

Jacoby crawled out from under the hover. He reached back under and pulled the forward anti-gravity generator out. With a grunt, he lifted and put it on the table he set up. He let go of it and wiped the grime off his hands. Anti-gravs units were always filthy, no matter how well sealed in they were—not that this one had been sealed. He had to rub hard before his hands were clean of the oily slime.

Plenty of people put out theories as to how the slime happened, but he didn't care about the how. He just wished someone came up with an easier way to clean the gunk off.

He looked up from the anti-grav unit at the joyful roar. In the distance, a group of Samalians was at the shooting range Alex had set up.

Jacoby picked up the rifle and looked through the sight at the group. He adjusted the focus, which never remained set. The large group was a mix of young and older Samalians. He couldn't tell genders from the back, and at this distance and only recognized the big, sandy-furred one who'd become Alex's shadow.

The Samalian fired, and the shot went wide, hitting the edge of the polycarbon sheet which had been set up a few-hundred feet away from them. Someone had painted a rough animal shape on all of them, and no one seemed to be able to hit them reliably. After almost a week of practice, they should be better.

The Samalian prepared to fire again, and Jacoby zoomed in on the gun. One of the Dakary Epsilon Disruptors. The Samalian fired, and the muzzle-flash almost hid the smaller flash at the bottom of the capacitor, which was located over the trigger. The shot went wide again because the flash was hot enough to hurt, if not enough to ignite the fur.

He zoomed out in time to see Alex motion for the Samalian to fire again. Another wide shot. Didn't Alex notice that the capacitor wasn't seated properly? Alex had checked all the weapons to make sure they were in good condition. That was an easy problem to miss, but he should've been checking the gun after someone missed consistently.

Jacoby looked at the other Samalians. They seemed to be having fun, if nothing else. Wrong way of holding the guns on three of them. Half of them didn't even try to aim, firing wildly at the targets. When one of them waved the gun around, exclaiming something, Jacoby put the rifle down.

Alex had no idea how to train people.

He looked at the anti-grav unit. Ideally, they needed to be swapped out for a new one every decade. The dirty unit was then sent back to the manufacturer, disassembled, and each component immersed in a dissolving bath.

If you couldn't afford that—or like his dad, wanted to save money—some alcohol, rags, and a lot of patience would get you the same results, since the dissolver was deemed too dangerous for people to use. Jacoby found there was something soothing in the act of cleaning and reassembling it.

Back home, everyone went to Tech to get their anti-grav units cleaned, but Jacoby took care of his himself, just like his dad taught him.

Back home.

How long had he been away? Objective time? The trip to Mobius Station had been a long one, so a year? He'd cooled his heels for seven months there while Alex and his crew got the medic. The trip to the Sayatoga had been what, two months? And this one had been another long one.

He'd known he would miss Emily and Greg's firstborn beginning to walk when he decided to go with Alex, but now he realized that she'd be a young girl by the time he returned. Banny would have gotten over his dislike of girls and found one to date, or maybe decided guys were more interesting; his mother kept saying he spent more time looking at guys. He'd find out when he returned.

How many kids would be born in his absence? Kids who wouldn't know who Tech was. He could call home the next time he went to the city, but he wouldn't. Realizing he was missing so much was enough.

Alex hadn't wanted any of the kids to help in Tech's rescue because he hadn't wanted them to get hurt. Jacoby hadn't wanted them to experience this, not aging while the universe kept going. Coming home to unknown siblings, to a parent dying in an accident.

It had been a factor in him getting out of the life. When dropping by his parents' after a job, he found out his mom had been killed when her hover failed. His dad had almost been dead when Jacoby arrived. It hadn't been his dad's fault; his mom had gotten the hover maintenance done by the manufacturer, but it hadn't stopped his dad from letting himself waste away in guilt. If his trip back had taken any longer, Jacoby would have gotten there to find a corpse.

Yells came from the shooting range—triumph, he thought. Someone hit a target, in spite of Alex's teaching.

He reached for another component to clean and found he'd done the entire unit in his musing. He put the rag with the other dirty ones and turned, leaning back against the table.

