Introspective Hero

by Weiila

Summary

Through all the mistakes he has made, and all the horrors of his existence, Jak knows that he'll always be able to count on Daxter to remain by his side. And that means more to him than even the fuzzball realizes.

If you've been in the fandom and shipped Jaxter for a while, chances are great that you read this story before - probably while it was incomplete. Started in 2005, abandoned in 2007. But then, six and a half years later, the writing began anew and, my friends, it was finished. This is that fanfic you might vaguely remember as the one that had intros and outros of every chapter from a different character perspective. The one where Jak was pining for Daxter for a change. The one where there was an ex-KG-OC-with-a-history working as a mechanic for Kleiver. The one where Damas was slowly, slowly realizing that Jak was his son.

This is Introspective Hero. Enjoy.

Notes

Since this story took about nine years to write, you'll notice my writing style changing a bit over time.
I should be dead by now. They should have tossed me away months before I heard that voice. One of those voices I had been replaying in my head over and over and over again...

Curled up in a cold corner, clutching my own shoulders and trying to become part of the shadows in the small cell... every night, I tried to hide by imagining. Hiding from the cold, the hands, the metal, the restraints and the needles - and most of all from myself, myself there in the cell, knowing that the stale, unnatural light from outside would fade into sunlight and paint the walls crimson and gold... and then, the footsteps would come again.

Always those footsteps. They never ceased. Even when my own screams tore through my body, those footsteps were somewhere in the background. When the pain ceased and the arch of my back cracked and I collapsed, beyond the bland female voice reporting and the Baron's swearing - I heard the footsteps. Footsteps tasting of bile, blood and dark eco.

I doubt that anybody realizes how close I come, every single day, to snap and break the spines of any marching moron, even our own soldiers whenever they march around within the reach of my ears. And my ears are painfully sharp.

Sometimes it gets really bad. So bad even Torn notices and asks if there's something he should know since I look just about ready to maim something. More ready than usual, at least.

But then there's always that nasal drawl coming from the weight on my shoulder. Always.

"Don't wet yer undies, dreadlock Jim, he just hasn't gotten to pull that trigger for half an hour. Come on, buddy, let's get your blonde little self over to the shooting range before somebody gets hurt."

Or whatever else he can think of. You might be surprised if you knew how many of his gags I remember - even more surprising that he seldom repeats himself. And then, if I grab a zoomer and fly as high up as they allow and focus on whatever he's babbling about next, then his voice and the buzz of the engine can block out the footsteps.

But when I try to forget the footsteps and I turn to him for help to forget, sometimes it backfires and slaps me straight in the face again.

In that cell, through the nights when the coma no longer could keep me safe, I imagined. With all the will I could muster I summoned echoes of the past, grabbing onto the memories of every kind word I had ever heard and remembering them with such intense despair that I could actually hear the voices in my head. Eventually, I could almost see them standing there, backdrop of blue sky and green hills framing their smiling faces.

One step further and it would have been madness, but what did it matter to me?

It soothed and tortured me at the same time, because I could not be there. They were never there with me, they were in their own world - and I was fully aware of it all the time. I could have given my right arm to once again hear Samos snarl about what a disobedient, senseless boy I was.

I shaped him in my mind, standing beside Keira who smiled and reached out her hand for me. Unseeing eyes staring at the metal wall facing me, I watched the past that could never reach me.

The weight on my shoulder was simpler. The weeks, months spent with those small feet perched
on my shoulder panzer had merged it with me and I could almost be sure that if I turned my head too quickly I would feel that warm, fuzzy bounce and hear the angry yelp as he almost fell off.

It was a manic comfort, but soon it turned into fear. If he would be here with me, then the footsteps would come for him too. And that thought widened my eyes and shattered the awake dreams in pure horror.

Logic? Logic of the man going insane.

I'm not quite sure when it happened, that. But in my deranged little mind, I had to keep him safe if I was to imagine him, otherwise he would be too real and then they would find him.

Do I have to repeat that my mind was deranged?

To keep him safe, I changed the images. I removed the safe weight from my shoulder and I placed him beside Keira instead. Changing his furry little body into the scrawny boy he used to be - what he had expected me to bring him back into.

He became unreachable, just like Keira and Samos.

But then I realized that I could make him move around. I knew his way of moving from start to finish; twitchy, fluid motions mixing and always prepared to dive to safety at the slightest sign of danger. He could move along the walls of the cell and they would melt away into a scenery with a blue sky and a warm ocean, sand clinging to his toes whenever the waves did not lap them away. Turning halfway and waving, smirk disturbed by his insistent front teeth as his silly plume of red hair glistened of salty water and sunlight-

"Come on, Jak! I don't have all day!"

And I could almost reach him, too. I would have answered his call, but I still could not.

And he had promised to save me, hadn't he?

I'm not quite sure when it happened, it must have been somewhere during that first year. Late during it, I think. I had heard them talk.

"He's not responding."

"Maybe we should give up."

"Not yet!"

Praxis was stubborn, but even he was starting to sound more frustrated than usual. I knew that they were going to kill me soon.

It felt good. No more footsteps. No more screams.

But then I had to go and make the single most idiotic mistake in my entire life. Not a "Throw mystical thing that explodes, get thrown into your covering friend and push him into the vat of darkness"-mistake, no, one at a whole other level. Even remembering it now makes my fingers twitch and I feel the heat crawling into my neck.

I knew it was wrong, every fiber in my being screamed that the familiar form was not the one my fucking stupid brain wanted to make it, desperately wanted to- because he could not be there, not for real.
But I had not slept for a whole night, aching body refusing to even fall into that coma-like state I dared to call rest. All night, staring off at nothing, curled up on the floor watching that red plume whip around and the lips curl in a smile around the front teeth—my eyes were full of dust that I couldn't care to get rid of, sluggish brain not registering properly—

And when I heard soft footsteps, soft instead of boots, I just looked up and all I could see was that red hair in the glaring light from the door. I couldn't think, I just reached out a numb hand and my lips parted, tongue for the first time moving to form something else than a scream.

Pleading to everything holy and all the time I knew, I knew—

"Daxter...?"

Please, please...

He tilted his head in surprise, in a way that was not Daxter's.

"I think you're mistaking me for somebody else, freak."

And HE smirked.

I don't really remember what happened next, but I wish I could recall it clearly. Because I do know that they had to pry me away from him that time, in the last moment before I would have crushed his windpipe. I know because they were very loud about it afterwards.

HE started hating me right then.

I wish I could recall what happened then, in that short moment when I lost it. I wish I could recall HIS struggling, muffled screams for help as my hands squeezed HIS throat. But my mind went completely blank, and try as I might I cannot remember. Sometimes my hands tingle when I try to summon the memory. That's not enough.

I remember the familiar hands, cold metal gloves pinning me to the floor harder than usual, and I heard my own snarls. Even I thought that I sounded like an animal, but I could not stop.

It felt good. Great precursors, it felt good. Good to hear the swearing, and that one coughing, snarling wheeze as HE struggled to regain the breath that I had almost broken forever. Even if I was confused, I understood what had happened. I could still feel that tingle on my hands.

Sometimes I think that it probably would be best for myself if I found a feeling that is sweeter than what I felt right then. But I don't think I ever will, nothing to compare to that sick, sick, vile triumph—he was not dead but HE was shaken, rocked from his metal throne just when I had hated him even more than Praxis.

I had changed. I had released something, just for a brief moment. And it had been seen.

"What's going on here?"

When I have nightmares, I remember footsteps. The ones that approached then were a bit different from the choir that moved in sync, but I dream about them too. My lips stretched further in a louder snarl, static swearing surrounding me as the guards tightened their grips around my twitching limbs. They had no real trouble holding me down, but I did struggle with more force than usual.

"Baron Sir... commander Erol, he was..."
The bulky shadow swept past the stammering guard and entered the cell, gaze flying between me and HIM, standing by the wall and massaging his throat.

"What happened?" Praxis demanded.

HE snarled, one hand still on his blotched throat he pointed a shaking finger at me, voice hoarse with my rough treatment and his own rage.

"He tried to kill me!"

Looking back at it, I almost go down in hysterics at the sheer, moronic irony in that statement. Right then, I opened my mouth to form words for the second time in my life.

"Burn in hell you fucking-!"

Metal slammed into my jaw and the curse drowned in a snarl, falling back into a groan. Stars danced through my vision, but I still heard the click, felt the cold circle against my temple.

"Baron, Sir?" a guard's voice crackled, and the gun pushed at my head.

Praxis snarled.

"No reason to wai-" he started.

But he was interrupted.

"Wait."

HIS voice was still hoarse, a snarl filled with pain. But the rage had changed. I pried my eyes open, glaring up at him. He wasn't watching me, instead looking at Praxis.

"I swear, his eyes turned black. Pitch black!"

Praxis' eye widened slightly.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes!"

The hand that had been about to signal the shot swept around, hovering in the doorway instead.

"Proceed with the injections!" Praxis ordered, and the metal circle left my skin.

I was ripped to my feet and dragged towards the cold light, as I had been hundreds of times before. But this time I didn't trash around and cry out wordless protests - I tore at the living restraints with curses spewing from my mouth.

Somebody probably said "He can talk?" in the background, but I wasn't listening. I met HIS gaze and his lips curled upwards despite the pain. It didn't matter whether he had been telling the truth about my eyes or not - I feel inclined to believe him. But it didn't matter. All he wanted was to see me in pain.

Until then, he had not been present from the moment that my screams began, only showing up to drag me back or out of the cell. But after that he was always in the corner of my eye, even when dark eco flared through my bloodstreams and my head was just about to explode. Waiting, waiting as I was, anxious about not being the one given that order we were both expecting more fervently.
for every day that passed - waiting for Praxis to give up again and tell HIM to finally finish me off.

Yes, I should be dead by now. But because of that incident, Praxis got his hopes up and kept me for another year.

In the long run, I guess it was good. I saved the world, I guess. Good for it, to have a hero.

But, after that it became easier, in a way. My fear, my trembling, my silent pleas for mercy and death - they were burned away by that thing that had awakened. I called it anger.

It transformed the questions ringing through my head as the floor grated against my slipping feet, as my back hit the table, as the rough hands pressed me down until the restraints had been secured, as the needles bore down and the darkness ripped into my flesh. It was no longer "Why are they doing this to me?'", it was "How can I kill them?'".

I never did manage to bite any finger or nose off anybody, but by the precursors I tried. I think I broke a hand or two... a few times they shot a dart with a sedative drug through the celldoor window, because the guards hesitated to take chances.

That first time I met the anger, it didn't scare me. It wasn't until it betrayed me that I could look back and realize that it had become too strong. But then it was too late, and it had filled a space where something pure used to be.

It didn't matter how strong it grew while I was in the prison, it only pulled me up from the loneliness that had been about to drive me insane. I wasn't exactly moving away from the madness, but I stopped rushing towards it. The anger gave me a reason to exist there in the cell, in the cold - to do anything I could to pay them back, even if it was only as pathetic as another curse.

I got stronger, far stronger. I paid for it by giving up what I had been before, but that person was already dead.

To say that I felt better is a lie, however. Less desperate, yes, better no. Everything was just as hopeless as before, I was just going down screaming with rage instead of pain.

Because I had betrayed Daxter, mistaking HIM for him. I snarled as I curled up in my usual corner every night, staring at the specter of my imagination and asking him how I could ever make up for the treachery I had committed. But he never looked angry. I couldn't make him look angry, even if I, somewhere deep down, feared that he would be.

The situation didn't change, but I got stronger. The drug - the awake dreams keeping me breathing, they needed to be stronger too. I had to make up for what I had done to him.

He came closer. Every night, closer.

Not once had he managed to win against me when we fought for fun, wrestling around in the grass, sand or water around the village. My pride never allowed it, he could pout and mutter as much as he wanted - I was going to win. But that first time when his ghastly hand reached out and brushed against my cheek and I almost felt it, when he swung forwards and jabbed at my shoulder, playfully, I fell back. And he chuckled.

"What are you doing, Jak?"

And then he drifted away, only to step forwards and do the same thing again moments later. I didn't flinch from his transparent shoves as I did for the real, metallic ones. His were warm memories on my skin.
"Jak, what did you do?"

His voice was always playful, blue eyes scanning me curiously.

"Come on big guy, I know you're hiding something. Teeell meee..."

I never replied. This wasn't like finding a really cool shell on the beach and hide it, saving it for some special moment when I could give it to him. I never was good at keeping secrets.

And finally one night, when he leant forwards to ask, I reached up and curled my arms around his shoulders, dragging him down - I was on my back, it was half a wrestling match and he won without any effort.

*If I let you win, will you forgive me?*

He just laughed and melted away into the heavenly scenery of Sandover, wandering back towards me as I sat back up, numb spine pressed against the cold wall.

*Forgive me, please forgive me...*

The anger couldn't reach me here, not when I stared up at him and he flung himself down with a loud laughter, spreading his arms wide as he dove for me. I hit the floor again and he drifted off.

Eventually the guards started wondering why my side and arms were covered in bruises. The marks weren't quite shaped as they should be after rough hands.

They never did bother to investigate too deeply though. They didn't find Daxter, even if I worried a little.

He seemed to live a life of his own, slipping out of my weakening control - I didn't have to wish him around.

Finally one night he took my hands and dragged me forwards, both of us plunging into the warm waves of the ocean. I felt the salty water slip its carressing velvet over my skin just before Daxter's hands hit my lower back and I went down in a storm of bubbles - a real memory this time, a dirty little trick he used when nothing else worked. I heaved myself up above the surface and gasped for air, my own hands fumbling against him as he tried to keep the frail victory within his grasp.

Hands sliding over slick wet skin, his warm laughter filling my ears as I grinned.

But then he suddenly stopped laughing and looked into my eyes, the smile dying on my lips as well. A hand resting above my heart, my hand in a mirroring position.

He watched me strangely, until suddenly his lips tilted upwards again, braving the protruding teeth masterfully.

"It's gonna be okay, Jak. Okay?"

I didn't understand, but pulled him close. Because suddenly the fear bubbled up despite the roars of my anger.

And then daybreak came, and for all my struggling and swearing I met with the familiar table again.

Praxis was furious, impatient.
"Triple the dose, this is the last time!" he snarled.

I didn't have time to process this information before the agony exploded in a dark flare. I screamed until my voice broke and all that came out were load groans, grating my ears with their softness.

It ended.

"... should at least be dead with all the dark eco I've pumped into you!"

"... fear the Dark Warrior program has failed..."

"... finish this thing off tonight!"

"... I'll be back later."

I only caught snippets of their discussion, but it was enough. I felt the touch on my skin, breath on my face - Praxis left me to HIM, when Daxter had promised, he promised it would be okay!

So when that squeaky voice rose up and the unpleasant weight bounced around on my aching stomach - when it demanded me to speak you little bastard I'll have you know just what I-

"I'm gonna kill Praxis!"

And wring Erol's fucking neck! was close behind, but I didn't get that far. Not with the furry hand clamping down on my lips and it was all wrong, he shouldn't be like that, it wasn't him, right? It was all WRONG!

But no, no, no, that voice, that VOICE- I had been WAITING for it STOP IT-

I saw claws hovering above him as he covered, and the anger fell flat.

Because it WAS him.

"Daxter...?"

He stared at me, wide blue eyes glazed over with shock.

"What was that?"

But in the next moment he was cracking a nervous joke that I hardly registered, I just let him point me in the right direction as the familiar weight hopped onto my shoulder - it didn't care that I had been worried about it, it wanted to be there.

He did come for me.

And now, they call me a hero because I killed the monsters and saved the city. I'm not a hero. Ever since I was a kid I wanted to be a hero, but I lost my chance to be one. A hero doesn't go on a quest for revenge alone. A hero doesn't work for the mafia. An he doesn't stop caring. Caring whether or not he manages to avoid the pregnant woman with the little kid and pet as he speeds through the streets on a stolen vehicle, even if he's racing against time to save a dozen men from being eaten alive by metal heads.

Maybe at some point I'll be able to make up for it, but until then I'm not a hero.

I hate all that sentimental, melodramatic crap. But I do know what a hero is.
A hero is somebody who never gives up even if he has no idea where to start, who keeps grasping for hay and the slightest hope - never stops until he has fulfilled a promise. I needed a hero, and I got one.

Everyone else thinks that he's the sidekick. I guess he thinks so to.

I don't.
Chapter Summary

In which Erol directly addresses the readers. Fun for the whole family.

Oh, hello. Fancy seeing such a pretty little thing in this place. How did you get in?

I asked you a question, didn't you hear? I don't like it when people don't answer me. I really don't. You know who I am, don't you? Good. Now answer my first question.

Aha. Really? Well, I guess I'll have to replace those ones, then. Maybe add a few more, too… hmm? Where do you think you're going?

Such an amusing little face you're making. What, you didn't think I had a remote for the door? No way out for you, I'm afraid. I don't like intruders either.

My, you look like you're watching a ghost. Oh, ha ha. Very funny, aren't I?

Too scared to plea for mercy? Pity. I always enjoy a good plea.

You had heard of me before you came here, I take it? It's so nice knowing that such things can't be avoided. Don't worry, I'll make a larger imprint next time and make sure that nobody repeats your stupid little mistake. Then again, I could always use some distraction to lure that special somebody back to me, if nothing else works. You could be useful, after all… hmm. It's worth thinking about.

Ah, that's better. Break all those nails against the wall, now that's a nostalgic sight. Won't get you anywhere, no more than anybody else. But we all know that, now don't we? I was there too, sort of. Well, I didn't claw at any walls. I didn't even have any fingers then, I think. Difficult to say, really. I guess they were somewhere nearby… but they might have been crushed so badly that he just had them thrown away.

Strange that he cared to try any of this anyway, now that I think about it… oh, stop sobbing, it's boring. If you want to keep me amused you should try a nice screech of pain. Want me to help you with that?

No?

I know a lot of ways to make you sound really good. It's an art of mine, you could say. Every voice is different… ah, but there was that one voice, more beautiful than any other. Yes, before I heard that one I had not fully learnt to appreciate this art form. Sadly I have yet to find anything like it. No… really, I don't think I want to find its match.

There is a problem with that though. It irritates me, too. That time I mentioned, when I didn't have any fingers? Yes, there was a time back then when I screamed so loud that I became uncertain whether it was my voice, or that beautiful one. Now that is aggravating.

Sigh.

I guess that it's the scream of a man losing everything he had before. It wasn't just the fingers, no.
There's a little bit left, up here, all packed up and secure beneath the steel. Other than that, I am perfect.

Keep that look, I like that.

Oh yes, it was very painful. It was hell. I would like you to know a bit of it too, so I'll see to it in a short while. Something like that, ah… it needs to be shared. I simply can't live, if that's the word, with the idea of anybody getting away from knowing even a small piece of what I went through.

So that is my reason, really. Now, what is your reason? Idiot. I mean for coming here, of course. Didn't know what you were getting into. They never do.

Actually, I didn't either. He called it duty. He liked that word, let me tell you. I didn't really care, I didn't really have any reason to. I didn't worry either… oh, so I slipped there. You get used to knowing that everyone is too scared of you to lift a finger, you know? Oh, you don't. Of course. It's like a drug, you only want more of it once you've had it. Everyone looks for it in different places though.

Me? I wasn't that interested in the masses. I had them under my thumb, he had them under his heel. What fascinated me was that which he never cared about. Details. He should have cared more about the details… I guess he did, in the end. Oh yes, I sure got to feel that. But then again, I wasn't a detail.

Neither was that voice. We were… special. Damn, there I go, putting myself in the same group again.

It can't be avoided I suppose. We were special. We are special. We survived.

What are you looking at, hm? It might be unhealthy.

Oh fine, so I didn't exactly survive. Just this last little piece of meat left, plugged full of wires behind this forehead. Want to see it? Thought so.

That's better. Now stay like that.

Where was I? Voice… special… details… masses. Right, that.

There was that girl, you see. Pretty little thing. Noticed because she came out of nowhere, and built racing vehicles. I guess I was attracted to her for a bit. Can't really remember how that felt.

Well, it wasn't just what she did. She did build some amazing vehicles. But there was something else.

It still amuses me, even now, that she never knew who I was. You might have thought that she was stupid… no, she was very bright. Too bright for her own good. But I was better at hiding. Because you see, it was something she let slip the fourth time we happened to talk. Guess she had began to drop her defenses then. She mentioned that she was looking for a friend, and wondered if I had seen him.

Ah, that description she gave. She was so… fiery about it.

That's another good expression. No, I haven't practiced this laugh. It comes naturally.

Spot on. Yes, I knew exactly who she meant. I could have told her. And I was tempted, because it would have been so funny to see her expression then. But no, I never did tell her. I let her think that
I was sorry to be unable to help.

Do you understand why? No?

That is power. I held her in the palm of my hand, and she didn't even know about it. I could have crushed her at any opportunity and I reveled in that knowledge. Just as I looked forwards to silencing that voice. Silencing it to let it live on in my memory, forever.

I kept her floating in ignorance, enjoying every moment of it. She was beautiful like that. Oh, and it was beautiful when that voice tried to speak to her, and she didn't listen. She told me that she was worried about it, that it had changed. Told me that. And I could have crushed her at any moment.

That… is power. Pure power, to have another soul so completely in your grasp.

Sigh.

But then things went downhill. All the way until that crash.

And I woke up.

When he spoke of duty back then, I didn't really understand. He had the damn piece of rock that he had spent months and months fretting about. What was I supposed to be? Backup, I was informed. They had a plan to deal with the metal heads, but there was that other… irritation.

There ought to be a better word for moron. I hesitate to use fool, because that means somebody who has no idea, no plan. He had an idea. Ideals, even. Cold, hard ideals tipped with sharp steel edges. Entrancing. No, he was no fool. Now, moron, that's somebody who manages to let something slip right out of his hands.

He had his fair share of the drug, and he knew what he needed to do. Hell, we needed him to do it. He wanted us to survive, that was all there was to it really. Didn't matter how, or even if there was much left of us… as long as we came out alive in one way or another. I wanted to survive too, I suppose. Can't remember how that felt, either. Nowadays, the idea of not getting to finish what I started- no, it's not fear. But I would be very irritated if I did not get to see it to the end. That is, the end I want.

There's the same word again. Irritation. Ironic that I keep making connections, isn't it? Voice, irritation… that voice remains an irritation. But ah… I would love to hear it again. Not just in any fashion. No, no… it hasn't screamed for so long, I know. That needs to be set right.

I lost the track again, didn't I? But you're being a good little thing not interrupting me. Did you know who I was before you stepped inside?

Didn't know I was here?

Fool.

So… yes, he thought he had a good idea about the metal heads. We all know how that went, now don't we? How I know? Kid, I can hook myself onto the entire Haven intelligence database. If I want I can see him die from three different angles.

Of course he had security cameras set up in there too. He was so anxious about that he could've wet- no, not him. He was just very anxious about his little bomb. It might have been amusing to tinker with, but I'll rather play with the more sophisticated things.
It remains a rather amusing show. I look at it now and then.

And you see, all those security cameras… I'll let you in on a little secret. You won't squeal, now will you? Trust me, you won't.

Cameras all over the place, always. I can find just about anything, from quite a while back.

