

“Keep firing!” Jacoby yelled. He shot down a soldier, only for another to replace them. They were faceless with their helmets, and numbered more than they had any business to. This was one town; he was one man. Regardless of what the person who’d called him said, all this had to be about more than that.

A soldier appeared from between two buildings behind the Samalian line, and came at Jacoby. He was too close to fire, so he tried to strike the soldier in the chest with the butt of the rifle. The soldier grabbed the weapon and ripped it out of Jacoby’s hands.

With a curse, Jacoby grabbed the soldier and slammed his head into a wall, cracking the wall and the visor. He slammed him until the soldier fell through the wall and the building fell over him.

Jacoby leaned against another building and caught his breath. “That’s it, Jakey boy, you are due for a rejuv.” Maybe he could talk Cornelius into investing in the equipment needed, that way he wouldn’t have to leave to get them.

When had he gotten so fucking old? His last treatment was what, seventy years ago? He’d undergone it just before the job that had almost killed him, the one that resulted in him finding his way to Terion Two. Maybe there was truth to the stories claiming the more treatments someone had, the faster they caught up to their real age.

He looked at the fallen building, with a black foot visible under the rubble. He’d still taken a fully armored soldier in hand-to-hand, so he wasn’t that far gone yet.

He rejoined the eight Samalians at the town’s edge firing at the still incoming soldiers. They couldn’t be an army, since corporations weren’t allowed them. Not that SpaceGov sanction ever stopped a corporation. This would be one of their security’s assault divisions the corporations denied existed.

There was no way they were winning this. He should have stayed at the hover, but now that he was here, he wasn’t abandoning these people.

“All good?” he asked the closest Samalian.

“All good,” she replied with a grin the others echoed. At least she was too busy shooting soldiers to hit on him.

Eight here, how many left elsewhere? Clearly the line broke somewhere, if that soldier was able to come from behind, but who else but his fan club had continued carrying their guns?

He couldn’t look at how hopeless this was; he had more important things to focus on, like how they were going to win.

The few glimpses of the dropship he’d gotten between the thinning soldiers showed no one was exiting it anymore. So these were all they had to deal with. That was a positive. The sheer number of them, not quite that positive.

And the bodies between the town and the ship, so many of them. Like the overconfident fighters they’d become, most of the Samalians had rushed the ship, taking the fight to them. How many of the townsfolk were left? Where were they hiding? Every instinct told him to leave, this was hopeless, but the way Alex had yelled at Jacoby about his willingness to let everyone here die stung, and kept him firing at the incoming soldiers.

The soldiers were scattering, not in fear, but because there were other places that didn’t shoot back. There was nothing he could do about it; the town was going to be overrun.

The light on his rifle turned red, and he dropped it. He found the rifle the other soldier had, a newer model he didn’t know, slung it over his shoulder, and rejoined the line.

This wouldn’t be the first time he’d been an idiot.

He aimed at joints in legs and took soldiers down, only for them to be replaced by still more of them. Between one shot and the next, he heard the sound of hard boots behind him. Only one other person in this place wore boots, and this was multiple of them.

Jacoby ducked in time to avoid being clobbered, the rifle's butt flying over his head. He elbowed his attacker and pulled a knife as he turned. He stabbed this one and froze at the four rifles aimed at him.

He was dead. Yep, he should have been smart about this and just gone back to the hover, threw Alex and Tech in it, and flown away. Fuck that, he should have brought them home the moment Alex told him Tech's cure was some spiritual bullshit.

Instead of shooting him, the soldier in the lead placed the rifle down and took out a knife. Were they really stupider than Jacoby had been? Even if their orders were to take him alive, the smart thing to do was shoot him and drag his unconscious body back.

Jacoby dropped his rifle. If they were going to play macho games, he could go along and take advantage of their overconfidence.

The soldier came at him, fast and sleek. Jacoby deflected the blow and delivered a quick slash that opened the arm joint. He didn't care how good they were; nothing beat a couple hundred years of experience.

There was only a thin line of red before foam sealed the cut.

Of course, technology did bring its own advantage. They exchanged strikes. Any cuts Jacoby managed to inflict that reached flesh were quickly sealed. The ones he received were shallow, but kept on bleeding. He wasn't winning this. Blood loss would take him down, and if he somehow managed to beat this soldier, there were three others who—

There were three quick flashes of a blaster, with the detonation of close-range explosions.

His opponent spun to face the new threat, and Jacoby planted his knife in the soldier's kidney. He twisted it to be safe, then cursed as he saw the gun's barrel against the soldier's head. Jacoby threw himself to the side. Another flash, another detonation, and that soldier dropped.

Jacoby rolled on his back and reached for Termy at his hip. The black fur had a red tint to it, giving an indication of how many he'd killed in close combat. He tried to remember any black-furred Samalians at the gun range, but those who had been there had more vivid extra colors than the small dot of red. Tan stripes, or swirls. He only knew one Samalian with a light speckling of..

"Tech?"

The Samalian crouched next to the closest soldier and went through the pockets. He handed Jacoby an injector.

"My name is Tristan, but you already know that. Heal-All, take it. I don't know that there's going to be enough unguent to treat everyone."

Jacoby injected himself and the small aches and pains vanished. This mix had a painkiller in it. Before he could object, Tech had another injector at his neck.

