

The meeting had dragged on an hour past its stated end time. Some participants had quietly retreated after the extra ten minutes; others stayed to see if the seemingly forgotten agenda items would be addressed. None of it seemed to bother the three at the center of the distortion - a girl with grey skin and red-feathered wings, an all-too-relaxed boy whose eyes held rings of color and near-slit pupils, and an impressively calm politician with moon-dappled skin and gently spiraling horns.

"I see the human gift for obstinance remains intact," the politician remarked, tapping his papers - probably important to the planned schedule - against the table once again. "But I have no intention of allowing your family to move onto this planet. Your collective behavior leaves *far* more to be desired than your revenue generation can offset."

Polandra snorted, ruffling her feathers. "You know neither of us is human. If your eyes stopped working and you can't see me anymore, I'd've thought knowing his family's reputation would've come with knowing any of them are half human at best."

The politician huffed at Caelum's easy smile. "Hey, easier mistake than you think, Polly," he said. "My own twin loves being seen as human, and I don't mind rolling with her. But when I'm just by myself, I take Mom's view. Makes things a lot simpler."

"And what," the politician sighed, "would that be?"

He shrugged. "What's it matter? I'm not *not* human. Genetics do what they do, but the only thing they gave me that's not human standard is a little tweak to my legs. Some athletic potential, maybe. Pretty eyes. Getting all worked up about what I am or I'm not is kinda pointless when the practical level is just about the same, don't you think?"

Caelum reached up to pat his girlfriend's arm, smile warming. "You were always proud of yourself, though. So I don't mind being not human with you either. It never bothers me."

The politician sighed loudly, disrupting the attempted tenderness. "Unfortunately those genetics you write off matter as much as the culture you would drag with you. Your mother's propensity for hybridization--"

"Father."

The politician waved off the interjection. "Captain Steele behaves as she will, with limited regard for the consequences to the worlds she visits. Her children, as I understand it, tend to behave quite the same. *You* are a moderately famous example - I did my reading before your attendance. *You* would be infinitely worse for my planet than your more conventional siblings."

Polly went still, resting one clawed hand on the back of Caelum's chair, but his easy smile only turned into a small laugh. "My little gift, you mean? If you did any level of research on me, you'd know good and well it's highly noticeable. I go out of my way to avoid using it, especially on sensitive matters like this."

"Your *mind control* is not a *gift*," the politician finally snapped, rising to his full seven-foot height. "And I will not be hearing what other so-called *gifts* you may be referring to. You scheme,

you lie, and you force events to resolve to your liking. This so-called Paver of Ways, you trample free will and open expression almost by *breathing* on us, and you still remain one of the famously *less* stubborn members of your house!" He tapped his papers one more time and swiftly moved for the door. "Consider your proposal thoroughly rejected, Mr. Steele. I will not be hearing it again."

The pair said nothing as he left, door sliding shut behind him. The remaining participants looked between themselves - uneasy, but sympathetic. Caelum closed his eyes, set one elbow on the table, and leaned his head on his hand. Polandra half-stepped forward, extending a wing to gently shelter him, keeping their quiet as the others wordlessly assembled their things and left, casting looks back behind them as they went.

"Well?" she quietly asked, minutes after they'd been left alone.

Caelum tipped his head back and opened his eyes, smiling. "They never even noticed."

His girlfriend sighed, stepping back and running claws through feathers. "I did." It was almost a complaint. "That guy does have half a point, you know. It's just a little unsettling that blending everyone's moods is less visible than direct commands."

He shrugged, pushing his chair back to stand. "It messes up my eyes, and I need a hand free to mix it up." He wiggled the fingers of the hand he'd kept below the table. "That's what the look of silent defeat is for. You played your part perfectly."

Polly shook her head. "You're a devious man, Caelum."

A quick grin and a quicker kiss. "You love me anyways. So - let's go figure out the next shift in popular opinion, yeah? I think we should go out for dinner, somewhere nice but reserved. Give the other stiffs a chance to see our face again."

She walked out behind him with a hidden smile. "Sounds like a date."