

## Epilogue

Katherine gasped and immediately tried to jerk out of Alex's grasp. Except she was lying on the floor. When had that happened? She could hear the fighting, but it was now unbearably hot.

She sat up. Where was Alex? She'd been defenseless, the knife had been coming... She touched the underside of her jaw and found caked-on blood. She placed a hand on her chest and there was more blood as well as her shirt being cut, right over her heart. She could almost remember a sense of pain there, but Alex hadn't stabbed her in the heart, the knife had gone in—

She shook her head. Her memory was jumbled, that was all. She'd probably hit her head in the fall.

She looked around. Chaos was all over, but fights on this scale usually were. She saw Braunda fighting someone in gray armor. Brad was fighting Carlie, and men in gray were fighting each other.

Had the universe gone mad? Why were they fighting each other when Tristan was still around? She stood and something clattered to the ground. An arm.

A cybernetic arm was at her feet, next to a Kataran Carbine. What was an arm doing there? And why was it wearing her glove? To confirm it couldn't be hers, she raised her hand and looked at pink flesh. She moved the fingers. And they responded, while the metal hand on the floor was still.

The world spun, and someone bumped against her. She saw the fist coming and blocked it in reflex, then punched as hard as she could. The head should have caved in under the force of the blow, but all that happened was the man staggering back, his nose bloody and pain exploding in her hand and then vanishing.

What was going on?

The man's nose straightened, and it stopped bleeding. He snarled at her, but someone hit him over the head with a metal bar and he went down. The man who'd hit him turned and hit someone else, and another until Friday stabbed him over and over. Even he didn't seem to notice her. His face was a rictus of rage and horror.

"That is enough!" she yelled.

No one reacted.

She grabbed the Carbine, and shuddered at her cybernetic arm next to it. The polycarbon butt felt rough as she picked it up with her flesh hand. Her new flesh hand. She fought another shudder and shouldered the carbine. She fired over people's heads, but that too went unnoticed.

She lowered it and looked at the fighting. What had gotten into them? Morrison stabbed Friday in the back, and turned to cut the throat of one of Baran's men, then he ran for one of her recruits whose name she couldn't recall.

She shot Morrison in the shoulder, then fired into the crowd. She only injured her people; Baran's men she put down permanently. After a dozen bodies, the fighting near her calmed enough that her people noticed her.

Coppernic kicked her opponent in the balls, then joined Katherine. Others joined her, extricating themselves from fighting Baran's men. Some of them looked like they were about to explode, looking around frantically, eyes wild.

One of Baran's men noticed the group and charged, screaming. She shot him in the head and he went down. The rest were too busy fighting each other.

"What's going on? Where is Tristan? How many people did we lose?"

"No one, as far as I can tell," Brad said. His clothing was bloody, cut, and burned, but he looked to be uninjured.

"What do you mean, 'no one'? In this free-for-all?"

He pointed to the man she'd just shot. The body twitched on the floor, the last of the neurons firing. Why did Brad look afraid? He didn't see as much fighting as the others, since he had trouble stepping outside ships, but he'd still seen enough not to be bothered by a dying—

The man gasped and sat up.

Her aim dropped in shock. He couldn't be alive. The hole in his head had been— The man looked around and she saw the lack of a hole where she'd shot him. The burned flesh was flaking off, revealing fresh pink flesh underneath.

She looked at her hand, and everyone around her, all of them showing signs they'd been hurt by the state of their clothing, but not their bodies.

"It's happening to all of us?" Brad asked. "I've been killed a few times already, I think."

It was insane. He'd hit his head and imagined that. No one came back from being dead.

She looked at the man who was unsteadily getting to his feet. She placed a hand under her jaw. The knife had been coming, she thought she could remember it piecing her flesh, a sharp pain...

She started shaking. No, she wasn't going to lose it; her people depended on her. She looked at them, used anger to chase the fear away.

