

Chapter 11

“Where’s Brian?” Olirian asked the system, hurrying to transfer all the data to his datapad.

“Brian is currently in his office,” the system’s calm voice returned. Of course, that was where he was. Brian was possibly the one person in the company who worked more than Olirian.

He ran the entire way there.

“We have a problem,” he panted as soon as the door opened.

The man seated behind the desk raised an eyebrow. “If it’s about Jofre’s party, I know about it. I thought everyone was there, including you.” Brian indicated the chair opposite his.

Olirian dropped into it. “This is about Salvation. There’s something wrong with it.”

Brian’s smile didn’t falter. “Oli, it’s just nerves talking. Salvation is a departure from anything that’s ever been done with health-related technology. It’s going to revolutionize how people live, how they—”

“Damn it, Brian, I’m not here for the sales pitch.” He threw his datapad on the desk. “I ran a simulation last night. This morning—”

Brian pushed the datapad back toward Olirian without looking at it. “Oli, we ran all the simulations already. In four years at most, the whole universe is going to be infected. Within a couple of weeks all infections, all genetic defects will be corrected.”

“Days,” Olirian corrected.

“Days,” Brian agreed. “The point is that the statistical department ran more simulations than anyone else. They’ve looked at everything.”

Olirian pushed the datapad back to Brian. “Not everything. Not one of them looked at the effect of Salvation over the long term.”

Brian looked at it, sighed. “Yes, they did. They studied how society will change because of it, because of the population boom. Oli, they’ve covered everything.”

“No, they didn’t. Brian, not one of them ran a projection on the effect of Salvation on the body itself, because if they had, no one would be partying right now.” He pointed to the datapad. “Look at it. Those are the result of the simulation I ran.”

With clear annoyance, Brian picked up the pad and swiped through pages, too fast to be reading any of the information. “What am I looking at here?”

“The statistical death of the universe within twenty years from release.”

Brian eyed him. “Oli, that isn’t funny. You know the kind of money I invested in this.”

“Brian, when have I ever been one to joke about Salvation? You put money in it, but you know the kind of time and energy I invested.” He pointed to the datapad. “That’s telling you that if we release Salvation, we are killing the entirety of the universe.”

Brian shook his head. "Salvation doesn't kill, it heals."

"Salvation isn't magic, Brian. It works off the template, which is the DNA. We already know it can alter it since Salvation has to embed itself in it. But we missed something, because at a certain point it either stops respecting the baseline, changes what it is, or simply forgets. It doesn't just let mutations and defects slip in, it forces them in."

"That's impossible," Brian stated.

"The simulations don't lie." How could Brian not be worried about this? Terrified.

"Then there's an error in the simulation.

"Plural, Brian. I ran a dozen simulations. Different subject pool, different starting conditions. I get the same result each time. Everyone dies."

Brian smiled. "Then it's clear the problem is in the simulation program itself. I'll get the coders to look it over tomorrow."

Olirian slammed his hand on the desks as he pushed himself up.

"Brian, tomorrow is going to be too late! If only one person gets infected with Salvation, everyone dies."

Brian pinched the bridge of his nose. "Oli, this is the stress of eight years of hard work talking. There is nothing wrong with Salvation, you're just tired. Like you said, you've invested energy in this where I did money, it's taking its toll. Take a break, Oli. Go to Jofre's party, have a drink."

"A drink? Brian, I can't have a drink when we're about to do more harm than anyone before us. You need to postpone the distribution until we've gone over Salvation. We need to find the flaw and fix—"

"That's enough." Brian sounded tired. "Oli, there is no flaw. The stress team found them all, and we, you included, fixed them all. You're tired, that's all this is." He pushed the datapad to Olirian.

"Damn it, Brian. What's it going to cost us to delay? It isn't like you're selling Salvation. We're releasing it to the universe for free. What are a few days going to matter?"

Brian took a breath. When he spoke, his voice was calm, measured. "Oli, there isn't just money involved here. There's the contract with the studio that's going to document the launch. They're probably—"

"Then tell them to come back."

Brian sighed. "That isn't how this works. The contract stipulates the times, the locations. I had to arrange to get them passes. You say a couple of days, but it could be months before I have everything else worked back in any form where we can proceed."

