

Alex eyed the basin of whatever Tristan had brought back from the settlement during the night.

He'd taken Alex with him the day before to fell a tree, and they returned with a two foot tall piece of the trunk Tristan then set to hollowing out with one of Alex's knife, complaining the entire time about not having the time to build a proper work station and the proper tools for the work he was doing.

Alex was amused and found watching his Samalian in 'technician' mode endearing. He hasn't gotten to see him like this while in space, the work setting up the land for their house didn't bring the same attitude in him, and every time before that, it had been in the workshop, where Alex wasn't permitted.

They'd slept for a few hours, then Tristan had left for his observation of the village. When Alex had woken this morning, the basin was already there, and Tristan returned from the forest not long after that, put the leaves he'd collected in it and climbed to their shelter to sleep.

The fact Tristan had put his hand in it as he pushed the large leaved under was an indicated that while it smelled acidic, it wasn't that strong. His Samalian had simply rinsed out of his fur in the river before going to bed.

Alex returned to using the polycarbon knife on the piece of wood in his hands.

As much as he'd appreciated the pause in their trek and enjoyed not being on his feet for days on end, he hadn't realized how quickly he'd gotten bored. After two days of giving his feet their needed break, he'd been antsy to do something. He'd convinced Tristan to have sparing sessions, but with having to take care with their helmets, they couldn't push as hard as either needed to make it satisfying.

Tristan had his project to occupy him, but Alex had found himself with an utter lack of things to do. He, as he suspected most people living on technological planets, needed technology to occupy him. He'd encountered that problem at the sanctuary, but there, he had been given tasks to keep him busy.

Drying the meat had taken little work beyond slicing it and hanging the strips on the rack by the fire after Tristan had skinned and butchers the animal. Refilling their canteens had happened once and then was only needed as they drank one empty. He'd considered making a hoe and setting up a patch for gardening, but no matter how long Tristan took to resolve this project, Alex wouldn't have the time to plant and harvest. And he was definitely not scrubbing a section of the ground while trying to think of nothing. It hadn't worked for him while it served a purpose in clearing the sanctuary's floor. Here it would be beyond a waste of time

So he'd grabbed one of the chunk of wood to come out of Tristan's work and had put a knife to it and had mindlessly chipped at it. In no time, he'd ended to with a stick the thickness of his thumb, and nothing else to do. So he'd grabbed another piece and now he was trying to make it look like something.

Not that he had any idea what it might be.

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When Tristan climbed down from their shelter, the piece of wood Alex was carving away at could pass for the representation of a slug. If the person looking at it had a lot of imagination.

Tristan nuzzled Alex's shoulder, growling when the helmets impacted, then grabbed a handful of dried meat and headed to the leaves he'd brought back from the village.

"Still supple?" Alex asked.

Tristan nodded, bending, then folding them, before studying the fold.

Alex stood and stretched before joining him. He dug his fingers into his Samalian's neck fur to get his attention. "I'm bored."

"Sparing isn't going to help much." Tristan tapped the helmet.

Alex laughed. "I know, and without that, I don't think I could distract you enough from your project for sex, so how about you entertain me by explaining how you think this works?"

"That." Tristan pointed to the liquid in the basin. "Is a mixture which softens the fibers as well as keeps them from turning brittle, without leeching any of the metals in it."

"There's metal in them?"

"It's where some of the taste comes from. Everything native to the planet we've encountered at this point seems to have a much higher metal content than us. Part of how they can ground themselves, I think." Tristan pushed a finger through the leave. "The process does make them weaker to puncture, but lets them be folded. They refine the fibers to the point they can weave fabric with them."

"Tell me you don't plan on taking up weaving so you can make us fully conductive clothing."

"We wouldn't need that much, only a hood or cap, and something to connect it to the ground so it would discharge. But I wouldn't be able to acquire the needed tools without attracting attention. They were already questioning the lower than expected levels in their basin from what I used to fill mine, one of their weaving machine going missing would be noticed."

"What are you hoping to get out of this?"

"I am hoping to work out what makes out the liquid, but I'll settle for using it to make us something that will be more comfortable than either type of helmets."

"How long do you think making that will take?"

"I can make one in fifteen minutes. It's just a question of layering them and tying them together. The question is how long they will last while being worn."

"How about you make one now? You show me how to put it on and tomorrow, when I get up, I can wear it as I go about doing nothing."

"That isn't nothing." Tristan nodded at what Alex held.

