

Tristan watched the boy wash his plate and pan. Alex had left while it was still dark, and Tristan had waited until full light to wake the boy. They'd eaten quietly, and now Tristan considered how to proceed. While the boy didn't talk about his father, he was growing comfortable around him.

The boy put his things aside to dry. "Are we going to look for more plants?"

Tristan smiled. "We don't have to; Alex brought enough to last us until he comes back."

The boy looked at the cooler and the cases of non-perishable food. He bit his lower lip. "Can we still go? I like it when you talk about the plants."

Tristan nodded. Maybe they could have a meal only of plants, see how the boy cared for those. "Okay, do you have your knife?"

He pulled it out of a large pocket, sheath and all. Tristan examined the boy's waist. The pants didn't have a belt, and weren't stiff enough to have a sheath clipped to them. "I'm going to have to make you a belt for your knife. Having to reach in your pocket for it and then unsheathe it isn't practical if you need it in a hurry. When we get back."

Tristan led them into the forest from a different direction. Immediately the boy was comparing leaves and flowers to the pictures of those Tristan had shown him, trying to identify them.

Tristan considered taking the datapad away. He hadn't had that when he'd learned to identify edible plants. He'd had to remember them, or get sick again. Letting the boy depend on the pad to remember for him wasn't helping him in the long run. But, he told himself, the boy was only human, and the datapad also served as a reminder civilization existed; it played a part in keeping him calm. In a few days he'd suggest leaving it behind.

As they found leaves and tubers, and put them in the bag Tristan brought, animals scurried around them. Something large roared in the distance occasionally, and the boy clung to Tristan. He studied the boy in those moments, an idea forming. Once the boy was sleeping, he'd go investigate that creature.

When there was enough in the bag for both of them, they stopped, and Tristan showed him how to make a shelter from the trees and branches. He'd had to learn that on his own. His father hadn't bothered before taking him blindfolded into the forest and abandoning him there to survive and make his own way back.

The first few times Tristan hadn't needed to—the weather had been mild, and even the rain only a minor annoyance—but the next time he remembered it being cold, and a bitter wind howled in the night. His fur provided insulation, but it had limits.

He showed the boy how to split the end of branches so they could grab onto another branch and make a frame for a lean-to. He showed him large-leafed plants and ferns to use to make the wall and moss to insulate the floor.

"This isn't going to last you for very long, a day or two, but if you make it with the opening pointing so the wind won't get it, even without a fire it'll help keep the elements out."

"Can't I bring my tent?"

Tristan chuckled. "What if it gets broken in the crash?"

"If I crash, I stay with the ship so the rescuers can find me."

"They teach you that at the academy?"

The boy nodded.

"How long do you stay with the wreckage? How long will it take them to find you?"

The boy thought. "Every ship has an emergency beacon that turns on during a crash. So they can find it quickly."

"What if no one comes?"

"They will."

Tristan sat in front of him. The boy clearly had too much faith in technology. "Buddy. Sometimes everything goes wrong in the worst way possible. The universe works hard at..." He searched for the words to use, to instruct the boy in the danger of the universe without scaring him. He couldn't be the cause of the boy's fear. "At making our lives difficult. That's why we prepare. It's why we plan like this, so that when it causes everything to fail, you can still go on. Do you understand?"

The boy watched him. "My teacher says the universe doesn't do anything. It's just the place in which we live."

Tristan smiled and placed a hand on the boy's shoulder. "Take it from someone who's been dealing with it for a long time. The universe is actively working against us."

The boy looked at the lean-to. "And that's part of preparing against it?"

"That, learning to identify food. How to handle a knife."

"Does Alex know how to do that?"

"Handle knives? Yes."

The boy motioned around them. "Find food, make a shelter."

Tristan laughed, hard and deep. He was surprised at how funny he found the idea of Alex, alone in a forest. He shook his head, still chuckling. "No, but that's why he has me. Like you, Alex depends on technology to survive. I'm going to teach him, after this job is over. Now, I expect you're hungry."