"Then it takes months! Brian, we're talking about the universe."

"That is only one factor; there were hundreds involved in arranging all this. You don't know all of them, but if you want, we can go over them right now if you need me to."

Olirian looked at Brian, listened to the calm way he spoke. *He thinks I'm unhinged*, the realization came. *He's trying to calm me until, what? Did he call security?*

Olirian opened his mouth, closed it. What would Brian do if he kept pushing? Have him sedated? Lock him in a room until he calmed down? He cursed silently. Brian couldn't be that blind; he was a scientist as well as a rich entrepreneur. He knew science didn't lie. Why couldn't he see that?

"Oli," Brian said, his voice gentle. "Just take a break. Jofre's party is moving, so go there, relax. Salvation is done. You no longer have to stress about it. In the morning, I'll have the simulation program taken down and examined. You can rerun your simulation and you'll see that it's all fine."

Olirian wanted to scream. The problem was Salvation, nothing else. He wanted to shake Brian until he saw that, until he understood they were about to become murders on a scale never imagined before. Instead, he forced himself to calmly pick up the datapad.

"You're right, I'm probably just overworked." He couldn't afford to get sidelined. If Brian wouldn't see the truth, he'd have to find someone else to see it.

Brian smiled, relief visible on his face. "There's no shame in it. You worked hard. You're a driven man. The things you sacrifice to make this happen. Your wife m—"

"Don't." His tone was harsher than he'd intended, but he hadn't expected him to bring Satina into this. He calmed himself. "Please don't."

"I'm sorry."

Olirian nodded. "I'm going to go to Jofre's party now."

"Good. You have yourself a good time."

The moment the door closed, Olirian ran. He was going to the party all right, but not to have a drink. He needed to talk to Jofre. If anyone here could look at his results and see the truth, it was him. Once he

convinced Jofre, the two of them could talk sense into Brian.

He heard the party before he got there. The music was loud, something with a lot of strident sounds and screaming. Was that what passed for music these days?

He stopped in the open doorway, searching the crowd. The first thing he noticed was that everyone was dressed. The tables and desks were stacked against the wall. It opened up a space that could accommodate everyone in the company, it seemed. He'd never realized the statistical department had this much space.

He hurried through the crowd, through those dancing to the horrible music, those talking, and drinking. Where was Jofre?

He found him talking to three women from the engineering department. Olirian had met them when Brian had decided they'd build their own fabricator specifically for Salvation.

Olirian grabbed Jofre and unceremoniously pulled him away from them.

"Hey," Jofre yelled, "careful. You almost made me spill my drink." When Olirian had him in a quieter corner, Jofre was unsteady. "Hey, Oli, you made it." He turned. "Hey everyone, Olirian's here, we can start the orgy!"

Cheers went up.

"Relax," Jofre laughed at him. "I'm kidding. There was never going to be an orgy."

Jofre was drunk, Olirian realized.

He took the drink out of the man's hand and shoved the datapad in its place. "Jof, I need you to focus. We have a problem. Salvation is going to kill us all."

Jofre laughed. "No, no. It's going to save us. No more dying, no more getting sick." He looked at the datapad, turned it over. "This isn't mine, is it yours?"

"Look at it. I ran a bunch of simulations. We're going to die."

"No, I told you, we won—"

"Damn it, Jof, tell me you have some Detox on you. You have to look at this. Brian won't listen to me, so I need you to help me convince him."

"Why would I have Detox? This is a party!"

More cheers went up.

Olirian cursed. He didn't drink alcohol—his own personal act of rebellion against his family's excesses—so he didn't carry any Detox. He'd have to run to the infirmary, six floors down, to get any. He didn't have the time; the fabricator could be moved any moment now.

Olirian looked around. What were the chances anyone here was sober? Or that they would understand the data he had? Everyone looked drunk, or at least uninhibited enough for him to think they were drunk.

No, not everyone. One man was standing by a table, looking uncomfortable, a drink in his hand. Olirian recognized him as being part of Jofre's team, but nothing more.

The man smiled as Olirian approached. "Hey, I know you. You're—"

"What are you drinking?"

The man looked in his glass. "Just water. I can't drink alcohol because of my relig—"

"Good, then you're sober." Olirian pressed the datapad in his hand. "I need you to take a look at this."

