

The Other crept closer.

It was a presence that had been following him forever now, it seemed, that always was with him. Far away or hovering directly over his chest, draped over the back of his neck, like a shadow or a growth; always it was there. There was not a moment he was unaware of it, could close his eyes and not know it.

There was the him that has existed before it, and the him that existed after it. No in between.

Today, the presence stayed dogged, trailing him through the marketplace. It might wander sometimes, but it always found him again, trailing closer. Closer.

Ever closer.

He would be caught, soon. But not yet.

He turned a corner and moved down the street, quickening his pace. This particular section of the Huscar Ring was relatively unscathed from the riots earlier in the year and so was clean and bustling, more affluent citizens shopping or going about their days. He slipped into their midst with easy stride despite his limp, his cane a third tap with each proud, stiff step.

Closer, the presence came. Closer.

He dodged with a simple quarter turn around a holodisplay for the nearby university, then ducked through a throng of milling students. Another few meters saw him into a holotext store and out the back door, then down the side street alley. He emerged into a sitting area with benches and trees, ringed by more stores and cafes.

For a few minutes, it seemed he had a reprieve; that the Other was faltering. But then it returned, like a shiver down his spine, like a fire in his gut, like a star in his heart. It was bright and alive and it crashed into his legs with great excitement and a not at all subtle squeal.

"GOTSYA!"

Uji Tameike looked down at his daughter as she bounced on his feet and held onto his robes and hands. Her smile was so big it dwarfed her face, squishing her eyes into thin lines. Her cheeks were scarlet spots of excitement and her pigtails flopped like [rabbit] ears.

"Good work, my butterfly. Now, your effort is only half done. You have two targets. Can you find your mother?"

The little girl's chubby, excitable face scrunched up in seriousness again for just a moment, but then it was gone to a gasp and giggle of delight as she spotted the goods in the window of the

bakery behind them. She pointed at it viciously, launching herself at the shopfront and attaching herself half to the window ledge and half to her father's leg.

"Faddah, I cans gets uh bake 'op! 'akeop, 'akeop! Preeeease prease!"

He was about to tell her that distraction would not be rewarded, nor would failure mid-mission, but then she turned and smiled up at him and he was suitably done for.

Uji sighed, then stroked her head.

"You did find me, so that is worth a treat. We need to collect your mother first, though. Practice telling the shopkeep your order."

"Ye!" Samantha exclaimed, her smile stretching even bigger. She went back to looking in the window with a fierceness that ran in her blood, already forgetting the 'collect your mother' portion in favor of picking which color treat caught her eye and reciting to herself over and over.

"I wants a broo pop prease. I wants a broo— broo. Brue. Brue. B— **Buh.** Boo."

"No shortcuts," Uhi reminded her, and she flushed and mumbled and fidgeted, chewing on her finger as she nodded. "You know the word is **blue.** Do not leave out letters."

"Ye, faddah," responded his daughter, who was starting to look frustrated. Still, she squared her tiny, little shoulders and soldiered on, saying more quietly, "Brue. Bwue. Buh-luh-oo. Buh-loo."

While she practiced, Uji mentally nudged his wife, watching the plaza from the corner of his eye. She responded immediately with warmth and amusement, having been paying close attention, and came sauntering out of a decor shop that had seen better days.

Hey Daddy, can I get a treat to suck on too? Maybe later, came her voice in his head through their bond. Uji twitched, narrowing his eyes at her approach.

If you behave better than this, perhaps.

Ooh, that a promise?

He snorted, and she licked her lips lewdly as she stopped next to them, leaning over to kiss him. The slide of their mouths was wet thanks to her antics, and she nipped at him when she pulled away.

"Mommah!" Sammy cried, turning around and pointing. "Finds yah!"

Both her parents blinked, then Satsi burst out laughing while Uji gave a little, contented grin.

"You are technically correct," the man told his daughter, "in that you have just found her in your perspective. However, you did not suss her location out yourself, as she came to you—"

"What Daddy means is that you're our clever devil, babygirl. C'mere." She opened her arms and Samantha leapt into them for a hug with all her weight and force, actually tipping Satsi back off her heels. Uji moved his cane in a blink to right them, preventing a topple, and the pair nuzzled.

"Very clever, my love. By the time you are three, we will have you tracking by sense and sight like a professional."

"Ye, daddeh!"

"Or when you're older, because Mommah and Daddy love you regardless. Always. No matter what."

"Indeed," Uni agreed amicably, leaning with difficulty to kiss his wife and daughter. They met him halfway, his girls, kissing each cheek.

Perhaps they would not always follow each other everywhere, but they would always be together nonetheless.