

The trek through the mountains proved less problematic than Tristan expected. The locals[need to come up with an actual name for them now that there is someone who speaks Standard] knew paths he wouldn't have found even with technology, or have believed they would allow passage if he did. Narrow cracks in the rock face, barely visible hand holds, paths on the side of a mountain that weren't visible until you stepped onto them.

Although colder than even he preferred, the weather never turned bad, making their journey bearable, if not pleasant.

The stops happened at fixed locations, instead of when time demanded. Caverns within the cliff face that had seen previous visitors. Fires provided heat, and the mountain protection from the magnetism.

The first such stop proved to be the most surprising for Tristan. Where Alex garnered suspicion and hidden distrust, he didn't. Even after removing everything he wore, exposing his alienness, no one looked at him in fear or even distrust. When he caught someone looking, it was in silent... on a human, he would call it awe. They were close enough he was confident that was the expression, but he couldn't be certain.

More than once, he noticed groups speaking in low voices and looks sent his way.

He hoped they weren't mythologizing him, because if his reading had taught him something, it was that people found it easy to make demands of mythological heroes. They had acted once, therefore; they were required to act the next time problem occurred.

They would be disappointed when Tristan and Alex left them to deal with whatever happened next once he had the information he needed.

Unless they made that information dependent on solving whatever problem they were hoping it would solve.

Because what other reason was there to ask them along? To tolerate a human, even if he had helped rescue them, along with an alien they knew nothing about, other than he too had rescued them.

Tristan wasn't looking forward to that discussion. To telling them no. To forcing them to tell him what he needed and then moving on.

To hoping the Source would let him do any of that.

He hadn't managed to meditate between the arduous trek, then sleeping holding Alex. And it hadn't made itself heard through that instinct which had told them these were the locals he needed to save, but if it demanded more?

Could he refuse it, if he wanted Alex cured.

The question hounded him even once the dark village came into view. Hunger had been part of the reason. Even rationing what they'd taken from the slaver camp. The journey had been long enough there had been little left when they had set forth that morning.

A deserted village might feel like a good place for the locals to stop for the night, but Tristan hoped that now they were down from the mountain proper, there would be chances to hunt when they got going in the morning.

Instead of entering, the woman who had invited them along called to the lifeless village. Called again, and on the third time, a flame flickered in a window, then another, and more, until each building in sight had one in a window facing them.

The reaction among the locals he'd traveled with was instantaneous. Gone was the

tiredness of the journey. Excitement and relief spread.

A call came from within the village, and they ran. Doors opened and locals stepped out.

Old, was the sense Tristan got from them. Even with the excitement of the arrivals, a tiredness remained on their features. When the woman motioned for him and Alex to follow her, he saw many hugging, crying in joy at the reunion. But many more searching among the arrival, the arrivals searching among them, and the defeat when they didn't find who they had been looking for.

The woman lost her composure and ran to the...teen standing alone in the center of the road. The only thing Tristan was confident of was that they weren't adult sized, or so small as to be a child. It left many years between them they could be. Alex would know, but he was tired enough not to be able to hide his irritation. Now that there had reached the destination, he wanted to be done with them and back on their own journey.

With tears, the woman turned to them and motioned. "Come. Come. Offer hospitality."

"Let's end this," Alex muttered, moving before Tristan.

The worry Tristan felt was his own. His concern that the Source would force his hand.

The building she led them to was the largest one, in the center of the village. Eight trees grew from its corners, tall with wide canopies reaching to over those of the surrounding houses.

The smells confirmed his suspicions. They were the same chemicals as those he'd smelled in the other abandoned village.

"I welcome honored Ancient to home of I," she said, the words flat the way someone recited a phrase without understanding its meaning.

Alex's annoyance was replaced by puzzlement, and while Tristan wanted to demand the information, he knew that when used properly, social play led to better result.

"I thank you, on mine and Alex's behalf." She seemed to struggle, so he placed a hand on Alex's shoulder. "This is Alex. I am Tristan."

"Name of I is Durigna. Name of help is Ferol."

"My name is," Alex muttered, and she looked at him, worry and curiosity mixing. "The proper diction is 'My name is'," he said, annoyed "not 'Name of I'. It's basic code grammar."

That she still looked confused didn't please him.

"Ancient welcome for table," the young one, Ferol, said, stepping in from another room.

"Come," Durigna said. "Eat."

They followed her. The table was low to the floor, and they sat. She and Ferol on one side, Tristan and Alex on the other.

The offering was pitiful. The few vegetables on their plate looked like they were about to die, the meat more ligament than flesh. But there were nearly four times more on his and Alex's plate than on that of their host.

"Fuck this," Alex muttered, taking his plate and stretching over the table.

The young one protested in their language, sounding scared, and Durigna looked

distressed.

Tristan placed a hand on his shoulder. “Alex.”

