

The tarurowler had seemed gigantic to his young self. Low to the ground, as long as Tristan had been tall, and with a dirty and smelly fur coat. He'd been terrified of it, but after the half day trek through the forest, he'd been famished. His father had told him he wouldn't eat until he caught it.

"You need to learn how to hunt, boy. I'm not spending my life doing it for you."

He'd had questions, like what would he do with a beast like that, but he'd learned the hard way that when his father gave an order, he didn't question it. He just obeyed.

Its claws weren't long, but they were sharp, and after a few cuts Tristan worked harder at avoiding them. He jumped on its back, got thrown off and clawed again. He didn't cry out. Crying out meant more time in the cage, alone. He hated the cage.

"Stop your whining," his father said the first time he'd thrown Tristan in the cage. "Survivors don't whine. They stare down the world and tell it to go fuck itself." His father had thought small.

He jumped on its back again, wrapped his legs around its lower torso and arms around its neck. It bucked, ran, and screeched, but Tristan held on, and eventually it slowed, became still, except for its panting. He didn't let go. It was his first time catching a tarurowler, but he'd already worked out it was cunning.

He rolled on his back, pulling it with him, and it kicked and shook, but it was too late. He had it. He looked at his father, smiling triumphantly.

The adult, in his brindled gray fur, hadn't been impressed. He'd learn that nothing ever impressed the man. Tristan continued holding on to it, waiting for his father to tell him to let it go so they could gather what was needed for the meal, but he simply stood there, watching.

His father finally gave an annoyed sigh. "Well? What are you waiting for? Aren't you hungry?"

Tristan hadn't understood what his father meant. He'd caught it like he'd been told. They should start preparing their meal. And then he did understand. He knew where their meat came from; he'd watched his father skin and butcher many animals. Only he didn't mean to butcher this one.

He looked at his father. He couldn't have been serious, but his father always was, and now he was also getting impatient. He'd felt sick, but he didn't show that either. He wanted to let it go, but to disobey his father meant a punishment worse than the cage. It meant a beating.

He fought the bile that rose and sunk his teeth in the tarurowler's tough hide, held on tighter to its thrashing body. He tasted blood and pulled, and to the sound of ripping flesh he began chewing.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tristan shook himself. He hadn't thought of those days in a long time. It was watching the boy in the clearing and the edge of the woods. Alex's question had stirred the past.

"I'd be trying to catch my next meal," he replied flatly.

Alex stared. "Are you telling me you had to hunt your own food at his age?" His tone became pained. "What about your parents? Didn't they—"

"Drop it," Tristan snarled, and immediately rebuilt the mask. He gave Alex a smile. "It's all fine." He began standing, but stopped as Alex reached for him. Thankfully he stopped the motion before they touched.

"Tristan, you can't just smile something like that aside. You need to—" He recoiled as Tristan leaned in, still smiling, but making sure the anger showed in his eyes.

"I said, it's fine." He continued the stare until Alex broke it, then headed for the boy. Alex needed to remember who Tristan was, and he needed to get this bad habit of caring under control. It would get him killed before this job was over otherwise.

The boy took a picture with his datapad—a green and purple flower among the grass. He sat back and swiped the surface, read, swiped again.

"Hey, Buddy, what are you doing?"

"Trying to identify this plant." He was comparing two images of similar flowers.

"You did that with a lot of them. Enjoying it?"

The boy nodded. "I like knowing things."

Tristan smiled. "That's good. Knowledge never lets you down. Your father must be really proud of how you like learning."

“He told me he approved of the results of my tests.”

“Did the academy bring you to many places like this so you could learn?”

“No, I learned over the net there. My father didn’t want me leaving the academy. He didn’t want the bad men to get me.”

Tristan nodded. More likely he didn’t want anyone figuring out who the boy was. He hadn’t expected his already low opinion of Orwell Academy to drop, but not only had they treated this child as a prisoner, but for all the father paid, they weren’t even preparing him for the reality of the universe.

Tristan had learned early that anyone who looked like they wanted to help you were suspicious. He’d thought his father was helping him, teaching him, caring for him. But he’d wanted something from him. He’d wanted him to stay. To ignore the lessons he’d been taught and remain with him. Anyone who said they wanted to help wanted something from you. The boy would learn at least that out of this.

“Your name isn’t Brian, is it?” The boy didn’t look up from his pad to ask the question.

“What do you mean?”

“Aaron was confused when I asked, ‘where’s Brian?’”

Tristan added that to the list of things he needed to teach Alex. He crouched. He could easily give another false name, but the boy was observant, and how likely was it that Alex would give them away again? A second lie would be harder to justify to a boy who had been treated the way this one had.

“No, it isn’t; mercs don’t use their real names on jobs. We have to protect our families.”

The boy looked at him. “You have a family?”

Tristan smiled. “Of course. Everyone has a family.” He took out his datapad and looked through images. “Mine’s on Samalia. I have a daughter,” he said, settling on the one he’d use. He showed the boy the picture of a family. A mother, a father, and an infant in the father’s hands. The mother had mottled red and white fur, the infant red, white, and hints of black. The father’s fur looked black in the image, and the white speckling almost not visible.

Humans liked families, needed them, it felt to Tristan, so he’d constructed himself many of them, all on Samalia, waiting for him to return. In some it was only him and the female, in others one child, male or female, in others yet there were multiple children. Once he’d taught himself how to manipulate images, it had been simple to fabricate more families, so he’d done his best to cover any possibilities.

