

Chapter 35

The laser torch was so bright, Katherine had to shield her eyes as she approached.

“Almost done, ma’am,” the man said as the torch inched around the door.

Ma’am? Katherine wasn’t that old. She looked at the young man cutting the opening. The very young man. Children, really, already looking to escape the Law. That’s who she’d had to contend with when replacing the people she’d lost. It was depressing.

She looked at the other young recruit—a clean-cut woman with an earpiece looking at her datapad, typing one handed.

“What’s it look like?”

“The electrical pulse took down their jamming. It got an upgrade recently, but it was slapped over the existing system, so at its core this is still just a cruise ship. It isn’t giving me any trouble.”

“Have you found the cells?”

She looked up at her. “This is a cruise ship, ma’am, they don’t have cells. But I am seeing a few rooms that have been hard-locked. If they were going to convert something into a cell, that would do it.”

“Where are they?”

“Spread around.” She paused as she typed. “Eight rooms on this level, one room two levels below us, more toward the back of the ship. Engineering is clearly in hard-lock mode, as is the bridge. The other rooms are—”

“We’ll start with this level. If he isn’t here, we’ll move on to the next closest, and so on.”

The girl—how old was she? She couldn’t be more than twenty-five. She nodded and typed again. “If we split up, let’s say three to a room, not taking into account the bridge and engineering, we could cover most of the rooms I’m seeing here.”

“Miss?”

“Coppernic, ma’am.”

“It’s ‘Boss, when we’re on a job.” And let them all get in the habit of calling her that the rest of the time like the others so she would stop feeling so damned old. “And Coppernic, splitting up the team is the best way to ensure we all end up dead.”

“Ma-Boss? There’s almost forty of us.” She looked around Katherine at the rest of the now-cramped ship. “We could force our way into a small corporation. What’s going on in an old cruiser that can give all of us a problem?”

“One person.”

The young woman looked around Katherine again, and this time she turned to look at the assembled men and women. The seven from her original team were in the back, serious and ready. The thirty others, far too young, worked hard at looking as tough, and failed miserably.

“We are after one person,” she repeated. “One male Samalian who made his way through one of the more secure corporations, from the ground floor to the president’s office. He then made his way back down and vanished from the universe.” She looked them over as they fidgeted. “I repeat, one man. So consider that before any of you decide to wander off on your own.”

She gave them time for the enormity of it to sink in. “Also, we don’t know who else is on this ship, but they are clearly trained since they captured him. So I want you to shoot anyone we encounter. Don’t ask if they’re friendlies, don’t look to take prisoners. Take them down hard before they can do the same to you.”

“Except Tristan,” Armiln stated. “He is mine. If any one of you touches him, I am going to disassemble you.”

She looked at the Porfedian. Since his boyfriend’s death, his temperament had darkened every day he hadn’t enacted his revenge. She’d had to break up a fight before it started between him and Brad because the pilot wouldn’t just rush at the ship. At least soon he’d have what he wanted, what they both wanted.

“Stay focused, Armiln. We are not your enemy.”

He gave her a smile that did nothing to reassure her. Not long now and he’d be busy hunting—

The clang of the metal hull hitting a metal floor announced the start of the job. She stepped through and onto the ship. She didn’t pause to take in the fresher air, or admire the color scheme. She looked at Coppernic, who pointed.

She headed in that direction.

Katherine still couldn’t believe how easy it had been to find this ship; they hadn’t even bothered trying to hide their propulsion trail. Within a few hours of getting into space, it had been on their sensors. If she’d had the armament, she could have blown it up at a distance, but that had never been part of her plan. She needed to be certain Tristan died; and that meant doing it in person.

They encountered a handful of men, who died before they realized it. Each time, it was a volley of blasts that took one out. But she didn’t hear the cheer she expected from the young mercenaries. At least they knew to conduct themselves professionally.

They opened two of the doors Coppernic indicated before reaching the one Katherine knew would contain her prize. One had only been storage for an exorbitant amount of fabricator base material, but this one had four men trying to break the door open.

Or they had been, before they were shot. This was where they’d holed up. Why else would anyone be this determined to get in?

“Get the door opened.”

Coppernic stepped around her, opened the cover, and connected her datapad to it. She typed, frowned, spoke.

“Problem?”

“A coercionist locked the door. To keep anyone from getting in.”

Katherine looked at the bodies on the floor and didn’t comment on the obviousness of what the young woman said. “Can you get through?”

“Yes.” She studied her screen. “It’s an okay job. Alex, you said his name was, right? He looks to be good.” She smiled. “But I’m better.”

While she worked, Katherine had people take position in front of the door, ready to shoot at anyone there. The door opened, and they fired. When they stopped, they had a perplexed look on their face. Katherine looked in. Four men were inside, three had rifles pointed at them, but didn’t fire.

“Forcefield,” Carlie said, looking in with her.

“Sorry,” Coppernic said, typing furiously, “that’s in a different section; I didn’t know it was up.” She pursed her lips. “It’s going to take longer.”

Katherine studied the men. Mercenaries, in various types of gray armor. They were covered in blood, a lot of it. On one of them it had flowed down as if someone had dumped it on his head. She looked around them, and the amount of blood on the floor. Where were the bodies? At least one person had to have bled out.

Behind the crates? The room was a medical bay, but it was being used for storage, considering the number of crates and machines in it. She didn’t see Tristan, and considering those men were alive, she doubted he’d been here.

“The field’s about to drop,” Coppernic said as Katherine was going to tell her to forget it.

Well, if it was going to happen. “Kill them.” She stepped out of the way.

