

Chapter 09

Where was he?

It didn't look like the prison, with its white metal walls, and all the devices making sounds. Some looked familiar, but Olirian couldn't quite identify them. Then there were the people fussing around him, looking at the devices, but not at him.

"Where am I?" What had happened to his voice? Why could he barely hear it? No one answered him. When he tried to look them in the eyes, get them to at least acknowledge he was there, they looked away.

Fosham's Ears, where was he? At least in prison people looked him in the eyes. They spoke to him, respected him enough to answer his questions. This kind of behavior reminded him of something, some time. How long ago?

And he was so tired.

It wasn't the bone-deep weariness that had been his constant companion for the last...how long? For a long time now. No, strangely enough, his body felt fine—it was his mind, like it would feel after spending days on a problem, finding the solution, and then having to pay for all that work.

One of the people—a doctor, he realized—waved a wand over him, and as her eyes moved up, following it, reached his face, looked away. This one knew him. Knew who he was, what he was. She couldn't stand looking at a killer.

He realized a door had opened when a group of people were halfway to his bed. Three humans and an alien. One of the men was from the military—he recognized the uniform as such. He even thought he'd seen it before, but he couldn't place where.

The other man... The way he was dressed didn't mean anything to him, but the way he moved screamed danger. Unlike him, that man was used to violence. No matter how often he'd had to resort to it, Olirian had never gotten used to being violent.

The doctors fussed over the devices as their sounds became more strident. Then the fear he'd felt melted away. He knew that man was a danger to him, to all of them, but he just couldn't bring himself to be afraid.

The woman was... He couldn't take his eyes off her. She was beautiful, there was no denying that, but there was something more. She was familiar to him, he was certain of it, but who was she? He studied her face as she spoke, trying to place her. He wished his mind wasn't so tired; he was normally much faster at working out a problem as simple as who someone was.

She looked him in the eyes.

His surprise derailed his thoughts. She had kind eyes. She addressed one of the doctors. How could she look at him like that after what he'd done? She knew him, he'd seen that, but there was no revulsion in her eyes, in her voice. Who was she?

She still spoke with the doctor, and Olirian focused on the conversation, tried to make the words mean something. This could be important.

"...body is fine," the doctor said. Yes, he understood them. The doctor spoke in a detached tone, clinical, devoid of emotions. "We cleaned out all the toxins he accumulated over his incarceration, repaired the damage to his internal organs, and began the rejuvenation process. His mind, on the other hand, will be slower to heal. I can bring in a specialist and have it rebuilt, but my understanding is that you need his memories intact."

She looked down at him with those kind, loving eyes and smiled. "Grandfather, can you understand me? Can you speak?"

"Hello," he said, his voice still weak. "You are very beautiful for a jailer."

"Grandfather, it's me."

"My name isn't 'Grandfather', it's..." He had to search for it. "Olirian." He'd almost forgotten it more than once in that hole that had been his prison. The people there had never called him by his name, only "the Killer". He had never set out to be a killer. A healer is what he'd wanted to be.

There was only that young man who called him by his name, who called him Olirian. He had been nice, sitting by his side and talking with him as he'd fallen ill. They talked for hours, and days sometimes. What was his name? He'd been such a good listener.

Martin, that was his name. Was he here too?

She took his hand. Her skin was so soft, softer than any of the women in the prison. He'd never set out to have relationships with them, but he was a man, and he had needs. They'd been happy to help him take care of those. Of course, afterward they expected him to keep them safe, and that led—

He felt wetness on his hand. She was holding it to her face, crying. "Why are you crying?"

"Grandfather, it's me, Dalia."

"Dalia?" The name was familiar. Who was that?

The laughter came to him first. A memory of sitting in a room filled with animals—no, plush animals, a girl on his lap. No, a child. She clapped and laughed.

"Tell me another story, Grandfather!" His granddaughter.

He looked at her. "Dalia?"

Her face lit up. "Yes, it's me! I missed you so—"

He wrenched his hand out of hers. "You're too old." He tried to move away from her, but the bed restrained him. Who were they? What were they doing to him? His memories. The doctor had said something about his memories. They were after his secret. He had to get out of here.

"Olirian." The voice was deep, calm, on the other side of the bed. He turned to it, expecting a doctor. Instead he looked into brown eyes. He saw the muzzle, the ears, the deep brown fur with small white dots in it. The eyes were so kind and caring. He smiled, and Olirian thought he had a kind smile, for an alien.

"We're friends," the alien said. "You're safe here." The voice had a light rumble to it. It wasn't a purr, but it still reminded him of the cat his mother had given him when he was six.

