

Tristan motioned for Alex to stop as he picked up a scent in the breeze. Something metallic mixed with earthiness. The smell reminded him how was the flesh of the plains animals tasted. His ears had been covered for long enough he no longer bothered trying to hear whatever it was that carried the scent, instead searching for motion in the direction the wind came from.

When he caught it, distant and through branches and trunks, he had the sense of something humanoid. He pointed, and they approached silently, making sure to remain downwind when it shifted.

Once they were close enough, he could hear them through the helmet and folded ears. He made out multiple voices and a cadence to the sounds that indicated speech. Not long after that, he was in a position to observe them.

That they were the same specie as those who had attacked them at the ship was evident. Nearly human in appearance, but with a musculature that favored their upper bodies, although it hadn't ignored the lower parts either. Social, by the way they talked and laughed as they looked through bushes that were too well lined up to have sprouted naturally. They were all bald, with the same red-gray paint covering their heads that their attackers had worn. When one turned, he saw the pain went down under the garment that covered them, and which trailed on the ground. He'd thought the paint had been a type of combat decoration. The equivalent of how his ancestors used to shave patterns in their furs before battles to mark their previous victories and make themselves more intimidating. Now, seeing it on a group of them out collecting berries, and seeing fully how it was applied, he had a new understanding of its use.

When they left, he considered following, but there were too many unknowns, not the least of which was if they had more waiting for them to return. Possibly ready to take on one of the animals who might try to hunt them. Tristan knew that upper body strength translated into hitting strength and that they were weapon users. He'd need to do recognizance before deciding how close he could afford to venture.

He and Alex returned deeper into the wood. This was reminiscent of the first jungle, with tall trees with large individual canopy, but there were fewer of them here, further apart, making the overall canopy lighter and not able to fully protect them from the magnetic field's effect.

"Does it seem strange to you how human they look?" Alex asked. "Do you think this is a case of parallel evolution?"

"They didn't evolve on this planet."

"Why do you say that?"

"They use the paint as a protection against the magnetic field. The native life has adapted to it."

"Why do you think it's not just decoration?"

"It continues under the clothing, and the clothing trails on the ground, grounding them."

"But that would mean there's something conductive within those."

Tristan nodded. "Most likely, they have a way to weave the plant fibers into clothing, which means they either have bred the brittleness when they dry out of them, or have a process that lets them retain their suppleness."

“And you want to know which it is.”

Tristan glanced at his human, who smiled.

“We aren’t heading toward the pole. If you weren’t interested in them, you would just have had us detour around where you think they might be living.”

“Being able to keep the leave from going brittle would let us have something light we can wear for more than a few hours at a time.”

Tristan had been the first to take up wearing one of the animal’s skulls, after he killed the largest specimen of grass eater they’d seen yet, but it was no more comfortable than the helmet, so he alternated between them, changing where the discomfort was located. Alex had hardly worn the skull since Tristan had gotten him one.

“It is worth the risk of them seeing you? Any fight we get in risks damaging the only protection we have.”

“I’ll go during the night. I should be able to follow their scent back to their settlement. They were active during the day, which means that unless their physiognomy has changed more since they arrived than I expect, while still looking as human as they do, they will be sleeping through the night with a minimum of guards in case of animal attack.”

“Or attacks from another tribe. Remember that even Samalians still do that when times are too hard.”

“Those are unlikely to be common. If they were, they would have been guards with the people harvesting the berries.”

“You think we can eat those berries? We haven’t come across and fruits in a while.”

“It’ll depend on how far their adaptations took them, but I doubt it would be wise to take from those bushes. They aren’t wild, so they will know how much they should get from them in a single harvest. We don’t want to create discrepancies they will investigate.”

Alex laughed. “They won’t notice. Animals will be taking as much from them as they do.” Tristan stared. “I grew up in a family running a farm industry, remember? Even with all the technology we have, loss of produce to animals is part of the calculations. So long as we only take a few from each bush, they won’t notice.”

