

Chapter One

"This is the worst alcohol I've ever tasted."

Katherine smirked at the way John, one of her oldest friends and current second-in-command, wrinkled his nose after finishing his tall glass of homemade port. "Want me to pour you another one?"

"Please," he said. Everyone laughed, including Katherine who took his glass and walked to the tiny kitchenette on the far side of her quarters. After topping up his drink, she popped her head around the corner and shouted out, "Anyone else want a refill?"

The other two women in the room, Bindu Raewadee and Lori Windrunner, both fervently shook their heads. Katherine didn't blame them. The port had the consistency of gravy. She poured another generous serving and headed back to the living area.

"Thanks, Katherine," John said, accepting the drink.

Katherine slid down the wall to settle cross-legged on the floor. Her three senior officers, the ones not currently working in Operations, sat scrunched together on her tiny sofa, the only piece of proper sitting furniture she owned, beyond a desk chair. She sat across from them, her back cooled by the unfinished, metal wall. She picked up her plate of reconstituted spaghetti and soy meatballs from the coffee table. If the port tasted like conduit fluid, the pasta tasted like conduit foam.

John raised the glass to his lips and guzzled the viscous liquid, all eyes on him. He shook his head, frowning. "Lori, this is disgusting."

Lori put on her best injured face. A good one, too, in Katherine's opinion. "You asked me, *Commander Roberts*, to provide you with a steady stream of non-corrosive alcohol. It is not my fault that it tastes like single malt from the Scottish Highlands." She gave an indignant sniff.

John narrowed his eyes and, with his best Scottish brogue, growled, "Do not mock the Highlands."

Katherine laughed and looked at Perdition Docking Port's newest head of engineering, Second Lieutenant Bindu Raewadee. Why they sent her a puppy straight out of school to head up repairs on an entire port was beyond her. The kid seemed bright enough at least, if a little too shy. "Ignore them. They've been in space too long. We're seeing the first signs of space dementia."

Bindu offered a tense smile. She looked at her full glass of port and back at Katherine. "It really does look like conduit fluid."

The ceiling pipes clanged, shaking the walls and floor. All Perdition's senior staff snapped their heads up and toward the eardrum-crushing sound, except for Katherine. After three months of living in the make-shift quarters, she barely noticed when her neighbors one deck up flushed their toilets. Instead, she stayed focused on twisting the barely-edible noodles around her fork, which proved significantly more difficult than it should have.

"God, Katherine. How much longer will you have to live here?" John asked.

"Engineering," she said, half-heartedly glaring at Bindu, who visibly flinched, "promises my old quarters will be habitable again within the month."

John scoffed. "What's the point of being the captain of a space port if you can't even get your own bedroom fixed?"

"Damned if I know."

They shared a laugh, and Katherine took a deep breath, soaking in the moment. Twenty minutes into supper, and the war had still not been mentioned. No doubt it was still there, weighing on their minds. It would be impossible for it not to plague them, considering where they were eating. Her quarters, once along the outer ring with a great view of Dock Five, now existed in a converted cargo bay. The old apartment sat unrepaired after the Coalition attack on Perdition three months before, which left a significant portion of the habitat ring unsafe.

At least for now, the black cloud of war had not penetrated dinner. For that, she gave silent thanks.

"One of these days, I'd like to visit my old quarters without needing a zero-grav suit," Katherine said, her tone gruff, though she did wear a smile.

"I'm not sure your quarters will be finished on time," Bindu said, clearing her throat, and she pulled out a hand-sized silver data device from her satchel of tools which sat on the floor. "I received this message before I arrived, Captain, err Katherine."

Katherine opted not to mention the mistake of using rank during Sunday dinner. She remembered what it was like trying to balance the job with after hours, having once been a young officer a lifetime ago. As it was, she struggled to think of her as "Bindu," even when off-duty. John and Lori were different; they were old friends. But, apparently, personal interaction with the troops was important, according to Dr. Adam Win, Jr. of Earth, and who was she to argue with a man possessing initials both before and after his name?

"New orders to delay having my old room back, huh? Let me see them." She leaned closer to take the pad from the young woman and froze. She stared at the thick, brown goo in Bindu's bowl. "What *is* that?"

Bindu looked down at her food and back up to Katherine. "The package said lentil soup."

John leaned over Lori to stare at the soup. He frowned. "Mental note. Avoid the lentil soup. You'd think they'd have come up with decent emergency rations by now."

Katherine gave John an exaggerated roll of her eyes, mostly for the benefit of her new head of engineering. He did have a valid point, however. What she would give for fresh fruit! Coalition ships had destroyed the last two convoys destined to resupply Perdition. Ajax, the planet that Perdition orbited, lost most of its agricultural lands in the penultimate Coalition attack and now lacked enough food to export. Until the convoys got through, all Fleet personnel ate emergency rations, so that the civilians could be allotted whatever fresh food the docking port still had in storage or managed to produce on the hydroponics level.

