

Donjon

Part Two

Kaci's War

Kaci had a shitload of guns, but she was running out of food.

Truth be told, aside from the food thing, she was really beginning to love it here in the Donjon system. Sure, it had originally been a work prison, but once she got to talking to the other inmates she began to realize that more than a few of them were good people who had just been dealt a bad hand.

She knew that most of the people on the other colony worlds were guilty of nothing more than having debts they couldn't pay off. The Copernicus Mining Company was a little different though. It was a maximum security penitentiary. The people who had originally been sent here were real criminals, herself included.

Even so, nobody deserved to starve to death stranded on a chunk of rock out in the middle of nowhere. She'd been more surprised than anyone when the rest of the inmates had unanimously elected her to be their leader and spokeswoman, and now it was her responsibility to keep these people healthy and at least relatively happy.

She decided to take a walk down to the recycling bay to see if any of the pickers had managed to find anything edible out in the trash heaps. A few months ago, one of them had found a cache of discarded MRE's buried in a pile of old aluminum tubing. They'd been well past their expiration date, but had still been like a gift from God.

She figured that the ration packs would hold out for another six weeks or so if they were doled out carefully. After that however... Well, if someone didn't show up wanting to trade soon, people were going to start dying.

The Copernicus Mining Company Penal Colony #1 was like every representation of a mining colony in every bad science fiction story every written. The walls were bare stone infused with polymer to keep atmosphere from leaking out through any pores in the rock. Rusted steel doors with stripes and numbers painted on them in fading, yet still god-awful yellow paint separated each section. Men's Cellblocks A and B, Women's Cellblocks C and D, the mess hall, storage and loading bays, the guards quarters and Wardens office, the pit, and "The Yard".

"The Yard" was the biggest joke of them all. She'd read about old prisons back on Earth. In those days the yard had been an outdoor place where the inmates would go for a few hours every day to get a little fresh air and exercise. Here however, the yard consisted of mineshafts, ore processing facilities, smelters, garbage dumps and recycling facilities.

Every inmate pulled two eight-hour shifts every day. Eight hours in the mines, a one half-hour lunch break, and then another eight working sorting trash for the recyclers. Another one hour dinner break, then six hours of down time. A half-hour for breakfast and you were back into it for another sixteen hour day. Seven days a week, three hundred and sixty-five days a year. They hadn't even gotten Christmas off. As far as the Copernicus Mining Company had been concerned, the inmates hadn't ever even been people. They were just fleshy robots.

Things had radically changed when the inmates took over the prison, however. Kaci had instituted a maximum eight hour workday, four days a week. The newly freed citizens of the mining colony had been separated into a series of rotating work crews. The mines and recyclers now ran twenty-four hours a day, as opposed to the sixteen before, and no-one was working themselves into an early grave.

The guards had left ages ago, almost immediately after the wormhole snapped shut. They didn't want to be stuck in a prison camp with no hope of reinforcement, outnumbered five to one by prisoners who wanted them dead.

The guards thought it better just to leave the prisoners here to die.

It hadn't gone down that way, at least not yet. They had begun actively scouring the junkyard for anything that they could find useful. Wo had found a set of plans for a thing called a "multimachine", a small, compact machine shop built mostly out of old engine parts. Kaci had originally thought of nothing more than building a few multimachines and using them to maintain the prison's essential infrastructure.

Then Patariki had managed to find an old junked prisoner transport ship out in the garbage yard.

The ship hadn't been in terrible shape, all things considered. It had needed a few essential parts, but they had been easy enough to fabricate once they got a couple of multimachines up and running. The plan was, Pat would take the ship and travel out to a couple of the farm planets. He'd talk to them out there and see if he could come to some kind of trade arrangement.

They had just begun construction on the new machine shop when another prisoner, Max Westfield, had come forward and suggested a different use for the new machine shop.

Westfield had always been very quiet and kept to himself; the very definition of the "model prisoner" even before the guards left. He'd been here for no-one really knew how long, rumours circulated about how he had been purposefully "disappeared". No-one ever really put too much stock in the stories though - they had always just been a good way to pass the time, and Westfield never seemed to mind them overmuch.

