

The trees, when they reached them days later, were different from those they had encountered to this point. Instead of tall, with thick canopy, they were short, thick of trunk, and bushy of leaves. The canopy was light enough that Tristan didn't let them take their helmets off.

Not long after entering the woods, they came across trees that had long fruits with five-sided hulls that ranged from green to orange. The hull had a hardness that kept Alex from crushing it unless he was serious about applying pressure, then it broke along the edges and became pliable the way thin plastics could be. The inside was firm, harder when it was orange, as well as more tart than sweet, and very soft and overly sweet, along with nearly dripping with wetness. When it was half orange and green, it had the texture of a ripe apple while bursting with sweet liquid when he bit into it. There was no bitterness to the it, which Tristan had gotten him to test initially as the best test they had of its compatibility with his digestive system.

It also tasted safe for Tristan, but he wasn't a fan of sweetness so Alex was alone in enjoying them as they walked, Tristan working the leaves into something of a head cover since they were wide and had fronds at the edges he could use to attach them together.

Then, a few hours after the last fruit, Alex's body protested, and he was barely out of his pants and squatting, and it started.

"I thought you say that without the bitterness, it was okay to eat them," Alex complained. He'd been eating the meat without these kinds of effect for days now, and the only other food he'd had were nutrient bars, to ensure he had all the nutrients he needed since they couldn't know if what they ate here might be missing something needed for their survival.

"Safe to eat doesn't mean it won't come with side effects, such as your body not being adapted to properly process all the components. Also, bitterness isn't a full proof method, just one that has served me well when I was without a scanner and having to depend on the local flora for survival." He handed Alex the canteen. "You need to make sure you don't dehydrate."

"How much water do we have left? It's been a few days since the last stream."

"Four canteens."

"We're going to need water soon if I can't use the fruits to keep myself hydrated." He handed the canteen back after drinking half of it.

"It is possible this is simply part of an adaptive period for you body."

"I don't think we can afford to use up the water we have left finding out. Can you smell any?"

"Not at the moment."

"Right. Sorry about that. Give me a few minutes and I'll be good to go."

Tristan handed him large, soft leaves to clean himself with once he was done. Even the taller trees had them, they had discovered. They had the feel of fresh growth to Alex, but turned hard and brittle within hours of being plucked. Most of the vegetation was like that, perishing much faster than others once they were taken off their trees or out of the soil. Even the fruits started turning a sickly maroon within minutes of being harvested, but it took a few hours for that to reach its meat.

Tristan theorized that they could have evolved to depend on the low level current the

magnetic field caused the plants to generate.

All Alex had cared about was that it meant he wouldn't be able to stock up on them when they left these woods. Not that he cared about that anymore.

The next few hours were stop-and-go as Alex's body continued to deal with the fruits' effects, and, even if the sun was still high, he was left so exhausted after the last time that called it a day.

Fortunately, his body settled before full dark, so he was able to sleep in the branches without worry, but it left them with only one canteen of water until they found more.

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It was three days later when they found the small lake and sated their thirst. The animals which had been on the other side ran off, although one, with a predator's sleekness, bared their teeth at them, which sparked before doing so.

Then they refilled their canteens and washed.

Alex eyed his boots evilly once they finally exited it.

"How are you not being driven insane by having to wear those boots?" Alex asked as Tristan put his own, and knowing full well the answer.

"Pain and discomfort are only information your body sends your brain. You don't have to acknowledge them."

"I'll remind you that's one part of your training I never was good at."

Tristan smiled at him. "For which I am grateful. I like knowing that your reactions are always honest."

"Whereas you depend on me trusting you're being honest about them with me." What he'd said registered, and he cursed. "I'm sorry. I don't mean it like that. I know you're honest about how you feel with me. I don't know why—that's bullshit. I ache everywhere, I'm tired of having to walk, and I needed to bitch."

"Then maybe we should rest here for a few days."

"Can we afford it?"

"Our destination is far, no matter how close to it we are at this time. Letting our bodies rest will serve us better than pushing until they break."

"Is that you admitting you are actually in need of a break from all this walking?"

"Yes, it is. And it will give us the opportunity to test if some of the fruits will react better with your digestive system."

Alex eyed his Samalian. "If you're going to have me eat more of those things and get the runs again, you are also eating some. That first time was all on me. I was too eager for something sweet to wait to see how I'd react, but this is you having me do that. You are joining in."

Tristan made a face, but nodded.

They spend the next two days building a shelter among the larger branches, cutting down trees and making rough planks to secure between branches and use a tarp as a roof and wall to keep most of the rain out.

Then, they alternated between them eating a type of fruit and waiting for the rest of the day, then the other did the same.

Every fruit in the trees was a version of elongated. Even the bulbous ones were so at the bottom, and Alex was quick to point out it didn't require much imagination to make

them phallic.

Tristan made them caps from the leaves, which they tested. Even one layer had a protective effect, but not enough to let them move. Five layers blocked enough of the magnetic field, they didn't notice any effects anymore. Unfortunately, with the leaves becoming brittle so quickly, just moving about caused them to crack and easily break off, and then they weren't protected anymore.

Tristan used the time he wasn't testing a fruit, or dealing with its consequences since, much to Alex's pleasure, his Samalian wasn't so perfect at to be immune from them, hunting and drying meat, returning with large specimens, both for the extra meat they provided, and for the largeness of their cranium.

Alex discovered why when Tristan attached wires to one and had him wear it. He felt ridiculous wearing the skull of an animal, tilted so its upper jaw acted as a cap[probably the wrong word] shielding the sun, but with how well it hugged his head, covering even his ears, if not entirely comfortably, he didn't feel the effect of the magnetic field, and even if he picked up the wire, un-grounding himself, it took a few minutes for the wooziness to start.

It was no more comfortable than the helmets, but this was something they would be able to use to replace the helmets when they eventually broke, which Tristan was certain would happen eventually since he didn't expect their trek to always be easy. So with them, and the leaves, if they also lost that, they'd be able to function long enough to get replacements and keep going.