

Tristan watched the man make his way through the underbrush in the direction of his camp. He was closer than he'd prefer, but the return of the heavy rain had forced this. Still, with standing among the tree's branches, and the man not looking up once, Tristan was confident he had forgotten the basics of merc life after the time he'd lived within this sanctuary.

Maraco had not looked up once in his approach.

Tristan hadn't expected the man to seek him out. If there was to be a confrontation, he had expected it to happen close to the sanctuary. Somewhere the man could expect someone would come to his help. He also hadn't expected it to take so long.

Full dark now lasted half the planet's revolution, and with a reduction in sunlight, had come a fractional cooling of the air, and an occasional lessening of the rain, which was how Tristan had become aware of the intruder within his territory.

Although that said intruder was a human had only become apparent once he has made his way close enough to see him. Wildlife no longer braved his territory, but until now, they had been the only ones he expected.

That the man had come alone was an opportunity, and a dilemma. There would be no witness, and regardless of what he'd told others, the hours of walking needed to reach Tristan's camp meant any of the larger predators could be blamed for his death. He could even find one willing to eat the corpse, if he suspected a need to have the remains found.

The man wore the typical clothing of the people from the sanctuary, which included a shirt loose enough to hide a holstered sidearm at his belt.

He followed Maraco from the tree, the creaking of the branches covered by the rain. The man paused at the start of the clearing Tristan had made over the months. His shelter was nothing more than a mound in the diminishing light and heavy rain. He took three steps within the clearing and stopped.

"Tristan! Come out!" The man's tension was visible even through the rain, but he did not reach for a hidden weapon or even move a hand close to where it might be.

Tristan waited. If the man turned and left because he didn't think he was present, this would simplify everything.

"Tristan!" he called again. What he said next was hidden by the rain. He looked around. "Fuck." He approached the shelter, which was now fully walled and roofed with hides. Tristan had decided that even if they eventually rotted away do to not being fully cured, they would last longer than the leaves he'd used. And wall means the wind couldn't push the rain in either.

He hadn't realized how much he appreciated being dry until it became difficult to accomplish.

Tristan dropped to the ground before Maraco was lost to the rain and moved enough to keep his outline in sight.

“Are you in there, Tristan?” the man yelled over the rain. “Come out, we have things to talk about!” He paused before the shelter’s entrance. The large flap made of hides sewed together with tendons and stripes of hides was different enough from the walls of hides even someone with no experience with living in the wild would know an opening would be behind it. Maraco continued on around the shelter until he was back before the flap.

Tristan didn’t wait to find out if the man would go in. He stepped behind him. “I’m here, Maraco.”

The man spun, arm raised, fist closed.

Tristan caught it and threw Maraco away from his shelter. He landed and rolled clumsily to his feet.

“I’m not here to fight.”

Tristan watched him. He hadn’t reached for a weapon, which, unless he had lost more of his instinct than Tristan expected, meant he wasn’t carrying one. If he had come here without even a knife, the man was looking to die.

“Aren’t you going to say something?”

Tristan kept watching him.

“Why are you here?” Maraco demanded.

“So Alex can learn to control his killing urges.”

“Bullshit! A murderer like you doesn’t give a fuck if someone else kills or not.”

Tristan didn’t think he could convince Maraco. He had no need to convince him. But watching him, and what he represented, he understood that somewhere along all the reading about his people’s traditions, their beliefs in the Source and the Aspects, reflecting on what loving Alex and having a community meant, he had come to a decision regarding people like Maraco. And that decision required that attempt to avoid a confrontation.

“I care if his lack of control will result in complications on jobs. In it attracting the Law, or bringing about unwanted retributions from those connected to the needless kills.”

The man didn’t immediately reply. When he did, there was disbelief in his voice. “You fucking expect me to think you give a damn about repercussions? You fucking murdered hundreds of people! Innocent families! How was that for not attracting attention?”

“They were a calculated decision.” There were only a few large-scale destruction Tristan had caused that had included people who would qualify as innocent, and they all had one thing in common. “They were part of a message, a deterrent someone refused to listen to.”

“A message?” Maraco asked, disbelief still in his voice, which shifted to anger. “That’s what Sasha and her kids were? A fucking message?”

They were immaterial, but reasons for Maraco’s actions all those years ago fell into places. His associated probably had similar motivations.

“You don’t fucking care, do you? You kill my sister and you don’t even have the decency to say you’re sorry.”

“I’m not.” Even through the rain, Tristan felt the stare, to shock in it. “If you’re here for a form of apology or contrition, I won’t give it. All I cared for them was ensuring my

survival. I will give you the comfort of being honest. My intentions here are only toward Alex and his recovery. The Sanctuary had nothing I intend to take, no one here, other than you, as done anything to me that I might consider acting on.”

“Acting on how?” Maraco demanded, tone mocking. “By dropping another mountain on top of me?”

“You and your team assaulted my workshop. Destroyed everything I had collected.”

“We weren’t stupid enough to let you have any weapons.”

“You weren’t smart enough to understand the extent I go through in insuring I can survive. If you had been, you would not have followed me.”

“You murdered our families. What did you think we were going to do?”

“Move on. Insure you continued to live. Instead, you threw your life away for nothing.”

“Justice, that was what we were after!”

Tristan didn’t bother responding, and Maraco seemed at a loss.

“I should kill you,” the man said. “For Sasha, her kids. All the others. For leaving me to die in that cavern.”

“I didn’t. If I had suspected you survived the cave-in, I would have gone back around and made certain you were dead.”

“You would have killed someone unconscious, with his legs buried under a mountain?”

“You tracked me down and tried to kill me. That wasn’t a potential threat I could allow to continue.”

“You didn’t know I was alive.” The disbelief was back.

“I found your identities in your ship’s system. Looked through the net for any potential retributions, but the five of you were mercs, and whatever jobs you’d taken hadn’t come from the boards, so it was over. I considered programing the ship to fly to my depot, but I couldn’t think of what I’d do with something that basic.”

“And now, you know I’m alive.” There was resignation in the voice. “What are you going to do?”

“That depends on you, Maraco. A year ago, subjective, maybe a little more, finding out you are alive, would have meant your death. You would have been the only person alive who came close to killing me, and I wouldn’t have allowed that to remain. Now. I’ve decided that someone’s threat potential isn’t something I should judge based on their past actions. If you leave, you live. I will let you be.”

“Just like that? I let you live and you let me live?”

“I live either way. You aren’t a threat to me, Maraco. You’re here because you don’t want to fight anymore. I’m here to ensure the man I love will be able to continue fighting at my side.”

“You should be brought to justice.”

“If you are willing to attempt it,” Tristan replied calmly. “I am willing to kill you.”

The man remained still, then turned and walked into the jungle.

Tristan trailed him until he was back at the Sanctuary, then returned to his shelter in the dark.