

The location Tristan chose was a few hours' walk away from Alex and at an angle, so that it would take him as much time to reach him, or the ship.

He'd made the decision when researching the planet, once he'd confirmed this was where it was located. Jungles were denser than forests, but it would be similar to being back on Samalia, in his youth, but without his father or brother to make the experience less enjoyable. Humid had meant no chances of the winds carrying particulates.

He still itched at memory of his time on Arjolis.

He hadn't expected it to mean the warm rain would be constant.

He had considered altering his plans; Being closer to the ship so he could be dry. But this was about going back to basics. To his Survivor core. As a group, they took the mentality of depending on themselves to extreme, but there was something to be said for it. For pitting himself against the planet and its inhabitants. Not to conquer, but to coexist within its ecosystem.

He wanted time alone, after so many months as part of a community.

The area differed from the rest only by the trees being slightly further apart. Once covered, he would be able to out of the rain, not that he expected to ever be dry during his stay here. With how wet everything was, it probably didn't matter how big he made his fire, nothing would catch.

Making the rope on which to hang his covering was only a matter of finding leaves long enough, then stripping them to fibers and weaving those. Those same long leaves then became the roof, angled so the rain drained toward what he considered the back of his shelter.

Making a bed consisted of cutting down branches to elevate the leaf bedding off the wet ground. The only way he'd get something resembling a dry floor would be to build a wall to divert the rain's runoff away. He didn't delude himself into believing that building the half-wall from the House to the Defender's alcove had given him the experience needed to make one here that would keep water out. He'd need some form of mortar for that to happen.

He considered digging a channel around his shelter and decided that it would be for the following 'days'. Once he had taken care of his basic needs.

Making and assembling his shelter took him through half the nutrient bars he'd brought. That left him one 'day's' worth of food to acquire more. That meant working out which plants he could eat, then hunting the local fauna for something more substantial.

His datapad informed him the day was over, and Tristan glanced up, seeking confirmation and not getting it. Along with the passage of his days, it had a reminder for when he would return to the sanctuary, Eight days would be enough for Alex to get used to

the schedule they would impose on him, and it would come as plausible that he finally missed him enough to venture out of the wilderness.

He already missed him, but humans expected anyone could go extended time before the need was more than could be endured.

As with all creatures who lived on planets with day-night cycles, he was adapted to that to represent the passing of a day. As someone who had spent so long in space, he had the advantage of not always having it as a reference point, so it was easier to break himself of the habit when required. But it surprised him each time how easily he fell back into it, each time he spent extended time on a planet.

The sun was still high in the sky, hadn't moved in any way he could tell. His datapad held the information as to when night would fall, but it wasn't of use.

He stretched on his bed of branches, closed his eyes, pushed the discomfort away, and slept.

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Tristan didn't sleep well.

The last time that had happened, his sanity had been questionable. Now, it was the accumulated discomforts that caused him to nearly wake multiple times.

The heat, along with how wet the air was, was suffocation. His fur felt heavy with the water it contained. The rain falling on the leaves keeping it off him had created a droning that was maddening, and the lack of darkness, even with his eyes closed, had been more disturbing than he'd expected.

He'd endured two, and sometimes three, of these conditions in his career as a mercenary and hadn't been bothered. All of them at once would require time, it seemed.

Reaching the river wasn't the relief Tristan had looked for. It was no cooler than the rain. It contained aquatic animals, and he caught three after tasting the first one, then confirming nothing in his composition was harmful to him. He'd have a source of food while he worked on learning the patterns of the larger animals.

On the trek there and back, he found three plants he could eat, and that the bark of one of the trees contained a chemical that caused him to add a plan to the current one. He'd need to locate the local analogues for the others, but if he did, he would be able to recreate a Samalian ritual.

He didn't believe in using chemicals to reach a state that let someone communicate with the Forces. If not for his two encounters with the Defender, he'd consider anyone claiming it could be done delusional. But reading about his people's beliefs had brought up their rituals and what was needed to execute them. The names of the plants were local, but they had all been cataloged by SpaceGov scientists when his planet was first discovered, along with all the chemicals they were composed of.

