

Tristan leaned against the tree, catching his breath, hand over the gash in his side to keep the bleeding down. Alex was using some of the treated leaves to fashion bandages. They're gotten as far from the dead animal as they could before stopping to deal with his injury.

It was the fourth such unprovoked attack over the last seven days. Four more than the previous sixty-three days. Unless they were stepping into a den or interrupting an animal's feeding, they had kept their distances. Tristan had only hunted to restock their meat supplies, and Alex had grown adept at using the fruits and other plants that were edible when cooking to give them more than straight up meat to eat as a way of stretching how long the nutrient bars lasted.

Tristan had argued against taking time to cook everything. The meat was already dried, and plants could be eaten raw and still carried the nutrition they had. Them and slivers of nutrient bars ensured they had as balanced meals as they could. Alex had ignored him, roasting them, or boiling them, cooking them in the coals, then offering the result to Tristan on the wooden plate he'd carved.

It has been edible from the start, and only gotten better as Alex practiced, and Tristan had gotten used to it to the point that, given the choice, he took Alex's cooking over the dried meat.

"We're going to need more of these soon," Alex said, wrapping the woven leave fabric around Tristan's waist. They'd both had to figure out how to cut and weave the treated leaves into something resembling fabric when they'd run low on Heals. The leaves were the easiest things to steal out of the settlements.

The Samalian strengths Heals had been used up first, both because they hadn't had as much and because Tristan did the bulk of the hunting and the times he fully isolated his prey from the herd was the exception, therefore injuries had been common.

He'd been careful the last few hunts in properly cutting the prey from the herd, but there had still been one time when one of the other animal had come to defend his target.

Alex handed him two pills.

"How many are left?" He asked, taking them. He'd prefer not using more, or limiting it to one, but these were human strength, so even two would only boost his healing, so this injury would take weeks to fully heal, instead of a day or two.

Alex took the bottle out of his pocket and shook it. "It's the last one." It sounded full, but if they both depended on them, it would be empty before they reached their destination.

Tristan looked north, searching for signs of the mountains they were heading towards, but they were still too far.

They were making progress. The weather was cool enough at night. They would have to decide soon about either having to keep a fire going through the nights, or get him clothing more appropriate to the cooling weather from the local population. The vegetation was changing, the large canopy of leaves being replaced by smaller, narrower ones composed of thicker, but leaves that were narrow and long. The trees were closer, making for a denser forest.

He swallowed the pills with the last of the water in his canteen as Alex tightened the bandage. Something else they were running low on. At least this one they could refill.

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Tristan winced as climbing the tree pulled on his not quite entirely healed injury. As soon as he'd picked up signs, they were approaching another settlement. He'd intended on resting until nightfall, then sneaking in to steal treated leaves, maybe thick clothing for Alex. But the sounds had been too loud for how far he expected the settlement to be, so this was to get a sense of what was ahead of them.

And what it was, was extensive. This wasn't a settlement of between fifty to a hundred families. This could be four or five times that, with three-story structures in place, each built around a central of the trees with narrower canopy. This led to buildings being closer than in the previous villages. And the height might be a response to that lack of ability to spread.

They were open spaces in place, made through a cluster of trees without buildings, but what he saw of them was busy with people. He thought he made out hurried shelters there. He couldn't see where the leaves were treated, and within something the vast with this many people, he wouldn't be able to sneak in to look. With the right covering, Alex might, but they didn't have that.

"What does it look like?" he asked once Tristan had carefully climbed down.

"A large town." Tristan tried to work out what it meant. His understanding of humans extended to their societies only to the extents it let him positions so he could take advantage of someone, or be one of those who slipped by unnoticed. People living in open spaces, in make shift settlement spoke to a situation of overpopulation, but when did that become prevalent? When did population grow beyond its capacity to expand with it?

"Okay. And?" Alex prodded him.

"We won't be able to acquire what we need here."

Alex nodded, and they moved on.