

Tristan sat up with a groan and immediately took stock of the situation. He was in pain, the fight with the animal. He was still in the forest. He'd fallen unconscious—a mix of blood loss, shock, and exhaustion. He had bandages on his arm and chest. How had he gotten those?

The boy was far enough away Tristan couldn't reach him without getting up. He had an expression of fear and worry. A knife in one hand, the remnants of a blanket in the other. At his feet were more cut blankets, wet and bloody.

"Who taught you to make bandages?" he asked, breathing as deep as the cuts allowed.

"My datapad. I have a lot of books about healing people. I hadn't started on them yet, but I found one that explained about bandages and cleaning injuries. It said I should have used hot water, but I don't have anything to boil water over a fire."

Tristan smiled. "Next trip, I'll show you how to make a heating stone." He needed a few Heal Alls—too bad he'd already taken those he'd brought—immune-boosters, and to go over the work the boy did. "How are you doing? Did the animal hurt you?"

He looked at his feet. "I ran away." His voice was filled with shame.

"Good." He didn't bother trying to smooth his tone. He didn't have any time for shame or people who felt it. It just got in the way of doing what needed to be done.

The boy was surprised at the lack of compassion. "Shouldn't I have stayed and help?"

"Buddy, look at me. Look at what it did to me. I came this close to not surviving. I'm a trained killer, I had a knife and claws, and it still did all of this to me. What would it have done to you?"

"I abandoned you."

"I told you to leave. That's different, and even if I hadn't, because you ran, you were there to patch me up. You wouldn't have done me any good dead."

"You're not supposed to leave your friends behind."

"Bullshit."

The boy's eyes went wide.

Tristan closed his eyes, put his anger in a box, and focused on not making this worse. "Buddy. If you were a soldier, I'd agree with you. You'd have the training to come to my defense, and together we would have had a better chance of winning. You've watched vids with kids your age saving their family? Saving a city, just because they know a little and they are in the right?"

The boy nodded.

"You had fun watching them?"

The boy smiled a little.

"They're lies, Buddy. Children, they don't save people. They go find shelter so they'll survive until someone comes to save them. It isn't something to be ashamed of, it's just how things are. Those vids, they're entertainment. They're there to make you feel good, but they aren't a reflection of how things go in the universe. Do you understand?"

The boy gave a half-hearted shrug.

"Buddy, look at me." When he did, he looked like he'd just stopped crying. "You did the right thing. I'm not saying that because I want you to feel better. You did the right thing. You ensured you stayed alive. Never feel ashamed of having survived."

"Wasn't the test for me to take it on?"

Tristan shook his head slightly. "The tests are never about taking on something, it's about winning, and a lot of the time winning means running off to survive. Come on, help me up. We need to get back to the ship. With all my talks about how you needed to prepare for anything, I don't have anything to help with the healing."

"Our things?" The boy got under him and pulled as hard as he could.

"We'll come back for them once I'm better."

The going was slow, but they made it back to the ship. Inside he dropped in the pilot's chair and indicated a cabinet. The boy took the medical pack from it.

"Make one of those and always carry it with you. This place felt too comfortable; I let my guard down. Now you see what happens when you aren't always on your guard." He took out two injectors. "Make sure you have some good immune-boosters and Heal Alls. They come in pill form too, but injectors are faster. You want good painkillers, but you need to be careful of

those. It's easy to use too many, and then you risk becoming dependent on them." He leaned back and chuckled.

"What's funny?" The boy's tone was wary.

"I'm alive. That's always worth a good laugh at the universe's expense. Pain killers and immune-boosters are pretty much all the same, but Heal Alls, those you need to make sure they're rated for humans, and for someone your age. They can mess you up if you don't use the correct ones. After those you need to have something to close wounds." He took a stapler from the pack. "This isn't pretty, but you can be sure it's going to keep things in place. If it's a small cut, then a sealing agent will be enough." He took a spray bottle from the pack. "Those are pretty safe. Unless your physiology is odd, it's safe for you. Just spray it over the cut and keep still for a while. This won't stay in place if you exert yourself too much."

The boy nodded.

"A last thing you need in there is something to fix broken bones. You have a few options." He took another injector. "This is a bone-mending agent. It speeds up bone healing. The problem with just this is that it won't straighten your bones, it'll just knit them. So if your bone broke crooked, you need to straighten it first." He took out a metal cuff. "This is to hold a limb in place." He twisted it and pulled. It split into two, and both halves were connected with wires. "You attach one half at each end of the broken bone, turn it on. It becomes stiff, and then you extend it. This is almost all mechanical, so you don't have a computer to assist you, but it fits in a pack."

He stood. "And if you can afford one, you want a full range medical table on your ship." He tapped a control and the wall flipped over, becoming a bed with screens at the back. "With one of those, all you need to do is crawl on and go to sleep. It will handle everything short of neurosurgery."

