

“You’ve looked better,” Alex said, looking up at him.

“The wildlife has proved stubborn,” Tristan replied.

Alex stood, and the woman kneeling in the soil a few plants over cleared her throat, looking at him expectantly.

“I’d help you clean up,” Alex said, masking his annoyance, “but I have tasks until midday.”

“I can wait until you’re free.” As much as he wanted his human, he could make use of the time.

Sounds reached them through the rain as Alex kneeled back in the soil. Voices, a mix of worry, and one voice in a calmer tone. Tristan turned and waited. The head of the sanctuary, accompanied by a handful of his acolytes, became visible. They were agitated, while he was calm.

Once they were close enough to see details, Teklile stopped, surprised. “I didn’t expect you back so soon, mister...”

“Tristan,” he said.

“Yes, I remember now. I’m sorry no one was there to welcome you, but we didn’t hear a ship...” he looked at the pelts Tristan had over his shoulder. Possibly the ripped fur along his arm. “I was under the impression you were going to be leaving while waiting for your lover to be done.”

“I did.”

“I mean, leave the planet.”

“No. I made camp a few hours from here.”

“I would advise against that, the fauna can be—”

“They’re learning their place.”

The man looked at the pelts again. “Yes, I suppose they are.”

“Can you use them?” Tristan asked. “These are what I can’t make use of. With the constant rain, I don’t know how to finish treating them.”

“Yes, we can take them, but I’m afraid that we won’t be able to pay you. The only currency we have is the work we do.” He motioned for them to head back toward the sanctuary.

“I don’t need payment. I have what I need at my camp.”

“Your injuries?”

“I’ve seen to them. Once Alex is done here, I’ll spend time on a medical bed and get them fully repaired.”

“You understand that it could be years.”

“Yes.”

Once out of the rain, he handed the pelts to one of the acolytes, who took them once Teklile nodded.

“You’ll want to step away,” Tristan warn, and once they did so, he shook himself and sighed in relief as his fur no longer pressed against him.

“If you want to wash, we have showers. We also have clothing, if what you brought got wet.”

“I’ll take pants. A dryer, if you have one.”

“I’m afraid the best I can offer are towels. But you should wash first. I doubt your fur feels comfortable.”

“I’ll wait for Alex for that.”

“It will be hours until midday.”

Tristan nodded. “Am I allowed to explore the sanctuary while I wait?”

“Yes, of course.” The man hesitated. “Mister Tristan, if Maraco is correct, and this is some sort of job. Please understand that we are peaceful. The mercenaries here aren’t working. They aren’t guards. Most are looking to leave what they did behind, learn to function among ordinary people. Much like your lover is seeking to do.”

“The only reason we’re here is for Alex to get better,” Tristan stated.

The man searched his face, but even if Tristan was giving something away, it wouldn’t be with human body language anymore. Teklile nodded. “I ask that you respect doors that are closed, otherwise you are free to explore. I’ll have someone guide you to the showers for towels, and to find you once midday is here.

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Tristan explored the Sanctuary systematically. Corridors by corridors, floor by floor, returning to the room he sought only once he reached the bottom.

The library was larger than the text he’d come across had suggested. It contained more books than he would have believed existed at one time. Books were items of antiquity, of planets that had reverted to times before they knew space. Of species who didn’t know it yet.

Only a subjective year ago, Tristan would have scoffed at their existence. Who could need the things contained in things so old. Anything of worth had been transferred to the net, to be accessed as needed.

He... felt something odd, standing among so much old knowledge forgotten by more of the universe. He felt annoyance at the lack of an indexing system. Finding the books he wanted would take time.

Fortunately, time was something he would have.

He’d already decided this place would help Alex before coming across the information about the library. And even now, he wondered if it was a form of reward from the Source for only seeking to help Alex, instead of putting his desire for information on his people first.

The Sanctuary had been established by a man reputed to have collected a great many things in the early days of Space Gov, without regards for how he obtained it. He’d had a ship and a crew, and they had been feared and respected. They took without hurting. They cherish what they took, respected what they meant.

Tristan had seen no evidence of the cultural items they were reputed to have taken before that man had decided he was done with that life and came here. But around him was proof the man had loved books.

Tristan gently pulled one from the shelves and opened it. He breathed in the aroma. Nothing like that of the books in his collection, but those had been made on Samalia, and carried his planet's scents. This came some elsewhere. The writing had something reminiscent of Standard in the blockiness of the lines. Samalian writing had a flow to it, a change in the lines dating back to when they were done by claws in clay.

He placed the book back and wondered if he'd be able to identify the books he wanted by smell after them being here for so long. He carefully took out the one next to it and looked at the writing. Standard, but written by hand. A report detailing a theft. Enough information Tristan worked out it was in city, not a ship, space travel was new, and the person writing it did not appreciate it because too many of the criminals he dealt with came from out there. The book seemed to be a collection of such reports. He placed it back and took the next one, confirmed it wasn't Samalian writing, and moved on to the next.

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Tristan paused his reading at the approaching steps, but otherwise didn't react to them. They weren't the first as he went through the shelf, but these approached with purpose, instead of pausing as they realized he wasn't human.

A clearing of the throat, and Tristan pivoted to look at her. She was dressed in the same material as nearly everyone. The same material as the pants that had been provided.

"I was told to let you know it's midday." Her voice trembled.

"Thank you." He gently closed the book and set it back in its place, then left the library to find Alex.

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The water falling on him felt nearly as good as Alex's fingers digging into his fur. Tristan allowed himself a moan only loud enough Alex heard and Alex massaged his back harder under the shower, working in the detergent.

"I missed you," Alex said.

"Me too."

Alex wrapped his arms around him and Tristan felt how much he'd been missed. "I don't think this is working."

Tristan ran a hand down his human's back and let him decide when to elaborate. Alex looked up at him.

"They keep telling him to just stop thinking. To just let the work carry me. All it's doing is driving me insane. I can't do what they want, Tristan. I'm not like them. I'm..."

Tristan tilted an ear in curiosity, and Alex chuckled.

"How much thinking does it take for you to do that?"

"Surprisingly little, but why are you say you aren't like them?"

Alex went back to kneading the detergent in his fur. "They've given up on the life. They expect me to do the same. That Maraco guy was pissed the other day that I was still training when I have nothing else to do."

"Has he been causing you trouble?"

“No. He questioned me about your real intentions, but he believed me when I said this is just about me.” He rested his hand against Tristan’s chest.

“You need to give it time, Alex. How long did it take me to break you? This will not be any faster. You are willful. That is one thing I respected from the start. You do not simply give in.”

“This is supposed to be to help me. I want to have it work.”

“You don’t know how to give in, Alex.” Tristan nuzzled the top of his human’s head. “It will have to break you, just as I had to.”

“What if...”

“Alex?” Tristan asked gently when the silence stretched.

“What if it can’t?” He hesitated. “What if nothing can help me?”

“I will never stop search for a way to make you better, Alex. You didn’t give up on me. I will not give up on you. Whatever it takes.”

“I know.” Alex kissed him, gently at first, then more forcefully.

Tristan hated seeing the fear in his human’s eyes, so he gave him something else to feel for a short time without care for who might hear them.