Amongst the Ruins
by Weiila

Summary

There was a harsh, scraping sound of claws over concrete. Hulking shadows clambered over the wreckage, drool dripping into the mud from their sharp fangs. Grunting, Erol cocked his gun.
"If we survive," he said over his shoulder, "I'm still going to shoot you."
"Likewise," Jak growled, trying to find some purchase in the slippery ground.

Notes

This story takes place during Jak 2, sometime after surviving through the assault on the water slums.
“Who the heck would even get the idea to stash coded messages in Samos’ hut?” Daxter complained as he dragged down another old, smelly tome from the shelves and shook it. Nothing fell out. “Doesn’t he have enough moldy books?”

Jak shrugged as he pulled out several more books and shook them. Torn had said that the courier would stash the message somewhere amongst the manuscripts. What he had refused to explain was from where the courier actually came, though he had said something about not daring to use communicator for such “long distant calls” due to the risk of them being intercepted. Inside the city there was enough of a buzz to be fairly safe and lost in the electronic conversations, apparently.

But despite Daxter’s complaints, though, they both knew that Samos’ hut was the only place in Dead Town that was safe from the metal heads, for whatever reason. It was just that neither of them wanted to be there.

Too many memories – not just of hours’ worth of boring lectures, but of what life had been then.

Jak shoved the message-less books back on the shelf so hard the furniture might have broken, just to stop his mind from going there.

“Aha!”

Daxter triumphantly shook a thin, leather package out of his latest tome and snatched it up from the floor.

“This must be it!” He sniffed it and quirked a furry brow. “Smells weird, though.”

Jak took it from him and peeled it open, not only out of curiosity but also to make sure this really was it. He did not feel like staying, nor getting forced to go back. A faint smell of salt whiffed up into his nose, and grains of sand slipped around in the folds of the package.

Almost like the ocean, but dryer.

As he peeled it open, he realized that the package itself was the message. Strange letters had been inscribed on the inside of the leather. It struck him that the material itself felt weird, not at all like that made from yakkow hides. There was no fur, rather a scaly pattern. Had it been made from a snake? Or a lizard, maybe?

He pushed the idle musings away. That didn’t matter. What did matter was that this really had to be it. He could not read the message, the letters nothing like he had ever seen before. Satisfied, he wrapped the message up again and stuffed it in his backpack.

Torn had given them strict orders to leave the hut the same way it was, so the Demolition Duo spent some time putting all the books back on the shelves. If they got back upside down or not, however, was another question entirely.

With no little relief Jak turned and leapt out of the hut over to the nearest crumbling apartment complex, Daxter clambering onto his shoulder even as he was in mid-air.

“Well, that’s enough heroics today,” Daxter said. “Can we have a breather?” His belly made a gurgling sound as if on cue.
Smiling a little, Jak ducked around a decrepit corner and sat down. He was fine with a break, but he had no desire to stare at that hut made of too distant memories, especially not while resting. From a pocket he fished out a ration bar and broke it in two, giving one half to Daxter.

“I could murder for some ketchup…” the ottel sighed, but he accepted his share. He’d only eat a quarter of it, of course, and give the rest back to Jak. Daxter had, after all, a tiny stomach. But sharing by half was one of their small, important routines.

As he took the first bite out of the dull ration bar, Jak could not avoid noting the bizarreness of the situation. He stared at the opposite wall, thinking of the placement of the hut behind his back. If they were here, then the beach would have been over there, and the other huts there, and there, and...

Frowning, he turned his gaze upwards and looked at the sky through the hole in the roof. It was grey from smog, but beyond that there was unmistakable blue, promising that it was once again the limit.

That, unfortunately, did not manage to pull the brake on his line of thought, which immediately took a swan dive into...

“Jak!”

Daxter’s voice whipped through the air. Jak blinked and looked down at him, meeting the ottel’s glare.

“Put the thoughts down and walk away slowly. No eye contact. I’m warning you, buddy.” Daxter waved the remains of his food like a rectangular, crumbling sword to emphasize.

When Jak only gave a small, strained smile, Daxter sighed.

“I can’t leave my post for a sec, can I?”

He hopped up on Jak’s shoulder in a single jump.

“There, all better, ya needy teen?” he asked, but the annoyance was so fake and melodramatic that Jak had to chuckle.

His laugh, and Daxter’s grin, disappeared immediately at a sudden, distant buzz. It was low, still far away – but familiar, and growing fast. They knew that one all too well.

Jak scrambled up and dove under what remained of the ceiling, the ration bar pieces falling from both his and Daxter’s grips. Within a second the morph gun was in Jak’s hands, as Daxter clutched onto his friend’s shoulder plate.

Dust powdered down the walls as a shadow passed by above, then another. A glint of red flashed past in the corner of the ceiling hole, but as Jak pressed himself against the wall far away from that, there was no way he and Daxter could have been spotted by the guards in the two air trains.

The buzz of the engines continued on, fluttered upwards and further away.

“They’re looking for a place to spill out,” Jak murmured as he straightened up, looking towards the direction the hum could still be heard from. Crumbled walls stood in the way, but they had come from that way to the hut. It would be no problem to go there.

“What does the Krimzon Gutballs want out here?” Daxter complained. He turned and sniffed the
back of Jak’s ear, causing an involuntary snort of laughter as it tickled. “Maybe you should change your cologne, bud. Seems they’re picking up on it!”

The amusement died, and he gave Jak as commanding a glare as he could.

“And for the record,” Daxter continued, “my cologne is Eau de Getouttahere.”

Jak, however, was already creeping forwards, in the very, very, very wrong direction.

“We’re supposed to avoid those goons, remember?!” Daxter hissed.

“But we better find out what they’re here for,” Jak countered in a low voice. “It can’t be anything good.”

He had that Look again. The “Haven’s Most Wanted” one. Daxter groaned as loudly as he dared.

