

ODD JOBS
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“I’m sure you’re a fine tenant aside from the explosion that leveled your previous apartment.”

“Hey, that wasn’t my fault,” said Tanner. “Those guys broke in to kill me and they died from their own bombs.”

The apartment manager’s lips pressed together to withhold her response. Though her office was miles away, the holocom projector presented her as if sitting at his table in the cafeteria. She was poised, professionally dressed, and utterly unmoved. “I don’t think that’s quite the approach you want to take the next time you apply for a lease.”

“I sent my financial statements. I’m happy to transfer enough into a secured account to cover the length of the lease. I’ve even got an asylum support stipend from the Fremantle government.”

“That won’t cover the cost of a second demolished apartment, I’m afraid.”

Tanner ran one hand through his short black hair. In contrast to the apartment manager, he wore only casual clothes for an ordinary day on campus. He didn’t need to get dressed up for an interview about a lease, though he no longer owned such clothing anyway. What little he had went up in smoke with his last apartment. “What are the odds that’s gonna happen again?”

“You were already the focus of anger after the Debtor’s War and a target for assassins before the crisis on Minos. Am I correct in assuming you made enemies there, too?”

“My life is not all violence,” he sighed.

“We don’t have active security on site, Mr. Malone. We do, however, have other tenants with a reasonable expectation of safety.” He’d gotten used to the nuances of the Fremantle accent. This wasn’t going anywhere good. “Your references are excellent and I appreciate what you did on Minos for our students, but I’m afraid I must... Mr. Malone?”

Tanner propped his elbows up at either side of his cafeteria tray and put his face in his hands. “You’re saying no. We can drop it and say goodbye now, can’t we?”

“I...yes,” she admitted. “Thank you. Goodbye.” Her projection winked out of existence. The remote holocom projector ball on the table went dark.

“Fuck me.” Tanner sank back in his booth seat. This was the fourth rejection since returning from the Minos expedition a week ago. The fallout from that disaster was still falling out. He had more interviews and debriefings to do with Union authorities, Fremantle authorities, university

faculty and staff, and more. Local media took on a more positive angle toward him after that fiasco, at least. Students were more welcoming of his presence on campus. None of it changed his living situation.

Lynette stayed around with her ship for a day after bringing him back. From there he found a couch to crash on, and then a cot tucked away in the xenoarchaeology lab. It wasn't pleasant, but he could live with a little temporary hassle and discomfort. The problem looked worse with the impending Landfall holidays and the closure of the campus. He could afford a hotel, but with the holiday crunch it would be expensive—and then his problems would only grow as his savings shrank.

He also didn't relish the thought of being rejected by hotels for the same reasons he couldn't land an apartment lease. *What's the big deal?* Tanner grumbled inwardly. *As far as they know, all you did was throw half the Union economy into chaos, murder the richest guy in the galaxy, betray your own government, and unearth an angry ancient alien queen.*

"My life is not all violence," he repeated under his breath.

"It's him. I'm going to talk to him," hissed a voice near his booth.

"Do you want me to come?" whispered another.

"Obviously. This was your idea."

The second accent was familiar, but he couldn't place it right away. Regardless, they weren't local and didn't sound like officials or media. Tanner lowered his fork and waited. Better to deal with this without his mouth full of food.

"Good day. Pardon me, you are Tanner Malone?" He was youthful and dressed like any other student if a little on the wealthier side, with East Asian features and a bright smile shining with excitement. His companion was a woman of the same age and in similar fashion. Her olive complexion and black hair helped him place her accent from Hashem, but it was the young man who introduced them both. "I am Hideo. This is Imani. May we join you?"

"Sure" Tanner gestured to the empty seats.

"Thanks." Imani smiled with excitement. "You are friends with my cousin Khalil."

"Khalil?" Tanner doubted but didn't scoff. "Do you mean Prince Khalil?"

"Oh, we are not so formal within the family," Imani replied.

It didn't allay Tanner's doubts, though it did amuse him. "Isn't it a large family?"

“Oh yes, very large. I suppose I should say, ‘third cousin twice removed.’ But I believe I have been in the same room with the man on a few special occasions,” Imani joked. “It is an honor to meet you. I have seen you on campus several times.”

“I don’t think I’m ready to be an honor. Just not being a pariah is nice.” He glanced over his shoulder and to the nearest reflective surfaces out of habit. The break in his class schedule let him hit the cafeteria at the tail end of the lunch rush, leaving the hall active but not crowded. “Having people talk to me at all around here is a nice change.”

