

The sounds were too loud to be one of the creatures. Branches breaking, trampled undergrowth, even the occasional cursing. Someone was in a hurry, and by the sounds, they were heading for his ship.

Or possibly one of the others he had there.

Could he have missed one of the mercs? He'd left them to be eaten by the predators. Could one of them had survive, hidden away to heal, and they were looking to get off the planet? They'd need a way to find out where their ship had been moved to, but even with the ships shut down, and how he's deactivated all independent electronics on them, there were ways to make locating a ship again easier.

Tristan followed them from a distance. Beyond the noise they made, the light scanning ahead of them made it easy. He wanted to see which of the ship they'd go for.

What he didn't expect was for them to go for his ship after barely passing the light over the other two. The slumped shoulder as they illuminated the access panel to the ramp gave him an idea of who it was before he made out the longer hair and caught his scent on the shifting wind.

He dropped from the tree without caution, and Alex spun at the sound, gun in hand.

"You decided to leave without me?" he asked, take the cover off.

"I'd have to steal one of the other merc's ship for that. I'm glad you heard me, because I have no way to find you in this jungle."

"What do you need from the ship?" He moved the wired to their proper place, then entered the first unlock code. When the display flashed green, he entered the second one, then tapped the open button.

"The computer. We were infiltrated. One merc using a modified anti-grav emergency harness to drop from above the cloud cover. Now I need to find his ship and bring in down before whatever failsafe he had in place to warn his boss he failed goes off." He shone the light at the closest ship. "I'm guessing that's why it took this long for us to be assaulted."

"I co-opted the closest research station's sensors so I'd know when a team landed. I don't want them interrupting your training."

"It's more torture through mind numbing boredom," Alex replied, dropping in his seat. "If some of the locals weren't forcing me into training them, I might have slit my throat to escape it at this point."

Tristan stop in reconnecting the power at the casual way Alex spoke of ending his life. "If this isn't working, Alex, we can explore alternatives."

His human sighed. "I hated how you trained me just at much. I'm a coercionist. I'm used to putting in code and hearing immediate results. This kind of so incremental changes you only realized it's happen years down the line grates on me."

Tristan relaxed. "I have trouble imagining any of the acolytes forcing you to do anything, especially fighting."

"A few of them didn't take well to how they were shoved around when we were attacked. One of them died, and they felt they should have done something. I told them no, but Teklile decided it would be a more effective way to work on my control. Especially after I told him how I went about training the Samalian back home."

Tristan smiled at hearing that. He inserted a power cell, now that everything was reconnected, and the boards lit up.

"Has it?"

"I haven't killed any of them," Alex finally said. "And I'm giving them more bruises than broken bones, so I guess that's an improvement. Also didn't kill the merc, so there's that."

"Why didn't you?" he took his seat and had the ship run diagnostics.

Alex sighed. "I need him to answer questions. I have him tied up so I can deal with this. Can I bring his ship down here?"

"Yes. Anywhere close will do. I'll make sure it isn't a danger."

Alex's response was to subvocalize, which meant he'd made contact with the ship and details would have to wait.

* * * * *

The ship that landed only crushed three trees, being narrow and long. The reason the Tarita FI-324 went by the name of the Needle among the mercs who made use of it. It was designed for two, with minimal living space. It was mainly used as an insertion ship, its design minimizing the basic scanner profiles, and it was simple to add modification that would also minimize electronic and power readings when doing a planetary insertion.

Those hadn't been made, which would be why the merc had left it in the atmosphere. The modifications had beefed up the anti gravity capabilities, allowing it to better deal with turbulences. Tristan deactivated the revival chip, then had the computer commit suicide. He removed and destroyed any unattached electronics, then he disconnected the generator from the accumulators, removed those, and stored them on his ship.

Alex was still coercing, which meant he'd moved on to something else he considered important. Tristan could wait and get all the information on the attack and so the two of them could enjoy each other, but he had no way to know how long it would be until he was done, and there was no point in forcing him out of it when he could get the information from someone else.

* * * * *

The naked merc now tied to the table before Tristan was much like his ship. On the thin side, with modifications to help him function, instead of hide. Manhandling him to force him out of his clothing had revealed dense muscles beyond what happened naturally with humans. A few added cavities in his body had revealed tools he could have used to escape if Alex hadn't been so thorough in restraining him before leaving the sanctuary. Surprisingly, his skin hadn't been reinforced. It was the usual addition to enhanced muscles.