The buzzing had settled, coming from the top of a decrepit, two-story house. As Jak silently leapt and ducked his way over to that building, dozens of heavy steps made the roof tremble. Sand and flakes of paint rained down on the two spies as they got inside. There had been a couple of floors to this one, but most of that had fallen off and sunk into the thick mud that flooded large parts of the ground floor. Most of one wall was gone, too, but there was a metal staircase leading at least up to the remains of the second floor.

Jak approached the stair but, to Daxter’s great relief, stopped some ways away from it, crouching behind a pile of rubble. That was the only visible way up, but also the only visible way down. Not even Jak was crazy enough to risk getting spotted from above, stuck on a stair.

The light lazily filtered through falling dust as the boots kept clamping about up there. Daxter thought to himself that this whole “town” might crumble at any second. Then again, he’d seen parts of it do so already.

He really, really wished Jak would get the bright idea to stop doing insane stuff like this. Gritting his teeth, Daxter curled up further, leaning into the soft safety of Jak’s hair.

“No enemies in sight, Sir!” came a rough voice from above. The steps moved around again, sounding like they lined up. Shadows danced on the wall by the stair to the sound of the heavy feet.

Jak raised one arm to shield his own and Daxter’s eyes as concrete pebbles and more sand rained down.

“Y’know,” Daxter whispered, “if they cause the whole thing to collapse with all that fancy footwork, I’d rather we weren’t down here!”

To that Jak just softly hushed, never taking his eyes off the stairs.

Somebody up there started to say something, only to be cut off by a sudden, hissing shriek. A hail of pebbles tumbled down, the soft clicks and splashes as they fell drowned out by the shouting and gunfire from above. Daxter eeeped, grabbing Jak’s hair.

“Spread out!” somebody on the roof shouted, almost muffled by the unmistakable roars of more metal heads. Sounded like grunts. But they did not make that kind of wail that had been heard seconds before.

At the order, though, Jak’s shoulders tensed and he straightened up with such a sudden start that
Daxter almost fell off.

“What the—” Daxter started.

“Get down!” the same somebody shouted.

The guards’ curses were cut in half by an explosion. Raw dark eco splattered down the stairs and over the remains of the wall, mixed with shrapnel. But by then Jak had already thrown himself away from the stairs, deeper into the room, crouching with one hand on the floor for balance.

Judging by the shouting above, it was not the KGs who had decided to rock the party. Rather like the metal heads had chosen to use them as test subjects for some new eco bomb.

And then, suddenly, there was a creaking noise.

For a surreal second everything stopped as everyone all at once realized what was happening.

Then the creaking grew to a deafening roar, mixed with the screaming and screeching from the combatants above as the whole building began to topple.

Daxter clung desperately to Jak’s ear as the renegade ran towards the wide open wall. And then Jak slipped, sinking halfway up to his knees in the mud. The world seemed to move in slow motion in those horrible, desperate seconds.

A furiously shrieking metal head fell from the roof, one of those creepy, big ones that looked like humanoid snakes. Daxter never bothered to learn their names, they were awful and a pain to fight even for Jak and that was all he needed to know. It crashed into the thick, dirty liquid, splattering mud all over. A screaming KG followed, head first. That splash was heavier.

Daxter realized, when a block of concrete fell down in front of them and cause Jak to recoil and slip backwards… that they would not make it.

Then Jak’s hand clamped around the ottsel’s body, tearing him from the safe shoulder. Daxter grappled for the thumb – No! No! – catching a glimpse of Jak’s eyes – I’m sorry – and then Daxter sailed through the air. He flew through the gaping opening in the wall, desperately reaching back. Not without you!

He saw the crumbling building, the soldiers and monsters on the top floor desperately struggling to keep their balance. They, at least, had the luxury of open air above them.

The sun blinded him and his downwards arch began, his ears filled with the thunder and roar of collapsing concrete. Then he could no longer see it, but even as he hit the muddy water and sunk, stunned for the first terrible moment by the cold, slimy slap, all his mind could picture was the walls toppling like a card house. Cards that weighed ton upon ton, metal and concrete falling on top of Jak.

He pushed upwards and broke the surface screaming in air, muck coating his mouth as well as his body. Coughing and sputtering he tried to swim, tried to make it in the direction he though was towards the ground. After some frantic seconds he managed to get to a rock and clung to it, shaking his head to get the mud out of his eyes.

He knew there was only destruction before he could properly see. And still, the shock stunned him so that he froze solid, sitting stock still on that cold rock with sludge licking his fur slick to his body. For how long he sat there, he wasn’t sure.
It was a jagged heap, just another one amongst many, many others in this landscape of sad ruins. Dust peacefully fluttered in the wind above the sharp angles and pipes that stuck out of it like bent needles. The two air trains had careened into the dirty water, blots of eerie red amongst all the grey and brown. There were dark bodies, too, and some red armor showing here and there in the wreckage.

Nothing moved.

Nothing.

“Jak… Jak!”

Daxter cried out before he had considered that there may be more metal heads around. But the monsters didn’t matter anymore.

He started forwards, tried to leap to another rock only to fall into the mud again, too weighed down by the slimy dirt to jump properly. Scrambling, he managed to crawl out again gasping and sobbing at the same time. Some instinct managed to make it through, driving him to stop and shake off the worst mud before he struggled onwards.

The mountain of rubble rose above him, and for a moment he felt a wave of dread. Suddenly back there, two and a half year in the past, staring out at the jungle of metal in which he had to find Jak and get him away from those strange people who had dragged him off.

Find Jak.

Not a single thought apart from that remained in Daxter’s brain as he hurried up over the nearest chunk of what had been a wall or ceiling.