"What is it?" He didn't sound enthusiastic.

Olirian explained as the man read through the screens.

"Brian won't listen to me," Olirian said when he was done. "I was hoping Jofre could help, but he's drunk, so you're going to have to be the one."

The color drained out of the man's face. "You want me to speak with Mister Carnian?"

"You understand the information there, right?"

"Yes," the man hesitated, "but—"

"But what?" Olirian asked, unable to mask his annoyance.

"I can't speak with him, I'm just... I just collate information. I don't have the seniority to speak with..." He pointed up, indicating Brian's office, somewhere above them.

"You said you understood the importance of—"

"No, I understand what this says, but there isn't any contextual data. I haven't seen the program you used. There could be an error in it."

"I checked, there isn't an error."

"You're a biochemist, not a coder."

"Geneticist," Olirian corrected. "I know code, at least enough to check if a program is faulty. Look, I'm trying to save the universe. I'd think you'd want to help."

The man looked at him, dubious. "I do, but I'm just... Why would Mister Carnian listen to me, if he didn't listen to you?"

"We can at least try, don't you think? We have to—"

The music cut off, to loud protests, and the back wall flickered before showing Brian, smiling at them. "I hope everyone's enjoying this unauthorized party during business hours." The crowd cheered. "Good. I thought you would like to know that in exactly forty-five minutes, Salvation will be loaded into the shuttle that will take it to our station, to be loaded into the ship that will take our creation to Pardue Station."

Boos resounded.

"Now now. I know not everyone is happy with Pardue as the release point, but I think you'll agree Salvation is more important than us. So it's more important that the release point be where a lot of people go through, than us being the first ones infected with it. We're saving the universe, people, not making ourselves superstars."

Cheers.

"Now, I suggest you slow down in your partying since the official party starts in thirty minutes in—"

Olirian was out of the room. Where had the time gone? He thought he still had a few hours. What had happened to that time?

Forty-five minutes.

That was how much time he had to save the universe. How was he going to accomplish that? He had to keep the fabricator from leaving the planet, that was the first thing. If he could force a delay, then he'd have the time to get Brian to see reason.

He almost fell as he realized a delay wouldn't be enough. Brian had the activation sequence. If he activated it while it was in the warehouse, Salvation would find its way out and infect someone.

What frequency? Could he find out? Would it be stored anywhere in the system? The moment Brian realized the fabricator wasn't on the shuttle, he'd know Olirian was interfering, and he'd activate it.

And even if he managed to cause the delay and Brian didn't activate the fabricator, then what? Would any of this help Brian see reason? What if instead, Olirian was pushed off the project? How could he stop them then?

He ran into the lift and rested his hand on the wall. He had to destroy the research. All of it. That part would be easy enough. Everything was stored on the servers in the Telrize Complex. He could insert an infection that would eat all of it.

"Damn it!" He ran out of the lift before the door was fully open.

That wouldn't be enough. It would set them back years, but they could recreate the research, rebuild Salvation, relaunch it. But at least it would force them to take a second look at it, and this time they'd catch the flaw in it.

Wouldn't they?

Olirian forced the bile down.

He slowed, leaned against a wall, trying to catch his breath. Could he risk the universe on the hope they would find the flaw? A flaw everyone, including him, had missed? That he hadn't defined yet? And he wouldn't be there to even ensure they looked. Brian would know who had destroyed the data, and he'd make sure Olirian paid.

He ran into the restroom and threw up.

He sat against the bowl and looked up. "Please, tell me there's another way. Fosham, there has to be. They're my friends."

But the universe was at stake.

He tried to stand, but his legs buckled under him.

He was going to have to kill everyone here to ensure the universe lived.

How could he even contemplate that? He wasn't a killer. "I'm a healer. That's the only thing I ever wanted. You can't ask me to kill."

Only, he would be a killer either way. His choice was the number of people he was responsible for killing: a hundred and fifty or so, or the whole universe.

He closed his eyes. How could he kill friends? People he'd been working with closely for the last eight years. Some he'd known longer. How many in the universe did he know, in comparison? He could count them on two hands. His mother, his wife, his two sons, his daughter, their children.