We discussed, we cursed, we swore- he nearly tore the remaining hair out. I really found it amusing to watch, because I didn't see it as much a problem as a nuisance. A funny little nuisance. Yes, yes… it plucked my own soldiers like flies. But it was still just a nuisance. Those who got downed by something like that, they shouldn't have been in that armor in the first place.

I'm leaping back in time a little again, see? You're following me, I hope.

What we discussed, it was that nuisance. The voice.

It just seemed to have no weaknesses. But you know, I watched those tapes, and I thought about it. Because they caught some sound too.

There was that one word that struck me as interesting. Well, a name, really. I remember being rather irritated hearing it, because I was confused.

The voice looked at that rat, and all that which we had worked to create, it fell back. Again. But that wasn't what interested me when we watched that scene for the first time. Praxis… he was busy fretting about the fact that the voice had claws and horns. Ah yeah, and the fact that it slipped outside and disappeared into the city.

Me, I listened to what it said. It repeated something I had heard before.

Not screaming, not screeching… yet, that voice was beautiful again right then, speaking that name. Do you know it?

Yes… "Daxter". You should hear it spoken like the voice did, though.

The voice was weak then, so utterly weak and confused. Almost like the first time I heard that name, but even better.

I just don't get why it looked at me and talked to a rat, but really… I don't care. Maybe I'll ask it at some point.

Hmm? What's that look, now? Do you know something?

Really. I'll have you talk in a while, trust me. But right now… this is kind of enjoyable.

I don't care what that rat is supposed to be, but I do know that I found something there. Something so obviously a weakness. Too bad we never got around checking it out too well, it would have been interesting to see if I was right. See, the soldiers had their hands full trying to survive against the voice. They never had the mind left to aim for the rat.

Idiots.

Where was I, again? Backup… right. I was fucking backup. Secondary. Me! Secondary! But you know, Praxis had learnt something from the voice. That would be that if you're going to create a monster, make sure that it can't get away. He talked about duty, and he knew I wanted to stand up and crush his skull all the while.
Just that… well, I didn't have any legs.

No arms either. I was just… a remain. Watching. Listening. Sometimes I could reply. Sometimes they didn't bother to give me that ability.

You think you can picture hell, I'm sure… you have no idea. Somewhere around then was when my voice mixed with that one voice, inside my mind. I screamed, trust me… I screamed.

And then they suddenly came rushing down there, a good deal of soldiers. My, were they disturbed. I had never seen those slugs of scientists working so fast. Praxis dead. Metal heads in the city. Beautifully done. We all knew it was just a question of time, didn't we?

Then, there was the fun part. They pieced me together like a puzzle, all the while making such pathetic screeches and blabbering about how I was needed out there.

I just smiled. I have to admit that they put a lot of impressive work into my face, it was quite lovingly rendered. Because of that I can still produce a whole lot of expressions. I smashed it in a fit of anger though, the first time I caught my own reflection. Cranky, cranky.

I love watching Praxis crash into that scaffold. Would have been better if I was the one sending him flying, but… you take what you can get.

Yes, yes… getting back on track.

When they finally had finished connecting all the circuits, set all the plugs right and turned the last screw, I stood up. Finally.

And then, then was the really fun part. When one of them came up with the bright suggestion that I make sure of my new abilities before going to protect the city.

One of the better suggestions I've heard, really.

Do I need to tell you what I did? My, you're a bright one. You don't have to hear it… you can guess.

And… you're right. Not a single one of them left alive. Or in one piece. The cameras caught that too. I removed those files from the database, though. I didn't want to spoil the surprise for anyone else. But I still have them stored in here. Want to see? It would be a nice appetizer for you.

What a bore you are.

Well, anyway… I got out of there, and I watched the city crumble from above. It was really funny, watching all those little ants running around. Sadly I never did catch sight of the voice. I knew it was out there somewhere, but sadly it eluded me.

But I heard another voice.

How to describe it… at first I thought that I was picking up some random radio signal. It was like a distant, irritating wailing. Not sure if I would have shut it off if I could, but as it were it just became something in the back of my mind as I watched the chaos beneath me.

And it just came together. After a while, the wailing began to make sense. No, there were no words, not like you would define it. Just the emotion in it. Intention.

They were sending out signals to find planets like this. Not exactly expecting a reply, but they got
You would think that creatures like the Dark Makers are intelligent. Well, I suppose they are, in a way. But at the same time they are very simplistic. I believe that they somehow know what they are doing, but they act on impulses alone. Very interesting impulses, mainly considering how to squish everything soft. I guess they didn't expect finding somebody who sympathized.

They didn't really know what to make of me, see. But they are easily fascinated. And they did somehow know that there was a danger here, somebody who the precursors trusted in. Well informed bastards. I could have lived without that knowledge.

There were a lot of other things that I wanted to know, however. And they did tell me a lot.

That was how I learnt to communicate with the metal heads as well. Ah… they were much like the Dark Makers, confused around me. But they were lost, so pathetically lost, without their darling leader. They just don't know what to do without that big hand pointing and saying "kill THAT one".

I'm surrounded by huge children with fangs and claws, really. So grateful for my robots. They never hesitate, not even before they have been given a purpose. Well, metal heads can get the job done, and they can sniff their way to eco from miles away. Especially very concentrated eco.

Crystals, yes…

Ahh… that was the first time I saw the voice again, because of a crystal. I didn't expect it to see it there, and I was quite irritated that I wasn't prepared. Not to mention that it took that crystal. Well, I have a few more… but it's still irritating.

I made sure that I was the one prepared the next time we came, ah… face to face, so to speak. The voice is good at frowning, but I would rather hear it scream. It looks sickeningly healthy these days. More life in those eyes.

It'll be so sweet crushing it.

I suppose that's it, really. Now, about you, my little friend-

Hmm? Now what, the alarm?

…

You're in luck. Looks like there's a better playmate for me incoming right this moment. Ah, the voice, the voice… it's finally here. I don't have time for you, I'm afraid. Out of my way.

Oh, don't give me that look. You're just not important. I don't care whether you get out of here or not.

Because I'll silence the voice forever, and then I'll destroy this pitiful world. It doesn't matter where you go.

But do tell everyone you came face to face with the late commander Erol, if you feel like it. I'm sure that they will make very funny faces. Not as good as yours, surely, but good enough.

Ta-ta.
Evening breeze

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Begin Introspection. Serial code: Jak.

People often wonder how I can possibly stay sane with Daxter around 24/7. It's not that I don't understand what they mean. He's loudmouthed, anxious, weak and very seldom able to lend me a hand in the battles.

He's everything that I'm not, really.

Opposites attract? No, it's more than that. I hope we can agree on that the "having a wimpy sidekick makes the hero look tougher"-crap is pure bull, too. With everything that I have become, that I was created to be, I don't need a midget to add a jarring chord.

I guess gratitude really is a large piece of the puzzle. A very complicated sort of gratitude.

He got me out of Praxis' prison. There is nothing, nothing, that anybody else ever can do to measure up to that. I can't even begin to understand how he survived on the streets, all alone for two years, and kept looking for me.

Was the knowledge that I had been lonely too, so terribly lonely, the thing that made him stay with me throughout all those months that followed? The months when the only difference between me and a psychopath was that I took orders from others?

I scared everyone, I know I did, and I didn't have time to stop and care. But he, he still sat on my shoulder all the time even though he knew I could hardly control myself whenever the anger took control. Every time I woke up from that red haze only to find the world still red, the color covering me and filling my mouth – the times when I choked and hurled, trembling hands pressed against a wall or tree, anything to support me. All those times when I finally sunk down beside the disgusting stains of crimson vomit, hugging myself desperately to keep from retching again – then there were small paws on my forehead, sorting through the threads of hair plastered to my soaked skin.

"Sheez, Darkie sure was pissed today, wasn't he? Probably got bored not getting any action for a while. Pff. Buddy, you gotta tell'im that patience is a virtue."

Always something like that.

Daxter was the one who dubbed the anger "Dark Jak". He gave it a name, distanced it from me. That thing that drank elf blood and ripped metal heads apart to chew on their limbs, it wasn't me. Because Daxter said so.

And he was qualified to say so, because he watched. All the time. And despite that, he always stayed on my shoulder, even when I wasn't me, because he still trusted me enough to believe that I wouldn't try to hurt him again... that I wouldn't let Dark Jak try again. And people claim that Daxter is a coward?
Nobody else would ever even consider going that close to Dark Jak. Because he's chaotic evil that's just slightly nicer than metal heads, because there is something within him that's still human.

And yet… it's not true. Dark Jak is not another person, he is me. It's never anybody else who slices up the opponents, beast and elf alike, who roars at the fleeing survivors and pursue them until not a single one is left alive. It's always, always me, just… rawer. It's my rage that drives me to do all those things. People just like to deny it and think of Dark Jak as an entirely other being. I want to deny it too, but I can't… not alone.

It's only true when Daxter denies it, because he's the only one who's spent enough time with me to reach that conclusion. And then… I can almost believe that it's not me, too. If he just keeps telling me that, then I can forget what I actually know about Dark Jak.

I need him around, to keep reminding me. Even now, when the white eco has pushed the darkness back, I still need reminders every now and then – because it's not gone. It'll never go away. It's just further back, resting beneath a thin layer of light within my mind. Just because it's sleepier doesn't mean that it's dormant.

"Freaky-cool! Let's call him Light Jak!"

Yes, the light finally dragged me up from the mental muck that just couldn't be reasoned away, that stuff that always slouched about within me and irritated me even when I didn't even notice it. I feel better now, far, far better.

But there are things even the light can't do… I just don't want to think about that.

…

Sig asked me once, how I can stand bringing Daxter with me all the time. He whines and prophesizes about every single thing that might go wrong, from the moment I get the order, on the way to the danger zone, through the entire mission and up until the moment we finish it up and start heading back. How can I put up with that?

Why doesn't anybody ever ask why he keeps following me through it all, when he's so scared? Or maybe they just ask him that, and not me. I don't know.

I couldn't explain it to Sig. Just couldn't put to words that it's like… like we have a deal. He tells me everything that he's scared of, and I make sure that nothing of it ever happens.

So, when I couldn't give him an answer, Sig asked about the aftermath instead. The part when Daxter – often more or less drunk – starts telling the story about our day. A very warped story, of course, exaggerating everything and glorifying himself in front of anybody who's willing to listen and get a sneer. He looks like an idiot in the process of course, and we all know that he's lying. But he just loves the limelight and the giggles he can get.

Giggles.

Bah.

I actually could have explained that to Sig, but I didn't.

What Daxter does is… he sees it all. Every last disgusting detail, depending on how close I need to go to finish the mission. And then he takes it and makes it sound stupid. Takes the blood, the claws descending on me, the breaking bones and shattered skulls spilling over with gore – and makes people laugh, because he tells it as if it's silly.
"And then there were twenty less metal heads in the world! Hoo-ha!"

Might be true now and again, but not thanks to him. We all know that, right? But it's good for a laugh, such a comedy act. Everyone gets a laugh, and if Tess is there he's guaranteed a nice little petting by dainty, pink nails. And giggles. Giggles.

Of course it's tasteless. Making jokes about marauders and metal heads being reduced to unrecognizable lumps of flesh should in no way be amusing. But we're all coldhearted bastards living in a cold, evil world, now aren't we?

And Daxter can make it seem funny, against all odds.

I need that. All the things I do, the walking nightmare I passed through a few hours earlier? The ruthless scum I am? The mon- no. He creates a distance to all that, and I desperately need that somebody who knows and still can shrug it off with a laugh, even if the smile comes hours later. Somebody who can make it seem not so bad.

But telling Sig that? The guy's like a big brother to me, but… he'd toss me into the Survival Program Wasteland Style – for a month, no questions asked, no insurance paid, no objections heard. Kindly so, of course.

Mental relief is not supposed to be like that, I suppose. But alcohol just doesn't have the same effect as Daxter's babbling, it just blurs things a little, doesn't make them go away.

Daxter makes me feel okay again. People think he's a pet, and that's fine – especially that all the people and creatures wanting my blood think that he's just a pet. There's a great number of people that need to never find out that Daxter really is a friend, that he's important.

And… when I think "Daxter", I think of that scrawny friend of mine who dove into the ocean with me, who laid in the grass beside me counting stars, who… whom I pushed into the dark eco and who kept me "sane" through my time in prison.

It's just that I forget that part about his fuzziness when I'm not watching him. When I just listen to his voice, it's like it slips my mind that he's an ottsel.

Of course I know that he's the way he is, but I can forget that because he's just the same as he ever was. It's just a pain to be reminded, every time I turn to look at him and see the small fuzz ball instead of the elf with the blond-red hair.

But he's still here, and that's all that matters.

It's not a question of "dealing with" having him around. It's more like I get to have him with me despite everything he's frightened of – everything that isn't me, even when I sprout claws, horns and fangs.

I have a debt to pay, too… for screwing up his life by turning him into an ottsel, to repay him for saving me, for him daring to stay with me, and most of all for my betrayal in the prison. I need to have him here so I can keep repaying him, every day. It's the only thing I can do, and it's the least he deserves.

And because I love him, I couldn't bear not to have him with me.

End Introspection.
Jak really liked Spargus. Sure it was hot and rough, but it was alive. Every stone laid upon the walls of every building had been dragged there and slammed down with one thought only; "We're gonna live!"

It was essentially the opposite to Haven. Big plus there. Huge, really.

Survival in Haven was completely different from survival in Spargus. In Haven, it was all about making it out on top if you wanted food for the day, so everyone constantly tried to claw their each other's eyes out to keep them from winning.

Yes, yes… survival of the fittest, it always worked like that. The difference was that in Spargus the battles were set with rules, with everyone watching. Damas watching. And if anything threatened Spargus, every last man, woman, child and pet would rush towards it with weapon in hand to defend each other, while in Haven there would be a stampede in the other direction and maybe a few nervous cheers to the armored men running off to put their lives on the line.

Spargus was dusty and sandy. So what? Haven was a smog-filled dump, even more so now that most of it had been smashed or terraformed into something looking like the inside of a snake's belly.

But there were lives there, countless lives crouching in the shadows, frightened voices whispering prayers for somebody to save them. And as much as he loathed as good as everything that Haven symbolized, Jak just could not ignore those voices. He had tried for a while, still burnt by their judgment… but coming there, seeing them again, it broke the rage. Time, and white eco eased his hatred as well – it had become harder to get angry.

Now he could look back at all the little things that had dug into his nerves, small, stupid things that used to irritate him… and just shake his head at himself. The dark eco had always had him on the edge, in the worst moments almost driving him to snarl at Samos to stop scratching his beard in that irritating way when thinking.

Haven needed him. His friends needed him.

But with the war factory destroyed, he had been able to return to Spargus – with the excuse to look for useful artifacts of course. Though he hesitated to admit it aloud, it was a relief. Not only because it was easier to breathe in the desert.

As he sat on a rough stone bench in the shadow with his back against a cooling wall, Jak closed his eyes and let the ocean breeze flow over him, filling his nostrils with the memories of simpler times. The evening brought a lower temperature and more energy to the children dashing about, screaming and whacking away at each other with makeshift "weapons". If he tapped at it carefully, Jak could make his memory mingle another child's laugh into the other's, a voice that only had gotten squeakier with the teenage development.

The teenage development he had been cruelly dropped from, landing him with an even shriller voice. Jak pursed his lips and forced those thoughts away, willing the laughter to return.

He did it carefully, however, because all the time he knew that it was akin to the madness he had hovered within not too long ago. It could never become "too long ago".
Grimacing he opened his eyes and watched the scenery for a while. Beyond the sharp cut of the cliff the ocean spread out towards the horizon, and a few desert snappers screeched to each other as they flitted through the breeze. The children still played, ignoring the uncouth warriors watching them to make sure they did not get too close to the cliffs.

They had fun, but there was no mistaking the diffuse plan behind the game. Even these kids would have to earn their battle amulets one day, and they were preparing for that moment with every smack of colliding staffs made of sand reed. And laughing all the while.

Jak closed his eyes again and leant further back against the wall, making himself forget the harshness waiting for the kids again while his fingers idly scratched the fuzzy warmth curled up on his lap.

Laughter. Focus on the laughter. Just for fun, nothing else.

Small feet running in the sand, warm waves suddenly slipping up to the ankles and turning the dry sound into merry splashes.

Bigger feet, slightly louder, deeper voice. The figure grew.

Jak frowned.

"Come on, Jak, I don't have all day!"

He focused, pushing the images back. Children!

The laughter shrunk back into the almost girlish squeal again, loosing what little maturity it had had. And the frown eased a little.

It was less uncanny to recall childhood memories instead.

No… uncanny wasn't quite right either.

Jak let out a silent sigh.

"Mmh, right there, Jak…"

His eyes snapped open and he blinked down at Daxter's small, furry form and his own fingertips working at the area just behind the little ears. For a moment he was frozen, but then his lips twitched without any joy and he resumed scratching.

Daxter never seemed to notice anything.

This sigh was harder to stifle.

Thinking about Daxter as he had been when they both were children… it became less of a pain to be reminded of the truth when looking at him. Jak really thought he should have gotten used to it by now, but the dull stitch of regret never seemed to change.

Nothing ever changed…

*The metal head fell to the floor, but instead of the darkness they had expected to see floating out of it… there was light. A pure cloud of puffy, shimmering light.*
Lowering gun, bloodless fingers clenching around it.

The frown returned, and he shook his head. It did not help.

White eco?

The oracle had granted him healing powers, but he hadn't really believed that to mean that there would be white eco right in front of them just a few minutes later. Neither of them had.

Looking at Daxter, the teeth chewing the furry lower lip, eyes wide and almost glassy.

It hurt too much. He tried to stop thinking, but his mind had a tendency to slip on the things he had not practiced to forget yet.

"Wanna try?"

Gulp. Sudden hope, but scared… scared that maybe, maybe nothing will happen…?

"Y-yeah! O'course!"

Weight slipping down arm, careful with the claws around bare skin. Skittering feet across floor. Swirling…

Jak clenched his teeth, but there was no going back. He shifted his grip, stroking the back of the small head he had been scratching. Daxter mumbled something in a sleepy voice, unaware of the memories that marched through his friend's mind.

Orange fur glimmering with the fading light, but nothing happens. Standing there, watching his small paws… silent, ears drooping, eyes half closed. Looking up, trying to shrug, smile, hide disappointment.

Chest burns. Hardly helps to put gun away, lift him up, hold him.

I'm sorry, I'm so sorry…

"Well ah… g-good thing we saved the world back there on the silos, eh?"

Mutter something, can't speak, can't tell how sorry, so sorry… want to tell him to stop trying so hard.

Can eventually move again, continuing through the temple in silence.

Jak sighed.

He looked up at the area around him again, noting that the sun was halfway down the horizon now. Break time was almost over. The children did not seem to think so, their game instead intensifying as the air cooled. Their laughter and the soft smacks bit by bit became the only sounds disturbing the lonely whisper of wind across sand, and low howl as the breeze found its way through crevasses in the cliffs. The birds had begun to find their way to their nests.

Really, he was not supposed to have a "break time" in the first place. But considering that the last weeks had been spent running around like a maniac and gunning down anything with claws or colored red for the sake of Haven city, and just an hour ago narrowly making it back to safety before the sandstorm really hit… Jak had decided that he needed a break, world be damned. He could save it tomorrow.
Involuntarily his gaze traveled upwards, as if driven by a sudden stitch of guilt.

The daystar glared back down, its light never changing whether it was day or night.

Eyesore.

And Erol was still out there somewhere. So was Veger.

Argh.

Jak stood, the peace once and for all broken. A vague protest against the movement came from Daxter, but he soon settled in the nest of his friend's arms instead.

Trying not to let the frustration root too deeply again, Jak began his trek up Spargus' main street. Every now and then somebody would wave a calloused hand at him in greeting, something he mostly just nodded in reply to. Carrying Daxter around "like a little doll" of course earned a few smirking comments, but it was nothing that fazed him.

The warm, flicking light of candles began lighting up the windows he passed beneath, outlining Spargus with their gentle glow. Not even the light was of the manufactured kind here.

Eventually he could climb the stairs and push the door open to the small home he had been granted after the first arena victory. Just someplace to sleep, really.

With the windows tightly shut it was almost pitch dark inside, but it did not bother him too much. Without letting go of Daxter he kicked the door shut behind them, and lightly pressed his shoulder against the wall to feel his way across the first room and into the second. With so little furniture, there was nothing he had to worry about stumbling on.

Well in the next room he hunched down and felt his way across the simple, woven mat on the floor with one hand. As soon as he found the pillow he set Daxter down on it and went to take off his equipment.

The safely locked up morph gun created a metallic clatter as it met the floor, but the silence stretched as Jak blindly sought for the straps on his armor.

Minutes and muttered curses passed, now and again interrupted by triumphant hisses as Jak's donkey-inspired power of stubbornness won the battle against the darkness. Piece by piece the protective gear landed on the floor – leg protector, gauntlets, shoulder-

Oh shit.

Jak bit back a hiss as a chilling pain shot through his shoulder in the moment he reached too far back for the straps.

'Not again…' he thought, grimacing.

More carefully he reached up and pressed down on his back, just beside the top of the left shoulder blade. Another wince as his fingertips slipped on a hard lump beneath his skin, sending another cold flare all around the surrounding expanse of muscles.

Crap.

Apparently he had been ignoring these bloody things for too long again.

The sound of a yawn sent his knitted eyebrows twitching.
"Whazzit now?" Daxter mumbled.

"Nothing."

Replied too quickly. He could almost feel the sluggish blink, and even more so the evil grin slowly creeping onto his friend's features as the realization dawned.

"Jaaak…"

Sleepiness gone, exchanged for a throaty parody of a ghost's frightening whisper.

"Guh."

Jak grunted, letting the hand slip over his shoulder and down into his lap.

"Okay, okay…" he muttered, "tomorrow. It's too damn dark now."

For the bigger part of the time Jak spent carefully finishing the removal of the last armor pieces, the sound of Daxter's chuckling hung in the darkness. After finally being free of it all Jak heaved a sigh and crawled onto the mat. He stretched out, once again concluding that the pillow was hard as a rock. But it worked for a tired head.

As soon as he placed his left hand beside his head there was a muted, rustling sound. Within a moment tiny hands grabbed his pointing finger, and a fuzzy cheek soon followed.

Raaar! Mine!

With a low, content mumble Daxter settled with his new pillow. Jak's lips stretched a little.

The warrior closed his eyes, knowing that the next day would bring more world-saving, and a little piece of heaven and hell.

Mostly hell.

He tried to fall asleep despite this knowledge.

Begin Introspection. Serial code: Jak.

I'm not irritated by any of Daxter's tried and tired gags, because they're okay with me, they still make me smile. But him and Tess in the same room could make a metalpede puke. And that thing wouldn't have the headache I get from the sugar.

Sigh.

Okay, let's get a few things straight.

I'm shock full of dark eco.

I'm impatient on the verge of idiocy.

I can with a single thought become the embodiment of menacing.
I'm definitely one of the most dangerous men in the world.

And I'm in love with my best friend. Who's fuzzy, two feet tall and likes girls. Dainty, girly girls.

This… is not good.

Chapter End Notes

This was the chapter where the story proper really gets going, with the introspection intros and outros of every chapter. I was very close to just having every chapter be from a different character's perspective, but I had so many ideas for what difference characters could weigh in on, that didn't really fit in the narrative proper. So we got these things instead.
Partnership

Begin Introspection. Serial code: Daxter.

