

Tristan was out of the shuttle the instant it landed. It hadn't been large, like Jacoby had said. The man had no idea what "large" should be. There should have been some place he could have gotten away from Alex, been able to stop his enticing scent from reaching him.

And his father. Tristan could have strangled him, if he'd actually been there, but his father was a figment of his imagination. One he couldn't control and that was driving him insane. He should be able to control his own mind.

If he'd been piloting the shuttle, it would have given him something to do, something to focus on, instead of feeling like he was caged again and could only pace in circles.

He should have thrown Jacoby out of the chair, out of the shuttle. He should have done the same with Alex for keeping him from doing what he wanted, but Alex had glared at him and told him to behave himself, and Tristan felt small for displeasing him, much to his father's amusement.

He stood among the other hovers in the lot and considered running, getting away from Alex, losing himself in the city. He breathed in the air, and under all the artificial scents of permacrete, poly-plastics, and metals, there was one he couldn't place, but any urgency at escaping left him.

"The scents of home," his father said in disgust.

The sun was high and bright—no, not bright, purer. He shaded his eyes and looked at it. There was something about the color. It was different from any other he'd seen. The sky was bright blue with only wisps of clouds. The contrast was stark against the gray of the buildings.

"You know," Jacoby said, interrupting Tristan's...what? Observations? Soaking in the sensations? "I sort of expected something more primitive."

"All this looks recent," Alex replied. "No more than twenty years objective, I'd say." Alex was looking around, taking out shades and putting them on.

Tristan agreed with Alex. He didn't remember much of the city he'd run to after escaping the forest, but he remembered low buildings, close together. Nothing like these towers.

"This didn't look like this the last time you were here?" Jacoby asked.

"I didn't play tourist. I was here for information, got it, then left. Things felt cramped, not airy like this." Alex took out his datapad and pointed. "We're heading that way."

The walkway was lined with buildings, tall, made of metal and permacrete and glass. They were like any other, on any of the planets he'd been on—cramming as much as possible in as little space as they could. It was what humans did, only it wasn't humans on the walkway. It was Samalians, going in and out of the buildings, walking among them. Noticing Alex and Jacoby, and giving them a wide berth.

It felt wrong, there being so many non-humans walking the streets. It wasn't how it should be, how it was, based on his experience. Humans always outnumbered aliens.

"This is home, boy," his father said. "Humans have no business here."

His father was wrong; the Samalians' behavior showed that. They didn't treat Alex and Jacoby with curiosity, but with deference. They got out of their way because they had to, had been told to. Humans had made their mark here, like everywhere else.

"How far do we have to walk?" Jacoby asked. "I could have landed us closer, if you'd told me where we're going." His tone was neutral, but he was uncomfortable at being surrounded by aliens, although he tried to hide it.

"It isn't far." Alex didn't react to the people around them any differently than when he was among humans. He was looking for threats, a hand close to his knife, just like Tristan had trained him to be—always on alert. "This was the closest designated landing pad."

"I could have landed us on a roof, or between buildings."

"If you don't feel like walking," Alex replied, tone cold, "feel free to turn around and wait for us in the shuttle."

Jacoby rolled his eyes.

They reached an intersection and Alex checked his pad, had them backtrack and slip between two buildings. The lane narrowed beyond the towers and they were walking through a maze of alleys, with low buildings that felt more appropriate to Tristan. The few Samalians they saw here moved out of their way, but in fear, not imposed respect.

"Yes, now this is what I expect when I'm among aliens," Jacoby said.

"Of course," his father said, "the human wants to be feared. Why don't you show him why it should be him who fears us instead?"

"Shut up," he grumbled. He had nothing to prove to anyone, let alone someone like Jacoby.

Alex turned, and the alley widened until it opened up to a courtyard with a few trees and benches among dark green grass.

"This is nice," Jacoby said.

Tristan agreed with him. There was a calm here that called to him to sit on a bench and take in the serenity. The scent of the trees brought up a distant memory of running and laughing.

The courtyard led to a domed building, slightly taller than the low ones around it, but minuscule compared to the towers. Unlike those, it was made of stones, carved by hand. Nothing had been machined here, or poured. Stones had been stacked, a binder used to keep them in place. He searched his memory. The binder was stone dust mixed with sap from the...arbash tree? There was a third component, but he couldn't recall it.

There was a reason the building was a half-sphere. He had researched it when he was young, when he'd thought he needed to pass himself as a knowledgeable Samalian to get employment. That was before he'd realized humans didn't care about him knowing about Samalians, they cared about him being as human as he could be. So he'd stopped researching Samalia and started learning about humans.

He followed Alex, pausing to run a hand along the stonework. It was amazing workmanship. Words were written next to the entrance, but he couldn't read them. He did remember they went down to up, and that it was only traditional to places like this.

"What's it say?" Jacoby asked.

Uncertainty hit him. Was this something he should have remembered? Studied? "Nothing useful," he answered in a disinterested tone and entered, hurrying to join Alex.

The corridor was made of the same stone as outside, the same workmanship. It was tall, but somehow felt smaller than it should. How could he know what it should be like? He'd never been in one of these. His father had never mentioned details about them.

