

Chapter Three

Katherine stood off to the side of the metal, rectangular table as the official Pious III announcement played on a large projection monitor built into the wall. In front of her sat the five officers who currently made up her senior staff, their expressions bleak. She would have preferred the entire team to be present, but two of her officers, medical sciences and personnel, were off-port at a conference.

"Monsters," Windrunner growled under her breath.

Katherine was unable to argue the point. Sweat pooled along the waistband of her uniform trousers. The environmental controls had broken the moment Raewadee pulled all engineers off port repairs to work on upgrading Perdition's extensive conduit system, along with every ship docked in port.

Murphy's Law of Space Docks: when it rains, everything breaks down.

The first few notes of "Danny Boy" broke the silence of the room. Katherine tapped the bottom right of the screen, as the names began their march across the black background. The feed ended, returning the screen to its glossy, black finish. Displaying the names during the meeting amounted to a waste of valuable time. The message would be on every screen on Perdition within the hour anyway. Her staff could read it then.

She allowed a moment of silence for her crew to collect themselves. It didn't matter that they weren't from Pious. What mattered was that it had happened. The silence also gave her a final opportunity to turn the last of her raw emotions to stone. Her crew needed her. All Perdition needed her. Her family and friends were already gone. She held no illusions of false hope. Nearly two decades of service had taught her that. Three years of brutal war taught her that. Those people were gone and would never be coming back.

"Any questions?" Katherine asked, scanning the faces of her officers, faces that were etched with every possible combination of grief and rage.

Commander Nova Ambrose, *Perdition's* head of security, raised her hand, exposing a sweat stain on her grey uniform. "How did they defeat the planet's defenses so quickly? *Pious III* is remote, but it had forty ships patrolling the area."

"There was a fragmented communication from the fleet there." Katherine looked down at the large console screen built into the table and flipped through the various digital folders for the information. Getting the details correct was important at any time but especially now. Her family deserved at least that. "The lead warship, ah the *Congo*, managed to transmit a garbled message to Sector Command before being destroyed. It appears the Coalition found a fault in our conduit construction on Class Four warships."

Whispers hissed through the room, but no one spoke up with a new question or comment. Katherine continued scanning the information. The number of sections and tabs steadily increased, and she couldn't keep up with the barrage of new material. She looked up at the group. "Raw data is still being transferred. We won't have any complete answers for several hours, perhaps even days. However, it does look like the Coalition fleet destroyed the *Congo* in less than two minutes. The rest of the patrol fell shortly after that." She left off the fact that there were no survivors. Salt did not need to be rubbed into that particular wound.

Lieutenant Commander Jayson Williams, head of tactical, shook his bald head. "I can't believe they took out a warship in two minutes. How fast until we can get the upgrades done?"

Raewadee shrugged and said, "Quite a while yet. We're down an industrial processor as it is. To do this, we'd need to replace the broken one and find another one besides. We have three cargo bays of scrap metal plus eighteen ships in tow to be stripped. We can't go any faster until we can melt down the scrap and manufacture the parts we need."

Katherine drummed her fingers on the table. "All right, set aside five entry-level engineers dedicated to general maintenance and repairs." She used her tunic sleeve to mop the sweat from her brow. "Tell them to start with climate control. It must be thirty-five degrees in here."

She opened a text field to transmit a port-wide message to in-dock ships. "I'm requesting all ships to give us access to their onboard processors. We can use them to reprocess the smaller

scrap and fabricate wiring and micro parts. Perdition can focus on the large items. Will that speed things along?"

"Yes, Captain, though I requested that yesterday. Only four ships accepted. The others felt it put undue strain on their ships."

"Which ships agreed?"

Raewadee looked down at her own pad. "*Druid, Jane Austen, Terra Firma, and Wellington.*"

Katherine thought for a moment before typing in an addition to the message for the ships. "I'm adding the following: Upgrades will be placed on a first-to-volunteer, first-to-be-upgraded basis. Since those four—I've listed the ship names—granted us access, they will be placed at the front of the pack." She tapped send and looked up. "That should make your life easier."