Heey! It's everyone's favorite cuddly, funny little ottsel! Did'ya miss me? Know you did.

If you wanna know anything about moron-safe flirting, comedy acts, sweet lovin' and Jak, you've come to the right place.

… I just said "sweet lovin'" and "Jak" in the same breath, didn't I? Oops.

Well, it just can't be helped. I always seem to get back to that subject no matter what I'm entertaining people about. My life is based on the guy, in case you've failed to notice. Especially my continued life.

No thanks to his kamikaze tendencies, of course. I used to think that his hobby of using lurkers as punching bags was bad, but now?

"Metal heads? How many, three hundred? Really? Wohoo, let's go!"

Okay, so he wouldn't be caught dead in a mousetrap saying that, but it's the general idea. Whenever those ears perk up like wumpbee antennas at the smell of honey, you know there's trouble.

… please don't tell him I just drew a parallel between him and wumpbees. He'll flip. Trust me, he'll flip. Hard. Only way to make him flip harder would be to tell him something like "Y'know, sometimes when you grin like that it makes me think of Baron Praxis."

And now I'm starting to scare myself, so we'll stop right there.

Ahem.

Sooo, anyway. I'm the second half of the Demolition Duo DeLuxe, and you better believe me when I say that Jak wouldn't last a second without me. 'Cause he couldn't.

… okay, so he could. But no longer than that. Happy now?

The point is, there's a duo right there. Yep, duo. Not just Jak, there're two of us, baby! He brings the guns and action, and I take care of the little things. Like observations. And Jak. Not that he's a "little" thing.

And yet people don't think too much of me for some reason. Take Torn for example. He just loooves to call me a rat, wimp, dog food, whatever. Pff. Like he's got any bragging rights. Can he make Jak squirm? Didn't think so. Too bad I can't tell him that, because Jak would chop up my tail if I ever let this one slip. Oh well… it's mine and my blonde's little secret.

Not that I, uhm… like it that much. But you just can't help but grin at it, y'know?

End Introspection.
"Ow!"

"Sheez! Good thing I found this one before it locked up... hepp!"

"Muscles don't do tha- rrgh!"

"What are you, man or pansy? If anyone heard you complain so much because of some tense nerves they'd toss ya off a cliff."

Daxter underlined his point by digging his heel into Jak's back and rolling it over the offending muscle knot. The victim of the treatment bit the pillow to keep from giving the smirking ottsel the tease-fodder of another groan, thinking that "massage" was just another word for "friendly torture".

"This thing's the size of mossman's eyeballs. With the glasses on, that is," Daxter informed.

He continued to work on the lump with his heel, using just a little less force this time.

"Mmrgh," Jak eloquently replied, still with the cloth between his teeth.

"Why don't you get this fixed more often, hotshot?"

"Mechu ong a chachu."

Daxter crossed his arms and looked down at the blond-green spikes pointing at him. After a moment he reached out and pulled one of the long ears.

"What?" he said.

Using his tongue Jak pushed the pillow cloth out of his mouth, but it was with a slight reservation that he dared to let go. He turned his head and looked at the ottsel from the corner of his eye, suspiciously.

"I said 'because you're a sadist'," he said.

This earned him a scoff from Daxter.

"I am not!" the little guy proclaimed.

"Sure you ain't- ow! Goddammit!"

"Hey, here's another one!"

Jak nearly chewed through the pillow as the small feet marched across his bare back in the search for more tense nerves.

"You could use some of these for bullets, I tell ya," Daxter said while strutting about, "either you need to cut down on the tension or we're gonna have to do this more often."

Jak's eyes rolled at the mere thought of the second option.

"No way in hell..." he growled, burying his face in the slightly moist lump of cloth and feathers.

Soft knees landed on either side of his spine, and a second later a pair of small hands pushed down on his neck, the claws safely pulled in. A deep intake of air slowly caused Daxter's perch to raise
and fall, and he grinned to himself as he began kneading the area before him.

"Thaaat's it, babe. Nice and soft."

After a while Jak turned his head and let his cheek press against the pillow instead, eyes closed as his breathing grew more steady and the shoulders began to sag from their tense posture.

"Ya know, if it became known that you're such a weakling we'd all be doomed. Imagine any nutjob just sneaking up from behind and poking at the right place-"

He suddenly paused and Jak immediately tensed, expecting just that kind of jab into a sore spot. But when Daxter cackled, the blonde knew that he had fallen for a false alarm. Shooting a dirty look in the ottsel's general direction, Jak moved his hands to rest beneath his cheek to collect himself.

"… and that'd be the end of it," Daxter continued, poking the neck with one fingertip, "no wonder you need me to watch your back, eh? Though as far as I remember this wasn't in the job description."

"You are watching my back," Jak muttered.

"Yeah, yeah… smartass."

"Mmf."

Smirking, Daxter returned to the neck rub.

"I tell you, it wouldn't hurt so freakin' much if you didn't let these buggers get so freakin' big before you freakin' ask me to deal with 'em. Sure it's macho and all to fight the system, but think about me! It's a pain to sort them out, and your complaining ain't helping."

Jak just mumbled something inaudible somewhere in the middle and at the end of the yapping. A soft warmth spread across his back and arms from the area that Daxter worked on. This would be the "heaven" part.

But just as he was about to drift off, the small hands disappeared and the weight on his back centralized on the two small places where Daxter's feet were positioned. Sighing, Jak took the pillow between his teeth again.

"Ready?" came from above.

"Mmf."

Jak pinched his eyes tightly shut, chewing the cloth as the small heel came down straight on the first big lump again. It did not hurt quite as much as before since he had managed to relax, but it was still uncomfortable. Hello, hell.

Okay, so this really was pathetic for a guy like him. It was not like he hadn't endured hours and hours of things that made this stuff seem like a trip to the café. But the bolts of pain from where the tense nerves were kneaded and crushed were only a fraction of it, and an excuse.

Pain made him tense. Pain made the anger stir. And pain shot a searing instinct straight into his backbone that he needed to stifle.

This is Daxter, just Daxter trying to help, don't fight back, it hurts but don't fight back.
Biting the pillow helped him stay calm and continue allowing Daxter to be the stronger one until the massage was finished. It was a stretch, it would always be a stretch, and getting to the current point had taken a lot of time and psyching for Jak to agree to.

And letting anybody else do what Daxter now did was something that the blonde could not even begin to consider. Not even Keira. Only those two small hands – and feet – could he deal with, secretly wondering what it would feel like if they had not been quite so small and fuzzy. As long as they were the same hands.

Jak grunted when the pressure increased again, relaxing only slightly as the pain slowly began to ease up. It was buckling now, as the tense nerves bit by bit melted beneath Daxter's insistent kneading. At least… this lump was. There were others.

Another groan had to be stopped.

Standing on his friend's back Daxter looked down, studying the skin his heel pressed against. A thin scar went straight across the impact area – too thin and straight to be the work of a metal head's claws.

Fuzzy ears drooped.

He really knew nothing about what Jak had lived through. Jak spoke with nobody about Praxis' prison.

Nobody.

Not that he could not imagine – anyone who even got a glimpse of Jak's scars could. Only half of them could have been gained from battle. A few were of questionable origin and could with some goodwill be credited to daggers or claws merely scratching the skin, but… too many were still obviously created with surgical expertise. And all the tiny pricks from needles, too… all over, even on his neck.

But Daxter tried not to imagine, because it was just too horrible. Just seeing all the lighter lightning bolts and dots marking Jak's skin, and knowing that if he had just been quicker, there would have been fewer. Even if it was just one or two fewer…

Even the smallest mental image could make his fuzzy little body shudder and made him want to cower, hiding from the thundering guilt with his arms over his head. In an egoistical way he was glad that Jak never even gave a broad idea of anything that had happened, because the mere thought of hearing the details made Daxter's stomach churn.

But at the same time, he knew that he would listen to every last word if the pain ever got the better of Jak. That pain that was so excruciatingly obvious in those blue eyes sometimes.

The bump beneath the skin was getting smaller by the minute. He sat down on his knees again, exchanging the heel for his hands despite the stinging feeling creeping up the bony arms. He clenched his teeth and continued to rub.

Jak moved again, and Daxter threw a glance upwards. That made it worth any pain his tired arms could throw at him.

Heavy eyelids hung over the blue irises as the blonde returned to the position with his cheek against the pillow, and the knitted eyebrows had moved up to a far more relaxed position, taking the constant scowl away with them. Even if there was no smile on the lips, a hint of it hung over the tranquil face.
Daxter let out a silent sigh of relief as he watched Jak's dreamy look. Much, much better… he winced, unwillingly.

**Eyebrows knitting in discomfort, dirty fingertips fumbling and pressing down on shirt stretched across skin.**

"Oi! You got an aching shoulder there, buddy? Want me to rub it for ya?"

**Blinking eyes, twitching eyebrows. Head shake, small movement but a little too forceful. Rustling cloth, standing up and leaving.**

The one left behind is surprised.

**Frown, realization.**

**Suspicion. Always the suspicion.**

**He doesn't want to be touched.**

A knock on the door jostled both of them out of their thoughts – or well, Jak out of his sweet oblivion. With an irritated groan he heaved himself up, Daxter slipping onto the floor.

"Whazzit?" Jak called, setting himself cross-legged on the mat.

He looked straight ahead, watching the door open from across the dusky main room. Sunlight spilled inside and lit up the simple table and the two chairs; there was not much else to see in there – which the sunlight probably appreciated since it had to make it past the tall, bulky figure blocking most of the doorway.

"Yo, cherries. Mornin'."

No mistaking that one. Jak smiled slightly, raising a hand in greeting.

"Mornin', Sig."

He yawned and the hand moved to scratch his bare chest instead. This turned out to be a bad idea as a popping sound came from his still un-cared-for shoulder, and he winced. Sig squinted at what his working eye made out as dusk, while the two people more used to the dim illumination had no problem whatsoever to see every last detail.

Especially scars. Daxter grimaced.

Sig debated asking if Jak was okay, but reached the conclusion that the answer would just be a yes. Even if golden boy was bleeding to death. The thought made the big man grin slightly with friendly pride.

Instead of asking about health, Sig settled for the original question he had in mind.

"You boys up for some action? Kleiver said his men saw something big moving in the ruins and wants somebody to check on it."

Jak smirked at Daxter's immediate "Nooo..." and completely disregarded the protest in favor of a nod.

"Yeah, sure..."
He tried rotating both his shoulders, getting another pop with a bonus cold flare for no extra charge.

Ow.

"Just give us twenty," he said, keeping the sigh out of his voice.

Sig gave a small mock salute, hefting the Peace Maker over his shoulder.

"I'll go prepare the Sand Shark. Don't chicken out on me."

At that, Jak just gave a dry chuckle. Grinning, Sig closed the door, increasing the dusk radically. The demolition duo heard his boots slamming against the stone stair as he left, listening in silence for a few moments.

Finally Jak stretched and laid down again, resting his forehead on his lower arms.

"Okay," he muttered.

With a slight cackle Daxter hopped back onto his pal and headed for the next victim.

"Ready or not, here we go!" he cheerfully said.

"You enjoy this far too- ow! Son of a-!"

The pillow was having a rough morning. But even that got to rest as Jak's tension gradually dissolved beneath Daxter's stubborn hands.

Kind, soft hands.

Begin Introspection. Serial code: Daxter.

I hate horror stories, 'cause I just can't shake them off afterwards. Yeah, yeah, go ahead and call me wimpy. Didn't y'all know I'm of the careful kind? Yup, that's right. I get enough action, gore and terror in my everyday life with Jak, thankyouverymuch.

Sooo my point is, I'm really not hot on hearing a real life horror story. But it's not just that I'm anxious of having to listen to Jak talking about what they did to him, not just that I won't be able to forget. It's… it's because I could've prevented some of it, a lot of it, if I had just been able to find him faster. Maybe even stopped Darkie from ever being born.

I don't… don't want to know how bad I failed.

The scariest thing really is not knowing, but the suspicions. Of course I can see the scars, and they tell me a lot more than I want to know. But there are those things I can't see, that nobody can… that Jak never will tell. Not when he's conscious, at least.

I know they beat him up, he looked like a freakin' patch doll of bruises when I first found him for chrissakes.

Mmf…
Yeah. Nasty stuff... ugh... I don't wanna think about it.

I don't wanna think about the rest either, 'cause... 'cause those bruises healed, of course, but I still remember them, a-and... and...

... and Jak never wants to talk about it and I totally respect that but there's a crapload of other stuff, y'know, stuff that doesn't show but never heals and Erol always said these really weird things and I'll never know if anything happened and how bad Jak hurts and what he hides but there's that bloody suspicion that it's much, much worse and I ran away, watching them drag him off- rargh!

Okay, I'm calm, I'm calm. Damn, that crap makes my blood pressure rise, hehe... heh.

Sigh.

I don't wanna think about it. But... I just ran away, and left him there. Let them take him to do precursors knows what. S-so I had to find him. Had to find him, and that was the only thing that kept me alive during those two years of hell. Don't call me an animal, peeps, I know how it's like to live as one. And they don't treat animals any better than people in Haven. Almost got made into a fur hat at least seven times. Ugh.

... yeah, trying to change the subject. Sorry.

I got a thousand leads that led nowhere, I tell you. And getting into the prison was no cakewalk either, no siree. Especially since I had almost given up at that point...

Ugh.

So I fo-found him. B-but it wasn't enough, 'cause they had hurt him so bad that he wasn't Jak anymore and I was so sure that he'd kill me when he flipped and Dark Jak came out for the first time bu-but then... then...

I... I never want to hear him talk like that again. Not the way he said my name when he snapped back to reality.

Now we'd spent our entire childhood together and of course I teased him and tried to coax him into talking to the point where he'd shove me into the grass and have me eat mud just to shut me up. I really thought it would rock if the first thing he ever said was my name. Think I told him that a few times, kinda... said that since I always put up with his cheating in wrestling and crazy zoomer driving he owed me that.

But I really, really wanted him to smile when he said it. Not like he did back there beside that torture device, stumbling backwards and staring at me like that. Not sounding as if he was about to break. Not in that place.

I-I don't really think that Praxis' death sentence was the first thing he ever said, but I don't know. He won't talk about that either. For all I know his first words could've been a plea for mercy.

So I... really screwed up. Well, it's not like I could've done anything when they grabbed him off the street – "Oh shit, it's an orange rat! Everyone retreat!". Yeah, imagine Erol saying that. Wish it sounded funnier to me.

But anyway, I just can't stop thinking that I could've found him faster, before they messed him up. B-but I didn't. I couldn't. So... so I promised myself, and him, even though I never told him, that I'd make it okay again. I'd stick around and make sure he was okay no matter what happened, even
if he went completely psycho and turned into that monster a hundred times over, I'd still be there.

And it was worth it, 'cause even though I was scared outta my mind at first, throwing stupid gags like "breaking stuff's fun, right!" at him while he was kicking guards in the face and sneaking up from behind to twist their necks… even though he never changed from "manic mode" until we got outside, even though he chewed out an old man with a kid (and about that, holy crap!) and turned into a monster again to beat up a dozen guards – then, then it got better. When he had walked away from Kor and the midget, and suddenly just stopped and looked like he was about to fall over… had to tell him to go lean on a wall, and he just did what I said like he couldn't do anything on his own. Guess the adrenaline had run out on him.

I got worried that he'd flip again of course, I just didn't know what to make of him right then. But he just stood there staring up at the sky above, ignoring all the odd looks he got from every other passerby. I… I guess he finally realized that he was free. For real.

No idea how long he stood there, and I didn't dare to say anything due to this really hot wish to not see tall, dark and gruesome again so soon, especially not since Jak said he couldn't control it.

Not cool.

He stood there for ages, it seemed, and then finally he just raised his hand and reached for the cloudy sky – through the smog, I might add – as if he wanted to make sure it was real. And when he did that, looking all spaced out, I just couldn't keep my yap shut any longer.

"Could be prettier, but hey, it works, right?"

That just got him looking at me, all blank. Like he hadn't noticed me before, and that was really damn creepy I tell you. Which only got me talking more, of course. What else could I do?

"Uh, uhm…"

Yeah, smooth talking! Don't gimme that look, I wasn't even sure if he heard me!

"It's gonna be okay now, Jak… okay?"

Now that jolted him back into focus, for some reason. He really jumped and gave me this odd look, but I forgot that in the next moment 'cause he smiled.

He finally smiled.

If I was a girl, I'd go all "Awwww!" just thinking about it.

"Dax…"

Yup. This time he said it like I had wanted it.

"… thanks."

And that made it all worthwhile. 'Cause, they hadn't managed to totally kill my Jak after all. So then it was my job to make sure he stayed alive, to make him smile even as things got darker and dirtier by the hour.

And no matter how many mad skills he got with his gun and Darkie, and no matter how many metal heads and Krimzon Klutzes came at us I'd still hang on to his shoulder and never let go.

So… I lied back there in the desert, when me an' Pecker-flap argued. I was the one who wanted to
go and help Jak, and I would've gone with or without the birdbrain. 'Cause I need to stay with Jak
and make sure he's okay.

I'm gonna make sure that nobody ever knocks him out and drags him off again, even if I hafta
scratch somebody's eyes out to stop them. Nobody's ever gonna get another chance to hurt Jak like
that if I can do anything about it. And sheez, okay, fine, I'd probably get squished in the process,
but even that's better than doin' nothing. So bring it on, world! Bring all the sand, sun, metal heads,
crazy zealots, politicians, morons and cyborgs, and I'll help him deal with 'em 'cause I'm never
gonna let anybody take him away again.
Sympathy of the Demon

Begin Introspection. Serial code: Daxter.

You wanna know something hot that isn't cool? The freakin' desert.

You can turn this world inside out and you won't find a sandier, hotter place o' living hell anywhere… I hope. That would be freaky beyond belief.

And the inhabitants ain't any better either. Between the metal heads, giant lizards-slash-snakes-slash-insects-slash-unspeakables, marauders and Dark Maker freaks it's a wonder me an' Jak even get a chance to sleep around here. You know what, slap the storms into that group of inhabitants. They're so bad they just gotta be sentient.

I'm not even gonna mention how much Jak grins at the thought of dealing with all of them. At the same time. Armed with a toothpick.

And he'd probably win, too.

People don't give 'im enough credit. He's a freakin' juggernaught on legs, and all him and me ever hear is "go there, do that, what took you so long" bitchbitchbitch. Okay, not as much as we used to when we worked on making Praxis' lose his much needed beauty sleep a year ago, but still. Even though Sir Dreadalocks looked like he'd cream his pants in relief of seeing Jak entering my bar when we finally got back into Haven… well, the best we got were a "Jak's back!" and a "Knew I could count on you" from Ashe'. Gotta love 'em. It's all "Yay, our secret weapon is back, let's celebrate by dropping him into the sewers!". People, people, people. Erol lets us know that he's ecstatic about seeing us again, for cripes' sake. Angry screams and metal heads and armies of KG bots… oh yeah. He's riled up alright. Lucky us.

The rest of you? Bow down and lick Jak's boots. I'm waaaiting. After all he's done for you, the best you can do is throw him a weapon upgrade and admit that he's "the man" after how many suicide missions? Pff.

Oh god, had a Brutter flashback there. That's a hoot. The only one who ever showered us with gratitude was a frickin' lurker. Speaking of which, I wonder whatever happened to him… haven't seen that lug since they rounded up the last lurker slave and headed out of Haven to rebuild their colonies. Bet they're doing better than us up here though. Meh. Bunch of turncoats…

Where was I? Oh yeah, appreciation of the Jak.

Just can't believe that they let him leave with a few "we're sorry" and "good work" with a coupl'a gun upgrades on top. Okay, he loves his toys as much as the other evil-masher, but sheez. They think that's gonna patch up all the nicks he's gotten? He's still pissed, dammit! It's more for his own sake than the people right now, just like when he went joining every fracture of resistance against Praxis to make sure he wouldn't miss a chance to piss the big bully off.

Jak wouldn't admit it but I know he wanted to get back to Spargus after a while. Only reason he kept up with ol' Haven was that he knew they needed him, and Veger an' Tinman Erol were out there somewhere. Blondie's a real good guy, really. Too good to not be told so. Ashelin and Keira
wouldn't die if they'd fawn about him now and then, now would they? A guy needs to know people got the hots for him. He needs a Tess. Tesses are good.

Uhm… except when they talk about pink houses. Brrr.

Well hey, not saying I'm not taking care of Jak, but don't ya ever think he'd like to get a backrub or something from somebody more, ah, life-sized? Hey, hey, I'm a man too! And my pal, who's very much a man as well, hasn't gotten as much as a proper cuddle since him and Keira drifted apart. Can't be healthy, I tell you. No wonder he beats so much crap up.

Okay, "getting Jak a girlfriend" moves up a few notches on The List. I don't care how relieved he seems to be to be back in Rock Village 2000, we gotta get him a hug. Gotta get me somebody who can help me help him relax.

But that better be somebody who knows him well enough to see all those little flinches and twitches and smiles that so very many seem to just ignore, and I'm looking at you, dreadlocked and green peeps.

This might pose a problem. Gonna have to think about it for a while… especially now that we're in the wasteland again. Wohoo.

Y'know, I do have some issues with Spargus being "better" than Haven. There're no sweet little women, it's hot, populated with brutes… half of which Jak is at constant glare-war with. Yipyip. Nooo, he hasn't made any trouble in Spargus, but there are a lot of sour grapes who recall him from Haven and being on his bad "suspect on foot!" side. Why the heck do so many peeps here have to be ex-guards?

What, you thought Damas would throw people out just 'cause they worked for Praxis once upon a time in Haven? Kingy would lose half his population. At least. 'Sides, most of 'em are probably here because they managed to piss Praxis off at some point, so those guys can't be all that bad… I guess.

The rest of them?

… because they pissed Ashelin and the council off after Praxis kicked the bucket. They… kinda make me a wee bit nervous.

Ahem.

Oh yeah. Damas.

Now I like the big man for picking us up from the big hole o' sand he calls a kingdom. Really, that was nice of him. Introdution scenes and diplomacy though? The guy's got a lot to learn there.

But Jak… oi. The two of them sure had their clashes but… ya know, I really think that if Damas said "Jak, I need you to cut off your left arm", blond boy'd have the knife halfway through the bone before he got around asking why, and the arm would be on the floor before Damas could cough up an explanation. After that "you're one of my finest warriors" speech, well… hehe. You could've gotten high just being near Jak after that. I almost saw pink lurkers, just 'cause he was just oozing… content. Perfectly, people. Perfectly, amazingly, mindnumbingly content. Oh yeah.

It was beautiful.

Sooo, taking that into account… I guess I can deal with Spargus, sand, thugs and all. If anything can make Jak smile like that, I can even deal with the metal heads. I suppose. And it's not like
Haven is high on my list of things held in the ol' high regard, not after those bootlickers gave me an' Jak the boot instead of a fruit basket for saving their sorry asses.

Okay, so putting up the pluses and minuses on the chalkboard… let's just come to a conclusion of this ramble, shall we? Hold on tight 'cause here it comes:

Up yours, Haven, let the master show you how it's done. Damas and his kingdom rules.

But he'll need a torture chamber to get that much outta me.

End Introspection.

