

Tristan closed the book and rubbed at his eyes. He hadn't expected reading to become tiresome. While enjoying the smell of books was a recent thing, he'd read thousands of research papers throughout his life, all the documentation about how each weapon he'd collected functioned. He'd gone through ships' operations manual and had never encountered what he felt now.

Reticence.

He was surrounded by more books than he'd known still existed, and he was uncertain he wanted to open another one.

He'd found the copy of the She'Hiemar. The collection of the true stories of the first Aspects. As well as the teaching the Source had imparted to them. He'd read it and scanned each page so he could recreate it once they returned to Samalia. It was the stories he figured Hea'Las would be happy were returned home, not the material they were written on.

Not that she'd be able to tell it wasn't the original.

He'd also read and made copies, for himself, of Ferocial's[need to check if I already gave the founder a name] journal. The woman had founded what they called Solitude, after a lifetime of traveling the universe and collecting books and artifacts from any culture she found interesting.

He'd been interested in it because she had been who took the She'Hiemar from Samalia, and he'd wanted to know what she had to say about his people.

She had little to say about them; it turned out. The book had been of interest because it was held in a place of importance for the tribe.

She had stolen it because it seemed valuable.

Did Teklile understand the woman behind the sanctuary had been a pirate? Did it matter? Her journals made it clear that how she viewed the universe had changed, and that the change had led her to his place with the goal of providing others who sought change a place to find it. She hadn't changed so much that she returned what she stole to their rightful owners, but with the change had come a respect for those items, a desire to safeguard them so seekers could come and view them.

She spoke little of how the change happened. And what she did say about the pool, those who led her to it called the Jorterolima, read enough like the flight of fancy of someone grasping for any reason to justify that wanted to be different that if not for his own experience meeting the Defender, Tristan would have dismissed her words outright.

The problem, Tristan realized, was that until now, his reading had been driven by his need to learn. The operation manuals had been interesting because they let him build procedures to take advantage of delays in the reporting of a defect and its correction. Or in

the minutes between the intrusion alarm sounding and the security force being ready to intervene.

He was now reading because he had nothing better to do.

The option of returning to the jungle was there, but with the planetary spring approaching, the rains were returning, and he found he wasn't as eager to be wet as he'd been before.

And even if he didn't mind it, he justified, he couldn't go back to his shelter. It was too far. The security perimeter he'd established could only be so large with the technology he could scavenge out of two shuttles, so he needed to be close enough to respond when it was breached.

He put the book back in its place.

There were advantages to being here. Alex was also here.

Unfortunately, Alex had duties, and Tristan's presence would distract him. It still left them afterward to enjoy each other. And Tristan took full advantage. Other than the book and the hunts to supplement the what he ate during the meals within the sanctuary, Alex was all he had to keep the boredom at bay.

And if he couldn't endure reading anymore, Tristan wasn't sure the other two would be enough.

Tristan didn't want to be bored.

* * * * *

Tristan shook himself dry before stepping past the vestibule. The rain had come out of nowhere and ruined his hunt, and it would be hours before Alex was done with his training and he could spend his frustration with him.

He put the pants on out of respect for the humans and did the patrol of the corridors. He couldn't grow careless, he told himself. And the patrol was something to do for a little while. Something to keep the mounting boredom at bay a little longer.

How much research was happening out there while he was in here? He could take off, acquire a few weapons to study, new security systems to take apart. Maybe a new ship to reconstruct. There and back, it would take no time at all.

For him.

He'd be leaving Alex alone for at least a year, possibly more.

This was why boredom was dangerous. It made him reckless.

Maybe this would be worth grabbing Alex and—

"Would having someone to speak with ease you?" a woman said, and Tristan bared his teeth reflexively, angry he'd been too lost in thought to notice her approaching. "I apologize," she said, rising her hand placatingly. "I didn't mean to intrude. You simply look as if you have a lot on your mind."