These would be for later.

The branches he'd hung in his shelter were as dry as the humidity would let them get, but it still proved too much for the striker he'd made. If he wanted a fire, he'd need to pull out a torch.

But he didn't need the fire, he decided. It might chase some of the humidity, but unless he made walls, it wouldn't be noticeable. He didn't need it to cook his meat or boil his water. He certainly didn't need it to raise the temperature to a comfortable level.

With that decided on, Tristan started on his next endeavor. Acquiring meat.

These challenges weren't as unexpected. He already knew rain masked scent, sounds, sight, and most trails. He'd simply never encountered an unending version of it in his youth. The longest he remembered rain falling had been for a week, and it had been a cold, comfortable rain. His father had still sent him out to hunt, and punished him for returning without food, but the following time in the cage hadn't been quite as miserable.

His fear for it hadn't been ingrained quite that deep at that time.

He had still learned, over the subsequent rains, and while it wouldn't be quick, Tristan was confident he would have meat soon.

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The animal slipped out from his grip, its skin slicker than the human's version he had expected it to be. It was darker and mottled in color, and he'd expected the slick aspect to be the result of the rain, not a slippery coating.

He rolled to his feet, then went still. It was low to the ground, and had looked lumbering when Tristan first saw it, but it moved quickly. Its coloring was too distinctive to his eyes for its usual predator to see the way he did. They would miss some of the color spectrum that would mute the reds and oranges.

The ears atop its head peeled up and turned, both keeping the rain out and searching for sounds out of place. Tristan didn't know how it heard through the noise of the rain. His ears were plastered against his skull to keep the water out.

He stepped to the side, aiming to flank it, but it was on him before his foot was down again. He clawed it as he leaped aside and the lines left behind ran red in the rain, and smelled of iron and copper on his claws. A lick gave him an already diluted taste of blood. Nothing unusual in it, but he'd need something less diluted to be confident. If he wanted certainty, he'd have to wait until he was back to his shelter and the scanner.

But he was hungry, so he'd be fine with being confident.

He ran at it and was nearly on top when it rose on its hind legs to reach his chest in height, and the front paw that impacted Tristan's shoulder as he slipped the wet ground trying to change his approach sent him sliding away and left cuts of their own in his flesh. Its musculature was dense to be so much stronger than it appeared.

He planted claws in the harder ground, then launched himself as it dropped to all fours. Possibly, it didn't have mobility on them. A form of intimidate, implying it had a predator that was larger. If he could find another, using it to lure its predator close would be something to consider.

It skittered to the side, but Tristan had landed on harder ground, and was able to change direction with it, landing on its back, wrapping his arms and legs around it. Arms under the hind legs, and his legs under the front ones to keep from being slipped out of.

He arched as it rushed about, trying to shake him off, but no longer finding purchase as Tristan bent its body back. Unfortunately, it had a more flexible spine, and he reached his maximum before it did. Then he was on his back, sinking in a softer part of the ground and had to throw it off when it jerked, and his head went in deep enough in the ground dirty water made it in his mouth.

He struggled to his feet in time to take its charge, sinking in to his ankles and unable to move out of the way. He grabbed its jaws with both as it opened them, then pulled them

apart until the lower one snapped. Then he was struggling to pull himself out of the muck as it slipped from his grasp and ran off.

He found it not long after, struggling to pull itself forward, its head no longer held aloft and pushing more of the muck down its throat with each weak motion. Tristan wrapped his arms around its thick neck, and it barely struggled against how he twisted. His arms slipped, then the slick coating was wiped off, and he had enough purchase to snap its neck, ending its suffering.

He took a minute to catch his breath, then carried it to a more stable section of the jungle's ground. By the time he reached it, the rain had washed all evidence of the fight off him.

He knew he should wait until he was back at his shelter, but his hunger wouldn't wait. He carefully opened its underbelly with a claw, then set about cutting off muscle to eat.