

[changes that will be made to previous chapters. Rework the travel so that they only recently have encountered the cold. Tristan and Alex will encounter multiple fragments of the ship embedded into the landscape. Each one will either have an active outpost, or an abandoned one. If it's abandoned, the fragment of ship has been mined of everything even remotely useful. There will be some distant observation of the locals used as slave labour and the hover sled, but they haven't gotten involved. It isn't why they are here. Possibly make that the more important part of the story, minimizing the traveling problems while playing up encounters with the slavers.]

The outpost had to feel of a village to Alex, looking at the buildings, with the trees part of the walls and their canopy covering them. The one aspect that marked it as not a village, other than how the leaves had been trimmed so none of the paths around the houses were covered, was the towers on each side, next to the road that entered and left it. They were built along a tree, so had the usual canopy for protection and the fact it had been one of many was evident by the stump and remains of a house on the ground.

Each tower had someone in it, not a local, dressed in thick clothing with a modern look to them. Smooth fabric that was possible with printing, instead of woven fibers.

There had been more houses, but thirteen were left. Plus one that had to feel of a barn more than a house. The foliage over the structure was light, as if the trees had fallen sick, and the space around it was fenced by rough lumber. If he had to guess, those had come from the trees that had protected the other houses.

"I'm guessing their supplies will be in the larger building," he said, handing the binocular back to Tristan. "What are the odds they have Heals?" His Samalian was now bundled in clothing, wrapped and tied, since nothing meant to be pulled over their head fit him properly. As massive as the locals were, few of them matched Tristan. No clothing like that had been left behind in the abandoned villages.

"Impossible to know. It'll depend on how long they've been here and if they have an ability to print more."

"Okay, how do they keep one of those working on this planet? I can accept those hover carts we saw them use since they I saw them working, but a medical grade printer is a lot more complex."

"The road heads north." Tristan looked in that direction. "The closer to the pole they go, the less the magnetic field will affect technology. That will make protecting it easier. Considering they stripped everything out of that wreckage we came across, they would have enough hyper conductive material to insulate a large building."

"Okay, so that's how they keep one working. How do they refill the base materials?"

"I don't know. I suspect that with the right equipment, many of them can be extracted from what grows on this planet. It could be the reason for the plant material we've seen being hauled, along with the pieces of tech. But some of them will be complex enough to be require being synthesized. The most likely situation is that they are working off the stock they arrived with, which brings the likeliness of Heals being here dependent on how long ago they crashed."

"I counted six slavers moving about the camp. That's eight, including the ones in the towers. How many do you think are inside the buildings?"

“The previous camps had a dozen, so it’s the likely number here.” He looked to the south. “We will want to hurry. There is a group approaching. There could be as many as eight more among them.” He put the binoculars away. “How do you feel? Do you think you keep your killing urge in check? The ideal procedure is for us to be in and out without anyone noticing. They can easily blame the disappearance of items on miscalculation or each other.”

“It’s going to depend on if there’s someone in that building. I don’t feel like killing anyone at the moment. But I didn’t either that last time. Until one of them suggested putting a collar on you.”

“If there is one in the building, he’s yours. If we can’t find what we need there to dispose of it, we can take it with us and leave somewhere for the animals to enjoy.”

Alex looked at his Samalian. “Didn’t you once tell me human was the worse tasting meat you ever ate?”

Tristan gave him a toothy smile. “I don’t expect the animals have my distinguished palate.”

Alex narrowed his eyes. “You live off nutrient bars. Those things don’t taste like anything. In the times I’ve been with you, not counting us being stuck here, I don’t think you ate more than two dozen meals I cooked, and half that has been since we settled on Samalia.”

Tristan leaned in and nuzzled Alex’s exposed cheek. “You are an excellent cook.”

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Approaching the building was slow, but simple. The slavers in the towers looked in the distance, so avoiding their gaze had just taken waiting for them to shift their attention to another distant direction, and once among the buildings, it was just about avoiding the slavers when they moved between buildings.

They couldn’t look into their target as the windows were covered over by tanned hides to keep the cold out. From next to the door, Alex had a clear line of sight down the south road. He tapped Tristan’s shoulder and pointed to the forms visible in the distance. Tristan acknowledged them, then put his shoulder to the door.

As they had trekked north, the doors had gone from flaps of fabrics to thick hide and, more recently, logs with a sweet smelling pitch filling the gaps. The construction imposed limits on how solid any locking system was.

The shoulder connected, and the snap of wood breaking was soft. Alex was in before Tristan, heading for the man and the woman huddled next to low the fire. He registered the boxes and piled on jackets in his way to them and had a knife across the man’s neck, then cut the woman at the wrist, causing her to drop the chemical gun, before planting it in her chest.

Then the heat of the room hit him and he was momentarily woozy after the frigid temperature outside. He, too, hoped they’d find proper cold weather clothing. The layers over layer of the local’s textiles kept him from freezing to death, but only just so.