The sand swept past beneath the massive wheels of the Sand Shark, being ripped into a cloud behind the vehicle. A landscape once unfamiliar and hostile surrounded the two men and the otsel, continuing to spread out in front of them – still a dangerous place, but no longer alien and threatening. Well, not within itself, at least.

With the sun still not too far from the horizon, the real heat had not yet begun tearing at the day either. It was still bearable.

The mission was simple enough; find the big bugger that the lizard catchers spotted and deal with it. Those warriors had already tried getting a decent shot at it of course, but the metal head had disappeared in the night.

Bleedin' weird behavior for a metal head, as Kleiver so eloquently had put it according to Sig. Probably a big mama.

This remained the subject for the dialogue in the Shark.

"We're walking straight into a trap, I tell you!" Daxter proclaimed.

Again.

Sig rolled his eye, giving up the "Ignore" tactic.

"Metal heads don't do traps," he said. "Nothin' past digging themselves into the ground."

"Metal heads don't have mommies either. They have an army of nannies, as far as we've seen. Right, Jak?"

A mere nod. Jak kept focusing on his driving.

"Yeah, yeah," Sig had to agree, waving his hand at the sky. "Just like wumpbees, th- whoa!"

Daxter's claws alone managed to keep him stuck behind Jak's shoulder, though there was an unpleasant sound of claws against metal. Blinking in surprise Sig straightened up and rubbed his forehead, even though he had avoided smashing it into the Shark's frame.

"Rock."

Jak answered before the question had even made it into the air. And he hardly moved his lips,
"Rock?" Sig repeated.

"Rock."

"Rock," Daxter agreed, nodding.

Sig turned his head, looking at the cloud of dust and sand behind them. He could not remember there being a rock that big around here…

After a bit of pondering he mentally shrugged the whole thing off. If Jak said rock, there had to be a rock. It wasn't as if someone like golden boy would jump on his seat or something bad enough to tear at the wheel that much.

While this kind of confusion did manage to create a pause, it was very brief. The limited view did pose a problem, but Daxter tilted his body until he at least could have a peek at Jak's face. Seeing that the height of paleness was beneath the danger zone, the ottsel did just what he would have done even if there had been more severe warning signs.

He launched into another rant, barely giving Sig time to reach his conclusion about the rock issue.

"As I said before the commercial break, metal heads don't do the whole parenting thing! Their idea of family life consists of a buck load of babysitters and more eggplants than you want to shake an eco poisoned stick at."

Sig grunted, wondering if Jak would be angry if Daxter's mouth suddenly found itself filled with cacti. It was with relief that the veteran wastelander looked ahead, towards the skeletal remains of a city growing closer by the horizon. Only a little while longer, and there would be the peace and quiet of metal head hunting.

"Might've been gatherin' snacks for the small buggers then," he said, just to shut Daxter up.

It was instinctual, how he answered. And he always wondered, in retrospect, why he never learnt to just use the silent treatment. Because that "shut up" idea never worked – quite the opposite.

But if he was perfectly honest, Sig knew that he kept trying because just listening to Daxter for an hour on end would drive him into a homicidal rage that might not be appreciated by the other residents of Spargus. At least not if he did it inside their walls.

Man, Jak really had to be the proud owner of the steeliest mind in history. Who'd think such a hotshot would be patient enough to deal with somebody like that blabbering pet? Or maybe he had learnt how to turn his eardrums inside out.

It had to be something extraordinary.

All these thoughts almost kept Sig occupied enough to block out Daxter's further ranting about metal heads' way of life.

But when a mere half mile remained to the first worn walls of the ruins, Jak made a small motion of his head – not quite looking around, the blue and black just flashed by in the corners of his eyes before he returned to the area ahead.

Daxter shut up in mid-sentence, shifting his weight on Jak's shoulder. And Sig's lips twitched in relief.
The taller wastelander never bothered to ask, he just assumed that the blonde did not want to be disturbed in case there were vital sounds that needed to be heard. It was the logical conclusion.

Daxter thought about a warning.

The white walls rose up before them, shortly surrounding them completely. Every now and again there was a flash of grey-green between the buildings, wild leaper lizards fleeing from the intruding sound of an engine. Daxter caught himself with twitching hands – catching those things were starting to grow on him. Badly. Grimacing, he clenched his fists.

Jak continued to steer, following Sig’s hand motions to the middle of the dead town. And of course, when the blonde finally stopped it had to be with half a spin, sending the Shark sliding up beside the empty lizard cage.

The two men exchanged half-smirks. Daxter, meanwhile, climbed back onto Jak’s shoulder while muttering to himself in a hushed whisper.

"Okay, cherries," Sig said, waving vaguely rightwards towards the northwestern side of the town, "Kleiver said they saw the big’un in that direction, but it slipped off the hook."

He reached back for his Peace Maker and leant it against the frame of the vehicle, ready to fire. While he did so, Jak unhooked the flask from his belt and took a few deep, quick gulps. Returning his gaze to the town ahead of them, he moved the flask to the side of his head and held it lightly so that Daxter could drink from it.

Sig made a thumbs up as the flask returned to its original place.

"Keep your eyes open."

Jak gave a quick nod in reply and stomped down on the gas pedal almost before he had changed the clutch to a proper setting.

And for the life of him, Daxter just could not figure out what there was to grin so much about. Then again he was really too busy trying to remain safely on Jak’s shoulder, to think properly.

Leaving a brand new cloud of sand behind, the Sand Shark took off in the direction Sig had given.

It became a short trip, passing only a couple of corners before they spotted their first clue – a splatter of red taking up a considerable area on a white wall. The color was on the sand as well, but darker since it already had dried among the hot grains.

The engine’s roar fell into a low growl, and in the relative silence three pairs of ears sought to catch any other sound. When there seemed to be nothing, Jak and Sig exchanged glances.

Without a word Jak turned the ignition off and reached up to grab onto the bare pipe frame of the Shark. He swung himself out of the vehicle and onto the ground, Daxter clutching the shoulder guard beneath him.

The morph gun was in Jak’s hands almost before his feet hit the sand, obediently folding itself out into scatter gun mode.

He headed closer to the wall, keeping all senses open for anything suspicious.

A good portion of the blood was still wet. Looking down at the ground Jak noted familiar footprints, ending just before the crimson in a chaotic pattern in the sand. From it, a wider trail
went off, along the wall. There was more blood there, but it had been mixed with the sand – something bleeding had been dragged off.

There was enough evidence to reach a certain conclusion.

"Leaper lizard," Jak said over his shoulder.

Sig frowned and looked around. While he did that, Jak ran his gaze along the trail in the sand. Beside the shallow holes left by the lizard, there were several thin, smooth lines that randomly zigzagged across the bigger trace.

"And some small metal heads," Jak added, with his gun pointing in the direction of the larger trail.

"Shit," Sig grunted.

He stood up on the Shark's floor, trying to get a better overview. Jak headed back to the vehicle and climbed into the driver's seat, but he left the morph gun on his own lap as a safety measure. Sig sat back down and they took off again.

For once Jak drove rather carefully, keeping his eyes on the trail. But they did not get far like that – just after rounding the corner the clues disappeared in an alley far too narrow for the Shark. Jak hit the brakes again, eyes narrowing in irritation. But Sig was on the ground before the blonde could speak.

"I'll check it out," the veteran wastelander said.

He ignored Daxter's mute impression of "dying of shock". It involved a lot of wide eyes, tongue hanging out, grabbing chest, and falling over – straight onto Jak's idly held up hand, in fact.

Jak merely nodded at Sig and turned the engine off again while his partner climbed back to his shoulder. A moment later the morph gun whizzed and changed once more, the yellow shine of the blaster mod reflected in the eco ring fastened over Jak's chest.

As Sig cautiously stepped up towards the alley entrance the blonde shifted on his seat, preparing to fire at anything that might try to make it out of the alley.

The hot sand whispered beneath Sig's massive boots as he walked, holding his weapon ready for attackers. He stopped beside the entrance, shielded by the wall for the few moments that he merely listened. Eventually he threw a glance backwards, catching Jak's eye.

A final nod, and he went in.

The soft crunch of the steps grew muffled behind the wall, but still managed to hang just within earshot. Sig moved real slow, especially for being him.

Controlled, shallow breathing hardly moved Daxter's perch at all. He glanced at Jak, seeing the intense blue of his eyes straining between the slits of his eyelids. The grip on the gun seemed easy, hands knowing they did not have to clench as hard as they used to when the weapon was a novelty. Man, how long ago was that?

The steps continued. From the sound of it, there seemed to be a few walls left within the broken building, Sig moving between them carefully.

A drop of sweat began to form from the glistening moistness on Jak's forehead, a shimmer sluggishly slipping towards his eye. Daxter reached out and swept it away with his small hand,
shaking the water off carelessly a moment later. Holding on to the smooth leather of his pal's goggles he tipped forwards, dropping his head sideways to grin straight into a big eye. A split second only, he wiped another drop away and swung back to where he would not be in the way. The brief glance he got was enough of a thanks.

Steps.

They waited.

Daxter was just about to reach out for another irritating assembly of sweat, when the first shot rung through the air. Immediately the ottsel snapped back, grabbing hold of the shoulder guard beneath him. Jak tensed, a foot ramming into the floor of the Shark.

"Get ready!"

The shout was hardly finished before a black body shot onto the top of the wall, fangs glistening with saliva and the egg shaped crystal set in its forehead sharply reflecting the sun. Sig snarled in the background, the sound of gunfire never ceasing.

The beast leapt forwards, long body stretched out against the blue sky.

One shot was all it took. With a shriek the serpentine metal head was flung in the other direction, the skull gem falling out and landing in the sand a second before the body did.

Thump.

Daxter hissed, batting at a long ear with his hand and Jak flung himself forwards out of the Shark, landing in the sand. He rolled onto his feet and looked back just in time to see a dozen claws descending into the driver's seat, passing through empty air where his back would have been. Screeching in fury, the new metal head struggled to tear itself free.

Jak shot forwards, the butt of the gun smashing into the monster's face to the sound of tearing cloth. The dying metal head crashed into the passenger seat and bounced, gracelessly rolling onto the ground on the other side of the Shark. A thump, then silence.

Heavy steps approached quickly from the ruined building behind them, but a hissing caused Jak to spin around. From the ground by his feet and from beneath the Shark black bodies exploded and he leapt backwards, swinging the gun at the first one to attack. Two smashes followed each other as the beast was hit and crashed into the massive wheel. It snarled, clumsily rolling over to try again.

The others skittered back and forth, preparing for an assault. Jak stepped back, aiming at the bigger group. Red light fluttered over slick black skin and he pulled the trigger. One of the stingers screeched, its violent throes of pain forcing the others to scatter not to be hit. Never hesitating Jak took aim for another one while they were confused-

A sound from behind and he ducked, cursing as a flash of black flared past his ear.

"Ah!"

His head snapped up at the scream, eyes shooting wide open at the sight of orange against darkness. Tiny hands stretched out beneath the metal head that had knocked the ottsel away from his safe shoulder, fumbling at empty air trying to stop his fall.

The stingers reared up like one single being, beady eyes set on the scrawny body flung towards them.
"Daxter!"

Jak dashed, the gun falling from his hand.

A flash of light burnt Daxter’s eyes and he blinked. The darkness above him was gone when his eyelids rose again – all he heard was the smack, a shining fist flitting in and out of his sight so quickly that he hardly could register it. A metal head shrieked.

He hit the sand, instinctively rolling into a ball.

The morph gun landed on the ground a little ways away, the sound making him peek upwards.

The light shattered in a feral snarl, the hands that slammed into the ground changing color in a flare of dark lightning. Claws sprouted from the fingers, digging into the sand in anticipation of black flesh.

Screeching, the stingers attacked.

Daxter sharply gasped as a big hand ripped him from the ground, dagger-like claws clashing against each others as the fingers bent. Jak’s roar tore at his ears and the world around him spun, the only stable point the massive chest he was pressed to. He fumbled for support – grabbed a thumb in a sickly shade of pale purple. In the corner of his eye the other huge hand cleaved the air.

Dark lightning stormed from the free hand, sending the metal heads flying, twisting in pain as they went. Crashing in the sand they kept writhing until Jak's boot crushed their faces, black blood spilling across the ground. He ignored them after they stopped screeching, throwing himself into their midst when the remaining ones tried to regroup.

It was over within a minute.

Daxter looked up as Jak stopped moving, seeing only the pale goatee and flashes of the face as the head snapped back and forth, nostrils flaring in the search for more attackers. Heavy breaths moved the elf’s entire form, but he stood still.

Nothing.

There was only the desert wind.

Finally it seemed like Jak gave up searching, and Daxter let out a sigh of relief as the rough grip of his body loosened a little. In the next moment he blinked, pulled away from the chest. The fingers relaxed, leaning him backwards.

Claws clashed again, from both hands this time as the big palms met side by side. Daxter kept gazing up at the face of the demon who held him, trying to force his hands to stay unclenched and ears from pressing down against his small skull.

The eyes watched him, narrowed – two pools of pitch black darkness with only the tiniest reflection of the intense sunlight.

Even as the face came closer, fangs showing in a tiny sliver between the lips, Daxter sat still.

He would not believe that this was Jak, not this bloodthirsty berserker.

But he would not show fear either, would not, would not… for that tiny, frightening possibility that… that it was Jak after all. And Jak might remember, he never said that he did but-
The head moved, twitching back and forth in small motions. In his dazed state it took Daxter a moment to realize that he was being surveyed.

That the "demon" was checking him for any sign of damage.

Like Jak would do.

A mad thought wondered for a second what would happen if there had been any little wound. Somehow, Daxter had a creeping suspicion that such a thing might have involved that sharp tongue hidden behind the fangs. Hard not to think of Jak as an animal in this form, whether the ottsel wanted to or not.

*Eek.*

He pushed the thoughts away – with a lot of force there, might be added – and wrestled the shadow of a smile onto his lips as he raised a small hand. The black eyes at least *seemed* to turn towards the O formed by thumb and pointing finger.

"This ottsel be a-okay, Darkie-"

Another sound and the attempt to calm Jak down went askew as he spun around, a new growl exploding from his chest.

Sig stood by the entrance between the buildings. He glared back at the demon, never recoiling, though he did hold his gun ready to block an attack. There was a brief silence, the only sound the hissing as the flesh of the last metal head melted into a lump of half gaseous dark eco. The heavy, purplish clouds hung above the sad remains of the beasts, lurching back and forth as the wind pushed at them.

Finally Sig spoke.

"Chill or it's the rolled up paper for you, cherry."

The words hung in the air for a moment. Then Jak snorted and straightened up slightly, still holding Daxter defensively in his grip. An attempt from the ottsel to get up and climb to his usual perch was hindered by a thumb pressing him back down. Blue eyes nervously gazed up at the black ones.

"Uh, I'm okay, Dee-Jay," Daxter said, holding up a pointing finger. "You can relax, really-"

A snarl, and the dark head started turning back and forth again. The ears moved, spreading and pressing themselves against the skull to the turns of Jak's neck. Sig frowned, gazing about. He could not hear anything, but with the way Jak acted he could not be sure. After a moment he motioned at the ruined building behind him with his thumb.

"There were enough tracks in there to land us an army of critters," he said.

His gaze went between the snarling creature and the ottsel in its grip, not entirely certain if either was in any state to listen to him. As he stepped forwards however, the dark eyes turned to him. Sig glared back.

"You watch my back, cherry," he said. "We're gonna need a bigger team for this one. And no funny business or I'll knock you across the desert."

Another snort, but Jak set Daxter on his shoulder and nodded slightly.
He understood.

Daxter crouched, unsure how to handle this one. It had been ages since he had seen Jak pissed enough to be unable to revert into himself when there were no more enemies in sight. While Sig took out his communicator and started dialing, the ottsel carefully reached out and dug a small hand into the gray hair.

If Jak even felt the push against his skull, he did not react to it. Daxter frowned but did not press on any harder, just rolled his palm in slow circles, listening to the soft rustle of the hair.

It took Sig a while to finish, since he was holding the communicator in one hand and his gun in the one he used for hitting the buttons. Eventually however the speakers crackled to life.

"Yea'?" came Kleiver's gruff voice, "what d'ye want, Sig?"

It did not sound much better over the hissing line.

"The big bugger left a present, this place is overrun by stingers," Sig said, motioning over his shoulder. "An' they've been chomping on the leaper lizards."

A growl erupted from the speakers, but Kleiver's mutterings suddenly grew distant as somebody on his side took the communicator from his hand. A new voice broke through, one with a slighter higher pitch but far more commanding.

"How many?"

Daxter noticed the twitch of Jak's ears at the sound of the two brief words, and the ottsel had to beat back an amused grin as the black eyes seemed to turn towards the communicator. Sig straightened up a little bit more, too – as if that would be visible to the face displayed on the screen in his hand.

"I found tracks of at least thirty, your lordship," Sig said, "and we killed about-"

He glanced up for a moment, counting the lumps of dark eco floating above the sand, adding them to his own successful hits inside the ruins.

"... ten. There're probably more of them little bastards though."

"And the lizards?" Damas asked.

"Remains of two."

A pause, then a distant shout surrounded by static. From the tone of it Damas was barking commands at Kleiver and anybody else standing within sight, but the words did not quite make it through the communicator.

After a few moments Damas returned his focus to the two men and the ottsel.

"I'll send a bigger team to the ruins," he said. "Are any of you wounded?"

The question was simple, yet the tone was slightly beneath neutral. Not condescending, but rather making it clear that the one who asked really doubted that he would receive a worrying reply. And precursors protect anyone who let him down.

Oi.
Jak snorted, a smirk tugging at his lips.

As if.

Sig did not notice the cocky expression of the dark one, only shook his head.

"No, your lordship. Although Jak ain't in a talking mood right now."

He turned the communicator over, towards the destruction duo. The camera could not possibly catch much that was beyond three feet away, but Damas could at least see a purple-grey blur with an orange smudge on the right side.

With a grunt, Jak waved his hand. He probably meant as a greeting, but it was a little hard to tell since it was more like a slow lash out. It might have been about as much as the dark eco would permit. Of course, Damas only saw some kind of movement of the haze.

The thin lips belonging to the King of Spargus twitched.

"I see. Carry on."

Another grunt, sounding mildly approving. Daxter straightened up, waving both hands enthusiastically and with his tongue hanging out – safe in the knowledge of the camera's reach. Even though the ottsel still remained oddly silent, Sig quickly turned the communicator back towards himself to be on the safe side. During that, Daxter ducked as a set of pale knuckles swiped at the air a few inches away from him. The motion was slow though, and the claws aimed in another direction. Jak did not even look at Daxter as the little one crawled back onto the shoulder guard – pale head turning back and forth suspiciously.

"Should we hang around here until the backup rolls in?" Sig asked the metallic box in his hand.

He threw a glance ahead, frowning as he saw that Jak had returned to acting as if he heard something. The wind continued to howl, nothing else – until Damas' voice called on Sig's attention again.

"No," the king said, "you three deal with the task you were given. Kill any metal heads you see, but don't get sidetracked."

"Yes, your lordship. Over an' out."

Sig turned off the communicator, hefting the folding form back onto his belt. He then took the Peace Maker in both hands and glanced around. Even though Jak's fingers still twitched, claws clattering against each other, he seemed a little more relaxed now. The head turned with slower motions, shoulders not held quite so high anymore.

"Think you can relax enough to-" Sig started.

A screech cut him off. Both men spun around just in time to see five stingers leap up from the ground on the other side of the Shark, two of them tearing through the air above the seats.

Snarling, Jak leapt. He lashed out and sent the closest beast flying backwards in a high arc, its face sliced open so badly that it hardly could shriek in pain. The other one crashed on the ground and skittered around, avoiding the explosion of sand from a bullet missing its mark. Sig cursed and took aim again while Jak spun around, fangs bared in rage.

Metal clanged and screeched, claws drawing bolts of tearing sounds across steel. Sig missed his
second shot too as he spun at the sound, seeing the other three stingers crawling all over the Shark, tearing and biting at everything they could reach.

They were trying to destroy the vehicle.

"Shit!"

Sig dashed, swinging his Peace Maker as a club. A smash and a serpentine body crashed in the sand, away from the control board. The other two turned and hissed, leaping forwards – Sig threw up his arm, blocking the attack with his armor made out of skulls of the beasts own brethren. Fangs like metal nails dug into the hard bone and he stumbled backwards, flinging out his arm to keep the furiously sweeping tails away from him. The two long needles at the end of the tails blindly swung, seeking for any weak spot to hit. With a curse Sig rammed his arm against the Shark's wheel.

The first smash dazed the two cretins for long enough to let him draw back for a harder hit, and this time one of them let go, slipping onto the ground. He recoiled from it in case it was still alive, not having time to check closer – the other one still moved and he focused on trying to break its skull.

A hiss from below caught his attention in the middle of his new attack and he stumbled back with a snarl, seeing the moving blackness by his feet. The other one was still alive, and he was off balance.

The dazed stinger shook, dizzy but prepared to attack anyway. And it probably would have, if it had not been for the black claws slicing it clean in half just as it pulled back to leap. Sig almost grinned, but finished off his own little problem first. The last metal head fell, the wastelander stepping back to avoid the dark eco slipping out of its remains.

Then he looked at Jak.

Two dying metal heads hung by their tails in his left hand, pathetically writhing as the last of their lives ebbed. Their skin and flesh evaporated, bones and skull gems falling to the ground while the dark eco flowed into Jak's hand, tendrils of dark lightning crawling like tiny worms up his arm until they faded away. Daxter crouched during this process, quickly stepping as far away as possible when the eco threads crept too close.

It was gone.

Nothing moved, only the wind that never rested. Silence settled, the men and ottsel waiting to see if anything else would dare to challenge them. Moments passed.

Nothing.

Jak swayed. Clutching his head he bent over, groaning and trembling as the horns and claws grew backwards, skin and hair reverting into more natural colors. A hand lashed out, grabbing the Shark's wheel for support. He kept swaying, head bowed low as if he felt sick. Daxter nudged his pal's head worriedly, increasing the push as nothing happened.

Frowning, Sig stepped forwards.

"You okay there, cherry?" he asked, reaching out.

Jak straightened up before the big hand got close enough to touch him, fumbling for the water flask by his side.
"Fine… fine-" he croaked.

Sweat pearled down his forehead, and Sig scowled deeper. Daxter too frowned, folding his arms over his chest while glaring at Jak.

The blonde ignored them both, almost biting off the cork of the flask as he tore it out with his teeth. He spat out the stopper and took a deep draught of water, turning his face upwards and by the look of it just pouring the liquid straight into his throat.

"You're crazy, fighting like that in this heat," Sig said, narrowing his eye.

Jak bent forwards and removed the flask from his lips with a hoarse sigh of relief, then glared up at Sig.

"I didn't hear you protest," he said.

They exchanged irritated looks for a moment until Sig finally sighed and shrugged. He reached out and lightly rapped his knuckles against the hot leather of Jak's goggles, the glare changing into a tired smirk.

He did not see the flinch.

Daxter did.

"Just don't lemme catch you pulling crap like that again, ya hear?" Sig said, stern but no longer angry.

"Heh…"

Jak managed an exhausted hint of a grin. He raised the flask again, offering it to Daxter while Sig turned to look at the Shark.

"Well, they had the heart but lacked the brains," the senior wastelander said.