"This is a stim. I can't have you passing out."

"I was fine," Jacoby objected, rubbing the spot.

Tech detached the pouch from the belt and handed it to Jacoby. "You'll have everything in there to deal with your injuries. Seal your cuts while I go see to the others."

Jacoby grabbed Tech's arm as he stood. "Tech, did-did it work? Are you cured?" He searched the Samalian's eyes, and they were clear. None of the confusion that had been there since the Sayatoga.

Tech looked at the hand. "Let go of me, Jacoby."

"We can leave," Jacoby said. "I can have the hover ready to fly within the hour."

"Let go." The tone was cold, murderous. Jacoby's hand opened on its own. "We can't leave until I've made things right. See to your injuries."

Jacoby watched Tech speak with the four Samalian still standing—all that was left of his fan club. He noted the female that hit on him wasn't among them. He found her sprawled on the ground, a hole in her chest. He found the sealant, and by the time Tech returned, Jacoby no longer had open wounds. He looked up at the flash of blaster fire.

Soldiers dropped, and the four Samalians left were banging on each door they came across, yelling.

“All done?” Tech asked.

For an answer, Jacoby got to his feet.

“Good, now come on, I’m going to need your help.” Tech walked toward the edge of town, toward the dropship.

Jacoby didn’t move. “Tech?”

The Samalian stopped, waited, then turned. “What, Jack?”

Jacoby ground his teeth. “That’s not my name, it’s Jake.”

“And mine’s Tristan. You—”

Jacoby dropped as Tech raised his gun. Jacoby spun, raising Termy, and joined in firing at the approaching soldiers. Tech fired seven shots, and seven soldiers died. What kind of gun did Tech have that blasted through visors with such ease?

Tech replaced the powerpack out of his gun.

A modified one, definitely something Tech would do. Jacoby found himself smiling.

“Come on,” Tech said, “we need to move before more soldiers come for us.”

“The hover is in the opposite direction.”

“I know.” Tech walked in the direction of the dropship.

Jacoby ran to catch up to him. “Are you insane?”

Tech’s lips curled up, showing teeth, and Jacoby took a step away, realizing he’d never seen Tech smile the Samalian way before.

“I can finally say that no, I am not insane.”

“There are going to be more soldiers on that ship.” Jacoby fired at a soldier running after them.

Tech took down two approaching from the ship. “I certainly hope so. I’m nowhere near satisfied with the amount of death I’ve caused.”

“Where’s Alex?”

“At the House, being looked after.”

Jacoby grabbed Tech’s arm and forced him to stop. Part of him screamed at the stupidity of having this conversation in the open, where any soldier on the ground could be acting, waiting for a chance to pop up and shoot them, but he had to get Tech to see reason.

“Then think of him. We need to leave, now. There’s no way we can defeat these soldiers. They have numbers and training. Let’s get Alex and head out while they’re busy with the town.”

Tech looked at the hand the entire time Jacoby spoke. When he raised his gaze to Jacoby’s eyes, the expression in them was death. “If you don’t take your hand off, I am going to cut it off.”

Jacoby noticed the knife in Tech’s other hand. He was certain it hadn’t been there when he began speaking. He let go.

Tech fired three times over Jacoby’s shoulder.

“You need to understand something, Jake. I don’t care what you want. If you want to leave, take the hover and leave. I’ll rebuild one of the others.”

“I’m not abandoning you.”

“Then stop wasting time telling me what to do. Tech followed orders, I don’t. I give them. These soldiers are here because of us. We brought this on these people, so we need to fix it. Not to mention they hurt Alex. Are you going to help, or not?”

“Of course I’ll help.”

“Good.” Tech started walking again.

By the time they reached the dropship, a handful of soldiers exited it, only to die before they could take position.

“Stay here and shoot any human that approaches, except Alex.”

“I thought he was at that House?”

“It’s where I left him, but I know him. If he wakes up, he’ll come here looking for me.”

Jacoby scanned the field. “I don’t think we have to worry about the soldiers; they’re busy in the town.”

“That won’t last. If they haven’t already called them back, they will the moment I start killing inside the ship.”

“Tech—”

“Jack,” Tech growled.

Jacoby sighed. “Tristan, be careful. There’s no way to know how many soldiers stayed behind.”

Tech grinned ferociously. “I know how many there are; nowhere near enough to stop me.” He vanished inside.

Jacoby holstered Termy, grabbed the rifles off the dead, and lined them on the ground, ready to pick up. Sooner than he expected, screams came from inside the ship. Not long after that, soldiers appeared at the edge of the town. Jacoby took his time aiming, and took three of them down with one shot each before the others began weaving about, or threw themselves down to crawl forward.

He didn’t kill many this way, but the soldiers also couldn’t advance quickly. He glanced inside the ship at the sound of steps running in his direction.

“Time to go,” Tech said, jumping out and grabbing two rifles.

“There are soldiers between us and the town,” Jacoby said, following him toward said soldiers. “All of them, I think.”

“Good, then this is going to be even more fun.” Tech fired at soldiers who’d crouched for shots.

“What’s the hurry?” Jacoby yelled, trying to keep up and fire at the soldiers.

Tech didn’t reply.