

Jacoby wished he'd kept the hover in a readier state. He wanted to leave before Tech changed his mind, or Alex convinced him they needed to stay. If he'd known today was the day, he'd have put everything back in already.

At least after all these months tinkering, and all the new parts he'd installed, they'd be back to the city faster. The sooner he could put this planet out of range, the happier he'd be.

Alex paced, pausing each time he turned toward the temple to watch Tech and the group of Samalians talk, before resuming his pacing. Jacoby only glanced at them once in a while, and whatever conversation they had wasn't going well. Tech was calm, but the majority of the others were agitated.

Alex's expression went from concerned, to fearful, to angry, but the only thing he did was pace. Jacoby wondered what happened to all the hope Alex had been holding onto at getting Tech back to who he was. He should've been overjoyed, preparing a bed for them to rock the hover.

How had this thing worked? There was no way an imaginary being had come down and made repairs just because they'd put a statue back in its place. It had to be something else, something real. Maybe something like meditation. There were enough devices that made that work, maybe that's what building the wall had been: a repetitive, monotonous act that allowed Tech to focus in on himself and what? Jacoby didn't even know how meditation worked, only that he'd seen enough practitioners change their lives with it.

He glanced around the hover. Alex was inside now, Tech still talking with the other Samalians. Jacoby thought he saw anger in some's body language. The priestess didn't show any reaction to the conversation. Had they expected Tristan to stay? To continue protecting them? Even as out of touch with the real universe as they were, they had to know LeisureTek was going to return at some point, if only to find out what happened. Whatever they rebuilt wasn't going to last long then.

If they thought Tech was staying, Jacoby had news for them: he wasn't going to let that happen. He wanted to be out of here, and he was taking Tech with him. If they tried to stop him he would... Well, he wouldn't decimate them, which Alex would do, but he'd make the point that this was out of their power.

Sometime later, he finally put the last of the plating back on. The hover was ready to fly them back to the city. Alex was leaning against the table Jacoby had used to do the repairs, fully dressed in his gray and red clothing, his harness under his jacket, and gun belt on. His arms were crossed over his chest, fingers tapping impatiently.

"We're ready to go," Jacoby said.

Alex pushed forward. "What the fuck were you thinking?"

Jacoby took a step back. "I was thinking the hover needed work, I explained that before. I just put in more recent parts from the other hovers the mercs used."

"That's not what I'm talking about, and you know it."

Jacoby leaned against the hover. "If that's not it, I have no idea what you're pissed about this time."

Alex got in his face. "You spent all your time here bitching about wasting time, about how he could be fixed in that town of yours. And the moment he's cured, you go and fucking let him almost kill himself?"

Jacoby pushed Alex back. "Wait a minute. That's what you're angry about? I didn't let him do anything. I tried to get him here the instant I saw him. Maybe you forgot that detail in all the time Tech's been sick, but he does whatever the fuck he wants. I went along with him so I could do everything I could to keep him alive."

"And how well did that work out? He's hurt, got his side gouged out! He could have died!"

Jacoby wondered how he'd missed it. No, he hadn't even looked. He'd been too busy rejoicing because they were finally leaving. "Alex, you didn't lose him. I get that you're

afraid you almost did, but he's right there, talking with the others. When he's done, he'll come here, and we'll leave. Everything's fine."

"He's not fine! You're just too fucking self-absorbed to see it. So long as things are going the way you think they should, you don't give a fuck about how they really should be. All you're interested in is maintaining that little fantasy of yours."

"My fantasy?" Jacoby raised an eyebrow. "I'm not the one who picked this place because he thought some mumbo-jumbo would fix the guy he loved."

Alex snorted. "It did something, which is more than any shrink could have accomplished."

"Oh, like you gave that a chance. It's pure luck you got something out of this, but you're still not happy with it."

"You think this was luck? I did my research. You think the only people with a grasp on what's real are humans? If you'd bother getting to know people, maybe you'd learn something about how vast and strange the universe really is."

"I've gotten to know plenty of people."

"Really? Give me the name of one Samalian in your fan club. How about one in the entire town?"

"There's the one you had trouble with. Rig."

"His name's Rig'Irik, which you'd know if you bothered getting to know him. You don't even know the name of the one who was interested in you, do you? And I told you her name."

