

Arx made his skin crawl.

Ruka was fervently aware of his every movement being watched, the protracted orderliness of the hunched citizens. But he had to be here, so like anything else, he sucked it up. The ride up the Dark Ascent sent his senses scrambling, a constant, itching unease.

Worse, he *liked* it, the Dark curling around him. He felt powerful and in control here, even as the elevator brought him closer to prescenes that blotted out the freaking sun.

He didn't want to feel *in control* over Arx or its people. Instead he focused on the anxiety, walking fast to his destination as directed. He was almost running to get to the office as the guards let him in.

Ruka had been expecting something ridiculously rich. What else would a Dark Councilor have except something that an emperor would? What he got was a freakishly clean space of pale gray with a zen-like quality helped by some potted plants. There was a desk and a chair on either side and ordered office supplies.

"Welcome."

The greeting was cool. Ruka looked to the man rising from his seat and remembered he was meant to be respectful. Cora would have bowed and been kind. Cora was his better half. Ruka just nodded.

Marick Tyris was almost too beautiful to be called handsome, or vice versa. The Mirialan felt himself swallow. It was a visage he'd have had on a holozine under his bed once.

Tyris was also kriffing deadly. A Master. The Voice. A maybe enemy, maybe ally. Satsi hadn't been clear.

He realized he was staring. Funnily enough, so was Tyris.

"I'm here to talk. About. Things," Ruka said haltingly. "Satsi sent me."

"I know."

Those blue eyes wouldn't stop *dissecting* him.

"... Right. Then...?"

"Here." Marick nodded at the free chair. As Ruka moved uncomfortably to sit, there was a ghost of movement too fast and fine to follow.

He hardly even noticed the prick.

"Ahh...?" the Mirialan muttered, looking to see a single spot of blood on his arm. His eyes shot wide.

*Oh, frang—*

His heart thudded, muscles twitching with the sudden rush of fear-fueled adrenaline. The poison snaked through his veins and he staggered, dropped to his knees, and then met the floor face-first.

**-x-**

When Ruka awoke, he opened his eyes gingerly, expecting agony and a dungeon but finding only the pleasantly soft and quiet atmosphere of the same office. He wasn't shackled to anything and nothing hurt, save his tongue where he'd bitten it. His skin felt a little tender too, like a sunburn, but not bad.

He sat up and realized he'd been given a *neck pillow*.

"Okay, what the hell," Ruka asked aloud.

"Good afternoon," replied Tyris, and Ruka jumped, turning to stare across the desk and noticing him there. The Hapan had been so still it was like he was invisible. Or maybe he had been invisible. Ruka wasn't sure.

He was angry though.

"What is this kriff?" the Sith growled, gripping his weapons. He still had his weapons. *What even?* "Why'd you attack me? What're you going to do to me? You won't get anything about the Lotus out of me! Not Odan-Urr either. You guys aren't even supposed to be hunting us anymore. You wanna torture me, kriffing try it."

Anger was easy. It hid how scared shitless he was.

But the Voice barely reacted. He just sipped a mug of what smelled like tea and blinked. He set down his datapad as he switched his gaze to Ruka.

"Your people wear geometric tattoos, which are by their definition symmetrical," Marick stated calmly. "Yours were off by varying degrees and millimeters at multiple points on both your face and arms. I had that fixed for you."

Then, just like that, he went back to the pad.

"Now, you had business from Satsi?"

Ruka stared. This. *This* was the Brotherhood's top assassin everyone feared. This was the person Satsi warned him about.

*Be careful*, she'd said. *He's... You'll see.*

"Goddammit, coach," muttered the Mirialan, cheeks flushing in embarrassment. "And damn you too, that's creepy! And non-consensual, *ay!*" he added to the Voice, who blinked again.

"You're welcome."