“Alex?”

He shook himself. “Sorry. Heat fatigue.” He headed for the table with the jackets. They were patched, but definitely modern materials. One even had what felt like a heat lining. “The magnetic field interacts with metals, right? You think it’s enough for someone

to make hearing clothing?” He took off the layers and tried the jacket.

“I don’t know. I suspect by itself it wouldn’t be enough. Induction heating requires current along with the magnetic field.”

“But that can be generated with the magnetic field.” He took the too large jacket off and looked for another. Most of them were only insulating material, but he found four with the metal lining, the third of which was only slightly too large for him. With them, he found thermal pants. None of which had the metal lining.

“Any luck finding Heals?”

“No, but I have found an equivalent to nutrient bars.” He showed the unwrapped bar. Unlike the nutrient bars, which were grayer in color, [need to check if I ever gave them a color] this one was the definite color of dried meat. It looked to have been pressed into a bar close in size to what Alex was used to.

“I doubt that has everything you need to survive on.”

“I agree, but—” a yell came from outside, silencing them. Another followed, a returned greeting. “The convoy has arrived.”

Alex handed Tristan the largest jacket and thermal pants. “Best they have put them on and we can leave. They’re probably all going to be on the south side.”

“Except for the two in the towers.” He divested himself of the layers, cutting the binding with his claws. “But they will look inward for a time, and the two here will be expected to join.”

Alex was already in the pants. “Is bringing them with us still worth it? Them missing will be as suspicious as them being found dead, and carrying them will slow us slightly.”

Tristan secured the pants, then looked over the lining before putting it on. “There is time to be gained in the confusion while they are searching for the missing.”

“I’ll tie their limbs so we can hand them around our necks.” He put the gun on the table. “And she had this, in case you want a second one.”

“Only the bullets. Let me know once you’re done, I’ll keep an eye out for anyone approaching.”

With the door opened a crack, the voices came in more distinctly. “They don’t sound so happy anymore,” Alex said.

“There’s a commotion. How long? Now is the perfect time; even the guard’s attention will be on—”

The cry was high pitch and reminded Alex of a child. An angry voice responded, and the cry came again, clearer as cold filled the room. Alex turned to watch his Samalian marching toward the assembly. The gunshot caught him by surprise and he rushed to help Tristan. Only once he was outside did he realize he was the one who had fired, one of the slavers falling, missing part of his head.

Alex threw a knife at the one who was pulling her gun out, then he was among the group, a dozen easy. He kept moving from opponent to opponent, forcing any with a gun to worry about hitting their ally if they tried to fire at him. When he disarmed one of them, he threw the gun in the direction Tristan had shot last.

They seemed unsure how to deal with him in close quarters, and a few of them who tried to take advantage of him fighting someone else lost their lives to one of Tristan’s bullets.

It hadn't taken his Samalian long to get a feel for the recoil and how it affected his targeting. When Alex ran out of slavers to kill, he shifted his attention up, expecting at least one of the tower guard to be aiming at them, but one was sprawled over the railing, blood dripping down, and the other was nowhere to be seen.

Alex started to ask Tristan, but his Samalian shook his head, nodding at the people watching them. One held a child to them, who was bleeding from the head. Alex found the blood on a man's boot, the one Tristan had shoot first. Now he wished Tristan hadn't killed him, so he could cut him and make him suffer. More children ran to the adults and were clutched tight. When he'd seen the children as part of previous convoys, Alex had thought they were there because the slavers wanted to keep the families intact, but now, he suspected it was how they ensure the adults remained docile, on top of the pain the collars inflicted. After all, Alex knew first hand pain was something that could be adapted to.

He swallowed the anger. The man was dead and no one else here deserved it.

The locals let out distressed cries, pulling the children to them. Tristan stepped next to Alex, holding a box that controlled the collars. He raised it in a hand, then tightened his fist around it until it broke. He turned his hand and let the pieces fall. The locals looked at them in confusion. When Tristan pointed toward the distance, they stayed where they were. Even him growling had no effect.

Alex took a step forward, intent on just telling them to go, but they recoiled with such fear he kept moving instead until they were fleeing. When they were no longer visible, Alex returned to Tristan.

"Not how I was hoping to do it," his Samalian said.

"You mean growling wasn't about scaring them away?"

"I'm a creature of nightmare for those who aren't familiar with me; growling should be expected."

"I'm sure you haunt the nightmare of plenty who also know you."

"I don't usually leave them alive. And I don't think it's nightmares Victor had when I'm in them."

"Now you're going to have to do something about the image of him and you that just put in my head."

Tristan's smile was all teeth. "As it turns out, we now have as much time as we need here before we have to make the place look like local predators have destroyed it. I will delight in showing you that you are the only one the real me will pleasure."