Chapter Fifteen

 Kynard was already in the office when Phoebe showed up for work the next day. She was pleasantly surprised to see that Kynard had indeed managed to complete all of her paperwork, leaving her free to do as she pleased today. And so, she planned to talk with Kynard about their relationship, as well as ask him if he really was an automi. At least, this was what she planned to do, but it quickly became clear that it wasn’t meant to be…

 As soon as Phoebe emerged from her office, she watched Kynard walk out of his own office and immediately head downstairs, Kendra and Screwdriver following behind him: “Wait! What’s going on?”

 Screwdriver turned around to respond to Phoebe, but Kendra and Kynard kept going: “We’re following a lead regarding a threat on campus!”

 “W-what kind of threat?”

 Screwdriver put her paws together, quickly moving them apart and making a boom sound. Phoebe went pale as she realized what it meant and quietly retreated to her office. As Kendra and Kynard stepped outside, Kynard connected his mental computer to the surveillance cameras, scrolling to the one he was most interested in: “You forwarded the voicemail to the Police Department, right?”

 Kendra nodded, stretching her wings as she followed Kynard: “Chief Annie has a copy of it, yes. What’s your plan?”

 “I have a camera visual on a suspicious package in Symphony Hall. I’ll go in and defuse the threat. While I do that, I need you to look around for anybody watching the building from a safe distance, Chances are they’re the culprit.”

 “Got it. I’ll start making my rounds in the air.”

 Screwdriver caught up with Kynard as Kendra flew into the air and made her way onto a nearby rooftop: “What should I do?”

 “There’s a chance they run, or they might…” Kynard stopped for a second, thinking about how the situation could play out. Something clicked for him, and he slowly turned to look at Screwdriver: “You have your pistol on you, right?”

 “Yeah, why?”

 “…put the faculty office on lockdown and stay with Phoebe. There’s a chance this is a diversion to get me out of the building.”

 “You really think this is just a diversion?”

 Kynard nodded: “Pureau’s still out there, and he still wants me dead. He may be the one behind this, either by trying to get the bomb to take me out, or using it to get me out of the office so he can then hold Phoebe hostage. Lock the place down, alright? If it comes down to it, deadly force is authorized.”

 Screwdriver nodded and ran back into the faculty office, immediately locking the building down and making her way to Phoebe’s office. Kynard watched and then went back to running towards Symphony Hall, checking in with Kendra as he did: “Any visuals yet?”

 “Negative. You and Screw almost at Symphony Hall?”

 “No, I sent Screwdriver back. I’m thinking this could be a diversion, so we need somebody to stay back and protect Phoebe.”

 “Copy that, and thank you.”

 “What for?”

 “For keeping my wife out of harm’s way.”

 Kynard nodded, opening the doors to Symphony Hall: “Don’t mention it. Entering the building now. The surveillance camera shows the suspicious package is under the stairway on the north side of the building.”

 “And you know how to defuse it?”

 “Not yet. I’m downloading the training for it right now.”

 Had anybody else said that, Kendra would have immediately turned around and gotten Screwdriver and herself out of the Colierri. But, she knew what Kynard meant and felt safe enough with that: “Don’t download the wrong training, Kynard.”

 “I won’t. This one’s the training given to everybody. Science Department, Police Department, Revertian Intelligence… It’s the best one I can use.”

This was the first time Kynard had entered Symphony Hall, but he had studied the layout multiple times during downtime at work. There was a central amphitheater with two locker rooms, one on each side. The sides of the amphitheater were attached to three floors of music classrooms, all of them soundproofed so they couldn’t be heard even during concerts. To access them, both sides of Symphony Hall had a flight of stairs that also lead up to the rooftop, which doubled as an outdoor lounge with another coffee shop.

The bomb was surprisingly quick to locate, but Kynard found another problem: “Kendra, the bomb’s running on a timer.”

“What does it look like?”

Kynard carefully pulled the bomb out of the duffel bag: “It’s got two colored chemicals, one on each side of a central control panel. By the looks of it, the chemicals will mix when the timer goes off or if it’s tampered with.”

Kendra thought for a moment and then frowned: “I’ve seen those before, back when Screwdriver and I were assassins. They’re called Lascarae Mixers, manufactured in Abreyville. Ironically one of the few harmful devices *not* built by Abrey Dynamics back in their heyday. No, this one’s made by the Lascarae Corporation.”

