

The roar-like yell had Jacoby looking up from the anti-gravity generator he was cleaning, the one from the old bus the last group of mercs had used. The outside had been in bad condition, but the parts had been upgraded at some point in the last objective decade, if not maintained.

He shielded his eyes from the late morning sun as a group of kids ran away from Tech, who watched them, teeth bared. They did that every so often, a game they'd been playing since the last attack.

Jacoby shook his head in amusement. And Alex thought there was something wrong with Tech. Playing at terrorizing kids wasn't something someone sick did. Alex tried to keep them away, but he was now too busy socializing with his new friends or training them.

Alex wasn't here now. Jacoby looked at the fighters to confirm it. If he were, he'd be playing herder to keep them away from Tech, so he could work.

He watched as the kids huddled and then spread out, heading toward Tech, trying to sneak closer to the working Samalian. Invariably, one of them attracted his attention and Tech jumped to his feet, roaring. They ran off.

Jacoby wondered what would happen if Tech were to chase them, catch one. Would that scare them enough to go complaining to their parents? Would they demand Tech leave? Would they finally go home if that happened?

He shook his head to clear the idea out of it. He wasn't the kind of man who used kids to get his way. Alex would see reason eventually.

The adults were nowhere near as smart as the kids, and Tech nowhere near as gentle with those who bothered him. He always had some watching him now. Males and females, and at least with the males, their excited states made it clear what they wanted out of Tech. Those who got close to him were growled at, and those who didn't take the warning seriously got a beating.

Jacoby thought that would be enough to get them to leave Tech alone, but there was always a stupid fool willing to risk his life for... what? A chance at getting Tech in the sack? That would never happen, not while Alex was around. Like the kids, this started after the last battle, and after a week, it showed no sign of slowing.

Those smart enough not to get close to Tech left him...offerings, was the best Jacoby could come up with. They didn't just put the bowls of food, or other trinkets, on the table. They went to their knees, bowed, and offered them. They were distant enough, Tech ignored them. They put the stuff on the ground, stood, and backed away.

The whole thing had a reverence that made Jacoby sick.

There were enough Samalians at the gun range that he wiped the gunk off his hands and joined them. The Samalians did their best to include him in their conversation by using as much Standard as they could.

Except for Rig, and a blonde female with light-gray swirls Jacoby hadn't bothered to learn the name of, it meant Jacoby got to understand one word in every dozen. Rig had been fluent before they arrived, and she had practiced hard, and she now spoke a broken, but understandable Standard.

"Rig," Jacoby called as the Samalian decimated the target with the DSU-21 rifle. "Aren't you neglecting your hand-to-hand?"

"No." He deftly took the powerpack out, put a fully charged in, and fired at another one of the wooden stick figures they were now using as target.

Jacoby watched a little longer before shaking his head and moving on to help someone who needed it.

Something had happened between him and Alex, and now the two avoided each other. Or rather, Rig avoided Alex, and Alex didn't seem to notice, which made Rig angrier. Instead of confronting Alex about it, he shot targets. He was now the best Samalian rifleman.

The blonde-and-gray female let out a string of Samalian curses as she tried to take

the pack out of the Brazely Personal Power. The BPP was notorious for having a sticking pack, but she couldn't get the hang of the sliding unlock and pull required to take it out. Without words, Jacoby steadied her hand over it, indicated the unlock, and helped her through the motions again.

Excitedly she thanked him, forgetting to speak Standard in the moment, then switching. Those around commented in Samalian, and she barked replies that had them snickering. He had her repeat the motion a few times before moving on to someone else. He'd have to help her again tomorrow. When she got excited, she lost her manual dexterity, and the BPP did require finesse. She should've used something else, but she was in love with the handgun, carried it everywhere, even if he didn't let her keep a powerpack for it.

"Where's Alex?" Jacoby directed the question at Rig, but the Samalian ignored him. "He should have showed up to teach them knifework already."

Even though they had claws, a few Samalians had taken a liking to knives, and Alex had been teaching them how to handle them. But since the battle, that was something else he was neglecting.

