

Chapter 38

There were broken bodies everywhere. As well as sparking electronics, the smell of burnt conduits, and something emitting a high-pitch whine that was grating on Katherine's nerves. There was surprisingly little blood, and no Tristan.

The majority of the dead and broken bodies were Armiln's doing. He'd entered the moment Ruefield had forced the lock to cooperate, dodged blaster fire, and gone through nearly everyone there, breaking limbs and necks indiscriminately. This was a side to her second-in-command or his predictive ability she'd never seen before.

The fact that there had been fighting at all had surprised her. She'd expected a bridge crew to surrender at the first sign of danger, not to be armed, and certainly not to fire back, causing her rookies to rush in firing indiscriminately.

"Brad, see if you can get me any information on where this ship was going."

Her pilot looked at the carnage. "You do see what the younglings did, right? I don't think this ship knows where it's going itself anymore."

"Give it a try. Knowing where they're heading might give me a clue as to who this Baran is, and why he's after Tristan too."

"Bounty?" Carlie asked as she walked between them. "I'll take a look at the electronics. Maybe there's some way I can reroute around the damage."

"There aren't any bounties on Tristan on any of the boards; he's still incarcerated on the Sayatoga. There also isn't a bounty on any other Samalian. If this Baran is after Tristan, it's personal."

"It isn't like there's a shortage of people who might be pissed at him," Brad said. "That Samalian does have that way with people that scream. Come hunt me down."

"I thought he killed everyone he came across," Carlie called.

"And leaves ample broken-hearted spouses," Armiln growled. "He wasn't here."

"I know, but we'll get him. He can't leave this ship." She took out her comm. "Coppernic? Tristan isn't here. There's also no signs of someone who might be in charge. Did that woman lie to me?"

The ensuing silence was long enough Katherine almost called again; then her coercionist spoke. "Sorry, Boss. Something came up here."

Katherine thought she could hear shots fired, but Coppernic continued. "But to be fair to her, she only said that Tristan was after Baran, and that the most likely place to find him would be the bridge. Since he's the ship's captain, it would make sense for her to assume that."

"Boss?" Brad called. "Bridge's dead." He was at one of the few stations that hadn't been shot up.

"It should work," Carlie commented, crouched before the open panel.

Katherine sighed and looked at the rookies, most of whom wore overly proud expressions. She so

wasn't cut out to train rookies.

"Can't blame the younglings for this," Brad said. "This isn't damage, it's processor death."

"Not death," Coppernic said. Katherine was surprised the woman had heard him, unless she was plugged into the bridge's audio?

"If it's not death, then what is it?" she asked.

"A reroute. Everything's been transferred to engineering."

"Couldn't you stop it? You did know I was heading here."

Coppernic hesitated. "I was busy with Tristan's coercionist. I didn't see it coming."

Katherine signaled for everyone's attention. "They went back to the medical bay?" Was that the shooting she'd heard? It couldn't be; Coppernic wouldn't be this calm. Out the corner of her eye, she saw Armiln shake his head.

"No, sorry, not physically busy with him—in the system. He showed up while I was dealing with the ship's coercionists. As soon as I noticed him I made him my priority, tried to figure out where he was on the ship, but he's better than his work on the medical bay indicated. A bit before you called, the bridge coercionist went dead, so I'm guessing that's literally what happened to him. Then there was a hard shutdown and when the system came back up, the command programs and processor were walled up in engineering. Alex came back in, but didn't stay long enough for me to get a location on him. I think it's safe to assume he figured out where they were too."

"Alright people, we're done here." Katherine ignored what Coppernic was saying, in spite of the urgency in her voice. She had more important things to do than comfort a rookie. "We're heading to engineering." She caught Armiln's arm as he tried to race by her and earned herself a snarl. "You're staying with us. And don't ever snarl at me again. I don't care what you can do, you are not taking him on alone. That goes for everyone else," she added, not looking away from the Porfedian. "The odds are we will run into Tristan on the way there, so we're staying together. Go off on your own and I am not coming after you."

"Boss?" Coppernic started, the panic in her voice louder. "Where do you want me and Friday to join up with you?"

"Stay there. Keep trying to gain control of the ship. If you can get me sensors, or just the cameras, it'll make it easier to find him."

"Boss, I can't—"

"Coppernic," Katherine warned. "Were all rookies this easy to scare?"

When Coppernic continued, she did sound calmer. "Boss, I can't do anything. I'm not sure you understand, but when I say they transferred the control programs to engineering, I mean there is nothing left in the rest of the ship for me to take control of. Everything is on automatic. I can't see the core, so I can't get to it. Boss, I really can't stay here."

Katherine closed her eyes. She'd wanted a coercionist, had been desperate for one. Now she had to deal with having one. Her exposure to them outside of the corporate structure was Alex and her stay-hidden coercionist. She'd hope Coppernic would be more like Alex, but no.

It wasn't like Coppernic would add anything when confronting Tristan, but Friday was with her. One extra man probably wouldn't make a difference, but it could.

"You and Friday meet up with us by engineering. Be careful. Any indication of Tristan and you hide. When we go in, try to find a terminal and gain control."

"No worries there. What about the prisoner?"

Katherine sighed. Yet another complication. She should leave her there—she was of no use—but the question of why Tristan had left her alive nagged at her. The idea that Tristan had done so because Alex asked felt less right by the minute. Tristan only left people alive if he had a use for them.

"Bring her, but she stays restrained. I don't want her to run off. The prisoner thing might be an act."

"We're on our way." Coppernic sounded relieved.

Rookies, Katherine thought as she put the comm away. "Form up, weapons hot. Armiln, I'm warning you. You run off, and you're not going to be able to predict which limb I'll shoot off. Reign in that anger, I will not have it getting you killed. Is that understood?"

The Porfedian locked eyes with her, then gave a small nod as he took position behind her. "Left leg," he mumbled. "Three inches above the heel, severing the tendon, making it impossible for me to walk until I receive medical attention."

They went down three levels when Coppernic, Friday, and their prisoner were almost shot down. Of course the rookies wouldn't have gone where she'd told them. For them to get here that fast meant they had

hurried, not been careful. She sighed, and almost decided to give them the kind of dress down she'd give one of her experienced people for making a stupid mistake, but they were far too nervous, and Friday's clothing was cut up and bloody.

"What happened?"

The two exchanged a look. "We...we got in a fight, ma'am," Friday said.

It was clear he had, but he'd been eager to kill before. Why did he look sick now? Coppernic she understood. The biochemist just looked subdued, like the prisoner she was.

Well, she wasn't coddling them. She'd told them this would get violent when she took them on. If they couldn't deal with it now, it was their problem, so long as it didn't get anyone else killed.

"Friday, at the rear with Coppernic and the prisoner. You're still in charge of keeping them safe."

"Yes, ma'am."

"It's 'Boss,'" she grumbled. She wasn't old enough to be a "ma'am", damn it.

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