

# Prologue

Moon knew something was wrong the moment Kad Minslok put his hand over hers. She felt the warmth and pressure from his fingers and looked up with alarm into his startling blue eyes. Her hand was poised and still, sandwiched between his touch and the blinking communications button she was about to press. The tip of one finger grazed the smooth polymer curve but it wasn't enough to activate the signal.

She had worked with Kad for years but in all that time he had never touched her. Ever. And she had never seen that particular expression on his sculptured features either—an unnerving mixture of amusement and wariness.

“Don't tell them I'm here,” he said quietly.

Her brow furrowed. “Don't—? What are you talking about, Kad?”

But he stepped away, slipping his hand from hers and drifting to a position directly behind the console, where the holographic communications display wouldn't pick him up.

The button continued to beep and flash insistently. With one frustrated glance at the silent figure of her research partner, she pressed the small blinking square and tried to regain her composure in the second before the image projection materialised.

“Dr. Moon Thadin?” The display presented a young man who looked earnest, serious and impervious. He looked like nothing in the world surprised him. His jaw

was square, his eyes were clear and his fair hair was brushed back with not a single strand out of place. Moon could easily imagine him advertising something mundane yet deadly, like weapons systems. She could only see to the top of his chest—his head dominated the display space—but she was sure he would be as tall and broad as his demeanour indicated. She didn't really need to see the insignia on his collar to know where he was from.

“Y-yes,” she stammered, blinking a few times. Anyone who wasn't nervous at facing such an officer had obviously developed a death wish.

“My name is Captain Surrem of the Republic Security Force. We are looking for Dr. Kad Minslok. I believe he works with you?”

Why in the universe someone like Surrem would even attempt social niceties was beyond her. The Security Force was a law unto itself—the brutal muscle of the human-led Republic, an entity that dominated nearly a fifth of the mapped galaxy. If the Security Force didn't know about someone, they weren't worth knowing about. And of course they knew she worked with Kad. Half their funding came from them, and both entities were on the project's paperwork. Were people really reassured by this false hint of modesty from their all-seeing government?

“Yes he does.” She let a small frown form on her face, using the scrap of displeasure to fuel her larger sense of irritation, willing herself not to dart a look at Kad's tall and solid figure behind the slightly rasterised image of Surrem's head. “Do you want to speak with him about something?”

“Is he not there?” Surrem seemed not to hear her question. His eyes scanned the laboratory, from the open

door behind her to the Quantaflex computer banks along one wall.

Moon tried to look unconcerned, grateful that Kad was keeping as still as possible. She focused on the Security Force officer and imagined her partner as a blob of abstract art on the wall.

“He could be somewhere on campus,” she demurred, knowing that Surrem would have access to that information in any case. Their research facility was a secured unit and all entries and exits were carefully monitored. “But he hasn’t come up to the lab yet. He sometimes likes to take his breakfast in the canteen.”

*But there are cameras there, able to pick him out in a second!*

“Or...or outside in the gardens,” she added with hasty improvisation. The vegetation was dense and lush there in some areas. She was sure there was enough cover for someone to plausibly disappear for a while. “He likes to take walks.” She hid nervous hands behind her back. “He says it clears his mind.”

There was a charged silence.

“Thank you, Dr. Thadin,” Surrem finally said. And his image winked out.

Kad strode forward a second after the call terminated, his body full of leashed energy. “Thank you, Moon.” It was an echo of Surrem’s words but didn’t sound so flat or unemotional.

She looked into Kad’s face, a face she’d gotten to know better than her own over the past four years, one that belonged to her intellectual equal. But now that she looked closely, she wondered at the tightness in his eyes and the lines on his cheeks. Had they always been there,

those signs of tension and deeply buried frustration? His black hair was swept back from his face, the strong thick strands dull rather than shiny. When had that happened? She clearly remembered the gloss of his hair when they first created their partnership, along with his handsome features and dry, engaging sense of humour. The man who stood before her now looked prematurely aged, and she felt ashamed that she had not noticed the changes in him. He looked more like Kad's father than Kad himself.

"What's going on?" There was no nervousness in her voice. He was her fellow researcher and, even though they weren't physically intimate, there was an intellectual ease between them.

"They'll be coming for me," he said tersely. "I think I have half an hour. No more."

"Coming for you? What are you talking about, Kad?"

She watched him as he moved around the lab, his fingers flying over the smooth console keyboards.

"I'm a terrorist, Moon. Didn't you know?" He paused long enough to shoot her a quick smile, then continued on with his tasks.

*Know?* She barely understood the term. Terrorists belonged to some nebulous concept floating on the periphery of her reality. The only beings she had ever classified as terrorists were shapeshifters and their sympathisers. They certainly weren't handsome, accomplished men who worked side by side with her, closer even than a wedded partner, breaking the secrets of the universe together. How could he be a terrorist? He was a *scientist*.

She shook her head to clear it. There was only one explanation for the topsy-turvy world that had suddenly

come into being, and her expression darkened as she considered it.

“Is this a joke?” she demanded. “Is Surrem a student friend of yours? Because if he is, someone should tell him it’s dangerous masquerading as a member of the Security Force. And my birthday isn’t for two months, so your timing’s off.”

