

Chapter 40

“Tristan came this way,” Armiln hissed.

She wanted to roll her eyes, her temper getting frayed at each body they came across. *And is that all your predictive senses can tell me?*

The bodies they'd been finding on their way here hadn't been in as bad shape as they could be, considering Tristan had been the one to kill them. The ripped throats and bashed in heads were the kind of things he went for.

There had been a few footprints in blood here and there, but now that they'd reached the door to engineering, there were none.

Ruefield was looking through the door's lock panel. “This hasn't been used. The lock's on from the other side.”

She looked around. “Then where is he?”

Armiln glared at the door. “In there.”

“How did he get in? Walked through the door?”

“He is in there,” the Porfedian snarled.

“Coppernic, can you see inside?”

“No.” The woman looked around nervously.

“Damn it. Focus, Coppernic. What's going on with you and Friday?”

“Nothing, Boss,” the man replied, but he was looking behind them, ready to fire at anyone who might show up, even if all that was there were dead bodies.

Katherine tried to calm herself. Being this badly on edge was for rookies, not her. “Coppernic, can you access the cameras inside engineering?”

The woman calmed at Katherine's controlled tone. “No. They locked it tight within the system.”

“Just like they did with the lock,” Ruefield said. “I can get through it, but it will take me a bit.”

“How about Alex? Is he anywhere in there?”

“He isn't inside the system. No one's entered it since he last left. There's another door, on the opposite side. Maybe they went there?” she offered.

“Not when the carnage points to this door. Tristan is smart, but he's boxed in. Running out of options.”

“Speaking of options—” Coppernic glanced up from her datapad. “—can I ask you something, Boss?”

“Is it relevant?”

“I'm pretty sure it is.”

Katherine motioned for her to go on.

"If the people in there control the ship, why aren't they venting it? Engineering is sealed tighter than my mom's cred stick on the day after she gets paid. They could open the airlocks, keep us from taking refuge in the rooms. Even if I could keep the door closed, they also have control of the life support system. They wouldn't have to risk anything to kill us."

Katherine looked behind Coppernic, at their prisoner, who didn't look anywhere near as nervous as she thought she should. "My guess is that this Baran needs her alive, or wants her to keep living, like he would any ally of his."

"Or someone holding valuable information," Coppernic said. "She was tied up, well taped up."

"She claims Alex did that, so it isn't doing much to defend her position. But we're going to find out the truth soon enough. Regardless, when the shooting starts, I want her as far away from it as possible. If it comes down to it, she might be useful as a bargaining chip."

"Do you really think Tristan wants her?"

Katherine rolled her eyes. "Hardly. Even she said Alex had to argue to keep her alive, but I don't think he did that because he likes her. They're both cold-blooded killers." She eyed the biochemist again. "No, my guess is that he wants to find out her part in this, too. He tied her up so she wouldn't go anywhere."

Coppernic checked something on her datapad before looking up. "So you are going to use her against them?"

Katherine let out a bark of laughter. "Tristan doesn't negotiate. He kills everything in his way and takes what he wants. If we put her between us and him, the only thing that will happen is her getting shot up. No, Baran's the one I'm interested in. I want to know why he wants Tristan."

"But we're attacking him."

"No, we're going after Tristan, who is in this room, or will be shortly. Trust me. We will all be going after him when he shows up."

"Mine," Armiln growled. "He is mine."

"Yes, I know." Katherine was getting tired of this. She understood his pain more than anyone else here, but there were limits. "Carlie, I need you to blow this door. Sorry, Ruefield, but I want the element of surprise."

Her locksmith stood. "Never complain when you don't give me work. Have at it, Carlie."

The engineer kept wide of the Porfedian, but Armiln didn't say anything about her doing what would have been Jurrans' job. He glared at the door as if he could will it to open.

Katherine opened the closest door, a large janitor's closet, and pulled Coppernic in. "You two are going to wait in here. If it looks like any of the fighting is going to spill out of engineering, close the door and lock it if you can." She motioned for Friday to bring the biochemist over. "If the fighting moves away from this side, go in and find a terminal and get me control of this ship, got that?"

"Yes, Boss. Her?"

Katherine sighed. "Coppernic, if you want to make it as a merc, show initiative. You know why I want her alive, so use your best judgment on how to make that happen, alright?"

"Yes, Boss," she answered, chastised.

"Carlie?"

"Set up and ready to go."

"Alright people, goggles on, earplugs in. Don't come complaining to me if you don't and this does more than blow the door." She put hers on. "Armiln, if I have to move you, I'm locking you in a room and dealing with Tristan myself."

The Porfedian transferred his glare to her, and there was so much rage in it she was surprised the door hadn't melted. When he joined her, away from the door, she lowered her voice.

"You need to get yourself under control; you're setting the example for the rookies, as much as me and the others are."

"This is me controlled," he replied through gritted teeth.

She swallowed as she realized she believed him. She'd always worried about what would happen if Armiln died in a fight and his boyfriend lost control. Armiln had always been so laid back, she never even considered what would happen if Jurrans died. Granted, she'd never considered Jurrans could die. Frenian were as tough a species as it got. She had been concerned about the wrong person entirely.

She motioned to Carlie, and the door ceased to exist.

Neither the flash nor the sound of the explosion registered, but she felt the blast shove her back; the hot debris hit her armor. Armiln was gone before she could tell him to wait.

Suppression-fire came from inside the room, but the Porfedian ignored it, dodging some, and

seemingly letting others hit him. He was suicidal, she realized. This wasn't about killing Tristan, it was about joining Jurrán.

And just as she feared, the rookies took that as the sign to start the attack. Brad and Kamile didn't wait for her signal. They threw the flash-bangs in, ahead of the rookies, and that saved a few of them as they were protected from the lights and sounds. By their screams inside the room, Barán's men weren't.

She and her more experienced people moved carefully, using the distraction they caused to take down whoever hadn't been incapacitated.

There turned out to be more of them than she'd expected as the still-standing men she faced wore goggles of their own. Either they'd been planning on that same tactic, or had been behind enough bodies to have the time to put them on.

Unlike her still-standing rookies, she hit what she aimed for. Those who survived this would learn that all running did was make it impossible to hit your target.

It took a moment, among the confusion of the firefight, to realize there were none of the machines in the room she expected. There was no cover at all. She also realized there were a lot more people than she'd planned on. This wasn't the two dozen men she'd expected. Closer to a hundred, and they were focusing on her people. So Tristan wasn't here.

Even with Armiln dropping them almost as quickly as he touched them, this wasn't a battle she could win. She cursed. Unlike Armiln, she wasn't looking to die, and she had the rest of her people to think about.

As she opened her mouth, something fell from the ceiling in the middle of the room. It had been human-shaped. Someone else dropped. Black, and muscular. Almost immediately, screams came from where they'd landed. She smiled. Finally, the star of this show had shown up. Not only that, but Barán's men would tenderize him for her.

As the screams continued, and intensified, the men firing in her direction began backing up to go defend their comrades. That worked in her favor too, but not all of them did, and she and her people had to stay low and move cautiously.

The crowd between her and the other fight thinned as they changed position to... She chuckled. What did they think they could do? Get a better position? That was why she kept her team as small as she could, so they wouldn't get in their own way.

She could make out Tristan and Alex, moving apart, splitting that fight into two. Tristan was moving deeper, away from her. She started figuring out how she would get to him when she noticed Alex was heading closer to her.

And he was looking at her, firing at anyone getting close.

Well, if he was so interested in dying, she could accommodate him. And she did owe him, anyway.

* * *