He pointed with some amusement at the bite marks on the Shark's pipe frame. It seemed that the stingers were short on knowledge of what was good to attack when breaking down a means of transport. Sig poked at the torn seat, concluding that it was still fit to sit on. He looked around, taking note of Jak's heavy eyelids and labored breathing.

"Want me to drive for a while, cherry?"

Jak started to shake his head, but that was apparently a bit more than he could handle for the moment. Groaning he pinched his eyes shut and pressed his free hand against his eyes. Daxter leant forwards, worriedly pressing a hand to a throbbing temple.

Sig did not have to say "that's what you get…", it was understood. And he knew better than to say it, either way.

Admitting a temporary defeat Jak collected his morph gun and climbed onto the passenger seat, still holding the flask in one hand and taking frequent sips while Sig steered them through the ruins. At the first given possibility Daxter slid onto his friend's lap, unwilling to be an extra weight on a sagging shoulder. Jak gazed down at him and he made thumbs up, giving the normal side the same kind of reassuring facts as the he had tried giving the dark.

Jak shook his head lightly, rolling his eyes. He thought it had been stupid of him.
Daxter grinned, tilting his head in agreement – yeah, it was stupid. Shouldn't a wastelander like yourself know better, eh?

There was a pause, Jak squaring his jaw.

Then Daxter's grin softened, silently saying thanks for getting his hide saved from being chewed on by half a dozen beasties.

After a moment Jak smiled too.

Sig glanced at them, unable to understand the exchange. Yet it was so obvious that there was some kind of communication that he not possibly could miss it.

He wondered, dreaming for a fleeting moment of the possibility that Daxter might keep his trap shut for a long time to come. But he knew it would not last of course, sighing silently. Ah well. Just the weird fact that Daxter for once was silent was a blessing in itself.

He could not know what went on in the ottsel's head as the fuzzy little body curled up on Jak's lap, making himself as comfortable as possible despite the bumpy ride. The silence lasted and though Daxter found it aggravating to constantly bite his tongue, there was a memory that was stronger.

A heavy body crashing on the bottom level of a bunk bed, on a mattress just slightly softer than stone. Dreads'n'Knives'r'Us moving about in the background, muttering orders into his communicator every now and then. Still not used enough to that sound to completely drown it out. It doesn't matter, only important thing is being back, together. Small body able to curl up to sleep above a big shoulder just like two years ago – safe.

"Daxter?"

Voice hoarse, tired. Still determined.

Yawn. Doesn't really want to talk, want to sleep. Sleep right there, in Jak's warmth and the familiar smell persisting through the metallic tint of dark eco.

"Yeah?"

Mutter. Already know tattooed wonder well enough to know he'll love a reason to snarl, keeping voices down. Don't feel like arguing.

"From now on, don't talk when there are enemies about, okay?"

Blink.

"Huh?"

Big hand lands on small back, protective.

"Don't let Praxis know you're intelligent."

"... oh."

Pause.

"Well, you owe me an ass-saving but I see where you're coming from. Now shut up and sleep, jail breaking and stealing flags is exhausting."
Snort. But he's only almost-smiling for a moment.

"There we are!"

Sig's voice brought Daxter back to reality and he sat bolt straight up, bouncing onto Jak's shoulder without thinking. But there was no protest, Jak only straightening up to see better ahead of them.

A broad trail crawled out between two buildings and headed down the main road of the ruined city, disappearing into the dunes ahead. The sand had been shoveled up in the middle of the trail, a smooth trench surrounded by thousands of ragged holes as big as a man's fist. The shadow from the mountain range reaching up beside and beyond the ruins made it easier to see the marks.

They were quite easy to read.

"Metal-pede," Jak grunted, squinting towards the dune over which the trail tumbled out of sight.

Sig's lips tightened slightly, but he pushed down the gas pedal and they took off along the tracks.

The trail zigzagged across the dunes, but seemed to follow a rather straight route towards the end of the mountain range. For a job in the wasteland it suddenly seemed like an easy task, at least at this point. The two warriors paused only at one time, changing seats as soon as Jak felt ready to drive again.

With the new setting they continued, following the trail as it crawled up a slope in the mountains. At the end of the path was a huge hole in the cliff. Jak hit the brakes, narrowing his eyes at the opening.

"Not natural," he said, raising his hand to move it in a circle.

Sig nodded, frowning. The entrance was too round, the metal heads must have carved it open themselves.

Metal heads came in two flavors, really – stupid bastards and clever bastards. Stupid included stingers, seeing how they had attacked the Shark. But metal-pedes were normally not included in "clever bastards", which would be the ones intelligent enough to open up extra entrances. And they definitely were not smart enough to bring a bunch of babies between one place to another.

The evidence pointed to a variety of them working together.

Wonderful. A new hive. Sig stood up, checking the ground around the hole. Rocks and pebbles laid strewn over the ground, having laid there for long enough to be at least partly covered by the drifting sand. It could not be too new, then.

He sat back down and motioned ahead with his hand, silently agreeing that they should press on.

Daxter dove for cover behind Jak's shoulder guard, peeking up most cautiously as they entered the darkness.

They did not get too far away from the sunlight. The Shark's headlights shed two pools of light onto the ground before them – two pools that suddenly disappeared into complete obscurity. Jak rammed the brake pedal into the floor, sending all three of them in the car lurching forwards. Luckily he had not been driving too fast, so they got away with just a grunt each.

The relief only held on for a moment before surprise and growing irritation took over.
A chasm spread out before them, engulfing the glow of the headlights. Frowning, Jak flipped the switch to turn the lamps to the left and right, catching only solid wall on their sides. And a couple of yards away in front of them, the other side of the gorge.

He snarled, and so did Sig. Even Daxter let out a sigh of exasperation. So close and still so far…

"We're gonna need the Hopper to make it inside this place," Jak concluded.

All three of them glared at the chasm. It silently glared back. And probably smirked, too.

What a wonderful waste of time this trip had turned out to be. Getting back to Spargus would take another three hours; finishing this today was not to be thought of.

Jak was about to start backing outside when Daxter leant forwards past the bigger head and gazed at the blackness in front of them, then looked around quickly. No evil little critter in sight.

He turned and looked at the other passenger.

"Mm-hm, metalpedes and big holes," the ottsel said, grinning. "Some bad experiences there I'd say. Wanna hold my hand, Sig?"

A small hand reached out, fingers wiggling.

Jak had half a mind to try blocking Sig's glare, in case this would be the first look to actually kill. The possibility did not seem too farfetched.

But instead he just shook his head and trampled on the gas pedal, the Shark ripping backwards into the blasting sunlight. As he turned the vehicle towards the horizon holding the distant Spargus, Jak took one hand from the wheel to rub his temple.

"I think I'll need a drink after this," Daxter said, glancing at his pal.

Jak gave a small nod in agreement, while Sig grunted something that sounded somewhat approving.

The trip back to Spargus would have been silent if it had not been for Daxter. Even with the irritation filling the Shark, he just would not keep his mouth shut. As usual.

After a while Sig just zoned it out, glaring at the desert and grunting every now and then to avoid imploring questions like "hey, are you listening?". He threw a glance towards Jak every other minute, shaking his head to himself at seeing the kid's lips twitch at the babble.

Those twitches were the only thing keeping a huge fist from rising and smashing down on a highly irritating, fuzzy body. The familiar walls of the desert city were truly a blessed sight.

The gates began to open as they drew nearer, precursor technology sensing the approach of the two gate passes owned by the wastelanders.

Finally inside, Sig allowed himself a sigh of relief. But a silent one.

The fun was not yet over with, and they all knew it.

Jak hardly had time to park before a huge shadow lumbered into sight, complete with a none-too-pleasant expression. Before anybody else spotted it, Daxter was standing up and waving at the incoming storm cloud.
The big, friendly grin plastered onto the fuzzy mug did in no way make any other expression any softer. On the other hand, that was never in the plan either.

"Oh hey, Big K!" Daxter said. "We might wanna consider founding some food aid for the metal heads so that they'll stop gnawing on the limos."

A hand with fingers thicker than the ottsel's waist curled around the naked frame of the Shark, thumb rubbing against one of the holes left from fangs. If possible, the bushy eyebrows crept even lower.

"You should'a just let 'em eat yer scratty butts instead, if ye ask me," Kleiver said.

"We aren't asking."

Those three words were all that Jak offered. He swung himself onto the ground, careless, still irritated at the waste of time. But Kleiver was not about to let them go that easily, stepping into the blonde's path.

"Well? Did ya cap the big momma?" he rumbled.

Jak's face hardened, but he never even had to consider explaining. There were already detestable excuses in the air, the weight of Daxter's feet on his shoulders shifting as the voice snapped at the silence.

"Ah, about that… there were some, ah, complications."

"Really," Kleiver said.

A dangerous sparkle of smugness leapt into his eye.

Kleiver had nothing against excuses. Kleiver loved excuses. They all made such funny squishy sounds under his boot. Jak rolled his eyes, the possible argument already running through his brain. Joy.

Sig got in between, landing his boots on the ground with a determined thud. Resting his Peace Maker over his shoulder, he waved at the direction of the desert.

"We tracked it all the way home, but we gotta get back there with a better car. Unless you wanted us to make Shark pancake at the bottom of a big hole."

"Watch it, Sig, he might get a craving!" Daxter interjected.

Kleiver ignored the ottsel, glaring at Sig for a moment. He might as well have looked at a statue. Finally he scoffed and turned back to the Shark, waving his hand at the small troop.

"Fine, ya sissies. Now clear out, we gotta have a look at this baby."

Sig caught Jak's eye as they both took off towards the city entrance, smirks tugging at their lips. Then a familiar voice let out an all too loud whisper.

"Yeah, we really don't wanna see him kiss the booboos, now do we?"

A hand shot up to hide a snicker, Jak's head dipping forwards while his eyes squeezed shut. Daxter grinned, ignoring the non-too impressed rolled eye he got from the last part of the trio. The growl from behind them just made it better.
The city gate slid open and they stepped through.

Kleiver did not waste another thought about them as soon as they were out of sight, turning to estimate the damage on the vehicle. A few nicks were hardly anything to lose sleep over, but stingers were small buggers…

He sat down on a knee, taking his gun from his back. The sand's whisper was the only sound as he poked the Peace Maker's head between the ground and the Shark's underside, holding an armored arm up for defense in case something would leap out at him.

But nothing attacked.

Satisfied with that Kleiver stood and looked around, gaze running over the parking lot and the handful of warriors walking about, minding their own business. Not finding the one he looked for, Kleiver raised his voice.

"Zem! Get yer fickle ass over here!"

A shuffle, screech of tiny wheels. A pair of boots appeared beneath the bulk of another vehicle poised beside the gate. In a clumsy roll the rest of a body followed, held up on a makeshift board on wheels.

The sunlight sparkled on the sweat covering the man's brow, adding to the effect of the black stains of oil covering him. He got up, rolling his broad shoulders as he squinted at Kleiver.

"What?" he called.

He went ignored, Kleiver glaring at the Shark again.

"I said get over here and check the damage!" he snapped.

"On my way."

A metallic clatter of a screwdriver hitting similar items, and Zem bent down to pick up his box of tools from the ground. He paused only for another moment to grab the board by the rope fastened in it, hanging it over the edge of the box.

As he walked he stuck his free hand in his armpit and pulled off the dirty glove, letting out a deep breath while wiping his forehead.

Skin rubbed sweat away from skin forever darkened and marked by thick stripes of gray tattoos. An eyebrow went up as he got close enough to see the bite marks.

"What did they do, park it in a hive?" he asked.

He dropped the box and board, kicking the latter closer to the Shark. Kleiver shrugged, growling.

"Should really make the nipper fix his own trashing," he said.

A roll of his eyes.

"But he's useless with that," he added.

Zem paused for a moment in his attempt to put the glove back on, glancing towards the city gate. His hands clenched, leather crumbling between the fingers.
Kleiver did not notice his mechanic staring off into space, busy giving the Shark's frame a second look over. He looked up only when he heard Zem speaking.

"Well, blondie's a fighter."

A dull tone, eyes narrowed towards the city. The statement hung in the air, Kleiver giving the mechanic an odd look.

It was a pure fact, and yet he made it sound as if it could be questioned.

The big man shrugged it off a moment later. Most of the ex-KGs had been doing nothing but acting weird around Jak from day one, it was nothing to consider anymore. As long as nobody attacked somebody else, Kleiver could not find himself caring. Bad pasts were rather compulsory if you were a wastelander, causing many of them to avoid each other – often more or less politely.

But for Damas' and their own sakes, the majority of them also knew better than to push. All in all things were peachy.

"Yeah, yeah," Kleiver said, waving it all off. "And if he doesn't cap the mouth of that rat he'll get a fur hat to go with his gun one of these days."

Zem smirked a little, then laid down on his board to scuffle beneath the Shark. Safely out of sight, shielded by the tough machinery all remains of the smirk dropped and he allowed himself a long, slow sigh. Only after that could he reach up, fumbling over the pipes and once smooth surfaces in the search for holes, scraping his gloved hands against the metal.

'Begin Introspection. Serial code: Jak."

From the moment I stepped into the arena that first time I knew that it wouldn't end well. I had been pissed off for quite a while, and the introduction I got of Spargus didn't help. So yeah, "bring 'em on". I really needed to kill something.

And it went well for a while… until the cheering got to me. All the whistles and clapping, the shouts – they didn't care if it were the marauders or Daxter and me. They wanted us to die spectacularly, just like Haven.

So I flipped. Totally. And let Dark Jak out in front of an entire city.

And then I stood there on the platform glaring at Damas, waiting for the disgust and hatred I had already seen in the eyes of the weird woman with the face paint.

Waiting to be called a monster again.

But they kept cheering.

And Damas…

I have taken orders from a lot of people over the years. Samos, Keira, Torn, Ashelin, Krew, Sig, Vin, Onin… and I have done everything asked of me – because I had promised, because I had to, because I thought it would gain me something.
But Damas?

I'm proud to take orders from him. He and his entire city looked at this filthy beast I am, and called it useful.

End Introspection.
Desert night

Begin Introspection. Serial code: Jak.

Shit, I acted like a greenhorn back there in the ruins. I just lose track of everything when I let the dark eco take over, everything but the enemy. That might as well have killed me. Idiot. Can't use eco to fight the heat.

But I didn't have time to think, it happened so fast. Just like everything else.

They don't normally attack Daxter, they just don't. He's not important, he's just a pet, an accessory... they have to keep thinking that. But it was just because I ducked, wasn't it? It must have been aiming for me, and I messed up. He could've been hurt because of me, of course I flipped. Nobody hurts Dax. Nobody.

But it was different this time, I haven't lost it for a while. And I don't remember looking at Daxter like that before. I used to be... worried that I'd hurt him sometime when I was out of it, but it never happened.

I can remember things better now. I remember him in my hands, the claws behind him, and him talking to me as if it wasn't me. I don't really like that, it's still me, it is, I don't want him treating me-

But at the same time, I still want to be told that I'm not the monster. Even when I can see through its eyes more clearly, can remember being it. I can't really deny it to myself anymore, but as long as he does it, he doesn't call me a monster, he... it's okay. It's okay.

I saw it, I saw it better than ever.

He's not scared of me, not even when I held him and wasn't me, when he wasn't safe on my shoulder.

Daxter's never said that I'm not a monster, not straight to my face. He just skirts around it, says it in other ways. It's far more than anybody else does, they just try to deny it. And still, I kinda worried before. But he's not scared.

I can't ask for anything more. Other things just aren't attainable... but it's enough. It has to be.

End Introspection.

There were several bars in Spargus, all with one simple rule set down. "Hold your liquor or you're gonna get it". Oh, it was not a written rule. But nobody would care if you had the hangover of a lifetime, if you had a job to do there were no excuses less than a broken arm or leg that could get you out of it.
And if there was something that Kleiver loved, it was to torture already suffering people by sending them out into the blazing desert to fight for their lives. Wastelander knew, or learned very quickly, to quit drinking while they were ahead.

Except for one. Of course, he did not actually count as a wastelander, despite doing odd jobs every now and then. But since he was not expected to get his own battle amulet anytime soon, but was too small to really bother about, he was just... there.

And he kept refusing that One Rule despite the fact that he was bound to be dragged along on another mission the next day. It still boggled the mind of many, even his best friend.

Well, at least he wasn't the one who had to do all the walking.

The Black Oasis was a decent bar, and the fact that it was situated in the cellar of a house near the ocean made it pleasantly cool even during most of the day. Sig himself usually went to bars closer to his own place, but he was not one to complain about something like that. The drinks were perfectly fine, and Jak and Daxter seemed to like it.

Or they just went there because the latter had a personal vendetta against the night-bartender. It had so far offered much amusement to most of the guests and obviously continued to cause Jak a good deal of frustration.

The air seemed to thicken as the two men and the ottsel made their way down the stair into the dusk. Voices fell silent in the back of the big room where the largest crowd sat, and glances were flung towards the intruders. From the less populated tables came half-waves and calls of recognition, returned with a raised hand now and then. Not everyone glared, thankfully.

Sig took careful note of how Jak kept his gaze glued to the bar as he crossed the floor, while Daxter kept chattering away on his shoulder. The big man rolled his eyes, but it was with relief he concluded that things were getting better. A glance to the side told him that most of the tattooed men at the other end of the room had turned away and tried to get their conversations going again. However, many kept watching Jak's every move with unveiled aggravation.

Not until he had hopped onto a barstool did Jak look around, glaring daggers in return. Faces marked with the symbols of those serving Baron Praxis turned away, jaws set in stone – but some remained unmoving, shouting a mute challenge at the blonde.

It went against the law of nature, Sig figured, that there had not been a murder or twenty in the first few days of Jak's life in Spargus.

"Hey Jak, are you listening?"

Blue eyes blinked and moved, drawn to the wonder of orange fuzziness that hopped onto the counter. Sig sat down between his friend and the crowd, blocking their view of the blonde. He got a half-glare himself for this, but ignored it. There were no safety measures that were ridiculous when it came to this mix, not with alcohol added to it. Somebody could always get stupid.

"So anyway," Daxter yapped on, "I was saying that you really oughta squeeze Jinx for a bit more when you sell those artifacts to him. You know he'll sell them off for triple dough."

Jak did not get a chance to reply during the brief pause as Daxter gave his chin a thoughtful rub.

"Then again," the ottsel added, grinning and giving the blonde a wink, "I bet he might be giving
you a few extra bucks for getting to live after calling you Pretty-Boy."

He cackled and ducked away from the hand coming at him, and took cover behind Sig's huge fist. Jak did not say anything, but his lips stretched in a half-smirk.

That was when the bartender finished serving a rowdy costumer by the corner of the bar, and came over to the trio. She quirked an eyebrow at Daxter.

"Back for more, are we?"

Jak rolled his eyes to hold back a groan, catching sight of Sig's highly amused expression. A few chuckles were heard from the closest tables, the attention only riling Daxter up further. He crossed his arms and stood straight up, braving the blank look of the female bartender with a huge grin.

"You ain't getting rid of me yet," he declared. "Do your worst!"

The blank look split in an evil smirk. She glanced at Jak and caught the small shake of his head, signaling that the real "worst" was out of the question as usual. This only got her lip curling further.

Weaklings.

Back in the day when the duo were still new to Spargus and visited the Oasis for the first time, a veteran in the place had kindly offered a piece of advice to the newcomers. Must have been a generous fellow. Or he might have known what would come, seeing as he was now sitting further down the bar with an amused expression on his scared face.

To this day Jak still wanted to punch him, and there were no signs of that feeling disappearing anytime soon.

What the "gentleman" had said was:

"Jus' a tip, kids. Dontcha ever ask Etche there ta make ya somethin' she likes if ya wanna be able ta walk outta here with yer tongue left in yer mouth."

Daxter took this to heart.

As a challenge.

Jak sighed.

"Usual," he muttered.

A chuckle escaped Sig's throat before he too caught the eye of the bartender, and still snickering made his order.

"Black beer."

"Coming right up."

She paused only to jab her finger towards Daxter.

"And you're going down," she said.

"Not in this life, alchemist," he shot back.
All grins and cackles, Etche spun towards the collection of glasses, fruits, knives and bottles that made up her laboratory. Daxter grinned too until a pointing finger poked his back.

"We're going hunting tomorrow," Jak said, "try not to get plastered, okay?"

Daxter gave the finger a slap and crinkled his face at Jak.

"Relax, who d'ya think you're talking to, big guy?" the fuzzy one said.

The reply that Jak had in mind ended up cut off by a cooing voice from behind them.

"The talking fur hat who'll be singin' sweet, sweet love songs to his friend within the hour?"

Jak turned around and glared at the foursome of warriors sitting around a nearby table. The woman who had spoken straightened up her tilted head and snickered together with her friends, the scars covering all their faces making the mirth a rather disturbing sight – a missing tooth here and there only added to it. The laughter had nothing of the high-pitched cutesy manner of the taunt.

While he could not be bothered to remember any name, Jak fully well knew that they had seen the show before and were up for it again. It was not that hard to reach such a conclusion.

He turned away again, shaking his head. Daxter grinned at him.

"Well hey," Sig said, smirking slightly, "it ain't like he's a pain to lug through the city afterwards."

There was a huff from the counter, the two men looking up to see an ottsel standing there pouting and with his arms folded. Anybody had to agree, whether they liked it or not; it was a quite stupidly cute display. Fuzzy just isn't the best state for expressing exasperation.

"I have no idea what you're going on about, Spike!" Daxter declared.

All around them mildly curious expressions grew to amused smirks, smirks to grins. That half mind to shield Daxter came back again, but Jak never got the chance. Before he could make a plan, a small glass half filled with a bluish liquid landed in front of the ottsel.

The drink hissed, apparently not pleased with being swirled about within its transparent prison. Jak glanced at it, then at Etche. She grinned evilly at Daxter. He in turn studied the drink, arms folded and eyes narrowed as if he was trying to figure out how it would attack.

Jak chanced a look at Sig. Even he seemed interested in this development.

Sighing, Jak returned his attention to Daxter, who was about to make the first move before the drink could. The warrior could feel the beginning of a headache behind his temple.

Minutes passed.

Minutes that lost more and more of their silence. In the back of the bar the conversations continued regardless of what was going on by the counter, but the people closer to the attraction of the evening did not bother to talk. They were too busy snickering.

"Y'knoow, Shiggy, ya shooulnd't log that bigash gun 'round 'll th' time. Ish not healthy."

A small fuzzy finger wagged at the air in the general direction of Sig. It became more and more apparent for every passing word that the big man struggled to look unimpressed to maintain his image – but his lips were helplessly twitching. Few others in the surrounding area bothered with that kind of restraint.
"Mean, yer gonna kill'um onna sheez days. What'ser namesh… th' heads. Yeah."

Jak sipped his own drink in silence, his eyelids parting just slightly to give Daxter a suspicious look. The ottsel laid sprawled on his back, leaning his head backwards to smile lazily at Sig. The small hand flopped in the other direction.

"Gotta leave some work for sexy here, ya knoow! Don't leave the babe hanging-"

Jak drained his glass, put it down and scooped Daxter up in the same motion. He caught Etche's eye just before turning around and slipping off his chair, her amused nod assuring that the last artifact he'd handed her still counted as payment for this round of drinks. Sig just waved at the blonde, his other hand used to hide the huge smirk on the dark face.

