

The boy exited his shelter with a thick blanket over his shoulders. He looked fully awake, looking around. Not searching, Tristan decided, looking to make a decision.

“Hey, Buddy,” Tristan called, and the boy looked up. “Did you sleep well?”

“The ground was hard, and it’s cold.”

“Yes, it tends to be. Did you use the blankets as a mattress?”

“No, just against the cold.”

Tristan dropped from the branch, barely feeling pain from his ribs. A Heal All before he went to sleep had taken care of the worst of it overnight. “Now you see why you want to bring some? You never know what you’ll encounter, so it’s better to over-prepared.”

The boy placed the smallest kindling they had on the still glowing embers. “Should I take the shelter down? Make it look like we weren’t here?”

“If there are people chasing you then you’ll want to do that, but we’re just enjoying ourselves. The weather will take care of it for you. A few storms and no one will be able to tell.”

The boy looked at it. When he focused on the fire, the kindling had caught. He added small branches. “It’s strange not putting everything back the way it was.”

Tristan sat next to him, but out of the reflected heat from the pit. “I noticed you always make your bed and store everything. Is that how they taught you at the academy?”

The boy nodded. “Being orderly means being productive. Putting things back means others can also be productive.” He extended his hands toward the fire. “You put things away too.”

Tristan grabbed the end of the blanket hanging off the boy’s wrists and pushed it back. “Careful. You don’t want it to catch on fire. And I do, but that’s because on a ship you don’t want anything laying loose. When you do hard maneuvers, trying to escape someone who wants to shoot you down, the inertial dampener can’t always keep up. If something is loose and flies at you it can knock you out, and then you’re dead.” He grabbed the bag with leaves and roots and handed it to the boy. “Anyone who lives in space learns to be careful.”

“It wasn’t what you were taught when you were my age?” He prepared the food, making a salad with what they had left.

“I grew up in a forest like this, remember? Here, putting things away means covering the fire to avoid burning everything, and hanging anything animals might want to eat high in the trees. Making my bed wasn’t much of a concern when this was my bed.” He patted the ground.

The boy found a handful of tubers at the bottom of the bag. He cut them and added some of the more aromatic plants to them before wrapping them into large leaves and pushing them under the fire. “Why did you leave?”

“I could see ships fly over the forest. Most of the time they were just small points, but once in a while they were low enough I could make out they were something. If nothing else, it told me there was more than me and my father.”

“Did your father tell you what they were?”

“No. My father didn’t like all this fancy technology. We were Samalians. We came from forest predators, that was where we belonged. He believed the outside world wanted to destroy us, so we had to stay away. We argued about it a lot because I just couldn’t believe those wonderful flying boxes were bad. In my imagination, they were things that led to more amazing things.” He smiled. “And I was right.”

“He let you go?”

“He died.”

“I’m sorry.”

Tristan shrugged. “The forest can be dangerous, even when you’re experienced living there. One of the forest predators got the better of him. Without him there to stop me, I had no reason to stay.

“Is that when you met your wife?”

Tristan smiled. “That was later, between trips.”

The boy nodded. “Aren’t you worried some bad man will get in your pad and find her picture? They could find her, hurt them.”

“I have friends looking out for them. Anyone who tries will regret it.”

“You should still hide her picture.” He used his knife to pull the tubers out. “Do you think the bad men will continue coming after me and my father when we’re together?”

“Hopefully they won’t have a reason by then.” He took the salad with steaming tubers on top.

“If I stay away from my father, do you think the bad men will leave him alone?”

Tristan ate in silence, giving the impression he was thinking it over. The tuber was soft, but it could have cooked longer. “I don’t know. I don’t know why they are after either of you. Without knowing that, it’s impossible to know how far they’ll go.”

“How do you find out?” He devoured the salad like he hadn’t eaten in two days.

“The easiest way is to find one of them and ask. Sometimes, just knowing who they are is enough to work out why. If not, I’ll look for someone else who has the information. There are people who only do that, gather information on people.”

“You don’t have any of that now?”

“It happened too fast. We barely got away, then we were attacked again, and again. I’ll find out, don’t worry. What Alex is doing is part of that.”

The boy looked in the bag. “There’s nothing left. Are we heading back to the clearing?”

“Do you want to? Alex isn’t going to be back today. Tomorrow at the earliest, based on what he said.”

The boy thought about it, checked the bag again. “We need to get food then.”

“Okay. Do you feel confident doing it by yourself?”

“A-Alone?”

Tristan nodded.

The boy bit his lower lip and looked at Tristan, who gave him an encouraging smile.

The boy took a breath, squared his shoulders, and nodded. “I can do it.” His voice barely trembled.

“I know you can. You’re pretty good at living in the woods. Now, because this is your first time alone, I want you to head in that direction and in a straight line. Use your knife to mark the trees so you can find your way back.”