“Where’s Abreyville?”

“PAR-C, where I met Screwdriver. That’s in Conaton.”

Kynard frowned and stared at the Mixer: “Exactly how does a bomb from Conaton make its way to Revertianni? We’re two different universes!”

Kendra shrugged: “Whoever brought it here either has a ton of money or a ton of connections. Maybe both, to be honest.”

Kynard sighed, still watching the timer go down. When he arrived, it had been at ten minutes, but they had just lost a minute during their conversation: “In any case, how do we defuse it? The training finishes installing in two minutes, but if this bomb’s from another universe, then it might not give me the tools I need to stop it.”

“I do remember each one came with a frequency code. You see the little auxiliary port on the front of the control panel?” Kynard looked at it while Kendra continued to speak: “You attach a little device called a frequency code to that. As soon as it powers on, it plays a tone set at a specific frequency that the control panel is programmed to defuse if it receives.”

“OK, so now we find the culprit, get the frequency code, and then turn the damn thing off? And we do that in eight and a half minutes?”

Kendra shook her head: “No, there’s another way to do it. Lascarae Mixers were phased out in 1906 because of a fatal flaw in their design: Lascarae Corporation wasn’t exactly computationally inclined, so they did everything mechanically. That includes the memory for the right frequency. If you open the control panel, there should be a little, charged crystal that’s vibrating. Well, there’s two of them, but one won’t vibrate until the frequency code sends it the signal.”

“So… if I get that second crystal to vibrate at the right frequency, it will read as the frequency code being used?”

“Precisely. The problem is that you need a way to actually measure the frequency.”

Kynard thought for a moment and then connected to the Science Department database again, this time looking for a frequency reader to connect to his eyes. Sure enough, he found what he was looking for and downloaded the internal visor program: “OK, I got it. Let’s see…” Kynard pulled off the front panel, revealing the two crystals. Sure enough, one was vibrating from the electrical charge it received, whereas the other was standing perfectly still: “…it’s vibrating at 486 hertz.”

“OK, now you need to find a way to replicate it.”

Kynard looked up from where he had been crouching and immediately knew what to do: “I’m at Symphony Hall. *Somebody’s* bound to have a tuning fork, right?”

“Yeah, I suppose so.”

Kynard got up and climbed the stairs to the second floor, quickly making his way into one of the classrooms. The entire class froze and stared at him as he looked at the professor: “I need a tuning fork urgently!”

“Mr. Kynard, are you… practicing music?”

Kynard shook his head: “Long story, but I need a tuning fork to save everybody in this building! I have… five minutes to do it.”

One of the students pulled out her tuning fork: “I have one!” She threw it to Kynard, who caught it and nodded at her: “I appreciate it. What’s it tuned to?”

“440 hertz out of the factory.”

“I need to shave off part of it, so come to the faculty office later and I’ll get you a new one. Thank you!”

Kynard stumbled his way back to the bomb, having pulled out his knife to begin filing off the ends of the fork: “Erivelle got me this knife after what happened with Desarri. I gotta tell her thanks when we’re done here.”

Once Kynard thought he had the right frequency, he hit the fork against the wall and measured it: “…484 hertz, almost there. How exact is the frequency code?”
 “It rounds to the nearest whole number.”

“OK, so as long as it’s in the range of 485.5 to 486.4 hertz, got it.” Kynard made his way back to the bomb and tested the tuning fork again: “Uh… 485.92, that will do, right?”

“Yeah, that should do it.”

Kynard sighed and knelt in front of the bomb again: “If this doesn’t work, what’s going to happen? Will the bomb immediately detonate?”

“Correct. So, please make sure you got it right before you do whatever you’re going to do. I’d rather not have to switch to body retrieval. My wings are strong, but I can’t carry more than one person at a time, you know?”

Kynard nodded, taking a deep breath as he prepared to defuse the bomb: “Here goes nothing. I’m going to count to three, and then I’ll press the front of the tuning fork against the crystal. My guess is the vibration from the fork will also move into the crystal, replicating the frequency we’re looking for.”

“Whenever you’re ready.”

“OK…” Kynard hit the fork against the wall again, slowly moving it closer to the crystal: “One…” He pressed the handle of the fork against the crystal, watching it begin to vibrate. Then, he quickly moved it away, watching the crystal vibrate as he closed the control panel: “I lied, I only counted to one.”

