

Chapter Three

Rumil didn't notice the rapidly approaching dawn. Instead, she twiddled her thumbs restlessly as she sat in a small plastic chair in a dark corner on the downstairs level of the locksmith's shop. The basement was but a single room about seven Tacks square with a small exposed light hanging from a chain in the center. The walls were fashioned out of brick, not the modern fiberwall found in most recently built establishments. The bricks themselves were a deep gray, and thus didn't reflect much illumination onto the rest of the surroundings, which were probably pretty dismal anyway.

Fifteen other guests were in with her, quietly discussing business of the less than legal sort. Four Arcadians and an Ubek were in the corner furthest from her, too far for Rumil to overhear, but judging from the tight circle and open sterilization bags they were likely dealing in narcotics. Two Demodians were in the center of the basement, probably interstellar pirates, trying to sell some of their wares to the six Arcadians around them. Finally, two Arcadians were the closest to her, just two Tacks away, and were discussing another narcotics deal. Seven Ruma, reptilian descendants with bony plates that extended from the top of their heads, roamed between them, serving as runners for the owner upstairs, delivering drinks or messages.

The locksmith business that she currently sat in, like most other businesses all around the galaxy, had two parts. One was the legitimate business that took place above ground, and then there was the underside, where businessmen took in their *real* profits. However, that business often took a backseat to the legit one, and thus Rumil had been waiting for several tenth-cycles for assistance.

Finally, a Ruma came close enough for Rumil to reach out with her foot, and trip the small reptilian being. It stood quickly and glared at her, its eyes shrinking to pin-width slits and the eyelids narrowing threateningly. For a moment, Rumil looked uneasily at the bony plate that extended vertically from its scaled cranium, as it appeared that it had been sharpened. Such a natural weapon promised pain to those that crossed its owner.

Instead, the Ruma attached to the plate said with false sweetness, "May I be of assistance to you, somehow?"

"Yes," Rumil said, "Can you please inform your employer that I am growing extremely impatient?"

The features of the Ruma went flat, and it said dryly, "There's a lot of business in locksmithing... she will be with you as soon as she is able. Had you made an *appointment*...?" It let its voice drop off, mocking her.

"Sorry, I couldn't anticipate being nearly arrested," Rumil interrupted acidly. "Next time, I'll be sure to let you know when I intend to be apprehended again."

Either the Ruma didn't get the sarcasm, or it chose not to care, since its reply was, "Yes, that may be beneficial for prompt service." Then it walked away.

Had Rumil's arms been free, she probably would have thrown the chair she was sitting in at the retreating reptilian. Instead, the frustrated woman settled for a completely ineffectual kick in the Ruma's general direction. Slumping dejectedly back into her seat, she exhaled depressingly.

The two Arcadians closest to her found interest in the young beauty in the chair. Ceasing their business arrangements, they approached Rumil, who recognized the gleam in their eyes. She had seen it in many a man... although she had been at least partially in control of the circumstances before.

The one who stood right before her had brown hair and eyes, with a small scar on his left cheek. "Well, well, pretty little thing..." he began. "What brings you here?"

"Oh you know... I like tormenting ragged excuses for men like you, letting you know that you'll *never* land a girl like me," Rumil replied darkly. She was not particularly in the mood to deal with hormone-driven addicts.

"Is that so?" the Arcadian hissed, "Looks to me like you don't have much say in the matter, seeing how you're kinda... tied up... at the moment." The man laughed at his own joke, obviously finding humor that Rumil didn't share.

She sighed, then replied with a voice coated in honey, "Yes... perhaps you're right. Why don't you come a little closer, and I'll show you just how sorry I am for teasing you..."

With a triumphant smile, the scarred Arcadian said, "That more what I'm talking about." He took two steps forward, and then Rumil sneered maliciously, sending her left leg up, striking with considerable force between her target's thighs.

The dealer's eyes rolled into his head, his jaw dropping open, and he staggered back a Tack before dropping to his knees, then falling to his left onto the cold concrete floor, clutching his wounded genitalia and moaning in pain occasionally. The other denizens of the basement stopped their transactions for a brief second to analyze the situation, but quickly returned to their business. One good thing about black market operators: they weren't particularly nosy.

The Arcadian dealer's partner, a black-haired, well-built specimen, at first gaped in disbelief, then turned towards Rumil angrily. Lashing out with his left hand, he slapped her across the face. The force of the blow knocked her completely out of her chair as she accidentally bit down into her lip. With her arms bound found she had to struggle to return to a reasonably upright position, while blood from her bite began dribbling down toward her chin. She could have easily sucked on her lip to keep it under control, but she felt it that letting it run freely was more appropriately defiant.