Katherine nodded at the data pad and then gave Bindu a pointed look, waiting for her to hand over the new orders she'd received.

“Oh, it's an update from the Corps. They're ordering all in-dock ships to be retrofitted with triple nanite-fibre barriers and an independent blast system at each junction point. No one can leave for the front without it. Also, the Tenth Fleet has been ordered to Perdition, so that we can upgrade their ships. They'll arrive in thirteen days.”

The entire Tenth Fleet? Katherine did not like the sound of that.

Katherine's voice turned firm, switching easily into the tone she reserved for her role of captain. “Lieutenant Raewadee,” she began, “this is a major project. To implement it, the entire engineering team will need to be pulled off shield maintenance, not to mention repairing the last of the internal damage. Why is this the first I've heard of it?”

A rosy flush spread across Raewadee's dark features. She spoke fast, as Katherine observed she often did when nervous. “The message came in on my way here, so I downloaded it while I was walking.” She handed the pad to Katherine. “I haven't even read the entire order yet. I thought it would be best to stay for a bit, since our Sunday dinners, well, are important. I'm sorry. I didn't realize—”

Katherine held up a silencing hand. “No major harm done. Next time, let us know that something important has come up. While we don't generally talk shop during dinner, we can make exceptions for major overhauls like this.” A learning opportunity was still a learning opportunity, even when it happened over a meal of reconstituted food.

The room fell silent as Katherine scanned the document. Technical data well beyond her skill level filled most of it. She was about to hand the pad back when the communications panel chirped.

"Incoming message from Ensign Ostyn."

She gave everyone an apologetic look. Needing to stretch her legs, she opted to walk to the communications panel instead of using voice command. Using the panel would bypass having the call piped through her quarters, too. She tapped the blinking red square in the middle of the screen. “Francis here.”

“Captain, I apologize for bothering your dinner,” said a frantic feminine voice through the speaker. “It’s only that news came in from one of the trader vessels, and we can’t—”

“Ensign Ostyn! Spill it,” Katherine snapped.

The caller gulped and spoke slower, though the shake hadn’t left her voice. “A merchant convoy entered communications range.”

Katherine nodded. Perhaps this was the overdue grocery run. Anything to move away from emergency rations.

“Captain Baker of the *Pharaoh* said the Coalition captured Pious III last week.”

The hairs on the back of her neck stood on end and a cold chill gripped her body.

Home.

Her breath hitched in her throat. She swallowed hard to move the rising lump that threatened to cut off her air supply. Once certain that tears would not fall, she looked over her shoulder. John was already at her side, his expression concerned but hard. The room tilted on its axis for a moment, and her heart pounded out of control.

Eighteen years of service prepared her for war. It did not prepare her for the invasion of her home planet.

“Are you certain that’s what he said?” Her voice cracked, but she forced out a long breath. The technique calmed her enough to focus on the ensign’s words, though not enough to stop her pounding heart.

“Yes, Captain. Since he didn’t witness it himself, I’ve sent a message to Sector Command for confirmation.”

“That was quick thinking. Good job.” Katherine nodded, even if the woman couldn’t see her; vid-mode was not generally used on the docking port to conserve power. Obtaining confirmation would not have occurred to most ensigns. “We’ll be right there.”

She tapped the screen again, ending the transmission. Even though she was in the company of friends, they were also her subordinates. Pushing aside her grief came with the job. She sucked in a lungful of air and expelled it forcefully. “Dinner’s over.”

Lori stared at her, pale and wide-eyed, but nodded. Katherine turned to Raewadee. Small rivulets of tears trickled down the younger woman’s dark face, and Lori put a supportive hand on Raewadee's shoulder.

Katherine wanted to offer a supportive smile, but she didn’t have the strength. With only a month on Perdition and straight out of university, Raewadee hadn’t developed a thick skin for death yet. Katherine gave her credit, though. The young woman sniffled and quivered but held back the rest of her tears. Katherine had more practice keeping the outward mask, but that did not mean the grief didn’t touch her. It did and shook the marrow in her bones.

Thankfully, John was there, offering age and experience for her to mirror. Katherine didn't know a harder man than John, and she yearned to be surrounded by that cold detachment to keep her own emotions in check. If the attack were true, her family was already dead. The Coalition rarely left survivors. She pushed the thought aside and focused on her next steps.

John narrowed his eyes at her. “You ready?”

Katherine nodded, her gaze lingering on a palm-sized photo stream hanging on the wall. Pictures of her last visit home, of her sister and step-mother, faded in and out. She pressed together her lips, fighting rage and fear. She tapped the door panel. It hissed opened, and she hurried to OPs, her senior officers behind her, boots clacking against the metal floor.

Silently, she begged the universe to let it be just another rumor. Her gut told her otherwise.