

CHAPTER FIFTEEN...NOW

AT the stern of the hobbled and dying Argos a place of healing was unrecognizable. The air and walls of sickbay felt saturated with floating droplets of blood. All six operating beds remained occupied and the stacked cots along the aft wall were overflowing with wounded waiting their turn; survivors from all over the ship kept making their way in, or were carried in by the stronger. The patients had to be strapped down on the beds in the absence of gravity. While drifting in the air, Doctor Mamiya Rimiko was succumbing to fatigue as she tried to suture a head wound that had sliced past the flesh and cracked the skull. A few of her nurses and a lot of her equipment had been vacuumed out in the brief breach leaving her sickbay a weakened shell of the place which she'd first stocked and overseen. Rimiko could barely hold herself awake as she glided, but there were still so many more that needed surgery or treatment, and they still had patients needing triage before they could even wait for tending.

"Doctor, I need you over here," Brianna Sommer was calling again and again from the other operating tables. She was the only other surgeon left alive, and that only by grace of the gash on her temple being no more than skin deep. She was a military graduate on her first tour and looked as lost and wounded as her patients.

Glancing over the young woman's shoulder Rimiko saw the same situation that Brianna did, but the young doctor couldn't admit the truth to herself and needed someone else to say it. "We don't have time, cauterize it as best you can and move on." Damn girl was a fool. She knew what to do, but was letting childish daydreams of saving every life foul her up.

"If I get it wrong he could die." Brianna was new to the surgeon's dilemma, the difference between life and death lay in the choices she made, but she had to make a decision and move on.

"If you get it right he could die, but there are other people here who need you, too." Rimiko caught the girl at the elbow and yanked her around so that they were face to face. She didn't need to say anything else. Rimiko just made sure the frightened girl heard her and watched the distant memory of some training flicker in the young doctor's eyes. There was no time left to hold her hand. Rimiko was no soldier-doctor, the Tokyo native had cut her teeth in hospital trauma operating rooms and built a world-wide reputation for excellence, but this would call on all her skill and stamina.

The young doctor looked at her patient, the student's desire to have a professor check their work overwhelming her. Her hand was still shaking when she brought it up to the man's wound. She stalled, took a deep breath, and made herself jam the silver nitrate in to seal the wound. Tears in her eyes, she went on to the next bed and fought a need to vomit.

Tilting about in the air Rimiko was fighting her weightlessness as much as the collection of broken bones, contusions, exposed organs, burns, and concussions on her tables. Every time she twisted away or bobbed like a cork she grew more frustrated. The screams weren't dying down and the wounded seemed to be multiplying and she could not hear her own thoughts in the tumult.

A whine from the walls and floor made Rimiko hesitate. The high-pitched wail grew louder as it dropped to a deep rumble. The red emergency lights went out, then the standard lights flickered on, the air was running, and then everything began to have weight again. Doctors, nurses, patients, scalpels, stitches, blood, and everything else fell as the gravity surged back to life. The ship itself was the last of them all to wake up.

Bruised and feeling all that she had been through in a great rush, Rimiko lolled her head to see the nightmare her sickbay had become. Her brief tour on the *Argos* was supposed to be the jewel of her career, her crowning glory, and a story to tell curious young doctors for the rest of her days. Rimiko made something of herself despite a world designed to hold her back. She'd risen to great and almost unequivocal heights in her field without ever looking backward or failing when a test of her ability arrived. Now she was casting about like an army nurse in the Great War for anything to soothe the dying coming in from the trenches.

She caught herself staring at a cracked skull on the deck just beside her and cursed herself for her own stupidity. She was lying on the ground waiting for someone's help, waiting for the situation to turn on its own. She was letting the problem beat her and that was something she had never done, and refused to do now.

Pushing herself up to her knees Rimiko banished everything from her mind but the job at hand. She could feel pain and think on the tragedy of it later, just now there was work that needed doing that no one else could do. Gripping the operating table Rimiko hoisted her body up with a grunt and looked around the room now stained with blood and filled past capacity with the dying screaming for mercy. The weight of gravity felt heavy for only a second, and then it swirled around her as a helping hand, letting her arms and legs move as they should.

"Everyone who can better get up on your feet to help with those who can't," Rimiko's voice broke the spell of inaction that had fallen after the shock of the ship's systems coming back to life. "No more blaming gravity for mistakes."

Her whole world coalesced down to the patient on the table. Her lasers and optic imaging equipment were gone in the breach or bashed worthless, so she took up scalpel, drill and thread and remembered an oath sworn a long time before. If denied technology and digital readouts then she would fall back on the more traditional tools of her ancient trade, the goal—to save a life—remained. Death was her enemy and she would fight with whatever weapons she found at hand as valiantly as any soldier did.

