

Focus, his teacher told him, was the path to reaching inward. Focus on the item he held, to the exclusion of everything else.

Tristan found focus can easily. The item in his hand, this time a stone he had picked up as part of his patrol through the landing area, had many particularities he could catalog. It had mass, a volume, irregularities in the form of scratches and a break that could be the result of the weight of a landing gear crushing the missing section. The wetness had given some of the minuscule hole peppering one side a glimmer.

Focusing on it, listing its characteristics while also paying attention to his thoughts, came easily to him.

It was the exclusion aspect he had trouble mastering.

Excluding what happened around him meant he was vulnerable to attack. He'd attempted doing the exercises in the center of the sanctuary, in a room with a lock he had built, but concern over of the sanctuary was under assault kept breaking his focus.

He didn't care about the people here; he reminded himself. Except for Alex, who was somewhere within the structure, teaching or performing tasks to help him achieve his own control

That fear, of an assault happening without him being aware and able to intervene if needed, had sent him running out of the room each time he attempted to meditate there.

Tristan didn't give up on it. He wasn't someone who allowed fear to govern his decisions. But he had decided that attempting to master all aspects required to achieve the needed focus at once was counter productive; he would overcome obstacles individually.

So he'd found the stone during his patrol, then a place to sit. Out of the way, both so he wouldn't be underfoot and so he wouldn't be easily found by anyone seeking him, and where sounds could reach him. Sounds of the lives taking place. Sound he could learn to ignore.

Sounds of branches breaking under that of the rain.

He was moving before the significance reach conscious thought. It might be one of the acolytes, venturing in the jungle, where the predators lived, because the claustrophobia of the sanctuary had driven them outside. Then, they'd be unaware of Tristan observing them, and he'd return to his exercise.

He scanned the dark jungle. They were still hours from 'sunrise' with the sun fully breaking the horizon for a little over ten minutes now, and the hours long dawn didn't penetrate the rain, but he still made out a form creeping toward him from the gardens.

That was the wrong direction for the sound. There were no trees this close to the mountain that housed the sanctuary. And he knew the way the man was moving. He stepped out into the rain and made his way to Alex.

He purposely dislodged stones mere paces away and Alex spun, knife held ready to throw. Tristan made out the shape of the rudimentary night sight goggles he'd made for him, and Alex's demeanor relaxed.

Tristan leaned against his ear and whispered. "What did you make out?"

"Breaking branches," Alex whispered back. "In that direction. If they're heading for the garden, they'll be—"

Something heavy fell among the trees. Muffled curses. When might have been a mocking rebuke.

"Somewhere over there," Alex whispered.

"How much does the rain impede the night-sight?"

"I can see a few feet a head of me. Enough, I won't crash into anything, and for an up close fight."

"Let's keep this quiet," Tristan whispered. "There's no need for the acolytes working the garden to be distracted."

Alex nodded, and they set forth for where they'd last heard the mercs. At least two, more than that, most likely.

Well before reaching their destination, they made out the sounds of steps on soggy jungle ground. By now, Alex was adept at moving without announcing himself even under these conditions, and stalking was something Tristan had learned young because the alternative was to go hungry.

He made out the back of two merc, the clothing seemingly made for the hot and wet environment of the jungle. As they made it close enough to attack, the two whirled around, each with a weapon held with two hands.

Ranged, was the first through in seeing the shapes and he shoved Alex away, to the barely audible sound of magnetic driven projectiles. Then the pinprick of pain in his side as he moved out of the line of fire, and impact of the needles into bark.

"Report," someone whispered.

"I'm pretty sure there's someone out here with us," came the whispered reply from the man who had shot him.

There were only a handful of manufacturer of needle based weapons. Their practical applications were too few, since any military grade armor will stop them. There had been a design using nano-needles, but Tristan had only been able to get his hands on the experimental model since even before being tested, the impossibility of keeping something that thin within their cartridges have become obvious.

The one advantage they had was that nearly all components involved in their functioning hardly made any sounds. Their use, along with the whispered voice, said they wanted to be as quiet as Tristan.

"Why couldn't we get ourselves gear to work in this place?" a fourth voice whispered.

"Do you have any idea how difficult oculars that can see through rain are to get? It disrupts light intensification, heat sensing. You need to go active sensing, and that means you risk getting detected. And ladar or sonar aren't going to work shit under these conditions. Forget any form of motion sensor in a jungle. It'll always go off from the animals until you have to calibrate it to something larger, and that lets one of the small,

deadly one get to you. Not to say that—” the rest turned into a gurgle as their throat was sliced open.

“Fuck, we need—”

“Silence,” a forceful whisper ordered, and Tristan stepped around the group toward him. “Okay, this confirms there’s someone, and they are listening. It’s got to be the bodyguard we’ve been warned about. Defensive position; it’s just one of him and five of us.”

“Four,” someone whispered.

The forms moved into a defensive circle. Unfortunately, they didn’t have Tristan’s night vision, or Alex’s goggles to give them a visual edge.

A branch broke, and three shifted their aim in that direction.

Tristan was in the opening, claws ripping a throat open as he pulled the rifle up, the death spasm causing the merc to press the trigger, the shoved the body into another merc, then quickly stepped away and to behind a tree to the impact of needles against more bark, then one gasps, and a body dropped to the ground. Tristan was among them, grabbed a head and turned it hard. The lifeless body fell, and he turned to the sound of fighting. Knife against polycarbon. The last merc using their rifle to block and deflect. And harsh yank and they raised it, only for it to go flying out of their hand from a kick. Then it was fists against flesh as Tristan approached. He continued as one of the fighter dropped to the ground, stepping over them and shoving Alex against a tree to ravage him.

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Tristan rested on his back, Alex pressed against him and the rain falling on them. As always, the release had been good, and this time quietly together almost as enjoyable, even among the uneven ground and dead bodies.

Alex shifted to look at him. “You know this isn’t going to stop.”

“I don’t mind us doing this for the rest of time.”

Alex snorted in his fur. “I mean the merc, and if this is what’s going to happen each time we take down one team together, I’m good with this never ending.” He rested his head back down. “But we both know how this goes. We’re just getting the merc who were in the area now, but the longer this goes on, the more specialized they are going to become as Hart gets those he specifically hired to deal with this here. There will be collateral damage at some point.”

“Will that affect your training?”

“I doubt it’s going to help it. I can’t get into that mindset of theirs when I lose myself into what I do and something happens. The only time I lose myself in something is when I fight. And that’s the thing I’m trying to get under control.”

“My understanding is that the goal is for you to focus on the actions you are performing so you will see within you and find answers.”

“And how’s that working out for you?” Alex asked.

“I’m struggling too. I’m supposed to block out what’s happening out here, but if I’d done that, you would have fought them alone.”

“Yeah, this wouldn’t have been as fun without you. The thing I keep coming back to about these mercs is, shouldn’t we do something about them, just because we can? We have skill and resources. Should we only use them when we get paid? Wouldn’t normal people

go out there and try to make it stop?”

“Normal people would hide in their homes because they would lack the skills and resources we have.”

“Good point.”

“Going out there to convince the employer to abandon this course of action will mean postponing your training.”

He felt Alex’s chin on his chest and looked in that direction, making out the form of his eyes in the stronger light. The goggles were lost to the jungle.

“I was thinking of hiring someone to track Hart down and have a talk with him.”

Tristan knew mercs with the qualifications to make that happen. There was only one problem. “I don’t know anyone I can trust not to then turn around and seek to capture me.”

“I know someone,” Alex replied. “Well, I know a crew who can probably get it done. If they aren’t too busy managing the ship they inherited when I rescued you.”