“Yes. Forgive me. I was shy.” She nudged Hideo with her elbow.

“Yes,” said Hideo. “I believe the students know better after everything you did on Minos.”

“It’s fine. No worries. So... hello?”

“I, too, am shy,” Hideo admitted. He took in a sharp breath. “Imani suggested I approach you as someone in similar circumstances. This is... awkward? That’s the word?”

“That’s fine,” Tanner said patiently. He had to agree with that.

“I am from Izumoto’s Star,” Hideo began. “The university accepted me as an art student. The Izumoto government does not allow many students to study abroad. I am an exception.”

“They don’t allow many people abroad at all, from what I understand,” said Tanner.

“Yes.”

“Can I ask how you got the exception?”

“Family,” said Hideo. “I have family in the government and the military. I know I earned this place at university, but I also know the reality of powerful families. I am not proud of that.”

Tanner shrugged. “Your family is your family, not you. What kind of art?”

“Painting and sculpture. Traditional, physical methods. Some computer-assisted, some not. It is the ‘not’ that gets the attention. This university is the best in the Union for such skills.” Hideo frowned with an internal struggle. “My uncle, Makoto is on his way here on government business. I think he also wishes to bring me home. I do not want to go back.”

“Do you plan to ask for asylum? You said we had similar circumstances.”

“Asylum was granted three weeks ago,” said Hideo. “I applied after my mother died.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. What happened?”

“Hickam Syndrome. It happened fast.” Hideo shrugged. “My family knew I would never hurt her. That is why they would let me leave. I would embarrass the family if I defected.”

“But without her, you’re not worried about it?”

“The rest of my family does not deserve such care,” said Hideo.

“Okay.” Tanner looked from one face to another. Imani’s tension was laced with hope. Hideo kept his under a tight leash, but clearly he had to let some of it out to have this conversation at all. “You’re not here to talk about Fremantle’s asylum system, are you?”

“No,” said Hideo. “I do not want to run or hide. I can stand up to Makoto. I want to stand up to him. But I believe he will bring others. He travels with security.” He shrugged. “It is math.”

Tanner saw where this was going. He had to ask the obvious question anyway. “You have asylum. Can you talk to the constabulary about that?”

“My situation brought asylum, but not protection. I can cite fear of persecution at home. I do not have evidence for a specific threat here. It would be one thing if I knew when Makoto might find me, but the constables cannot give me daily protection. Also, he is involved in several high-level negotiations with Fremantle. He will be here under diplomatic privileges. The constabulary will have limited options for dealing with him as long as he keeps it quiet, and he will.”

“So, you’re looking for a bodyguard,” said Tanner.

“For a short time, yes. While Makoto is here, and until he gets the message.”

“I have to tell you this isn’t really my skill set.”

“You rescued my cousin Khalil from a secret military prison not long ago,” Imani spoke up. “You are a veteran. And you accompanied Khalil onto the floor of the Union Assembly. That did not come to a fight. The impression you made was more than enough. Maybe there won’t be any fight here?”

“Fighting isn’t the hard part,” said Tanner. Then he winced. “Okay, that came out wrong. Fighting sucks, but at least I know what I’m doing there. What I don’t know is all the other stuff. I’m not trained in personal protection. That’s all about knowing how to watch for danger and planning your life around threats and...”

The thought trailed off. They watched Tanner prop his arms up by his elbows and rub his face. “Okay, yeah. I live with that all the time,” he finished.

“As I said, Makoto will have to keep this quiet, but he is also dramatic,” said Hideo. “He will want to be part of anything that happens. He will want to impress me with his power, even if it is his security who haul me away. Also, once this becomes known at home, I will be cut off from the family. I believe he must prevent it now or live with it—and then it will be over.”

“This is short-term,” said Imani. “We do not have to worry about this forever.”

“Why not lay low while he’s here? Avoid him altogether?”

“If there is any doubt, he may act on it later,” said Hideo. “I believe this must happen, or it will hang over my head forever.”

Tanner watched his face. Though stressed and afraid, Hideo didn’t beg or plead. That might have been as much out of consideration for Tanner as his own pride. “How long?”

“Over the next week. The government here made concessions to schedule these negotiations. They will run through Landfall.”

“That’s another problem,” Tanner began glumly.

“We can make this worth your while,” said Imani. “We do not ask for charity.”

“Nothing wrong with charity. I can’t take payment, anyway. I’m on a student visa with my asylum. I can’t work.”

