

Tristan hunched in on himself, crouched on the branch, arms hanging low, watching the eight mercs cautiously proceed through the trees. The numbers might be the same as the one Alex stopped, but these were better equipped. Which included wearing low light visors of some sort.

One of them looked up and at Tristan, rifle following the motion in jerked surprise. He stared back, making his expression bland. It was probably unnecessary, since he hadn't moved. The merc had to have thermal sight, but if they called to him, he didn't want them to see anything more than another of the dump jungle creatures.

They wouldn't have the experience with the local fauna to read his heat signature, or even his appearance, as not belonging to one of the animals, and so long as he didn't act threateningly, they would ignore him.

They were merc on a job, not happy-go-lucky tourists willing to shoot anything and not understand the consequences of their actions.

He let them pass until they barely registered in the stars and satellite's low light. Then he followed the trail they left behind.

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Finding the ship Alex's mercs had used had taken time, but Tristan had had ample of it. They had locked it, but no more than a careless merc, on a planet they didn't think had anyone smarter than they were, did. Tristan had flown it, staying close to the canopy to avoid the closest station's sensors, and landed it next to his, having to crush a few trees in the process.

Then, he'd spent four days under the medical table's care. He had time.

While the failure message had been instant, the closest station that catered to mercs was slightly over a month's travel time, objective, with the fastest ship a successful merc could afford.

Alex had noticed his healed body, but hadn't commented. He too knew there would be other attacks, although he didn't realize Tristan planned on making sure his human never had to deal with them.

He'd scavenged the new ship for component and built a relay unit, setting up the receiver at his shelter, then had spent two weeks making his way within the research stations' system, co-opting their sensors for his own needs. There weren't enough of them to cover the planet, but the three closest to the sanctuary covered most of the approached. He'd then set programs in place to alert him of any approaching ships before returning to his shelter and surviving off the land.

When he'd received the alert, the ship was on approach for an area opposite the front of the sanctuary, and a full day's trek by someone who was familiar with the jungle. Tristan

had made good speed to intercept them halfway to their target.

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He dropped to the ground with no more sound than one of the predators, and not enough for the mercs ahead of him to notice. So they didn't have sound amplification.

They had spread apart, after they'd walked over a den of a burrowing semi predators. Those Tristan had observed fed off the leaves of the low hang branches they burrowed their dens under, but if disturbed, they could rip apart creatures ten times their size.

As part of testing if he could use them as attack beasts, Tristan had maneuvered one of the large armored herbivores onto the den, and it hadn't lasted an hour. Even escaping hadn't been possible since the first thing the creatures did was climb all over it and kept on devouring as it ran.

Tristan had then confronted the issue that made turning any of the jungle's creature into human hunting beasts impossible. He didn't have any humans to use so they'd learn to hate the species.

The mercs fared better than the herbivore; their armors were designed to survive blaster fire, so sharp teeth could go through the plating. Some of the creatures had found softer area in the joints, and now, Tristan had the smell of blood added to how he could follow the humans.

He smelled the herd on the wind, and throw a large stone in their direction, hurrying to grab the rear most merc under the cover of the noise they made. A hand on the exposed mouth kept him from calling out, claws in the throat, then the trachea ripped out stopped the trashing.

His nostrils full of the dead's blood meant he couldn't use that to track, but they were careless enough to make plenty of sounds, even if they were remaining silent.

The disappearance was noticed quickly enough, but too late for them to be able to find Tristan's handy work unless they backtracked and delayed the assault. It was discussed, but one of them pulled a datapad and announced he wasn't getting any life signs from her suit.

The team leader berated the merc for not having set that to sound an alarm, and that was rectified. Now informed that only one of them had a way to know when someone was injured; Tristan had his target.

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The merc kept within the circle of the others. Whether it was because of his role as alarm, or it was simply his position, Tristan didn't know. But it was something he needed to deal with.

He did so by running ahead of them until he located another herd, rousing them with a roar and sending them running toward the merc, remaining only far enough to adjust their trajectory with a properly placed roar.