Suffice to say, Kaci was a little more than surprised when Westfield came forward and told her that he knew how to fabricate Gauss rifles, proving that there was probably more than a grain of truth behind the rumours. Only a handful of people knew how to make Gauss rifles, and up until now, everyone had believed that they all worked for the Earth government. He suggested that maybe they should start building some, just to be on the safe side.

She'd almost called bullshit and laughed out loud when he told her that, but there was something about the look in his eye when he told her that made her want to believe him. So, she gave him permission to go ahead.

He had a working prototype built before they'd even finished fabricating the replacement parts for Patariki's new ship. The prototype had met and exceeded all but the most outlandish expectations.

Westfield still didn't talk much at all, least of all about his past, but Kaci wasn't the only one who had started to wonder who Westfield really was, and what he had done to get himself "disappeared" to a mining colony out in the ass-end of nowhere. Still, rumours be damned they needed weapons to defend themselves should the guards choose to return, and Gauss weapons were the most advanced weapons there were. Not to mention the fact that other people would want to buy them for precisely the same reason, which made them worth a hell of a lot in trade goods. So, she went ahead and diverted an entire third of the new machine shop solely to Westfield's use, and the Gauss rifles went into production.

Kaci made her way out into the recycling yard and sidled up to an elderly man wearing a cowboy hat made out of copper foil.

"Mornin' Pete. What the hell have you got on your head?" she asked.

"It's my new hat. You like it? I made it myself. It keeps the aliens from stealing my thought-energy."

"Seriously? Are you fucking kidding me?"

"Not at all. Aliens hate copper. It fucks with their transducers. I've got another half roll that I'm going to sheet my bed with so's they don't sneak up on me when I'm sleeping and en-probe-ulate my rectum. Which is an entirely unpleasant experience."

Kaci took a step back, her eyes widening in shock. It had finally happened, she'd done her level best to cut down stress, and make an at least moderately comfortable environment, but someone had finally gone completely off the fucking reservation.

Of all people, why did it have to be Pete? She thought to herself. I mean, he ran that guy through a paper-shredder the once, but that was a long time ago, and he'd made amends for that. Such a shame, sweet old man like that going shit nuts. What the hell am I going to do with him now?

Pete thumbed his copper hat higher up on his forehead, looked at Kaci out the side of his eye, winked, and started laughing fit to burst.

"You dirty old bastard!" Kaci yelled. "You scared the shit out of me!"

"Oh come on!" Pete wheezed "I'm just having a little harmless fun. I mean, if you can't laugh about copper hats and a probe up your rectum, what can you laugh at really?"

"You are an asshole. If you ever do that again, I'll tie you up, light your hair on fire, and shove you down a drill-hole."

"Fine, Miss Fussypants. I'm keeping my hat though, because it makes me happy. It's my happy hat."

"Well, as long as you're happy, that's what matters i guess."

"Did you come down here for any particular reason Kaci? Or are you just here to admire my magnificent hat?"

"Have we found anything edible out in the heaps? We're going to run low on rations before long."

"No. Not a damn thing. We found a shitload of slightly used electronics though. Computers, tablets, that sort of thing. Most of 'em still mostly work. Good for trade."

"Yeah, I suppose. Provided someone show up before we all starve to death."

"Don't you worry young lady. Someone'll be here before long. I'll bet there's a bunch of ships out there just whistling around looking to trade. Those farmers are going to start needing parts for their equipment before long."

"I hope you're right Pete, and I hope its soon. Otherwise we're all going to have to start trying to learn how to eat aluminum."

"You wanna borrow my hat?"

"Fuck you, Pete. Fuck you and your damned hat." Kaci laughed.

The walk back to her office took no time. She was still worried about their situation, but she was in a much better mood overall. Pete was good for that. He could tell when you were having a shit day, pick you up, dust you off and make you feel a hell of a lot better about just about everything.

She was lost in her reverie when the ancient wired telephone on her desk rang.

She snapped the receiver off the cradle, annoyed at the interruption. "Yeah?" she barked.