He indicated the infant. “That’s Sa’Orda. I expect she’s about your age now.” He put the pad away and offered the boy his hand. “My name is Tristan.”

The boy looked at him. “Is that your real name?”

“It is. I think I can trust you with it.”

“But it’s a human name.”

Tristan nodded. “My father gave me a human name because there’s a lot more humans than of my people. He felt I’d have an easier time interacting with humans if my name was like yours.”

It was the story he always told, because it made sense to humans, and before he left he’d even thought it was true, but once he’d realized his father hadn’t planned on letting him go, it had stopped making sense. Why give him and his brother human names if they were never going to be among humans? Why rename Tristan at all? He’d come to realize his father’s actions hadn’t always made sense.

The boy took Tristan’s hand and shook it. “I’m Emil Rithal.” There was no hesitation in saying it. He either believed it was his name, or had spent so long practicing it, it was second nature now. A mask the boy wore. Normally he’d think it would be the former with a human child this young, but this boy was smarter than those he’d interacted with. Alex described him as a miniature adult, and it was apt.

Either was fine; what name the boy used didn’t have a bearing on how the job would end.

“It’s a pleasure to officially meet you, Emil. Are you going to be okay on your own for a while? I need to go back in the ship and make sure we have everything we need while we’re here.”

The boy nodded and went back to his datapad.

“If it gets too dark, just come to the ship. I have some lamps there you can use.” He stood, ruffling the boy’s hair.

Back inside, standing in the cockpit's doorway, he watched Alex work, with that silly-looking earpiece in his ear. He spoke quietly while manipulating code. He searched the screen before making adjustments. He took out the earpiece, rubbed his ear, and put it back in without ever stopping manipulating code.

Tristan stepped closer, keeping his reflection off the screen, and moved his hand toward Alex's shoulder. Alex didn't react. Just how focused did Alex become? Was it because it was difficult for him to code this way? Or simply a consequence of the work? Alex had spent his entire time coexisting from a protected environment, so the need to be aware of his surroundings had been minimal, but now? This could get him killed.

"How is it going?"

Alex didn't react. This would definitely be a problem. He placed a hand on the human's shoulder, and Alex tensed. Tristan looked down at Alex's Nurri, which was pointed at Tristan's groin. If Alex fired, that would be excruciatingly painful. Tristan hadn't even seen his hand move.

Tristan raised an eyebrow.

"Sorry," Alex replied, holstering the weapon, but the anger in his eyes contradicted the apology. Good, let this be a reminder of the danger Alex was in if he couldn't be aware of his surroundings.

"You need a different weapon. The Caraton XDS is the same size as your Nurri, but it is deadly." Before Alex could reply, he nodded to the screen. "How is it progressing?"

"I like my gun," Alex replied through gritted teeth, composed himself, and continued. "It's going okay. I'm in the process of building an identity for Georges Pantor, vid producer from Tartios Five. It doesn't take much of an ID to rent a cargo hover. A small one will be large enough, since I'll be doing multiple trips. Does the ship have any kind of grappling capability? Or do I need to rent a rig to bring the hover here? Or are you capable of remote-piloting this?"

"It's only programmed to go to specific destinations. It isn't worth adding this one." Tristan activated another screen and entered a command. "The underside is able to take hold of a hover. This was a cargo carrier before its previous owner repurposed it. You have the option of gravitics or magnetics. The trigger range is fifteen-feet, but the closer you are, the less of an impact to either, so get as close as you're comfortable. This is the lock command. Once active the hover won't fall off, no matter what you do with my ship."

Alex nodded and studied the screen. He was still tense. He hadn't relaxed while they talked. Tristan's tones and casual behavior would lead someone to relax, lead them to think they had nothing to worry about, but Alex knew about his masks, and knew he had to worry anytime Tristan was close to him.

Tristan patted him on the shoulder before heading to a cabinet, looking through it for something he'd be able to feed to the boy. "Oh, the boy worked out Brian and Aaron aren't our real names. I gave him my real one. Feel free to give him yours. I told him we used false names to protect our family. I have a daughter and her mother on Samalia." Tristan looked over his shoulder as Alex got over his surprise.

"Why did you give him your real name?"

Tristan smiled. "Because I trust him."

Alex rolled his eyes. "I'll only be gone a few hours," he said instead of commenting on Tristan's lie. "I've ordered most of what you'll need, and I can finish Pantor on the way. I'll collect that with the hover before coming back. Save a trip that way."

"By 'everything I need', I expect you don't include the equipment for the job." All he had in the ship were nutrient bars. He didn't know if the boy would protest at eating one of them now that they were groundside. He frowned as he found a package of emergency rations. He knew he hadn't bothered stocking the ship with that. Somehow he'd missed it when he'd taken the ship. That might be more palatable for a human boy.

Alex was going on, explaining what he'd have to do before he could order what the job needed. He listened, but didn't comment. The universe had forced his hand, and Alex was the one to do this part of the job. Tristan would let him handle it as he saw fit, and judge the result.

He took the portable cooker out of storage and filled a water container. There was a river in the forest, but it was too far for today. Alex helped him carry the few things he and the boy would need in his absence a safe distance from the ship. Before Tristan could return to the ship,

the ramp closed.

Tristan watched Alex slowly maneuver his ship into the open clearing before going straight up. Tristan shook his head. Not only was it still daylight, but he was heading for the travel lanes. Maybe he should prepare himself for an assault right now, considering the way Alex was doing things.