"She must have brought you," his father said. "A woman like her would try to fill your head with this kind of nonsense."

He wanted to ask him what he meant, why she might have brought him here. But they entered a large room, a half-sphere that mirrored the outside. The primary light source was the half-sphere in the center of the floor. It was the Source, he remembered that much. The light wasn't quite enough to fill the space, so torches were lit around the room, the firelight flickering between the alcoves.

No, not firelight, just light made to look like fire.

"Look at them," his father said, striding to the middle of the room and raising his voice. "Look at the idiots wasting their time looking at statues, hoping they'll fix their problems, instead of making sure their survival is assured."

Tristan looked around, hoping no one would notice his father, and the handful of people did seem intent on ignoring him and his rant.

"You really think statues care about your problems? You think faith is going to solve your problems? You need to do that yourself." His father fixed his gaze on Tristan.

“And you, boy. You’re worse than them. You know how worthless a place like this is. I taught you better.”

Of course, he didn’t believe in them; he wasn’t here because he wanted to. He looked for Alex, who was talking with two Samalians.

“Oh, sure, he brought you here. Care to explain why you let him lead you around? What are you, his pet?” His father peered in an alcove at a woman, red fur with white stripes. She held scrolls in her hands. “Knowledge,” his father said in disdain. He addressed the man who was laying a piece of scroll at her feet. “What do you expect that thing to do? Touch your ears and you’ll automatically know stuff? Pathetic.”

“She’s the Wise One,” Tristan said, and the man looked at him in surprise. “Not knowledge. She inspires people to learn, represents the aspect of them that drives them to learn.”

The man said a few quiet words Tristan didn’t understand, bowed his head to the statue, and walked away.

His father was glaring at him. “And exactly how do you know that?”

Tristan shrugged. “I had to research this, when I thought I had to be able to pass myself off as like them.” He motioned to the other Samalians.

“You wanted to be like her, didn’t you? Well, she isn’t worth it. Best you forget her completely. The only good thing about her was how tight she still was after the men who used her.”

Tristan clenched his fist at the comments. Emotions swirled in him, telling him he should defend his mother, that his father had no business talking about her that way, but they were old, faded, and didn’t take hold.

“She believed in those things, your mother,” his father said as he moved past a few alcoves to stop at another one with a woman. “It’s a good thing I took you from her.” He indicated the statue. “That one would be your mother. Sex. At least your mother was better-looking than this one.”

“That’s the Mother, not sex. She’s pregnant.”

“Then she’s sex. How do you think she got that way? I can’t believe you wasted time learning this stuff.”

“Lower your voice,” Tristan said. “You’re going to cause a commotion.”

“Who gives a fuck about them!” his father yelled, looking around for a reaction. “See, they don’t care. They don’t even understand what you’re saying.” His father looked around. “So if she’s not sex, which one of them is?”

“None of them.”

“Really? Aren’t they supposed to represent aspects of people? Are you telling me no one has sex here?”

“Of course they do.” Tristan rubbed his muzzle. His father was doing this on purpose, being stubborn. He’d grown up among those beliefs, hadn’t he? “Sex isn’t an Aspect, it’s a physical act. The Aspects are... different.” He didn’t remember the details, but it had been covered.

“You better tell me you don’t believe in those things, boy. I taught you better.”

“Of course I don’t. They’re just stone.”

His father wasn’t listening to him, having moved on to a different one. “Hey, now that’s a man. Violence. Yeah, him I can approve of.”

Tristan snorted. Of course he would.

“Watch your tone, boy. You know, they give him the right coloring, and he could be you.”

“The Aggressor,” Tristan said, and his father was right. Tall, broad-shouldered, muscular. His fur was ruddy, and he had a determined expression. The expression on the face of someone who confronted his problem head-on, fists at the ready. The one who didn’t just wait for fights to come to him, he went looking for them, bringing them to an end before they could escalate. The one who reveled in fighting them.

His father shook his head. “Violence. Why do they try to cover up what they are with fancy names?” He pointed at the alcoves. “Fucking, eating, wasting your time, more fucking—I guess—fixing you up. Getting the crap beaten out of you.”

“Don’t,” Tristan warned before he could stop himself, which earned him a raised eyebrow from his father. “That’s the Defender.” He didn’t know why he felt defensive about that one, other than Alex carried a statue of him.

This one had small differences, two swords in-hand instead of one, reddish-brown fur instead of tan and black pants, but the position was the same, as was the intent. He hadn’t gone looking for this fight, but he was ready to stand in the way of anyone who would harm those he cared about, those he was sworn to protect.

Tristan smiled. He even had the notched ear. Maybe it wasn’t damaged, but was just the way he was represented.

“Gets the crap beaten out of him. Just like I said. Of course he has damage.”

Tristan didn’t reply. At this size, there were details in the face that couldn’t be portrayed in the small one Alex had. Fierceness in the eyes, determination, but in a different way than the Aggressor. This was someone who didn’t give up. This was someone who Tristan could beat over and over and he would stand back up—bruised, but not cowed.

He’d seen that expression before.

His breathing caught in his throat. He’d seen it on Al—

“It is an ill omen when someone like you graces a House, Tristan.”