“Gods, you just keep getting us into trouble! I gotta keep you on a shorter leash so you’ll stop pulling this kinda crap, man! It’ll be the death of me, saving your neck every—”

A splash from below caught his frantic mutterings in his throat. He spun around, already knowing that it wasn’t Jak. Jak didn’t make sounds like that when he moved in water. Daxter had heard Jak thrash around in a warm ocean almost every sunny day for ten years. He knew.

The metal head he had seen falling earlier rose from the mud, spewing out dirty water. Hissing, it turned to the unmoving red armor sticking out of the sludge, slithering forwards. The monster’s mouth opened, revealing dripping, hungry fangs.

It would only take a heartbeat before it realized that the KG was dead, and go looking for something else to kill. Like something small, that could squirm and struggle and go down in one bite.

Daxter dove over the top of the broken edge of concrete, only to find there was a slope on the other side. He managed to get a hold and not fall, but kicked down a piece of rubble in his fight for purchase. It tumbled downwards, and there was a hiss and lazy slap of the metal head moving through the mud.

Holding his breath Daxter let himself fall, slipping on the debris as he frantically looked around for a quick hiding hole.

He heard the scraping, but his frenzied brain didn’t recognize it as anything but another creak of the unstable wreckage. Not until the shadow of a hand flashed into his vision and, clamping over his mouth, ripped him in under the shade of a precariously leaning wall. The other arm of the
attacker came down, locking Daxter’s thrashing legs and tail between itself and a cold wall of chest plate.

“Shh!”

Hot breath flowed against the top of Daxter’s head and ears by the hush.

Despite the warmth, and the thick moisture still covering him, every hair on Daxter’s small body rose like ice cold needles. He went stock still, feeling his heart trying to beat its way out of his chest.

“Don’t give me any trouble,” the hushing voice breathed. “If I miss this shot you’ll be the appetizer and you know it.”

Daxter shuddered, but when the fingers pressed to his face squeezed in a demand for a reply, he nodded to the best of his ability.

Claws clicked just above, and a serpentine shadow rose up against the sky above the concrete slab Daxter had jumped over moments before.

The arm that had been trapping him whipped out and a shot from a handgun went off, the noise almost silenced. Fancy technology. It did the trick. Without a sound the metal head fell backwards, a hole straight between its eyes. A hard thump, and then nothing.

If it had been Jak, a “headshot!” cheer had been in order. But it wasn’t Jak.

The arm was back against Daxter before he had a chance to try to use the small freedom to struggle loose.

“Were there any others out there?”

Daxter shook his head.

“Okay. I’ll let you up for a bit but you’re still not going to cause me any trouble. Got it?”

Daxter had to be treated to another hard squeeze before he nodded.

The hand over his face let go, only to grab him by the middle and lift him up and turn him over. And with that, Daxter came face to face with Commander Erol.
Chapter 2

In the last moment Daxter suppressed a whimper, trying to at least maintain the image of him being nothing but an animal. Too late he realized that after his nodding and headshaking, that was pretty much shot to hell.

“I know you can talk,” Erol said.

That comment was a perfect cue to start struggling.

Before he even knew what had happened, though, Daxter found himself face first on the ground, pain stabbing through him as Erol roughly pushed him into the jagged debris. Through the haze Daxter felt big fingers curling around his arm. He would have screamed if it hadn’t been for the pebbles pressed into his face.

“I’m not in a good mood right now,” Erol hissed. Daxter hardly dared to breathe. “So if you don’t behave, I’ll break your little bones.”

Daxter didn’t look up. He laid stock still, begging some lazy god to deign show some mercy and let Jak burst out of the rubble to save him.

No such luck.

However, the paralyzed state of his prisoner seemed to satisfy Erol, as he pulled his catch up and around to stare him in the eye again. Daxter could swear that his pulse was trying to break him apart.

“You’ve lost Jak, it seems,” Erol said, matter-of-factly. When Daxter gave a start, he pressed, “where is he?”

“If I knew, he wouldn’t be lost, right?” Daxter hoarsely snapped, voice breaking.

“Hm.”

Erol glanced at the sky for a moment. Then he finally let go of Daxter’s arm, eliciting a tiny sigh of relief from the ottsel.

Of course, that was far from the end of the nightmare.

Erol lifted his wrist to his lips, using his teeth to tear up one of his red cloth bracelets. It was already tattered, and with just a small effort Erol ended up with two jagged, long strips. He took the thinnest in one hand and made a loop out of it, easily holding Daxter down with only one thumb. The ottsel saw what was coming, and started to squirm.

“K-keep me out of your bondage fantasies!” he choked.

Erol’s lips twitched.

“You’re a little too scrawny for my tastes. Don’t move.”

He threw the loop around Daxter’s thin legs and pulled the knot until the prisoner writhed.

“Y-you know, it’s n-not like they ever tell me anything,” Daxter said, words stumbling over each other as Erol started preparing the other strip of cloth. “I’m not worth keeping. Really, I can just
scurry off and you’ve lost nothing but a fancy accessory.”

He was thrown down on his stomach, his arms swiftly gathered up and tied behind his back.

“Well,” Erol said. “I could just wring your neck for the fun of it.”

Daxter bit down on his lower lip so hard he almost drew blood.

“But for now I won’t,” Erol said as he pulled Daxter up to a sitting position.

Under the glare he got, all the ottsel could do was gulp. He had no jokes to shield himself with from that.

*Jak... oh Precursors, Jak, help!*

“No, I’ll be a little preoccupied for a few minutes,” Erol said and poked Daxter in the chest. “So you are going to keep a lookout for metal heads. Because neither of us wants to get eaten.”

Daxter grit his teeth but nodded. He could not run, and for now Erol’s goodwill and gun was the only thing that could keep him alive. It was not, however, until Erol put the gun down and braced his hands against the ground, that Daxter realized that it was not merely shadows that kept his warden’s legs out of sight. Erol was actually stuck beneath the wreckage.

