

The boy waved to Alex as the human entered the hover, and Tristan waved too. The gesture made Alex pause, and he gave them a small wave in return. Tristan wondered what Alex thought of it, being waved goodbye. If it perplexed him, he didn't show it. The back closed, and a moment later the side shimmered, the letters forming "In the Dark" vanished, leaving only the dark blue. Then even that vanished until the sides were the pale gray of any random cargo hover. It climbed above the canopy and disappeared.

The boy watched the sky, a wistful expression on his face. He studied the boy. This wasn't about Alex leaving; Alex had been careful not to become too close to the boy. This was about his father. The multiple times he thought he'd finally see him, only to have it be prevented were taking its toll, starting to crack the boy's control.

Tristan wasn't certain he could change that in the few months they had here until the boy's father arrived. And possibly having the boy still miss him would work in Tristan's favor, reinforce his position as surrogate when the time came.

The boy went back to the eating area and took his plate and pan to the washbasin. He worked efficiently, but slowly. He was still too young to know how to compartmentalize how he felt.

"You okay, Buddy?" Tristan asked in a soft voice.

The boy nodded.

Tristan placed a gentle hand on his shoulder. "You know you can talk to me, right?"

The boy bit his lower lip. "Will I ever see my father?" The corner of his eyes glistened.

"Hey." Tristan rubbed the boy's arm. "Don't cry."

The boy quickly dried his eyes. "I'm not."

"That's not what I mean," Tristan said, beginning something that ran contrary to everything his father taught him. He pulled the boy against him. "It's okay to cry, but you don't have to. You'll see your father, I promise. It doesn't matter who gets in our way. You will be able to stand before him." He looked down at him and gave him a sincere smile.

The boy sniffled. "I'm sorry. I'm not a baby anymore. I shouldn't be crying."

"You miss your father, it's normal to be sad."

*Stop your crying, boy. She doesn't matter. None of them matter, do you hear me? It's just me, you, and your brother now.*

"I miss mine too," he said softly. He let the boy go and took his plate, dunking in it the basin.

"Do you cry too?"

Tristan looked in the distance, remembering his hands closing around his father's neck, the momentary outrage at realizing his father wouldn't live by the rule he'd taught Tristan. "Not anymore. I lost him a long time ago."

"You lost him?"

Tristan gave the confused boy a smile. "He died when I was a young man."

The boy had his arm around Tristan's waist. "I'm sorry."

Tristan patted his head, ruffling the hair. "Thanks." The boy let him go, and they finished washing in silence.

Once everything had been set aside to dry, the boy took his datapad and sat by a tree.

Tristan gave him a few seconds, then called. "Hey, Buddy, how about we take a walk in the forest? I can show you how to identify edible plants. We can use them for our meals."

The boy looked up. "You can't eat plants from the forest. They have to come from the farms."

Tristan chuckled. "Where do you think the plants growing on the farms came from before that?" The boy looked at him, confused. "Before the farms existed, everything came from the forests, or the plains. It grew wild, and a lot of them still do."

The boy looked at him doubtfully. "How do you know that?"

"On my planet, Samalia, a lot of people live by gathering plants in the forest. That's how I did it when I grew up." He grabbed the analyzer and hooked it to his belt. "Come on, I'll show you."

The boy joined him, and Tristan guided him through the trees. After a dozen steps he crouched by a patch of green leaves on the ground.

"What are they?" the boy asked. He took a picture of them with his datapad.

"I don't know." Tristan plucked a leaf.

"Is it good to eat?"

"Maybe." Tristan watched the boy search through pictures. He broke the leaf and sniffed it. Peppery, barely any sweetness. "Buddy, put your pad away. You don't need it."

"I need it to find out if I can eat it."

Tristan smiled. "You don't need that." The boy was still comparing pictures. "Don't you have a search program on your pad?" He hadn't wondered why the boy did his search manually in the clearing. He'd figured it was part of how he had fun, but this was a survival issue.

