

“What are you talking about?” Jacoby asked. “What job?”

At least he waited until Tristan was out of earshot, Alex thought as he watched Tristan sulking off. He screamed at someone only he could see. His dead father again? Or was it like back on the Sayatoga, where he saw multiple dead people? He’d hoped that knowing they had a job would give him something to focus on, not set him off like this.

Alex winced as Tristan kicked the wall, somehow managing to undo all his work with one kick.

“Alex,” Jacoby called.

“Yes, we have a job.”

Jacoby raised an eyebrow at him. “And who exactly hired us?”

“The priestess,” Alex answered, even if it was something of a stretch. He’d told her that more people would come, tried to explain it was probably corporate-sponsored, which meant they needed to prepare for an escalation.

She’d level her gaze on him. “The Source sees to our safety.”

No wonder the corporation was taking over this planet, if they preferred praying instead of fighting back.

“How much are we getting paid?” Jacoby asked.

“Enough.”

“Alex, this is me, not Tech—”

“His name is Tristan, I told—”

“We already had that talk. You don’t need to play games with me, how much money can they have here? Are they paying us with one of the animals? Can it even be sold for anything SpaceGov will recognize? What are you even hoping to accomplish here?”

“I’m thinking this place needs to be standing for Tristan to finish his work.” He indicated Tristan, on his knees, putting stones on top of one another again. “Unless you’re not paying attention, we might be here longer than expected.”

“That’s on you. You put him in that state. If—”

“What? You think letting him go off is going to help him?”

“I think that letting him get whatever’s eating at him out of his system is going to do a lot more good than having him believe in some magical solution that comes from building a wall.”

Alex stared at him, feeling the need to plant a knife in the man’s chest. “How long until you can get the hover working?”

“Huh?”

“It’s a simple question, Jacoby,” Alex growled.

“It’ll be a couple of hours to clean everything and make sure it’s all properly calibrated before I put the parts back in.”

“But it can fly without doing that, right?”

“Sure, it got us here, but—”

“Then do that.”

“Why?” Jacoby eyed him suspiciously. “I’d get us there fast—”

“Because I told you so.” Alex cut him off; he had no interest in listening to his excuses.

“Alex, I’m not—”

“You know what? Just leave.” A quick slash at the throat. It wouldn’t connect; Jacoby still had good reflexes for someone who hadn’t seen much fighting recently. “Take the hover and go home.” It would be a good fight, but Alex had no doubt as to the outcome: Jacoby dead. “We don’t need you. We can find our own way back once Tristan is better.” He put emphasis on that, and hoped Jacoby understood that was all that mattered to him, because Alex wasn’t stating what the alternative was.

Jacoby stiffened. “I’m not abandoning either of you.”

“Then do what I fucking tell you. This isn’t a vacation, it’s a job, my job. If you’re staying, you work for me. I’m telling you to get the hover flight-worthy, because I need you to get something.” Alex turned and headed toward the town. “Don’t worry, you’re going to have plenty of time when you get back to do whatever you want to it.”

“That’s what I’m worried about!” Jacoby yelled back.

He could kill Jacoby, Alex thought. Probably should. Tristan wouldn’t care; he probably wouldn’t even notice. If it wasn’t for what Alex expected was coming, that would be the simplest solution. He didn’t want to have to deal with Jacoby’s constant arguing, his use of “Tech” as Tristan’s name, but he was going to need the man’s fighting skills, and as he’d seen, Jacoby hadn’t exaggerated when talking about his combat experience. But Jacoby alone wasn’t going to be enough.

He walked by the House without stopping. The priestess wouldn’t be any help. If she thought some magical force would fix this, she wouldn’t be willing to do the work needed to ensure it happened. So he had to hope there was one person in the town who knew enough Gov Standard to translate for him.

He walked along the narrow alleys for awhile before coming across his first Samalian. “Hi,” he called to her. He did his best not to glance below her chest. “Do you speak SpaceGov Standard?”

Her blank expression was answer enough.

He indicated further within the town. “Is there anyone here who’ll understand me?” Very clever, Alex, like she understood that.

She said something, head canted, and before Alex replied he didn’t understand her, someone answered her. A deeper voice, so a man.