“Don’t fucking tell me you’re going to let them starve on our account. Look at him. He’d barely more than skin on bones.”

“You’re scaring him.”

“Yeah, well, I never had your self control to start with and I am fucking tired so—”

Tristan kissed him gently. “Let me tell them what you are doing. Let me make them at ease.”

“I just...I just want us to move on, okay?”

“We will.”

He looked at Durigna. “Share in the honor of eating equality with us.”

She took a few seconds processing what he said. “Ancient get most. Sacred words First Ancient, then Servant, then Workfor.” She motioned to them. “Ancient.” To herself and Ferol, who still cowered away from the table. “Servant.” She motioned to the walls. “Workfor.”

“You have got to be fucking kidding me,” Alex said. “Even here, trying to survive, they went and enforced their hierarchy?”

She nodded eagerly. “Hierarchy. Sacred honor.”

Alex clamped his mouth shut and closed his eyes. His first trembled under the table.

“We.” Tristan motioned to him and Alex. “Are not those Ancient.”

“Other Ancient?” she motioned up. “Sky Ancient?”

“Yes. We eat equal with Servant.” He took his plate and extended his arm until he could drop some of the food onto her plate. She looked at Ferol and spoke in a rapid tone. Instead. Instead of returning to the table, the youth hurried away.

“If he’s coming back with more food so we’ll still have more than them,” Alex said. “You are not going to like what I do.”

“Sky Ancient come before,” she said. “Say more come, one day. Take those with still Faith back to Sky.” Her expression darkened. “Prate come, think Sky Ancient. Say we still Faith. Ready to go Sky. Prate say need prove Faith, after take Sky. All work, all work long and long and longer. Ask when. Get hurt.” She touched her neck. “Use Sky Science to make stop asking. Make pain when not work.”

Her expression brightened. “I ask Ancient help. Still Faith. You take Sky.”

“Is she serious?” Alex asked.

“We can’t,” Tristan said.

She slapped her chest. “Still Faith,” she said in desperation.

Ferol returned and stopped in the doorway. He held a rolled tapestry and looked distressed at what he’d returned to.

“I know,” Tristan said. “I believe you. But we are here to cure Alex.”

She looked at his human. “Sick? Sky Science? No sickness.”

Alex snorted. “Trust me, we tried everything we could get our hands on.”

She looked at Tristan, confused. “Then Ancient here made a special Science. A stronger Science. A glowing water.”

“Light,” she said. “Water of Light.”

“You know about it?” Tristan had trouble believing it and Alex stared at him.

“Up long days away. Water of Light in a cave of straight walls and floors.”

She knew where it was.

Tristan grabbed the edge of the table to keep his hands from shaking. This was why. This was why the Source had him rescue these people. It wasn't payment. They were the next step toward his goal.

“Can you take us there?” he asked articulating the words carefully to keep from making it a demand, or sounding desperate himself. He didn't know how they might come out otherwise.

“Take Sky after?”

Lie. What did it matter what happened to them once you had what you wanted. Tell her yes and leave them behind once you have what you want.

Tristan froze. It wasn't the strength or the words themselves that kept him from saying anything. It was the voice.

His voice.

The him from before.

What terrified him more was that it was right. They wouldn't know any better. Once he found a way to get him and Alex off this planet, it wouldn't matter what they believed.

He wasn't someone who cared what others wanted. Even now.

But he understood something new, again.

“I can't make that promise,” he told her.

He understood hope in a way he hadn't before. He felt it and the fear that came with it that it would be taken away. The slavers had used it against them and Tristan found that, without the Source making itself heard. He couldn't do the same.

“I will try. But I can't promise that I will succeed.”

“But Sky Science?”

“This world keeps it from working. It makes it difficult to work,” he amended, thinking of the collars and the guns.

She placed a hand on the tapestry roll Ferol placed next to her. “Help you get healed,” she said. When she looked at Tristan again, her expression was harder. “After you try take Sky?”

Tristan found he had trouble speaking. Fear had a grip on his throat.

“We will,” Alex said. “We will try.”

She looked at Alex, then nodded and Tristan found he could breathe again.

“Ask help,” she said, and he kept his reaction from showing. There would be a price, after all.

“What is it?” he asked before Alex could object. He'd find a way to explain it to him after.

“Prate take children away. When take homes, Prate take all, but children go away. To other place. If not obey, children hurt.”

Alex cursed.

“Take few children on journey to keep family obeying. More children hidden away. Know where. Need Ancient help taking from Prate.”

Tristan looked at Alex, who stared back in disbelief. “If you're expecting me to put up

an argument against helping them, think again. If there was one thing that Source of your could throw at us to make sure I'd go along with it, it's a bunch of kids held hostage by pirates." The smile he gave Tristan was predatory. "Remember the last time we went and rescued a bunch of kids from criminals?"