The Arcadian probably would have struck again, had he not been tackled from behind by a pair of Ruma messengers, who succeeded in dropping him to the ground, and pinning him firmly to the floor. Another Ruma appeared from the stairs, its brown scales lifting off its skin angrily. "While this basement may not be one of the most savory places on this planet, I will *not* tolerate violence here." The Ruma locksmith then turned in Rumil's direction, and sighed. "I was told that I might have to aid you, Miss Bonamede. Come upstairs, and I'll escort you to a private room we can assess your situation in."

The two Ruma restraining the violent Arcadian promptly released him, and motioned for Rumil to follow them. They climbed up the long set of steps, and led her around a back hall behind the main business floor. Rumil mused that if the legit customers knew there was only a thin fiberwall partition separating them from thieves who were in the process of learning how to crack the very locks they were purchasing, they'd never have any faith in security ever again.

The two Ruma led her to a very small room that probably would have better served as a closet, and likely had been its initial purpose. She sat on a long wooden unpolished stool, and looked gloomily on the gray brick framing a bare concrete floor that only gave about three square Tacks of space. Half a tick later, the brown-scaled owner of the establishment entered and smiled. "I apologize for your wait, Miss Bonamede." Without waiting for a reply, the Ruma placed its orange hypersteel workbox on the floor, and spun around to Rumil's back, analyzing the hacker's bonds.

The Ruma made a trilling hiss in what Rumil assumed to be the reptilian equivalent of an impressed whistle, which to her ears sounded more like a canine pup being dragged along a

cheese grater.

“Hmm... Your last boyfriend get a little kinky, dear girl?”

Rumil snorted at the idea, then had to bite down a scream as the Ruma grabbed the hacker’s wrists roughly to examine the restraints more closely. It opened the scabbing wound on her lip again, and this time she sucked her lower lip into her mouth to keep it from bleeding once more.

“This is quite the specimen indeed, young lady...” the Ruma nodded appreciatively.

“This is Solarian made, and quite an impressive restraint indeed.”

“I rather gathered,” Rumil acknowledged ruefully, her tongue involuntarily licking her broken lip right afterwards. “Can you get it off?”

“I can... but it depends on if your credits are good or not...” the Ruma replied with a wary eye.

Rumil sighed. “If you know who I am, then you know who my employer is. Trust me, my credits are good.”

The locksmith twitched, as Ruma often did when in thought. “I suppose they would be... but credits in the underworld can disappear in the blink of an eye. Those on top can quickly find themselves on the bottom.”

“Well, I can assure you my employer isn’t going to be falling off his perch anytime soon.”

The Ruma didn’t seem terribly convinced as it said, “Perhaps not...” Nonetheless, the reptilian locksmith reached into its workbox, and pulled out a remarkable collection of picks and rods, setting to work on Rumil’s restraints soon after...

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Three tenth-cycles later, a varied assortment of metal rods was sticking out in random angles from the keyhole of the restraints. The locksmith said with a wipe of her eye ridges, “Fortunately for you, this is not the first time I’ve seen a crystalline restraint.” With one more turn of a pick that the Ruma had slipped in among the already numerous mass, the restraint fell open.

Rumil examined her sore wrists as the Ruma picked up the restraint to examine it appreciatively. As the reptilian did so, a small, clear, spherical object dropped to the floor. The Ruma curiously picked it up, and then its eyes nearly bulged out of its skull.

It quickly pushed Rumil to her feet, and said, “Get out of my building *now*.”

“Why?” Rumil asked, then saw the item in the Ruma’s hand. *Well... this Solarian is a devious little sort...* she thought, ironically impressed by his ingenuity.

“Trust me... it’s not for your sake, but for *mine*. The last thing I need is a Solarian ripping up my place looking for you. Now *go!*!”

Rumil rushed out of the room as the Ruma quickly smashed the minute device with a hammer in its workbox. “Out the *back!*” it shouted as Rumil turned to her right, to leave from the main entrance.

The hacker quickly did an about-face, and ran down the left hall, barging out a small wire-covered emergency exit, then jumping down the small flight of metal steps that led to the back lot where the trash was collected. Rumil squinted as the light of the rising sun blinded her, then as soon as her eyes adjusted to the dawn she bolted through the back alleys, hiding in the darkest shadows she could find.

She didn't dare return to her old hotel room... it was likely that the Solarian Knight following her was keeping watch on it. Added to the fact that there was a Kiros Knight lurking around somewhere that no doubt wanted just as badly to bring her to justice, she knew she had to get off-planet quickly.

Morning was in full bloom by the time Rumil felt desperate enough to come out onto the main streets. Finding her way to a small ducha house, Rumil sighed in relief when she saw that several computing consoles were lined around the walls inside. Slipping inside quickly, and trying to keep casual without rousing any undue attention, she sat down on a stool in front of the third console on the wall adjacent to the window. She leaned forward into the divider separating the terminals, trying to make sure that no one could see her face from outside.

