

## Chapter 15

The lobby was busy, and Victor had to push his way through the crowd of people who hadn't been smart enough to install even a basic identity security program on their node. They were screaming at the sergeant seated behind the desk who looked haggard. She still managed to wave to Victor when she noticed him. He returned the wave and even forced a smile. Of everyone here, she was the only one who ever looked like she was happy to see him.

The entrance to the bullpen didn't immediately unlock when he put his hand on the handle. The scanner was slow, he told himself, as he did every day. And like each time, the fear that today it wouldn't unlock started creeping in. The door clicked, and he pulled it. So, Captain Sinor hadn't carried through on his threat.

The sounds of screams and arguments were replaced by lively discussions between officers once the door closed. Talking about cases, sharing gossip, laughing at a joke, or a story of what a crook had done to try to avoid capture, which often was a joke in and of itself.

Except for a circle three desks deep around Victor. When Victor approached, all conversation died. They eyed him and some sneered. He ignored them. He hadn't done anything wrong, he reminded himself.

"Why hasn't he been fired yet?" someone mock-whispered.

He didn't turn and scream at her. What was the point? It had taken him a couple of years, but he'd realized there was nothing he could do about this. He hadn't done anything wrong, he told himself again. If after a decade they were still hung up on it, he wouldn't be able to change their minds.

Of course, the fact that Captain Sinor threatened to lock him out of the precinct every evening didn't help anyone forget that Victor was a pariah. He endured the stares, the glares, and the whispers all the way to his desk, in the furthest corner of the large room.

He sat, having to be careful; the chair was old, and his bulk was more than it should be. If he broke it, he wasn't sure he'd get a replacement.

He looked the room over as his terminal registered his arrival and booted on. They still gave him the same disdainful look. Fifteen years later, and still all they could see was the one they held responsible for the blemish on the precinct's records.

Like it was his fault that a lone criminal had managed to circumvent the precinct's information security and get into the system. His fault that he'd managed to make his escape by destroying a power station. Yes he'd been the one talking to him, yes he'd had his datapad and that was how he'd accessed the system, but any detective would have had one.

But someone had seen him and the criminal in the same interrogation room. The criminal had asked to speak to him directly, therefore Victor was responsible for everything that had happened afterward. For the higher ups coming down on all of them for lax security, for the punitive measures they'd all had to endure,

Victor included.

And the timing couldn't have been worse. His career had been starting up again. Cases were making it to his desk. He was an actual detective, not just one in name anymore. He didn't care the cases he got were first-year stuff, things only the newest of rookies dealt with. It was a sign that he was finally back on track.

Now? He wasn't even allowed to look at active files. The only files he saw were the closed ones, needing to be filed. He'd been relegated to doing secretarial work.

He'd hoped that when the captain retired, five years ago, things would improve. A new captain would mean one person in authority that didn't hold him responsible for every problem with the precinct, and with that person on his side, he'd hoped that ever so slowly attitudes would change.

But not only had the promotion come from within the precinct, Casey Sinor—his loudest critic, the man who'd made it his mission to make Victor's life miserable—became his captain. The only reason the new captain didn't make his first act to fire Victor was that he found out he didn't have that power.

So his captain did everything he could to get Victor to quit. Victor tried transferring to another precinct, and those were the only times Captain Sinor smiled at him, as he explained that Victor was too important to the precinct to ever be able to let him go.

The first time this had happened to him, thirty years before this incident, he'd told himself he would tough it out. He would prove he was better than that one mistake. He'd been younger, stupider; he'd let himself be used by a criminal to gain access to the database. He'd believed that he deserved a second chance, and he was going to fight for it.

During that attack, the precinct had lost more than eighty percent of the data as the criminal corrupted it to hide what he was after, and that had made the punishment warranted. Victor had deserved the suspension, but he didn't lie about. He took that one subjective year and tried to find the criminal. How hard could it be? By then he knew the criminal far too well.

Only it turned out Victor knew nothing about him, not even his name. Every lead he followed based on some information he'd dropped, details he'd mentioned, led nowhere. He did find a name, eventually, but all that gave him was a list of possibilities, not certainties, and with his suspension coming to an end, what else could he do?

He'd put the incident behind him, gotten back to work, and endured the career-stall he was in as best as he could. He hadn't let himself go. He'd stuck to his exercise regimen because he knew, without a doubt, it was only a matter of time until it blew over and he would get back to work.

The problem with people being as long-lived as they were, was that "a matter of time" turned out to be almost thirty years. Still, he'd endured it.

As certain as he'd been that it was a "matter of time" before he returned to work after that incident, he was equally certain that this time, his career was good and dead.

A shadow fell over him. "We have a break-in at the Granhern Storage Facility. I need you to investigate it."

Victor looked up at Captain Sinor holding a chip for him while reading his datapad. Victor looked at it, and then the meaning hit him. He was getting a case. He reached for it, only to have it yanked away.

Captain Sinor was eyeing him. "You're not Zhelan." He looked around. "Damn it, Zhelan, where are you? How come you didn't tell me you moved desk?"

"Sorry, Captain," a woman yelled back. "Forgot to tell you." She ran to grab the chip, smirked at Victor, and walked back to her desk.

He slunk back in his chair, making it creak. He'd been at this desk for the last nine years. He wanted to scream, but what would that help?

Captain Sinor squinted at him. "Who are you? I'm pretty sure I'd remember hiring a secretary as fat as you."

"I get it," Victor growled before he could stop himself. "I have no business being here. All I do is bring shame to the department. I'm not even good enough to lick your shoes. You've had your fun, Captain. Can I get back to work now?"

"Right," he replied, stretching the word. "I remember you now. You're the guy who slept his way into a filing position."