"Thank you, Captain," Raewadee said. A tiny smile formed, contrasting with the exhaustion in her eyes.

Katherine inclined her head; Raewadee's smile was balm for her frayed emotions. At least she could do one thing today to make life a touch smoother for someone.

"Captain, so let me get this straight," Windrunner said through clenched teeth. "Fleet Command knew about Pious III when they sent Raewadee the upgrades list."

Katherine's spine went rigid. She nodded, though she gave a warning stare. Her patience was raw. They still had to speak to their individual departments to prepare them before she could post the message for public viewing. A lot of work had to be done. Whining wouldn't get it done.

Roberts sneered. "The patrol wasn't blown up because of a conduit fault, Windrunner, and you know it. They were destroyed because the Coalition was hiding in Alliance territory, crossed over, and surprised our ships."

"It's not like it hasn't happened before," Ambrose snapped back, nodding in agreement. "Pious III's protection fleet should have been prepared for it."

Frustration filled Katherine, though she wasn't certain if it was because of John's attitude or because Ambrose was right. She paused long enough to ensure her tone could remain calm before speaking. "I realize that it's unavoidable for the discussion to fall back to strategy, but let's avoid it today. We have a lot of work to do."

"Why shouldn't we discuss it?" Roberts asked. She could see the sweat beading on his face. "Everyone in this room knows the Neutrality Agreement between the Alliance and the Coalition is the real reason Pious III was captured. Unprotected conduits built too close to a ship's hull only sped things up."

Katherine licked her lips, trying to balance her own personal wish to fall into the negativity of blame against the need for duty and order. The room's stifling air didn't help. The stench of body odor pressed against her, along with the unrelenting stagnant air. It made her grief harder to manage.

She blew out a long breath. Perhaps addressing their feelings would be better than keeping them bottled up. "I know that the Agreement puts us at a disadvantage. We can't go into Alliance space to attack the Coalition, but they can use Alliance space to attack us. And, yes, it is frustrating when the Coalition is able to use Alliance border systems to hide from our scans. And, yes, it is frustrating that the Ethics Laws prevent us from using drone weaponry along the Alliance border."

Katherine threw back her shoulders and looked at the grim faces around her. "So we will work within the rules laid out by the Union's government."

Roberts muttered, "As long as the Neutrality Agreement exists and the bloody politicians make us follow the Ethics Laws to the letter, we'll lose this war to the Crazy Patrol."

All eyes stared at Katherine. She frowned, knowing she needed to address John's words, even if giving dignity to them was the last thing she wanted to do. She skimmed the console in front of her. Eight new sections had been added. She opened a new folder and scanned.

"The Coalition fleet," she drawled out, refusing to apply the "Crazy Patrol" nickname to them—they deserved no such attention—"approached Pious III from the Alliance boundary. Our

ships hadn't been concentrating their patrols in that area and didn't notice the invasion fleet until it was too late. The planet's defenses were no match without the patrol to assist them."

Silence blanketed the room once more. Katherine found reading out the dry and neat facts of war easier to deal with than her grief. There was comfort in facts, like a warm blanket in winter.

"Intel reports six privately-owned ships, merchants and the like, one mining ship, who dropped its load to make room, and three survey ships escaped with approximately a thousand people. So, about a tenth of the colony's population." Her tone turned grim. "At least some were able to outrun them."

A small voice whispered its hope that some of her extended family and friends made it out and were merely missing from the refugee list. She shot the hope down. Katherine lacked the time for fantasies.

Roberts snorted, slamming his glass of water down hard on the steel table. Water sloshed over the sides, and he used the sleeve of his grey uniform to clean it up. "Our weapons are shit against Coalition shields, but at least Fleet engines are the best in the galaxy. We can outrun anyone, any place, any time." He gave a sloppy salute, his thumb crossing his open palm.