The speaker stepped out of the small home. Yes, definitely a man. Alex pulled his gaze up. They spoke, and Alex tried to follow the conversation. It was too quick for him to make sense. Ultimately, language was just code, so he should be able to parse it, even without a translation program.

Their discussion ended with Alex only catching one word—a name, he thought, by the way it was intoned. Rag-Rik. Then she walked away.

He followed her and they crossed the town, exiting the narrow paths into an open plaza large enough everyone could gather in it, and then back among the buildings. She stopped at one and banged on the wooden door.

A man opened it. Alex swallowed, staring far too long. He was taller than Tristan, broader, with his blonde and copper fur crisscrossed with scars. Alex tried not to pay attention to his groin, but he was also larger than Tristan there.

He and the woman exchanged words, then he looked at Alex, and the intensity in those coppery brown eyes made Alex’s knees go weak. He clamped down on whatever he was feeling, reminding his body he belonged to Tristan.

“Need help?” His voice was higher, lighter than Alex expected, making him feel less dangerous.

“I need to talk with everyone. I need you to gather them and translate for me.”

He narrowed his eyes and shook his head. “Not help.” He turned back into the house.

“Wait!” Alex called. He couldn’t just walk away without even listening.

“You wait,” the reply came, then a soft conversation. Alex strained to make out anything. “Come.”

Alex entered the home and closed the door.

The only window illuminated the large room. There was a large bed against the right wall, an extinguished fire pit in the center, and a table with five chairs on the left. An older Samalian sat in one, with the other standing behind them protectively. The fur was mostly white, with patches of washed-out brown. Their shoulders were broad, but the skin and fur seemed to hang loose on them.

“You need help?”

The accent was heavy, but Alex understood them. Their voice was higher-pitched, and if not for the other Samalian having sounded similar, he would have said the voice was that of a woman. He reminded himself that he was going to have plenty of time to learn to distinguish gender without having to rely on their midsection.

He indicated the chair opposite them. "Can I sit?"

The Samalian gave a flick of the ear, but didn't react otherwise. He'd seen the gesture among the other Samalians, but he hadn't been able to determine what it meant.

"I'm sorry, is that a yes or a no?"

"It means yes. I thought one of us was with you."

"Tristan's body language is human, as far as I can tell. I've only seen him use non-human mannerisms when he plays the role of being Samalian." And now he realized that even that hadn't been based on actual Samalian behavior.

"He is one of the spacefarers."

Alex nodded. "Before we continue, can I ask if it's polite to ask what gender you are? With anyone standing it..." Alex hesitated, realizing that it might not be appropriate for an outsider to mention their sexual characteristics.

The Samalian motioned for him to continue.

Alex sighed and indicated the standing Samalian. "I can tell what gender he is, but you're sitting."

The Samalian smiled, full showing of the teeth, but there was none of the threat in the eyes Tristan had when he did that. "I am female."

"Do Samalians prefer being referred to as women?"

"Isn't that a human female?" she asked.

Alex shrugged. "It's used to refer to just about anyone female, at least among mercs." He tried to remember how he'd heard alien women referred to before he went to space, but as far as he could recall, humans referred to aliens as they, or it.

She gave the same flick of the ear as before. "You can use whichever one you prefer, but I prefer Sartas. It is my name."

"Alright, Sartas. Where did you learn Gov Standard? You have an accent, but you're more fluent than even the priestess."

"I was a translator to the humans who visited us, many years ago. Scientists, at first. I helped them understand who we are. When they left I helped the corporation, but they didn't seem interested in us, just Samalia. Then the other corporation came. They sought my help in convincing Samalians to abandon their home and live in the cities they were building. To work for the humans there. I wouldn't do that. I came home." She indicated around her. "I taught Rig'Irik, but he never applied himself."

"No human here," Rig'Irik replied flatly.

She indicated Alex, and the man's ears did something that made Alex think of annoyance. When he spoke in Samalian, the tone conveyed the same.

She answered in a way that reminded Alex of his grandmother, when he'd been disrespectful to her. Don't talk to me that way, it said.

"You need help with something," she said to Alex. "What is it?"

"Did you hear about the attack on the herd?"

Her ears did a different kind of flicking. "No," she added.