Victor glared at him. That had been before—before Sinor had even joined the precinct. And he'd paid for that one already. He'd paid for falling in love with Simon and not realizing it had been an act on his part.

"At least you should have kept it within your species," the captain sneered.

He ground his teeth to keep from saying anything. Sinor would just use that as an excuse for another suspension without pay, and he'd promised himself he was never making it that easy for the captain again.

“Is there anything else, Captain?” Victor said through clenched teeth.

The man sighed. “I suppose not. You really should leave, you know. No one wants you here.”

“Tried it. You won’t let me transfer.”

The man looked offended. “And give you a chance to ruin another precinct? I don’t think so.” He smiled. “And you make such a pretty secretary. How about you get me a coffee?”

“Get it yourself. I’m not your secretary.”

“That almost sounds like insubordination.”

“It’s the sound of me trying to do my job.” Victor focused on his screen and waited for the captain to make a decision. Maybe he’d be suspended again after all.

The shadow left without another word.

He moved a few files to the closed case server, then stopped. Maybe he should quit and get this over with. Find a job elsewhere. It couldn’t be in law-enforcement; no matter where in the universe he went, his file here would be waiting to sink him. Sinor would make sure of that.

He couldn’t go corporate either. Their requirements were even more stringent than the Law, which left private security. But that was barely a step removed from being a mercenary, which was the same as being a criminal.

No, he was going to tough this one out too. Sinor was ambitious, so he’d get promoted away, eventually. Maybe then Victor would be lucky and get a new captain who didn’t know him.

Of course, if the end to the incessant attempts at breaching their data vaults hadn’t made the captain mellow out, probably nothing would. They’d put that on his head too, probably because they’d started after the incident. Everything had become his fault since then, so that had to be too.

But then, if any of them knew that the attacks had actually been his fault, not that he’d known it at the time, there probably wouldn’t be a body left of him.

It was pure luck on his part that he even knew why the attacks had stopped, and therefore why they had been happening. It had been the twenty-fifth anniversary of Simon vanishing, so he’d decided to take a look at the list of possible locations for him he’d compiled, but it was gone. No trace of who had taken it, just a gaping hole where the data should have been.

He panicked, almost told the captain, then realized how stupid that would be. Instead he bribed one of the techs into removing all evidence it was ever there, and decided to forget about it.

Minutes stretched into hours. He moved file after file as they came in. On a good day he fell in a sort of trance, collating the files and moving them without being conscious of it. Those days could pass in an instant.

Today wasn’t a good day.

His eyes hurt, his mind hurt. He had trouble reading the file numbers. All he wanted was for the day to be over. He looked at the time on his screen, but not even two hours had passed since he’d arrived. He groaned. Would this day ever end?

As he went back to filing, he noticed a blinking icon. He looked around. If this was some trick one of them was playing on him they’d be looking at him, waiting for his reaction, but everyone was busy with their work.

And now that he thought about it, there was something familiar about the icon. He activated it and an image appeared on his screen. Two people walking along a corridor. One was human, the other—

“Simon?” Almost fifty years later and the alien still caused his heart to flutter. He reached for the screen, but stopped himself. That wasn’t Simon. There had never been a Simon.

His name was Tristan.

Now he remembered what the icon was—a surveillance program he’d bought and had inserted within the port’s security system, in case Tristan ever made the mistake of coming back here.

He studied the image. The Samalian was with someone, and they weren’t strangers. Their heads were inclined toward each other, talking. He requested the port’s security footage, and because he technically was still a detective, got it. He couldn’t get anything from the landing bay, due to the privacy laws, but the corridors were public space and had multiple cameras.

He sent the human’s image through the recognition programs, but nothing came back. That didn’t feel right. Tristan was a criminal of the highest caliber—any associate of his would also be a criminal. Unless this was a pawn?

No, that didn’t feel right either. There was something about the way his head moved as he spoke that felt so familiar. It was like he’d— Oh no. He dug out his datapad and searched through it. He’d kept a picture, he knew he had. He had wanted to remember the man. He’d promised himself that if he ever found him, he

would make him pay for destroying his career.

He found it, looked at them both. They weren't identical, but still. It was the scar on his cheek. It was him—the asshole who'd attacked the precinct, who'd put him at this desk. There he was, with Tristan.

Victor had known Tristan was still out there, despite one prison after the other claiming they had him. He might have given up his hunt for him, but he'd kept an ear to the news, to the merc boards. He'd heard stories, rumors. Tristan was dead. He'd infiltrated SpaceGov. He was working with a partner.

He'd dismissed that one out of hand. Tristan didn't have partners. He worked alone, and he used people. He brought up a feed from the camera and watched them walk together. There was something there, an ease, a comfort. Tristan was a great enough actor he couldn't trust what he saw, but the human was comfortable with him.

What were the odds the man who had attacked the precinct was now a pawn of Tristan's? And a deeper realization hit him: the man had stolen something from the precinct, but he clearly remembered him saying, "*I just copied something of yours*". Not the precinct's, his. His list. The bastard had stolen his list, and now there he was, walking with Tristan as if they were friends.

Victor felt a stab of jealousy like he'd never felt before. That was what he'd wanted. And because of his list, that guy had gotten it. Anger bubbled up. What did that guy have that Victor didn't? Why had he been abandoned?

He ran a search on the prison boards for Tristan. There, the Sayatoga claimed they still had him. He almost sent them an alert to check the cell. He'd compiled the file, with biometric identifiers and images. Then he hesitated.

They were here. On this planet. Within his jurisdiction. If he caught Tristan, if he brought him to justice. If he brought in both of them...he'd be vindicated.

He requested the tag on their shuttle from the rental company. He was going to find out where they were, capture them, get his career back.

He was finally going to get answers.

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