"And you just went nuts?" She indicated around them. "You decided to just see if you could actually kill each other?"

Brad looked away. "I freaked out." He looked at her with an effort. "Boss, this isn't natural."

"You're right, it isn't." She swallowed, but felt better. "And what's done is done." She looked her people in the eyes one after the other. "It's in the past, understood? I don't want any grudges. We're better than that." Braunda looked at Kamile and snarled. "Enough! Look at them. Is that who we are? We're professionals. We have a job to do. The first thing is to end this fighting. Arm yourselves and try to get them to listen to reason. Those who don't, kill them and tie them up before—" She couldn't stop the shudder. "—they come back to life."

Her people got to work. She grabbed Coppernic as she passed by. "What's going on with this heat?"

The coercionist shrugged. "No idea, it was like this when I woke up."

"Okay, forget the fighting, I need you to find out what's going on with the ship, and get the damned life support system working properly. It feels like I'm being baked."

Sweat ran into her eyes and Katherine rubbed it away. There was something wrong with her face. Panicked, she looked for a reflective surface and noticed this wasn't engineering. She'd deal with that later. She picked up a polished case and looked at her slightly distorted reflection.

It wasn't so distorted she didn't notice her face was symmetrical. She ran a hand over the smooth side which, only moments before, had been covered with so many scars it couldn't move. She smiled, and it was a perfect, natural-looking smile instead of a terrifying expression.

She put the case down and put the Carbine to her shoulder. Her joy at having her face back would have to wait until they had control of the situation. She scanned the room—a cargo hold, she guessed—and readied herself to provide support to her people, but they were handling the subduing of Baran's men in a systematic manner.

In no time, a third of Baran's men were "dead" and the rest were lining up against the wall, having gotten the message.

"Life support's on the fritz," Coppernic told her. "Air's fine, but the cooling barely works."

"Can you fix it?"

She shook her head. "The problem is hardware, not programs. But we have a more pressing one. I can't find the core processor anywhere."

"Is it dead?"

"No, we wouldn't be breathing if it was. Someone, and I'm going to guess Alex, did an amazing job of

hiding it.”

“You can bet he still has access to it. We find that and we find him. How could he do it?”

“The easiest way is a hard-line connection. It’s secure and can’t be coerced away from him.”

“So, the bridge?”

Coppernic shrugged. “I guess. I don’t know where the processor is physically on this ship, but that is the most likely place. If not there, then engineering.”

“Boss?” Brad called from the other side of the hold. Definitely a hold, now that she took the time to look around. The shelving had been removed, but the movers were still on the ceiling. He motioned her over.

There was a body at his feet. She thought it might be Alex, but then she saw the green tint to the skin. “Oh, Armiln.” He’d lost his fight against Tristan. She crouched next to him.

His head was gone. The flesh there had healed over the injury, forming a dome of tight skin that pulsed slightly. She looked at Brad. “He’s still...alive?”

“If you call this being alive.”

His body was still warm. That could be the ambient heat, but she felt his heart beat. His chest moved up and down. How was it getting any air?

“His head is in the corner, should I get it? Maybe if we put it back he’ll—”

“No!” She couldn’t keep the horror out of her voice. She swallowed and continued in a calmer tone. “He died avenging Jurrant. We’re not taking that away from him.” She placed a hand over his chest and ignored the movement there. “I hope the two of you are happy together in whatever afterlife you believe in.”

She bowed her head in respect. She’d never been religious; that had been Tom’s thing. Her chest tightened. She missed him so much. When she trusted herself not to break down, she stood.

She faced her prisoners. They weren’t happy, but they were behaving themselves. The ones tied up were waking up.

“Alright, you lot listen up. I’m going to make it simple. I’m in charge, if you want—”

“They don’t answer to you,” a tied-up man said. He shook his head as if to clear it.

“Really? And who do they answer to?”

“Me.” Even seated he looked like he’d be tall, and on the thin side.