"Now Olirian," she'd said, "she's your responsibility. You need to make sure she's fed, that she has water to drink, and to clean her litter box."

He'd been angry at first. He hadn't wanted something to take care of. Why couldn't her mother had gotten her a model that took care of all that by itself? It was what all his friends had.

The cat had ambled to him. He'd watched in horror as it climbed on his lap, its small claws catching in the fabric. It had looked up at him before curling up and purring. His anger had melted away in awe. None of his friends' cats did that.

What had happened to the cat? He'd loved that cat. He couldn't remember what had happened to her.

He was still looking into the alien's eyes, who was calling his name. He expected anger at being ignored. Most people ignored aliens, felt they didn't matter, and they didn't like being treated that way.

But this alien still smiled at him. "Olirian, are you back with us?"

Olirian smiled; he had to return one to such a kind alien. "Of course. Where are we? Which prison is this?"

"This isn't a prison," the alien said.

Olirian wanted to believe him, he wanted to so badly to be free again, but a man like him didn't deserve freedom, no matter how much he'd fought to keep it before being captured.

He tried to look away, but the kind gaze held him. "Of course it's a prison. But it's a very nice one."

"Grandfather, please," the woman pleaded, taking his hand again. "This is our ship."

"A prison ship?" He'd heard of them, but he'd never thought he'd be on one. Those only had the worst

of the worst. Maybe he did belong here then.

Her hand trembled in his. She opened her mouth, but the alien shook his head. The alien was in charge? He'd never heard of them running anything, especially not something as important as a prison. He wasn't a speciest, but he'd never thought aliens were quite intelligent enough to be in charge of anything.

"Don't worry, Olirian," the alien said in a pleasant tone, "Dalia is coming. You'll see her soon."

For a moment he smiled, he'd see his granddaughter again. Then. "No!" Dalia couldn't be here, she couldn't be in a prison. Only people like him deserved to be here, not someone as innocent as her. He tried to get up, but a hand held him to the bed.

"Olirian, please calm down."

"No!" He fought against the hand, he had to get up, he had to find her, to protect her, to get her out of here. He wouldn't let them hurt her.

Beeping, strident sounds, doctors moving around them. They tried to come close to him, but the alien pushed them away. The doctors argued, but the woman spoke sharply and they became silent.

He couldn't make out the words anymore; his need to get to her was too great. But the alien was holding him down with a hand, and as hard as he fought, it wouldn't move.

The tone reached him finally, calming, then a word. "Safe."

The alien had continued talking to him while he fought. "We're friends, Olirian. You need to calm down. You're safe, she's safe."

"Liar!" The rage in his voice surprised him. He'd never gotten angry before, but how had they found her? How could his son let her be taken? Physical exhaustion took him and he stopped fighting. He looked at this alien, tears falling. "Please don't hurt her. She's just a child. She has nothing to do with this."

"Olirian." Still in the calm tone. "We're not going to hurt her, or you. We just need to know about Hastead."

Hastead.

Of course this was about then. "If I tell you, you have to promise me that you won't hurt her. Not even bring her here. I don't want Dalia to see me like this."

The woman sniffed. She was crying again.

"You have my word, Olirian," the alien said, and Olirian believed him. He didn't know why, but he trusted this alien.

He sighed. Everyone had known. The trial hadn't been broadcasted, but something like what he'd done couldn't be hidden, and everyone had learned about it.

But he had never admitted it. Even in prison, where there was no point in denying it, he wouldn't admit to it.

At least he didn't think he had. Those last weeks were fuzzy, with only Martin for company.

He closed his eyes. "It's true. I killed them, each and every one of them."

"I need more, Olirian." The alien's smile didn't falter. His tone didn't insist. "There's more to the story."

Olirian nodded. "There was a group of people—researchers, doctors, scientists," he began. He'd told this story before, to his granddaughter and grandson. If they had Dalia, telling it to them meant they wouldn't have to question her. "They were possibly the brightest minds of their time. They'd gotten together because they wanted to save the universe. They were going to create a virus that would save everyone, make them healthy, no matter where they were, what species. We were going to save everyone from sickness, from death."

His voice felt raw, and before he needed to ask for it, a glass of water was brought to his lips. He took a sip and sighed. He'd forgotten how good cold water felt.

"They succeeded, or at least they thought they had, but they'd miscalculated. There was something wrong with the virus. It would heal, at first, but over time, after years of amazing health, the virus would unravel the DNA. By the time this happened, the entire universe would be infected. They'd made the virus extremely contagious because they didn't want SpaceGov, or any of the corporations, to take control of it—to control who would, and wouldn't, get access to it. They wanted everyone to benefit from it, not just the rich. They called it 'Salvation'."