"Town," The female answered.

Of course, Alex was in town, but what was he doing there, all day? Drowning his misery in drink? Burning off energy in... He looked at Rig. If Alex was in bed with someone else, it would explain Rig's behavior, but Jacoby couldn't see Alex doing that. Not because of Rig, but because of Tech. Alex was devoted to him, to an unhealthy level.

But Samalians were rather free with whom they loved. Jacoby avoided going to the town since walking in on three of them going at it in an alley. Had Alex decided that because Tech was Samalian, he wouldn't mind him having sex with other of his species? If that was the case, Jacoby had a feeling Alex would be in for a surprise if Tech found out. Jacoby didn't see him as the sharing kind.

As the sun started going down, Jacoby saw Alex returning. Jacoby met him halfway, away from anyone who'd listen in. Mainly Rig and Tech. This could turn ugly if either heard this.

"Alex," Jacoby greeted him. "Out of curiosity, what's keeping you busy in town?"

"Their computers," Alex replied, not stopping.

Jacoby watched, too stunned to walk with him. "What do you mean 'their computers'?" he called once he got over it. "They don't have computers."

"Of course they do." Alex wasn't entirely paying attention to him, distracted by his thoughts. "They just can't use them. Someone unleashed an infection on them."

Jacoby looked at the hover by the priestess' cabin. "Should I be worried?" He didn't go on the net often, but he did go to check his node for news from back home.

Alex finally looked at him, then followed his gaze. "No, we're safe. Their computers are identified as Samalian, so LeisureTek can track what they do on them. The infection targets that identifier. The only way ours would get infected if is one of us were to insert the infection in those systems."

"So LeisureTek's attacking them? Cutting them off from the rest of the world?"

"That doesn't feel right. LeisureTek doesn't want them to die, they want the people here to give into them. They're applying pressure, not strangling them. How are they going to call for help without access to the net?"

One of the Samalians from the fighters called to Alex, speaking quickly. Alex replied in Samalian with an ease Jacoby didn't like.

"It might be someone at LeisureTek," Alex continued, "but I doubt it's approved. Like you said the other day, all this has probably been assigned to a cubicle jockey who's doing the best he can with limited resources."

"What did the Samalian say?"

"Huh?"

"The one who talked to you."

“Oh, he wanted me to spar with me, so I can evaluate his form.”

“And you answered?”

Alex looked at him. “I’m busy. What’s going on, Jacoby?”

“You spoke to him in Samalian.”

“Did I?” Alex looked back. “Huh, didn’t realize it.”

“You didn’t realize you spoke in a different language? How does that work?”

Alex shrugged. “I already speak a bunch of different languages. SpaceGov can only enforce a standard form over the network. Internally, every corporation has its own coding language, and I’ve had to learn them if I didn’t want to waste microseconds with a translator program. I guess speaking Samalian’s the same. It’s just code, after all.”

Jacoby shook his head. At least Alex wasn’t cheating on Tech, he had to be content with that.

Alex nodded to the table with the anti-gravity generator. “How is that going?”

“It’s going. Turns out that bus has more recent parts than either of the other two hovers. That’s from it.”

Alex looked around. “So, you kept it?”

“It’s in the woods.”

“Which of the hovers are you putting that in then?”

“After I’ve cleaned it, it’s going in the vacation hover we came in on. It isn’t so powerful that it’s going to make much of a difference in how long it takes to get back to the city. I don’t think you want to be cramped with Tech in the small thing the mercs came in on, and the bus has no comforts.”

Alex didn’t say anything. He looked at the generator, ran a finger over one of the section Jacoby hadn’t cleaned yet, the tip coming away covered in black goo.

“You mentioned something about these parts not being well maintained. Do you think that’s on purpose?”

“What are you thinking?”

Alex wiped his fingers on the rag. “Mercs are disposable, as far as corporations are concerned. They could have sabotaged this so it would fail after doing the job. It happened often enough to Tristan and me when we took jobs for them. They promise this giant pay for a tough job, you do it, and on the way back, the hover blows up under you. Job’s done and they don’t have to pay anyone.”