The tattooed face twisted into a grimace of pain, but he dragged himself forwards. Rocks strained and clattered down in an alarming manner, forcing him to pause. But nothing came crashing down. Erol braced himself again, pinching his eyes shut and face paling to a sickly, sweat matted white – and still not a sound passed his lips.

And suddenly he tumbled forwards to the sound of rolling rocks, panting but free. He pushed himself up quickly, reaching down to check on his freed legs.

From the way he tensed when he touched his left ankle, Erol did not like what he found.

“Got a problem?” Daxter asked in a moment of desperate glee. All amusement died, though, when Erol turned his cold stare towards him.

“Yes,” the Commander said through clenched teeth. “We have a little problem.”

He pulled off his other bracelet and tore it into a single, long strip.

“Hey what–?!?”

Daxter’s protests fell on deaf ears, unsurprisingly. The strip was looped around his chest, and Erol completely ignored the pathetic sound of pain as he lifted the ottsel by the makeshift rope and tied it stuck under his shoulder panzer. Daxter was left hanging painfully by his own armpits, his arms and tail thumping against Erol’s arm and chest plate.

“What the hell are you doing?” Daxter rasped.

Erol didn’t reply. He reached for a thin, fairly straight pipe sticking out of a heap of crumbled concrete, and ripped it free. It reached up far above his head even as he managed to stand, using the pipe as a prop.

“You can’t walk.” Daxter spoke the moment it hit him.

To that, Erol made an annoyed sound. He started forwards, leaning on the pipe and holding his gun
in his other hand.

“It’s just a sprain,” he said. “And I figure that you…” he knocked the gun against Daxter’s side, causing a wince, “… might ensure that Jak hesitates for a second in case we find your friend before we find any of mine.”

Daxter gazed out at the rubble around them, hope sinking like lead. How long had it been? If Jak hadn’t broken out yet…

He couldn’t think further.

Erol began a struggling trek towards higher ground, turning his head cautiously back and forth. Looking for KGs or metal heads, or Jak. The enemies remained firmly secondary in Daxter’s mind by now, though. What if Jak was in no condition to find them, but only to be found? And in what state?

Daxter glanced up at Erol’s face, suppressing a shudder. He had to get free. Had to.

A groan rose up from somewhere ahead, near the water. Whoever it was, that was a human voice. Erol headed for it, and Daxter’s heart dropped at the sight of red armor.

It creaked upwards from a hard heap, heavily rolling over. The KG grappled for the cracked mask covering his face, fumbling and blinded. Erol reached him and pulled off the mask, revealing a pale, tattooed face warped with pain.

“C-commander…” the KG hoarsely whispered.

“Can you stand?” Erol asked.

The KG slowly blinked, dazed. After a moment, though, he pulled himself together and managed to sit up, holding a gloved hand to his forehead.

“I’m… I’m just dizzy, Sir. Give me a minute…”

Erol ignored him, sitting down on a jagged piece of wall with the mask in his hands. At the edge of its inside was a small black box, and a snapped cord crawled out of it. The other end of the broken cord came out of a tiny microphone, set just about where the mask’s wearer’s mouth would be.

Holding down a button on the small box, Erol took the torn metal strings of the cord between his thumb and pointing finger, rolling the threads against each other until they were tangled. Then he moved his thumb from the button and raised the mask closer to his face.

“This is Commander Erol,” he said. “Command, do you read me? Do you read me?”

A crackling rose up from the black box, but nothing like a voice could be heard through it. Erol growled and spoke again.

“This is Commander Erol. Command, if you read me, I require backup in Dead Town. Repeat, need backup in Dead Town. We were attacked and a building collapsed. Unknown number of wounded and dead.”

He glanced at Daxter with an unreadable look, then turned back to the mask once again.

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“This is Commander Erol. Command, if you read me, I require backup in Dead Town. Repeat, need backup in Dead Town. We were attacked and a building collapsed. Unknown number of wounded and dead.”
The KG jumped up straight, panic blazing on his face. Erol took one look at him, dropped the mask, stood up with the help of the broken pipe, and then backhanded the soldier with such force that he fell on the ground. The violent motion also gave Daxter a painful swing and he winced at the agony shooting through his shoulders, but apart from that the world seemed to have gone numb.

*He can’t say that. He can’t say that Jak is dead. He can’t. He isn’t. He can’t.*

“Don’t give me any bull about him being immortal!” Erol was snarling at the KG, in Daxter’s mind sounding like he was speaking through a wall. “He’s as human as the rest of us, no matter what you idiots think!”

“Wow, oughta be bad when you admit you’re not better than him,” Daxter dully said, automatically.

The butt of the gun smacked into his stomach, knocking the air out of his lungs.

“You shut up.” Erol turned back to the groaning soldier. “Being an eco freak doesn’t stop him from bleeding. But if you need a chicken boost, this rat is Jak’s pet, and he’s important enough to him to make him think twice about attacking.”

The KG got up, looking far from convinced but probably more afraid of his Commander. He did clutch his gun tighter.

“We need to find a working radio,” Erol said, dropping the broken mask. “They’ll send a team to check on things since they lost contact with us, but if Jak is somewhere around here I want him found before he can recover. Now…”

He pushed Daxter’s chin up with the top side of his gun, forcing the ottsel’s head back.

“Where did you lose him, rat?” All strain was gone from Erol’s voice this time, and he spoke smooth and slow. This was the voice that could make Jak freeze up.

“I don’t know,” Daxter winced. “I don’t know!”

“Really?” The gun pressed a breath tighter against Daxter’s brittle jugular.

“It all came crashing down, how’d I know?” he choked, squirming.

The gun let up a little bit, but with the back of Erol’s fingers touching his chest Daxter still hardly dared to breathe.

