

There was, to Alex's mind, a surprising lack of information about groups they were seeking within the databases he searched. He'd expected SpaceGov to have in depth files on groups that focused on gaining control, but the closest he'd come was mention of a few fringe organizations gathering people, buying a ship, then getting on it and vanishing.

All it meant, as far as he was concerned, was that SpaceGov hadn't had an interest in finding out where they'd gone to, or had, and were keeping the information on server that Alex only risked coercing his way to if his or Tristan's life hung in the balance.

As dangerous as he might be, Alex didn't feel he was there yet.

The Children of Order were a group founded by Alisa Ord, nearly two centuries ago, objective. It began its existence on Arfaniel, a planet at the edge of the core worlds, with significant corporate presences. She had been management, on the lower side of the middle, until the corporation she worked for merged with another and her position was one of the victims.

She disappeared from the net for almost three years, then was recorded standing before the building where she had worked, proclaiming she had had a revelation and that their future lay away from corporate and with each other. That it was time to stop letting those organizations dictate how things were supposed to be, and to become the architects of their own society. The recording terminated with her being removed by security.

Alex empathized with her, to a point. He'd learned the hard way corporations weren't the welcoming entities they portrayed themselves as being, but he didn't know what she'd thought proclaiming it would get her, other than incarcerated.

Or, not. She next surfaced as a recorded plea floating on the network. The message was much the same, but this time with something more concrete to act on. Gathering for support. He'd found corporate actions, observing and evaluating, but no actions were taken.

She moved from planet to planet, some deep within corporate, others only affected by them marginally. Within a dozen trips, over fifty years, she gathered a following. Alex couldn't find indications of someone paying for her travels, and the few ships he could link to her were cargo transports, so she'd traveled much how Alex had that first time. Paying for her passage through work.

The name, Children of Order, first showed up seventy-three years ago, objective, when she published what she wished to accomplish with her group. She believed that only people could maintain order, not organizations. That it was the duty of individuals to see to it that all around them had comfortable lives. That through each of them controlling their impulse to dominate others they could usher a life where order for all rules, and not simply those who had corporate power.

Ten years, objective, later, she showed up as owner of a small cruiser with no

indications of how she had acquired it, then spent twenty calling those who believed as she did to join her, with a promise of taking them to a world where they could live free of corporate interference. Where Order would shepherd them to a life of happiness and joy in helping each other.

The ship laid a flight plan to Gorgeolek, a system with nothing of note, other than a planet stripped of anything useful except for its atmosphere, and a SpaceGov monitoring station.

That was how he knew they had never arrived. It would have registered it.

They might have been attacked, or the ship might have failed. There were many reasons why they never reached the destination. One of which was that it wasn't where they intended to go.

If the goal was to not be bothered by corporations, not being where you'd told them you would be was a good way to do it.

Another details that led Alex to think it was what had happened was that the Children of Order still existed as a movement. People went from planet to planet, speaking of the good that could be accomplished by walking away from corporations and embracing a life of helping each other. Small groups traveled, teaching they were about through example and helping other for no other price than listening to what they had to say.

And it seemed to work. Since that first ship, twenty-three others had left, never reaching the destination they claimed. Against all the ships traveling through the universe, it was an insignificant number. Possibly enough corporations hadn't noticed it.

It took Alex nearly three months to find where they'd actually gone. Most of that spent waiting for his programs to return information as they searched for anything that had recorded the ship's tag. So he researched other such groups, which mainly turned out to be excuses to take money from the desperate. When he received a packet from one of his programs, he added it to those that came before.

It was one thing to not go where you claimed. It was another to do so and not encounter any other ships. There were a lot of ships out there, and even if the people in the ships weren't speaking. The systems needed to talk to each other. So, it was just a question of finding ships which had spoken to them, trace when and where the conversation had happened, and Alex built a trail to a world so insignificant it didn't have a name within SpaceGov's registry. Only a designation.

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He brought it to Tristan, who looked over the information, did his own search and came back with a similar lack of details.

Those that were relevant were that they promoted order and control over your own impulses. That they helped others was a point in favor of them too. If Alex was going to learn to no longer kill indiscriminately, he might as well do so while helping.

Which was how he'd come to exit cryo as Tristan maneuvered them close to a planet as plain as Alex remembered ever seeing. No population centers that could be seen from this far. The green of plains, blue-gray of oceans, forests and mountains.

