

Chapter 12

The old man paused, and Alex noted that his eyes were still distant. "I intended to go back, once things quieted down—destroy the fabricator, the backup's physical location. But they never did. The Law figured out I was behind the deaths and chased me. I ran. I hid. I came home and tried to hide here, but what I did caused friction." He looked at the woman. "You and Baran were the only ones young enough not to judge me."

"Did you tell anyone here about the fabricator? About the research?" Tristan's voice was gentle.

Alex studied him for any cracks in the mask. He had to be angry; if what the old man said about the Salvation virus was even close to true, Tristan's life was now in danger. But even something this severe didn't shake his ability to lie to people.

"No, of course not. I never talked with my children about what I did. The stories I told Dalia and Baran were simplistic, only enough so they understood I had to go."

"Did you ever tell them about the virus?" Tristan asked.

"No, not even Satina knew the details, only that I was on a quest to save the universe."

Tristan studied the man. "How about your office then? Did you leave anything there? Any information? Your son locked it up. What was he trying to keep the Law from finding?"

Olirian looked at Dalia, wonder in his eyes. "He did? He screamed at me the last time I came. He threw me out. Told me that if I came back, he'd tell the Law."

She squeezed his hand. "He was angry, but he would never betray you to the Law. You were his father."

Olirian sobbed, and she wiped his tears away.

"Your office," Tristan asked. "Could there have been anything in it?"

The man shook his head, then looked uncertain. "I don't think so."

"Did you do any of your research when you were here?" Tristan asked. "Did you bring it with you?"

"No," Olirian stated, "I wasn't here often enough in that time. It was rare that my mother would take the ship so close to Bramolian Six; the trip there was under a month. I came here to be with Satina and my children." He hesitated. "But there were calls. Brian did call me while I was here. He insisted on keeping me updated on the project. He might have told me about the backup during one of them."

"Was a record of the call kept?"

"Oh no, we don't do that here," Olirian said, but Alex caught the expression on Dalia's face, which told him they might have found how Baran knew where to go.

"Did he ever discuss the fabricator during those calls? Where it was stored while waiting for transport?"

"No." His eyes became unfocused. "I don't know. It was so long ago. I was careful." He looked at Dalia, becoming agitated. "I was, wasn't I? Did I make a mistake? Did I leave something? Am I going to kill the universe after all?"

"No, Grandfather, no," she spoke softly. "It's going to be alright. You didn't leave anything. The universe is going to be safe."

The old man began wailing about not wanting to kill the universe. She looked at one of the doctors.

"He's exhausted, Lady Prian. Mental fatigue. I can give him a stimulant if you demand it, but what he needs is rest."

"Where is the warehouse?" Tristan still acted calm, but Alex caught the hint of urgency in his voice.

The question quieted his wails. "Warehouse?" Almost as if the word was foreign to him.

"Yes, where the fabricator was stored. Where it's hidden."

"Telrize," Olirian answered, eyes fleeting about. "Brian picked Telrize because they offered both physical and data storage."

"Is it enough?" Dalia asked hopefully. Tristan nodded, and she relaxed. "You can rest now, Grandfather. You've earned it. Sleep, and I'll be here when you wake."

The old man closed his eyes and grew relaxed. His breathing calmed, and she motioned for Tristan and Alex to follow her.

The moment they left the room, Tristan's face changed. Gone was the warmth, the caring expression. Back were the hard eyes, the flat, thin lips of someone who never smiled. He was thinking, Alex could tell that much after the years with him. It was the ears, straight up, pointing forward as if there was a sound there.

The abrupt change made Dalia take a step back. Alex didn't even bother being amused by it. He'd seen such reactions often now, usually as Tristan dropped a mask before killing the person. He could switch from mask to mask with such ease that it used to make Alex dizzy. Seducing a woman one moment, being a stern businessman the next. He'd even been an old man, for one job, hunched over, and having difficulty walking. Alex had seen him change, and he'd still been as convinced as everyone else.