Daxter kept mumbling something while he was carried towards the entrance, laughter erupting behind both of them. Jak merely rolled his eyes.

As the blonde left the thick air of the bar behind and walked up the street towards the duo's own little apartment, night had fallen well enough to obscure most faces ahead of him. Therefore, he did not scowl at the small group passing him just a few yards away from the bar, as he never saw the marked features some of them wore.

But after the blonde had passed by, one of the shadows looked around and narrowed his eyes at the disappearing back. After a moment he shook his head and turned back, holding a hand to his forehead.

"You okay there, Zem?"

He parted two fingers and squinted at the speaker as a hand landed on his arm. The other warriors had stopped too, looking back at him.

"Headache," he said, forcing a smile.

"You gotta tell Kleiver to keep ya outta the sun now and then, he'll boil you alive one'a these days."

"Yeah, sure. You'll tab my funeral then?" Zem retorted.

"We'll make a fund, promise," one of the others said, eliciting a round of chuckles.

"Thanks, guys."

Zem grinned a little, letting his hand fall as he shook himself free and headed down the stair into the Black Oasis. His companions were all around him, talking to each other, distracting him. But he remained silent, only listening. Nobody commented, probably thinking him tired.

One went to order their beer, making a hole in the conversation where that voice should have been. Suddenly the distractions weren't enough anymore. Zem stared at the table, fidgeting with the dirty gloves hanging by his belt.

Trying to block out the sound of other gloves, harder, clenched, slamming into a body that spasmed, writhed, weaker and weaker attempts to get free.

He clenched his teeth so hard they grinded against each other.

Standing close, too close all the time, hearing the acid whisper. Another kind of glove, a leaner hand clenched in blonde hair, jerking the swollen face upwards.
"Dirty, ugly, filthy, useless little monster!"

A big glass slammed down in front of him, startling Zem out of his thoughts.

"You sure you're okay?" the fetcher said, raising an eyebrow.

"Meh."

Grabbing the glass, Zem took a deep draught of the drink before speaking again.

"I'll jus' head home early an' sleep," he said.

"Prolly good. Yer kinda pale, buddy. Gotta take care of yerself or we'll have to come and carry ya from work."

At that, Zem just grunted something inaudible.

And nobody ever saw the giant body rising from the ruins of an old city, taking off into the sky with heavy flaps of its leathery, black wings. It headed towards Haven City from the wasteland, the dull glow of its skull gem illuminating the air around its head.

And in Haven, the metallic hulk that once had been a man waited for a report.

It was not that far to get to their own little place from the bar, and Jak could soon climb the outside stairs up the wall. He pushed the door open with his shoulder and kicked it shut again after stepping inside. Just making sure that it was properly closed he left the entrance and stepped further inside the small apartment. There was a lock, but he had not bothered with it for a while.

When they had first arrived to Spargus, he had used to lock the door out of habit. In Haven, you could not expect to wake up after leaving your door unlocked during the night. And even if you did, you would probably wake up a whole lot poorer. The habit had persisted for a couple of weeks, then he had left it behind. Yet another remain of Haven discarded by the wayside.

Sure, Spargus was the place for what were called Haven's worst. By Haven's judgment, that would be. They did not bother to throw thieves out, that would be too much work. And those who still remained in Spargus were the people who had the brains and strength to a) make it out of the arena alive and b) enough sense to realize that pissing Damas off was a very, very bad idea. Besides, everyone was too busy to help each other fight for survival to even think of sneaking into somebody else's place.

Daxter had voiced some worry about the less than friendly-minded ex-KGs, but Jak did not find a single grain of concern about that within his body.

First of all, no damn KG in the world could make him worry. Make him struggle with memories until he possibly went into a blind rage, yes. But not worry.

Second, all of the exes that might wish him dead knew better than to try an attack in a group smaller than twenty against one. And that would be rather hard to sneak inside without him or Daxter waking up, or somebody else getting suspicious. Spargus never slept, that was about the
only thing it had in common with Haven.

And there was that thing with Damas. Jak hardly felt generous enough to count on any of the exes even knowing what honor was, but the king of Spargus could without a doubt inspire something in everyone. Not fear, exactly, but something between that and respect. You just did not go up against Damas. Jak, having done it once, had no plans on repeating the act.

It couldn't be worth it.

He had no other words to describe it than the knowledge that he actually wanted to receive orders from the man. Not because of any selfish reasons, but because any order was something that would benefit all of Spargus. Benefit Damas. Something, somebody worth fighting for.

Somebody who would be proud of him if he succeeded.

And that was also the sole reason that he did not tear every tattooed bastard apart on sight, even if his hands twitched in anticipation.

He shook himself out of the thoughts, stepping further inside the room to lay Daxter down on the table. The ottsel just mumbled something when he was carefully slid off the hands and onto the stone slab, dragging up his arms beneath his head. Jak moved around the simple piece of furniture, heading for the two open windows. It only took him a few steps, the room was not that big.

It was a simple abode, no different from what everyone else in Spargus owned. Nothing more than one bigger room with a table and a pair of woven chairs, and a large clay pot for the weekly rations of water. In the back was a smaller room, with a plain mat for sleeping. Bare and simple. But it was more than the two friends had had in years. It was a home.

The windows were a pair of square holes in the wall, accompanied by a wooden flap each to block out the sunlight or night chill. Jak reached for the closest one, but a sound made him turn around.

Seeing Daxter sit straight up, grinning at him, confirmed a suspicion which Jak had nurtured for a little while. He bent forwards, placing both hands on the table.

"You're not drunk," he said.

Daxter bounced onto his feet, clapping his hands above his head as he made his declaration.

"Ding-ding! One point to the blondie. He's in da lead, people!"

He grinned, teeth glimmering in the torchlight fluttering through the windows.

"You see Jak, I couldn't get drunk outta my skull when there was something I had to tell you."

Raising an eyebrow, Jak bent a little closer while one of the fuzzy hands fell. The other one hung before the protruding little face, waving in a parody of a coyly calming gesture.

"There, there," the ottsel said. "There are no wumpbees in the desert, not even metal head ones. Nothing to be afraid of."

The glare only met with a wide smirk, despite its force.

"Don't make me wanna smack you, Dax."

"Hah, try as you might I could kick your ass a-ny-time."
As he spoke, Daxter put his fists to his "hips" and stiffly moved his head from side to side for every syllable pronounced.

"I know all your weaknesses, buddy boy," he finished.

Jak raised an eyebrow and glanced at his own shoulder. Enough to point out that the bad muscles in his back had already been defused by the very person claiming he could abuse them.

"Don't count on it, there'll be plenty of knots to poke in the future. And don't you roll your eyes at me, pal, you know it's true!"

He received a long, blank look for all of this. Eventually he cleared his throat, smile never faltering.

"Well hey!" he said, waving his hands about, "I couldn't tell ya about the 'heads when there were spies all over the place, you know. I had to make sure I could convince you at some point, 'cause you really started to look pale back there."

That did not even warrant a comment. Jak just shook his head and turned, walking over to the water pot and lifting its lid. The pottery gave a hollow clang as he grabbed the dipper hanging on the ear of the jar. A soft splash followed as he filled the smaller container with water and turned around, dropping the cover back where it belonged.

Still silent Jak put the dipper down on the table, looking at Daxter. The ottsel shrugged and bent forwards, placing both hands on the ceramic edge of the big bowl.

It was clumsy, but the damn thing was too heavy for him to lift. But he had already decided a good while back that it was okay; nobody saw it except for Jak.

The blonde in question sat down and leant his chin on a fist while his pal drank his fill of the water. Blue eyes moving slowly, gaze studying the motions of the small orange creature – the scrawny little body, the tail swishing back and forth for balance. Well, at least Daxter was far from falling into the dipper tonight.

He was in one piece too.

Jak's face hardened for a moment.

Not an orange hair out of place. No wounds. The blonde frowned, trying to relax.

"You checkin' me out?"

The tension snapped and Jak blinked at the sudden question, catching sight of Daxter's smirk a moment too late. He had been watching, too. The ottsel straightened up, swiping a few drops of water from his lips while making a pose.

"If you want some sessy ottsel views ye're at the right place, mister!"

Maybe he was drunk after all. But he had not yet declared that he was in love with his friend, so he could not be that drunk… and he seemed to have a grip of everything. Except for the sudden bout of flirting.

Jak's lips twitched, and he quickly rolled his eyes again to cover it. But the plan failed; the fuzzy smirk still widened to a grin.
But he did not know the full lip-twitch scoop.

Jak shook himself out of the thoughts.

Daxter had stopped thinking about what had happened in the ruins, obviously. And if so, Jak figured that he should be able to do the same. Shaking his head he picked up the dipper and drained it himself. The moment it was back on the table he was turning to the windows again.

Dot-dot-dot-

He reached backwards without even looking as the sound of padded feet against stone disappeared, and the arm swung back from the weight of two feet of ottsel. It took only a moment for Daxter to climb to Jak's shoulder; a few nimble grabs of armor, fur brushing skin between the protective metal, and the weight was in place.

A small hand grabbed a long ear for balance, making Jak snort. Daxter pouted.

"What, now you're laughing, huh?" he demanded.

"No."

Wood smacked against stone and Jak fastened the metal clip to keep the window closed.

"You couldn't fool me even if you wanted to, buddy, I saw you snickering. Did too! Don't laugh at me when I'm not making a joke! Hey!"

Daxter's voice only grew louder with his delight at seeing Jak's lips stretch.

The room fell into darkness as the second window was closed, but Daxter kept chatting while Jak felt his way along the wall, the dry sound of boots against floor the only reply the ottsel got.

But Jak was listening, and Daxter knew it.

The warrior made his way into the smaller room and found the sleeping mat with his foot. When he was certain where it was, he sat down and started to blindly work on getting his boots off.

Daxter slid off the shoulder, still talking as the sound of his pads against the floor grew softer upon reaching the mat.

"... deserve a break. At least in these joints they have some respect for ya if you crawl into your joint after finishing a job and let ya rest. Gotta give'm credit for that. Apart from Kleiver, but you know him... ugh. Could we avoid him better, Jak? I swear he's still out to get me, he looks at me weirdly all the time. I'm not making it up!"

At that point Jak grunted, making it clear that yes, he could very well imagine that Kleiver still had culinary ideas when it came to Daxter.

"Right, and speaking of that I'm still getting back at you for that one of these days, don't you forget that!"

By now Jak's eyes had gotten used enough to the darkness to let him see Daxter's pointing finger jabbing at him. He snorted again, a little louder this time.

"I wouldn't lose," he said. It was not, however, the first time he countered with that reply. But he was not giving it up anytime soon.

"It's not about losing, it's the principle!" Daxter insisted.
Jak started on his shoulder armor as he retorted. He did not let it show, but it was quite a relief to fulfill the motion without the flare in his back, that which he had suffered last night.

"Fine," he said. "Next time I'll bet the Shark."

"Next time?"

"You never know."

Jak smirked. Daxter grumbled for a while longer, but when the blonde finally had gotten rid of his armor and stretched out on the mat it didn't take long before small feet and hands padded across the woven material.

"Tell ya what, next time I'll just be part of the audience," came the ottsel's voice through the dusk.

There was only a grunt in reply. Daxter continued without hesitating, finding his way along Jak's side. One of the big hands laid beneath the blonde's head, but the other one laid flopped on the pillow and waiting.

"Then again, there's that issue with you managing stuff without my help," Daxter mused on. He curled up, laying his head in Jak's palm. "Drat, I guess I can't let you down, now can I?"

Maybe it was subconscious, or maybe he planned it so. Either way, Daxter did not let the day end with even a jocular argument. In the darkness Jak's smirk softened. He rolled over on his side, hand emerging from beneath his head to land on the fuzzy little back.

"Hey now, you're too hot!" Daxter protested.

Jak's lips twitched, the humor gone from his face. But it did not show in the darkness. He let up, fingertips brushing a fuzzy neck in an idle scratch.

It could not be just the alcohol that made him open his mouth and ask. He had been wondering the same thing many times before, and after having more to drink than tonight.

Maybe it was just the way Daxter had just expressed himself, or the unease that still clung to the blond from the incident in the ruins. Jak was not quite sure why.

But he asked.

"... Why do you always call me 'sexy' anyway?"

"Uh?"

Daxter blinked, raising his head at the sudden question. The big shadow that was Jak laid silent however. Unsure what to say, and feeling a beginning heat crawl up his throat to his cheeks, the ottsel shifted uncomfortably. Jak removed his hand, rolling onto his back again while still keeping his head turned to the side.

With a cough, Daxter tried to get a grip. He was used to people questioning his jokes and he could laugh them all off with another joke, but Jak wasn't "people". And the particular joke he questioned abruptly appeared all the more embarrassing. The alcohol suddenly did not seem to be the only thing making him feel warmer than usual.

"Well, ah..."

He coughed again.
"I gotta keep us both on the edge, y'know."

It got much easier once he got started, the awkwardness swaying in the face of Daxter's mad talking skills. Crawling into a sitting position he leant against Jak's shoulder, waving his hand at the darkness as he went on.

"There ain't no pretty gal to flirt with here, but I can't let meself get rusty. And as for you, everyone and their mother back in Haven wants ya, buddy. Second to me, of course, but they really should form a line. Point is, ya gotta stay alert or I'll have to go out there and save your ass more than necessary."

As he stopped, the silence begun to stretch.

Jak said nothing at first, but eventually the hand on the other side of his body rose up against the light from the other room. Seeing the impending smack Daxter got ready to leap aside, hoping that the alcohol still had not gotten to his legs.

But the hand never got that far, instead flopping down on Jak's chest. The soft thud might as well have been an ottsel's heart falling into his stomach.

"Right…" Jak murmured.

There was nothing positive in his voice, only a tired sarcasm. Broken nails scratched, idly pushing the cloth of his tunic around. Underlining without a needless word what was beneath the fabric. Maybe the question had not been whether he was called sexy, but rather why he was called so by somebody who had seen what was hidden.

Daxter only allowed it for a moment before sitting up even straighter.

"If you go all angsty on me now I'm revoking your bar privileges!" he stated, jabbing a finger at the air by Jak's cheek.

The hand slid away to the sound of a snort. As if.

Nodding, the ottsel laid back down.

As the silence lasted and Jak's breathing eventually evened, Daxter dared a sigh of relief. He made a mental note to avoid that jibe in the future.

Making himself comfortable he closed his eyes, soon enough drifting off. It had been a straining day. Fuzzy heroes deserved their sleep as well.

He was not quite sure if he had time to properly fall asleep, but he could vaguely recall drifting between sleep and wakening – the knowledge that something was wrong floating towards him though he tried to recoil and drift off again, unwilling to deal with it.

But then he heard it.

Mutters, unintelligible at first. Starting to form words, forming a phrase. Sleep shattered and Daxter sat straight up, the haze of alcohol drowned in a rush of panic. In a clumsy roll the huge hand brushed past his back and disappeared in the darkness.

"Don't- don't…"

Jak turned over, back rising up like a massive wall between his face and Daxter. Hissing, the ottsel
leapt to his feet and dashed around the blonde head. He narrowly avoided the arm that moved about, in the unconscious state sluggish – raised in defense and pulled away by whoever Jak fought in his sleep.

"Jak!"

Daxter finally reached the other side, his eyes so used to the darkness that he could see the contorted face. Before he could reach out Jak rolled onto his back again, thrashing while the muttering got louder. The words grew more distinct, the entire phrase becoming clearer. He did not seem to hear Daxter's call, curling up, trying to protect himself. Soon he would scream.

"- me… don't!"

It was almost a shout now, as Jak's arms pulled themselves up over his face. Daxter bit his lip, knowing this situation. He had to stop it before the scream.

"Jak!" he shouted, louder this time while batting his hands at the bare arms.

No reaction, the shaking head might just as well be the dream again. The words continued to pour between Jak's lips, broken, hoarse-

… frightened.

Daxter pounced.

"Wake up!"

He landed hard on Jak's waist, smashing his small feet into the tense muscles.

"Oof!"

With a sharp gasp Jak sat up, Daxter tumbling onto the floor. He hit his back and groaned, but looking up the relief washed over him. The giant silhouette of his friend was silent, sitting with one hand pressed to the now indistinct face.

No scream tonight either.

Daxter got up with some help from his tail, huffing loudly as he brushed imaginary dust off his arms and chest. Torchlight made it through the planks covering the window in the other room and squinting upwards, he caught the reflection of light in an eye. Jak gazed down between his fingers, rocking slightly with every labored breath.

"Man, that was fun," Daxter dryly said as he padded closer. "Haven't done that in ages."

He pretended that he did not notice the trembling.

Jak groaned, lifting the other hand to rub his face with both of them. Still like that, he spoke.

"Did I say something?"

The words were muffled because of his palms, but still more distinct than what he had been mumbling just a minute earlier.

Daxter threw up his hands.

"Nah. You still oughta take a sleep oration course, buddy," he said, somehow managing a grin.
"Let me hear something better than 'mmphsgrhh', at least!"

A slow, deep breath flowed out between the hands before they fell into Jak's lap. He might believe the statement or he might not, Daxter could not tell in the darkness. He could only hope.

Seconds dragged on in silence between them, the only sound Jak's harsh breathing. Then finally he spoke again.

"Good… good."

A hand reached out and Daxter grabbed hold of the wrist, being lifted from the floor. He pretended he did not feel the trembling either.

As his feet touched something solid he let go, plopping down on Jak's chest as the blonde laid back down. The stench of fresh sweat assaulted Daxter's sensitive nose, but it was something he had gotten so used to over the years that he could ignore that as well. He stretched out, laying his arms just beneath Jak's collarbone and resting his fuzzy chin on his own wrists. His tail lazily swished back and forth over the soaked tunic beneath him, marking that he was right there and awake.

Big fingertips dug into his fur, scratching clumsily. It did not feel good, motions too sluggish and heavy. But he did not protest, knowing that it was something Jak did in an attempt to calm both of them.

He had to help too.

"Jak?"

"Hm?"

"Do ya figure Damas ever sleeps? It sure seems like he can start ordering us around and shouting mass-orders across the entire city any hour of the day and night. We're real damn lucky being foot soldiers and all, I s'pose… ya notice those bags under his eyes? Maybe we oughta bring him some soothing tea or something…"

It sounded lame at first, until he warmed up enough to chatter away as if nothing had happened. Because Daxter knew that Jak liked to hear about Damas.

Eventually Jak's breathing evened out and the hand slid away, but Daxter kept talking. Babbling in a lower and lower voice until he murmured softly.

He did not fall silent until he was sure that Jak slept, only then daring to take in a deep breath and slide off the hot chest. There was a protesting mumble, but he quickly curled up in the crook of Jak's neck and the blonde settled again. Sighing softly Daxter rubbed the top of his head against the rough jaw line above him. Another murmur, this one calm.

Daxter sleepily grinned and laid down, eventually falling asleep as well.

',

Begin Introspection. Serial code: Daxter.

',

Jak's a real worrywart when he's in that mood, lemme tell you. Just don't tell anybody else, 'kay? I don't want him to lose sleep over stuff like that, he needs his naps. 'Cause if he doesn't sleep, it gets
hard to be as alert as both of us needs to be, y'know. And then things'll get nasty. And I really don't like that. Things could get real bad a year ago, with him misplacing snores every other night. It's loads better nowadays, so don't you dare mess him up. If you do I'll kick your sorry ass into next week.

But he sure can be a fusspot. Jak cares… a lot. It's just that people often don't seem to see it. He's not a softie, nuh-uh. You'd need a pat on the head and a nice cup o' something if you'd think that.

It's just that beneath all that anger and thorns turned outwards there're a lot of other feelings. I'm really amazed that people seem so thick – I mean, his face is like an open book. It can't just be that I'm so used to reading him. Those eyebrows jump around like crazy grassbugs whenever something's up, and sometimes you could play the drums on his tense muscles.

Maybe they notice though, but can't be assed to bother. Or they don't believe it. Heeello? Selfless dude who'll risk his life to save your hides, and you can't believe it when he shows some emotion?

I sure do. Think of what he's done for me. He saves my cute little bum on an almost daily basis, if nothing else than by capping the nasty little critters ahead before they even notice us.

Okay, so he's the one they all aim for.

And he's the one who brings us both into danger.

Humph. It's the thought that counts, you know.

…

What?

…

Well, ah… yeah. Thoughts that count. There was that… time. Just after… that. You know.

Damn, damn, damn, I don't wanna think about it! Dammit!

…

Oohkay. Deep breath. I guess I'll try that "deal with issues" crap.

Huh.

There was that time just after Misty Island… well, we were still on Misty Island, technically. I must've passed out from all the screaming, 'cause I woke up just when Jak set me down on the bottom of the boat. He was so damn huge, I wasn't used to it. I just plopped over, trying to understand the size of his hands. Just stared at him as he prepared to set off, and once we were out to sea I watched him wave at Samos' hut in the distance. I knew he meant to say that ol' Garden Gnome probably could do something.

And he sure said that he was sorry, with his eyes.

And that… pissed me off more than anything. Thank you for that, man, ol' buddy best friend, sorry! Sorry for the trauma, do you have any idea how scary that was, falling and falling forever, seeing that goo speed closer and knowing there was nothing to save you? And then get swallowed by it, even if it was quick it just thrashed me and I was still so damn shocked and scared and now I'm this THING-
Huh.

A-and… he looked away 'cause he had to check the reefs, or it was an excuse because he was feeling bad or something. So… he didn't see it when I glared at him, and that was good 'cause he probably would've read me like I did him. I said… stuff. Real bad stuff. Stuff I couldn't put into words for all my blabbering.

…

I… I-I said- thought that… I hate you, I want you to pay.

Yeah. I was… real pissed.

But it didn't last long, you know. You can't stay mad at a guy who fights his way through the whole frickin' known world just to fix a problem for you. My anger didn't last longer than until the realization that he'd go all the way north for my sake, 'cause I sure knew it was a looong way.

And I hung on just to make sure he wouldn't screw up again. And you know what? If it hadn't been for all those near-death experiences, it would'a been pure fun. I learnt pretty fast how quick and agile I'd become, and the world was a lot more pleasant place back then. Hell, I wouldn't complain to do that all over again. Those lurkers were nothing in compare to what we deal with now.

And Jak was happier.

…

Y-yeah, I'm trying to skirt around it.

Uhm. You know when it's in the middle of the night and you just woke with a start from a nightmare, and you try to calm down and tell yourself that it wasn't real? But there… just is no logic in the middle of the night when you've just been through a fright trip thanks to your subconscious.

Well… the same equation works when it weren't you who had the nightmare, trust me.

Jak can… scream. Really scream. It's even scarier than it should be, because he's Jak. He's not afraid of anything. So when he is… it's not pretty. And that stuff he says before he screams, I wake up from that. That stuff that he won't even mention when he's awake. Stuff that I never tell him I've heard.

I'll never get used to it, but at least now I'm prepared for it. The first time… I think it was the third or something night after we got to the Underground. I almost up and died on the spot, couldn't sleep for two nights straight. Just watched him, trying to be prepared to wake him up if it would happen again. Shit. Shit, shit, shit…

Argh!

Okay, the point. Okay.

