

No one showed up for training the day after the funeral. Alex reminded himself not everyone had his level of dedication. Or was as unaffected as him by death. Keeping that in mind as he trained alone was difficult; his anger kept spiking, and he muttered about laziness and the need to prepare.

Done, he clipped knives to his harness, ensuring those needing power had a full charge, and that the polycarbon ones hadn't chipped. He knew they hadn't. He'd already gone through every knife he'd collected during the battle, but he had nothing else to do.

At least until a group of Samalians approached from the town. They weren't the fighters, so he wasn't surprised when they headed for the House instead of him, but it reminded him that he still had to convince them to leave, and that there was one person who might hold more power than those in charge.

He headed for the House too, ignoring Jacoby's curious gaze. He found Hea'Las before the Healer, speaking softly. When she was done, she moved to the Keeper and spoke again. Alex let her go through her rituals. The others cleaned the floor, refilled the lamps, or prayed at the Aspects.

She finished at the Order-keeper, on the left of the door, then turned and smiled at him. "Alexander, be welcome in our House. And let me add my thanks to those you have received for defending us."

Alex shrugged. "The town's fighters did most of it."

Her ears flicked, a mix of agreement and negation. When she didn't explain herself, he continued.

"I need your help convincing everyone to leave."

She canted her head. "Why do you want them to leave?"

"Because whatever happens next here is going to be a lot bigger."

"Why will anything happen? We won."

"We won a few fights, but this time, some of them escaped. They're going to have numbers; better weapons than the kinds we use."

Her ears flicked an affirmative. "Now they will know we can beat them, so they will not return."

"Why would you think that?"

"We won."

"We won plenty of times before, and more came. Why would it be different now?" He was missing something about Samalian psychology. Or maybe this was something about their faith?

"Before, they all died. No one could report our victory. Now they know. They will look for a weaker town to attack."

"You clearly don't know corporations." Her response was to cant her head. "What if you're wrong? Humans don't think like you do. What if they attack again?"

She placed a hand on his shoulder. "You are here. Tristan is here. Your friend is here. I have faith."

Faith isn't going to keep this town safe once we're gone, he wanted to say, but the way she looked at him, the belief in her eyes, that this Source of theirs would look after them, was disconcerting. She'd decided that all this was preordained or something, and there was nothing he could say to change her mind.

How could she be this blind? There was a limit to what faith could do. He told the voice calling him a hypocrite to shut up. This wasn't about him, it was about them.

"Fine, then can you at least convince them to continue training? If nothing else, they'll be ready for the next attack." And he might be able to beat some sense into them.

"Alexander, you fought hard. Now it is time to rest. You won. Be at peace."

He wrenched himself away from her with a too-loud curse. "When you know another attack is coming isn't the time to rest, it's when you prepare. You need to evacuate the town. You need to get everyone away from here or they're going to die."

She looked at him, head canted. She didn't understand what he said. She

understood the language, but their psychology was too different on this. She simply didn't grasp the danger they were in.

He forced himself to breathe. Cutting her wouldn't help. Cutting them all wouldn't do any good other than make him feel better. What he needed to do was understand them. Figure out how they thought and find a way to reconcile the differences.

"Before the humans attacked the town, were there other attacks?" He knew the answer, but he wanted her to explain it again, to maybe reach the conclusion herself.

Her ears flicked an affirmative. "In bad years, other towns will try to take our food. If it is bad for us, we will send our warriors to get food from them."

"How do you decide which town to target?"

"The warriors make that decision, not I."

"I know, but you know what they're looking for, right?"

An affirmative flick of the ear. "They choose a town which had a good harvest, many births from the herd. A town that doesn't have many warriors."

"How do you know any of that? You haven't had a way to talk to those towns in years. And even if you did, why would they tell you anything about how prosperous they were?"

She canted her head as she processed what he asked. "People travel. We send some to visit the towns. Some come here. They see how we are. When they go home, they tell their elders."

"You send spies to other towns and they report to you. They do the same. Why do you let strangers in? You have to know they'll tell their elders how well you're doing. They could decide to attack you."

Her head remained canted. "How could we refuse travelers? The Source welcomes all."

"Maybe it shouldn't," he grumbled. "Okay, so you do intelligence gathering, and you pick a town that is both prosperous enough and weak enough, right? What if the only town with enough for you is better defended?"

Her ears said no before she opened her mouth. "There is nothing to gain by attacking if we cannot win. It is better to attack many weaker towns, take less from each, and return home alive."

He had the disconnect. All he had to do now was make her understand. "So Samalians will only attack if they know they can win. If they misjudge, they regroup and pick a different target."

Her head was still canted. He really should've been talking about this with people who knew fighting.

"If a town is stronger, we pick another one, yes."

Good enough. "Okay, that's the Samalian way. Humans don't do things that way. Is that something you can understand?"

"Humans are different, yes."

"If humans find an enemy that's stronger, they are going to attack again and again."

"Why?"

"So they can win."

"But they already lost. If they are defeated, why try again? It only leads to their death."

"They're going to send more people."

"The city is large, but if they send all their warriors to die, it will be too weak to defend itself."

And here was another disconnect. She thought there was a limit to how many mercs the corporation could send at one time. How was he supposed to convey the concept of infinite fodder to someone who didn't know about the vastness of the universe?

"What if the warriors you send to attack come from another town, many other

towns?”

“Why would they fight for us?”

