

“Are you okay?” Tristan asked, tightening the bandage over Alex’s shoulder.

His human chuckled. “I lost it, so I think that falls under the ‘not really.’ But they were going to collar you, so they deserved what they got. And since they didn’t know about you until we met them, that means they’ve been using them on the natives. So I’m going with yeah, I’m okay.”

The fight had been so quick, the slavers hadn’t had time to react beyond one arrow, which had done nothing to stop Alex.

“How many of them do you think there are?”

“It’s impossible to know. Considering the collars, the way the locals reacted to you, the empty town, and the overpopulated others, if they are the ones responsible, their numbers are large.” The bandage wasn’t turning red, so the work he’d done on the injury was stanching that.

“They asked if we were chasing a legend about some lost family. You think they were researchers? Historians?”

Tristan considered what he knew while turning his attention to the bodies. “Legends, by their nature aren’t accurate. I find it difficult to believe a team of scientist large enough to have this effect on the general population wouldn’t have been equipped appropriately to do a scan of the planet well before they fell victim to the magnetic field. Also, as prone as I am to vilify humans as a species, I believe scientist we have to fall quite low to resort to slavery.”

“Pirate!” Alex exclaimed, and Tristan looked over his shoulder while going through the pockets. “A few of the natives kept throwing this word at me. I thought it was something in their language, even if it doesn’t sound like anything else I’ve heard them say. I think it was ‘pirate’.”

“While a group of pirate large enough to be able to do this is uncommon, they would be more likely to resort to slavery as a way of gaining a workforce.” He pulled a packet containing six pills stamped with the three wavy lines Heals were marked with. They were smooth and reflected the light, speaking to a high degree of technology making them.

He offered one to Alex. “I don’t know how strong it is, but since they were carrying them, there are no chances you’ll have a bad reaction to them.”

Alex swallowed it and stood. “Are we looking for anything specific?”

“Anything that indicates how they adapted their technology to function within the magnetic field will help. The arrows and spears have to make use of a form of charge accumulation similar to the locals’ weapons.”

“I don’t think the locals are responsible for this.” Alex was holding something which by the shape was a gun, but it had nothing technological Tristan could make out. He caught it from Alex’s lob and looked it over. A grip and barrel, a trigger. He aimed it away and pressed it. It required more strength than his usual weapons and in reaction, a component over the grip, at the back of the barrel pulled away. Doing the same with his finger let him study the end that had a protuberance. A striker for what was within the barrel. He quickly found the release that caused the barrel to pivot and give him access to the back. He pulled the canister out. Cylindrical with a metal head. The head had a deformation where the striker would hit.

He placed it back in, closed the cylinder and aimed at a tree before pressing the

trigger.

The detonation made his ears fold back, and they still ran, the smoke stank of burned sulfur and other things he couldn't identify. But the impact crater in the tree was impressive. This could kill an unarmored human with ease.

"I have more of those things that's in it," Alex said, showing a handful. "How do you think it works?"

"Chemistry, which is not something I studied in depth. It is a clever way of bypassing the magnetic field's effect on anything technological."

"Wouldn't they need tech to make them?"

Tristan took the casings Alex handed him. Sixteen in total. "They either have a shielded location, or a process that doesn't depend on electronics. The components are metal, so a forge would be enough to make them. The explosives would depend on how intricate the chemistry involved is. Many healing effect can be caused using plants. They can be intensified by concentrating their sap, which only requires water and fire. This could be a similar process.

Opening the gun to place a new one in revealed the previous one was still there, minus the metal end. "They can be refilled." The only scent he could identify was that of the burned sulfur and ash.

"Any danger of those things exploding in a pocket?"

"It's how they carried them, so unlikely. And the striker needs a lot of strength before it will hit."

"You carry them."

"Was it in a holster?"

"At the back of his pants, held in place by the belt."