"Did he lie, or does he not know?" Tristan asked.

She took another step back. Very few people could receive that cold, calculating stare and not be affected.

"A-About what?"

"His communications with Brian being recorded."

She shook her head. "He didn't know. I only found out when I took charge of the family, and it wasn't something he was ever going to do."

"I need those records."

"I've already requested them."

"Was he telling the truth?"

"Of course he told the truth," she replied indignantly. "My grandfather isn't a liar, he did what he did because he didn't have a choice..." Tristan wasn't looking at her.

"I can't comment on anything relating to the virus, but what he said about the coercion he did, that's plausible enough. If he's an amateur like he claims, then coding in the void is beyond him. So without getting into that vault, he couldn't build the kind of program he'd need to erase the data there. Detaching a vault from the indexes it's connected to is easy enough. The hard part is making sure you find all the indexes, and it sounds like he was careful with that."

"Can you find it?"

"If I have access to the physical mainframe."

Tristan nodded. "The fabricator? Did he give you enough information to find it?"

"That's tougher. First, I need to find a layout of the warehouse from before Olirian made the changes, and compare that to a current layout."

"Can you get one?"

"Not easily. For places like that warehouse, accuracy is vital, so any approved changes quickly propagate through the backups. If this was a few days old, or even a couple of months, I'd be confident I could find a backup the information hasn't propagated to. We're talking decades. The only ways I'll find one is if a backup glitched and didn't update for all that time, or if a coercionist happened to make a copy of the backup for some reason."

Alex shook his head. "Realistically, the simplest way to find the fabricator will be to go to the warehouse and walk around it. It won't be quick, but it'll be faster than looking through the net for it. And once I get into their system, I should be able to eliminate the places it can't be, by confirming the physical locations that are still active."

"Wouldn't someone have already done that?" Dalia asked.

“Why would they? All the computer cares about is that everything is where they’re supposed to be. It isn’t interested in blind spots because it doesn’t know they’re there. It can’t raise an alarm about them for the same reason. Criminals might do it, but they’d have to walk through it to find out what’s there. I don’t know any criminals who want to do that kind of work.”

“But you are certain you can find it?” Tristan asked.

“If you’re willing to spend the time, we will find it.”

“Good,” Dalia said. “Then you should leave now so you can reach it before my brother does.”

“I haven’t agreed to go after him.”

She stared at him.

Alex studied Tristan again, but the mask was still flawless. As far as he could tell, he just wasn’t that interested in this. Only Alex knew that this had to be driving Tristan insane. Survival was all that mattered to Tristan, and this virus didn’t just put it at risk. It guaranteed his death.

“How can you not take this job?” she asked in exasperation. “Didn’t you listen to my grandfather? Everyone in the universe is going to die.”

Tristan shrugged. “Unlike him, there’s no one I care to save in the universe. So why should I spend my time cleaning up your family’s mess instead of building a place to hide for the next twenty to thirty years?”

“Money?” Her disbelief was so honest, Alex almost laughed. Someone like her being surprised at that was just too funny. “This is about money? The universe could die, and you want to put a price on it?”

“The universe is going to die regardless of what we do. It’s physics.” He gave her a tight smile. “But until then, everything has value, as you well know.”

“You...want me to pay for everyone in the universe?” Now she was incredulous.

Tristan thought about it. “I’m not going to be that greedy. Pay me for one life. The others will be free of charge. After all, to save that one life, I have to save everyone else. You heard your grandfather. Salvation is extremely contagious.”

She seemed unable to find words. “You can’t put a price on a life,” she finally managed. “Life is priceless.”

Alex snorted, making them both look at him. Tristan raised an eyebrow, so he spoke. “The prison system assigns value to every prisoner it takes in. The bounty hunter’s boards are filled with people being assigned value. Everyone is worth something to someone.” This couldn’t be about money.

