

The structure housing people Tristan saw, as he and Alex were driven, had a uniformity to them that spoke to construction more interested in how efficiently they could be built than how comfortable they would be for those inhabiting them. They were what he expected to see in the wake of a disaster, set up by whatever corporate relief agency was closest. Cheap models so show they did their part, then gone, the people left to pick up the pieces and transform something barely meeting their needs into something they would be able to spend the rest of their lives in, however long they still had.

But there had been no such incident in the reports he had read on this planet. Only places where nothing happened to draw a corporation's attention could remain unnamed. Corporations were quick to make their mark by name anything they found.

It could be that those who came couldn't afford anything better, but a few of the ships they had would cover the cost of upgrading everything here to something closer to even remote human colonized planets.

Which left choice as the reason for their accommodations.

He couldn't dismiss the possibility. His father had chosen the harshness of the wilderness over the comfort of a supportive community. He was but one of an extensive community of Survivors who did the same. Each alone, away from anything other Samalian would consider needed for life. Their belief in being the ones responsible for their own survival getting them to push against Samalian's gregarious nature.

Tristan had had many of those beliefs forced onto him, but he was now seeing alternatives. Understanding that alone did not mean survival. That a community did not mean death.

That one extra person could mean finally living.

He wondered at the mindset at play here. There had been nothing about being austere in the published belief of the Children of Order. Maybe they kept that for once those showing interested arrived, a final test to determine those dedicated to their cause.

The people they passed had a mix of disinterest and mild curiosity at the vehicle and its passengers. They all looked at peace, so this would suit them.

"Are the children at school?" he asked once he noticed their lack among the adults. It was day, and human educated their children apart from the community. In buildings dedicated to learning.

Samalian did the educating of their young slightly apart, to avoid the distractions working adult brought, but still well within the community. Then, they learned along with those doing the work.

Segregation was not something Samalians engaged in naturally.

"The what?" their driver shook her head. "Oh, yes, I suppose they are. They need to

learn if they're to become productive members of our community.”

Alex stiffened.

“And what is the role they're expected to fill?” Tristan asked.

“That will depend entirely on what they're skilled at, won't it?” she replied with a chuckle.

More basic houses, more people with complacent expressions going about... something. Tristan couldn't locate one who seemed to do more than take care of the structure or the space immediately around it.

“What do the adults do?”

The question caused Alex to look around.

“Oh, the people here are between work.”

“What type of schedule do you have them work on?” he asked.

She glanced at him, surprised. “I'm not sure what you mean.”

“Are you on the Reuben-Corander method? The Jaslalin, or the Premefor?”

Corporate scheduling systems. Tristan looked around again. Each created to emphasize a type of work corporation needed done. Unfortunately, nothing among the people he saw indicated what type of work they were required to do. Helping others included all types of work.

Alex had been on whichever one applied to office workers. He would have had seven hours of work, with mandated brakes to ensure his mental capacity remained optimal.

“I don't know what those are,” she said with a shrug.

Alex nodded, and was silent again, but looking outside more attentively.

The structure where the road seemed to terminate gained definition as they approached. No taller than the houses, but wider and with ornamentations to show it was more important.

“Is this the only hover?” Tristan asked.

“We have more.” She smiled. “But we rarely need to be anywhere so fast one is needed. You caught us by surprise.”

“The buoy didn't inform you we were approaching?”

“Do they do that?” Another smile. “I was just told to go see what you needed.”

Alex frowned, then looked back. He took his datapad, studied something, then put it away, his expression thoughtful. Tristan hadn't made out what he'd looked at.

“Shepherd Hector will have the answers you seek,” she said, easing the hover before an entrance too large for the height of the structure, as if it had been taken from something else and moved here without thought to how it would fit. An indication of importance.

Why would a community like this need such a symbol?

Tristan's experience with communities was minimal. Unlike his brother, he never sought to control them, so the Samalian community he and Alex were not part of was his first. There, the most important building was the House, and even once it is complete again, it will only be distinctive because it needs to be large enough to accommodate the community, and due to needing to be a dome, its height will also be of note.

This had a sense of what Justin had set up in a few of the communities he'd taken control of. Display of grandeurs to force people to recognize he was important.

An older man exited the structure as Tristan and Alex stepped out of the hover.

“Welcome!” the man greeted them jovially. “It is not often pilgrims find us on their own.”

“You don’t make it easy,” Tristan replied.

“If it is easy for those seeking to join us, it is also easy for those who disagree with what we are doing. Corporations prefer exterminating to persuading. We believe we have the right to continue existing as we please, contrary to their desire.” He placed a hand on their driver’s shoulder. “You did well, the Mother is pleased. You are now due for rest.”

The gesture, the cadence of the words, had a ritualistic element to them. Humans accepted patterns easily. They became norm, they allowed actions to not be questioned anymore, because it was simply how they were done.

Tristan had often made use of such patterns in manipulation people.

She smiled and blushed before walking away. Her scent carried hints of sexual excitement. Did rest automatically come with sex among this community?

“You’re Hector?” Alex asked.

“Shepherd, if you don’t mind.”

“Why the title?”

“Because the Mother wishes me to bear it. Children must be shepherd, so it is our responsibility so see to it they are guided to order.”

More cadence; ritual.

“Can we go in?” Alex asked, and the question took the man by surprise.