The boy nodded.

Tristan dug a fire pit before the lean-to's opening and showed him how to make it so the smoke wouldn't blow into it while the heat reflected inside, warming it. Then he showed him how to wrap the tubers into leaves and bury them under the fire.

The boy frowned. "We didn't bring any meat."

Tristan tilted an ear.

"To go with the vegetables."

As fast as Alex had been on picking up on Tristan's body language, the boy was faster. Innate ability or training? His father was a politician, so he might have wanted his boy trained that way.

"You want meat?"

"We're supposed to eat a balanced meal. That means vegetables and meat. And you have to eat everything on your plate. Do you think meat grows in a different part of the forest? Or outside the forest?"

Tristan chuckled. Didn't humans teach anything to their children? "Wait here."

Tristan had no trouble finding one of the small rodent-like creatures and catching it. He returned with it and showed it to the boy.

As he expected, the boy smiled and reached to pet the animal's head. It chittered and tried to wriggle out of Tristan's grip. "This is where meat comes from."

At the boy's confused expression, Tristan considered snapping the creature's neck and opening it, but that would scare the boy. And it was now calming down under the boy's touch. It would make Tristan the cause of the fear.

"You, me, the animals—almost anything that's alive, we have meat inside us. When it dies, you can take it out to eat it."

The animal leaned into the boy's hand as he scratched its head. "I thought meat came from the stores."

"That's where you get it, but before that, it's in animals."

"Like this one?"

"Bigger ones. This one doesn't have enough meat in it to feed anyone."

"Bigger, like people?" The question didn't have any disgust in it, which surprised Tristan. Then he realized the boy was only seeking a frame of reference.

"Not people, but large animals like them, yes." He didn't elaborate, or mention the horror humans felt at eating someone who could think. Or that beings that were sentient seemed to end up eating a lot of things that were bad for them, and made their flesh taste horrible. Tristan did his best to avoid that kind of meat when he could.

"So, if we want meat, we need to find a dead animal?"

Tristan considered his answer. Weighed not causing fear versus injecting some reality in the fantasy life the academy had constructed for him.

"Or you can kill it."

The boy looked at him, horrified. "You can't kill it!"

"You can decide that. If you're only lost in the forest for a few days it won't matter, but there are things you need in meat, so at some point, you'll have to make a decision. It's going to be kill one of them, or not eat properly, not eat a balanced meal."

The boy looked at the animal Tristan was holding. "But we already have all that meat. Do we really have to kill it?"

Tristan placed the rodent down. “No, we don’t.” It stood on its back legs, studying them, then scampered off. “You won’t need to kill anything here. If we need more meat, Alex will get it for us.”

“Have you killed animals?”

“I grew up in a forest, remember?” Tristan made his smile sad for the boy’s benefit. “There aren’t any stores there. If I wanted meat, I had to get it myself.”

The revulsion at sinking his teeth in the tarurowler flesh hadn’t lasted long. Once he’d begun eating and his body had understood it was needed to survive, he’d begun looking forward to the hunt, the fight, and the sensation. It was only once Tristan stopped showing any hesitation at eating a still-living animal that his father allowed him to kill it first. He wouldn’t have a squeamish son.

“Did you hate it?”

Tristan focused on the boy. “I had to live. In the forest, anywhere away from civilization, it’s how it works. Small animals eat plants, and the large ones eat them.”

“I don’t want to kill them,” the boy said, determination mixed in with revulsion.

“You don’t have to.” Tristan smiled. “And to be honest, I prefer not having to do it either. It’s a lot of work killing something large enough to feed me. And some of them will fight back.”

They waited quietly among the sound of the animals, rustling leaves, and crackling fire. The roar sounded in the distance again.