The merc didn't panic, firing into the herd, but all the smell of death caused was to panic them more, sending them in all directions, and obscuring Tristan until he'd reached his target. A punch in the neck rendered him incapable of breathing, let alone calling for help as he ended up over Tristan's shoulder. He took the datapad out just as it sounded an alarm and snapped it in half.

As satisfying as it would be to have them find it as it told them another one had died,

he couldn't let them have a way to get early warning when it picked one of them off.

He pulled the merc off his shoulder, never slowing his run, and slammed his head into each tree he passed until he held a mostly headless corpse; then he dropped it.

He doubted they'd find it, but if they did, all they'd think was that he had gotten caught on one of the fleeing creature and hadn't survived the run through the trees.

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The third merc he got while they stopped to eat and patch up from an encounter with an angry predator. It had pounced out from the undergrowth, and only the armor had saved the targeted merc, but left her bloody as long claws slid over the hardened plates until they caught in the joints and ripped.

No longer overconfident, they had set two of the merc to patrol. They'd decided to do so individually, and when one of them stepped far enough from the light they'd set, Tristan struck.

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They knew it was no common creature hunting them.

Tristan's kill had managed to cry out as he'd ripped out her throat. Then he'd focused on putting enough distance between him and the body before they arrived so they wouldn't be able to get details of his heat patterns in their visors.

It meant they stayed close and watched all around them. They even looked up occasionally. But they no longer fired at every large creature they saw among the branches after doing so had caused one of the long clawed one that slept through most of the daytimes to fall on them and rip one of them apart in spite of the armor.

Tristan remembered how strong they were as well as how sharp their claws were from his own encounter with one of them.

That left four, and the ability to move among the branches again. He tested it by making himself heard and ready to bolt, but all they did was to move away. He hurried ahead of them silently, then waited.

They'd kept to a straight line unless they were forced to move. He'd planned on just dropping on them, but he was noticed and they gave his position a wide berth. He considered the situation, the numbers, then threw himself in their direction with a roar.

The shots went mostly wide, and the one that caught him in the side cauterized. He landed on top of one, his mass crushing her chest, then he was up and onto the other to yells of 'don't shoot' and of 'kill the thing'. When he grabbed the merc, he turned, wrenching the neck hard, then holding him up before him. He slowly pulling the knife out of the man's sheath as the other two froze.

"What kind of animal is that!" one of them yelled, rifle aimed in his direction, but not firing.

"That's not an animal," the other replied, taking off to flank Tristan. "Animals don't use people as shield."

Tristan threw the knife at the one standing still, then turned and his shield took the hit, his armor absorbing it. Tristan pulled the handgun out of the chest holster and threw himself aside, firing. He landed, and was up, shooting again, blinding the merc with impact so that by the time the man realized what Tristan was doing, it was too late and they collided.

The merc used the momentum to push Tristan off, but before he got to his feet, Tristan was on him again. This time the claws went into the softer stomach joint, and the man screamed as Tristan ripped him open.

Then Tristan roared as the knife entered his back. He turned and hit the woman in the visor, cracking it. Then he stepped aside as the downed and dying merc fired and missed. Tristan broke his neck with the slam of a foot, then took the gun and took his time aiming at the terrified woman's face before firing until there was nothing left in the broken helmet than burned off parts.

He could still breathe, so the knife hadn't punctured a lung. He located the heals and sealant before attempting to pull it out. He laid down to prevent falling and so that once he applied the sealant, if he missed the wound, it would drip in that direction. Reaching the knife almost pulled his shoulder joint out, but when he was free of it, probably bleeding heavily, and was emptying the tubes of sealant as close to the wound as he could.

Panting from the effort, he made plans while the sealant solidified.

The first item was making his way back to the ship and moving that close to his. Then he'd go through the system for any indication of a strategy on the part of the man who had hired them.

Then, he'd spend time on the medical table.

And then?

Then, Tristan needed to have a talk with the Defender to find out what the point of this was. He was doing what he could to undo the damage he'd caused Alex. More than that, since it turned out he wasn't responsible for the core problem.

He was trying to help, for once.

So why did it feel like the Source was getting in his way?