

Jacoby lost track of time. He threw himself into upgrading the large hover with anything from those he'd collected that were more recent—which meant just about every component—and did his best to ignore anyone who came bothering him.

The only regulars at the gun range were his fan club, as Alex called them, so he no longer bothered with it. The blonde female with the gray swirls looked him over each time she came to switch powerpacks. He felt the heat of her gaze on his back, but she kept her distance.

“You’re going to have to give her an answer at some point,” Alex commented after she left.

“Didn’t punching her do the job?”

“She’s respecting that. You demonstrated you’re strong, so she—”

“Yeah, yeah, I don’t want to hear more. We don’t all get off on the idea of fur, you know.”

Alex nodded. “I know. Some get off on the feeling of smooth skin. She certainly seems to.”

Jacoby put the capacitor array on the table and glared at Alex. “Why are you bothering me? Shouldn’t you be getting off training your furry warriors?”

Alex indicated the empty training field. “Which ones?”

“They left? Already?”

“I haven’t been able to convince any but the most fight-happy to keep training, and even those only come when there isn’t something more important for them to do.”

“This is what you get working with civilians.”

Alex chuckled. “I’d expect you to say something like that in an angrier tone.”

Jacoby shrugged. “Unlike you, I don’t care if this place gets wiped off the face of the planet, so long as we’re not here when it happens. I expect you’ll come to your senses if the fighting gets too intense, pack up Tech, and we’ll leave before we can be pulled into the end of their world.”

“Tristan,” Alex corrected.

“He’s the job, they’re a distraction. You keep playing with them, but my only concern is that the three of us leave this place intact.” He looked at the sky. “I hope whoever LeisureTek has managing the acquisition of this place won’t get fed up and drop a rock on it.”

Alex followed his gaze. “I don’t think they can do it.” Jacoby raised an eyebrow. “I’ve been looking into it, and ignoring the fact they seem intent on taking the place more or less in one piece, if not the people, Samalia has a satellite net to destroy the errant asteroid. This place doesn’t have as many as some, but SpaceGov still requires the net be in place. And they have monitoring programs embedded in them to keep track of how many asteroids they destroy. You know SpaceGov and their statistics.”

“So they can just have one go faulty. Those things fail.”

“They do, but I think the amount of work needed to cover up the fact it was an intentional hit is still more than that person managing this area wants to deal with.”

“So it’s easier for them to send ever-larger groups of mercs than deal with the gymnastics involved in explaining a fault?”

Alex shrugged. “It’s my guess. Otherwise, I think this place would already be a crater. SpaceGov, protecting minorities by making sure bureaucrats don’t want to do the contortions needed to explain subjugating them.”

“How do they explain the cities then? Forcing the locals there to live as humans do, clothing and all. Getting them to work for humans.”

“I thought them walking around naked was something you didn’t like.”

“It’s still who they are. I might find it offensive, but this is their place. You don’t see me going around telling them to put pants on. I just avoid them.”

“Getting them to wear clothing isn’t something that shows up as subjugation on a report. A city can be explained as increasing the quality of life. Remember, they’re

making sure no one here can contact SpaceGov about the details of what's going on.”

“You could.”

“I'm not here to save their world, not that I think involving SpaceGov would save anyone. I'm here for Tristan, just like you. The rest is about ensuring there's a town standing for him to finish his wall.”

“How is that coming along?” Jacoby glanced at the work. From what he could see, it looked fairly advanced.

“Who knows? Until it's done, and he's cured, I'm not going to guess. He could snap as he's putting down the last stone and tear it all down again.”

Jacoby studied Alex, then looked at Tristan, his face a hard mask. He imagined this had to be impossibly hard for Alex. A mix of being married to the jobs—like his friends liked to tease him—and having seen too many of them shatter after losing someone they loved, ensured Jacoby never became attached.