“After I’ve surveyed the settlement. We’ll make camp along the river that’s in that direction and I’ll hunt an animal. We can rebuild our stock of dried meats while we are here.”

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Tristan hadn’t intended to get this close. He’d plan for his first approach to be about getting a sense of how the settlement was laid out, but he hadn’t expected them to make use of fire as a light source to this extent. Nearly each house had a pole anchored into the ground, atop which was a clay container with a burning wick, so he could see details he’d expected multiple visit to put together.

The village was on the outskirts of the woods, but he could only tell that because of how artificial the positioning of the trees within the village was. Three or four of trees ground around each house, with the tall trunks bending over so their canopy was denser above them. He didn’t think there were enough trees over all to negate the effect of the magnetic field, but it would lessen it. Maybe enough that the clay the houses were made out of would provide the rest.

Clay seemed to be their main building material, with wood used a support structure

for it. The houses were uneven domes with a bowled roof. Possibly to catch the rainwater, or the shape might enhance the clay's protective effect. He memorized the consistent component to each house. They would be what he'd have to recreate when it came time to work on leaving this planet. They'll have to remain in one place, and a house where they won't have to fear being affected if they take off their helmet will be good to have. He'll need to find out if how the wood was used to hold the clay mattered to the protection it offered, but that would be for another visit. This time, since he'd come this close already, he wanted to study the fabrics they made.

He stayed to the darkness between lamps, keeping still when one of the three inhabitants patrolling came close. Their olfactory sense seemed to be on par with Alex's.

He followed the acidic scents to an enclosed courtyard, where leaves were soaking into tubs of the liquid. Others hung over beams, drying, and further along, on a table, someone had rolled some together and pounded on them until the fibers were exposed. There had to be more to that process that wasn't displayed, because bundles of the fibers hung from another beam, the refinement further along as he reached the opposite end. There were no tools to weave the end result here, but he could envision something similar to what some of the weavers in his town used to turn the wool of the animals they bread into the fabric they used to make the belts and bags as well as the ceremonial clothing for the Hea'Las and her trainees.

He collected some of the drying leaves to study, then exited the town. He slept with Alex in their elevated shelter for a few hours and returned before sunrise to watch how they started their days.

He had to change tree when, not long after the sun rose, everyone headed to the other side of the town, hoods over their heads. It put him up wind, but he was now confident that even closer, they wouldn't detect him.

The courtyard they gathered in was larger and before a house with designs on the walls; engraved and painted. He couldn't make out the details, but he had a sense they revered the building, or those in it. When they exited, it was five of them. A woman was at the lead, older, but not the oldest Tristan had seen. On one side were two boys, on the left a boy and a girl. As with all human children, Tristan couldn't tell them sufficiently apart to know if they were the same age or how far apart they were.

The woman was a leader in their faith, Tristan decided, the children her apprentice. She spoke to the assembled crowd and, once in a while, a word reached him that sounded familiar. It was possible they had arrived after SpaceGov had made Standard the only spoken language. Then there would be a core to their language Tristan might be able to decipher, which meant it might be possible to communicate with them, maybe learn the process they used to keep the leaves supple.

Something smelling acidic wasn't enough to let him recreate it.

When she finished, one of the child brought a clay bowl out of the house and offered it to her. As she placed her hand into it, someone approached. The gait and wide shoulders made Tristan think male. He knelt, and her hands were covered in clay when she took them out of the bowl. She spoke as she put them under the hood and when she finished; she pulled the hood down and the man's head was covered with shiny clay. He took place next to her, and another child offered him a bowl in which he placed his hands as someone approached both of them.

Then they two help assist getting the others protected, taking possession of bowl so the children could retrieve more of them, and soon, everyone's head was covered with clay and were going about their business.

Tristan smiled. He'd confirm the clay's effectiveness. All he needed now was to find out how it was made.