"Are you going to use it?"

"Do you think we have the time? I'm going to be out for a couple of hours if I do. If something happens, you'll have to deal with it."

"I don't think anyone will show up."

"Alright. Then you make sure you stay safe, okay?" Tristan lay on the bed and set the computer to repair muscle damage, and seal his skin. This would take care of anything pressing. He ruffled the boy's hair and turned it on.

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Two hours later, they were back to where the animal had attacked. Scavengers had started on it, but they'd run off as soon as Tristan and the boy had gotten close. He'd taken a hover sled out of the hold, and now they pushed the animal on it.

"Not letting this meat go to waste," Tristan said when the boy asked why.

The boy collected his things from the shelter and they pulled the shed back. It was slow going with having to maneuver it around trees and depressions too deep for it to handle.

Back at the ship, Tristan had the boy start a fire, and he made a drying rack. He then showed the boy how to skin, strip the animal, and hang the strips of meat around the fire for them to dry.

"What's wrong, Buddy?" The boy had been glancing his way as he worked.

He bit his lower lip. "Will you be mad at me if I lied to you?"

"It depends what you lied about."

"It's about my father."

Tristan nodded to encourage him to continue.

Instead, the boy focused on cutting a long strip. "He doesn't work at Vertex."

"Where does he work?"

"He works for SpaceGov."

"What does he do there?"

The boy shrugged. "I don't know, but he said it's important. That's why I'm not supposed to tell people about that."

Tristan asked more questions, nothing to get the boy to reveal salient details, but just to determine how much—or, as it turned out, how little—he knew about the true version of his father. In the end, he knew more about the lie. The boy didn't act like it bothered him. He understood the need for his father to be safe, so he could do his job.

He didn't ask anything more, and they worked in silence.

As the sun set, the leaves rustled. Tristan sent the boy to the ship, and he picked up the Azeru. When he turned, the boy was still with him. He shook his head. He would have to explain things to the boy after this, but at least this shouldn't be a problem.

The underside of a hover became visible and lowered. It had the plain gray sides of any cargo hover. It landed, and Tristan waited. The ramp came down and Alex hurried out.

"Alex!" Tristan called. "We're going to have some fresh meat for dinner."

Alex glanced in his direction, and Tristan saw the fear there before he turned and headed for the ship. Tristan looked at the hover. If anyone had caught him, they wouldn't have let him leave without supervision.

"Buddy, do me a favor. Either stay with the meat, keep cutting it, or go in your habitat. I need to go see what's wrong with Alex." The boy nodded.

In the ship, half the cabinets were opened. Their content had been moved out of the way, some falling to the floor. Alex was rummaging through another one.

"Alex."

"I need a scanner."

"Why?"

"I don't have time to answer questions!" The fear was mounting. "I have to find it and take it out." A box fell and bounced on the floor. A spare relay.

Tristan looked outside. The boy was by the fire, so long as they didn't scream, he wouldn't hear anything.

He grabbed Alex by the arm and slammed him against the wall. "Talk." Alex was near panic. Tristan could see him about to come undone. He forced himself calm. "Alex, what happened?"

It was enough for Alex to take hold of himself. The fear was still there, but no longer out of control.

"I've been tagged."

Too few words, no needless explanation, and the desperation in the voice. It wasn't a lie.

"How?"

Alex shook his head. "I don't know. Unless it was on Terion Two, it was the station. Those are the only times I've been around other people since we got here, and we haven't been here long enough for her to get here if it happened here."

"Alex, is someone coming here?"

"No!" Alex winced when Tristan fixed his gaze on him. He lowered his voice. "I forced her to deal with the local Law, but I don't know how long that's going to keep her busy. I need to find the tag and destroy it before she can get a fix on where I am."

If someone knew they were here, they couldn't stay. "Sit and don't move." Alex opened his mouth, closed it.

Tristan headed outside. "Buddy, we need to leave." He needed a new planet for the meeting. If one merc knew about this one, soon they all would, and they'd show up whenever they wanted. He needed to control when they showed up.

"What happened? Alex looked scared."

"The bad men found us. They're coming here. Come on, I need you to get in cryo."

"What about this?" he indicated the strips.

"I'm afraid we're leaving them for the scavengers. Me and Alex will pack what we can't leave behind. You wash up."

The boy looked at his bloody hands and nodded. When they were clean, Tristan escorted him back inside the ship. Alex was squirming in the chair, but he didn't say anything.

"Is Alex in trouble?" The boy stretched on the bed.

"He's just worried that he might have caused this. Don't worry. When you are awake, I promise you'll see your father." The boy nodded and smiled.

Tristan turned the field on and left the room. From a cabinet he took the portable medical scanner and shoved it in Alex's hands.

"Now, who tagged you and why?"

