

The boy watched the ship disappear, then went back to his datapad. Tristan cut a third off the nutrient bar he held as he headed for the boy, then sheathed the knife.

Tristan sat beside him. "You must be hungry." He handed the boy the cut-off section.

The boy put his pad down and looked the chunk over before carefully removing the wrapper. He let out an almost imperceptible sigh before taking a small bite.

*Time to be the good buddy again*, Tristan thought as he ripped the wrapper off the rest of the bar. "I guess you're bored with those. If you don't mind waiting, I have some emergency rations. I can set up the cooker and make them." He bit a chunk off the bar. "The plan was to deliver you directly to your father, so I didn't plan for actual food."

"This is okay." He continued eating, small bites after small bites.

"You'll have better food tomorrow. Aaron's getting us supplies."

The boy shrugged. "This is fine."

Tristan laughed. "I'm surprised you can say that after how long you've had to eat them. This stuff keeps you alive, but no one considered making them taste good when they invented them."

The boy shrugged again and picked up his datapad.

Tristan tapped the pad on the boy's lap. "How's that going?"

"Slowly. There are a lot more plants than I thought."

Tristan looked around and remembered what learning about those around his father's cabin had entailed. "That there is. You want some help?"

He shook his head. "I can do it." There was determination in that voice.

Tristan smiled. "Of that, I have no doubt." He finished the nutrient bar and stood. "I'm going to put stuff away. Just call if you need help with anything."

He placed lanterns around the clearing so the boy could see, and hid weapons among the trees. He placed them high enough the boy couldn't get to them, and even Alex might have trouble, but he shouldn't need them; even without his harness, Alex kept multiple knives on his body.

When it got too dark, the boy joined Tristan who was seated against a tree, reading on how broadcasting was handled, trying to work out what the authorization code Alex had added to the list was for.

"Why didn't you go with him?"

Tristan set the pad on his lap, screen down. "I can't leave you here alone."

"I could have gone too."

Tristan mussed the boy's hair. "Our job is to keep you safe, Buddy. This place is safer. The people who prevented us from making it to your father might have followed us to this planet."

"Can't Aaron get hurt then?"

"Yes, but it's okay if he gets hurt. You're the only one who can't get hurt."

Tristan walked around the clearing, turning the lanterns off until only the three by the boy remained. He sat in the dark, close enough the boy would make him out, but anyone who didn't know he was there wouldn't notice him until he killed them.

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Tristan came awake to the sound of the canopy rustling. He stood and backed away into the darkness. The boy didn't stir under the blanket he'd given him when the air had turned cool.

The rustling stopped, and Tristan searched until he made out the faint glow of the engine. They didn't want to be noticed, and had reduced power as much as they could while still remaining aloft. He took out his Azeru.

The vehicle settled over the clearing, then gently lowered. A light came on and searched the clearing. He took aim at it. The light didn't come close to the tree line, but was still close enough the boy had been visible at its edge. He wasn't worried about them shooting. The boy's father wanted him back alive according to every interview he'd given.

The light settled on the opposite side of the clearing, and the vehicle came low enough its underside was visible in the reflected light. A large rectangular form, then another form over it. It came lower, and he was able to make them out fully: a hover, under the ship.

He remained in the dark. He knew who it should be, but wouldn't know who it actually was until they stepped out. The ship stopped with the hover a few inches still off the ground. The

hover dropped with the sound of a punch to the stomach.

The boy jerked awake and looked around quickly.

Tristan ignored him, then remembered he couldn't see in the dark. The boy wasn't used to this environment. If he panicked and ran...

He put the Azeru away and quietly went to him, staying in the darkness. The ship crept up before heading in the boy's direction. He caught the boy's arm as he backed through the trees. The boy shrieked.

"It's okay," Tristan whispered. "It's me. That's just Aaron. He's back with our supplies." The boy hugged him tightly then stepped away. Tristan saw his eyes were glistening in the lantern light. The boy quickly dried them. Tristan nodded to himself at the demonstration of self-control.

The ship lowered as it approached so that by the time it was before them, the grass was flattened under it. It drifted under the canopy, turning so the back was facing Tristan. It silently touched down, then the engine went dark.

Tristan pulled the boy close to him with a hand, and kept the other one by the Azeru as the ramp opened. Alex stepped down it and headed for the two of them.

"Sorry I woke you," Alex said.

"It's okay," the boy replied.