"Umm, sorry to bother you Kace, but you might want to come down to the radio room."

"Oh thank God! Look, if Pat's looking for docking permission, just get him down the tube and be done with it. I'll meet him in my office."

"Ahhh, it's not Pat, Kace."

"Hrm. Alright, I'll be right there."

She dropped the phone back into its cradle, and all but leapt up out of her chair and strode to the office door.

She took a minute to calm herself; it wouldn't do to run down to the communications room - people might start to realize just how desperate their situation really was, and that would lead to widespread panic. That simply would not do, so she took a minute to center herself, and calmly opened her door. She walked composedly yet quickly down to the communications room, exchanging greetings to anyone she saw, but made it very clear with her poise and stride that she didn't have any time to stop and chat.

She made it to her destination without incident, and strode straight to the control center.

"So, what's going on then?"

"I dunno, they say they're ambassadors from something called 'The Followers of Alva' and they want to dock and come meet with you."

"Alright."

Kaci reached over and thumbed the transmitter. "This is Kaci Stolz. I'm the one in charge of this facility. I'm told you want to come meet with me?"

"Yes ma'am. We were sent to come speak with you and see if we can come to some kind of mutually beneficial arrangement."

"Alright, you have permission to land. I'll be waiting for you in my office when you get here."

"Thank you very much, Kaci. I look forward to speaking with you."

"Me too."

Kaci released the button and looked sidelong at Artee. "Land them, but make sure everyone prepares for the worst."

"Just to be safe?"

"More than you know. I know that voice. The man on the radio used to be a guard."

“Shit!”

“Yeah. Make sure everyone you talk to knows to play it cool. Let’s not tip our hand until we have to. Send them to me when they get here. Hopefully they mean what they say, and it’s just honest trade they’re after.”

They arrived at her office not long after she did. Three men, all wearing gas masks and body armour. Two of them were carrying guns – old guard issued crowd-control firearms which she assumed had been retooled into something quite a bit more lethal. The third stood out in front, carrying no visible weapons whatsoever.

Kaci took her feet down off the desk and tilted her chair back down.

“What the hell?”

“Hello, Miss Stolz.”

“What the fuck’s with the guns?”

“Ah, those,” he reached up and flipped open the buckles holding his gas mask on, and removed it.

“Danvers.” Kaci hissed.

“I’m pleased you remember me. I certainly remember you. You were the most talented whore I’ve ever met.”

“Die in a fire, fuckbag.”

Danvers sighed. “Fine. Have it your way. We have been informed by a reliable source that you have been making weapons. You’ve been a very naughty girl, and will need to be punished.” Danvers smirked. “Now, don’t look at me like that! From the look on your face, I can assume that our intel was accurate. We’re here to reclaim this facility and everything in it, including your new weapons, for The Followers of Alva.”

He smiled a great, beaming smile at her. “You’ll get to be my whore again. Isn’t that exciting?”

Quick as a viper, Kaci snaked the coffee mug off her desk and hurled it at Danvers’ head, narrowly missing and shattering on the wall behind.

Danvers didn’t even look, he just smiled his great crocodile smile at Kaci.

“You missed.”

“I really didn’t, you jackass.” Kaci smiled back as the lights kicked over from white to red, and the alarm started.

She took advantage of the split-second of darkness when the lights switched over and slid under her desk, grabbing the Gauss rifle she had duct-taped there when she first got back to her office.

“It’s just a fire alarm, you idiots!” Danvers barked. “I told you to keep her in your sights at all times, damn your eyes! I wanted to keep her relatively undamaged!” He produced a mighty sigh, brimming with fake regret. “Oh well, can’t be helped now, I suppose. Shoot her.”

The men beside him opened up into the desk, high-velocity rounds shredding it’s wood veneer into sawdust.

When they stopped to reload, they could hear Kaci softly laughing from underneath the desk. "This is a warden's office in a maximum security prison that processes metals. It's reinforced, you giant stain. You have one chance. Turn around and walk the fuck away from here right now, and I won't shoot you in the nutsack."