She crouched before him. “You don’t look to me like you’re in a position to give orders.”

“Doesn’t matter. I could be dead and they still wouldn’t listen to you.”

“Your death can be arranged.”

“Good luck with that.”

She smiled at him and patted his cheek. “Oh, I don’t know. I have a good idea how to make it permanent.” She rubbed the underside of her jaw. “A couple of them, actually.”

The man didn’t look concerned. “Doesn’t matter. You won’t give them orders.”

“Alright, I’ll bite. Why not?”

He smiled at her. “The Fifty-eighth don’t take orders from a girl.”

She stared at him. Looked at the men along the wall. “You’re the Fifty-eighth?” She stood. “You’re the people who took down The Sadist of Amsteldom? Are you fucking kidding me? Everybody talks about the Fifty-eighth like they’re some elite team, hired only to pull off the jobs considered impossible.”

“That’s us.”

“Really? What does that make my people? The twenty of us got the hundred plus of you against the wall.”

“Lucky, nothing else.”

“No, you guys are a bunch of posers riding someone else’s reputation. The Fifty-eighth wouldn’t have fumbled this. It’d be me and my team against the wall, and we’d be negotiating a transfer of power like reasonable adults, not making boasts and threats.” She stood and stepped back. “You people have a choice to make. You can work with me, for me, or you can stay locked in here while we take control of the ship and leave.”

“Go fuck yourself, girl,” a large man said. “The only thing that’s going to happen is I take you to a bedroom and enjoy that fine body of yours.”

She looked him over. “You? You think you can take me on?”

The men laughed, mocking her.

She looked at Kamile, who was a head shorter than Katherine and slimmer. “Are you sure you wouldn’t prefer taking her on? She looks more like you’d have a chance.”

“She isn’t the one I want to break.”

She looked at the tied man on the floor. "He's typical of your group, I take it?"

"Yeah, he's mean and knows what a girl's place is."

She rolled her eyes. "Okay then. Come on, come show me my place."

The man took a step forward.

"Boss? Braunda asked.

"Guns holstered. I'm going to handle him."

"Whatever you say, Boss," Brad said. "Anyone's got snacks?"

She motioned for him to approach, and the man ran at her with a scream. She rolled her eyes.

*Amateur.*

She punched him in the throat before he could close his arms on her, and cursed as pain ran up her arm. She'd already forgotten it was natural again.

He got up faster than she'd expected. Right, injuries didn't stay. He came at her again, and this time she planted her elbow in his throat, sending him on his back gargling. She reached for her knife, but it was gone. Right, Alex had taken it.

"Brad, a knife."

He lobbed it at her. She caught it, turned, and planted it in the man's chest as he was about to close his arms on her. He fell back again, and this time didn't move.

"Alright. I don't want to do that to anyone else, but I will if you give me a reason. I might be a girl, but I can kick your asses. You people are so fucking lucky you ran into me and not the actual Fifty-eighth. From what I hear, they have no pity for anyone besmirching their good name.

"Now, I'm choosing to believe that you're not all a bunch of sexist idiots. If you're willing to work for me, and get out of this oven, just come over to this side."

Half the men walked over.

"What about those you tied up?"

"I'll cut them loose," Carlie said.

She ended up with close to seventy of them. "Last chance," she said to the others.

"You can have those deserters, girl. When the rest of us get out of here, we're going to make you regret ever crossing the Fifty-eighth."

"I can't wait. We're moving out, people. Copernic, any other way out of here?"

"No, Boss. It's a cargo hold, just one door."

"Then once we're out, lock it."

She was the last one out, and as the door closed, she could hear a commotion behind her. She sighed. Of course trouble was going to start now.

She pushed her way through the people until she was at the front. Brad shot a man on the floor in the leg. Kamile had another one in a hold against the wall. Carlie was standing in front of another.

"They tried to run," Morrison said.