Tristan fashioned a holster out of harder leather from the slaver's jackets and made an under the shoulder harness to hold it. It tended to catch on the edge when he pulled it out, but this kept his hands free.

"Okay, this is going to be useful."

The shape of what Alex presented him was that of binoculars, although the casing had been opened and the sensor end of it replaces with lenses. The top had a series of gears to adjust them, and when Tristan looked through them, and adjusted the width and focus, he clearly saw something in the distance he couldn't make out without them.

The pirate had someone quite clever among them.

He looked at what else Alex had taken from the bodies while he made the holster. The collars, a bow and a quiver of arrows. Three spears, a folded shovel, clothing to which cartilage like plating had been added. Part of an animal's carapace, possibly.

"They've been here for quite some time."

Alex smiled. "Okay, how do you work that out?"

"They aren't relying on polycarbon armor anymore. Even the weakest clothing pirate with own will be armored. Like your jacket and pants. They've been here long enough they had to resort to adding armor they harvested to what they wear."

"Okay, what time frame are you thinking about?"

"A decade, objective, at least. They would have had the armor superiority over the locals, but not the physical strength. They could have improvised better close quarter

weapons out of the materials from their ship, harder clubs, better shields against the arrows. They already had better knives. It would still take time to put together something capable of displacing the number of people I saw in those towns.”

“And since the odds are we aren’t in the precise zone they started, they had enough time to spread.”

Tristan nodded, picking up a collar. The inside had technological components, capacitors in series, seven banks of them. Wires served to interact with the magnetic fields slowly charge the capacitors. He found contacts that if jostled too much would touch and discharge the capacitor.

Only that only worked to keep someone from taking it off. If they broke from whoever held them and ran.

“Alex, did you find anything that even hints at being technological?”

“There’s this thing.” He held a box which fit in his palm, and was three times the thickness of his hand. There was knob on top as well as thick button, which Alex pressed on. “There’s a lot of resistance.”

When it bottomed out, it was with a loud click, and Tristan cursing as the collar zapped his hand.

“How can that work?” Alex asked, looking at the box he was holding. “There’s no way this is shielding a computer, no matter how small it is.”

Tristan rubbed his hand. One of the banks had discharged. “How many positions on the knob?”

“Eight,” he answered after turning it all the way.

If one was to ensure no signal was sent, the others represented each of the banks. “Turn it three times and do it again.” Instead of the one he dropped, Tristan looked at the other collars. When Alex pressed the button, each one sparked.

“I still don’t understand how this is working.”

“That generates a radio wave, which the collars receive, then discharges the appropriate capacitor bank.”

“What does it do for power?”

“The capacitors. We need computers because of the complexity of so many frequencies being used by so many people. Here, it is simple enough to be done mechanically.”

“I still don’t get it, but it clearly works. Do we keep them?”

Tristan looked the transmitter over, curious how it had been put together. The casing was polycarbon crudely put together with chemical adhesive. Normally machines were used to apply them and created seamless joints. This he might be able to pry apart with enough leverage, but there was no way to be sure he wouldn’t damage one of the simple component it held.

Tristan nodded. “But we keep them out of sight, I expect that as much animosity as seeing you causes, displaying these will generate much more.”

“Which leaves the bodies? Do we leave them here for the locals to find and celebrate their death?”

He studied them, how they died. How likely was it the slavers wouldn’t send someone to find out why they hadn’t returned? How long would that take? What could he

expect the bodies to be like when they were found? It would take a significant amount of deterioration to hide the quality of the cuts, and if they knew what they were looking for, how cleanly the bones had been cut would tell them the killer had access to a mono-edge weapon. Could they believe the locals had stolen one from them? If not, how quickly would they jump to the conclusion they weren't the only ones crash landed?

Tristan didn't know the area for places they could dispose of the body. Burning them would work, but the smell could attract locals or slavers, if they were close enough. That only left once option.

“We find a place away from here to bury them.”

Alex handed him the shovel. “I'm in no state to dig.”