"You're familiar with Samalian expressions?" he asked casually. There were humans who had studied his people, he reminded himself.

"No, and if I was mistaken, again, I apologize."

"You're not."

"Then, would you like to talk about what is bothering you?"

What did a human living in this sheltered place know of the things someone like him needed? What could she have to offer him?

Other than a way to distract himself from the looming boredom?

“I’m here with—”

“Alex,” she said. “I’m aware. You are his lover.” She smiled. “You are quite distinctive, so people talk about you. As well as how it’s better to avoid the showers if you and him are seen heading there. Or to be sure to go, for those who enjoy those sounds.”

“Your surprisingly accepting of the situation.”

“A human and a Samalian loving each other? Or the lack of care at who hears you having sex?”

“Both.”

She shrugged. “Before coming here, prejudice ran my life. In part how I was raised, in part my fear of anything that wasn’t exactly what I had known before. I sowed discord under the belief I needed to set other right. I didn’t have to come across aliens living among us to find things that had to be fixed. In something the size of the universe, even humans will something act so different they might as well be aliens to me. And that is with SpaceGov dictating sameness. Travel to the further regions, as I did, mistakenly believing I would find more receptive ears for the truths I brought, and my years there did not leave me in a good place, or with a whole body.”

“How did you make your way here, then? And why?”

“A gentle being brought me. They found me, broken, and took me in. Nurtured me while we traveled. Never asked anything of me, never did anything in response to the disgust I returned for their care. They were a Porfedian,” she added.

“I have encountered one.”

“I don’t know if you can understand how the way they look almost human made it worse for. I was horrible to them, and they still treated me with care. When we arrived her, it was obvious he wasn’t a stranger. I didn’t want to be here. This was too different from anything I’d known. This unconditional acceptance of theirs was...alien to me.”

“You’re still here.”

She chuckled. “‘Just the time it took for me to heal,’ is what they said before they left me there. Jarom was in charge then, and said that regardless of what they’d said, I’d be welcome to leave with whoever left next, but that until then, they would see to it I got better.” She paused, then smiled. “And here I still am, fifty or so years later.”

“You chose not to leave.”

“I chose to keep hiding,” she corrected. “I had to get in touch with a deep part of myself to understand that my need to make everything ‘right’ was driven by fear. But the fear of the vastness of the universe, its danger and yes, all the so different things. I came to understand I am not a brave person. It is easier for me to be accepting of everything here, in this place of calm, then it would be out there.”

Tristan closed his mouth on the words that attempted to leave his mouth, on gently taking control of the conversation and manipulating her into returning to the one thing that was of interest to him.

“The attacks must have been unsettling to you, then,” he said instead.

“They were, and I’m glad the violence stayed far from me. I don’t know how badly I would have reacted to being confronted by it. But that isn’t what you want to talk about,” she stated.

“You said you needed to get in touch with a deep part of you. What does that mean?”

She considered. “I don’t know how it is for you, but I’m not aware of all the…” she searched, “aspects of who I am. I’m told we are all like that, but I don’t want to assume another species will be like me.”

“Samalians also have aspects,” he said, containing his surprise at the use of that specific word. “I have been trying to get in touch with one of them myself. I have followed the methods written in our ancient texts, used the herbs and songs, but haven’t been successful in my last attempts.”

“Are you sure it is something your species can do?” she asked. “Without meaning disrespect, stories in books are sometimes nothing more than that.”

“It’s happened to me twice before, but I didn’t learn everything I needed.”

She considered him. “Did the times that work follow those texts?”

“No, and I can’t recreate them. Most of the elements involved were outside of my control, then.”

“I see.” She considered him again. “Have you tried meditation?”

“I don’t see how thinking about wanting to have the encounter with the aspect will lead to it happening.”

She smiled at him. “That’s because meditation is far more than just thinking.” She placed a tentative hand on his furry arm. “If you’re interested in learning, I’d like being the one to teach you.”