

Tristan had paid attention to how he felt the entire journey following the convoy down the mountain.

The realization these were the people they were meant to liberate had come easily, whereas he had been able to walk away from the previous convoys they had encountered on their way here. Alex might not believe, or understand, but it was as he'd explained. He couldn't add more to that. He knew these were the ones.

Waiting to act until they were at the slaver camp had been a tactical decision. Liberating only the ones at the mine would cause repercussion to the locals there. There had to be more there, and as far as Tristan was concerned, they had to be included within 'these people'. But he had listened to that part of himself that seemed to be in sync with what the Source wanted in case it felt differently, but it had remained silent.

They had followed at a distance down the only path until they had made out the trees through the light snow that had started falling. They'd then approached at an angle, well out of the line of sight of the sentry towers who would be watching the arriving convoy.

Not long after that, houses under the trees became visible, as well as those built apart of the village, out of metal sheets, instead of out of the conductive clay under the added protection of the trees' canopy. Those were much larger than the houses, not having to worry about foliage. As they'd made it almost to the ground, Tristan had made out the striations on the opposite cliff.

"I was wondering what that was about." Alex pointed over the stone ridge they were using as cover to a fenced off area. Indications there had been houses between the trees were in the forms of part of trunks that had been damaged from attaching the planks that would support the clay. The canopy was thin enough, Tristan wasn't sure it offered much protection.

The one remaining building was at the back, and made of metal sheets like ones making the slaver's buildings, but unlike them, instead of the seams being welded, they sheet only seemed to lean against each other, causing it to look more like a barn than any kind of habitation.

The locals who had controlled the sled's descent were being herded into the pen, to join those already there, twice as many, by Tristan's estimation. Focusing the binoculars, he watched as the hoods were taken off the arriving locals and dumped in a box.

Remembering how he'd been affected by the magnetic field, before they'd made proper protection, he understood why the locals already in the pen barely moved from around the trunks, and why those he were venturing to and from the barn were walking with extra care.

"We are going to need to get enough head covering before we free them." He said, watching as a slaver carried a box full of hoods to a building facing the largest one. "Without knowing when another group of slavers will arrive, we need them able to move as soon as we let them out."

"Oh? We won't be sticking around to free all the locals who come this way?"

Alex failed at covering up the derision, but Tristan ignored the tone. He already knew Alex wasn't happy with the situation and the question had made him focus inward, looking for a sense of how the Source felt about other locals still being used as slave labor.

There was nothing causing him to think he needed to act beyond those already here.

“No. This is all it wants us to deal with.”

He felt Alex’s stare, but he zoomed on the building’s access, trying to make out details through the thickening snowfall.

“I see two guards in the closest tower,” Alex said. “I can make out movement through the snow from the one on our right, so there’s at least one there, and while the other two are too far for me to make out anyone, there should be at least one in each.”

Tristan did a head count as he returned his attention to the pen. “I make out thirteen outside, five on what looks like patrol. With the size of the camp, we can expect the same number to be on the other side and out of view, and a few more simply moving about.”

“There’s probably the same number in the barracks. Maybe a few less than that if they fully shut down at night. No power means no way to light the entire place. I doubt torches will work, especially in this weather.”

“We err on the side of more of them.”

“You’re saying that just to make me feel better about this little detour, aren’t you?”

He glanced at Alex to confirm the smile he heard in the tone wasn’t wishful thinking on his part, then said, “Think of it as your last hurrah before you never kill again.”

Alex rolled his eyes. “If this ends with me not able to kill, we are going to have an even more uncomfortable discussion than the one I’m already planning on about you and the Source. How about we get on with this? The barrack? They will be the least ready for us.”

Tristan nodded, putting the binoculars away.

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The snow was thick enough by the time they entered the slaver’s camp, they might have been able to walk by the patrols and not be noticed. Tristan couldn’t rely on any of his senses to warn him. His eyesight was equivalent to humans, The snow took away all smells, and while the hood give his ears freedom to move, they added to the muffling of sounds the snow provided.

They still made it to the building, then its door, without encountering anyone.

The door had a mechanical lock, but it wasn’t engaged, and they entered, standing by the door after closing it. Hardly anyone looked in their direction, and the lighting being provided by oils lamps mostly where people were gathered meant telling they didn’t belong couldn’t be easy.

Which was confirmed when one of the three to glance in their direction called. “Make sure you leave your snow covered stuff on the hooks to drip and dry. I’m fucking tired of water being dragged everywhere.”