“I see,” Erol said, and the smug note made Daxter’s soul turn to ice before the conclusion struck with all its force. “So he was caught in the collapse.”

Daxter could have bitten his tongue off.

“Radio and survivors,” Erol said, lowering the gun as he looked at the KG, who stiffly saluted him. “Move out.”

The two of them started to move towards higher ground. It did not take long to spot a piece of armor sticking out of the debris, and the KG bent down to dig out his comrade while Erol stood by, looking about.

“I hope you realize that if you can,” Erol said, looking down at Daxter, “you should point to where you think Jak is.”
Daxter didn’t reply.

“We’ll dig him out eventually, but if he’s alive now he may not be then.” Erol’s voice took on a musing tangent. “Lying buried beneath all this,” he motioned at the jagged landscape around them, “unable to move, a few bones broken. Maybe even suffocating slowly.”

Daxter remained silent, but the mental images poured into his already vivid fears about how and where Jak was right now.

However, he could also very vividly imagine gloved hands roughly pulling Jak out of the wreckage, ignoring his groans of pain, and clapping iron around his wrists.

Jak would rather die than be a prisoner again. And Daxter did have an idea of where he might be, but he’d rather be killed than let them get Jak again.

He suppressed a shudder, twisting about in an attempt to get some blood flowing to his numb hands and feet. Tried not to think about what would happen to him, regardless of how things went down from here.

The KG straightened up and shook his head at Erol. Just a dead body. And the mask in the guard’s hand was a bloody, mangled mess. Daxter silently, bitterly cheered.

A loud hiss made both of the men spin around, but they and Daxter recognized that sound well enough to know what it was even before they saw the metal heads. Three hulking forms moved at the edge of the ruins, creeping out of the still standing buildings farther out. There were smaller ones, too, slithering and skittering around.

“Orders, Sir?” the KG asked, admirably even-voiced.

“Retreat,” Erol said with a growl.

“Good call…” Daxter murmured.

He realized after a few steps that the two men were moving dangerously close to just about where Jak should be buried, though.

*Please… please…*

But they passed, hurrying on as quick as Erol’s sprained ankle allowed.

The two of them reached the ground and ducked around a wall just as the first metal head was about to rise above the top of the wreckage mountain.

Loud sniffs were brought down by the winds, followed by quick steps and the click of claws against concrete. Erol and the KG began backing further away, obviously expecting to be the prey. But then the hard paws stopped coming closer, and instead there was an irregular scraping. Daxter’s breath stuck in his already tight throat.

A low hiss escaped Erol and he moved again, until he could spy on the metal heads between two broken walls.

Sometimes, it seemed to Daxter that metal heads just knew where Jak was. Like they could smell his blood.

He realized too late that Erol was studying the look on his face, and that his thoughts must have
been written all over it.

One of the metal heads heaved a huge piece of fallen wall upwards, sending the concrete slab landsliding down with a thundering rasp of rolling rocks. The monster let out a triumphant shriek—

But that drowned in a sharp crackle of dark eco and Jak’s roar. A pale hand came up and black claws sliced the metal head grunt’s head clean off. The heavy body tumbled down and Jak crawled out of the hole the dead monster had opened up.

Daxter’s first wave of flaring joy went up in smoke as he once again remembered where he was, and how he could be used.

As if he had heard his small prisoner’s thoughts, Erol moved his hand up and pressed his fingers over Daxter’s mouth once more, the edge of his gun digging into the ottsel’s cheek.

The other metal heads came rushing over the top of the mountain, hissing and roaring as they descended on the figure that crackled with dark lightning.

“Uh, Sir…?” the KG whispered.

But Erol ignored him, moving closer to see better.

Jak heaved himself fully out of the hole and struck out at the first stinger who leaped at him. It crashed amongst the rubble in three pieces, oozing dark eco. The second and third fared no better, but…

Something was wrong.

Jak had never been graceful when he was in his Dark form, but his movements now were wilder and rawer than normal. Worse, he never got to his feet, dragging one leg behind him. Daxter dared a glance up at Erol’s face and regretted it immediately.

The remaining grunts tore down towards Jak, only to be blasted right through with a wave of pure, dark energy. They flew out of sight, the thumps, rolling and splashes the last thing that was heard from them.

Silence.

Jak crashed on the edge of the hole, shuddering back into his normal shape. His heavy panting was loud enough to be heard even down to the ruins. Completely spent, and unaware of the real danger he was in.

Erol looked at the KG and made a motion with his head.

“Stun and cuff him,” Erol murmured.
The KG, despite the tight press of his lips and the tense look in his eye, silently started forwards, raising his gun to aim it at Jak’s back.

But in that moment as Erol focused so hard on what was about to happen, his fingers slipped and Daxter’s mouth was freed.

Daxter tossed everything about his own safety to the wind. If they caught Jak now, it was all over.

“Look out!” he screamed.

Erol smacked him so hard that it was pure wonder that nothing broke inside the small body.

Too late.

Jak spun over, slipped and winced, but threw himself back into the hole - and the KG’s shot pinged against nothing but rubble.

“I’m going to chop your tail off inch by inch,” Erol snarled, shaking Daxter. “And he’s going to watch.”

“You gotta catch him first,” Daxter winced back.

“He can’t get far.” Erol holstered his gun and took an alarming grip of his small prisoner’s arm. “Let’s see how long he can sit there and listen to you scream.”

“Hey— hey, that’s cheating, cheating—!”

They had never talked about what to do if something like this ever happened. Perhaps the mere idea was too much to handle. Now it was very real, however, and Daxter wished that they had agreed on some kind of plan just in case. Because he knew, as the pressure of Erol’s fingertips bore into his thin arm, that if Jak heard his best friend shrieking in agony, he would not be able to resist. 

Don’t scream don’t draw him out don’t don’t don’t let them take him

He could feel the first crunch coming, his world turning blood red with pain. And he knew he could not stay silent.