Tristan watched Alex, studied his expression. He believed the human knew his place, but he had to remember the universe had sent him. Anytime he wasn't supervised, he would be making it so that Tristan could get killed.

"I've turned off everything I know how, but you said you wanted to do a full shutdown. I don't know how to do that, short of pulling the plug on the generator, and something tells me that's not how you do it."

Tristan nodded, still searching Alex's face. What made this difficult was that Alex didn't know the universe was using him. Like Tristan, the universe manipulated him. Alex believed he was here to help Tristan. Maybe even falling in love with him, although at this stage Tristan didn't believe that himself. Not after how he'd treated him, but humans could be odd. One of those things he'd done, thinking it was helpful, could be the one the universe would use to try to kill Tristan.

He looked in the ship. No shadows moved, but there could be people hiding in the hold, or in the room. No. Alex wouldn't bring anyone here.

"Are you okay to go back to sleep, Buddy?" Tristan asked. "Me and Aaron—"

"It's Alex."

Tristan's head snapped to Alex.

"You said it was okay to tell him; I didn't get the chance before heading off."

"I'm okay," the boy said.

Tristan smiled at him. "Me and Alex will shut down the ship. You're safe. Okay? No one is going to hurt you here."

The boy took his blanket and lay on the ground by the trees. Tristan stepped into the ship and Alex followed him. He opened the hatch to the hold and Alex froze. The human looked over his shoulder, then went down the ladder. Tristan followed him and closed the hatch behind him.

Alex was scared, Tristan could smell it. He knew he'd screwed up, even if he didn't know how.

"I told you to go once it was dark."

"It was almost—"

Tristan grabbed him by the collar and slammed him against the wall. Part of him wanted to strike Alex, but that was too much. All Alex needed was a reminder of what he'd agreed to.

"I said dark, not near dark. The ship has been identified. People are looking for it."

"Not in the travel lanes," Alex replied, his voice steadier than his scent indicated it should be. "I kept an ear on those gangs' channels. They have people looking for us groundside. After they found what we left of the others and didn't show up anywhere, they decided we're onto them and won't travel openly."

"The ship watchers—"

"Don't care about us," Alex interrupted, and Tristan's hand closed into a fist. The human's

eyes locked with Tristan's, not flinching this time at the anger he had to see in them. "I'm not as stupid as you seem to think. I listened around. Those people are only interested in vid stars. The moment they realized that isn't who we were, we became just another string of code to them. They didn't even report us to the authorities, which means none of the automated systems are looking for us."

Tristan let him go. The reasoning made sense, if he didn't take the universe into account. "You don't understand the situation you are in."

"You mean that I'm under an inch of you killing me outright? Oh, I get that." He straightened his collar. "I'm starting to think once this mission's done, my life is too."

Tristan didn't react. If Alex knew this, he had to adjust everything. Everything he did was now suspect, his survi—

"Stop worrying."

Tristan raised an eyebrow. He knew he hadn't given anything away.

"I accept what's coming. I'm not going anywhere—I'm not going to do anything to put the mission in jeopardy."

"For the boy," Tristan stated. He saw Alex prepare himself to lie, then change his mind.

"Partially. I certainly don't trust you alone with him, but unlike you I try to keep my word, even if I only give it by implication. I took this mission when you agreed to it. Which means that I agreed to follow through with whatever you decide it's become. You want revenge. I'm going to help you."

"Even if it gets you killed?"

Alex sighed, pure resignation. "I have nothing else. I don't know if you can understand that. I'm not like you. I can't survive just for the sake of surviving, not anymore. This mission is all I have left. You—" Alex snapped his mouth shut and shook his head. Tristan could smell what Alex wasn't willing to admit, and it pleased him. Let him be the one unable to control what his body wanted now. Let him have to be the one fighting his own desires.

Tristan opened his mouth, realized what he'd been about to offer Alex, and shut it. He'd already offered him a way out once. It had been refused. He wasn't making the offer a second time. Alex had accepted he would die once the mission was over. This would simplify things.

"Go to bed. I'll do the shutdown."

Alex didn't question him.

Alone in the hold, Tristan felt his finger run against the metal surface of the diamond. It would go smoothly now; that was how he liked things. So why didn't he feel any of the relief he should?

At best Alex was a distraction, at worst he was a tool of his destruction. Tristan growled to himself. Now wasn't the time to let himself be distracted. He needed to make sure Alex hadn't done something stupid, like try to give himself authority over the ship's computer, and then do the full shutdown. He'd deal with the rest as it occurred.