When was the last time he'd trained anyone? Four, five rejuvs ago? He'd been in the Palatian army. His high marksman scores had attracted the attention of the lieutenant, and he'd been put through the over-the-net courses on how to teach, and was given a unit to work with. Jacoby had enjoyed the experience.

But other than the occasional correcting a young merc on how to handle a gun, he hadn't taught since then. No matter how often the kids had pestered him about it back home, he didn't show them how to. It wasn't like there was a lack of people to teach them; most there enjoyed going hunting, so they knew how to shoot, but Jacoby was the big bad merc who'd fought in every big battle in the universe, so the stories went. He also was the only one who was always armed.

Of course, what none of the kids understood, what even most of the parents didn't, was how dangerous a gun was. For the kids, it was about being badass. That Mikael had killed himself while playing with his mother's improperly stored rifle hadn't had an effect on them. They were smarter, wiser, far more adept than Mikael had ever been, they would never do what he had.

He smiled in spite of himself. Kids. Another yell of triumph.

Idiot.

You, Jacoby, not them, he told himself. If he let Alex continue this, all they were going to learn was how to get hurt. Alex wasn't all that good a marksman to start with, and he was passing along his bad habits. Not teaching them to do better.

And whose fault is it that Alex is teaching them?

He brought the rifle to his shoulder and looked through the sight. Gun-happy, the lot of them. Kids with brand new toys and no idea they could kill one another with them.

He sighted a target, adjusted the rifle's power, and fired. It took five shots and the painted animal was gone, a hole through the polycarbon in its place. That should send the right message, he thought as he shouldered the rifle and headed for the shooting range.

They stood, looking at him, talking amongst each other. Not one of them had taken a shot while he approached. Alex didn't look like he wanted to kill him, but considering how hair-trigger he seemed to be, there was no telling how he'd react. Would he think Jacoby was trying to undercut his authority?

"Alex." He nodded a greeting. "How about we split the training duties?"

"I thought you weren't interested in helping."

Jacoby shrugged. "There's only so many repairs I can deal with in a day. This is going to be a distraction from that." He nodded to the Samalians practicing hand-to-hand fighting. "You can supervise the brawlers and make sure they don't kill each other."

"What do you think this is? A joke? You don't just do this as a distraction, Jac—"

“It’s a job, Alex. You said so yourself. I’m going to treat it as such. We can discuss payment later. I know you’re good for it.”

Alex didn’t immediately reply. When he did speak, it wasn’t in Standard, but in something that resembled what the Samalians spoke.

His shadow replied, they exchanged a few words, and then Alex looked at Jacoby. “I’m leaving them in your hands.”

“You speak their language?”

“A few words. I need to be able to instruct them.”

“How did you even learn?”

Alex shrugged. “It’s just code. I’m good with code.” He headed away.

Jacoby didn’t like that. Alex was spending too much time among the Samalians. Soon enough he was going to start going around naked, again. He was going to have to make sure the man didn’t turn native on him.

“We shoot?” the sandy-furred Samalian asked.

“What’s your name?”

“Rig’Irik.”

“Who else here can understand Standard?”

“Mother can.”

Jacoby looked among the others there. “Where is she?”

“In her home.”

“Then you’ll be my translator. Everyone, gun in-hand.”

Rig pointed to the rifle slung over Jacoby’s shoulder. “I want that.”

Jacoby raised an eyebrow. “Maybe once I’m confident you know how to handle a gun, we’ll move to rifles. For now, I’m going to show you how to check your guns to make sure they’re working properly.”

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“Alright, that’s enough for today.” The course on how to take a gun apart and reassemble it went quickly enough, then he’d had them go through each gun so they got a feel for them. He moved away from the crate where the rest were. “Now that you’ve tried them, I want you to pick your favorite one.”

Rig translated, and instead of the rush and fighting over the guns Jacoby expected, they waited. Rig went first and took the Enury Volt, the most powerful one in the bunch. While others waited their turn, they talked, and by the time everyone had a gun, there had been no fights or arguments.

Jacoby took the holsters out of the crate and handed the corresponding ones. “That gun is yours. You will wear it all day long so you get used to the weight.”

“Shoot?” a copper-furred female asked after Rig translated. It was the only word any of them had picked up.