There was a sudden hiss from the other side of the hill and a stinger leaped into the air, diving down the hole.

“Damn it,” Erol said at the sound of Jak’s half-muffled shout. His hand fell away from Daxter’s arm.

In retrospect, Daxter wondered how many times Erol actually had to be wrong to realize that he ought to stop underestimating Jak. The Commander actually looked taken aback when Jak’s arm swung up into sight, holding the stinger by the tail. Not half as taken aback as he was a moment later, though, nor as much as the stinger that was flung through the air down the hill, nor the KG as the stinger bounced on the ground and, in a blind range, launched itself at his face.

Erol fired a couple of shots, but before he could kill the stinger it had shoved its long tail claw through the underside of the KG’s chin. The soldier made a gurgling sound, then went limp.
The third shot hit and the stinger tumbled aside, dark eco oozing out of its punctured head. Erol recoiled from the vile substance, only to freeze in mid-step at the sound of a click from above.

Jak had crawled onto the top of the hole, aiming his morph gun right at the Commander. However Erol and Daxter both looked up just in time to see the hateful rage freeze in shock, as Jak saw the ottsel.

“Shoot him, Jak!” Daxter hollered, knowing he trusted his friend’s aim completely.

He had hardly managed to finish that short line before Erol’s hand came up, roughly pressing a finger against the small, brittle jugular. Daxter could not withhold a desperate noise.

“No—!” Jak snarled, tightening his grip of his morph gun. Unfortunately he had never, ever been able to keep his real emotions from showing all over his face. As if him hesitating wasn’t obvious enough.

“Oh really, now?” Erol breathed, the pleased, intrigued tone making Daxter pinch his eyes shut so hard it hurt.

“Jak— Jak, c’mon, don’t be stupid—!” Daxter wheezed, squirming. But when he heard the soft clatter of the morph gun touching the concrete, he slumped.

He didn’t want to know, but he had to look. Jak sat up there, shoulder’s hunched and tip of the morph gun limply resting against the edge of the hole. He didn’t trust his aim enough to risk it. Not when he might very well kill Daxter by accident.

“You keep this brat around Torn? How is he not skinned alive?” Erol said, as if talking about the weather. Disgustingly good weather. He tilted his head, a smirk spreading over his lips. “Because you’d never let anybody hurt him?”

Jak looked away, jaw set in stone.

A clattering sound from the other side of the debris mountain made him start and half-turn his head, and Erol tensed, shifting backwards. There was another, and another, and yet more, followed by sharp sniffs and hisses. Not too close yet, but not too far away either.

Erol removed the pressure from Daxter’s throat, making a beckoning motion.

As disgusting as obeying a suggestion from Erol must be to him, Jak grit his teeth and folded the morph gun to hang it on his back. Clambering out of the hole, he tore up a broken pipe of his own to support himself down the uneven slope.

By the look of how he moved, he could support himself a little bit on his bad leg, and Daxter’s frantic stare caught no sight of blood apart from a few scratches on Jak’s hands and face. Daxter’s heart still dropped like lead looking at him. There was no way that Jak could hold himself up on the pipe and fire the morph gun at the same time, he needed both his hands for that.

Erol walked backwards, keeping his gun aimed at Jak as he led the way through the broken building, around to where there were pieces of chest high wall remains. It was a bit more open, and might give them a better defense point than one where metal heads might crawl through the debris or jump down from the roof. They both kept glancing towards the debris.

And then there were several splashes heard from the other direction, some lighter than others.
Waves shivered through the mud as serpentine bodies and heavy, clawed paws dove into the muck. From the sound of it, there were more stingers than grunts coming from that direction. Jak unfolded the morph gun, taking an unsteady grip of it as he still supported himself on the pipe. He and Erol exchanged less than thrilled glances as they both had to concluded that they would have to stand back to back to hope making a defense.

There was a harsh, scraping sound of claws over concrete. Hulking shadows clambered over the wreckage, drool dripping into the dust and mud from their sharp fangs. Grunting, Erol cocked his gun.

“If we survive,” he said, “I’m still going to shoot you.”

“Likewise,” Jak growled, trying to find some purchase in the slippery ground. With clenched teeth he turned towards the wreckage and sunk down on his knees, putting himself in a much more dangerous position in relation to Erol. But there was no choice if he was to be able to fire his gun.

“I’ve got my eye on you, kid,” Erol said, half turning so that he could see Jak’s movements from the corner of his vision even as he aimed for the metal heads coming from the other direction. When Erol changed his stance like that, Jak was completely obscured from Daxter’s view. “Don’t try anything funny, because I can smash your rat’s head like an egg.”

Jak had nothing to say about that. The fact that Daxter didn’t, either, must have made it even worse for him, as well.

And then the metal heads charged.

All Daxter could know of how Jak did was the sound of his gun and the shrieks of the monsters, and occasional satisfying sound of skull gems coming lose. For everything else, all he could see was Erol’s display of – usefully so now, but also disturbingly – good aiming skills. He wasted the occasional shot, but almost all of them struck enough to wound if not outright kill, taking down the couple of grunts in between taking turns at the slithering stingers, most of them before they could get within attacking range.

But there were so many of them.

One stinger got too close and Erol jerked back, loosing his footing. He managed to shoot the snake-like beast down as it leapt at him, but in his fall bumped into Jak. The two of them exchanged a murderous glare before Erol dragged himself back up.

Later on, though, Daxter realized that Erol might have meant to do that, planning one possibility further than most.

One by one the hisses and shrieks were silenced by bullets, Erol taking down the last stinger with two well placed shots. Daxter had little concern for that, listening with a mix of hope and fear for the almost completely wiped out stomps and snarls of the grunts coming from Jak’s direction.

The last one broke through the gunfire.