He closed his eyes and tears fell again. He hadn't cried about that time in so long. "I tried to tell them about the flaw, but they wouldn't listen. Their dreams were about to come true; no one in the universe would ever have to suffer again. They couldn't imagine that there had been a mistake. I couldn't even get them to delay the release. I had to act, and it had to be total. If even one of them survived, they could recreate the virus. I locked down the building. I dabbled with coercion, you see, a hobby, something to distract me from my research when I needed a break. I locked it down, and I killed them all."

“Oh, Grandfather.” Her hand tightened on his. “What happened to the virus?”

“It’s destroyed!” By all the holy ones, this was even worse than he’d thought.

“Are you sure?” She searched his face.

“Of course. I couldn’t leave any of it for people like you to use. I don’t care how good your intentions are, if you release it, everyone will die.”

“How about the research?” the alien asked, still in a calm voice. Unlike the woman, he made no demands of him. “Was it destroyed?”

He buried the fear. There was no way they could find it. He hid it too well. “It’s gone.”

Now the alien searched his face. “Olirian, we need to know the truth. Your grandson is going after the virus.”

The woman looked at the alien, surprised.

“Baran? No, no. That can’t be. He’s just a child he can’t be going to— No, you’re trying to trick me.”

“Grandfather, please. I need your help. Something horrible happened to Baran. His family was murdered. They left him to die, but he survived—only his mind broke. He said the solution was your research. Please, I need to stop him before he does something he’ll regret.”

“Family? Baran?” Baran was just a boy. He’d been eight years old the last time he’d seen him. He hadn’t been able to keep away. He’d had to come home and see them again. It didn’t matter the Law was after him, he’d needed to see his grandchildren.

And the years came crashing down on him. He heard beeping as he remembered the bounty hunters, the chases, being caught, sold to Deep Down, the decades there, the other horrible things he’d had to do to survive, to make sure the peace was kept down there. Decades.

He looked at the woman, and this time he knew who she was. “You look just like your mother.”

“Grandfather?”

He nodded, and she embraced him.

“Oh, Grandfather, I missed you so much.”

“Dalia, what happened to Baran?”

She wiped her tears. “He was on vacation with his family. He had two boys and a girl.”

“And you?”

She shook her head. “I’ve been too busy running things after Mom and Dad died.”

“Stefron is dead? Celeste?”

She opened her mouth, but it was the alien who spoke.

“Olirian, I know this is a shock. I’m sorry for your loss, but we need to focus on Baran. You and Dalia can talk afterward.”

“And who are you?” Olirian’s tone was sharp. How dare this alien meddle in his family’s business?”

“My name is Tristan, and this is my partner, Crimson. Your granddaughter hired us to stop Baran before he can unleash the virus you created.”

“It doesn’t exist anymore.” The words came easily. He’d spent so many years repeating it to himself. Convincing himself that it was true because he’d known a day like today would come, and it was vital he sounded certain about it.

“Are you sure?” The alien’s voice was soft, but insistent. “Baran must have a reason to think there’s something worth going after.”

He looked at Dalia.

“Baran managed to get into your office.”

He frowned. Why did she sound like he shouldn’t have been able to? He’d never minded having either of them there. From the moment they could crawl, Celeste brought them to him.

“After you were caught, the Law came looking for you, for evidence of what you’d done. Dad locked your office. They tried to get him to open it, but he reminded them we are a sovereign people. There were other attempts. Mercenaries broke into the ship. Coercionists tried to get into the systems, but we stopped them.”

She smiled sadly. “Baran was always trying to get in. Until he got married, he’d try something new every few weeks to bypass the lock Dad had put on it. After they were murdered, he became obsessed with getting in. He took everything that was there, spent months going over it. Now he’s gone.”

Olirian tried to remember if there had been anything in his office that could lead back to the research. He had kept a lot of things there, so he could continue working when he visited his family. But it had been so long ago, he couldn’t remember.

“Then, why don’t you use what’s there to find him?”

“He took everything with him. Got on his yacht and flew off. I tried to get him to come back, but he won’t listen to me. He isn’t even answering my messages anymore.”

“If he found something among your things,” the alien said, “it must be related to Hasted. If I’m going to have a chance to stop him, to bring him back home, I need to know everything.”

Olirian couldn’t believe he’d found anything. He couldn’t have been stupid enough to leave anything relating to Salvation here. But it had been so hectic. What if he had? He couldn’t let his grandson be responsible for the death of everyone in the universe.

He began talking, and as he did, the memories came flooding back.

* * *