

The Tellurian Threat

Chapter 1

She could tell Kyle was flustered. His blond hair was a mess, as if he had been running his hands through it all day. *This seems serious*, she thought to herself, *Kyle is never nervous*.

"Everything alright?" she asked with concern.

"Yes... well, no. Sorry to have dragged you down here, instead of Po's. I didn't want the others to know I was here," he said apologetically.

She looked at him pointedly. "What's up? I've never seen you like this before."

He didn't reply immediately.

"I think I have messed up, and don't know if there's a way out."

"Is this about the new project?" she asked with a sly smile.

"Wha... how do you even know about that?"

She cocked her head. "You weren't at work yesterday, and you didn't come in today. Yet the X-comm shows you as logged in. Doesn't take a genius to figure out you're on a new project."

Kyle flashed his weird half-smile, seeming like himself for a moment. "No, but I bet not a single guy in my team could have worked that out."

She shrugged. "I've never seen you nervous about work before. What's going on?"

Kyle's demeanor changed immediately. He raked his fingers through his hair and met her gaze. "I don't know how to explain it, and even if I could, I've been asked not to talk about it."

Becca arched an eyebrow. "Let me get this straight. You can't talk about it, but you asked me to meet you here because you wanted to talk about it?"

Kyle sighed. "Just... hear me out, okay? When Andrew told me that I was being assigned to this new thing, I was excited and said yes. Now, I'm not so sure, and there doesn't seem to be a way out of it."

She almost sighed in exasperation. This had Kyle written all over it. "I can't help you if you don't give me anything to go on. At least a hint?"

Kyle leaned forward and took a deep breath. "No one can know about this, okay?"

She stopped herself from rolling her eyes and nodded.

"I don't know what this project is about, I don't know who I'm reporting to, and as far as I can tell, I'm the only one in it."

He relaxed his grip on the table as the waiter approached with their lunch. He expertly slid their plates onto the table and invited them to enjoy the meal. They waited until he had left.

"You went into this project without knowing any of this?" she asked incredulously.

He smiled sheepishly. "When Andrew laid out the details for me, it sounded really exciting."

She groaned inwardly. *Leave it to Kyle to jump first and ask questions later*. "And in just a day and a half, the excitement evaporated?"

"Well, I hadn't realized how hard it is to sit in my apartment and work all day," he replied defensively. "Time slowed down to a crawl. I looked up from the stuff I was working on, thinking I had been at it for half a day, but hardly an hour had passed. I just couldn't take it." She felt there was more to this, but then again, this was Kyle. He could make a big deal out of nothing. "So this was just yesterday?" she asked, unable to keep the sarcasm from her voice. Kyle frowned. "Of course, it was yesterday. It was worse today morning. I just couldn't stay locked up in my apartment."

"I still don't see what the problem is."

"The problem is that the project doesn't have an end date. I could end up stuck in my apartment, working alone for weeks, even months," he said with desperation.

"So, don't."

Kyle looked confused. "Don't what?"

"Don't stay in your apartment. Go to the office, request for a cabin and work from there."

He shook his head. "Can't. Not allowed to."

"What do you mean not allowed to?"

"I have specific instructions to not go to the office, or talk to my colleagues. Even on the X-comm. I have to do this on my own."

It was Becca's turn to frown. "That's ridiculous. Who gave you these instructions?"

He looked her in the eye. "Andrew."

"But you just said that you don't know who you're reporting to."

"Well, I meant I haven't met the person in charge, but Andrew did mention some VP who was looking over this whole thing."

"There you go. Talk to the VP, tell him your problem."

He shook his head again. "Can't. I knew that I would have to work in isolation. That was made clear from the start. What I hadn't realized was how hard it was going to be."

"You knew," she said slowly. "That's strange. Doesn't seem like something you'd get excited over. In fact, it's exactly the kind of thing you are likely to run away from." She looked at him warily. "Why did you accept this project again?"

He shrugged guiltily and said, "Andrew thought with the speed they were moving at, and the secrecy, it felt like this was something big. Like a secret project backed by the top management. He felt that this might just be the shortcut to the promotion I've been looking for."

"Ah, the old promotion hook. But what about the conversation we're having now? Don't you want the promotion anymore?"