“Blow out from under you and Tech?”

Alex smiled. “They tried, but they didn’t count on Tristan going over every inch of his equipment, and that includes the provided transport. They paid for it.”

Jacoby sighed. “Back in my day, there was more respect for the work we did. Tech would have to go over this to tell you if it’s sabotaged. I can repair a hover, but unless it comes with the data file explaining how it was sabotaged, I’d miss that. I think this is just negligence from the rental company. Before we got here, people kept showing up to harass the herders. That means they had to return to wherever they came from. I wouldn’t be surprised if it was the same people coming back over and over. Things only escalated once we started taking them down. That tells me they were expected to make it back.”

Alex nodded. “That makes sense.” He smiled. “I’m going to go in the hover. I need to work on the latest version of my antibodies. And you probably want to be alone with your fan club.”

“What fan club?”

“Ja-Co-By!” a Samalian called. Blonde with gray swirls was striding toward him with four others from the shooting range. “Shooting done.”

“So I see,” he replied, trying to work out what Alex had meant. “Watch,” she said, and she proceeded to take the powerpack out. It stuck, but her motions were precise, if slow. In a firefight she’d be in trouble.

“Good work,” Jacoby said, and she smiled, all teeth. She and the others put the

packs in the charging rack. "Come drink," she said.

"Have fun."

She canted her head. "You come."

"I'll pass. I've told you before, I'm not interested."

They spoke amongst themselves, and Jacoby turned to the generator.

She placed a hand on his shoulder and he stiffened. "Come," she repeated. "Celebrate. Hero."

Fighting the urge to push her away, he gently took her hand and moved it away. "The celebration was last week. If you guys are still celebrating, good for you. I have better things to do."

She canted her head. She didn't understand, Jacoby was sure, but he didn't care. She smiled, another show of teeth, and she grabbed his hand as he released hers. She pulled him toward her.

Jacoby didn't think. She had him off balance so he collided with her, but he planted a foot behind her legs and shoved her back, yanking to get his hand out of hers.

With the barking that was Samalian laughter she fell back, but he hadn't managed to get his hand out, so she pulled him along. He felt a hand on his belt, then he was in the air. His back hit the ground hard enough to take the breath out of him. Then he was moving, turning to get to his feet.

Her hands reached for him, but he twisted out of the way. She was stronger than he was. If he let her gain control, he was done for. She tried to grapple him again, but he easily evaded her, turning to keep facing her. The only advantage he had was that she lacked skill.

When she reached for him again, he grabbed her wrist and let himself fall back, pulling her with him. He raised his foot to plant it on her stomach, but she twisted. His boot slid against the fur and she landed on him, punching the breath out of his lungs.

She looked at him, panting. Her fingers caressed his cheek. He wanted to shove it away, shove her off him, but his arm was pinned. "Come?" she asked softly.

He got it now, got what she was after. He managed to pull an arm out, grabbing Termy, and put the barrel to her side. "If you don't get the fuck off me, I'm going to put holes in you until there's nothing left."

Laughing she rolled off him.

Shaking, he stood, glaring at her. "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

She canted her head, the laughter dying off. Jacoby knew she didn't understand the words, but he hoped the tone was enough.

She stood. "Angry?"

"What do you think? Yes, I'm fucking angry. I'm not interested in you, in getting a drink with you, or anything else that has to do with you. Stick to your own fucking species."

She continued to watch him, head canted. If she understood any of what he'd said, she didn't show it.

He threw his hands in the air. "Fuck it." He turned and focused on the anti-gravity generator. He saw them leave, and without the stress of her presence, he could think.

What could he have done to give her the impression he was interested in her? He shuddered at the thought.

"If you'd bothered getting to know them," Alex said from inside the hover, "you'd know why she's coming on to you."

"I don't want to hear about it, Alex. I told her, now it's the end of it."

Alex snickered, and Jacoby glared at him. There had better be an attack coming, because Jacoby got the sense that he was going to want to hit people real soon.