The boy took his knife, looked at it, and nodded.

Tristan clipped the analyzer to the boy’s knife belt. “Remember what I said about the universe’s tests. You’re allowed to cheat. If you don’t want to use it, that’s fine. You’re good at identifying the right plants, but if you encounter something new, I don’t want you to take a chance.”

The boy adjusted the analyzer on his hip, then began walking in the direction Tristan had indicated. Fifteen minutes later Tristan followed, using the marks as an easy way to make sure he didn’t lose the boy.

The boy didn’t travel as fast as Tristan expected, and he had to stop when he heard him move about in the distance. He didn’t only collect plants for them to eat, but collected data on plants he hadn’t encountered before.

The progress wasn’t quite the straight line Tristan had hoped for—the boy got distracted by a plant and that would become his new direction. Another one and a new direction. By the time the boy reached the area where the beast was slumbering the boy was further away than he’d liked, but he was downwind. So this would still work.

Tristan turned off the sleep inducer and tuned the stimulant to inject its maximum dose. The roar was loud, close, and angry. The boy froze. Another roar, closer. Branches breaking as trees crashed down. The animal seemed confused. Tristan hadn’t expected that. Angry and smelling an intruder and going there directly, not bouncing around.

The boy shook so hard he dropped his knife and bag.

The animal burst from the foliage with a roar, broken branches falling out of its foaming maw. It scented the air. *Move, boy. Don’t just stand there.*

It locked eyes on the boy, and Tristan smelled the boy losing control of himself. He cursed—the boy was frozen in terror. It ran at him. Tristan ran at it. *You are not hurting him.*

Its jaw was open when Tristan wrapped his arms around it, using his momentum to force it aside. He almost brought it down, but it set its forepaw down and shook its head. Tristan hung on. He couldn’t let go with the boy so close.

“Buddy! Run!” He punched the side of the animal’s head. If he could stun it he’d have the time to make sure the boy was gone. But the stimulants were letting it ignore the blows. He caught sight of the boy as it shook him about. His eyes were white. Tristan cursed; he couldn’t

lose consciousness.

He almost slipped off and dug his claws in. The boy wouldn't respond to anything short of more trauma. Tristan dropped his mask. All of them. He let his control go completely and roared at the boy with all the rage and anger he contained.

"Emil Rithal, run before you die!"

The boy's eyes regained focus, locked on Tristan, and with a scream he ran off.

He looked at the animal. "Now that you've done your job, I need you to go back to sleep." Of course, for that he needed to grab the remote, which was in a pocket.

He loosened his grip just as it gave a violent shake, and he went flying to the side. He landed on his side on a rocky surface, and what was in his pocket dug sharply in his leg. He jumped to his feet and then threw himself to the side as it pounced at him. He landed on his feet and its tail slammed into him. He crashed through a few small trees, but now he had distance. He reached in his pocket and pulled out pieces of the remote.

Tristan cursed. This wasn't how it was supposed to go. He glanced up. "You have no right." The injectors had manual controls. He could remove the stimulant, then activate the sleep inducer. But that meant getting too close to the animal.

It crashed in his direction, shouldering trees aside, breaking them as if they were kindling. Tristan roared, running at it. It responded by roaring back and rearing, making itself much taller than he was. He tackled it, pushing it on its back. He grabbed the injector, fingers against the deactivators, and pulled it off.

And it tossed him off as it rolled back to its belly. He barely moved fast enough, feeling claws scrape through his fur. He turned to face it. It growled at him.

"Yes, that was nasty on my part. Now, all you need to do is let me turn the other one on and you will sleep. When you wake, I will be gone."

It hissed at him and lunged. He quickly backed up to stay out of its reach. The other option was to keep this going until it exhausted itself. But filled with stimulant, it might outlast him. He smiled grimly. That wasn't happening.

He ran at it. It didn't pause. It raised a paw, long claws coming down at him. He was in faster than it expected, so he took the paw and didn't let that blow slow him. He slammed a shoulder into its side, staggering it. He used the moment of unbalance to throw it on its back. It reacted faster than he planned for, using its tail to right itself, but he still had time to see that things had taken a turn for the worst.

Where the second injector should have been was a bloody area, claw marks around ripped skin. It had removed it.

Tristan backed away. "Why did you do that? I was just going to make you sleep again."

It snarled.

The universe had turned his plan against him. Fine, he could adapt. This wasn't the first time things hadn't gone his way, but he always managed to turn them in the right direction. It did mean he had to take the offensive.

This time when it attacked, he jumped over the swing and dug his claws down its sides as he slid down it. Its dark blood marred its golden fur. It roared. Its tail almost hit him as he reached the ground, ducking down at the last moment. He hadn't caused it much damage, but pain was the goal. Take away its ability to think. Take away its cunning.