During those hours when I watched him, and every other time I woke up and worked to calm him down, I… remembered that time in the boat. And you know, you might not believe it but… I do believe in the precursors. I've seen a couple, for cripes' sake, and even before that I saw their artifacts and ruins. I heard their frickin' oracles talk to Jak long before we got to this desert. And… it's really damn easy to believe in anything, curled up in the darkness in the middle of the night, stroking a sweaty cheek and trying to whisper something that might help him forget. I wondered in
those hours… if the precursors had decided to grant a wish I made when I sure wasn't thinking straight.

And I wanted to scream that it was okay, I wasn't angry anymore and gods, precursors please, I forgave him, he tried, I know he tried. I wanted to tell Jak that he could stop hurting.

But hell… it was too late.

It gets better in daylight, of course, but the bad taste remains.

It doesn't happen as often now. Guess he's getting better, finally. And I've kinda managed to let go of that illogical crap, because he smiles a lot more these days.

Phew.

… what?

You were supposed to forget that part!

I don't wanna think about it! I don't wanna tell…

I'm not gonna tell Jak unless he wants to start talking.

Shit. I sure hope Keira's never heard him. But I think that if she had… it would've shown. We all would've heard it. It was bad enough talking Torn into shutting up back in the day. I… guess I owe him one for that. That and the back room he flung us into to sleep, where the nightmares couldn't be heard from outside. He only snarled at Jak to stop waking up screaming, though, thanks to our little chat. Okay, I'll admit it, there's a bit of humanity behind the tattoos. Scary, huh?

Oh, shut up. Shut up!

I've… never told anybody. Maybe, yeah… maybe it'll feel better if I let it out.

I really try not to think about it.

Oh god, oh god. It doesn't have to mean anything really, does it?

…

See, that's how I try to lie to myself. Ugly, huh? Hehe… heh…

Jak says… he says that…

"Don't touch me."

Over and over and over until he screams or I manage to wake him up.

Oh god… oh sweet precursors. He doesn't want to talk and I'll never know until he does, there's just the suspicion and his screaming and Erol.

Shit.

One of these days I'm gonna have to ask the tin man himself, because I can't take this much longer.

' 

End Introspection.
Begin Introspection. Serial code: Zem.

Me?

I'm just an ex. Ex-KG, that is. Yeah, Damas don't like us calling ourselves that, or others using either term but... it's stuck, and not even he can get it away. S'like our tattoos. He can take almost anything away, but not that.

I guess I used to think he could take away more than he really did.

It's easy to give 'im credit, he's that kind'a man. When you've been as low as me- us, you'll do anything for whoever picks ya up and says that you can earn a second chance. He'll treat you like trash if you don't live up to it, but he gives you another go at life.

Hella more than our Baron fucking bastard Praxis ever did. Yeah, I came here while he was still in charge back there, just before they started getting too desperate for soldiers to keep offing or dumping us in the desert when we messed up. Though I hear they just started using scum in the front instead. Same shit, different way. I got lucky.

Unreal, really. I was scum, was below scum. They usually just put a bullet in our heads. Though... I think I was one'a them uncertain cases, they didn't really know. I sure weren't gonna admit that I wanted to throw Praxis' burning carcass to a flock of metal heads. They just suspected I did. So they threw me into the desert to die slowly, in case they changed their minds halfway back and came to pick me up again while I was still alive, I guess. Somethin' like that.

Happened to a few more too- a few more like me. I'm the last one though, 'less Lorke's still alive with the marauders. Probably is, bastard wouldn't die if you shot him five times. Precursors know I tried- ah, no. Was back in Haven, I wouldn't pull shit like that here. Damas'd throw me out... too. An' I'd throw myself ta boil to death in the sun before I joined the marauders. If I went to them I'd be back where I left, no better' an a bootlicker of Praxis'.

We had an influx of exes half a year or so ago, Haven spring cleaning after Praxis' death an' all. From what I heard they'd just gotten started sorting out the trash from the soldiers, taking up the "throw out" style again.

Most of 'em got their battle amulets, fighters and all. Then half of 'em got themselves thrown out for breaking the rules here. And trust me, once a wastelander you gotta do real bad stuff for Damas to give you the boot. But the marauders, they don't care about anything.

The marauders hate Damas, and us wastelanders. They ain't got proper defense or equipment, but they grab all they can get. Desperate. But I ain't got no sympathy. If you're so low even Damas won't take you in, you've really lost your license to breathe. Ye're trash when he picks you up, but he makes something outta you. Then you're worth something. But if you don't deserve that and he drops ya, you're lower than you ever were. 'Cause you did something to lose his mercy.

An'... I'm scared a' that. 'Cause I think that... if he knew what I've done, he'd kick me out too. 'S'why I don't fight. Sure I can, but I try not to -- it's too damn tempting. Tempting to be like that.
again. I ain't gonna do it.

Got lucky an' became one'a Kleiver's mechanics. I got real good at it too, not 'cause I like cars but I gotta keep from fighting. Kleiver likes his mechanics with all their fingers intact, so I made sure he'd be guarding mine. Works so far, I get to stay outta the battles most o' the time. I get to keep from that pull o' the trigger that might be one too many. Life's kinda good.

… but then he had to come here. I just can't believe the kid's still alive. After all they- he- w-

Fuck.

I hear 'em talking. The exes that came last, most o' them… an' others too, they've seen the kid fight. Like a demon. They think they know something. The exes, they think they know they can hate 'im 'cause he beat 'em up some time. They don't know a fucking thing. Not a single fucking thing.

An' he doesn't either… about me, that is. An' if he ever finds out, I better suck on a gun before he gets to me.

… but hell if I blame 'im.

End Introspection.

Computers lazily buzzed and whirred, the light from their buttons flashing in the smooth plastic of the control panels. In the cold illumination from the ceiling, everything took on an almost clinical shine. Even the holy symbols and icons carved in orange metal, insignificant specks of color on the cold walls. Obviously, the room belonged to somebody with a lot of resources and religious conviction.

Furious footsteps cut into the mechanic peace. A lock clicked, followed by a door ripped open and slammed shut. Another click and more steps.

In the middle of the room stood a table, neat stacks of papers and books organized across it. Now the order was wrecked as a pair of hands shuffled through them, knocking some onto the floor. The man did not care as he stormed through the collections of knowledge, searching with such fury that he may as well destroy the papers he was looking for. Never once did he let go of the staff in his hand, no matter how much it got in the way.

A vein throbbed on his scalp, a disturbing sight aided by the rising color of his face. As he grew more frustrated by the minute, the flashing lights of the computers gleamed over a sliver of teeth and sweat erupting above his temples.

He caught himself, straightening up to take a deep breath, trying to regain his composure. Out of habit, he threw a glance at the many icons on the wall, but this did not have the calming effect it usually did. Instead, the color reinforced the memory of humiliation. He gritted his teeth.

Fools! All of them! Whimsically leaving the fate of the very world to somebody who was nothing short of an agent of the darkness that approached!

He tore into the papers again, with reinforced anger.
It was during one of the long, passionate inner monologues that the man suddenly felt an itch at the back of his neck. For a moment he attempted to ignore it, but eventually reached up and dug his fingertips beneath the collar of his coat. A quick scratch and he pulled back, shuffling through his notes again.

The itch persisted. Pursing his lips, he set out to pay it no heed again, waiting for it to subside on its own.

It might have touched his mind that he was being watched. However, he would never have believed in superstition such as that; believing in sixth senses was absolutely ridiculous.

Maybe it would have taken a bit off the shock, if he had been a bit more lenient. But as it was…

"Isn't it past your bedtime, count Veger?"

He spun around, the papers crumbling in his fists. The red faded from his face, being replaced by a pale hue.

A holographic projector stood between two of the computers, but until a minute ago the flat glass bubble had been dark. Now however, it shone brightly – and Veger had definitely not activated it.

Even worse than that, a head floated in the light flowing from the machine, transparent and outlined with pale blue threads. The color did nothing to make it seem kinder. It was distorted, sharp gashes cutting deep within its cheeks and lips perfectly visible.

Veger stared at it in pure disgust, paleness giving away for a furious red again. This did in no way seem to faze the intruder.

"You're starting to irritate me," the head said.

"You are an abomination!" Veger snarled back, lashing out at the holographic image with his staff.

The floating head sparkled a little as the metal stirred the reception, but other than that nothing happened. It looked rather amused, in fact. Veger collected himself and straightened up, but it was a feat to calm down. With his nerves already all over the place, this was the last thing he needed.

"What do you want, ex-commander?" he said, ice lacing his voice.

Erol's broken face tilted a little.

"Nothing much," he said. "You're just not important."

But Veger would not be baited again. He stood firm, a fine eyebrow raising in disdain to match the curl of his lip.

"Is that so?" he merely said.

A smirk formed on the bluish lips of the hologram.

"Yes, but I'm sure you could be competent enough to be a delivery boy. I can't seem able to hack into our favorite hero's communicator, sadly…"

A parody of a sigh, and then he was at it again.

"So be a good little church boy and relay my message if you see him before I kill him, will you? Tell Jak that if he goes and gets killed by a moron like you…"
The voice dropped down into a hushed whisper, the mere tone of it making Veger's skin crawl despite his aggravation.

"… I'll be very, very angry with him."

With his lips closing over the last word and a soft **bleep**, the floating image disappeared. The projector's light faded and its bubble returned to obscurity. The computers continued to blink and buzz without a care about what they had just been transmitting.

As he staggered backwards Veger threw an idle glance around the room, even though he knew that he was alone. But only after making sure did he let himself slump against the nearest control panel, pressing a hand to his forehead to keep from shuddering.

In a whole different part of the city, gears heaved as a huge body stood up. Moonlight shone through the opening in the wall of the circular room, glancing off the exposed steel and red coating.

Erol chuckled to himself. Sending off signals like that had been much easier when he had the proper equipment to straighten his own mechanisms, but the trouble was worth it.

Of course, the mere idea of Veger coming anywhere close to killing "the great hero" was absolutely laughable. But Erol liked a little strain on the competition. Besides, that look on Veger's face was satisfying within itself.

And he might have failed once, but the cyborg intended to be a lot more well prepared the next time.

The enormous warp gate on the wall glistened in the moonlight, empty space dark inside the eco-infused metal. Waiting for the signal to come close enough. But it wasn't time yet, and it would take a good while longer.

He could wait. But in the meantime, there was something else he wanted to do…

A distant shriek made him turn his head. A shadow floated past the moon, heading closer for every passing second.

Erol turned, walking away from the opening and towards the entrance to the chamber. Just as he snarled a command for somebody to get up there, the shadow tumbled inside, crashed and rolled until it came to a halt. Slowly and shaking, it dragged itself into a standing position, big wings draped over the floor in exhaust.

It was a weak kind of metal head, with a long, fleshy neck and a great wing span. Not really fighters, but spies and messengers able to co-ordinate attackers in distant areas.

Maybe flying between the wasteland and Haven had been a stretch after all. In the end, the bird was a living creature. Erol mentally shrugged.

He stepped away again when heavy steps were heard from below, and a bulky shadow made it inside. Without giving the cyborg a second look, the grunt lumbered over to the bird and sat down beside it.

Neither attempted to steady anybody.

The bird swayed back and forth, hunching beside the grunt while the bigger beast glared at it, cold eyes narrowed in concentration. The caws were harsh when they finally started up, emphasized by
heavy flaps of the wings.

Erol waited, fingers of his proper hand rapping against a metallic upper arm.

The bird apparently had a lot to tell, and that realization made his lips curl slightly. Interesting.

Finally the messenger quieted down and slumped even more, while the grunt turned to the cyborg. Claws clicked as the big metal head dragged its hands over the floor, raising them to sweep at the air.

It did speak, a little. One word here and there; "that – us – it", simple words forced between hard lips, guttural and growling. The more natural gurgles and snarls made it out far more easily, but it made Erol roll his eyes in exasperation at first. Very soon, however, his interest was piqued again.

'That one… like us but hated… it there, big place, fought-'

He could make sense of it, but it was a tedious process.

Communication with the metal heads had been very irritating in the beginning, and it would never run smoothly. First of all they did not trust him initially and kept attacking, but sending them impulses from the Dark Makers always did the trick in subduing them. Just that it was the same process over and over with every damn tribe. Hence the main reason for his absence from the rest of the world during the last year.

Then, the whole language barrier. Some of the more intelligent critters could understand normal language enough to translate it to their kin, but their replies took ages. It all boiled down to a combination of hand motions, and broken sentences made up by the few words the creatures were able to pronounce. Most of it, however, came through grunts that went through a process similar to the Dark Maker's signals inside the cyborg's mind.

He did not know how it worked. Perhaps it was the dark eco, which tied them together. Erol could not have explained it if he had bothered to try. The only important thing was that he could understand enough, even if parts of it came out as simple mental images.

Ah… there was that part about names as well. The metal heads really did not understand the term. They acted like ants, a mass of bodies instead of individuals, born to kill anything different from them, and to obey whatever "the Leader" said. The Leader had had something the rest of them did not, but that was because he was the Leader.

It all boiled down to the fact that they could not simply say something like "Haven City", "the wasteland" or "Jak".

It had taken a while before Erol had managed to understand who they meant when they said "that one who is like us but hated". Then he had been amused by it.

He rather liked that allegory.

And while the process always did irritate him in its slow progression, this particular report proved to be more interesting by the word.

'Kill us to- keep small prey… itself. Rage… rage like- us but we hate it…'

"Really…" Erol murmured, more to himself than anything else.

The corners of his lips twisted, a sliver of teeth visible one moment and gone the next.
The metal heads remained confused. All they knew was that they hated "that one" and that they had lost another battle – but would keep fighting, because they were many, and "that" was alone. Unless there was that other one with it, "that which takes our skulls".

They wouldn't count the little one, ignoring it like everyone else had done.

Who cares about such a "small prey", after all?

… interesting.

'Did not go- inside… too far- come back?'

Erol straightened up as the grunt stopped and fell back, dark body waiting for new orders. The bird still slumped, exhausted to the brink of unconsciousness after its long flight.

With a couple of long, hard strides Erol was within reach and grabbed the thin neck. There was a snap and the bird lost all tension, tumbling forwards as it was released. Only the skull gem reached the ground, dryly tinkering across the floor.

The grunt grabbed the body as it fell, tearing off a wing with the help of its fangs. The chewing chomped in stride with Erol's pacing, further and further away.

He stopped by the large hole in the wall, gazing out at the crumbling city far below. From here, the screams could not be heard. But he could sense them, hundreds, thousands.

Screams that meant nothing.

He had to be in the Haven nest if he wanted to have full control of things, with the fortress gone. But he had waited for so long, and now, things looked deliciously possible. The mere chance was worth wasting time. His face twisted up in sick excitement, illuminated by the shine of the deadly plants and the flickering lights far below.

If sleep was an entity, it would be a fickle bastard.

What would be good about that was that if sleep was an entity, you could have whacked it over the head like it deserved.

Repeatedly.

The fickle bastard never, ever decided to get its work done when it was sorely desired.

Zem had been around for long enough to come to this conclusion many, many times. This, however, didn't do much to make him feel any better.

He glared at the darkness. It remained uncaring.

In the silence, the familiar sounds of Spargus trickled inside. The hissing wind, muted footsteps of running leaper lizards, and the voices of the people moving about. Normally he found it to be a comfort to know that somebody always was around outside, but it didn't help tonight.

Damn kid.

He growled. It never helped to put the blame on him either. But if he would just stay out of sight everything would be flippin' dandy!
Stop. Deep breath.

'Okay man,' he thought. 'Sleep. Kleiver'll have yer scrawny neck if you fall asleep beneath a car tomorrow. He doesn't care, nobody ca-'

Zem pinched his eyes shut.

But it was already too late.

The hiss is gone, replaced by a silken edge. Fingertip drawn over a bruised jaw, eliciting a pathetic wince.


Silence, as the swollen eyelids slid shut and the body slumps.

"He's out cold, commander."

"Wake him up."

An arm and rough hands hissed against the mat as Zem bent, pressing his fingers against his face. He sat up, cursing loudly, trying to fill the silence for just a moment. But that could not help for long.

Still muttering curses he staggered to his feet and left the sleeping room. After a few deep draughts of water he blindly grabbed his gloves from the table and went outside. If he worked from two in the morning, he might get away with a few insults when he passed out later on…

Begin Introspection. Serial code: Jak.

My nightmares tend to start with two words Praxis spoke.

Once, I bit the bastard. Up until the roar as my teeth tore into flesh, I'd been so dizzy that I thought that it was just a guard that grabbed my chin.

I should have bitten harder.

The whole prison was silent when he ripped himself free, so silent even though he cursed. Nothing seemed to move, the guards, even Erol frozen in shock.

Even I stopped breathing, feeling the blood on my tongue.

It took him a while to get a hold of himself again, enough time for the world to recover somewhat. I was on my knees within a second, head pulled back by a rough, gloved hand in my hair.

Erol's tattooed face hovered above mine as he pressed a cold metal circle against my throat.

I remember lazily thinking that it was getting old. It was as if the drops of blood I had swallowed went straight to my brain, like a drug. I felt as if I drifted.

Then at least, I'd die with Praxis' blood on my lips.
But he was never one to make such decision, was he? No... never. You'd never just get to die if you pissed him off.

Clutching his hand, sole eye thin as a blade and rage coloring his face as blood dripped from his fingers onto the metallic floor – he did not order my execution. He had to make another decision.

"Break him."

Erol put the gun away.

He smiled.

End Introspection.
Begin Introspection. Serial code: Sig.

I heard people mumble that Jak'd gotten thrown out, but I kinda thought it was just the latest craze o' the tabloids. Y'know, the ones that scream about people getting litters of half-metal heads, and 'bout a new savior every week. Often gals, for some reason, comin' straight outta Praxis' old prison.

Right.

I stopped listenin' to that bull ages ago. So I never checked up on it… feel like a moron now, sure. But who'd think it, them sacking the best man they've got, in war time? Never thought even the Haven tops were that thick.

Never thought I'd see my cherries in the arena. Though I might'a should've suspected something when Damas said he 'had somebody who needed a real challenge'. When did we last have a newbie in Spargus, eh? Once things started go ugly again Haven quit the kickin' and started foraging people. 'Cept for Golden Boy.

I don' get their thinking, but hey… better for us.

Was pissed first, thinking 'bout them bastards leaving him and Daxter to die, an' then us getting chewed out by Damas. I always thought the kid's too bloody young for all this shit. I dunno what Praxis did to piss him off so bad, but it can't've been good. Not with that alter ego act he's flailing 'round. I've… got my ideas, but I ain't askin'. I ain't gonna dig into shit he won't tell.

Not even for Damas.

Just walking through Haven you pick up people talkin' 'bout Jak. I often hear'em spouting bullshit.

Let's just say those don't talk no more for a while. Chili pepper's one'a the few I'd dare to let watch my back out there, so I'm gonna watch his.

Anyway, it pissed me off. I thought, Jak shouldn't hafta be out here. I know he could cope even before I saw him roll with the action, but I said it before… too much shit.

But he ain't just coping. He likes it.

Makes me grin real wide. He was flung out here to die, but he looks hella better these days. Not frownin' so much, and you see people waving at him in the streets here. We ain't scared'a him. There're the exes, sure, but they won't do anything if they wanna live. Hey, some'a them don't even mind him.

S'like Daxter, I s'pose. I don't get how Jak can stand keeping that lil' moron around all day, but it's plain day the rat's good to the kid.

And, uh, I like seeing cherry getting some hard earned appreciation, sure, but…

Damas is… uh, I don't say I'm buddying with him, but I've been reporting to him for years. And he's, well, he's acting weird. Jak's the first newcomer in a while, but I ain't sure if that's it. I ain't ever noticed Damas curious 'bout a newbie. He wants to know about Jak, had me tellin' what I
knew.

Sure, Golden Boy's got skills you never saw, but... can't really crash my finger on it. S'like, something's on Damas' mind. He just seems, ah, concerned.

'nough to weird me out and then some.

End Introspection.

Daxter leant against the wall, one hand behind his head while he watched Jak doing sit-ups. He was talking about something half-heartedly, hardly listening to himself. The mouth just worked on its own without much input. The occasional scratch of Jak's feet against the floor seemed to make more sound than the ottsel.

Blue eyes glanced at him every now and again whenever Jak bent high enough to see the ottsel, eyebrows creeping lower and lower not only because of the strain. He had been going for a while, and it was starting to show in his breath and expression.

Fingers clasped under his neck, lifting the weight of his upper body towards his bent knees again and again. Sweat prickled his brow, and the dirty shirt looked like it clung to his chest more and more for every heave. Daxter, pondering the rising heat of the morning, held back a wince – but they could expect Sig to come in any moment, and therefore Jak kept his shirt on.

He did not want to answer questions that had been avoided thus far. Sig might be one of the few with the kind of tact required to shut up, but Jak didn't want even him to know.

Daxter's uninspired chatter dribbled down to a murmur.

Two hundred would do. Or whatever it was, he had lost count. Jak flopped down, letting out a nice, long gasp.

There was an instinctual wish of his body to let the aching arms spread out on either side of him, but he suppressed it. The mere thought of that position made him cringe. Instead he kept the hands beneath his head, rolling it to look at Daxter.

"What?" Jak said.

The ottsel looked up with a startled expression, prompting Jak to raise a quizzical eyebrow for emphasis.

"Whaddaya mean, what?" Daxter asked.

But the way that he crossed his arms and curled the tail around his feet gave him away. Jak tilted his head slightly.

There was only so much that Daxter could take from that look. And it wasn't much to begin with.

Sighing he rocked forwards and padded over on all fours, tail swishing behind him against the floor. Seemingly unconcerned with the light dampness of the cloth he climbed onto Jak's chest and sat down there, hands perched before him against the strong heartbeat.
"You cool?" he asked, slowly, hesitant.

Jak blinked. He didn't quite understand at first, but then that creeping feeling of dread made itself known through the exhaust he had brought upon himself. In a pang, the night returned to him and his brow sharply arched.

Daxter winced, tiny hands clenching in Jak's shirt.

But it passed, the green eyebrows drawn upwards again to the sound of a deep sigh. Small hands clenched harder, this time more due to Daxter's whole world rocking because of the breathing. He wanted to tell Jak not to just say that he should forget about it, but it wasn't his choice.

On his end, Jak debated how to handle it. Daxter getting protective was a rare oddity in itself, and he found himself rather amused by it. However, there wasn't enough amusement to cover the memories. He looked away for a moment, trying to get a grip of himself.

Daxter's voice in the darkness drifted back to his mind. Calming. There. Maybe lying about whether or not he did talk in his sleep, maybe honest. Maybe it did not matter, as long as Daxter was still making sure that his pal was okay when he couldn't do it on his own.

He looked back again, seeing the small eyes still staring at him. Daxter was tense, the tip of his tail twitching back and forth. Fuzzy ears drawn low, painfully tight against his skull. No... no, he had to smile. The dread lurked in Jak's mind like a dark beast, flitting back and forth and waiting for the chance to attack, with nothing to hold it back. It fed on the helpless expression before him.

With a shake of his head he pulled his hands free, cupping them behind Daxter's slumping shoulders. The ottsel perked up a little, confused.

There was no use trying to deny it or change the subject, it would only make those delicate ears even more tense.

"C'mere," Jak murmured, sitting up slowly so that Daxter slid into his hands.

"Uh?"

