

Full dark had brought with it a change in the weather that returned two advantaged to Tristan.

Sight.

With the end of the constant rain, the two orbiting bodies reflected enough light his eyes could make out outlines when a creature moved.

Hearing.

Without the noise of the rain and the need to keep his ears folded back to keep the water out, Tristan could hear them move, or call to each other.

It also brought complications; changes in the fauna he hadn't accounted for. The temperatures didn't drop so much he could feel it, but the creatures were adapted to it, and some which had been ponderous in the higher temperatures were becoming active. Establishing their territories, unaware Tristan had claimed part of the jungle as his own.

He'd returned from visiting Alex to find his shelter destroyed. Not the work of a herbivore following a path without care for what was in the way. There had been anger in the way the hides had been shredded, vindictiveness in how what was left of his dried meat had been urinated on.

It had been the work of something determined to assert its dominance over him.

He didn't wait for it to return; it had left a trail which he followed.

The creature had been claws and teeth and long fur that made grabbing it difficult. He had come across it before when there was light, stretched on low branches, hardly moving, other than to drop on a smaller animal and use its mass and fur to suffocate it, before eating and then climbing onto another branch to wait.

Tristan wouldn't have thought that creature capable of the fight it gave him. The injuries had slowed the reconstruction of his shelter, and caused him to visit Alex early, as well as stay longer while the fever passed.

He'd returned to his shelter with it in the same partially built condition he'd left it. He'd turned the ripped hides into ropes, and made traps to catch small animals, and to tie the larger hides he accumulated as more of the new predators thought to challenge him.

Now, he had set himself sufficiently high among the local predator; he had time to himself again; to do more than look after his survival.

He had to return to his ship to repair the hand scanner that had been damaged in the destruction of his shelter. While there, he considered using the medical table, but he didn't want to be away any longer than required in case something grew bold.

Then he returned to his search for the plants he needed.

The complication with that came that while all plants that grew on Samalia had been cataloged by SpaceGov and corporate scientists, they did so using human nomenclature,

and hadn't bothered attaching the local name. He had the chemicals they were made of, but Samalians didn't sort the plants they used in that way.

Which meant that all he had to go by in his attempt to locate a Shartorut sap equivalent was that once dried and powered, it could be applied to an injury to numb its pain and reduce the swelling.

The number of compounds that had analgesic capabilities was so vast that easily a quarter of the plants cataloged fit.

But it didn't mean they would be the correct ones to mix with the other ingredient the ceremony called for.

But he finally had located plants, as well as the spit from one of the animals, which matched what he needed, based on his best guess as to which compound was described by the effect of the individual plants required.

Because the text describing the ritual was old, it had the added advantage of fitting the situation Tristan was in. All it required was the surrounding nature, and each component could be made.

So he carved the bowl in which to grind the leaves out of the hardest wood he found, used tan hides to make the vessel out of which the final liquid would be drunk from. Finding the stone with the right shape to the brew as it heated over the fire brought back uncomfortable memories of desperate search for a stone flat enough it could be added to the wall and stay in place.

Because the ritual was considered sacred by the tribe who had recorded it, the process by which each of the component needed to be added came with actions Tristan felt were needless, but which he performed regardless.

He was seeking an audience with the servants of the Source. A thing all the science of SpaceGov and the corporation claimed didn't exist. A think of primitive the scientists said in all their research. A way to make sense of a world beyond their comprehension.

Tristan had understood the universe perfectly.

Until Alex came into his life. His human had broken his understanding of it. Made him realize that not everything was quantifiable. And had left him at a loss as to what his role was.

He had been raised a Survivor, with the belief the universe actively wanted him dead. He had made himself a mercenary because he needed ways to pay for the resources he couldn't acquire himself. His people called him an Aggressor, existing to destroy all that stood in his way.

But Alex clinging to him in the night, terrified of what he was, of what Tristan had played a hand in making him, made him doubt his role in the universe.

Tristan hated not knowing.

He had spent his life making sure he knew all he needed to ensure his survival, and now he needed to know his place within this world he and Alex were building for themselves and the community they were being included in.

The Defender had warned him he wouldn't be there if Tristan tried this. But that was fine. There were other aspects Tristan could call on for answers.

So Tristan went through the motions that came with preparing the brew. He spoke the invocation over the leaves before mashing them into paste. He asked the Source for its

compassion as he heated the stone, then added each of the prepared ingredients. He thanked those who came before him as he poured it in the drinking vessel, and once it had cooled, he drank it.

When he then fell sick and threw up the content of his stomach, shivered uncontrollably in spite of the heat, and had dreams that left him momentarily wondering if he was back on the Sayatoga, under his brother's care, he accepted it as the price to pay to achieve what he was after.

He gave himself days to recuperate, used the time to deal with pesky interlopers, to hunt, when needed, and to visit Alex. To spend time with his human, drink in his scent, the feel of his body against him. To remind himself of the pleasure they shared. Told himself, for a few hours, that it didn't matter what the universe wanted, what the Source wanted.

His place was there, with Alex. He was all he needed.

And he had no idea what he would be if he lost him.

When the tasks took Alex away, Tristan went to the library to seek the books he needed and enjoy others. Reading of other beliefs was another way to not think of what he still couldn't achieve. Not think of what would happen this place couldn't help Alex.

And a few offered alternatives to explore, if it turned out to be the case.

Tristan wasn't someone who gave up on the tasks he set for himself.

He would see to it Alex was cured. And he would see to it the Defender understood who he was dealing with.

So, once Tristan decided he was ready, he went back to looking for the right combination of plants and tried again.