"I'm not allowed to have programs on my pad unless I make them."

"And do you know coding?"

The boy shook his head. "I start that next year."

Tristan watched him. He didn't realize that in all probability there wouldn't be a "next year" where he'd learn coding. It was possible the boy wouldn't have a "next year" at all.

"Come on, Buddy. Put that away. I'm going to show you how to figure out what you can eat without technology. That way even if you never learn coding, or if you crash somewhere and everything's broken, you'll be able to survive on more than nutrient bars."

The boy looked at Tristan. "My datapad can't break."

Tristan raised an eyebrow. The things the boy had to learn. "Buddy, if the universe tries hard enough, it can break anything. Now take a leaf, and a small bite from it." He demonstrated. "Keep it on your tongue." There wasn't enough of it to taste the bitterness.

The boy made a face.

"Bitter?"

The boy nodded.

"Most plants are bitter, even the ones from the farms, and you have to be careful of that. But what you want to pay attention to is if there's a tingling on your tongue. It can take a few minutes, that's a sign this plant isn't good for you." He unhooked the analyzer and scanned the rest of the leave. "I have it set for human biology. See this? Those are all the things that make up the plant. You know about chemistry, right?"

The boy nodded. "Those are the elements that make everything."

"Right. See those highlighted in orange? Those are things that are harmful to humans if they get too much of them in their system. The closer to red, and the more dangerous they are. Everything here is light orange, so it's safe unless you eat too much, but you'll make yourself sick just by the volume of it. Any tingling?"

The boy shook his head.

"Then this is something you could survive on."

The boy made a face. "Do I have to?"

"Not this time," Tristan chuckled. "But if it was the only edible thing you could find, you'd be able to survive."

"You didn't react like it was bitter."

"I have more experience at eating food I don't like, but also I'm not going to react to the food the same way you do. Samalians are susceptible to different things. Human food never hurt me, so I eat mostly that, but you put too much sweetness in it. Also the analyzer doesn't have a Samalian setting; there aren't enough of us in space for the corporations to bother adding it yet.

"So is sweet bad for you?"

Tristan smiled. "Sweet's bad for everyone. Didn't you say candy was bad for you?"

"That's candy, it isn't the same."

Tristan eyed the boy, the smile broadening. "You know, when this is over, I should take you to a candy factory so you can see how they're made. But to get back to my people. Samalia doesn't have any plants that are as sweet as the fruits humans grow, so we never adapted to overly sweet food like you did."

The boy nodded. "So can sugar be dangerous to you?"

"No, it'll just make me sick if I force myself to eat too much of it."

"And the tingling?"

"That's a bad sign."

"And the bitterness?"

"That's a little tougher. If it's only a little bitter, it's probably okay. But humans and Samalian have trained themselves to tolerate it. It's why every ship comes with one of those." He indicated

the analyzer. “These will tell you exactly what you can and can’t eat.” He smiled. “But today we’re practicing without help.”

“How about other species?”

Tristan shrugged. “I expect every species has gotten used to some level of bitterness, but I don’t know other species as well as I know Samalians and humans.”

“If bitter is bad, why did the academy have sarimon sometime? Those are really bitter.”

“I don’t know that one, but I’m guessing that the same as me liking candies, even though they’re bad for me. Some people like bitter foods, and the farms will grow what people like. There’s a lot of things that can be done to farm food to make them safer, while keeping aspects like bitterness. In the wild you want to be more careful.”

Tristan helped the boy stand, and they moved to a patch of different plants and did the test again. He barely reacted to that one and Tristan showed him the scan, almost no orange at all. They moved from plant to plant this way, tasting them and trying to guess how much orange it would have. A few the boy spat out immediately. And some the boy had no problem with, while Tristan had to spit it out.

When they came to the first bush with berries on it, Tristan had the boy crush the fruit and taste a little of the juice. The boy enjoyed it, and the scan showed no orange. When Tristan tried it, the sweetness was overpowering.

