

Alex watched Tristan scamper down from the tall tree. "I saw a peak in that direction." He was sure where his Samalian pointed meant something to him in relation to the direction they had been moving in, but to Alex, it was still simply 'ahead'.

"Do you have a sense of how far?"

"These don't have a way to calculate the distance and without knowing the planet's curvature and height of the peak, there's no way to estimate how far it is."

Alex nodded and looked ahead. It might not be at the pole itself, but it was where they were heading. While the weather might be turning cold because of the season, it would be getting any warmer the further they went.

"I'm going to need warmer clothing soon. You might not feel it yet, but it's getting colder."

"I expect one of the town will have clothing designed to handle it."

"Aren't they too large for you to go in and steal?"

"There should be more deserted ones. One town isn't enough to explain the overpopulation I saw in the others."

"There's also the pirates," Alex said. "If they're operating this far up, they'll have appropriate clothing."

"It means finding one of their base, since it's unlikely they'll carry cold weather clothing until it's needed."

"Any idea where we can find one of those?"

The hood moved, and with an annoyed expression, Tristan shook his head. "The group we encountered will likely have left markers, but unless they are made to stand out against the environment, we won't be able to locate them."

"Then we keep going and at the next town, you get me something."

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There was something unsettling about the town being empty. Alex pulled the wooden door open and looking into the house. Chairs were upended in a sign of hurry. Food had rotten away on plates. Pantries were open and clay jars broken on the floor. They're quickly gathered what they could, and fled. They hadn't had the time to be careful.

He closed the door and looked at the other houses; they had a similar structure. Five trees roughly at the same distance forming the five corners, with clay walls between them, then a bowl like structure as the roof. He could imagine how they caught the rain that fell from the leaves, but not how they retrieved it.

The structure felt too intentional for this to be them using what was already there. So they'd planted those trees to eventually make houses out of them, with the canopy adding to the protection the metalized clay provided. How fast did they grow? How much planning went into letting their community expand?

The branches also spread over the paths between houses and caused the layout to lack straight lines.

Tristan exited a house with a bundle of clothing. "Nothing specifically for cold weather, but by putting on multiple layers, you will be protected."

Alex unfurled the top garment. "Doesn't it feel strange they don't have anything against the cold?" The robe was the same fabric as the hood. Possibly the only practical fabric they could use because it all needed to be conductive to ground the head covering.

“They might have taken them when they fled. We don’t know the direction they took. It is also possible we didn’t take into account they have grown adapted to this environment, which includes the colder weather.”

Alex stepped under the protection of the trees and removed his hood to slip the robe on. “How quickly can that happen? We are working under the assumption they were human when they crashed, right? How long until they evolved to be okay with the planet? I doubt they had the kind of tech needed to alter themselves.”

“I don’t know. And I agree, if they had done this to themselves, it would make more sense to start by giving themselves the equivalent for the bones the local wildlife has. It’s easier to protect yourself against the cold than to have to do all this to survive the magnetic field.”

With its hood raised, the chilly wind was mostly kept out. “I’m going to be horrible in a fight.” He reached under to unhook his harness, then had to take the robe off to remove it. He put it back on and put the harness over it. Then his belt, even if the holster and other knife sheath were empty. “This is better, but with how loose this is, there’s plenty of chances to grab it and pull me down.”

“It’ll do until we find something more adequate.”

“Do you know how to sew?”

Tristan chuckled. “No. Clothing was not something my father considered important, since we have fur, and it’s always been easier to acquire clothing to cover myself among humans than mend or make any.”

“Maybe I can figure out how,” Alex mused. “It’s going to give me something else to do than make those figurines.”

“You haven’t made all of them,” Tristan pointed out.

“I wasn’t making those,” Alex protested. “I don’t know how it happened. I was going for you, big and ferocious. Then it just felt natural to go with something smaller, more defensive.”

“And then pensive? Nurturing?”

“And that’s about when you pointed out they looked like the aspects, which I’m telling you was never what I was aiming for.”

“I believe you, Alex. But you should continue.”

“It’s not going to do anything toward helping us off this planet.” He tried to keep the tone neutral, but he knew he’s failed. He also knew this wasn’t Tristan trying to convince him the Source was real, as were the aspects. It didn’t change the fact it felt like it, and Alex resented it. He wasn’t Samalian. Even if, somehow, they were real, they wouldn’t apply to him. He wasn’t like Tristan. He didn’t need to believe in them to make sense of the universe. It didn’t make sense, and he accepted that. He had his Samalian, and that was enough. He dealt with the rest as it happened.

“How about we get moving?” he said and did so without waiting for Tristan to respond.

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He crouched next to the skeleton. It was one of three. They were locals. The wider shoulder and thicker bones made that clear. One had a broken leg, along with a shattered skull. Another smaller, a hole in the skull’s side, with the other side missing half of it. He

couldn't tell how the third had died. Whatever the slavers had done to make it happen hadn't left a mark in the bones.

"You think they tried to run?"

"Unlikely with this broken leg," Tristan replied.

"That one got injured and couldn't keep up," Alex decided. "These two pleaded for lenience. They weren't given it and tried to defend him."

"It is a probable scenario."

Alex looked at the ground beyond them. "There were a lot of them, or this is a path they've been using often. I can see the trail."

"It should mean there's a slaver camp at the end of it," Tristan said. "We should be able to get you better clothing there."

Alex stood. "And who knows? Maybe we can give these poor people a hand in the process."

Tristan stiffen and Alex went on alert.

"What's wrong?" he asked when he couldn't find anything.

His Samalian grimaced. "I think I might have been tricked."

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Alex sat across from Tristan, extra robes over him to keep the cooling wind out. His Samalian wasn't affected by it, sitting, legs crossed, eyes closed and looking serene. He wasn't, or at least Alex didn't think he was. He hadn't elaborated on what he'd meant, but had grumbled under his breath the rest of the day.

They'd made camp under the trees, ate and Tristan had said he needed to meditate. It had taken time in happening and twice had sent him pacing. But finally he'd settled himself and his breathing, and his face had grown relaxed. And had been like that for the last fifteen minutes.

Alex hoped he wouldn't be too much longer. The ground was cold, and he couldn't climb the trees without help, even when he wasn't encumbered by the robe. And he really wanted to snuggle against his Samalian for the heat he generated.