“No. The only place shooting will happen is here.” He showed them how to put the gun belts and shoulders holsters on. He had to go to each of them to help adjust the fit, and he felt weird being this close to naked people.

Once he was done, and he knew they were all properly adjusted, the Samalians growled as they played with the straps, trying to loosen them or smooth the fur under them.

“I know this doesn’t feel normal, but you’ll get used to it.” Rig translated and received comments in return.

“This means your hands are free to do whatever else you need to do until you have to fire at someone.” He took the box of extra powerpacks and headed for the hover.

At the hover, he removed the panel revealing the external charging slots. Fortunately for him, if there was one thing weapon manufacturers had agreed on, it was a standard powerpack.

He motioned to Rig’s gun. “Take the pack out.”

It took the Samalian a few tries, but he found the release switch. “Put it back in and take it out again.”

Rig did so, and the others did the same without being told to. Jacoby had them repeat it until they were able to do it without too much hesitation.

“Good. Rig, how much charge in yours?”

The Samalian took the pack out smoothly, turned it over until he found the display, then squinted at it in a way that had Jacoby suspect he needed eyesight correction.

“Low,” Rig said.

“Good enough.” He suspected as much, since Alex hadn’t brought any of the packs in for recharging. He took a pack out of the box and inserted it in a slot. He had no idea who thought a family hover needed thirty external charging slots, but it worked in his favor. “At the end of every practice, you are going to put your pack in an empty slot.” He indicated for them to put theirs in.

“New pack?” Rig asked, indicating the box.

“Not until I believe you will treat your guns with the respect they are due. I’m not going to be responsible for one of you accidentally shooting a family member.”

Rig translated, bouncing his gun in his hand. There was what Jacoby now recognized as laughter. Rig mimicked hitting someone over the head with it. “Use it as rock.”

“No.” Jacoby took the gun out of his hand. “This is exactly what I mean. This is a gun. You need to respect it at all time, otherwise someone innocent is going to die. Once I’m gone you can go about doing whatever you want with them, but until then, you’re going to do what I tell you.” He handed it to Rig and indicated the holster at his hip.

Rig put it in, first backward, then correctly. “We shoot tomorrow?”

“Yeah, once you’re done with your hand-to-hand practice, come here for your packs and we’ll go to the range. For tonight, I want you to practice disassembling and reassembling your guns. Oh, when you take a pack out of the rack, replace it with one from the box.”

They left, talking excitedly. Some took their guns out and pointed them around, pulling the trigger. Yeah, he didn’t expect they’d ever go back to town with a powered gun.

He added packs to the rack until it was full. This hadn’t felt like the waste of time he’d been worried it would. They had no military training, but had behaved more professionally on the whole than some of the soldiers he’d taught.

In the long run, this still felt pointless. They wouldn’t be able to learn everything they needed to be competent before Tech was done with his wall, or the next marauder attack, but at least now, when they died, it wouldn’t be because a friend had shot them.

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Days passed. Each morning, Jacoby worked on the hover while the Samalians trained in hand-to-hand. Now, there was almost as many of the older folks as the young ones. When they returned from lunch, those interested in learning to shoot came to the hover, took their powerpacks, and Jacoby accompanied them to the shooting range.

When a young girl joined them—Jacoby couldn’t tell how young she was, but she was younger than any of his trainees—Rig talked to her, then took one of the smaller guns out of the box. He showed her how to hold it and how to take it apart.

Jacoby watched him, ready to intervene, but the Samalian had the makings of a good teacher.

Then, one morning, Jacoby heard the cheers from the hand-to-hand fighters and saw Tech in the middle of them, letting loose. He ran to the group and couldn’t find Alex, so he grabbed Rig, standing and cheering with the others as Tech clawed an older fighter’s chest.

“Where’s Alex?”

“In town.”

Jacoby cursed. “Go get him!” Rig looked at him, confused. “Go get him before someone dies!” He pushed the Samalian and Rig headed away, if not with the urgency Jacoby felt he should.

“Tech! Stop!” Another Samalian ended up on the ground, unmoving, except for his breathing. “They’re friends!” He’d never seen Tech act like this, but he’d read the files, knew what he was capable of.

They were going to get themselves killed while people cheered, and there was nothing Jacoby could do to stop it.