He'd explained to Teklile that he would question the merc and that he'd need the furthest room with the best sound insulation. He didn't provide details, but the man's

discomfort indicated he had a sense of why. He'd considered asking how he wanted the mercenary disposed of, but since the idea of how Tristan would go about questioning him was already too much, he didn't. It would be simple enough, once he was done, to tell the man he would escort the merc to his ship and send him on his way, certain he now knew better than to disturb them again.

No one needed to know the man would feed the local creatures instead.

"The name of your employer is Hart," Tristan said. "Do you know where he is?"

The man's expression was impassive, eyes locked on the ceiling. Not acknowledging his presence of his words.

"My name is Tristan."

The flicker of the eyes in his direction and faintest trace of worry were the only indication the merc knew his reputation, if not details about him. This level of control spoke of extensive training or was part of the modifications the merc had had done.

With humans, it could be either.

"Answering me will make this easier on you. While I expect he paid you well, you need to be alive to enjoy it. You know enough about me to believe me when I say that if you make this too difficult, I will kill you and get my answers from your ship, which my associate is currently scanning for."

"I don't know where he is." The merc said. "All contacts went through the boards. It sounded like simple job. Get in, get one item, get out. Only the bodyguard to worry about. I didn't hurt anyone, and when he got involved, I only hurt him." He locked eyes with Tristan. "Unlike you, I keep the collateral damage to a minimum."

Tristan smiled, showing teeth. "Not leaving anyone alive is more effective at ensuring my survival."

"There's more to life than survival," the man replied in an annoyed huff.

"That is true. What is the item you were paid to retrieve?"

The man stared at the ceiling.

"You consider that information worth suffering for?" Tristan asked, his surprise genuine. "Are you worried I'm going to finish the job and get the payment?" no reaction, so not that. "Personal code?" a flick of the eyes. Tristan chuckled. "Your employer named it along with the author to the leader of this place. The only reason he couldn't tell me was that he didn't think it was important enough to be worth remembering. My associate, the bodyguard you were told to be concerned about, didn't, because his focus was on deciding if the man warranted being preemptively removed."

The hint of surprise was as faint as the worry. He either hadn't heard about how he'd been working with a partner, or it was the implication Tristan was part of a bodyguard job.

"So keeping the information to yourself only serves to hurt you."

"Just get on with it," the merc said. "We all know you're a sadistic maniac. So you don't care what I know."

"I suppose it can look that way looking at my history, but I'm not. What I care about are results. The methods I use are those that will give me those results. It all it takes is asking and you answering. That is enough for me."

Worry this time. The merc would be wondering if Tristan was playing him. If this was just another way in which he'd be sadistic.

“It’s called Moonset on Shoroun,” he said. “It’s a painting. I don’t know why it’s important to him, but it is.”

“You landed on the top of the mountain. How did you get in?”

Silence.

The method was easy to work out. The man’s physique let him pass through narrower spaces than most humans, and there were multiple vents opening up on the top, as part of how the sanctuary evacuated the excess heat. He hadn’t expected the man to keep that information to himself, which hinted to which of the vent to use being part of the information Tristan did want to know.

“I spoke with the man you forced to guide you and went through the steps you took through the structure to reach him. It was methodical and directed. You didn’t wander. You exited the vent, then subdued anyone you encountered or was in a room on your way. A precaution against them coming out while you were otherwise occupied, I expect. You knew where you’d find him. You were going to wait in his office, but you encountered him as he was heading away. The reason you needed him is that you didn’t know where the art is being kept. He isn’t the only who had that information, but he would be the only one the person who provided you with the layout of the structure would have been certain would still be here.”

Tristan ran a finger along the man’s stomach. “You will give me the name of that person.” The man didn’t react. He didn’t even shiver at the touch.

“I’m not sadistic,” he stated. “I am efficient. I studied human anatomy in details, but through medical manuals and direct experience. I did so because as soon as I left my home planet, humans began seeking to use me, abuse me, and treat me like I had no rights. Knowing how to take you apart was the most effective way to make that stop. An unexpected result of my research is that I also learned how to inflict enough pain to humans so they’d beg me to end them.”

Tristan bared his teeth and his sheath. “I will demonstrate how skilled I am if you refused to answer.”

The man remained silent and only had faint scent of fear.

That changed as soon as Tristan made the first incision.