“You do know the people here are dead, right?” Jacoby needed to know that Alex wasn't going to do something idiotic, like convince Tech to stick around and protect the people here. “All the training we're giving them means nothing in the end. Even if all LeisureTek does is send more mercs, eventually they'll be overrun. I've seen them fight. They don't have the right mindset to take on a coordinated assault.”

Alex was silent, still looking at Tech. When he looked away, it wasn't to look at the town, as Jacoby feared, but over the trees.

“We'd better hope Tristan finishes his damned wall.” The pain Alex felt came through now. “Because it's been more than three weeks since the last attack. You know what that means.”

Jacoby nodded. LeisureTek was taking its time putting together a proper assault force. Even with him and Alex helping, this next battle would be the final one.

Alex walked off while Jacoby thought, heading to the temple instead of the town. Another attempt to connect with Tech in his current state? But Alex climbed the curved wall and settled on the roof, long-range binoculars in hand. Playing sentry, instead of driving himself crazy with the wait.

Jacoby's gaze drifted to the town, instead of getting back to his upgrades. How long before a corporation decided his little world of Terion Two was worth annexing? It wasn't the best world out there, but eventually it would look attractive to one of them. It might even be LeisureTek that came knocking, looking to turn his town into an attraction for wealthy vacationers, in search of ever more exotic places to see. What was more exotic than humans choosing to live in isolation? Doing hard work, instead of looking for ways to get other people to work for them?

When that happened, would his town be lucky enough to have people like him, Tech, and Alex show up out of nowhere to help out? Granted, his town wasn't as defenseless as this community, but anyone taking on a corporation was playing a losing game.

He slung a rifle over his shoulder and headed toward the town. Homesickness, he told himself when he wondered why he was doing it. He'd been sticking to himself for so long that even being among Samalians would be a reminder of home.

Watch where that's going, he told himself. That was the kind of thought that led to seeing himself as one of them, and deciding it was worth dying for a chance to save this place.

The buildings were still too close to one another for his liking, but they no longer felt oppressing. They echoed how Samalians liked being close, touching, snuggling. Jacoby knew himself for the exception he was, even among humans. He wasn't tactile. A slap on the back was enough to show gratitude. Watching the community work made him feel part of it.

But Samalians touched, sometimes in places Jacoby felt shouldn't be touched expect behind closed doors, but he'd gotten better at seeing those moments come and

looking in the opposite direction. Different culture, different taboos.

And they didn't hold his aloofness against him. Even as gregarious as they were, they respected his need for distance—better than some people back home, in fact. Those who knew him from the gun range patted his arm in passing, greeting him in the few words of Standard they knew. Others spoke Samalian and gave him ear flicks that Alex would understand.

A ruckus drew him to a larger building—the tavern, he realized by the sign that hung over the door. A clawed hand holding a mug overflowing with drink. He walked by. That would be too crowded for his comfort.

In the center of the town, children played. They ran around in what looked like a variation on tag, where they pounced on one another, instead of simply touching and calling “you're it”. On benches older Samalians sat, watching them, making baskets and other things he didn't know. When one of the children ran toward Jacoby, an adult called them back.

Would anyone here surrender when it was obvious the only other option was death? Would they even be given the option? He didn't understand why LeisureTek was so adamant about breaking them. It couldn't only be about creating an attraction. Maybe there were resources under the ground it could sell to another corporation. Something special, rare, or unique to this planet.

Were there even such things? His galactic geology classes were too far in the past for him to remember if it was possible for a planet to have an element no one else had.

Not that corporations had to think in a way he understood. Sometimes he felt those were more alien than any non-human he'd encountered.

Barked laughter drew him to another alley, where a group was repairing a house, taking down old wooden planks and nailing new ones in their place. For a moment he wondered why use wood, but the answer was simple: they didn't have access to permacrete, or polycarbon sheets. LeisureTek wouldn't let them.

They touched while they worked. Hips bumped as they talked and laughed, hand rubbing a back. Leaning against one another as they held a plank in place to be nailed.