As soon as Kynard closed the panel, he noticed the timer had stopped counting down and completely turned off. He sighed in relief and laid down on the ground as he regained his breath: “OK, we’re good. The bomb’s been defused. Any sign of the culprit?”

Kendra shook her head: “There was one suspicious student on the Bilerro rooftop, but he wasn’t looking at Symphony Hall. Turns out he was just watching me fly across campus. I forgot that it still impresses some people around here…”

They both heard Screwdriver’s earpiece turn on: “Are you guys back already?”

“No, Kynard just defused the bomb. Why?”

“…who’s disabling the lockdown?”

Kynard immediately jumped back up, sliding the bomb underneath the staircase for the time being: “Kendra, get in through the rooftop access. I’ll go in from the front.”

“Copy that, flying there now!”

Kynard sprinted out of Symphony Hall and made his way back towards the faculty office, immediately realizing that he had been right about the diversion: “Screwdriver, Pureau’s the one in the building! Do *NOT* hesitate to shoot him!”

Kendra landed on the rooftop and unlocked the rooftop access: “Going in from above.”

Kynard opened the front door and immediately made his way to the stairs, hearing two gunshots as he climbed them and made his way to the offices. When he and Kendra reached Phoebe’s office, they noticed red stains on the floor, but didn’t see anybody there. Kynard paled in fear and opened the door to Phoebe’s office, shouting in as he did so: “It’s Kynard! I’m opening the door!”

He slowly opened the door, peeking inside and seeing Screwdriver standing beside Phoebe, who was hiding behind her desk. Screwdriver still had her Falcon Shroud pointed at the door, but slowly lowered it and then put the safety back on. Her hands were trembling, and she was taking deep breaths: “Pureau was here, but then he disappeared.”

Kynard frowned: “How could he disappear? Kendra and I had both exits blocked off!”

Kendra sighed and nodded: “I get it now… He must have been in PAR-C for a while, long enough to get his hands on the Mixer AND to learn about Zero-Sum Travel… I see how he made his way to being the leader of Revertian Intelligence now.”

Kynard turned to look at Kendra: “What’s Zero-Sum Travel?”

“A trick the Palaverans learned a while back. It allows you to teleport, but you also travel through time. In essence, you can teleport anywhere you like, but the process will take just as long as it would have taken you to walk there.”

“…what’s the point of that? Why not just walk?”

Kendra gestured towards the building: “He got away, didn’t he? Walking wouldn’t have let him pull that off. But, if he hasn’t appeared again yet, then he must have traveled far. For the time being, we’re safe.” She looked over at Phoebe and Screwdriver: “Are either of you hurt?”

Screwdriver shook her head: “I shot Pureau once, missed the second shot. The stain on the ground is his.”

Kendra smiled: “Let’s get this place cleaned up, and I’ll fly back to Symphony Hall and grab the Mixer. Unless anybody here knows how it works, I’m not worried about it being reactivated, but we’re better safe than sorry.”

By the time the Police Department arrived, finished taking notes and depositions, and then confiscated the now deactivated bomb, the day had already ended, leaving Phoebe with no time left to speak with Kynard. It was clear to her that he was too tired from the day’s work to speak, but just as he was about to leave for the day, Phoebe decided to try anyway: “Hey, Kynard? Can we talk for a minute? Before you go home?”

Kynard smiled weakly: “You wanted to go out for dinner? I’ll have to pass today. I’m too tired to do anything but rest tonight.”

“No, it’s not that. I uh… I wanted to ask you something personal.”

“…what is it?”

Phoebe noticed that Kynard had taken a step towards the front door, something which began to worry her: “I… well… I want to hear the truth from you. Kynard… are you an automi?”

Kynard froze, immediately remembering how Phoebe had reacted to seeing Merrevo and then Perrine. He knew that Pureau could have also warned Phoebe about him before he was fired from Revertian Intelligence. Was it a good idea to tell the truth? Or lie to Phoebe? Or-

“Are you?”

Kynard’s mind shut off, all of the possibilities and thoughts in his head disappearing until only a single word popped up: Run. He stepped out of the building and closed the door behind him, staring at Phoebe as he did so, and then he turned and ran away from the Colierri. As he did so, he sent a single message to Erivelle, Perrine, and Kendra: “My cover’s blown. I’m not going back home tonight.”

Phoebe frowned, watching as Kynard disappeared into the city. She had gotten her answer, sure, but at what cost?