Daxter heard Jak swear and the click of the morph gun, almost muted by the hard, heavy splash of something very big coming at them very fast, but he could not see a thing until Erol turned. A metal head grunt crashed down, and Jak’s back hit the mud with a thick splat and a choked cry. The grunt was over him, knocking the morph gun out of his unbalanced grip as it bore down on him.
Jak changed, blue eyes turning pitch black as horns sprouted from his head and sharp claws pushed his grappling fingers out of the mud – but the transformation halted half-way and faded away, Jak sinking deeper into the soft earth with an exhausted groan.

He had the eco, but his body could not handle another change into Dark so soon.

All this happened during a couple of seconds. Then Erol put his gun to the side of the distracted grunt’s head, and fired several times. The huge beast fell to the side, its skull gem coming loose with a dry pop. The dark eco seeping out of its wound slithered through the muck like snakes, drawn into Jak’s body as he heavily rolled over and pushed himself up, clutching his head with one hand and smearing even more dirty slime into his hair. He was covered with mud almost from head to toe at that point, anyway, making quite a sorry sight. Even the purple lightning sparkling from where he absorbed the dark eco seemed tired and fragile.

Silence. No more hissing, no more scraping.

“Going soft, boy?” Erol asked, a smirk breaking through.

Daxter wished he could have jumped up and clawed the bastard’s eyes out.

With a growl Jak pulled himself together and reached down into the mud to pull out the pipe and the morph gun. The look of his dripping weapon gave all three of them a pause as the realization struck, however.

Gingerly, with a look that said he really, really did not want to know, Jak gripped the morph gun properly and pulled the trigger. There was a wheezing sound. He shook it to try to get the worst sludge out, and pushed the button to change the settings. It folded and unfolded, but as he tried to fire it again the results were the same.

“Oooh, crap,” Daxter said, wincing.

For just one second, the two men and the ottsel were in complete agreement. Although, thinking a little further, the problem was a bit less acute for Erol. That was an unpleasant insight.

“Eh, if I may suggest a wise course of action,” Daxter said, “seeing as your peashooter just won’t do for another big wave, Gingerbread, maybe we should try to get to the city entrance?”

Erol glanced at his gun and at the pile of rubble, obviously thinking about the reinforcements that should arrive soon. But if that would be before more metal heads showed up, he could not be certain.

And despite all that, the smug bastard still had reason to stretch his lips in a smirk as he looked at Jak’s tense face. Erol nodded and gestured with his pipe in the direction of the city gate, turning the gun at the renegade’s chest.

“After you.”

Gritting his teeth so hard it was audible Jak raised his hand on the pipe and the one holding the gun in a gesture of surrender.

And then he threw the morph gun in Erol’s face.

There were so many things that could have gone wrong with that move, but it was a desperate action by a desperate man. He didn’t have time to think it over.
Erol staggered back, firing a blind shot that missed by a mile as Jak stumbled forwards. There was no grace to the fight, both of them unable to stand straight and Erol dazed, blood streaming from his nose. He weakly clawed for Jak, hand uselessly slipping – and Jak ignored it, drawing his free hand back to punch Erol. As unbalanced as he was there wasn’t as much satisfying force behind it as it ought to have been, but it did the trick.

The pipe slid out of Erol’s nerveless fingers and he splashed into the mud on his back.

Daxter grinned so hard with relief that his face almost split as Jak snatched him out of the sling and set him in the crook of his arm, just long enough for the renegade to grab the folded morph gun and hang it on his back. That done Jak took a gentle grip of Daxter with his free, muddy hand and made it over to a rock, sitting down on it so that he could see Erol from the corner of his eye.

“You know,” Daxter said, struggling to not let his voice choke up with relief, “as unmanly as it is I could use a hug. Or an adult.”

A strange sound rose from Jak’s throat and he clutched Daxter gently, brushing his rough cheek against the ottsel’s fuzzy forehead. It was brief, he quickly put Daxter down on his lap, hardly knowing where to start – fumbling with the makeshift ropes, rubbing the small, stiff shoulders to ease the pain.

He managed to get the knots loose after a minute, and Daxter immediately, if clumsily from numbed limbs, scurried up to cling around Jak’s neck. Jak’s big hand pressed against the thin, furry back, holding him up. That he got mud into his fur all over again didn’t bother the ottsel in the slightest.

“Gods, I feel violated!” Daxter grumbled, trying to bury himself in Jak’s scarf. “Let’s get out of here and have a shower.”

Grunting in agreement Jak got up, snatching his metal pipe from the ground.

The buzz of engines, far too familiar, made both of them look up. Four bright red air trains soared above the city wall and towards the rubble, but the standing buildings in between kept the Demolition Duo and the fallen Commander out of sight.

“Ew, let’s leg it before the vultures get here!” Daxter said, swinging himself onto Jak’s shoulder.

This time, Jak had no bright ideas about spying. He started towards the city wall, when the slurp of somebody moving in the mud reached their ears.

Jak did not bother to look, he just dove behind a piece of wall. A shot splattered into the sludge where his feet had been a second before.

“Oh great, it’s alive!” Daxter groaned. Well, they were out of the line of fire and it should be possible to go safely from this piece of wall over to the next building, Erol couldn’t move that quickly either…

Jak seemed to have the same idea as he started creeping forwards towards an area between the leaning walls, where he would have more space to set down and maneuver the jet board without risking sliding into the line of fire. It would be tricky with a wounded leg but shouldn’t be impossible.

“You could spare us all some trouble and just let me shoot you in the other leg, eco freak,” Erol said, sounding eerily smug despite the nasal way of speaking due to his possibly broken nose.
“Yeah, I think we’ll politely decline the offer,” Daxter shouted back. “No space left in our schedules for that kind of business!”

“There’s nowhere for you to go, Jak,” Erol said.