“We know. Hideo has the same arrangement. You lost your home in an attack shortly before the Minos incident, yes? It was in the news. Have you found another?”

“No,” Tanner answered slowly.

“Then you are welcome to stay with us in our flat in the city center. As your hosts, we must of course insist on providing for every need. We will have parties over the holiday. Naturally, we’ll have to find you something appropriate to wear for each day. Maybe a few extra choices for unforeseen occasions. Should any of it not work out, you can return them yourself.” Imani let her royal formality slip again for the tiniest crack of a smile. “Your asylum and student visas prohibit work for pay while on Fremantle. They do not prohibit gifts.”

“So this job pays in food, clothing, and shelter?” Tanner sighed. “Okay. I’m in.”

* * *

It was a good week.

Hideo and Imani lived in a lovely, spacious flat. Given her family lines, Imani wasn’t hurting for money. Hideo had sold several works of art in channels left open by his visa conditions at rates that spoke to his talent and capability. Tanner knew virtually nothing about art, but his hosts never batted an eye at his ignorance. His idle curiosity alone set him apart from many others they knew.

They had little worry about anything happening on campus. The area was too public and Tanner was already used to looking out for trouble there. They varied routes and routines, watched their surroundings, and went on with life. Parties at their place turned out to be tame affairs. Most traffic through their home didn't even amount to "party," and the two nights that did never went beyond a few drinks and casual company with longtime friends.

Tanner didn't need two slick new suits with accessories and substitute articles for variety to keep up with their social life. Nothing ever got so formal. Their social calendar didn't require him to have a small new wardrobe, or nice new luggage to pack it all into, or brand-new bedding in the guest room, or the shopping list of other personal items. Imani provided it all, anyway. A man could blow a respectable payday or two on her "gift" list.

They ate well, relaxed at home, and watched the holiday light shows at night from the rooftop of their residence. They played games together on their entertainment center. They got along.

It was almost enough to let them all forget what brought them together.

"Oh my god, this is the worst," Tanner laughed. Lasers and gunfire lit up the tunnel in front of him, its depth and darkness conjured against the living room wall by high-quality holo projectors in tandem with a flatscreen. Popcorn steadily disappeared from the steel mixing bowl in his lap. "Who wrote this movie?"

"They called this an instant classic back home!" Imani protested, though she also laughed. "It was the biggest hit in the year before the war."

"At least they gave the aliens a zombie plague, so it's not pure anti-alien propaganda," Tanner conceded. "It kinda signals that nobody is supposed to take this seriously."

"So you aren't laughing at the unrealistic action?" asked Hideo.

"It's not the fight scenes. I don't think you want realistic fight scenes in a movie like this. It's the build-up. All these guys do is fight or train to fight all day long."

"That wasn't your experience?"

"God, no. We trained for fighting a lot compared to earlier systems, but that's a change, not the norm. I hardly trained or fought at all in my first year after basic. Even during the war, we didn't train every day."

"What did you do?" Imani wondered.

"Cleaning. I cleaned a *lot*. I cleaned up after the people I worked for, I cleaned up after all the people I worked with, I cleaned up after people I didn't work with. Sometimes I painted and then

I cleaned up after that. Lots of the time I'd be 'on watch,' which is just being at a desk or in a room so someone is there in case something happens. If you don't have anything to actually do on watch? You clean."

"What about the people who outrank you? What do they do?" asked Hideo.

"I dunno. Find stuff for me to clean." His friends laughed. "I'm just saying, even when you're doing this shit for a living, life is not all—"

Loud pounding at the door silenced him. A deep, demanding voice bellowed, "Hideo!"

Imani turned off the holo movie. Like Tanner, she looked to Hideo. The comfort of home and companionship vanished from his face. "Hideo?"

"That's him." He swallowed hard, looking from one to the other. Though his face didn't give an impression to back it up, he said, "I'm ready."

They talked out boundaries and contingencies from the first day. Nothing changed. Tanner put the translator bud in his ear. "Whatever he says, don't give an inch. Whatever he wants, the best answer is no. Even if it's culturally rude. *Especially* if it's culturally rude."

"I'll get the door," said Imani. "I want to face this man."

Hideo stood with her but didn't follow. He stayed by the couch. Whether his nerves and his feet kept him glued to his spot or if his emotions urged him to take the lead and face this head-on himself, Tanner couldn't be sure. Regardless, he had hammered on tactics with Hideo and Imani over and over again. Whatever anyone said, however anyone felt, Hideo could not go near that door.