“You pay them. They get to keep some of the things they bring back.”

“But if they attack for their town, they will have more. Why do they give us some?”

“Because...” He couldn’t think of a way to get her to understand. How could he convey the concept of more population than there were jobs, so some took whatever was available, even merc work? Or that some weren’t suited for anything but fighting and killing? He’d known there were mercs out there in his corporate time, and if he was honest with himself, back then he hadn’t understood why anyone would do that, not when there was comfortable work available.

“Humans are different,” he said in defeat. “There will always be more of them willing to fight for some of the spoils. The corporation can, and will, send ever more of them until they finally win.”

She gazed at him, and Alex finally thought he’d gotten through to her. “You will stop them. It is why you are here. I have faith.”

Alex groaned. “You know that isn’t why I’m here. What if the next attack happens after I’ve left?” He hoped Tristan would be done soon, because the way the attacks had been progressing, two or three other attacks at the most and there would be nothing left of this town, this whole area. There had to be a point where the corporation would be fed up with this fighting and resort to dropping that rock from space.

She didn’t look perturbed by the idea Alex would leave. “The Source will see to us. I have faith.”

“Faith isn’t going to protect you from an orbital strike,” he snapped.

“I do not know what that is.”

“Never mind.” He took a breath. “My point is that if all you have for protection is a belief that you’ll be safe, you’re already dead.”

She looked past him. “You do not believe the Source can keep us safe?” She sounded amused.

“Of course not. It’s a thing, a half-sphere with a light source underneath. It isn’t some force that protects the people if it thinks they are worthy of it.”

She studied him, and Alex fought the urge to squirm under the gaze. “Why did you come?” she finally asked.

“You know why.”

Her ears flicked an affirmative. “You came because you believe a promise made over the Defender bound your lover. That this bond is forcing him to act in contrary to who he is. You are here hoping that by completing a task for the Defender, your lover will receive a boon and be freed from the bond.”

Alex didn’t bother correcting her on Tristan being his lover. “Yeah, so?”

She smiled, full of teeth like Samalian always did, but hers managed to convey sadness. “How do you believe one, but not the other? If the Defender can help your lover, why can the Source not protect us?”

“It isn’t the same,” he growled. “You think I want to be here watching him struggle with that fucking wall? You think that if there was a psychologist I could take him to, I wouldn’t?”

“So you believe that—”

“I don’t believe!” he yelled in exasperation. “Don’t you get that? I’m not the one who believes, Tristan is. He’s the one who’s been affected by the promise, so somewhere, somehow he believes in this stuff. I— I just don’t have any other choices.”

She placed a hand on his shoulder, and he was too tired to get out of it. “Then I will believe for you, Alexander. I will believe that he will succeed in his task. That he will receive his boon, that you will get your lover back.”

Alex chuckled wryly. “You don’t get that either. This isn’t about me getting a lover.”

She canted her head. “I have seen how he looks at you.”

“You mean the anger? The hate?”

“No, not that.” She was back to studying him.

“Then I don’t know what you saw. And it doesn’t matter. All I want is for him to be better. For him to be in control and do what needs to be done.” For all this to finally be over.

“Alexander, you do not need to fear what is coming. The Source will look after you, as it does all of us.”

“Haven’t we already had this conversation? I’m not Samalian.”

“The Source isn’t the source of Samalians. It is the source of all, and that includes humans—you.”

“So what? You think that thing controls everything? That it’s behind the corporation attacking this town? Is it trying to kill you?”

A negative flick of the ears. “The Source doesn’t control, not in the way you mean. It is the start of all things. It set the paths things will follow through the forest, but it is not one path. It diverges many times. It splits, it rejoins, it goes in other directions. All the paths have been laid, but we get to decide which one we follow. We are not its slaves, not like the corporation wants us to be for them. The Source sets the paths we can follow.”

“And you think that along those paths is your protection?” Alex shook his head. “How can you believe that, if you don’t believe it wants anything?”

“I know it, because protection came when we needed it.”

“How has that—” Alex frowned at her. “You’re kidding, right? You can’t believe that thing brought us here. I only came here so Tristan can get better.”

“You are here because you believed a story you read. A story you only searched for because you had the Defender in your possession, which your lover found in a market on a planet far from here, and gave you as a show of affection.”

“It was an act,” Alex stated.

“Possibly, but the Defender stayed at your side, even after you determined he had lied. You kept the reminder of the act.”

Alex raised a hand to stop her. “I didn’t keep the statue with me. It was on a shelf, pretty much forgotten there.”

“Waiting there for you to need him.”

Alex sighed. “You’re twisting what happened so it’ll fit your belief system.”

She smiled. “And you are twisting it so this will fit what you believe. We are both expressing faith, if in different things.”

Alex ground his teeth. “Look, this is getting us sidetracked. I’m not here to talk about faith. I’m here, so you’ll help me convince the town to evacuate. If not that, at least get them to continue with their training. The attacks aren’t over, no matter what anyone here believes. You need to trust me on that.”

“I will convey to them what you told me,” she said after searching his face. “I will explain it as best as I can, but in return I ask that you think on what I said. You already have faith, Alexander. You simply need to have faith that the Source will lead you along the right path.”

Alex nodded. Of course he had faith. He had faith in Tristan, that he would get better, that eventually this would be over. Now he just had to have faith that it would happen before this town got wiped off the planet, and the two of them along with it.