"That's enough, Commander," Katherine shouted far louder than she had planned. Heat rose in her face. She leaned forward, hands on the table, and took control of her tone. "If you are going to be sarcastic and salute, please do it correctly with your palm facing open and flat, your fingers tight, and your thumb parallel with your hand. Otherwise, I suggest you continue to show the proper respect worthy of your rank."

He gave her a weak, but apologetic, smile. "Yes, Captain. I'm sorry. I'm just...*tired*."

"We're all tired." She sucked in a breath of stale, hot air. "Look, I agree with all of you. The Alliance's neutrality and blind eye is making everything more difficult on us. However, losing people is expected during wartime."

Katherine's voice hitched uncontrollably. She took a sip of water and swallowed hard, hoping to disguise the momentary lapse as thirst. Not that her crew would care. It was her pride

that would. “I realize that it’s upsetting and demoralizing. But that doesn’t mean we’re losing the war.”

Windrunner scoffed, her light brown skin almost pink from either frustration or the rising heat in the room. Katherine figured most likely both. “Were you in the same meeting as the rest of us yesterday? Intel says we have a thirty-seven percent chance of winning the war. In my eyes, that means we’re losing right now.”

Katherine kept her tone calm. She had lost more than anyone else in that room. They needed to see her calm in the face of her grief, even if they didn’t know it. If she could remain in control, so could they. “Fleet Command has requested that all captains and higher provide a local action plan to help bring about a faster end to the war. If you come up with any suggestions, no matter how small, I want you to let me know.”

A sour laugh escaped Roberts. “Short of the Alliance joining our side, we’re screwed.”

“The Alliance isn’t going to join our side. They have their damned Neutrality Agreement. They pretend not to take sides in the conflict, all the while letting the Coalition inside their borders to attack us,” Ambrose said, shaking her head, blond curls bouncing.

Katherine decided it was time to end the meeting. They’d had their moment to complain and feel that they were in charge. Time to work now. “I don’t plan to start singing, ‘Hail the Conquerors’ yet, and none of you should, either. So, let’s brave up and put on our best faces. Civilians don’t want to see us falling apart. We have a long day ahead of us. Let’s get on with it. Dismissed.”

The group came to their feet, chair joints squeaking. Feet scuffed against the carpet. As the staff shuffled out, they whispered quietly amongst themselves. Katherine avoided meeting anyone’s eyes. Glances of sympathy would not help her.

“Commander Roberts, a word,” she said, not looking up.

He walked over to her. When the door closed behind the last officer, he said, “I’m sorry, Katherine.”

“You should be.” She straightened herself and looked up at him to meet his gaze. Katherine was a tall woman, but next to him, she felt tiny. “John, you’re my second in command. I expect a better attitude from you, especially today of all days.” Her voice quavered for a moment before taking control again.

The dark circles around his eyes and his snow white hair made him seem decades older than his mere forty-six years. “I’m sorry about your home.”

His words tore at her walls. She lifted a hand. “I’m not ready.”

John nodded at her, his eyes filled with understanding. “I have a department to speak to. We can have dinner later, okay? I’ll bring the Scotch.”

Katherine forced a half-hearted smile and nodded. She waited for the doors to swoosh closed behind him. Tears stung her eyes, but she held them back.

John was right about one thing. The Ethics Laws crippled their defensive abilities. Katherine had often thought a drone system of sorts could be installed along the Alliance borders to signal whenever Coalition ships crossed over. Even a minute’s extra warning could be enough to save millions of lives. Of course, it went against the spirit of the Union’s government, who refused to have any form of aggressive technology along their borders.

A dangerous thought crossed her mind. They had been losing because of their strict adherence to the Ethics Laws. The Coalition didn’t hold the same sorts of morals sacred the way the Union did. Perhaps, a minor greying of a few rules could help.

She took a deep breath. She knew exactly what to do.