

Tristan stopped at the top of the ramp, his thoughts derailed by the small building just inside the tree line. He looked around, wondering if any others had appeared while he was checking the computer for signs of coercion. No others.

So Alex had placed it there. How? It had taken Tristan weeks to build his house and workshop, and while this was much smaller, about the size of one room, it was still impossible it could have been erected in the hour he'd been inside the ship.

What was that glow coming from under the door?

He stepped toward it, trying to work out how he could be seeing such a thing. A projection? Was the universe's plan to make him doubt his sanity? Next to it he stepped on something. He picked it up, studying the building. Not Permacrete—there were no seams at the corners.

He looked at what he was holding. Packaging for something. "Wilderness Habitation," it said in the Standard SpaceGov script, blocky and clearly legible above a picture of that same building. Who needed a habitation in the wilderness? And that still didn't explain how it had been built so quickly.

"Temperature-controlled, self-anchoring and inflating," written smaller under the name. "Fits two adults or four children. Sound-dampening included. Power not included."

He touched it. The surface of the building was hard, but had a polymer feel to it. Inflation did explain how it was set up so quickly. He walked around it and found the power generator, a basic fusion system, its lights indicating it was running below one percent of its capacity.

He finished the circuit around the building as Alex backed out. "—by the bed," he said, holding the door open. "All you need to do is set it so you're comfortable. Have a good night." Tristan didn't hear the boy's response.

Alex noticed Tristan as he closed the door. He glanced at the packaging then back to Tristan's face and indicated the ship.

"Can we have this argument there? Emil needs sleep."

Tristan raised an eyebrow and flipped the packaging in his hand, indicating the "sound-dampening included" line. "That works both ways; the boy can't hear us." He smiled as he spoke, but his voice was hard. "You said camping equipment, not whatever this is."

"It's a wilderness habitat," Alex replied, his tone implying something Tristan didn't like. "I figured he shouldn't have to endure that much harshness, not after his time at the academy."

"The universe is harsh. Hiding that from him is not helpful." He threw the packaging at Alex's feet. "Do not use the boy to excuse yourself. Does yours have a shower? A soft bed?"

"Of course not. I can deal with all this. What's the big deal here? Tristan, he's a kid, one stuck in the middle of something that's going to turn horrible real soon. Shouldn't he get to have it easy while he can?"

"Life isn't easy, Alex," Tristan growled. "How is he going to learn anything from this experience?"

Alex stared at him and let out a bark of laughter. "Learn? What the fuck is this? You don't care if he learns. For that to matter he'd have to come out of all this alive, wouldn't he? But that's not going to happen, right?" Alex yelled. "You're going to toss aside his broken body like you do everyone else you use. That's how you do things."

Tristan grabbed Alex by the jacket and pulled him until his muzzle touched his nose. He clamped down on his emotions hard. If he gave them even a little reign, Alex might not survive. "And will you defy me when I do? Will you offer to die in his place? Will you fight me to protect him?"

"Am I even going to be alive by then?" Alex spat. Tristan growled, but it didn't have any effect on the human. Alex was too angry. "But no, I'm not going to get in your way. I might already be damned, but I said I was yours. That's what I agreed to when I refused to leave; you made sure I remembered that. So I'm going to stand next to you when you kill him."

"And what if I order you to kill him?"

Fear finally registered in Alex's eyes. "You wouldn't." He searched Tristan's eyes. "Please, don't ask me to do that."

Tristan released him and Alex staggered back. "And will you defy me then?"

Alex didn't even try to glare. He looked at the ground and shook his head. "But please don't force me to do that." He didn't move or say anything else. When he looked up, Tristan motioned to indicate they were done, and Alex headed for the hover.

This had been a mistake. He shouldn't have threatened Alex with the boy's death. Now Alex wouldn't be able to look at the boy without thinking about it, and the boy was observant enough he'd pick up on the tension. Alex was right. It was only a habitation, and the boy wouldn't suffer that much by not having to endure the cold nights or rain.

If only Alex could stop defying him. With one phrase he said he'd do what Tristan told him to, and with the other he argued against doing exactly that. It was almost as if Alex was looking to be certain Tristan would kill him.

How would this new tension affect the friendship he needed to create with the boy? He couldn't apologize to Alex. Alex knew him too well now; he would see it for the lie it was. He could tell Alex the boy would be set free when this was all over, but he didn't know if that was true. There were a lot of possible ways this job could go, and in many of them the boy died, had to die. And this was one time where, for the mask to be effective, Tristan couldn't have any doubt, not if he wanted to convince Alex.

Alex exited the hover with another package, his habitat. Tristan found a tree large enough and climbed up it. He settled himself on a branch and watched Alex set it up.

As he'd said, it was basic, only a canvas roof and walls to keep the wind and elements out. No power, no climate controls. Just poles and fabric, it wouldn't even keep the cold out. Finished, it was only tall enough for Alex to sit in, and only a little longer than he was once stretched out.

The human looked around, managed to find Tristan up in his tree, and the expression on his face was a jumble. Anger, pain, sorrow, want. Tristan thought he might say something, wanted to know what it would be, but the emotions were wiped off Alex's face, leaving only anger before he turned and crawled into his tent.

If only Alex could be less... Tristan couldn't find the words. They could work well together; Tristan could see that. Alex's skillset complemented Tristan's, and he was an adequate fighter. Tristan realized he didn't want to be angry at the human, it was just that Alex kept getting under his fur and making it itch in ways it never had. Made him want—

Tristan shut down that line of thought as he shut his eyes. The only thing he wanted was to survive, and he had to remember that Alex wasn't here to make that happen.