He laughed when he understood he wouldn't do this to save the universe. He would do it to save nine people—the only ones who truly mattered to him.

He got up, his legs surprisingly steady, and headed for his lab. He had to figure out how to kill everyone here. It had to be painless and quick-acting, both because he didn't want anyone to suffer and because he couldn't risk someone sounding the alarm. He might have enough time to stop the shuttle from being loaded with the fabricator, but he would then need far more time to deal with the research. Not to mention he'd have to destroy the fabricator after that.

He was in for a long day.

He sat at his terminal and only took the time to pop in a breath mint to cover up the taste of vomit before beginning his search.

He found the poison in the biochemistry archive. Odorless, airborne, painless, and fast-acting. He primed the closest fabricator, in the lab below his, to create it. While it worked, he dug through the drawers for his earpiece. It had been months since he'd gotten bored enough to do any coercion, but he knew it was somewhere in there.

He found it and put it in. He had twenty-eight minutes to lock down the company's floors and isolate the air system so none of the other floors would be affected.

He used up every process available to help in his work. Fifteen minutes in, the fabricator informed him it was done. He'd had it create twice what he needed to cover the company's floors; he wasn't taking a chance with this. With five minutes to spare he'd isolated the floors, cut off his lab from the air system, and convinced it to ignore any reports from the sensors, then routed the poison from the fabricator directly into the ventilation.

He switched to the pickup.

That was easier to handle since the entire process was computerized. He switched Salvation's fabricator's ID with something else in the warehouse. He didn't care what; it wasn't like anything could be more dangerous than the virus, and the shuttle wouldn't care either. The sensors would read the ID, it would match, and it would leave.

Now he breathed.

Now he had time to deal with the research.

He started on the program while contemplating the second part of that problem, and he had to admit it was only luck he knew about it. It had come as a surprise when Brian had told him about the backup server. It had made sense—after all, their research was vital to the universe—but in the joy of pure research, it had never occurred to Olirian they'd need one. Getting into that would take time.

He smiled. The time he'd given himself.

An alarm sounded.

"How?" He pulled up the sensor grid. Everyone at the party was dead, so who had triggered it? He expanded the grid.

Someone was stumbling away from the party, heading for the lift. He couldn't believe his bad luck; there had been someone with a tolerance to the poison. As he watched, the form staggered, dropped to a knee, fell, and all life signs ended. Well, at least that person wouldn't cause him any more problems.

Only the alarm was still going. He could shut it down, but the Law was already on their way, and because of the kind of research they did here, Health Safety would be too. The one group he didn't have to worry about was building security; they'd be busy handling the evacuation.

But not only was he running against the clock again, he had no idea what the clock was set to.

First thing. He set the fabricator to create the counter-agent and release it. He didn't want anyone not involved with the project to die. Second, he wouldn't be able to go destroy the fabricator in the warehouse, so he needed a way to make sure no one would find it. He erased the ID from the fabricator, and then for good measure, he erased the physical space it was in from the warehouse's database.

Then he got back to dealing with the research. He had to deal with the backup first. Wiping the mainframe here would be simple, but meaningless if the backup was still there.

He found the vault where the backup was stored, but couldn't get in. The security was beyond his coercionist skills. Maybe, if he had time, but... But then he'd need the time to write the infection, and the Law could be here any minute now.

With no other ideas, he decided to borrow what he'd done with the fabricator. He tracked the vault to its physical system, found the index, and erased it from the system. He took his time doing it; he couldn't risk anyone coming across it by accident. He tracked it to two more indexes, and removed them too. He did another search, came back without results, and finally breathed.

Had he forgotten anything?

The fabricator couldn't be accessed by any of the warehouse's systems, so it no longer existed. The

physical space had been removed, so there wouldn't be a conflict with the warehouse trying to place something there. The backups couldn't be accessed, except by going to the physical location where the vault was stored. The mainframe? Olirian coerced it into doing a reset to manufacturer settings, removing any information that had been put on it over the last eight years.

He took the things he needed and ran out, only realizing he'd forgotten to check the status of the counter-agent before doing the reset. Well, he hadn't died, so it had been dispersed.

He reached the ground floor, surprising the guard with his lateness. Olirian joined the crowd outside, moments before the Law arrived, then slipped away.

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