

[main change that will be made is the length of days. By this point, full dark last a few hours.]

Wakefulness came... early? Without looking at his datapad, Tristan couldn't know. The brightness seemed the same until night was about to fall, then changed quickly until the darkness was total. The never ending rain was more responsible for the lack of stars than the jungle's canopy.

He checked his datapad and had three standard hours before the darkening of the jungle began. He considered not getting up and could imagine his father screaming at him. But he had food, as fry as it would get even out of the rain and over a smoking fire. He couldn't it give the longevity the same treatment would grant it on Samalia, where the forest where he'd lived had been much dryer, the cool rains coming only once every few weeks, even in the winter months.

Tristan was surprised at how much he missed the forest, the dry air, the cool rain. The cold river and waterfall.

When had he ever missed... When had he ever thought of a place as 'home'.

Even his workshop, back on Terion Two, hadn't been—

No, that wasn't entirely true. While he'd been broken, he'd pleaded to go home with Alex, and that was where he wanted to go. The place where he and Alex had shared space in a building on a planet. There had been no emotional attachment on his part, as far as Tristan could remember, but he has still considered it home, because Alex had lived there, with him.

And now, Samalia was home because the two of them were building their homes there. Because he had a community how welcomed him for who he was, instead of the mask he wore.

He stood. He might not have to fear his father's wrath anymore, but he still had work to do.

He checked on the hides. They're reacted well to being prepared, and the excess liquid had dripped off in spite of the humidity, so he set to scraping them. While different from the animals he'd hunted and prepared in his youth, the hides reacted here, the way he remembered them doing then.

Once done, he applied a new layer of leaves to the roof of his shelter, then ate. Then he went to the river and submerged himself under the too hot water, before moving on to walking the perimeter. He was learning to read the signals the animals left, in spite of the constant rain. The scratches at the base of trees as a way to both keep the claws sharp and let other know who claimed it. While smell didn't carry well with the rain, clawing left

behind a pungent oil the local species would be able to identify.

This time, he didn't encounter any of the small predators from the previous days that had become his mostly dried meats. When he returned to his shelter, he decided to rest. The heat made his sleep less than restful, and if he was going to meet the animal that has made a mess of his shelter the previous two nights, he wanted to be fully rested.

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Tristan was at a rare disadvantage.

It was so dark his night vision didn't help. The rain removed any usable scents from the wind, and it's pounding on his skull and having to keep his ears folded back to keep them from filling with water made his excellent hearing useless. He might as well be blind as well as scent and sound deaf.

And he was waiting for an animal that had evolved to function under these conditions. He grinned.

The last time he'd been this eager for a confrontation was when he'd found the tracts of an animal three times his size after he's settling on Delphorm and he had to clear the wildlife from around his workshop. That victory had left him near death, but ecstatic. It had been one of his first fight against one of the universe's creature and he had won.

Looking back on it, he had made so many mistakes Tristan was surprised he'd won. If the universe had been actively looking to kill him, it would have succeeded. He'd been young, and, as much as he disliked thinking it, lucky.

For as confident as he'd been then in being so well prepared to survive the universe, too many victories had been due to chance.

And it sometimes still played a part.

This time, in the rain lessening just enough, he made out the approaching steps squishing in the wet ground early enough to realize they'd impact the tree he'd climbed to wait and anchor himself.

It didn't break from the impact, but shook hard enough that even with his claws sunk deep, one hand came loose. He didn't consider what would have happened if he hadn't been ready. He dropped toward squishing, claws out, but relaxed. He could only guess where the animal was, its mass, or the kind of weapons it had.

The stomping and force of the impact said large, with a reinforced head. By the sound, it seemed to be turning around, maybe moving away to come at the tree again, or satisfied the message had been delivered.

His claws sunk into something and he slammed his other hand against the side as the animal bucked, but he was sent in the air, then crashing into smaller, more flexible trees. He moved to a crouch and waited.

It stomped in place. It might have snorted, but Tristan couldn't be sure. Maybe it hadn't—

It ran in his direction, the squishing getting louder. Small trees broke against it without much reaction. Without knowing what part of the animal his claws had caught he couldn't know if some part of his upper body was harder than that, but what he knew was— He dropped on his back, hand extended, claws out—was that it was the rare animal that had a tougher underside than the softer part of the upper side.

Mud splash on him as the claws caught. His aim of opening it lengthwise and then

letting it run until it bleed out changed as the claws caught on something hard and he was dragged along.

A bone, possibly from the animal's ribcage equivalent. Hard enough not to break from the force, so it was most likely not only the head bones that were hard enough to stand a direct impact against a tree. At least the running was in a straight line, and it wasn't bucking.

He pulled himself and sank his other hand into its side. It bucked, but this time he held on. He pulled himself up and forward. The head meant a neck and the blood vessels that fed the brain. He couldn't know how the bones would be structured to protect them, but he was nimble with his claws and he would—

The impact against the tree nearly wrenched him off, possibly wrenching his shoulder out of the joint, but the other thing it had done was move him back. He could smell the blood pouring out of the animal. If he could hang on, it might be all that was needed.

He sank his other claws in a moment before the animal scraped against another tree, and he reflexively tensed, and remained in place, although he expected he'd lost fur this time. It understood he was there, and it would do what it could to remove him.

He pulled himself onto its back, claws over claws.

It came to an abrupt stop that nearly sent him off, but even as his arm twisted painfully, the claws remained in. He ground his teeth and took advantage of its lack of motion to swing himself over onto the other side, sinking his other claws into it, then letting his weight pull it off its feet.

It staggered, then shook itself, the motion twisting his arm, but also sending him back up and over it, adding momentum to his fall, and then its legs buckled.

Tristan was on its neck before it could stand, fingers digging into the tough hide, claws cutting around any hard bones until a hotter wetness splashed his face, and the smell of blood filled his nose.

It shrugged him off and stood, but he heard it stagger, then fall again. By the time he reached it, it was dead, and he was left with figuring out how he was going to get it to his shelter in the dark.

He looked around, not seeing anything

And exactly where was his shelter?