"Humans fired on the animals. Me and my associate—"

"The other human."

"Jacoby, yes. We took them down and sent them away."

"Kill," Rig'Irik said.

Alex watched for Sartas's reaction.

"I do not care they are dead. If they attacked us, you have my thanks for getting rid of them."

Alex nodded. "The thing is that is isn't over. I've tried to explain things to the

priestess—”

“Hea’Las.”

“Right, Healas, she—”

“No, Hea’Las,” she corrected, emphasizing the pause. “It requires a division of both part of the name. It’s a thing the folks from Arter’Val do.” Alex glanced at Rig’Irik and she smiled. “His father was from there. He insisted our son would have a proper Valian name.”

Rig’Irik stood straighter, and said something that came across as snarky. She waved it aside with a reply that annoyed him.

“Hea’Las,” Alex continued, careful with the pronunciation, “doesn’t understand that they weren’t acting on their own, or she doesn’t care. The corporation probably paid them, but even if it’s someone else, they will send more.”

“I believe you,” she said as the silence stretched, “but I don’t see how I can help.”

Alex let the breath out. “I need you to translate for me so I can explain what’s going on to everyone here. You need to organize and get ready to fight off the next attacks.”

She canted her head. “Can you not deal with them? You said you did so.”

“This isn’t going to stop once I leave. I’m only here until Tristan’s done, but those humans will continue to come. I can teach people here how to fight them off.”

“Is that needed?” she flicked her ears in a way Alex didn’t know. “My understanding is they do little damage.”

“They do little damage each time, but it adds up. How many of your herd have you lost? How long until you’ve lost so much you can’t feed yourself anymore? Or feed everyone here?”

“We fight,” Rig’Irik said.

Alex swallowed his first response. Insulting anyone who could fight wasn’t a good idea, but if they could fight, why had it been only Alex and Jacoby who’d acted?

“Waiting until you’re hungry isn’t how you win this. You need to start fighting them now. Have you tried to stop them at any time?”

Rig’Irik bristled.

She said something in Samalian and there was a quick exchange, sounding angry.

“Weapons,” Rig’Irik finally snapped. “They attack from far. Human weapons, better weapons.”

Alex nodded. “And those looking after the herd did the right thing in running for shelter. But I can provide weapons, I can train you in how to fight with them. Properly armed and with the right knowledge, they could have fought them off and kept the animal safe.”

“Weapons are not easy to acquire,” Sartas said.

“I know someone who’ll get us what we need, but weapons mean nothing without people willing to use them. I need your help in convincing them to fight back.

“Know fighting,” Rig’Irik said, pushing out his chest.

“Then you can help train them. Anyone who knows how to fight can help. But we need to start now. Hea’Las said the corporation wants this place. They aren’t in the habit of just walking away from what they want; you have to make it too costly for them to continue. It’s the only thing corporations understand.”

Sartas raised a hand and Rig’Irik closed his muzzle. “Why do you want to do this? You are human, a mercenary. Are you seeking to be paid?”

“I’m already here. I’m not going anywhere, and I have nothing better to do. I also don’t like the idea the corporation is trying to push its ways on you.”

She eyed him. “You, a mercenary, will do this, protect us, without asking for a payment?” She didn’t believe him.

He leaned back in the chair. “I don’t blame you. I’m not in the habit of helping.” He became pensive, realizing it had been a long time since he’d even considered just helping someone for its own sake. Even this had ulterior motives. “I’m going to be here awhile,

and like I said, I have nothing to do. I no longer deal well with being bored. Training you will give me something to do while I wait for Tristan to be done.”

“Done building a wall.” Her tone was still skeptical.

Alex nodded. “A wall he kicked down not too long ago. He isn’t...well. I don’t expect him to get better until he’s done.”

Rig’Irik said something, his tone neutral, as far as Alex could tell.

Her ears flicked in agreement. “He is looking for help, the Defender you returned.”

“We...” Alex sighed. “I have no idea what’s expected when it comes to your traditions, but I’m not interested in discussing the details again. I’ve already explained them to Hea’Las.”

Her ears flicked again, agreement. “You don’t have to explain. It’s between you and the Defender.”

“Thank you. Will you help me? Get everyone together, translate what I say?”