Alex activated the unit. "Her name is Katherine. She worked at Luminex. You killed her husband."

"I killed a lot of people there." He didn't even try to remember who that could be.

Alex moved the scanner over his legs. "I think he was the head of security, she said something about that at one point. She went nuts after that. She had me captured, interrogated, tortured. Anything to get me to admit I was your accomplice and to get me to reveal where you were hiding." Alex cursed. "Damn it, it's got to be there. It's the only way she could have found me."

Tristan watched as Alex started scanning himself again. A tag was a tracker. A play on the tag all ships had to have so SpaceGov could keep track of them. He hadn't gotten it on Terion Two. Tristan knew everyone there, and no one would give up even a new arrival. That meant the station, which meant they'd walked through multiple scanners without them registering the tag. Not only was it small, but it operated on a bandwidth no regular scanners searched for.

"How did you escape her?" He opened another cabinet and took a pack of tools. He couldn't bother looking for the frequency.

"The new president forced her to release me. She was punished, but she wouldn't leave me alone. I remember confronting her at the port, on my way to the station. I knocked her out somehow."

"You left her alive?" Tristan was more amused than angry. The Alex he remembered would never have pulled off something like that.

"Hey, I was a corporate coercionist back then. Not a merc, okay? I couldn't have killed her even if I wanted to."

"And did you kill her now?" His scanner revealed nothing. It was designed to work with ship circuits, not something on the nanoscale. If he couldn't find it, he'd had to try to fry it while still in Alex.

"I didn't get the chance."

Tristan glanced up. "If you had, would you have killed her?" Alex's hesitation told him all he needed to know. He'd have to work on that if he was going to keep him around after this.

"I wasn't armed, she had backup, and the Law was called in. I decided the job was more important than getting rid of her."

Tristan increased the sensitivity of the scanner as high as it could go and tried to remember where Alex had gotten hurt on the station. He focused on those areas. It would have been something added to a weapon. Knives were good for that, a stab in, through the armor and flesh, and as it pulled out, it left something behind.

The scanner gave him a reading, faint, but there. Right arm, just below the shoulder. He felt with a finger, but it was too small. He couldn't tell how deep in the muscle it was. He held the arm in his hand tight enough Alex protested, and then louder when Tristan took out the knife.

He cut an 'x' into the muscle. "Shut up." He pulled the skin apart, ripping more of the muscle. There was something. The question was could he see it? He did. Something like a grain of sand within the muscle's fiber. He took pliers out of the pack and reached in. He couldn't tell if he'd closed them on it until he pulled it out and no longer saw it there. He ran the scanner over the pliers and it registered something faint.

"Did you fucking have to do it that way?" Alex was panting. "Don't you have some numbing agent?"

This was impressive work. He tried to think if he had anything that could contain it, keep it from giving away his location. He'd love to study it when he had the time. With a sigh he threw it and the pliers in the disposal unit and forced multiple cycles to ensure it was reduced to component atoms.

Alex was covered with sweat and his arm was dripping blood.

"I don't like that you left her alive. She's going to be a problem in the future, but so long as you got all the equipment, that's the important thing.

Alex sighed. "Yeah, about that."

Tristan was in his face. "What?"

Alex looked away. "I couldn't get the broadcasting rig." He screamed as Tristan shoved his thumb in the open wound. "Something went wrong! When I went in to get the Broadcasting ID, I had to cause an alarm and the loaders shut down! Because of her I didn't have time to go back in and restart them! I've got the cameras!"

"I need that rig for the job," Tristan growled and pressed harder.

“No, you don’t!”

He let the arm go and watched Alex.

“A broadcasting rig’s just a specialized computer. You have one right here, and it’s better than most. I can connect it to the camera and write programs to get it to do what the rig would. If you give me full access to it, I can turn it into a broadcasting rig.” He took out his pad. “I have the broadcasting ID. That’s the only thing I can’t recreate myself.”

Tristan watched the human’s eyes. He wasn’t sure he could do this, but to admit he couldn’t was to admit he wasn’t worthy of still being alive. He could force him to go back for it. Force him to do this his way, now that Alex’s had failed. There were plenty of places on this planet for them to hide, and it would take time for mercs to show up.

An alarm sounded. Not the proximity alarm, the one he had connected to the mercenary boards. The one that alerted him when his information was changed. For it to sound and not just send a notification to his pad, this had to be big.

His bounty was being updated, his partner added to it. A full description of Alex. A list of crimes, including the theft at the broadcasting station. As he watched, it propagated through the board as more and more people accessed it and updated their information.

He cursed the universe again. There was no way to get the computer now. The next time Alex was caught on a camera, the mercs would come down on him hard in a hope he’d lead them to Tristan.

He glared at Alex. “You better be able to do what you claim, because you have just bet your life on it.”