

The reason for the surprising number of slavers they encountered, and how often they needed to detour from the route the priestess had them on, became apparent twenty or so days into the trek.

The wreck was recent enough that other than the snow; the landscape hadn't claimed any part of it yet. It also looked a far worse shape than their own ships. That spoke to either a weak hull or something much larger. Alex leaned toward the second, since this had to be where the pirates, turned slavers, had crashed.

"Murato class," Tristan said, studying the wreck through the binoculars. "Non-standard colors means it wasn't military on it when they crashed."

"Are you telling me every planet with a space faring military uses the same colors?" Alex asked.

Tristan smiled. "No, but the manufacturers use the same final coat for their ships. They charge for a change of color, so nearly all planets stick to having their insignia painted on. SpaceGov's military maintains a uniform color."

"Except for special force ships," Alex added, partially to himself. As coercionist working on the wrong side of the law, he'd had a few encounters with those kinds of stealth ships. "So, while unlikely, this could have been a military ship."

Tristan handed him the binoculars. "No."

Curious what could have his Samalian so certain, he looked at the wreck through them and when he found it, he stared. Alex didn't have a lot of experience with pirates. The Golly was the only ship he knew well, since he's served on it for something like a subjective year. The people there had made him part of who he was now. Tristan had taken that and refined it to a killing edge.

Or maybe not. If he'd been this way before Tristan had worked on him, it meant that Tristan had uncovered it, rather than honed it. He shook his head to clear it.

The Golly had played the stealth game. It passed itself as a merchant ship, so it looked unremarkable.

As a military ship, the crashed one could have blended in, in its own way, but the purple snarling face painted across the hull meant anyone seeing them knew they were dealing with trouble.

Some pirates preferred being recognized and let fear do the work for them.

Alex had been on the receiving end of a few of them in his early days, in large part through his association with the Golly. Unfortunately for them. Fear had no longer been something Alex listened to.

"I'm seeing what looks like habitations around the hull. Looks a lot like how the barracks were put together, but a lot less refined."

"By the time the survivors would have to leave the ship, they would have worked out ways to function within the magnetic fields. The outside habitations would be for whoever took control. So they'd have their own space, the sign of their authority."

"How many?"

"Four," the priestess answered, and Alex looked at Tristan.

"Four ships?" he asked, and she nodded. His Samalian contemplated the wreck. "The odds of four crews coming here close enough to each other to end up working together are low."

“There aren’t a lot of pirates with more than one ship, let alone four of them.”

“But there are some. Murato class is designed to house a thousand people. I don’t believe a pirate crew could survive being that large, but a thousand spread through four ships is manageable with strong leadership.”

“That’s a level of trust in each other I’ve never seen anywhere.” Alex paused. “Well, outside of you and me, maybe Flint and his girlfriend. The Golly had a crew under two hundred, and Anders was getting ready to take over when I asked Meron to let me use him.”

“It does explain the large number of slavers,” Tristan said, sitting down and leaning against the rocks that hid them from the wreck. “How long ago?” he asked the priestess, motioning over his shoulder.

“Five winters,” she pointed up. “Fall there, there, there and there.” She motioned to points in the sky that meant nothing to Alex.

“The formation broke apart when they were caught in the magnetic field. Each ship on a slightly different trajectory. If they were together, they would fall within general closeness, but without communications it would take time for them to find each other. They would have come across the Sovereign wrecks in the process. I doubt they understood what they found, but they would understand the advanced level of technology that survived.”

“With most of them having a village near it,” Alex continued, “and each village having one person who maintains Standard as a language they understand, they would have a way to learn enough to take advantage of the people here.”

“Say Ancient,” the priestess said. “Say help. Say take us up.”

Alex nodded and kept his opinion to himself. She’d called him and Tristan Ancient as soon as she’d heard them speak and immediately assume they’d help her. He gave her leeway, since they had already killed the slavers and freed them, but after what the slaver had done to them, Alex would expect even someone who believed as ardently as she did not to be so eager. Considering it was the second time someone had conned them, he would have expected them to be wary of the pirates, instead of immediately believing them.

He looked at Tristan, lost in thoughts and calculations. Unfortunately, when someone believed in something too much, they could be blind to the obvious.

“Do you think when they met up again, it was smooth?”

“Doubtful. The larger a crew, the less stable it is. Split them up, have the leaders die in the crash, and whoever takes charge of each group will believe they have earned the right to lead the whole. Did you fight for the Prate?”

She looked away.

“Whoever had the most Workfor would have ended up in charge. Possibly with a minimal loss of humans about the slavers.”

“Say show we believe more than others,” she whispered. “Say false Ancient tell lie. Then it over, they take children away. All Ancient false. Not Ancient, all Prate.”

“And as soon as one of them showed they were in charge, all the other fell into line,” Alex said. He’d seen it with Will. With a few exceptions, once they found out Anders was dead, they took his orders without questions. “How many of them do you think are left?”

“With the Workfor taking the casualties, putting the death toll from the crash as twenty percent, taking into account losses to acclimating to the planet, there can

realistically be as many as six hundred who banded together.”

“Two thirds of those are going to be grunts,” Alex said. “Barely above them.” He motioned to the locals. “In their eyes.”

“That leaves two hundred at the top. Those with cunning, strength, skills, and guile in a variety of ratios.”

“And not one of them the slavers we already killed.”

“Although, with the rescue of the Workfor, they will know about me at least. If we encounter a group actively hunting us, it will be a more interesting fight.”

“Do you think they left anyone behind?” Alex asked. “Is there anything in the wreck we can use?”

Tristan smiled and Alex was reminded there were few things his Samalian couldn't make use of.

He shook his head. “We already have anything I could build from whatever material they left behind. I expect they took anything technological to their base of operation. Once you are cured, we can take over that and move on to finding a way to leave.”

Tristan stood and offered Alex his hand. “So we should get onto the first part, so we can then move on to the rest.”