Alex chuckled. "It pretty much is. Just took a knife to it and didn't end up with anything much. A sculptor, I am not."

"Keep practicing. Doing something with your hands, other than wielding knives and guns, is good for you."

"Of course, you'd say that. You can do just about everything with your hands. I'm limited to my mind."

"No, you're not. You simply never had a reason to spend time doing much with your hands." His Samalian gave him a toothy smile. "The few things you have been practicing with me, you have become quite adept at, after all." What Tristan meant was plain for him to see since he hadn't put on pants yet.

“I guess I didn’t need to spar to get your mind fully on sex.”

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Alex hurried to switch from his helmet to the supple cap Tristan had made him after they were spent. He didn’t need to be so quick; the canopy was thick enough to lessen the magnetic field’s effects, but he wanted to start practicing, in case he needed to switch in the open. Once on, he adjusted it so his cranium was covered from his spine to his brow, with the cap being forward enough to register annoyingly at the edge of his sight. His ears were covered again, but didn’t impede his hearing significantly. Then, all he had to do was be careful as he moved not to step on the wire attached to the base as he moved and pull it free.

After both types of helmets for weeks. Something this light felt unnatural, but he got used to it, and then hoped they lasted, because he didn’t want to have to go back to the bulky helmets. If he could get used to minding the wire, Alex could see the two of them having a solid sparing match, finally.

He settled against a tree with a new chunk of wood in his hand and studied it. This time, he would work out what he wanted to carve out of it and make that happen.

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The sound was so loud Alex was on his feet, the failed attempt at a four-legged animal falling away, and knife in hand as he searched for the assailants. Only as he was halfway cursing himself for not having kept more knives handy, at least one mono edge, did he realize the sound had seemed loud only because of how long he’d been wearing the thick helmet.

He peered through the trees, further from the camp, and in time to see two of the native burst out, laughing as they tumbled to the ground. They were lean, giving them a bonier look than Alex remembered from the fight. Youth, he decided.

They untangled themselves, on pushing the other away, speaking something that had a playful tone to it. That one jumped to his feet and froze on seeing Alex. The other was slower to stand, and asked a question as he turned, his eyes growing wide as he, too, looked at Alex.

Youths out for a playful excursion in the woods. Not a threat unless Alex turned it into one. He checked how he felt and was surprised not to have a need to kill at the moment. Maybe roughing it was how he’d getting his urge under control. At least Tristan wasn’t back yet. He could imagine the reaction they’d have at seeing a furry predator on two legs. They probably had cautionary tales built around monsters like him.

“Look,” Alex said, feeling foolish since they wouldn’t understand him, but he couldn’t think of another way to convey he wasn’t a threat to them. “I know you probably don’t know what to make of me. But I’m not—”

The one who’d been slowest to stand yelled something, pulled the other behind him and motioning hard to go.

Alex raised his hands. “I don’t mean you any harm.” The gesture would probably be more effective if he dropped the knife, but that wasn’t happening. They might be much more aggressive than one of them looked to be.

There was an exchange, quick and heated, that ended with the one in the front snapped at the other and sending him running off.

“Okay, that’s good. Now, just run with him.” Instead, he bared his teeth in something that could resemble one of the predator’s snarl and before Alex could sigh in a mix of annoyance and disappointment, the youth was charging at him with nothing but bare fist.

He should teach him why that was a mistake, crossed his mind and Alex stamped the thought down. That was a kid, not some delusional merc in need of a lesson. Alex batted the punch aside, then shoved the youth away from him with a solid hit from his palm to the chest.

The youth howled in pain as he fell back, holding his chest. His eyes were filled with tear, pain and anger as he looked at Alex. Then he was up and running away.

At least, he hadn’t killed him. He began putting their things together. Whatever else happened, they couldn’t stay.

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Tristan returned at a sprint. “What happened? They’re massing and arming themselves.”

“Okay, that’s excessive. All I did was push one of them away hard.” He handed Tristan the bag of dried meat. “Two of their kids wandered in the camp and were scared of me. One attacked to give the other time to run off. I overestimated how tough he was, then he too ran off. I figured they were going to tell their parents about the odd person who had hurt him, but not that they were going to want to lynch me for it.”

Tristan pulled the leaves out of the basic and shook them before using dried ones to roll them into. “I wish I had something to put the liquid in.”

“We have canteens.”

“Water is too important. I’ll have to get some later. Right now, we need to leave.”