"I had no interest in getting to know her, of all people."

"Right, because of her fur. She couldn't be worthy of you, since she didn't have smoothed skin."

"Okay, that's enough." Jacoby put distance between the two of them. "I have no idea what's with you right now, Alex, but I'm not giving you the fight you're looking for. I've known plenty of aliens in my years as a merc. I even consider Tech a good friend, so you don't get to—"

Alex gave out a bitter, humorless, bark of laughter. "You don't even know anything about him."

"I've read his file, Alex." Jacoby sighed.

"And you still think he's this nice little Samalian you can keep as a pet."

"No, I don't. I'm not keeping him. We're not forcing him to stay. It's where he lives."

"Right, that's why more than once you've talked about tying him and me, and dragging us away from here, because you're not forcing him to anything."

Jacoby rubbed his face. "Okay, those weren't my smartest moments, but I'll point out I was angry each time. As for his file, I got to know the real Tech, not the criminal. Fuck, Alex. You more than anyone else has to know that criminal files, warrants, and bounties are always crafted to cast us in the worse possible light. No one is quite as bad as what's on there."

"You actually believe that? You actually think that there's someone at a desk in SpaceGov going over each file and removing the things that might cast a criminal in a good light? Like fucking what? Oh, look, that academy Tristan blew up, he actually took the time to take all the kids outside and only left the abusive teachers and administration to die. That shows he had a heart, so let's make sure that doesn't show up on any of the file.' You think there's anything that could be added to Tristan's file that would make him look like a nice guy? You realize one of my jobs is to tone down his file, right? Remove the worst stuff we've done? And it still portrays him as cold-blooded mass murderer. You're more fucking insane than I am."

Jacoby kept his mouth shut. Alex had one twisted view on the universe, but he'd already known that, if not how bad it was. Still, it wasn't his life, it was Alex's and Tech's. Tech had to know about it and he still cared, so hopefully he could help Alex get better now. But Jacoby did wonder what someone had to go through to get that twisted.

He nodded toward the approaching Tech, and Alex spun. At the temple, the Samalians were walking away, toward the treeline.

“What are they doing?” Jacoby asked.

“They’re leaving. I explained to them they can’t be here, at least not for awhile. It took some explaining; they don’t get corporations, so as far as they are concerned, this should have been enough to ensure no one bothered them again.” Tech looked from Jacoby to Alex. “How are things here?”

“I’m good,” Alex answered, but he was so tense, Jacoby thought he might vibrate himself out of existence. He should relax, now that Tech was standing next to him. Alex handed Tech a handful of pills.

“We’re good to go,” Jacoby said. “I should do a preliminary system check to be sure, but I’ve spent enough time working on the hover to know it’s going to have no problem getting us back to the city, so we can go home.”

“No,” Alex stated. Tech swallowed the pills dry as he looked at Alex.

Jacoby glared. “The deal was we go home once he’s cured. He’s cured. We’re going home.”

“They hurt him.” Alex’s voice was hard and cold. His eyes blazed. Jacoby realized it wasn’t tension that had him shaking, it was rage. “They could have killed him. No one does that to him and gets away with it.”

Jacoby picked his words carefully. “Alex, we can’t take on a corporation. They’re already after us. The best thing to do is to leave while they think we died in the explosion. Once they’ve gone through the bodies, they’re going to close the planet off.”

Alex snorted derisively. “After I’m done with them, there isn’t going to be enough left to lock a door.”

Jacoby stifled a sigh; Alex was delusional. “Corporations aren’t people. You don’t get to sneak up to them and shiv them in the back. If you try anything, they are going to crush you.”

“Maybe they scare you, but not me.” Alex’s voice was pure contempt. “I don’t fucking care what they think they are, no one, not a person, not a corporation, not the fucking universe gets to hurt Tristan and get away with it. I’m going to make it scream until there’s nothing left to make sounds.”

“You can’t make a corporation scre—” He was wasting his time. He looked at Tech, who’d watched Alex through the entire discussion. The only hint of concern had appeared at the comment about the universe. “Talk some sense into him, will you?”

Tech looked at Jacoby, as if he’d forgotten he was there, then seemed to consider his words. Jacoby relaxed when Tech nodded, only to tense again when he spoke.

“I’m with Alex. They should pay for this.”