"Of course they did." She sighed. "Just what part of 'you work for me,' wasn't clear?"

"Lady," the one on the floor said, still glaring at Brad. "I'm not staying on this ship. There is something very wrong here. I'm getting in the first escape pod I find and getting out."

"No, you're not." She stepped over him, turned to face everyone, and raised her voice. "No one is going anywhere until I'm done, is that clear? If that's your plan, just turn around and get back in there with the others. I don't want to have to waste power on shooting you and locking you in a room."

She looked at the three who'd already tried it. The one on the floor was glaring at her. "Throw him back. He's going to be nothing but trouble." The other two went back in line.

"Carlie, I need you to look at life support. Copernic said the problem is hardware."

"I'm going to need help, Boss. On a ship this size, whatever the problem is, it's going to be spread around."

She looked over the group in gray. "Any engineers? Mechanics? Dabblers?"

The men looked at one another.

Brad was the one who spoke. "I've had to patch up my ships a time or thirty."

"Yeah, I've seen what comes of that," Carlie replied. "Good thing you have me around now. And just your help isn't going to help at all. It isn't about you, Brad; a ship this big needs teams of engineer for a reason."

"Alright," Katherine said, "I guess we'll just have to learn to deal with the heat for the time being. Last warning: if you intend on causing me problem, get back in the hold." No one moved. "Good. You work with me and we will be out of here that much faster. Copernic, get control of as much of the system as you can and give

me a status on the escape pods.”

“Boss?”

“We can’t fit everyone in my ship. If we can’t take control of this one, I need to know how many pods we have to work with.” She didn’t add that she needed to know if Tristan had used one to escape. She already knew the answer, but she had to keep hoping.

The corridors were eerily silent as they headed for the bridge, and as she’d expected, a handful of the men tried to run. They were shot and locked in passenger cabins.

She split the group up to speed up the search for Tristan and Alex. One of hers, with a handful of the would-be Fifty-eighth.

“Boss?” One of her recruits she’d kept close by, along with Carlie, Morrison, and Coppernic. “Shouldn’t we get out of here? I mean like right now?”

“Not until we’ve dealt with Tristan.”

“But Boss, why would he even be here?”

“Because we’re still alive.” The man looked at her in confusion, which Coppernic shared. “Tristan doesn’t leave anyone alive. Whatever this is that’s keeping us going, he’s working on a way to deal with it. That means he’s here. Somewhere.”

He had to be. If he’d used the opportunity to escape, she was going to be pissed.

“Johanson, right?”

The man nodded.

“If we leave without making sure Tristan’s dead, we’re as good as dead. He will hunt us down. It might take a while, but it doesn’t matter where you hide. He’s going to find you.”

Johanson chuckled nervously. “You make him sound like he’s some sort of super monster.”

Katherine didn’t smile.

“Come on, that’s impossible. Samalians aren’t anything special, just aliens.”

“You haven’t read the file we gave you, did you, kid?” Carlie asked.

“I didn’t see a point. I mean you just need me to shoot at him until he stops moving, right?”

Carlie snorted. “If it was that easy, he’d never have become the problem he is. Someone would have ended him by now. When we’re done here, I’ll give you the chip and you can give yourself nightmares for a few months.”

“Enough talking,” Katherine said. “I want us to take the bridge.”

“Isn’t that where you think Tristan is?” Johanson asked, more nervous. “Shouldn’t there be more of us?”

“We’ll get some of the teams back before we go in. You’re going to have the comm system up by then, right?” she asked Coppernic.

Coppernic looked at her, a mix of defeat and exasperation. “I’ll have something working, Boss, if you don’t keep adding to the list.”

“I’m sure you’ll manage it.”

The lift wasn’t working, so they had to use ladders and conduits to go up. Those were even hotter, and they had to exit between levels to breathe.

Brad caught up to them, three levels below the bridge. Katherine was down to her shirt and pants, and the only reason she didn’t remove those was because she didn’t want Baran’s men to even think it was an invitation.