When they came to a tree bearing fist-sized brown and yellow fruits, Tristan hoisted the boy up to grab one for each of them. He taught him how to hold a knife, and how to cut the fruit without hurting himself. They tasted the juices, and when the boy proclaimed it sweet and not bitter, he proceeded to devour it. Tristan was more restrained, and made a note to give the boy one of Alex’s immune-booster, or half of one. It wouldn’t do for the boy to get sick.

They made a lunch of the fruits, the boy climbing the tree to get more, and during that time Tristan showed him how to throw his knife. Once the boy was sated, they went back to testing plants.

A roar came in the distance, something from a large animal, and the boy pressed himself against Tristan’s side. He smiled reassuringly and placed an arm protectively over him.

They found tubers under a plant with large leaves, and Tristan explained how those kinds of leaves were a good sign it was worth digging.

“How do you know so much about what’s in the forest?” the boy asked as they made their way back to the camp in the diminishing light.

“I grew up in something similar to this.”

“Your city had a forest?”

Tristan smiled. “I grew up inside a forest. My father taught me how to identify plants I could eat.” Of course, his father had considered Tristan getting sick a perfectly acceptable way for him to learn the lesson. Tristan sometimes wondered if his father hadn’t been hoping Tristan would actually die in those first few years.

They added the few leaves they brought back to the meal they prepared. When they were done, the boy took his knife and practiced throwing it at a tree. He was still doing that when Alex returned.

The human watched the boy from the hover before heading for Tristan. “You gave him a knife?” he hissed.

“He needed to cut open fruits.”

Alex glowered. “That isn’t an eating knife. What were you doing with a merc knife small enough for him to use?”

Tristan smiled.

“I don’t believe this. The station? You got that before we left? You were already planning on arming him back there?”

Tristan didn’t answer. Alex didn’t need to know he had supplies in the hold to arm and armor someone the size of the boy. There was no telling what a job would entail, and obtaining supplies once a job started wasn’t always possible.

“Fine. You got him to cut fruits with it.” He pointed at the boy. “How is that helping him cut fruits?” The knife bounced off the tree, and the boy ran to pick it up.

Tristan fixed his gaze on Alex. “You seem to be forgetting your place, Alex.”

The human ground his teeth, but didn’t reply.

“Knife-throwing is a good skill to have, you know that, Alex. It lets you hit opponents at a distance. A well-aimed throw can incapacitate someone long enough for you to finish them, or tie them up, if you need them alive.”

“Yes, I know.” Alex opened his jacket to show the harness with its dozen knives. He fought with the anger until it was under his control. When he spoke, his voice was even. “He’s just a kid.”

“He is a child no one has bothered preparing for the harshness of the universe. Knowledge is all well and good, but it won’t help him when someone attacks him.”

“What? Why would? You— This— I don’t—” Alex took a few breaths. “What is the point of doing this, considering how it’s going to end for him?”

“I am building a bond between him and me.”

“But damn it, why?” Alex glanced at the boy to see if he’d noticed his outburst but he was focused on his throwing. “At least tell me why, okay? Help me understand how that’s going to help get Masters here any faster.”

Tristan took a step forward, and Alex wisely took one back. “I don’t owe you any explanations, Alex. None. Those I provide are because it suits me to do so, understood?”

“I just—”

“No, Alex. You don’t. You made a valid point when explaining that with the ship, knowing how I thought helped you anticipate what I needed, and I will keep this in mind going forward. That does not mean you are entitled to knowing all my plans. As far as you are concerned, I am doing this to the boy because I enjoy using people and making sure they are hurt by the time I am done with them. Learn to be happy with this, Alex.”

Alex set his face in a hard mask. “No. I won’t stop you, but don’t ever ask me to be happy about you hurting a kid.” He turned and headed to the hover.

Tristan followed him, and silently they unloaded the food. The boy joined them and Tristan ruffled his hair again. The boy giggled and put his hair back in place. Alex didn’t watch. It took fifteen minutes to take everything out of the hover, except for one crate.