Jak just kept moving, but Daxter, of course, could not leave it.

“Apart from the whole city?” he called. “Works for me!”

“You need a gate pass to get back in.”

Jak petrified in mid-step. Daxter’s breath stuck in his throat. With an ice cold realization rising in his eyes, Jak fumbled his fingers over the pocket where the very important card should have been. Daxter leapt down on the ground and peeked through a crack in the wall.

Erol sat on a rock, his uniform smeared with mud, and blood all over his upper lip, but with a disgustingly pleased grin as he held his gun aimed in their direction. In his other hand, between his pointing and middle finger, he held the gate pass Torn had given Jak all those weeks ago.

“What can I say, you pick up a lot of skills growing up in Haven,” he said and twirled the key to freedom. “Like pick pocketing.”

Ears drooping, Daxter looked around at Jak. The first shock had settled, though, and a look of grim determination set in. He was not giving up.

Jak hunched down, watching Daxter as he pointed towards the crack in the wall with a question in his eyes. Daxter cocked his right hand like a gun and waved the other, showing how Erol was sitting and holding the gate pass.

The air trains were converging on the rubble. It would be mere seconds until the KGs would rush out, and there were more than enough of them to deal with roving bands of metal heads this time. All Erol had to do was shout and they would come thundering over, fully equipped and ready to take down a disarmed, wounded renegade. They’d be there in a minute, tops.

“Are you ready to give up?” Erol asked, the lack of impatience in his voice quite disturbing. This was bad. Real bad.

The two friends watched each other for another second. Daxter drew a wide, horizontal arch with his hand, and Jak nodded. And just like that they had a plan. Shoddy, but still their only chance.

“Promise you’ll run if it doesn’t work?” Daxter whispered with a sad smile.

Jak patted the folded jet board at his back. He couldn’t have used it before when Erol had Daxter as a hostage, of course, but now…

… now he still would not use it if Daxter wasn’t with him. He couldn’t lie with his eyes.

“Baby, you’re too damn high-maintenance,” Daxter whispered with a sigh. He raised his tiny fist.

The corner of Jak’s lips rose in a grim non-smile, and he touched his knuckles to Daxter’s. Courage batteries thus charged, the ottsel squared his shoulders.

“Jak— no! Jak, sit! Bad Jak!” he complained, on the last word darting away along the wall, away from the end where they had ducked into cover.

“Get out of here!” Jak growled and stood up as straight as his bad ankle allowed. “Go!”
KGs started pouring out of the air trains over on the fallen building, their shouts alarmingly clear and too near as they began searching for survivors.

“Are you sure you want to lose the rat?” Erol said from the other side of the soon to be useless wall defense. He took on that smooth tone again, making Jak grit his teeth. “It seems you’re a lot more pliant when that annoying thing is involved. It might be possible to talk the Baron out of giving you a public execution if he thinks you can be made useful.”

“But a private one?” Jak grunted. Keep him talking, keep him talking…

“Well, think of the people,” Erol said. “It would be such a blow to their poor, abused hearts to watch their eco freak ‘hero’ die right in front of their eyes.”

Jak debated accusing Erol of being worried that he’d lose in the racing championship – that would certainly get and hold his attention, but Jak could also picture Erol crushing the gate pass in a fit of rage. Better think of something else.

“Heh,” he grunted, putting all bitterness he could into his voice to mask his tension. Daxter had always told Jak that he couldn’t act his way out of a milk bottle, and that was probably true. But he had to put up a show now to keep Erol distracted. “Even if this is it, never thought I’d hear you call me ‘useful.’”

Erol scoffed.

“You did do a number on my men’s morale in the water slums,” he admitted. “And for their sake, a private execution could be in order. Just me, you, the Baron and the army…”

And that was when Daxter leaped up behind Erol, grabbed his ear and chomped down so hard on the lobe that a few of his teeth clacked together. With a howl of pain Erol shot up, clawing for the furious ottsel. He lost his grip of the gate pass.

Over on the rubble, somebody shouted their recognition of the Commander’s voice.

Erol’s bad leg gave away but he still tried to grab Daxter as he tumbled. However Daxter was already swinging away, bounded off from Erol’s shoulder and snatched the gate pass right out of the air. He landed in the mud and struggled forwards.

Swearing, Erol took aim at the ottsel, only to flinch away as Jak’s metal pipe sailed towards him. It splashed harmlessly into the soft ground just before the Commander’s head, but the diversion gave Daxter the extra couple of seconds he needed. Jak reached around the wall and grabbed his friend’s tiny, outstretched hand, pulling him to safety.

Heavy, armored feet rumbled and splashed towards them, picking up the pace as Erol hoarsely shouted orders for them to hurry up, catch the renegade.

Cradling Daxter to his chest Jak ripped the jet board onto the ground and fell to his knees onto it. It zoomed off in a clumsy arch as he tipped his weight, struggling to steer it while unable to stand. His pants and boots were so slippery that he had to hold on to the edge of it to not slip off.

Clumsy or not he managed to avoid hitting the building walls and the Devious Duo zoomed out of harms’ way just as the first shots went off.

“I would love to read your reports on this one, sunshine!” Daxter whooped over Jak’s shoulder.

Behind them Erol snarled commands to send every guard in the city towards the exit to Dead
Town. But it was already too late. Jak swerved around the buildings to the gate, and only a few impatient seconds more kept him and Daxter stuck outside, then they could jet it towards safety – unsteadily and making quite a sight, but with the KG scrambling to follow their enraged Commanders orders the road was more clear than usual.

As soon as they reached the Underground HQ Jak would tumble down the stair with Daxter bouncing beside him, and Torn would demand a report before letting them clean up, and then he would yell at them for not figuring out what Erol and the lost squad of KGs had wanted out there.

But that wouldn’t matter one bit, because the two of them had made it out alive and together.

*The End.*

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