“The Mother’s Hall isn’t for everyone.”

“You mean it isn’t for those out there? Or it isn’t for people who have a sense what you might actually be up to?”

“I’m afraid I don’t—”

“I have an implant that lets me hear computers,” Alex cut him off. “I didn’t think a lot of the fact I couldn’t hear one from the houses we drove by, because I was among people who don’t see computer as all that important recently. So I figured this was the kind of place this was. Only, I’ve been hearing the computers in there a way off. There are a lot of them. So I have to wonder exactly what you’re doing that needs so many of them while not letting anyone out there have theirs.”

The man’s expression went from jovial to serious. “Who are you?”

“I’m someone who thought you had the help he needed,” Alex said, then smiled as the man reached behind him. “He’s the one you don’t want to anger right now because there isn’t going to be anything left of you before you pull that weapon out.”

Tristan smiled too, and the man paled at the show of teeth.

“Now,” Alex said. “How about we go inside, so I can confirm you aren’t doing the one thing that’s going to make us care about what you’re up to?”

“Which is?”

“We can talk about that inside. Where your answers won’t draw a crowd.”

They were far enough from the houses it would take something impressive to catch their attention. Tristan’s smile broadened, and the man hurried inside.

“Data processing,” Alex said, as the door closed behind them. “At the very least. Enough of it to make many corporations jealous. Not what I’d expect from people claiming to be against corporate mindset.”

“The driver left expecting sex,” Tristan said.

“How do you know?” the man said.

“I smelled her excitement.”

“Look, we happen to believe that rest is important, and that sexual satiation is part of that. We aren’t doing anything wrong here.”

Alex snorted. “You’re bringing people here under false pretense, then you’re brainwashing them into believing that the work you’re getting them to do isn’t corporate. I’m guessing those outside are the ones who proved resistant, so they are actually living the kind of lives you promised them. They’re the ones going out there believing what you’re selling. Makes it easier to convince those fed up with corporate to join you. Then they end up either out there, or in here, doing the same work they did before, but someone convinced it was different. I’d say that’s plenty wrong. But I don’t care. Neither of us does. There’s only one thing I need you to do. Show me the kids.”

“What?”

“There aren’t any of them out there. So where are they?”

“They—they’re at the creche. They’re being taught and those still too young are being looked after.”

“Show me.”

“I don’t think—”

“If you think it’s best we don’t, because we aren’t going to like what we see, you’re already dead. If you think there’s even a fraction of a chance what we’ll see is going to seem acceptable, you want to take us there now, because it’s the only way you survive the next few minutes.”

The man ran.

The structure went down to hide how vast it was from those living around it. Tristan kept the man from taking the elevator, so they went down six levels by the emergency stairs. The only looks they gathered when they passed people were of surprise, and more often it was at the man hurrying instead of Tristan.

When the man opened a door, laughter escaped it; cries of joy over the drone of speech. Tristan’s ears folded back as he stepped in, trying to keep the subsonic sound out, but all it did was muffle it to a less painful level.

“Subliminals,” he told Alex at the raised eyebrow. “At the edge of your hearing, well within mine.”

“What are they doing to them?” Alex asked the man.

“I—”

“Compliance,” Tristan said. “It isn’t effective in adult humans since their hearing range has narrowed, but it is used as part of the education of children to facilitate learning and minimize disruptions.”

“You mean this is standard?” Alex asked, surprised.

“I don’t know if it’s used everywhere, but it is supported by SpaceGov.”

Alex found a terminal and spoke with the young woman at it.

“What is it doing?” the man asked fearfully as she ceded her seat.

“He is going to confirm assisting in educating the children is all the subliminals are about. If not, you want to make peace with the life you lived now, because I won’t give you

the time.”

The man stepped away.

Alex wasn't happy when he returned. “There's some behavioral conditioning, but if you say this is used in most school, then it isn't anything more than they did. Is Alisa Ord real? Or is she a fabrication too?”

“The Mother? She's sleeping. She's going to wake when we need her the most. I can take you to—”

“Don't bother.” Alex looked around, then at Tristan. “It's your decision. I don't like what they're doing here, because these kids are going to end up as nothing more than corporate drones, but that nothing more than what's taking place anywhere a corporation as a say in it. It's probably how I ended up at Luminex, for all I know. You're the one with slightly more extreme views on what's acceptable when it comes to kids.”

Tristan looked at the children. The very small ones cared for the older. Those who didn't need such care played games, ran around. Those older learned at terminals.

Tristan didn't like it. None of this was preparing them for the harshness of the universe. But he recognized it for the education he had received. The Survivor mindset that said everything someone did needed to be toward ensuring their survival. Even among the community he was now part of, children were left to run and play. That Samalian play leaned toward more physical and combative had more to do with being more resilient and aggressive than humans, rather than getting them ready for anything the universe might have in store for them.

No. The universe didn't do that.

The universe didn't care.

“You're certain that's all the subliminals are doing?”

“I looked. All they're doing is keeping the kids compliant and lowering their aggression.”

“Did you find anything that can help you?”

Alex snorted. “Only if my plan was to go corporate again.”

“Then we're done.” He fixed his gaze on the man and smiled. “If you're thinking you can somehow keep us from reaching our ship. Just remember, I'll be between you and any escape from this planet once we're done dealing with them. Be happy you can continue running this and forget we exist.”