

Chapter Two

Fourteen hours and six shuttle-craft-sized cups of burned coffee later, the confirmation arrived.

"Incoming message on Fleet Emergency Channel, Captain," said a male over the speaker on her computer console. Katherine didn't recognize his voice, but he sounded young enough to be one of the new officers working in OPs to help with less critical tasks. There were so many these days, she couldn't keep track anymore.

"Put it through."

The 3D holo-vid projector clicked. A blur of color appeared for a brief moment before clearing. A quarter-meter tall image of an older female in a black pantsuit displayed upward from the palm-sized projection disk on her desk. Katherine held her breath.

"We regret to inform the citizens of the Union of Planets that Pious III, one of our most remote geological research stations, was captured by the Coalition. The last transmission from the planet was June 19 2723 CE, eleven a.m. local time confirming the Coalition invasion force had broken through planetary defenses. The Union Parliament sends its condolences to the families of those who were lost or are still missing."

The muscles of Katherine's back tensed and part of her longed to curl into a ball of grief. A larger part seethed in anger. She grabbed on to that aspect of her pain and held it tight, massaged it, coerced it to grow. No doubt, the brass hats sitting in Fleet Command thought withholding news of the Coalition's invasion would be good for morale. They had not considered that merchant captains couldn't keep a fart to themselves, let alone the conquering of a planet.

The matronly politician in the video message finished reading the sterilized details of the invasion, her eyes grim.

“The Union Parliament sends its thanks to all the brave Fleet soldiers who risk their lives every day for our freedom. We particularly wish to recognize and honor the sacrifices made by those citizens who are settled near the Coalition borders, who continue to work and live even with the threat of war so close to their homes.

“Rest assured that the Union Parliament is doing everything it can to stop the conflict.”

Katherine rolled her eyes as the woman's 3D image faded away. “Inbred politicians.” Parliament most certainly was *not* doing everything possible.

An alphabetized list of the dead, injured, and missing appeared on Katherine’s main console, cutting off her one-sided argument with the unnamed politician.

She watched the names with cold detachment. At least, she started to. The flute rendition of “Danny Boy” floated into audible range. Her jaw clenched. Damn. That had been her father’s favorite song.

Thank God he didn’t live to see this.

She watched the white-text names against the black background. The Dead. The Injured. The Missing. Or, as popular talk called it, the “Dead, Dying, and Probably Dead” list.

Katherine flinched and chided herself for letting those words seep into her mind. She had a standing order that any soldier caught uttering that particular phrase was to receive a double duty rotation in sanitation. The assumption unaccounted-for people were already dead was downright offensive to Perdition civilians who still waited for news of their loved ones. It was demoralizing for the Fleet troops who had lost friends.

Yet, the phrase played over and over in her mind, like a broken music stream. With the Coalition, the saying was true. There wouldn’t be survivors. There were never survivors.

No tears came though, even as the names of her friends and family scrolled on the screen. Instead, near-blinding rage formed a tornado in her gut. She gritted her teeth against the storm, her body shaking.

Sherry Terrance, Missing in Action.

Katherine's math teacher in high school. She had never quite forgiven Ms. Terrance for that failing grade on a group assignment.

She clenched her fists and snarled.

Jesse Meyerson, Missing in Action.

Jesse and Katherine lost their virginity together in the crystal caverns outside the colony. The only man she had ever slept with. Gone.

Grief tightened its grip on her throat.

Alysha Francis, Confirmed dead.

A gasp escaped Katherine.

Her baby sister worked at an outer ring hospital. She must have been home for a visit. Rage rattled Katherine's spine, sending chills throughout her body. The urge to scream, hit, smash threatened to overwhelm nearly two decades of training.

Judith Haise, Confirmed dead.

Her stepmother and last remaining parent. Gone.

Heat rose inside her. Fuming anger swelled. They had invaded her home. They had killed her loved ones.

They were going to pay.

"Murderous sons of bitches," Katherine growled as she grasped the edge of her desk, talking herself down from destroying...it didn't matter what, so long as she could crush something. The more she read, the more her mind filled with blood-thirsty thoughts, fantasies of

wrapping her bare hands around the neck of anyone associated with the Coalition and squeezing until bones cracked. She wanted to do to them what they'd no doubt done to her family.

No.

She wanted to do worse than anything they'd done. She didn't care that the Coalition were humans. They were animals in her eyes. Animals meant for slaughter. And they'd fucking killed her family.

Katherine grabbed her stainless steel coffee cup and slammed it into the console panel that jutted from her desk at a comfortable reading angle. The cup and her hand smashed through the protective barrier, cracking the panel underneath. Sparks flared and wires puffed out a breath of smoke. Plastic-coated safety glass pebbled around her hand and embedded itself into her skin. She shook from the anger, ignoring the tiny drops of blood on her pale flesh and the burning sting of tiny lacerations.

She took several deep breaths, hoping to cool the boiling emotions down to a manageable level. She had a senior officers' meeting to attend. They needed to be shown the message and filled in on the details before the announcement on the docking port's communications Net could be posted.

Protocol during wartime had to be followed. Anger had to be managed.

A full minute passed before Katherine gained enough control to stand up from her desk, neat and organized, except for the tiny shards of glass that gleamed against the black finish. She took the several steps to her transparent dual doors which whooshed open when she tapped the side panel.

Muted voices, beeps, and chimes filled the air. Katherine stepped out into the Operations Center, the heart of Perdition. She lifted her gaze up at the two upper levels before dropping it to the main floor of OPs. Her family was dead. She repeated it several times, allowing the coldness of the words to harden her grief.

Duty called.

Before heading toward the lift, she turned to a blond, young man. Another ensign whose name she didn't know. "Have the comm panel on my desk fixed."