When he thought they were ready, Tristan used his knife to dig the tubers out of the embers. The leaves around them were black, but the tubers were intact. They had softened to the point where he could easily break one open to let it cool. They had no taste, so they added some of the leaves they had picked, but they were filling.

Once they were done, he showed the boy how to properly extinguish the fire and remove any indications they had been there, taking down the lean-to and spreading the leaves and branches around the area, then headed back to the clearing.

They were separating the leaves to store them when Tristan heard a vehicle approach.

“Buddy, go in the ship, in your room. Lock the door and wait for me.”

The boy obeyed without questions.

Tristan took his Azeru from its hiding place and waited. The engine’s sound was different from the hover Tristan had used, and Alex wasn’t supposed to be back for a few more days. The underside of a hover came into view, dropping and breaking branches before it righted itself. It descended in a zig-zag, almost as if it was inside a hurricane. It dropped the last ten feet, stopping just before it crashed, and then dropping the last inches.

It was Alex’s hover.

Tristan headed for it, going through the reasons he would be piloting it this badly. Damage or injuries. Alex had better not be hurt; too much depended on the human. Tristan didn’t want to deal with the delays waiting for him to be healed, or having to the equipment himself, would cause.

His only job was to go to a city and get what they needed. If somehow he’d managed to screw that up and got injured in a fight, Tristan was going to beat him.

The ramp came down and Alex stormed out, in good condition. Tristan grabbed his arm as he walked by and forced him to stop. Alex wrenched his arm and looked around.

“The boy is in the ship. I didn’t know who was coming.”

“A couple of kids got in the hover and messed it up.” Alex sounded tired.

“You didn’t lock it?”

Anger flashed in his eyes. “You think I’m an idiot? Of course I locked it. They bypassed it. It’s a hover, not a vault.”

“You didn’t add contingencies?”

Alex looked confused. “Like what? Something to blow it up if they got past the lock? What good would that do? I wouldn’t have a hover anymore.”

“It would make them pay for it.”

Alex stared at him. “You’re serious?” He looked at the ship. “Are you telling me that thing’s rigged to explode?”

Tristan simply looked at him. What had Alex thought his extra precautions were? A message

politely asking the would-be thief to desist?

“Is that the extra time you took locking it?” His eyes grew wide. “Are you telling me you had the ship ready to blow up when we were in that city? With Emil in it? What if someone had tried to break in?”

“They would have died.”

“Yes, and so would Emil!”

Tristan had his arm back ready to punch Alex when he understood what he meant. The ship could be replaced, as well as everything in it. Even the boy's death he could work around, but it would have been a major problem. He lowered his arm.

“You hadn't even thought of that, had you? Did you even remember he was in there?”

“Watch your tone, Alex. You're right, I miscalculated. That doesn't give you the right to speak to me this way.”

The effort for Alex to control his temper was visible on his face. He pointed to the ship. “He is not a commodity to be carried about, used and disposed of. He is a child. I wish you could understand that. Maybe there'd be hope for you if you did.”

“Alex,” Tristan warned.

“I know! Shut up! Know your place!” He stormed away.

“Where do you think you're going?”

“Away! Before I do something you'll decide to kill me for, before the mission's over!” Alex grabbed nutrient bars from a case and headed into the forest.

Tristan considered following him, reminding him he didn't care for that attitude, but it would be a waste of time. Angry humans didn't learn. One more thing to add to the long list of reminders once the job was over.

He entered the hover and shook his head at the mess the missing panel revealed. At a glance he could tell the stabilizer was missing. No wonder the landing had been so erratic. How had it been flying all this way without it? They reconnected the wires so the theft wouldn't be obvious, but that had caused a short in the sensor, as well as the dampeners. If Alex had been forced to stop suddenly, he would have turned into a bloodstain on the view screen.

This required replacement parts he didn't have. He'd have to see about rigging one of the ship's spare stabilizers and see if he could repair the other components. He smiled as he headed for the ship, realizing this was offering him another opportunity to bond with the boy.