"There's a landing buoy," Tristan said. "No identifier, localized broadcast."

"It's not saying anything." Alex listened to the background net. "But there are conversations happening. They didn't cut themselves from the rest of the universe."

“Reports on the success of their recruitment drives.”

“Are we doing a regular approach? Or are you going for something less orthodox?”

That Tristan took time to respond told Alex his Samalian might be due for an adrenaline shot. “Unless they have an aggressive response to our unannounced arrival, a standard approach is best here.”

The settlement became visible earlier than Alex expected. The structures stood out against the grass. A city of low buildings. He located the buoy by the eight ships not far from the city. Balls, where people wouldn’t even register yet.

“Are we landing with them?”

This time, the silence was occupied by Tristan reading. “No military designs. Two retired Balraron haulers, a Fonger passenger cruiser, four Haiklin fright carriers I’m curious how a group like these afforded, and—”

“You know I don’t need the rundown,” Alex said, chuckling.

“I’ll land us apart from them, but close enough we can walk to the city.”

“It’s larger and more organized than I expected. I didn’t come across purchases of the material needed to set something like this up. You?”

“No, but there are also no purchases of the ships. If they can receive them as gifts, the materials will be easy to.”

“You don’t think it’s that simple?” Alex asked, picking up on the suspicion on Tristan’s voice.

“I can think of half a dozen way to convince people that providing me with equipment is a good cause, while using that equipment to cause more trouble than they’d like to know.”

“The Morvorak job,” Alex stated.

They’d been paid to destroy a competing company and had arrived as investors with plans to expand their reach well beyond the planet they were on. They’d bought in and had paid for equipment to increase their capacity according to Tristan’s instructions and the promise that they would add to that once enough of the work had happened.

Then, when that points arrived, Tristan had detonated all that equipment.

Alex hadn’t slept well for a few months after that.

“The problem is that I look at everything through how it can be used to manipulate others. It’s making it difficult to evaluate how honest of an endeavor this is.” He read something. “But I do wonder how they afforded an Onerie transporter. They are still in business and from these reading this was build less than fifty years ago.”

“So we stay on our guards?”

Tristan look at him over his shoulder. “Is there any other way to be?”

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Alex felt unarmed as he exited the ship. He couldn’t argue with Tristan that since they were here seeing their help. They couldn’t arrive fully armed and dressed in armored clothing. It had been easy for Tristan to leave his Azeru behind, since job they went on needed to be clearly dangerous for the Samalian to bother with armor. Alex on the other hand had had to replace his preferred pants and jacket with lighter, civilian versions. Then he’d had to leave behind his harness, and Tristan had teasingly removed three-quarter of the knives Alex usually kept on his person beyond that.

It might have resulted with Alex wearing much less, but the sensors had warned them of an approaching vehicle.

So it was with only six knives on his person and no body armor that he watched the hover come to a stop and the woman in what felt like a casual version of office attire exit.

“Hello,” she called, sounding unsure. “How can I help you?”

“I’m looking for the Children of Order,” Alex answered. The response didn’t put her at ease, so he added. “I’m hoping you can help me. I have... self control issues.” That put her slightly at ease, but her tone was still cautious.

“How did you find us?”

“Research. Months and months of research. It’s something we specialize in.”

Now she smiled. “Well, we always appreciate people dedicated to achieving better. And you don’t look corporate.”

“I was, a long time ago.”

“He found a better way,” Tristan added.

“Yes, most of us come from that environment, but the Children taught me to be my own person. To no longer push corporate belief on others. We are here to do good, not profits.”

“How does this work?” Alex asked, “you helping me, I mean. There wasn’t much about how you teach self-control.”

“It is an in depth regiment of processes and methods where you learn to recognize the impulse for what they are and train yourself not to act on them. Through this, you will be given duties to help those around you.”

“How long does it take?”

She stared at him.

“Getting control. How long until I’m in control of myself?”

“The Children aren’t something you join only for a short time. What we do here takes a lifetime. Order isn’t achieved and then left. It must be maintained.”

“So no one leaves?”

“Some abandon our way, yes. And when a group leaves to spread our message, they go with them, back to the lives they knew before.”

Alex wasn’t sure he liked the wording, but it could be that she wasn’t explaining it properly. And this was the only place with something resembling help either of them had unearth in months, so he could tell them what they wanted to hear while he learned. Then, it wasn’t like knowing how to control himself would keep him from using whatever force they required him to use when he decided to leave.