“We have a problem,” he said, panting and soaked in sweat. “Enforcer’s gone.”

“What?” It couldn’t be. Her ship had enough security on it to keep anyone from leaving without her permission. Programs and physical securities. “Exploded?” she asked, considering one of them.

“Without getting a good look outside I can’t know, but that section’s sealed for being exposed to vacuum. That means it’s gone.”

“I guess we’ll have to use the escape pods too.” She wasn’t looking forward to that. How many did a ship like this have? It would be—

“I’m afraid not,” Coppernic said.

“Now what?”

“My programs aren’t registering any pods on the ship.”

“That’s impossible! It’s a passenger cruiser; pods have to be installed for them to be allowed to get out of the yard.”

“I know, so it means they’ve been disabled.”

“Then they can be fixed.”

Coppernic looked at Carlie.

“Probably. I can’t say until I’ve looked at them. But if those Fifty-eighth find out, we’re going to have trouble.”

“We don’t tell them. Let’s focus on getting control of the ship; hopefully that’ll be enough.”

Katherine’s hopes died a little, but she reminded herself that she was still alive and that Tristan never, ever left anyone alive. She summoned all the hope she had left and got moving.

They made it the rest of the way with only one rest. Katherine couldn’t shake the feeling it was getting substantially hotter. When they made it to the top level, she gave Coppernic time to get the comm system working, and she called five teams back.

While she waited, the temperature went up a few degrees—now she knew she wasn’t imagining it. It was getting close to the point where she’d get out of the remaining clothing and just shoot any of the men who thought they should do something about it.

The door opened to an empty bridge. That Baran wasn’t there didn’t surprised her. The biochemist had said Tristan was after him. There was probably nothing left of the man.

The biochemist was also gone. She’d almost forgotten about her, but now she knew she’d lied. She was probably hiding with Tristan and Alex. Maybe they’d known what was going on here and she was behind it? Could medicine do this? Bring the dead back to life?

As she stepped onto the bridge, the last of the failing lights showed her carnage added to what her people had caused when they’d first come. Every board was destroyed. Ripped out, as far as she could tell.

“He’s not here,” she told Coppernic.

“I said it was a possibility. The most likely other place for the processor to be located is engineering.”

“Later. You can still interface, right?” She nodded to the datapad. “Can you get the shielding up so we can look outside? Brad should be able to get an idea where we are from the star-field. Then see what’s actually working in here. And then get me sensors; we need to get to a station.”

Carlie got to work under the boards. Brad helped her, and the others stayed out of their way. Coppernic cursed as she worked.

“It’s being stubborn,” she replied to Katherine’s unspoken question. “I can’t figure out why. Alex must have done something to it.” A few minutes later she let out a yelp of joy and the shielding slowly retracted, letting in intense light and heat.

Before she could tell Coppernic to reverse it she was blinded by light, and then darkness. People screamed, and she felt like her skin being burned off. She blinked a few times, and to her relief her sight returned. She also felt cooler, or at least not like she was being roasted on a fire.

There was more light on the bridge, which was good, she thought, until she noticed where it was coming from.

“Boss,” Coppernic said, “Remember how you said Tristan wouldn’t leave the ship until he was sure we were all dead?”

Katherine didn’t reply. What she was looking at was too overwhelming. They were so close to it she could see the current of plasma under its surface.

Coppernic’s voice was too calm, Katherine decided, as panic gripped her. She should be screaming along with the others. Katherine thought she’d start screaming soon herself. No wonder it was so hot on the ship.

“Do you think that’s enough of a guarantee? Do you think there’s any chance we’ll survive?”

Katherine wrenched her gaze away from the sight to look at her young coercionist. She was looking back at Katherine with a pleading look. Katherine shook her head and went back to looking at the section of the star that fill the screen.

No, there was no way any of them could survive this.

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