

As he did every morning, Tristan used the rising sun to orient their trek, then the set out. The task had been slightly more difficult once they entered to forest, with its dense canopy, but at this point, precision wasn't a requirement. So long as they headed toward the pole, they were in the correct direction.

There had been a few more attacks by local predators, two of a smaller variety of scaled animal whose bite contained a toxin that had affected Tristan's balance, while Alex hadn't felt any effect. Their generalized anti-toxin only had limited effect, so they spent an entire day in the branches while it stopped affecting him.

While there, he studied the leaves. They were on thick and flexible, varying in size from his palm to his torso, depending on the tree it took one from. Once plucked, the green quickly gained a red tint, and those he'd taken with him afterward had turned brittle within days, with the smaller leaves taking the longest.

The other predator had been large, its strength and claws how it would win fights against most opponents. In tandem, Tristan and Alex had brought it down, although they had suffered injuries.

As with the reptiles, its bite didn't come with an electrical discharge, which supported Tristan's belief their first attacker had come from outside the forest, and indicated the canopy's protection might be significant. He was confident about that aspect enough that for the last days; they hadn't worn their helmets while traveling and hadn't felt any of the effects of their first time outside the ship. They wore them while sleeping because, without being certain they were completely safe, being unconscious while exposed posed too many risks.

Alex's mono-edge knives had easily cut branches, while the polycarbon ones required more work than they expected. The wood was also harder to ignite, but once caught, burned well. They cooked the reptiles and Tristan had gotten sick from their meat. The second predator's meat hadn't had negative effects on either of them, but he had left it behind when they had started their trek the next morning. He wasn't willing to gamble their health on it yet.

A few days later, the canopy lightened, and he and Alex found themselves having trouble remaining standing. Putting their helmets on resolved the problem.

"I guess it means we're heading out of the forest," Alex said. "Do you think it's worth staying deeper in and following it?"

Tristan looked at the better defined shadows. By his estimation, the sun was near its zenith, and they were pointed in the direction they were walking.

"Without a map, there's no way to be sure it doesn't end in either direction, and ahead is where we need to go."

"I guess there's no more nuzzling for a while, then."

"You will survive."

Alex snorted. "I wasn't the one pissed when his helmet hit mine."

"It was the surprise. Which is a good sign. It means we can get accustomed to wearing them and forget they are there."

"Maybe you can, but I definitely can't. I'll be happy when we get to that place, deal with this and find a way off this planet."

Tristan echoed the sentiment, but didn't voice it. Both so he wouldn't add to Alex's

annoyance and because in was worried that voicing it would cause the Source to make the journey even more difficult.

Telling himself the Source didn't care about their decisions didn't help. Maybe his faith wasn't strong enough yet, or maybe he simply had had to deal with too many complications in his life to be able to fully accept that it happened for no reasons.

The universe might not want him dead. But the Source had paths on which he had to travel.

It might not force him on any particular one, but it controlled what was on it. Or so he'd inferred from his reading. After all, the Source was all. Not simply all that had been, but all that was and would be. That had to mean it knew which path he would take, and it could make it that there would be complications.

When the last of the tree was behind them, they were looking at a vast plain with the forest stretching far to their left and right.

They continued on, heading for a copse of trees when the sun was halfway to the horizon. Tristan still wanted them off the ground whenever possible. Predators could find them in the dark, and if they hunted in pack, too many electrical shocks could incapacitate either of them.

When they encountered another pack of grass eaters, Tristan paused their trek for that day. He studied them for a few hours, then stalked as close as he could before giving chase, targeting one that lagged behind the most.

He encountered a snag after jumping on its back, when he went to bite its neck and his helmet kept his teeth from finding purchase. He was already on its back, so he switched to opening its throat with his claws.

By the time he rejoined Alex with it over his shoulder, a fire was going.

Tristan skinned it enough to cut out meat for them to eat, then remove its head, skinning that and removing flesh and muscle to study the skull.

"I guess it's my turn to be sick?" Alex said, smelling the cooked meat resting on the piece of fabric they'd been using as plates.

"That isn't who it works," Tristan replied, turning the head in his hand. The cranium bones were thick, and if they a form of conductivity, they might serve the insulating function the hyper conductive layer had in the ship. The question was, where did the charge go?

"Your turn," Alex said, offering him a small piece of the meat. "It doesn't taste bad."

The iron-like taste was stronger than it had been in the large predator and it caused him to look at the animal's hooves for indication it had a way to ground itself. He saw nothing, but also lacked the knowledge to know exactly what he was looking for. It was possible the hooves simply needed contact with the ground. Or maybe they didn't need to ground themselves. Maybe the electrical discharge came from an organ that stored the charge to be used later.

He placed the head next to Alex's, who narrowed his eyes. "It's one thing for you to imaging me as a Samalian, but I do draw the line as being made some random prey."

"There is nothing random about you, Alex." It was large enough, but the question was if the wire he'd used to ground the helmet would be effective with it. "And you are as much of a predator as I am."

He emptied the skull of brain matter while they waited to see if the meat would have adverse effect on either of them. It was as clean as he could get it by hand and without being willing to sacrifice their water by the time the sun set, and neither felt ill. So, sitting by the fire they had their fill, then climbed onto a tree for the night.

Tristan heard the animals approach. There was a fight, and he saw flashes of light, then some of them ate from his kill, and wandered away.

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Alex threw himself into the river, holding the helmet in place. Tristan was glad to have smelled it, as they both smelled by now. Him more than Alex because of kill a few days before. Unlike many of the wild animals, Tristan didn't care to lick himself clean. He enjoyed his shower or dunking himself in water.

Out of their clothes to clean them, then with them aside to dry, he continued to enjoy the water, and each other in it. Before leaving, Tristan scrubbed the skull clean.

The next day, when they encountered another pack, Tristan was reluctant to hunt another one, still feeling clean, but they had processed the prior meat without negative effect, and he had to consider their reserves of nutrient bars were limited. Going forward, it was best they hunt and preserve as much of the meat as possible for their travels.

He processed the kill away from the copse of tree they would be sleeping in. He and Alex had to fight off predators, which cost them more of their Heals, but by the time darkness fell, they had dried meat off the kill for multiple days.