He stopped then. With a dramatic flourish from his long, lean fingers, he pressed a final key. Then he faced her with a heavy sigh.

“How can such a smart woman be such an innocent?” he complained to the room in general, the hint of a smile tugging at his lips. He focused on her. “I don’t have much time to explain, Moon.”

“Then summarise,” she snapped, annoyed and more than a little anxious. “You should know how to do that by now.”

She was starting to hate the expression on his face, that mix of superiority and laughter. She had seen it all through her childhood years, and on into adulthood. She wanted to slap the smile from his face, as if by doing that she could slap the smile from every other person who had looked at her like that. Expressions like the one on Kad’s face were dangerous. They either meant that someone was laughing at her, or someone was laughing at the Republic. Neither interpretation boded well.

If he took offence at her tone, he didn’t show it. “All right,” he finally said, with a quick exhalation of breath. “I’ve been an underground anti-Republic activist for almost ten years now. In my position as lecturer, then senior researcher, at the Phyllis Science Centre I have used my influence and knowledge in every way possible

to undermine the Republic and bring it to its knees.”

Moon felt her eyes widen until she was sure they were about to pop from her head. “To bring the Republic—? But how?”

He shook his head. “It doesn’t matter now. And it would take too long to explain. But obviously the Republic has found out what I’ve been up to.”

“How did you know—?”

“—that the Security Force would contact the Centre today? I had a tip-off, although I was hoping it was wrong.”

*Terrorist. Security Force. Anti-Republic. Tip-off.* The words tumbled through her head, confusing her. “But Captain Surrem seemed satisfied—”

“He’s lying to you, Moon. They’re all lying to you.” He opened one of the many underbench compartments that lined three of the lab’s four walls and pulled out a large satchel.

“What’s in there?” she asked, even though she thought she already knew. Ripples of cold were running down her arms, lifting the hairs on her skin.

“My getaway kit,” he said with another quick grin.

She couldn’t understand it. If his reckoning was right, he was within twenty minutes of being captured by the dreaded Republic Security Force and yet, she had to admit to herself, she had never seen him look this energised, this *enthusiastic*, in her life.

“Where will you go, Kad?” she asked faintly. The question should have been, where do you think you will go? Because the truth was, he was trapped. The Security Force would not leave any escape route open. If he was right—if they really were after him—they would have

spoken to the Centre's own staff by now and put the campus into silent lockdown. And even if Kad could get through the tight security grid, they were on a Republic planet, with every spaceport and domestic transport transit point controlled by the Republic. Assuming he somehow managed to get out of the Centre alive—which she doubted—it would only be a matter of time and resources before they caught him. Escape just wasn't an option, despite the optimism that glinted in his eyes.

“What you don't know won't hurt you, Moon.”

He stepped up to her then, the satchel's strap biting into his shoulder. She could tell there were quite a few things in there by the way the bag bulged and knocked against his thigh.

“Thank you,” he said. His dark blue eyes mirrored the sincerity in his voice.

She let her gaze travel up his length, thinking that she had never noticed before how tall he was. Now that he was leaving so suddenly, another universe of questions opened up for her. She didn't know his likes or dislikes in music, entertainment or food. She had never before noticed the tiny light flecks embedded in the dark marine tone of his eyes, or the slight crookedness of his nose. Had he broken it as a child? As an adult? It seemed so unfair that now that she was just starting to take in all the details of her research partner, it should be ripped away so brutally.

“For what?” Her voice was unintentionally hoarse.

“For being so easy to work with. For covering for me when you didn't have to.” He didn't touch her but she felt the heat of his body radiating out to hers, and then he flashed her that quick grin again. “I hope you took a

recent backup of our work because I've taken the liberty of detonating a few scramble-bombs across our project net. That should take care of some of the research. The scramble reaches into the Centre's archives as well as across the wider data net, so unless they keep full isolated backups, they won't be able to fill the holes."

She shook her head. She was privy to all his research—she was his *partner*, dammit!—and she would have known if he had sectioned off part of his work from her. "But you didn't do any questionable research," she objected.

"No," he admitted. "I didn't. Not here. But the Republic doesn't know that. Trying to put everything together again should keep them busy for a year."

In the meantime, they'd come for her too. She knew it in her bones and some of that fear must have been on her face because he touched her again, resting his hands on her shoulders while he looked into her eyes.

"I wish I could explain to you why I'm involved in this." His gaze moved over her face, looking for...what? "You're too young to understand."

Young? She was older than him! She opened her mouth to object, but he hushed her with a look.

"I'm sorry for dragging you into this, Moon. That was never my intention. All I can tell you is—" he slowed his voice, measuring out each word as if it were pure platinum, "—if you ever get to that stage when you feel like the only choice left is to either jump off a cliff or be lasered, give me a call."

Nothing he was saying made sense. What made Kad Minslok think he was going to get out of the building alive, much less evade the Republic Security Force on

high alert? He, more than anyone else, knew their immense power and reach. And what made her think she was going to get out of this herself?

She was still trying to sort things out in her head, formulating questions that she wasn't even sure she wanted the answers to, when he punched her in the face.