“You will not need to speak. I agree this will help us. I will speak to the town leader and the elders on your behalf. I’ll explain what you want to do, and I will do what I can to convince them they should go along. Rig’Irik will do the same. I will send word to you when a decision has been made.”

Alex stood, trying to think if there were any specific details she needed to have, but he’d said all he knew. Rig’Irik escorted him outside, letting Alex exit first.

As the door closed, he saw Rig’Irik reach for him out the corner of his eyes and stopped, hand dropping to the knife at his belt. He kept himself from moving further, waiting to see what the Samalian would do.

Rig’Irik’s hand paused, then lowered to his side. “Guns,” he said. “You get guns?”

Alex turned. The Samalian seemed calm, but he kept glancing at Alex’s hand on his knife. “I can get them, yes. You’ll also be able to keep the ones from the humans who attack, after you’ve fought them off.”

Rig’Irik seemed to have trouble translating what Alex said. “More guns?” he said finally, hint of hope and excitement in his voice.

“Yes. With each attack, you’ll get more guns.”

Rig’Irik nodded stiffly, mimicking Alex. “You get guns. I make others say yes.”

This was the best he could expect. Now he had to wait and plan.

By the time he reached the hover, he had an idea of how he’d proceed with training, but the details would depend on what Jofdelbiro could get him as weapons.

“You look happy,” Jacoby said sourly.

Did he? “Tell me you have the comm system working.”

“Is that an order? Am I going to be punished if I don’t give the answer you want to hear?”

“Jake, I’m not in the mood,” Alex said through gritted teeth,

“My name’s Jacoby. You haven’t earned the right to call me Jake, and I don’t fucking care what mood you’re in. I deserve enough respect to be told what’s going on. Not to be ordered around blindly.”

It would be so easy to kill him, Alex thought, but he forced that thought away. Jacoby wasn’t being unreasonable. Alex was the one letting his frustration govern his actions.

“Things are progressing,” Alex answered. “I have people who are going to plead my case to those in charge, and one of them is eager for this to happen.”

“And that’s always a good thing, right? Things going your way, the upcoming fighting, the bloodshed?”

“I’m not starting this, Jacoby, I’m reacting.”

The man snorted. “If that’s what you need to tell yourself to sleep at night.”

“You really don’t care if they get stamped out of existence by a corporation?”

“Alex, they aren’t the job. No, I don’t want them to die. I’m not that cold-hearted,

but I remember what happens to mercs who take on more than one job at a time. Something always blows up in their face. Te— Tristan's the job. He's why we're here. What happens when he's done with his wall? Do you think the corporation is going to stop just because we leave? Taking on protecting them is going to have consequences, Alex. Are you going to force us to stay here until the corporation gives up?"

"No, once Tristan is done, we leave. I've told them that."

"So you're going to leave them to deal with the escalation LeisureTek is going to respond with?"

"I'm going to train them, Jacoby. That's what I'm going to be doing between attacks. So they can deal with it once we leave."

"And they agreed to that? They have no idea what fighting a corporation entails, do they? Did you explain it to them? The cost, the damage it will cause?"

Alex glared at him.

"No, of course not. This isn't a job, it's an excuse to fight something."

"Jacoby, you need to understand that I want to kill you right now. I'm not threatening you; I'm trying to give you a sense of how I feel. I need to kill something. It's sick, I know, but that's the monster I am. I have only three possible targets, and only one of which I'll be able to sleep at night knowing what I did to them. So please stop fighting me."

Jacoby studied him, and Alex hoped for his sake he was taking this seriously. "Me," Jacoby said, then indicated the town, "them, or LeisureTek. Would you really kill everyone here?"

"If I lose it, only one person here stays alive. And it's getting more difficult to keep my temper in check."

Jacoby looked beyond Alex, and he figured he watched Tristan. "Alright, to answer your question, no, I can't fix the comm system. Other than that, it'll be ready to fly in under thirty minutes."

Alex nodded. No comms meant no way to access any nodes, no way to check ahead of time with Jofdelbiro so he could acquire the weapons he wanted. He'd have to take what was available and hope it would be enough.

"I'm going to have a message written by the time you're ready to leave." Alex sighed. "I was really hoping to build a proper shopping list for you."