There was a tap on her shoulder, and it was everything Rumil could do to keep from jumping straight into the air. Turning her head cautiously, she saw a thin teenage Arcadian girl wearing a dress shirt of red and white vertical stripes and a name plaque reading "Kaylee," with "Welcome to Ducha Delight" in very fine print above it, and "I am Here to Help" at the bottom. Her adolescent face was creased with uncertainty, and her chocolate brown eyes looked like those of a young girl afraid to be bitten.

"Umm... miss?" Kaylee said nervously. "Only paying customers can use the consoles."

"Oh," Rumil said, trying to veil the relief she was feeling. "Of course. Where do I place an order?"

Kaylee straightened, then pointed to a counter top on the other side of the café, her full-bodied brown ponytail bobbing. "Over there at the counter. It'll only take a tick, and you'll be able to browse GalNet with no trouble."

"Thank you," Rumil said kindly, and did as instructed. As she approached, a Ferian with yellow fur dappled by orange spots suddenly popped up from some task beneath the counter, and Rumil gazed in dire wonder at the knife-like teeth in its mouth as it spoke. She was so enthralled that the Ferian had to repeat itself; "What can I get you today, madam?"

"Oh... can I just get a mixed-fruit mineral water?" Rumil said, shaking her head clear. "Two of them?"

"Certainly," the Ferian replied, tapping the order onto the console in front of it. "It will be 246 credits."

Rumil swiped her currency card through the digital reader, and the Ferian nodded appreciatively as the card cleared the transaction. The cat-like being pointed her to the console she had been sitting at, and said, "Just have a seat again, and I'll bring your order right out to you."

Rumil returned to the stool, and accessed her electronic messaging account. She didn't expect any mail to be there, since it was only used for business and not personal affairs... even if she *had* any personal affairs to speak of. She only accessed it out of habit most of the time, as she could never be certain when plans might change.

However, there was not just one, but *two* messages in her record. She examined the sender protocol addresses, and neither one was on the list of typical protocols she had memorized. Opening the first message, she discovered it to be from the locksmith owner she had went to earlier:

Don't ask how I was able to locate your message protocol, let's just say I know a few of the same people you do. I convinced them that I had news that you needed to learn quickly.

Your Solarian “friend” showed up at my shop as I expected, just half a tenth-cycle after you left. At first I thought he was just a skinny Arcadian, since he was a little taller than I’ve known most Solarians to be, but when I was able to see through the hair that he kept real scruffy, probably to hide his Erani ears, I figured it out pretty quick.

Rumil nodded to herself. Solarians and Kiros shared many physical traits, one of them being slight points at the top of their ears. They were unique to the humanoid races, likely a genetic tie back to their Se-Lan ancestors.

Anyway, he initially said that he was your boyfriend, and that you had disappeared last night. Once he realized that I was on to him, he became very stern and cold. He told me that if he found out I was hiding you, “things would happen to my business”.

*As if to prove it, every single flammable thing on my counter burst into flame. I could see that gleam in his eye... he was giving me a sample of what he could do. I would have attached his picture to this message, but I discovered just now that all my security recorders had been totally fried as well. Gods above, girl, you didn’t tell me a Solarian **Knight** was after you. Those are some of the most dangerous people to get on the wrong side of, and I know some **dangerous** people to be on the wrong side of.*

Rumil sighed. She already knew from experience what her pursuers could do.

*You have got to get off this planet quick, and hope to whatever god or gods you worship that you never hack a single thing again. Even then, he **still** might find you.*

“That’s what I’m planning to do,” Rumil softly muttered to herself as she closed the message.

Then she opened the second, and nearly fainted right out of her seat when she saw its first line. It didn’t say whom it was from... but she knew.

You can’t run, Miss Bonamede. Don’t make this any harder than it needs to be. I don’t want to have to really use force.

For the first time in a long while, Rumil was starting to get scared. The Solarian after her now was not like the incompetent investigators she had eluded at the start, when she had first been given her task. The Knight she was up against knew what he was doing, and didn’t appear to be against bending some rules to get what he wanted.

Her fingers trembling, she slowly tapped in the site protocol for the nearest starport, and began procedures to book transport off Talos. Eventually, she was prompted to scan her currency card, but when she did so, she was unexpectedly rejected.

She tried again, her eyes widening in disbelief. Once again, her payment was rejected.

She attempted a third time, and with her third rejection, an explanation appeared on the display:

*This card account has been seized for investigation of currency fraud.
Please contact your credit institution if you feel this is an error.*

Finally, at the bottom of the display, it said in small type...

This console address has been recorded to prevent illegal usage.

Rumil jumped from her stool in an almost blind panic, surprising the portly Arcadian businessman next to her into spilling his ducha into his lap. Rumil didn't even recognize this, however, as she had bolted out of the café in terror.

Meanwhile Kaylee had come out of the back room with two bottles of mixed-fruit mineral water, just in time to see her customer rifle out the door like a plasma round, nearly knocked the sliding door off its railings in her impatience.

“Hmm,” the girl mused with a chuckle. “Seems like she didn’t need any ducha anyway...”