

The camp wasn't what Tristan had expected.

Durigna had told them the children of the families the slavers had taken had been sent to this place. She hadn't seen it, having had the information from one of her people, one of the Workfor, who had been part of a group taken there, and then had found his way, after multiple shuffling through other work details, to the one she was held in. That had been the information she had been waiting for. With it, she felt justified in calling on the Ancient for help.

And, as Alex had become found of hatefully stating, it seemed her prayers had been answered. He might not believe in the Source, but he too was noticing how something seemed to govern events.

The issue was that the information she had provided him spoke of children of thirty families. Families tended to have one child at a time, waiting until they were old enough to join the other workers and have their own families before conceiving another. Factoring variations that always crept into social systems, Tristan estimated she meant there to be between thirty and fifty children. He doubled the number to account for the other families she had no way to know about and had built the rescue of a hundred children.

That number had implied how many guards and caretakers there would be. Children weren't like adults. They couldn't be locked in a pen and expected to survive. If the slavers wanted to keep them around in case pressure was needed, they had to ensure the children lived.

How many slavers there were implied the size of the base they would be assaulting. Her information had been light on those details. Her informant had been more focused on remembering how to reach it, then what to do once there.

A hundred children would need a quarter of that in caretakers. Those would need a support system for food, cleaning and everything else needed to keep things functioning. He estimated that had half the number of caretakers, but didn't diminish their threat value. The slavers had no outside people to call on. Each one of them would be a slaver too, and even the lowliest of pirate had to know how to fight and kill to remain alive in that environment.

Thirty-five people before he accounted for the guards. Four daily patrol rotations to ensure they were always fresh, three teams of two for each patrol circuit. They might occupy other functions during their off time, but he didn't factory that. He was planning for more people than he expected to encounter, not fewer.

He added seven more, a supervisor for each five and the person ultimately in charge of this camp.

He rounded the number to seventy. The barrack he and Alex had attacked held twenty bunks. He reduced the size of the building, because with needing multiple barracks, some would be set aside for other functions. One for food, one for recreations. It meant four barracks at the most as sleeping quarters, possibly three.

He was looking at a total of fourteen such structure.

If two were set aside specifically to deal with the children's need, and one for the workshop to maintain their weapons, it still left nine barracks. A hundred and eighty potential slavers. He saw nothing indicating any type of industry to justify the extra personnel. This location didn't even have signs of an excavated wreck, or that it had been a

village at one time.

The eight-day trek had been away from the convoy route, to what was, the middle of nowhere. Any of the locals looking to rescue the children wouldn't be looking here unless they had the information Durigna had gained.

Since there was no need for as many guards as his original count for the caretakers and support left him, he used the same ratio for how many caretakers there would be, and, through implication, how many children were held here.

They could be looking at as many as three hundred children.

He didn't have enough people for this level of a rescue, especially since a third of those within his force were only there to keep the children from panicking. To escort them away while the rest kept the slavers distracted.

He returned to the sixty people who had remained behind. Only Alex looked annoyed. He'd wanted to come survey the battle area too, but Tristan hadn't trusted the locals not to attempt a rescue without a plan.

"The original plan is a no-go," He told Alex, but it was Durigna who respond.

"Must rescue." Her tone was that of someone who thought she held the power. Tristan wished it wasn't true.

There had been arguments within the village about her coming. She was important to them. Not quite a leader, but someone they needed to make many of the items they used to function outside their homes. But a translator was needed, and her apprentice wasn't skilled enough yet.

"Using a different way," he told her. "Alex, we need to sneak in and acquire material."

"Let me guess. The stuff they use for those bullets."

Tristan smiled. His human knew him well.

Alex looked at the locals. "They can't take part. I doubt they'd know what to look for, and I don't trust them not to go off on their own the instant one of them thinks they see a kid."

Tristan nodded, although he wished Alex had kept the opinion to himself. While Tristan had quickly incorporated the extra Workfor within his plan, once it was clear there would be no convincing them to stay in the village, Alex had resented having them along the entire time.

"All of you need to stay here while me and Alex prepare the battleground," Tristan told Durigna. "You have to make sure they all stay here. There are more Prates than we thought."

She needed a full minute to process what he said, and her expression grew concerned. "Too many?"

"No. Me and Alex just have to ensure most of them are busy with other things, so we can proceed with the rescue." How they should proceed was to retreat to the village and reassess the situation. But he had known from the start these people would die trying to rescue the children rather than return without them. "But it is important you all remain here until you get the signal it's time to start the assault."

"Signal?" she asked.

"Oh, you won't miss it," Alex said, and she looked at him quizzically.