“We’ll handle this one,” Alex said to the boy, who ran off to grab his datapad and entered his habitat. Alex looked at the crate, finally shrugged with a soft curse, then pushed it toward Tristan. It was a cube two feet on all sides.

“This is going to help you bond with Emil,” Alex said with disdain.

Tilting an ear, he opened it. He frowned at the contents. Spheres of various size. He recognized some from studying humans, but most he’d never seen before. “What is this?” He took one out, nine inches in diameter, firm, but not hard, his claws digging it to its surface, which was textured with dots.

“It’s a ball.”

Tristan took another one out—this one fit in one hand. “This is a ball.” He’d seen human children throw those to each other in a ritual he hadn’t bothered looking into.

“And that’s a ball too, just a different kind.”

Tristan eyed Alex. “And what is their use?”

Alex pointed to the small one. “That you can throw to each other.” The larger one. “That one you kick to one another.”

He threw the small one in the crate. “What is the point to that?”

Alex sighed. “It helps people bond. Believe it or not, I thought you should do that with him. Now... At least this way you don’t have to traumatize him to get it done. You kick that to one another, you talk, you have fun.”

“We can have fun walking in the forest.”

“And what? Give him survival instructions? Tristan, he’s a kid, not a merc. Tell me you know how to have fun at least.”

Tristan remembered climbing trees as high as they would support him. He remembered looking up at the sky, in the distance. He remembered lying to his father, telling him he was trying to spot animals. He remembered the beating when his father had figured out it wasn’t why he did it. The cage.

“Fun will not keep him alive.”

“What’s the fucking point? You’re going to—”

Tristan punched Alex with enough strength he should have ended up bloody on the ground. He forgot he was still holding the sphere. The impact forced Alex back, but he was able to keep his footing, and he didn't bleed.

With a snarl Tristan let go of the sphere, but his claws were caught in it. He shook his hand, but that wasn't enough. He pulled it off and glared at Alex. "You seem to constantly forget that I do what I want. You continue to act like you have any say in what happens." He threw the sphere at Alex. "Continue, and the next time I will not be holding something to soften the blow."

Alex opened his mouth, and shut it as Tristan began growling.

When he was certain the human wouldn't speak, he continued. "Your only job at this time is to get me my equipment. I will bond with the boy however I see fit. If you can't understand that, tell me now so I can take the time to clarify what I mean while the boy can't hear us, and you can then leave and take the time away from here to heal."

Tristan's knuckles popped as he tightened his fist. He felt the claws dig into his palm, but he didn't care. He needed Alex to understand the danger he was in. If that meant pounding his thick skull in, so be it.

Alex looked down. "I know." He spoke softly, and Tristan was hopeful that— Alex raised his head. "I just—"

Tristan punched him and Alex spun, falling to the hover's floor. "No," Tristan stated as Alex looked at him, lip bleeding. "You do not get to add the hope that I will act in a way you approve of. You do as you are told. If you believe you have the right to ask something of me, we can have that discussion once this job is over. Now, unless you want me to break something, you will drop this line of thought. The boy isn't yours to protect."

Alex wiped the blood off his mouth. "How am I going to do my part of the mission if I'm hurt?" He didn't manage to keep all the defiance out of his voice and Tristan stepped over him.

"You are only picking up equipment or talking to people. You can get a portable bone regeneration unit in any city. You can tell them you got hurt trying to convince an actor to take on the role of that mercenary the vid's about."

Alex wanted to argue. Tristan could read it in his eyes, in the tension in his body. Then Alex deflated. "You're right. I'm sorry. I won't do anything like this again."

Tristan snorted. He didn't believe him. It seemed to be in his nature to want to protect someone weaker than him, regardless of the cost. Couldn't he see that such behavior would get him killed?

"Get some rest," he told the human. "You have things to do tomorrow."