"Of course, I do. But I'm wondering if this project is worth it. I mean, I can get promoted in a couple of years, but if I have to suffer like I did yesterday, even for one more month, I might end up in the psych ward rather than the corner office."

She would have laughed if it hadn't been for the grave look on his face. There were a couple of logical solutions she could think of but logic had never been Kyle's *modus operandi*. She would have to guide him through it. "In the eight years I have known you, I have lost count of the number of times you have thrown yourself into the deep end only to come up swimming. That's what you do. You always find a way to make it work, and that's why you are where you are today."

"No, this is different. I feel like I'm in way over my head."

She sighed. "You didn't learn to drive that fancy car of yours in a day, did you?"

He gave her a searching look. "What are you getting at?"

"Everything takes time, Kyle. You learn, you practice, and you get better at it over time. Just like you learned to drive that car, you will learn to work by yourself." She raised a finger to stop Kyle from complaining. "I know you don't like it, and you don't want to, but it's not as if you have a choice."

Kyle frowned but didn't say anything.

"I don't mean to be harsh, but you've gotten too comfortable in your current position. I know you love working with your team and they love you too, but you've got to realize it's not going to last.

"You will eventually get promoted. Whether in six months, a year, or two years, it will happen. Things will change. As you keep moving up, your team will go from 10 to 100, maybe more. Your decisions will have far more impact and will influence more people than you will even know.

"But all of this comes at a cost. You won't be able to enjoy the close interaction that you now have with your team. Like it or not, when you are higher up, you will be working by yourself. If this project is indeed a shortcut to promotion, it's just going to get you there faster."

He shook his head. "But I still have a choice. I can talk to the VP and go back to working with my team. They'll find someone else to work on this project."

"Of course they will. But what about you? Didn't you make your choice the day you moved to Waylain?"

He leaned away with a hint of accusation in his eyes.

She chided herself for bringing it up, but he was being stubborn. It seemed like the only way of getting through to him, but she feared it might backfire. "I'm sorry, Kyle, I didn't mean it like that."

He waved away her apology. "It's nothing. And you're right, I did make a decision that day. But what does this have to do with the project?"

She relaxed a little, realizing that he wouldn't shut her out. "You remember what you told me about why you left home and came here?"

"That's not something I'm likely to forget, am I?"

"Well, back then, you made your decision after that terrible incident. This time, your decision will lead to a little suffering. But it's all driving you toward the thing you've always wanted, isn't it? Do you want to let it go just to be in your comfort zone for a few more months?"

He didn't reply but played around with the food on his plate. It was strange to see him not come back with a quip. It spoke volumes about the turmoil inside him. Becca decided to finish her lunch while she waited for him to speak.

"I wasn't just stuck in my apartment; I guess I was stuck in my own head. Not being able to talk to anyone was driving me nuts, and I hadn't even realized it. But I see your point, and as usual, you are right," Kyle said, the weird half-smile back on his face again.

"The least you can do is say thank you," she said putting on a mock pout.

He laughed. "I'll do better. I'll treat you to dinner, and I'll let you pick the place."

"I guess that'll do," she said laughing with him. "Seriously though, what are you going to do now?"

"Like you said, I'll learn to swim and come out at the other end."

“Well, you know you don’t have to work in absolute isolation. There are other ways to get around the problem; restaurants, coffee shops, even parks. And considering how fancy your apartment is, I’m sure your building has a lounge as well.”

“Yeah, I could definitely do that,” he said lighting up. “In fact, I’ve just had a brilliant idea.”

“Well, as long as it doesn’t involve me, you can go crazy with it,” Becca said getting up from her place. “Unlike you, I have to go back to the office to work. Keep that in mind the next time you’re complaining about working from a coffee shop or your apartment.”

“I’ll trade places anytime,” he said getting up as well. “Thanks for coming, though, I really appreciate it.”

“After all we’ve been through, how could I not? You take care now. Don’t let yourself get dragged down too much, okay?”

She hugged Kyle, and they said their goodbyes. *Hopefully, he won’t get himself into any trouble now*, she thought as she walked back to her office. Then she shook her head and smiled to herself. Keeping Kyle away from trouble was like expecting water to fall from the skies.

Thank you for reading!

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by Debashish Das.

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