Jacoby didn't have a problem with that, so long as it wasn't forced on him. He wasn't intolerant, like Alex implied every so often. He respected these people. Maybe, in time, he could even grow to like them, but they'd never be his people.

They weren't the people who'd saved his life.

He shook his head to clear it. Thinking about what the residents of Terion Two had done for him would lead down the black hole that had been his life before them, and that made him morose.

Walking again, he came across a group of children seated before an adult. He found himself looking for Alex among them, before remembering him on top of the temple. The children were attentive to the teacher as he explained something, gesturing for emphasis.

This was different from how his education had gone, sitting in front of a terminal. No mingling among other kids for someone of his stature, his mother explained when he asked why. They were rubble, while Jacoby was of nobler blood. He'd realized that was crap, but by then his planet-bound education was over with.

It still happened that way on Terion Two, but there, it was because of the distance. Hovers were fast, but who wanted to have to fly their kids to a central place so they could learn when everything was available on the net? With programs to tailor the education to each kid's interests and aptitudes.

When he was back home, maybe he should try to convince the others to create a class like this. Where the kids could socialize outside of getting in trouble together.

If he got back home, the thought came, unbidden.

With Tech's inability to finish his wall, and Alex's worrying fraternization with the locals, he had days where he thought he'd die of old age here, regardless of how many

rejuv treatments he got. A few times he considered drugging both of them and just flying off, but then he'd have to deal with Alex, who had demonstrated a tendency toward being irrational when it came to his perceived well-being of Tech.

Fuck, he wanted to go home.

He turned and headed away from the class, from the people. He had enough of being among them.

A buzz came from his pocket.

He took the comm unit out, wondering how. The only people who had this frequency were on Terion Two, and these things didn't connect to the net.

"Who is this?" he asked.

"You must run," the reply came. A Samalian speaker.

"Who are you?"

"I am Mal'Irtan."

"I don't know anyone by that name." He remembered Jof, and his daughter, but while he couldn't recall her name, it hadn't been it.

"We have met, at the House. I hired you to attack the corporation's depot."

He stopped. "You're the priestess. How did you get access to this frequency?" He patted himself. Where was the other comm? He had more in his pack, but he always kept two on him so he could hand one over in an emergency.

"Jofdelbiro's child brought it to me."

Right, he'd given it to her so he could deal with her tails. "Why?"

"That is not important. You are in danger."

"I'm going to decide what's important. Why did she give it to you?"

A sound between a sigh and a whine. Whatever it was, the annoyance in it was clear. "I lead the people she works with. When you left, she brought it to me because I might need to hire you again."

"Well, I'm not taking any—"

"This is not that!" Samalian curses. Words were irrelevant when the tone said it all. "You are in danger. The corporation knows where you are."

"How?"

"I do not know, but they know you were involved in destroying the depot, you and the others. And they know you are in the wilderness. Among a village near Grr'Ler'Nin."

"How do you know that?"

"I have allies within the corporation, humans who think what they do is wrong. They give me information so I can use it. They tell me they are sending people after you."

Jacoby cursed and started walking again, hurrying, they needed to leave. "How large of a force?"

"I do not know, but large."

"Okay, when are they leaving?"

More Samalian cursing. "They left days ago. You must run!"

"Days? How many?"

"I do not know!"

Jacoby ran. "Thanks." He pocketed the comm. "An attack's coming!" he told the Samalians he encountered. "Get the others ready!" no one reacted. Those who understood Standard would be at the gun range or in the tavern. It didn't matter. His goal was to reach the hover, close it up, pray it would start up in its current state, and fly away with Alex and Tech.

The sound stopped him.

It drew his gaze up against his will. That wasn't the sound of an approaching hover. The dot was almost directly over the town and getting bigger. He sighed in relief; it was too perfect a shape to be a rock.

Which meant it was a dropship.