“Fine,” she snapped. “A hundred-million. That’s what I’m going to pay you to save the universe.”

“SpaceGov standard credits,” Tristan added.

She rolled her eyes. “Fine.”

“Good. Now tell me clearly what you want this job to be.”

“To save the universe, what else?”

“Alright. Then—”

“And bring my brother home. He needs help. I don’t care what it takes, but bring him back to me so I can make sure he gets it.”

Tristan waited. When she didn’t add anything, he nodded. “Half of it now. The rest when I deliver your brother and confirm the virus has been destroyed.”

“There’ll be someone waiting by your ship with the money. I thought you’d be different, but you’re a merc like all the others. Money is all you care about.” She stormed away.

Alex followed Tristan silently, trying to work out what this had all been about. “Is it about her brother?” he finally asked.

“What is?”

“The money. You don’t care about money. You have more than I’d know what to do with, so it’s about something else. Is it about her brother?”

“No. It’s about this being her job, rather than mine. The fact she included her brother’s life in it is just another parameter to the job.” He smiled. “I did tell her she was paying to save one life; now she accidentally made sure her brother would survive all this.”

“If this had been your job, there wouldn’t have been anything left of him.”

Tristan nodded.

The man who waited by the ship was dressed in the pale-yellow uniform many of the people working close to Dalia wore. He presented a small case to Tristan, who opened it. He took the one chip in it, handed that to Alex, and returned the case to the man. Once they were in space, he’d take all that money and spread it over all the accounts Tristan had.

Tristan unlocked the ship and Alex went in alone. Tristan would do the check of the ship while he checked the computer. When both checks didn't find anything, Tristan took them out.

Alex felt better as the forcefield shimmered over the ship and they officially left it behind, left her behind. He knew he'd have to see her again when they delivered her brother, but he hoped not to have to get off the ship for that. He could just imagine how grateful she'd be, and how she'd offer to repay Tristan.

It took Alex a few hours to distribute the credits through all of Tristan's identities. He had over three-hundred of them spread around the universe, and unlike Alex's paltry two-dozen, some of those identities were important. Alex kept his IDs ordinary, people that SpaceGov would never notice.

Tristan had high-ranking corporate officials among his IDs. They were from corporations Alex had never heard of, but somehow they moved about within them and no one noticed or raised all sorts of flags. It did mean he was able to move larger amounts. By the time he was done, like with previous times, Alex was left wondering just how Tristan managed to keep track of all of them.

With the transactions distributed, backdated, and set in motion among all the identities, and companies he'd coerced programs in to move the money, he stood. It didn't matter how thorough the Law's investigators were. With the system Alex had in place, they couldn't track where any of the money he and Tristan had came from, or who it ultimately went to.

He checked the cryo system, running it through its tolerance tests. He'd been in it only two days before, but there had still been months, objective, since the last time he'd confirmed everything was in order.

"That can wait," Tristan said. Alex glanced his way. He stood as he finished typing. "In my room, now."

Now? It had barely been days since the last time. He almost voiced the question, then came to his senses and ran for the room.

He threw his clothing on the bed, prepared himself, and lay on his stomach on the bedroll next to the bed. He barely heard Tristan enter. Then he felt his fur in the inside of his legs as he knelt. Hands grabbed his hips, and he was flipped on his back.

Before the surprise had passed, his legs were on the alien's shoulders and Tristan was using him.

Alex watched his face. It was rare they did this facing each other, so each time he looked for a sign that things had changed. They hadn't—they never did—but he didn't care. When he was used like this were the only times Tristan touched him, and Alex craved it.

He moved his legs to wrap them around Tristan's waist, freeing the neck for Alex to put his arms around. Tristan let him, moving at a rhythm that made this feel good for him, not Alex, but that also didn't matter. It still felt amazing, and Alex had no problem giving voice to his pleasure.

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