She spoke with the others and the conversation quickly turned agitated.

“I am curious,” Alex whispered, “as to how you’re going to turn those bullets into something that will blow up big enough to take some of them out.”

“I’ll explain once you see the barracks. What are they saying?”

Alex glared at him. As much as he didn’t like being around the Workfor, Alex’s ability with code meant he easily picked up on language. He had learned enough of the Samalian dialect spoken by Hea’Las’s people in a few months to be able to converse with them. Tristan had still been struggling with it after nearly three times that long and he already had the base of Roug’arn dialect he had learned as a child to start from.

“What I do understand,” he emphasized, “seems to indicate she’s winning them over to the idea of waiting. Those who aren’t falling in easily are pointing to me as the reason. They don’t believe, as hard as she does, I’m one of the Ancients. They’re afraid I’m going to side with the slavers when it comes down to it.”

There had only been four who had pointed in their direction, and they now seemed to be cowed into obedience.

“I guess that hierarchy of theirs works in our favor,” Alex said, as Durigna returned to them.

“We wait for sign,” she stated.

Alex was already moving, and Tristan caught up to him.

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“What do you think is in there? Animal fat?” Alex asked, looking at the closest building through the binoculars. It hadn’t taken long to move to the best location for their insertion, and it had come with a good vantage point to the back of a barrack and the large metal container attached to it.

“Unlikely. In these temperatures, it would solidify. I expect they tapped pockets of combustible gasses, the cold temperature would help liquify it for transport, but it would easily return to a gaseous form once the pressure is released.”

Alex handed the binoculars back. “Use a bullet to crack the container, then ignite the gas? I can see one of them making a significant hole, but not how now you’re going to ignite it.”

“With another bullet. But not by firing any. Our goal is to local which building holds the manufacturing equipment that makes the bullets. They will have the powder there, which is what we’ll make the explosive out of.”

“How long do you expect that to take?”

“I won’t know until I see what I have to work with. If the powder is already in bullets, it will take much longer than if they have barrels of it.”

“And all that without being seen by the guards,” Alex said with a sigh.

“You’ll get to kill as many as you can soon enough.”

“You know that isn’t going to make the return trip any easier on me, right?”

“I think that you part in rescuing the children will go a long way toward removing the stigma of being human.”

“Oh, I bet you have been wanting to say that for a long time.”

“I’d have to think you are purely human for that to be true. But even without that,” he added before Alex could start on that argument, “they are going to be too busy on the way back to be preoccupied by if you are in league with the slavers or not.”

“They have the older folk to deal with the kids.”

“They don’t have anywhere near enough. We might be rescuing as many as three hundred children.”

Alex stared at him. “Tell me you are joking.”

Tristan shook his head.

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The seventh building was the one containing the bullet assembling material and equipment. It was all muscle powered, and, as he’d hoped, among the boxes of already assembled bullets were crates of the loose powder. He also had what he needed to make the explosives.

Five of the six other buildings had been barracks. The sixth had been the lounge. Tristan’s goal had been to make one set of explosive and igniter for each building, but by the time he was done with the tenth, Alex had had to kill a second slaver who had entered. Possibly to continue work. Even with nearly two hundred slavers, it wouldn’t be long until their absence was noticed, and it shortened with each new death.

He handed five of the hand sized packages to Alex. “Once you confirm the building is a barrack, place one at the junction of the gas container and the building’s wall and use this to ignite the started.” He handed him the lighter and indicated the end of the powder infused fuze. “The initial detonation will rupture both, and the ignition will finish the job.”

Alex turned on over, hefting it. “Look, I know you can do anything when it comes to blowing stuff up, but for how primitive this is, it seems rather small.”

Tristan smiled. “That’s because you aren’t holding the explosive. You’re holding the primer. The explosive is already attached to each of the building.”

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The first explosion occurred while Tristan was in the process of setting up his third detonator. By the distance, it was one of Alex’s.

The downsides of the physical fuzes were that he could only estimate how long one would take to burn its way to the rest of the powder, and they had no way to synchronize the explosions.

A second, closer to him, explosion.

So he’d told Alex to set each one and run to the next building. The chaos should keep the slavers from mounting a defense in time to keep the rushing Workfor from rescuing the children.

The one aspect of this plan Tristan didn’t like was the inability to ensure all the slavers died. This was too visible, too loud. Someone would decide it wasn’t worth sticking around and run.

Without fault, Tristan had regretted not killing everyone of the enemies he had had to take on for a job. And even if he was doing the Source’s work, he knew this would again prove to be true.

He just had to hope that, as with every previous time, it would come true in a way he could deal with it.