When she realized that the patient below her was suffering from a swelling brain, she didn't hesitate. She cut through hair, skin, and skull to give the brain room to expand. In seconds the writhing creature eased his breath and lay back on the bed, passing out when exhaustion replaced agony. There was no time to follow every procedure and so she went on to the next bed while a couple of officers able to stand took the man away to a cot to free up the bed.

A young lieutenant appeared in the open hatch that led into sickbay from the science lab just forward, first clutching at the walls and then standing on his own two feet. He was drenched in blood, grime, and debris and his face was aflame not with terror but mania and unbridled hatred. When none of the doctors, nurses or patients gave him any more attention than anything else he began to lean into his apoplectic rage. No one would ignore him again, not after today.

"If you can stand, you can wait," Rimiko shouted at the newcomer when she caught a glimpse of him in the corner of her eye.

"No, bitch, you don't tell me what to do anymore," the young lieutenant screamed as he staggered further into sickbay.

"What did you say?" In spite of everything Rimiko looked up at his brazen words. Her sickbay had erupted with activity but was now grinding to a standstill once more.

Now that he finally had the self-righteous woman's attention Lieutenant Jean Girard pulled his hidden Glock and started waving it around in his would-be victim's faces. "I said you don't get to tell me what to do."

“What do you think you’re doing?” Brianna kept repeating the question under her breath as she stood frozen stiff between the gunman and her patients. She wouldn’t move, couldn’t even if she had wanted to.

“I’m putting things right.” Jean delighted at the way the young doctor jumped every time the barrel went past her. After so many years as an unnoticed nothing this was the moment when he became a hero for all time. “I’m stopping all of you before you can finish the devil’s work and enslave us all.”

“Take me. You don’t have to point that at anyone else. Just take me and leave the rest of these people alone, unless you’re going to prove to be that kind of coward.” Rimiko stepped forward, arms open. Covered in blood the doctor matched the gruesome sight of the gunman. She didn’t hesitate to offer herself up as a lamb.

“Don’t tell me what to do.” Lieutenant Jean Girard hissed the well-worn words. He whirled about, pointing the gun at everyone except Rimiko. He was the boss, not her, and whatever she wanted to happen he would see to it that the doctor died disappointed. He wanted to break her before he killed her. Jean owed Rimiko for particular crimes of the past still burning unforgotten.

“I’m the one you want.” Rimiko thought that there was something vaguely familiar about the man, but she couldn’t place him.

“You’re going to die today, but I’m going to have some fun with you first.” Jean sneered and laughed all at once, the two expressions mingling awkwardly. “All of you are going to pay for your part in the Alliance’s oppression.”

“Sickbay, conn, please report,” Suresh’s stentorian voice came through the speakers of the room’s com and made them all jump. Even the dying had hushed with the coming of the gunman.

“Conn, sickbay,” Rimiko said automatically with a computer’s stiffness as the barrel drew close to her face.

“What’s the sit-rep down there, doc?” Suresh asked and she noticed that there was a touch of off-kilter curiosity to the Chief of Operation’s question.

“Offhand I would say we have a problem, Commander.” Rimiko went on with her report even as Jean grabbed the doctor by her hair and pressed his gun to her temple. He was breathing heavily and growling, his eyes darting wildly at the wounded and the doctors.

“Say again, doc?” the captain’s voice now came over the speakers.

“There’s a madman with a gun to my head saying he’ll kill us all,” Rimiko recited coldly. Jean threw her by her hair across the room, ran after her, jerked her back to her feet, jammed his gun once more into her face, and then pulled her in as a human shield and hostage. His eyes were ablaze as he glared at the rest of his caged prey and waited for someone to make a move. He shot the wall-mounted controls to the intercom just to shut the voices up and give himself quiet in which to think. He was preparing himself to make his demands to the captain.

Behind the raging lieutenant a new figure crept into the open hatch of sickbay. Chief of the Boat Hector de Anza was moving as quietly as he could while advancing on the gunman. He realized too late that too many eyes were flickering toward him for stealth and he’d never get close enough to snare the gun. He cursed himself for leaving to tour the rest of the ship. He should have stayed right by the doctor’s side until the ship was in better shape, but he never would have dreamed that they had a traitor on board, not among this crew.

“I’m on the scene,” Hector said into his own portable com to make sure the control room knew there was someone dealing with the nightmare. The COB took in the blood spattered sickbay, the dying crewmen he loved as a surrogate family, and finally the doc and killer.

At the sound of the COB's voice Jean whirled with his hostage to face the chief and then tried to back away to the wall. Hector knew the lieutenant on sight, but had never seen anything like the mania coursing through Jean Girard. Hector reached to his side and undid the flap on his holster to lay a hand on his sidearm. One of them was about to die.