“Now!”

The guns flashed and one of the recruits staggered back. When the shooting stopped, the woman next

to him checked him out. Katherine entered the medical bay. Armiln walked around her and stalked the room.

She moved slower, trying to determine why Alex had locked this room. She walked around the machine in the center, which looked more like the kind of art installation— She stopped that chain of thought; she couldn't afford the distraction.

She noticed the woman just as one of the recruits pointed his gun at her.

"Stop."

To his credit, the man didn't fire. He looked at her. "You said to shoot everyone."

She'd have a talk with him after this about shooting someone who was tied up. "I know, but give me a moment with this one."

She crouched, and the women tried to back away.

"I'm not with them." She looked and sounded scared.

Katherine thought she looked familiar. She might have been with the crew that ran the drug lab. Flint had shown her pictures, but Katherine hadn't paid attention.

"What are you doing here?"

"I don't know. They just grabbed me and took me here."

Katherine sighed. "Try again. No one grabs someone for no reason."

She calmed down a little. "I swear, I don't know wh—"

"Fine, Shoot h—"

"Wait! I copied the memory from the fabricator we stole. I don't know what it is, but the guy who owns the ship wants it pretty bad."

"That's better. What does he want with Tristan?"

The woman looked at her, confused.

"Samalian?"

No recognition.

"Fur, black, muzzle, ears on top of his head?"

She shuddered. "I don't know him, or why he's here. The two of them were prisoners, I think. They escaped, but were recaptured. They tortured the human one."

"Alex."

"Okay, Alex, they tortured him. I think they escaped again, because they came here, tied me, and patched each other up."

"They tied you?" That didn't sound like Tristan.

She nodded. "I think the alien, Tristan? He wanted to kill me, but Alex convinced him I wasn't worth it." She lowered her voice. "He saved my life."

Katherine raised an eyebrow. "Why would he do that?"

The woman licked her lips. "I-I tried to help him when he was tortured, but he was in bad shape. I'm not a doctor."

She nodded. Alex did have something that resembled morals. He would feel like he owed this woman, and protecting her from Tristan would count. Why Tristan had listened, she didn't know. As best as she'd worked out, the dynamic was that Tristan was in charge, but there were no details in the files about how they worked together. So maybe the partnership wasn't as one-sided as she'd thought.

"Where are they now?"

"I don't know, they didn't say. They are pretty pissed at the guy who owns the ship, so if I'd have to guess, I'd say they're going after him."

"That's who brought Tristan here?"

"Some of his men, yes."

"And you don't know why?"

The woman shook her head.

"Who is he? The guy who owns this ship."

"His name is Baran. That's about all I know. Oh, and he hates mercs."

"What do you mean? He has mercs working for him."

"Yes, but he doesn't like them; they're just what he could get. I overheard him grumbling about how much better the universe is going to be when all the mercs are gone."

Great, just what she needed. Another loony who thought mercs didn't have a place in the system that was SpaceGov. It seemed like every year one of them popped up. The closest she'd come to capturing Tristan until now was because of such a man.

“The thing you have that he wants. Did you give it to him?”

The woman looked away, then forced herself to meet Katherine’s gaze. She shook her head.

She’d given it to him. Had probably handed it over the moment he asked to avoid suffering. Katherine understood the impulse. After all, this woman wasn’t a hardened mercenary or security expert.

She’d downloaded the information, not knowing what it was. When Tristan destroyed the fabricator, this Baran had been left with no choice but to take her, because the stupid girl hadn’t put that on a chip. No, she probably had an upgrade of some sort and that’s where she’d stored it. A life of crime in an easy city hadn’t prepared her for any of this.

Katherine stood and turned.

“Wait, you can’t leave me here, like this.”

“You’re safer here, trust me.”

“Can you at least untie me?”

“No.” She looked around. Only three of the recruits had come in. There wasn’t enough space here, with all the crates, for everyone. Armiln was in the hall before the doorway, looking at the floor of the corridor. Not happy.

“Coppernic, you stay here. This is as secure a place as you can wish for. Bring the forcefield back up once we’re gone. You,” she addressed the recruit who had almost shot the prisoner. “Frederik, right?”

“Friday, Boss. Mark Friday.”

“Friday. Stay with Coppernic. You’re her security detail.”

“And her?” The man indicated the tied woman.

Katherine looked at her again. She was trying hard to look innocent. Too hard. “I leave it to your discretion if you untie her or not—” She faced the man. “—but she is not to be touched. You are not going to do a damned thing to her, is that understood? I don’t know what crimes you committed that made you want to get off Bramolian Six so badly, but I will not tolerate needless violence, and especially not against someone who has nothing to do with it, understood? You disobey me on that and I’m not going to spare you; I’m going to castrate you.”

The man nodded eagerly, and Katherine left him with Coppernic, motioning for the others to follow her. She stopped next to Armiln.

“I don’t have enough information,” he grumbled under his breath as he paced.

“What can you tell me?”

“They went that way,” he indicated her right. “You can see Tristan and Alex’s bloody prints on the floor, but they vanish after a dozen steps. I don’t know enough to see where they went after that.”

“The prisoner said they were captured by the ship’s owner.”

Armiln nodded. “They didn’t come willingly, or consciously.” He calmed. “Tristan has a history of exacting revenge on anyone who seeks to imprison him. If the owner is responsible, then he would be Tristan’s next logical target.”

She smiled. “Good, then that’s where we’re going. We either find Tristan there, or this Baran, and make Tristan come to us. Either way, this ends here.”

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