"With what? One of your little zip-guns?" Danvers snorted "We're wearing body armour, you dumb bitch."

"Seriously? Are you seriously trying to tell me that nobody told you about Westfield?"

"Westfield? Who the fuck is Westfield?" one of the guards asked.

"You know, that real quiet guy. Got sent here for embezzlement or something. Ripped his employer off for a quarter million, or something like that?" replied the other guard.

"Seriously? She's trying to threaten us with an embezzler? What could an embezzler know about weapons. That's just weaksauce dude."

"Would the two of you just shut the hell up and shoot that bitch?" Danvers bellowed.

Taking advantage of their lack of focus, Kaci popped her head around the side of the desk and shot the two armed men.

A cluster of super high velocity steel flechette rounds roughly the size of sewing needles tore through the first man's gas mask, shredding the face underneath like steak through a cheese-grater.

The second shot narrowly missed Danvers, a half-dozen needles tearing through the flesh of his left arm. The man beside him was not so lucky. He took the brunt of the other round through his lower abdomen. The high velocity flechette punched through his body armour like so much wet tissue paper, obliterating the tender flesh and organs beneath.

Kaci kept her sights trained on Danvers as she slowly stood up and stepped around the side of the desk.

Danvers stared at her, soulless eyes wide as dinner plates, his face covered in a mix of shock and gore.

"You . . . you . . ." he stammered.

"Finish your sentence. 'Have a Gauss-rifle?' Yes I do. Oh, thank you. It really DOES bring out my eyes, doesn't it? And YOU are shit outta luck, fella. Looks like someone's going to get a traffic cone up their ass." Kaci laughed.

"Like fuck I will, you stupid cooze! You don't get to win, I get to win! You're mine! You, this prison, and everything in it belong to ME!" Danvers roared, and dove for one of the fallen men's guns.

He never even got close to the weapon, clusters of needles turning most of his upper body into a fine red mist before he even hit the ground.

Kaci calmly put a round through the face of the wounded man on the ground, and stepped out the door.

She took count of the bodies as she walked down the hall toward the sound of fighting. Three of her people killed versus almost a dozen of theirs. Things had turned out even better than

she'd dared to hope, though she was still deeply saddened by the loss of her people. Good people, who had paid for their crimes and wanted nothing more than a fresh start, and the freedom to pursue it.

She eventually arrived at the loading bay, where the fighting was still going on in earnest.

She crouched down behind a pallet of steel iron ingots next to Bartram Rasmussen, a Danish inmate who worked the smelters. He looked over at her as she crouched down, and winked.

"We have them pinned down behind that stack of I-beams over there. They won't get away. Sooner or later they'll make a break for their ship. When they do, we'll have them."

"No. Let them go. Did you hear that?" Kaci yelled. "Stop firing! Let them go!"

The firing on both sides slowly ground to a halt, the silence a sweet release after the riotous cacophony that had preceded it.

"Are you fucking serious?" one of the Alvites yelled back.

"Yes I am. Get on your ship and get the hell out of here. But I want you to understand, and tell your masters this, that the only reason you are still alive is because we have decided to let you live. Stay the fuck away from here. You're not welcome, and next time we won't be nearly so polite."

A few of the Alvites cautiously poked their heads up from behind their hiding place. When it was clear to them that they weren't going to get shot, they picked up and ran, en masse, back to their ship.

"I hope you know what you are doing," Rasmussen whispered out of the corner of his mouth.

"I really don't," Kaci muttered back, "but we haven't got the resources to host prisoners, and those I-beams are going to be hell to move if they're covered in yuck."

They rigged one of the smelters into a makeshift crematory oven, burned the bodies. The ashes of their enemies tossed out into space. The ashes of their own honoured dead respectfully interred in a makeshift mausoleum that they cobbled together out in one of the old abandoned mine shafts. They had just finished cleaning up, when Artee called Kaci back to the comms room.

"What is it this time? It's not those arseholes *again*, is it?"

"I dunno Kace. They're asking to speak to you directly."

"Fine."

Kaci reached over, and thumbed the transmitter.