I'm going to make you suffer." She tightened her fist just so he could hear the fingers working.

"He was here!" Martin shrieked. "He left!"

With a curse, she threw him across the room and headed for the door.

"I know where he's gone!"

She stopped, then turned and glared at him. If this was just a ploy, she was ripping off those metal sheets he'd welded and dropping him down that shaft. "Where?"

Martin shook his head. "First you're going to swear that you're taking me with you."

She growled and stepped to him. He tried to push himself into the wall. "Why don't you explain to me how you know where he's going? Did Tristan just happen to tell you? Do you think I'm that dumb?"

Martin shook his head. "No, he didn't say anything. But he wasn't captured, it was a setup. He was here to rescue someone. Olirian Prian—you know, the Killer of Hasteed."

The title did sound familiar, but not in any way that mattered to her. She motioned for him to continue.

"Well, for the last few years he hasn't been well—dying, I think. I spent a lot of time with him, and he spoke when he was delirious. No one ever found out why he killed all those people, but I know."

When he didn't continue, she made a fist with her mechanical hand. "I swear, Martin, if you don't get on with this, I am going to smash that pretty little head of yours."

"They created a virus," he said quickly. "So powerful it can kill everyone in the universe. He killed them to keep them from releasing it, but he wasn't able to destroy the research. I know where it's hidden. That's the only reason to get the old man—so you can find out where the research is."

She stared at him, shaking and trying to get away from her. Kill everyone in the universe? That couldn't be possible. Still, possible or not, it would be something someone like Tristan would want.

"Where is it?"

"Promise me first. I'm done spending time here. If you're not going to take me with you, I have no reason to talk."

She smiled at him, and he recoiled even more. "Oh, don't worry about that. You're coming with me, because if this is a ploy, I am going to enjoy making you suffer."

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