She opened it to find a somewhat short, severe-looking man with salt-and-pepper hair and a nice suit. He glared at her once and stepped forward without a word. Despite her resolve, habit and instinct took over. She got out of the way rather than letting Makoto bump into her.

Several other men in suits followed, all of them younger, larger, and fit. One stayed by the open door. The others followed Hideo's uncle halfway into the flat, looking in every direction like the professional bodyguards they were. They stopped short of the living room to give their boss space as he moved on to confront his nephew.

"Hideo, we must speak. Send your friends home," said Makoto. The translator in Tanner's ear caught onto Makoto's gruff demeanor within three words. The software matched the cold fury of his Japanese with an English translation almost instantly.

“Hello, uncle. They are home. This is Imani. She is my girlfriend, and she lives here.” Hideo’s gesture to Imani turned back to the couch. “This is our guest, Tanner Malone.”

He leaned back to be seen. The name and face didn’t register for Makoto at first, but his men looked on with instant concern. Tanner waved casually to their boss. “Hi.”

Tension rose amid the entourage when he reached into his bowl. “Aw, I’m out of popcorn.” He stood and stepped around Hideo, smiling to Makoto. “You probably don’t want me in your way,” he said—assuring with a friendly glance he would be exactly that, even from across the room. “Hi, guys,” Tanner added for the security detail.

“Why is *he* here?” asked Makoto.

“Why are you here?” answered Hideo.

“This is a family matter. We will not discuss it in front of others. Send them away.”

“No.”

Makoto’s hard eyes somehow hardened further. He wasn’t used to hearing that.

At the kitchen, Tanner caught a glance from Imani and beckoned to her with a tilt of his head. He stepped behind the counter, bowl still in hand. The security detail watched him.

“This drama is unlike you,” said Makoto.

“Yes. Drama is usually your tactic. Drama and intimidation. You can stop now.”

Makoto laughed bitterly. “Are you intimidated?”

“You brought three guards to discuss a ‘family matter.’ Shouldn’t I be?”

“And you brought a war criminal.”

“That would depend on what you consider a crime, uncle.”

The words came out with cold precision. Tanner had read and seen plenty of journalism on the subject of Izumoto’s current regime. A man in Makoto’s position likely had plenty of blood on his hands. Hideo could have hinted at any number of specifics.

“You asked for asylum in this place,” Makoto seethed. “You betray your people. You betray your family. Your mother.”

“My mother told me to do this.”

“Never.”

“Do you know that because you monitored our calls?” asked Hideo. “Because you would not let her leave home to visit me?”

In the kitchen, Tanner poured a cup of kernels into a second bowl safe for use in the thermal accelerator. Various containers and kitchenware on the counter concealed his hands from the security detail, but they watched as he put the bowl into the unit. In turn, he watched them. He didn't hit the button.

"She said no such thing," said Makoto.

"She told me in her last message that she wanted me to stay and that she loved me."

"To finish your studies and then come home!" Makoto barked. "Are you stupid?"

"She knew she was sick when she sent the message," said Hideo. A tear rolled down his face. His voice shook, but he held firm. "Do the math. She sent it before anyone else knew. Ask yourself why."

Makoto twitched as if slapped. He stepped forward. "You will come home with me. *Now!*"

Tanner hit the button.

Popcorn burst in a loud ripple within the accelerator. Makoto's security detail reacted in near unison. They turned from the argument to face Tanner with each reaching under his coat, whether under the arm or to the back of a waistband.

"Tanner." Standing only a few steps away, Imani held up a live holo screen. "Your constable friend is on the line."

"Aw, hell," Tanner grumbled. He looked to the security detail. "Knowing her, she's already overreacting at the sight of all this. Probably be here in minutes. You guys all have Fremantle permits for those concealed weapons, right?"

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Ian hit the "run" command on the molecular scanner and leaned back in his chair. He looked to the other side of the lab. "So, how did you take them out?"

"What do you mean?" Tanner asked. He opened up the container for the next artifact in line.

"The bad guys," said Kim. "The bodyguards."

"Did you hide a weapon in the popcorn bowl?" asked Ian.

"No."

"So what happened?" Kim pressed.

“Nothing. We just stared at each other until the angry uncle got fed up and left. He went home that night.”

They looked to one another, then Tanner. “That’s it? That’s the whole story?” asked Kim.

“Yeah.” He mirrored their exasperation, pointing to his feet. “You asked me where I got these boots! My life isn’t all violence.”