

Chapter 18

“What about the alterations Tristan makes?” Kamile asked as the view of the ships on the screen changed, the camera slowly panning over the giant landing area. “Those would have to be the same since he likes his ships to be able to do specific things. You’ve read the reports on all the ships he’s left behind. Isn’t that helpful?”

“Those are internal changes,” Armiln replied. “Tristan is careful not to alter the outside of his ships from the way the manufacturer designed them. He doesn’t want to attract attention. If you can get me inside those ships, I’ll be able to tell you which one is his.”

“Kamile, can you scan them?” Katherine asked, “give Armiln a look inside?”

“Not all of them. Six at most. Each time I run the scanners, there’s a chance the port will notice. They don’t like when people scan other ships. Privacy and all that.”

“It’s that one,” someone said behind them.

Kamile startled and Katherine looked over her shoulder.

“What are you doing out of the hold, Martin?”

Her prisoner looked from the screen to her face and didn’t quite suppress the shudder. “I thought you could use my help. I told you, I want to help you capture Tristan.”

“I’m not looking to capture him,” she stated.

“Fine, then to kill him. I don’t care, I just want him to pay for how he treated me.” The tone was just too accommodating for her comfort. He thought he could play her. “You don’t need this. I’m your ally.”

She snorted. “Sure, you’re not actually looking for a chance to escape and go back to committing crimes.”

Martin gritted his teeth.

“How do you know that’s his ship?” Armiln asked without looking from the screen. He’d paused the panning on the one Martin indicated.

“I was stuck in that room for all the months it took you to come rescue me.”

Katherine rolled her eyes.

“I had nothing to do, so I passed the time rebuilding the footage of the hangar. I reconstructed enough to see his ship.”

“You’re a coercionist?” Armiln asked.

Katherine watched Martin get his revulsion under control. “I know enough to get by. Give me an earpiece and I’m decent.”

Armiln looked her and she rolled her eyes. “No.” She didn’t care how badly she needed a coercionist, she wasn’t putting a man like that in her payroll.

“Unless there’s another guy out there with this level of paranoia,” Kamile said, “I think Shorty’s right.”

That ship is dead. I mean barely any power. As far as I can tell, even the relays are drained of power, and to do that you have to disconnect them, disconnect the hard line, and then drain them manually.”

“What’s powered?” Armiln asked.

“The lock and ramp, but it isn’t like he can do anything about those if he wants to get back in.”

“Kamile, can you send the scan to this screen?”

“Sure.” She entered commands. “If you want to be sure, we can get in—bypass the lock and drop the ramp. But if you want to power anything in it, we’re going to have to find what he disconnected and reconnect everything. Even on a ship that size, that’s a lot of possibilities.”

“Wouldn’t a disconnected line be obvious?” Katherine asked.

“Tristan is,” Armiln answered, “based on interviews with people who have had the fortune of surviving working with him, knowledgeable enough about ships that he could build one from scratch if he were provided with the parts. On top of that, I believe you called Tristan ‘the definition of careful’. He would have put everything back in place. We’d need an engineer to figure out what needs to be reconnected, and while Martin seems to be a few things, he isn’t an engineer.”

“Okay,” Katherine said. “Kamile, give that ship one pulse with the active scan. Keep it as narrow as possible, don’t give the port a reason to notice us. This is going to confirm he isn’t in it.” She waited for Kamile to confirm that. “Alright. We’re not going to bother with the ship other than making sure it’s watched. Getting in is a waste of time; there isn’t going to be anything in it pointing to him as the owner.”

“It is his ship, I’ve told you,” Martin said. “That confirms that I told you the truth about why he’s here too.”

“Why are you still here?” Katherine asked, annoyed.

“You need my help,” the man replied. “I can take you to him.”

She snorted. “Yeah, like I believe you know where he’s going.”

“He’s going to the Telrize Complex,” Martin answered, exasperated.

She eyed Martin.

“Boss,” Armiln said, “at the very least you need to verify if the intel is good.”

“Kamile?”

The woman looked at her screen.

Martin inched to the side, around Kamile, but he stopped when he noticed Katherine glaring at him.

“There’s been something there. The Law was called in. No details, other than calling it ‘Corporate Sabotage.’”

“So he was there and did what he wanted,” Katherine said. “Where is he going next?”

“Back here?” Kamile answered, but Katherine was still looking at Martin. The man was thinking. Any harder and he’d blow a sensor.

“See,” she said, “you’re no use at all.”

Armiln opened his mouth, but she raised her hand to silence him. Right now she wasn’t interested in the possibilities he saw. She had her own plans.