It was on him again. He clawed it under the arm, the side of the chest, the muzzle, before it got in a solid strike—it's hind paw in his side, hard enough he lifted off the ground and broke through more trees, and the claws dug in his back a lot deeper than he had cut it.

He hissed at the damage, to the left of the spine, so everything still worked. The bleeding was heavy, but his fur caught it. If he could stay still it would accelerate the coagulation. But if he did that, he wouldn't live long enough for that to mean anything. Time to use tools.

He pulled the knife out of its sheath and stood, wishing he'd brought his Azeru. He had no idea how clean he could make this death, but it wouldn't take any longer than it had to. He owed it that.

The animal roared, but when it stepped toward him, it was cautious. The multiple cuts he had given it could be taking its toll, or it was just understanding Tristan wasn't like other prey, or even other predators. It didn't have many scars, so how many hard fights had it had? Maybe it had enough?

“Leave now, and the scars will be a reminder of a great fight.”

It snarled. It might have been the stimulant still coursing through its system or the insult he had given it, but it was going to see this to the end. Only it wasn't smart enough to see that this would be its end.

It swiped at him, he dodged. He returned the swipe with his knife, and it had enough sense to back away. Tristan slowly walked around, forcing it to turn. They exchanged occasional swipes, as if it was trying to recalibrate to this adversary who wasn't as aggressive, but never smelled afraid. Tristan for his part was trying to see if the boy was anywhere within sight. If he was, he'd have to make sure not to lead the fight there.

Tristan didn't see the boy so he changed his stance, ready to finish this. It sensed the change and lunged at him. It was too fast. Its claws dug in, so he planted the knife in whatever he could reach. It roared, jumped off him, almost pulled the knife out of his grip, and roared again as it ripped more flesh.

Tristan forced himself to his feet and to attack it. It was licking the wound on its flank, but stopped and slashed at him, cutting his chest. He didn't back away. He couldn't. If he gave it one opening, it could finish this. An animal wasn't going to beat him, no matter what the universe wanted.

He stepped forward, saw the surprise in its eyes. He slashed at its muzzle. It reared with a snarl and swiped its paw at him. He let it connect, making sure it was the center, not the claws. He grabbed it and plunged the knife in the joint.

He was flying, flung off with a roar. Most of his breath vanished in pain upon impact with the ground. He still had the knife, still held the advantage, but he needed to get up. He couldn't win on his back. And he wouldn't let the universe win.

He bit back the scream and got to his side, then to a knee, then stood. He glared at the animal who was trying to put weight on its injured leg. It locked gaze with him and snarled. It went low to the ground, tail lashing, the spade end tapping the ground as its hind paws clawed at it.

He didn't wait for it to jump, he ran toward it.

Its eyes flashed, and without a sound it was in the air, coming at him. It had calculated better than he had. He couldn't avoid the collision, so he needed to take full advantage of it. The shaved patch made for an easy target to see as the animal fell toward him. He just had to make sure that was where the knife went in.

They collided. The knife went into flesh. Tristan was buried under a heavy, panting animal. It whined, then grew still. Tristan couldn't move. He needed to catch his breath. Except his breath wouldn't come, not with this weight over him. If he did nothing, the universe could still win.

With a scream, he pushed the animal off him. He wasn't compounding this fiasco by giving the universe what it wanted. He glared at the sky as he forced air into his lungs. He ignored the pain.

“I win,” he snarled. He caught his breath. “You didn't have to do this. It didn't deserve it.”

Tristan grabbed his side and groaned in pain. He had to take care of his injuries. He didn't want to imagine what all this was going to feel like once the adrenaline wore off.

He placed a hand on the animal's side. “I'm sorry. The universe forced our hand.”

Where had the boy gone to? Tristan staggered about, trying to catch a scent, but he wasn't sure he could smell anything with his own blood clogging his nose. Then he caught the faint scent of human terror and followed that back to the shelter the boy had made.

The boy saw Tristan and ran at him, crying. “I'm sorry, I'm sorry I ran. I was scared.” He wrapped his arms around Tristan's waist. He still stank of terror. He was going to need a shower and a change of clothing.

Tristan patted the boy's shoulder. “It's okay, Buddy. It's what you had to do. Sometimes, running away is the right course.” Tristan looked around as everything began darkening. It couldn't be sunset, not this early. Of course this wasn't that. “Buddy. I need you to let go of me.”

The boy shook his head, sniffing in Tristan's fur.

“Buddy, this is important. You can't hold on to me now.”

The boy looked up at him, his face now covered in Tristan's blood. “Why?” The fear and anger in his voice spoke of something deeper, and Tristan knew that normally he'd make note of it; it was something useful. Instead, he answered the boy's question.

“Because I’m about to lose consciousness.” And everything went black.