The section further from the door was partitioned using curtains and also in near total darkness. Sleeping areas. If their estimation were accurate, there could be a dozen slavers among them to match the slightly over a dozen visible between lounging and food preparation areas. The showers were partitioned like the sleeping area and none were occupied.

Alex hurried to remove his covering, but Tristan endured the heat. Once he removed the extra camouflage, someone might be able to make out enough of his form to notice he wasn’t human.

“You said this was for you,” he told Alex, not bothering to whisper. “How about you

take care of it and I step in only if you need help?”

“You sure? This is your thing. I’d think you’d want to do this.”

“I’ll get plenty of chances. You put up with me and this, you should get to have some fun. And I’m sure there will be a chance for me to take part before you’re done.”

“Okay, but this doesn’t mean we aren’t having that talk later.” Alex walked toward the other while Tristan slowly removed layers, keeping an eye on the slavers, who had paid attention to their conversation. None reacted as if they understood what they meant, but they did look puzzled.

One called to Alex when he entered the better light and immediately followed it by asking who he was. There was no accusation in the tone, and it told Tristan the number of slavers might be much higher than he’d expected. Alex’s response was to throw a knife in the man’s throat. Tristan had the time to remove two more layers, and Alex to kill another, before the others got over their surprise.

Tristan paused with another layer partially off him and watched Alex flow between his attackers. Blood streaked the wall and furniture. A lamp was extinguished from some, its cover off, for some reason. His human was death in motion and, as always, Tristan relished the sight. As with Alex, he hoped that he would retain his ability to kill once this was done.

Tristan would take Alex however he was, but felt it would be a shame to lose such a predator.

He forced himself to finish removing the layers. He wouldn’t be able to help Alex all the way here when the sleepers were woken by the mounting sounds of fighting, or if one pulled out a gun.

There were five left when the first sleeping pulled her curtain aside. Her demand to know what was going on was stopped by the sight. Then she grabbed something from within the sleeping space and threw herself in the fight with a scream.

When Tristan stepped into the light, the sleepers were rushing out, only to stumble on seeing him. They were the only ones not already too preoccupied with surviving to notice his arrival. The closest four rushed Tristan.

He dispatched them quickly, needing only his claws, then returned to watching Alex finishing the last of his opponent.

Tristan kept his distance as Alex panted.

“It’s safe,” his human said. “I’m in control.”

Tristan grinned. “But I might not be. If I get within reach, I might do something to you we could be walked in on. And we are on a job.”

Alex looked down at his blood covered body. “I’m going to grab a shower. Can you find me clean clothing and deal with anyone who comes in?”

“Do you need heals?”

“If these people were a danger as pirates, they’ve grown soft since crashing here. The few scratches I got don’t warrant I use the little we have left.”

“There might be more here.”

Alex undressed. “Then we add them to our supplies for the next time to decide to take on one of the animals.” Tristan licked his lips as Alex smears blood over his body in the process and watched him until he closed the shower’s curtain.

A search of the sleeping quarters netted him a stack of knives, a set of clothing for Alex, but no heals. The food was mostly root vegetables, similar to those they had found while traveling with stringy meats.

He had only one interruption, and the woman died before she got over her surprise.

Once Alex was dry and dressed again, Tristan was able to look at him without burning with the need to lick him.

“The storm will make it difficult to ensure we get everyone,” he said, while Alex attached knives to his harness.

“We could stay here, where it’s comfortable, and take them out as they enter.”

“Someone will realize people are going missing and go on alert.”

“At least we don’t have to worry about them radioing each other for checks. They are as blind as we are, and they won’t know how many of us there are.”

“Just like we aren’t certain how many of them there are.”

“Since we can’t wait for the storm to pass, considering the mess I made, we start with the towers, then kill whoever we come across? Once they sound the alarm, how safe are the locals in the pens?”

Tristan considered it. “They should be safe. As unexpected as we are, it’s unlikely they will attribute this fight to locals here to rescue the slaves.”

“And what’s keeping them from thinking the unknown factor we are isn’t here for that reason?”

“Human’s tendency to assume everything is about themselves. If we are also human, which is all they can conclude from the level of fighting demonstrated here, they will only connect us to the locals if we give them an indication they are why we are here.”

“So we kill as many as we can before you go to the pen, so that there’s no way whoever’s left can pull something that result in all of them dead.” His human smiled. “I can go along with that.”

Tristan reached for Alex, how batted his hand away.

“We aren’t putting your self-control to the test until we’re done with this rescue.”

Tristan grinned. “Then let’s finish this so we can enjoy each other.”