“I can find him for you,” Martin said far too quickly, and she smiled. “Just let me go out there. My contacts will know where he’s going.” The desperation was slipping though now.

She snorted again. “No, they won’t. You have no idea who Tristan is, how he operates. No one knows where he is unless he wants them to know. And if he wants that, it’s because he has something nasty planned for them.” She gave him her best smile, the one that her disfigured half turned horrible. “But don’t worry, you will still be useful.”

She motioned for Armiln to join the others. “Kamile, what kind of window do we have for everyone to exit the ship?”

“This port isn’t as high security as some we’ve been to, but at best that program you bought will give us a twenty-second window in their security. After that it’s going to be eaten up by the antibodies and the cameras will see us again.”

“I can help,” Martin said, but she ignored him.

“Set it up, then go change.” She turned and put her mechanical arm on Martin’s shoulder before he could move far from her. She pushed him in front of her before exiting the cockpit.

“Brad,” she called as her pilot climbed out of the hold.

The man raised both hands before him to forestall her. “Boss, you know how I feel about out there. I’ve just set up my hammock. I have plenty of reading material. I would much prefer staying in here, where it’s safe.”

She smiled. “I’m glad you said that.”

"You are?" Brad eyed her suspiciously. They'd had a few arguments over how she felt he'd let his agoraphobia control his life; there was medication for those kinds of conditions.

"Yes. There's a ship on your central screen. I need you to keep an eye on it. There's a high likelihood it's Tristan's ship. I need you to contact me if he returns to it."

"Just watch?" he asked, his tone still suspicious. "Not engage?"

"Well, if you want to unload all the armaments we have on him when he shows up, I won't complain, but the port might have strong objections. Also, Kamile's setting up our exit program. I need you to activate it when we're ready."

"Sure, Boss. I can do that." His steps were light as he went into the cockpit.

Katherine looked the others over, and they stopped what they were doing to face her. "Alright, we're going with the usual. You each have a civilian ID. As far as anyone knows, you're all here individually on vacation. Once Kamile's ready—" The woman in question stepped around Martin. "—Brad will give us the signal, and you're going to have ten seconds to spread out amongst the ships. Unfortunately, Bramolian Six is somewhat paranoid about keeping off-planet weapons from making it groundside, so you're going to have to acquire armaments and defenses on your own. Please do your best not to get your ID burned in the process; those things are expensive.

"This isn't your first hunt, so I don't have to tell you to be careful. Tristan is not to be underestimated. If you accidentally come across him, do not engage. You can't win on your own. Call me, follow him, and do not let him find out you are there. You are all good, but he's better. We will get him, but as a team."

"Yes, sir!" echoed through the ship in a chorus, loud enough to make the hull vibrate. She loved them for that unity.

"Braunda, I'm sorry, but I need someone to babysit him." Katherine pushed Martin to the woman, who caught his arm. She knew that Braunda would be able to handle him, no matter what he tried; she was almost as large as Jurrán. "You can't kill him, but if he gets uppity, feel free to beat him within an inch of that.

"The one exception is if he runs, then feel free to shoot him down. Try to be discreet, but he isn't to gain his freedom."

Martin tried to yank himself free, only to glare at the massive hand holding him. He made his face a mask of calm as he turned to look at Katherine, as if she hadn't seen the anger there. "Katherine, this isn't necessary. I'm an ally, not an—"

"You're a criminal."

"I am not—" She glared him into silence. She was done listening to his justifications. "Fine, then just lock me in the ship. You won't have to worry about me running off that way. Not that I have any plans on doing that."

Katherine patted him on the shoulder and she gave him another beaming smile her mangled face ruined. "Then what do you have to worry about? Think of this as a vacation and enjoy it. Braunda is a pleasant woman to be around." Braunda snorted. "Just relax, take in the sights with her." Katherine winked at him. "You never know, you might get lucky. She's been stuck with this bunch for months now. She could do with a change."

Braunda gave Martin a nasty smile and he tried to shy away from her.

Kamile changed into something less, "I'm going to kill you", and more, "I'm just considering it", and nodded to Katherine.

"Brad, we're ready," she said as the ramp lowered. "Give us a five count."

Brad began counting down. Braunda took Martin's hand and he winced. Jurrán and Armiln had their arms around each other, as actual couples did.

Brad reached zero and all of them ran out, Martin trying to keep up with Braunda's rapid walk. A couple of times Katherine thought she'd end up dragging him, but they made it under an adjacent ship before Brad called, "And the program's gone. Did everyone make it?"

She didn't answer, trying not to laugh as Braunda placed an arm around Martin's chest. The man looked like he was getting the life squeezed out of him.

* * *