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Alex headed for the hover as soon as he was done eating. He'd avoided looking at the boy, and the boy had been too busy enjoying the food Alex prepared to notice, or at least react to it. Alex avoided Tristan when he could, which he didn't mind. Fewer interactions meant fewer chances for the boy to pick up on the tension.

The boy went back to looking at the flowers and cataloging them. When Tristan tried to initiate conversations, the boy responded, but didn't become engaged in it. So Tristan left him to it and walked around the clearing, checking the weapons were still where he'd hidden them, while trying to figure out a way to crack the self-imposed distance.

When nothing came to him, he informed Alex and the boy he was going to scout the area to make sure no one was sneaking up on them, then grabbed the portable analyzer and headed off.

Within a hundred steps he could forget anyone else was here, that there was a job to be done, a human to keep in his place. The trees were wrong, the branches began too low, and the leaves didn't look anything like those he'd grown up with, but they were trees. The sounds of animals were like that of any animals, and for a too short moment the years vanished, and he was a child enjoying walking through the forest.

Then his father's memory intruded, and the illusion was gone. He had work to do. Then, it had been bringing back meat for the three of them. Ever-larger animals to show his father he could survive. When what he brought didn't please his father it meant a beating, or the cage.

When Tristan had been old enough to question the value in being caged, his father had explained, after a thorough beating, that he needed to learn how to get out of places like those if he intended to survive the world, because the world wouldn't abide people like them being free.

So Tristan had learned how to pick the lock using only claws and the few things he managed to hide from his father each time he was thrown in the cage. It had served as a solid base for the skills he had taught himself once he'd left the planet, and found locks came in so many different types. But the cage had quickly become constraining as he grew, and left him with a

strong dislike of confining spaces, and he could have done without that.

He remembered the analyzer and scanned the plants. He didn't need it. He'd learned to identify what he could and couldn't eat by the taste—after enough time spent sick as his father had him eat one plant after the other as a teaching method. But he couldn't rely on that to determine what humans could consume; their systems weren't as robust. What might upset Tristan could kill a human.

He returned, and they ate silently.

The next day Tristan went on another trek, finding he wanted to be alone for the sake of being alone. He returned with plants and three dead animals, which he skinned before returning so the boy wouldn't have to see. Back at the camp he made a stew with them.

The boy devoured it. He could eat the nutrient bars, but clearly he preferred actual food. Alex gave Tristan an angry look and stuck to nutrient bars. Tristan tried to get an explanation, once the boy was in his habitat, but Alex just glared at him. He could force an answer, but ultimately it didn't serve any purpose. It was Alex's problem, and so long as it didn't affect the job, Tristan didn't care.

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Over the next few days, Alex took over preparing the meals from what Tristan brought back, and Tristan quickly noticed something. The next time Alex started preparing a meal, Tristan stopped him. He didn't explain himself, but made it clear he wasn't to do it. Alex didn't argue. He took one of the fruits Tristan had found and headed to the hover.

Tristan sat down and waited. Now that he had his habitat, the boy spent most of his time in it. The few times Tristan had checked in on him, he was reading or working on his pad. This time he waited three hours past their usual meal time. Tristan knew there was no food in the habitat, but the boy didn't even look out to find out if the meal was being prepared.

Tristan looked in on him. He was reading on his pad. "Hey, Buddy, you hungry?"

Emil shook his head, even as his stomach growled. Tristan watched him for a moment before closing the door.

How deep did the training Orwell Academy had put him through run? Would he let himself die of hunger rather than ask for food, or get it himself? Teaching control was one thing, even restraint was good, but this? Even his father had never been this cruel. He'd trained Tristan to go get what he needed not to suffer needlessly.

Tristan fumed as he prepared the food. What the academy did wasn't prepare children to survive, it taught them to obey at all cost. They'd buried the fire that burned in everyone.

Tristan smiled.

What the boy needed was to learn proper survival skills. He needed his fire rekindled. He had to learn to get what he needed, and not depend entirely on others.

In the middle of eating, Alex had finally given in and ate the stew, even if he lacked the enthusiasm the boy showed. Alex spoke. "I'm going to be gone for a few hours. Something came in I'll need for the mission."

Tristan nodded, and kept his pleasure from showing. Before Alex left, Tristan gave him a list of items to get.

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The next morning, once the power generator showed an increase in output, Tristan poked his head in the boy's habitat. "Hey, Buddy. I need your help with something."

The boy set his datapad aside and followed him outside, where a second cooker was set up. Both had a pan and cooking tools on them. The boy studied them as Tristan sat in front of one. He patted the ground in front of the other.

"Why are there two cookers?"

"Because you need one."

"Why?"

"You don't want to always depend on me or Alex for your food, do you?"

The boy was confused. "You make good food."

"Yes, but don't you want to know how to do it too?"

The boy looked at the cooker, the tools on it, uncertain.

"Look, you like learning new things, right?" Tristan asked when it became clear he wouldn't

get an answer. The boy nodded. "Okay, well, this is something new. You like problems, and puzzles. Cooking is like a puzzle, one where the answer is how good it tastes. What ingredients you use and how you mix them will determine how it tastes. You'll make mistakes, and those won't taste as good, but it'll be fun, you'll see."

The boy's face became a mask of concentration. "What are we going to do?"

Tristan beamed. "I'm going to show you how to cook breakfast."