A slight smile pulled at the corners of his mouth at the sight of the bewildered expression. Jak reached up, tucking the fuzzy head beneath his chin. His own pulse had just begun to calm down and the tickle of fur and that cold nose upped it yet another notch. He tried to ignore it, closing his eyes again while idly scratching the back of Daxter's ears.

"Thanks, Dax."

There was a pause.

"Ye'll wreck your image if Sig sees you like this, bud."

But he smiled this time, playfully rubbing his nose against Jak's skin and grinning when the blonde grunted in protest. Jak relaxed, lightly pinching a small shoulder in revenge.

It wasn't "weakness" if only Daxter saw him.

He felt content like that, and it was a nice thing to notice that the ottsel didn't start to squirm after a moment. Instead, Daxter relaxed against the hands and throat, seemingly comfortable in the safe grip.
This changed rather drastically when there was a beeping sound from the floor, more precisely from the heap of boots, jet board and backpack. Jak leant forwards, barely having time to start reaching out before Daxter moved. Wary not to claw Jak's skin the ottsel scurried up and around on the big shoulder, grappling for the tunic as he went.

One moved boot later Jak grabbed the communicator and turned it over. The name flashing on the dark screen announced who it was before the blonde had even activated the mechanical chatterbox. A little surprised, he switched on the camera.

"Mornin' Sig," he said as a familiar face blipped onto the screen.

He had to straighten up further as Daxter's balance dangerously tipped in lack of a stable shoulder guard to hold on to.

"Heya, cherries," Sig replied.

Now, the veteran wastelander was probably one of the toughest guys the duo knew – and considering their existence, that wasn't an opinion easily thrown around. So, seeing Sig look slightly sheepish was rather disturbing.

He glanced away from the camera as to avoid eye contact, lips pressed tightly against each other.

While this was observed by Jak, Daxter still struggled not to fall off the shoulder he was perched upon. The tiny hands clutched about for a few panicked moments, before finally grabbing on to Jak's ear.

Finally Sig just shook his head and looked at the camera on his end.

"Listen cherries, something came up," he said, firmness properly lodged in his voice. "I gotta go to Haven. You clear on it?"

"They need help there?" Jak asked.

Without thinking, he shifted to stand. Daxter rolled his eyes.

"Nah, it's a one man job on my end," Sig said. He frowned. "But I gotta leave the big bugger inside that bigass hole to you."

Daxter nearly lost his grip, staring at Jak with pleading eyes. Noo, nonono…

"Sure," Jak said.

He grinned as Sig gave a hearty chuckle.

"That's what I wanna hear, chili pepper. Happy hunting."

"You too, Sig."

The screen went blank. Jak turned his head at an insistent tug of his sideburn, finding Daxter glaring at him.

"What?" the blonde innocently said.

Daxter slumped, groaning.

"You enjoy trying to scare me to death, don't ya?" he demanded and hopped onto the floor.
From down there, it was easier to use the full force of crossing his arms and scowling. Even when fuzzy and cute. He held up his fingers and counted down with wide motions.

"Lesse, there's been the ol' tomb, the metal head nest, more recently that lil' fly-o-matic romp, and that's not even counting all the other mini-near-deaths! And now you expect me to dwaddle into precursors knows what inhabited by at least one oversized mega-insect? I'm seeing some serious tab abuse here, baby, and no tip in sight!"

He was only halfway serious, of course, because by now he was fully aware that nothing short of two broken legs would stop Jak from doing whatever the heck he had decided to do. But then the furry one also firmly believed in presenting his own integrity. Loudly.

However he hadn't quite expected the utter lack of a smirk, and neither its replacement – a hard narrowing of Jak's eyebrows. The lips that should have formed a cocky reassurement tightened instead, becoming a thin, pale line above the green goatee.

For a moment, the confusion clogged Daxter's throat – and he briefly wondered if he had gone too far, and that Jak would suggest he'd stay in Spargus instead of coming along. Suggest he should be left behind by the only person who really believed he was of any use.

He stared up at his grim friend, lips parting slightly.

Then he recalled the day before; the hard head smashing into his back, knocking the air out of his lungs in a choked shriek as he was flung forwards. And Jak's scream, and the roar.

He had tried not to think about that.

Schooling his face back into irritation and forcing his drooping ears straight, he crossed his arms and reinforced the glare.

"I hope you realize that I expect you to kill everything that even sounds like a metal head, buddy," he said.

A second passed. Then Jak nodded, reaching for his shoulder guard while he spoke.

"I will."

After that, his expression began to relax a little.

Daxter hopped onto the shoulder guard the moment it was in place.

The hard feet of the leaper lizard slapped the rocks and sand as it dashed down the city street, its rider hugging its sides with his knees and holding the reins tightly. In situations like this Daxter knew better than to hang on to the shoulder guard for dear life, and had instead opted to disappear down the great hero's tunic. Wedged between the tightly stretched cloth, the eco ring strap and the warm chest wasn't really too bad. The ride wasn't too crazy since Jak at least wasn't racing anybody, and the cloth caught the worst bumps. All in all, the ottsel was just peachy, rocked against Jak's heartbeat.

The dusky cocoon might not have smelled like roses, but at least it was dark enough to hide the state of that chest. Which, considering the situation, was a big plus. Jak didn't like people seeing what was behind the cloth, and Daxter didn't like to be "people seeing it". 
Through the shirt he saw the shadow of a lower arm moments before it lightly pressed against him. Quickly Daxter shifted, holding his hands to the warm skin beside him to brace himself.

A particularly hard smack of feet from below, then silence for a second.

"Ouff!"

The smack of the lizard landing on the ground again was punctuated by Daxter's loud complaint. However, the support from Jak's arm and the time to prepare for the impact rendered the whole thing not half as bad as the ottsel made it sound.

Jak kept his arm still for a little while longer.

Now, Daxter wasn't too fond of the damn lizards after one of them had decided he was on the menu. But he had to admit that catching the things did have its thrill – and what made the lizards better than the jet board was that they could swerve to avoid suddenly appearing pedestrians who seemed to just sneak around waiting to be run into.

It would have felt even more handy-dandy if what needed avoidance had been still-at-work KGs, but you couldn't get everything.

The rocking came to a halt in a series of slowing slaps and a squeak from the lizard in protest to its reins being pulled. The last few swings came with a sliding sound and a thump of Jak's boots hitting the sand.

The world became visible in a flood of sunlight as the red scarf was pulled out of the way, and a hand came up to press at Daxter's cocoon from below. He shifted against it, letting it push him upwards until he could reach out of the collar of Jak's tunic and grab the shoulder guard. From there he easily climbed out and reclaimed his perch.

The market place of Spargus laid before them, rowdy citizens walking between the stands and baskets of supplies. The elderly warriors guarding the food from rats and insects divided the goods for the costumers as long as they could give proof of having a right to get the provisions. Small stone tablets with distinct markings for amount or weight traded hands in exchange for basic rations, artifacts, skull gems and other trading goods for additional supplies.

Spargus' people didn't have to starve, but a bit of restraint was necessary. Most of their food came from the ocean and to a lesser extent the desert itself, both foraging areas vulnerable to Nature's whims. An insistent storm lasting for too long could easily sap a weakened storage.

Goods traded for more food was accepted since the wastelanders traveling between other populated – and less sieged – areas could use them to acquire more supplies for Spargus.

Jak let go of his scarf, letting it flop down over his collarbones. He started walking, leaving the lizard behind but reaching out to give it a brief stroke over the head as he passed. The animal pushed its head into the hand with another squeak.

This only earned an annoyed look from Daxter. What was that, petting something that threw hungry looks at your best friend? He snorted.

Jak gave him an odd look, then caught the glare aimed at the lizard. Making the connection, the warrior smirked. This made Daxter change the direction of his glare.

"What? Oh, I see how it is, you just think me getting chewed on is comedy gold!" he started his oration.
The refreshing breeze from the ocean swept across this part of the town, holding back the worst assault of the sun. Jak walked with ease, now and then glancing at the ranting ottsel on his shoulder. Others threw annoyed looks at Daxter, but the blonde merely smirked a little.

He liked that voice.

It hung on the edge of his ears while he handed a few ration plates to a woman who gave him a package of dried lizard meat in return. As soon as he held it up, small hands grabbed it and with a soft rustling his backpack got a little heavier.

A few caranges were grabbed from another stand; hard-shelled fruits from cacti mainly growing in the shadows of the desert ruin and Spargus' walls. Getting through their armor was a chore, but the insides were surprisingly juicy. Not much taste to speak of, but it worked for hunger and thirst.

Daxter suspiciously knocked on the shells of every carange Jak handed him, to make sure they were fresh. Only when satisfied with the soft thuds did the ottsel drop the supplies into the bag.

While his partner was busy looking the other way and ranting about said trouble with getting to the interesting part of those well armored fruits, Jak got a slice of an imported melon and held it out of sight by his side.

"... and when you finally get there you're so exhausted that you can't even eat the damn thing! It's a defense system I tell you, they don't wanna be eaten. What, smoked fish again?"

The last comment came about due to the obvious route Jak was taking. He only got an idle glance for the complaint.

"It's bony and smells like Jinx' breath for cripes' sake! Can't you think about me for a change?"

Daxter grimaced, lolling his tongue out of his mouth. He only read the twitch of Jak's lips as amusement.

What he didn't notice was the slight lowering of eyelids.

"Really, you know I'm not made to eat those things in the first place! Well, second place. You know what I mean! They taste all- mmgh!"

Getting his face full of melon was a bit hard to miss, though. The complaints ceased immediately. On the other hand, the wet munching increased.

It sounded content enough.

Jak got the fish wrapped in a palm leaf and continued on his way through the market. Drops of melon juice dripped onto his shoulder guard now and then, but it didn't bother him much. The sun wouldn't even let it remain sticky for long.

A stone bench in the shadow of one of the buildings served a good purpose in the whole "breakfast" project. Daxter hopped off of Jak's shoulder and plopped down beside his pal, still munching away at the treat in his arms. It had so far smoothed most of the fur on his face and chest, but it didn't seem to worry him. Jak took note of that Daxter only seemed to chomp away at one half of the slice, however.

His lips twitched.

A smooth, smoky smell welled up as he ripped the leaf open, making his stomach growl. The
white-brown strips of meat crumbled to slices as he gripped them, melting on his tongue moments later.

Daxter wrinkled his nose. Meat hadn't really tasted that good to him in the last three years, not since he got furry. Well, did he look like a carnivore? A certain lack of fangs, there.

He looked up when that smoky smell suddenly increased, glaring up at the hand and the crumbling pieces of fish it held too close to his face. With his cheeks stuffed with crisp sweetness, it was just hard to protest verbally.

"You can't just live on that."

Jak pointed at the melon with his little finger. After a loud chew and swallow, Daxter sighed.

Damn points.

"Well you can't just live on fish either," he replied.

Small hands held up the melon slice and reluctantly accepted the fish. Jak took what remained of the fruit and broke it in half, leaving the part that Daxter had been taking bites from on the bench. The ottsel grabbed it half a minute later, tearing back into it to get rid of the fish taste.

Jak took it easier, finishing off the fish before taking care of the melon in a few bites. Finally he sat back, licking his fingers.

Hearing a low mutter he looked down, noting that his sidekick was in the middle of trying to wipe his fur clean. The remains of the lemon shell laid discarded on the ground, forgotten in the attempts to get less sweet and sticky. Smirking slightly, Jak unhooked the flask from his belt. He gave a corner of his scarf a quick dab of water and offered it to Daxter. The small hands immediately grabbed the cloth and used it to clean himself from the worst onslaught of the melon juice.

"Well that's a lot better," Daxter said. "I gotta hand it to you, buddy, you get some bright ideas now and then."

With that he hopped onto Jak's shoulder, giving a content sigh.

The blonde snorted, bending down to pick up the melon shell...

... only to have it snatched away by a copper-colored blur that looked very much like a kangarat. He gazed after it for a moment, then shrugged and threw the other half of the shell to one of the small, dog-like creatures sneaking around looking for a bite. It seemed to like the gift.

Their leftovers done away with Jak stood up and headed up the street, keeping his eyes open for a leaper lizard to use. Daxter was talking again, creating a soothing, familiar buzz in the warm wind.

It was one hella deep hole, in Daxter's opinion. And he said so. Repeatedly.

Jak just waved his hand at him, squinting at the other side of the gap. It shouldn't be a problem. He looked up, making sure that the ceiling of the tunnel was high enough.

Yep.

He put the gear in reverse and backed out into the light again, building up the distance they would need to make it across the obstacle.
The trip to the cave had been refreshingly peaceful. They had seen clouds of sand in the distance now and again, but since the duo had not been attacked those clouds had apparently not been caused by marauders.

So far then, there were only metal heads on the menu.

Jak hit the brakes, satisfied with the position of the Dune Hopper. He was about to shift gears again, when Daxter's fuzzy ears slumped into sight.

"Oh, a-hunting we will go... yay," the ottsel grunted.

The small body sat curled up on the passenger seat, tail tense against his legs. Jak reached out and poked him, curling his big hand into a fist when Daxter looked up.

"Hey, I got your back," the blonde said.

To both their relief Daxter cracked a smile, then punched Jak's fist with his own tiny one.

"I know, big guy," the ottsel said. He bounced to his feet suddenly, posing as he pointed towards the cave. "Now move out!"

Smirking, Jak did a thumbs up and shifted the gears. The humming engine roared as he released pressure on the clutch, slamming the other foot into the gas to meet the raising pedal. The Hopper tore forwards, the movement sending Daxter tumbling onto the seat. He grabbed onto it as good as he could, bracing himself against it in anticipation of what was to come.

Jak's lips drew back from his teeth in a grin as he squeezed the wheel, crushing the button atop it. Metal groaned and the Hopper dipped, still moving forwards with the same speed.

The engine's roar echoed as dusk enveloped them and for a moment the wheels hissed over sandy rock. Then Jak released the button and the whole vehicle sprang into the air, sailing across the small ravine that had sealed the cavern earlier.

They hung in the air for a moment, then smashed into the ground with another screech of metal and a half-strangled yell from Daxter as the impact sent him flying upwards. He hit the seat, blinking against the stars dancing in front of his eyes. It had not hurt much, but those damn jumps were never pleasant. Now his whole front side ached.

The progress halted along with the engine as Jak hit the brakes again, turning his head.

"You okay?"

A small finger came up.

"Get on with it so we can go home!" Daxter told the seat.

Lips tilting upwards, Jak sent the Hopper rolling forwards again. After a few moments Daxter rolled over and sat up, rearranging himself on the seat so that he was comfortable while still able to gaze past the control board of the vehicle.

They droned onwards, further and further from the sunlight. The headlights of the Hopper cast its pool of enlightenment in front of them, making the floor visible within a safe radius. However, not too far inside the tunnel took a turn and darkness surrounded them on all sides but ahead.

Immediately a long shadow reached into Daxter's line of sight, striking against the artificial light
splayed out in front of the car. He had already been pushing himself up to stand, and when the hand came within reach he grabbed it. It hoisted him up and away from the seat, dangling him past above the gear. He held on even when he first felt something rough and warm under the pads of his feet, letting Jak lower him further. Once the fuzzy one sat down on the big thigh, he let the hand go.

A few moments passed and he could see Jak's arm still moving above him, while the other hand tightly held on to the wheel. There was a whizzing sound and the light of the headlights briefly slid over dark metal and a bit of yellow. Then it was gone again with a thump as the morph gun landed on the empty seat, and Jak grabbed the wheel with both hands.

The tunnel stretched, slowly twisting deeper and further inside the mountain. It was thankfully wide enough at all times, leaving generous space for the Hopper on both sides.

As they proceeded, the air grew cooler, but at the same time heavier. A smell of mould whiffed against the warrior and ottsel, each time a little stronger than before. And now and again there was an even more unpleasant smell – sickly sweet and rancid at the same time, making Daxter's stomach roll. After a few assaults of the stench he grabbed hold of Jak's tunic, ripped the cloth free from being held stuck by the blonde's belt, and buried his face in it. While that cloth, once again, did not smell very nice after a few days in the desert, it was still nicer to his nose than the rotting remains of metal heads' leftover meals.

A few times he heard a crunching, cracking sound from beneath the Hopper's wheels, quite content in the knowledge that he didn't see the bones of the unlucky lunches. He still had vivid memories of the broken elf skulls he had caught sight of in the older, oh-so-popular metal head cave.

All of a sudden the headlights lost contact with the walls and the tunnel opened up in a cavern. Immediately it became easier to breathe, and Daxter cautiously lifted his face from Jak's tunic.

The stench was still there, but with this much empty air it didn't get enough space to rule supreme.

It was a huge cavern. Jak leant forwards and squinted, trying to estimate what they had ahead. But it was hard with the car's headlights eating up most of his vision, not leaving much else for the additional light to work with.

He could make out that there was some sunlight coming down from cracks in the ceiling far, far above, and patches of glowing moss shed an eerie, green glow over the rocks around them. By a broad assessment it seemed like this cave was just a little bigger than the main room in the other caverns, where he and Daxter had gone to hunt metal heads together with Sig. But this was new territory.

He sat back down and steered the Hopper further inside.

Nothing seemed to move, he heard nothing save for the engine's drone. The occasional gaze at Daxter gave no other tidings. Even if the ottsel turned his head back and forth, now back on his pal's shoulder, he gave no warning signs. It seemed safe to press on.

They continued deeper into the cave for a couple of minutes before another sound made itself known. Daxter immediately tensed and Jak's lips curled dangerously. The ground beneath them tipped upwards and the blond prepared to hit the brakes.

Seconds later the Hopper reached the top and gave the passengers a view of a basin, surrounded on all sides but one by huge bumps of smooth rock and sand. Almost straight ahead a ravine stretched out, the deep blackness gaping into obscurity. This cave seemed to like big holes.
More interesting than that were the three gigantic bodies at the bottom of the valley. Screeching roars tore at the air as the black eyes caught sight of the intruding vehicle above them, the light of the skull gems gleaming across natural panzer. The same armor clashed as the beasts reared up, a good thousand claw-legs furiously scratching empty air.

Jak's palm smashed into the big red button on the control panel before Daxter even hit the floor of the vehicle.

With a sharp whistling sound a dark ball shot from the Hopper's cannon, sailing through the air and-

Another roar, this one in pain as the bomb smashed into the underside of one of the metal-pedes and exploded. Fizzling fragments of armor and claws rained down as the beast rocked backwards, out of control tumbling over its companions and sending them all to the floor. For the moment Jak decided to ignore it, as it seemed to head in another direction. Instead he fired another shot as soon as the weapon panel flashed green again, the second bomb successfully exploding just behind the head of the wounded beast.

It reared up again blindly, out of control, crashing claws-first into the face of one companion. They wrestled about trying to get rid of each other, giving Jak time to aim more carefully.

In this confusion the third monster seemed to decide that a momentary withdrawal was a good tactic and blatantly tore away, skittering up the side of the valley. For the moment Jak decided to ignore it, as it seemed to head in another direction. Instead he fired another bomb, this time hitting the ground just before the metal-pedes.

The explosion rocked them both, and the one on the bottom twisted in pain, shrapnel getting into its eyes. The other tumbled away, flung towards the center of the valley. Both of them twitching in pain, the blinded metal head failed to see the edge of the gorge.

It shrieked when it felt the air beneath its claws, but it was already too late. Propelled by its own agonized throes it tipped, desperately scratching for purchase in the rocks to no avail.

Roaring, it fell, the echoing cry of rage ending in a violent, far off crash.

Daxter winced. Jak, meanwhile, intently studied the motions of the squirming survivor. It too rocked itself dangerously close to the gorge.

Just a little closer…

Another bomb went off and with one last screech the metal-pede rolled into the hungry gorge. Seconds later it fell silent.

Daxter slumped with a sigh of relief. At least until Jak backed up in order to turn towards the escape route of the last beast.

Right. Two down, one to go.

Greeeat.

But then again, those two had gone down with a very small amount of trouble thanks to that nifty hole. Hopefully the last one would be just as kind when it came to causing trouble.

About one hour later, it was however becoming glaringly apparent that such would not be the case. The last metal-pede kept fleeing, disappearing down tunnels in the floor and appearing in a whole
other end of the giant cavern whenever the hero and sidekick got too close. And not even Jak was prepared to drop the Hopper into one of those escape routes.

As this very odd metal head behavior went on Daxter grew more nervous at the rate of Jak’s decreasing patience.

The fuzzy one had a bad feeling that unless this got resolved otherwise, his blond pal may do something crazy to get a hold of that big bugger. And Daxter really did not feel so hot about that prospect.

This unpleasant suspicion got its confirmation soon enough. After they had rolled across rocks and rushed over the flatter areas of the cavern only to reach the top of another hill and see the tip of the metal-pede’s tail disappear down a jagged circle of obscurity for the fifth time, Jak hit the brake.

He had done so all the other times the escapee had slipped out of their grasp, so that he could stand up slightly, looking around trying to locate the beast.

This time however, he sat down without having bothered to locate their prey. Instead of turning the Hopper around towards the rest of the cave he steered it forwards, closer to the wall.

Daxter's stomach felt like it was about the level of his knees. The bad feeling got some assurance to feed on.

Jak was going to do something crazy.

Here and there in the cavern laid the odd, huge boulder which may have fallen from the ceiling sometime in the past. One such crunched the floor pretty close to the wall Jak was heading for. The warrior turned the wheel and headed for the gigantic stone, steering the Hopper in between it and the wall.

Up until Jak hit the brake and muttered his conclusion, Daxter had still managed to hold a small hope for sanity alive.

"It hears the engine."

Crap.

Jak turned the ignition and pulled out the key, putting it inside a pocket in his belt. He stood up, grabbing the morph gun from the passenger seat even as he moved.

"Uh, Jak?"

The booted feet hit the ground.

"Jak, buddy, I don't think this is a good idea!"

The blonde winced a bit at having the words hissed straight into his ear, returning the favor with a glare.

"You wanna stay here all night or come back again tomorrow?" he muttered.

Without even looking he turned the setting on the gun, setting it to Vulcan Fury. With a few whizzes the weapon folded outwards into a thicker shape, the yellow color changing to blue.

"And what if some beastie-babies eat our ride home while we're gone?" Daxter hissed.
"They don't do that," Jak said.

"Oh yeah? What about yesterday?"

But Daxter knew he and his arguments were doomed when Jak gave him one of those all-too confident, mildly insane smirks. Those ones reserved for really big guns, gliders, or plans no sane person would ever call "interesting"… but Jak did.

"Sig knows where we are," Jak said.

Not quite grinning like a psychotic loon, that face was only used when charging into final battles against metal head leaders. However, the prospect of spending a night or two stranded in a cave – full of who knew how many beasts – depending on when help would arrive… it seemed Jak thought it was sort of similar.

Daxter had to agree.

This did in no way make him feel any better about it.

"Yeah right, Sig knows where we are but he's out of town! And Kleiver will be reeeal happy if he gets to have us work for another car, you know the lardy tusker'll screw up that infected face of his in joy. And then we're cooked. Or rather I'm cooked, thankyouverymuch!"

Jak had already left the car behind and started walking, cautiously following the wall but staying several feet away from it in case something hid in the shadowed cracks. He glanced at Daxter at the last complaints, giving a casual shrug. The movement swung the ottsel's perch, forcing him to grab hold of Jak's hair and goggle strap to maintain his balance. It shut him up for a moment, enough to let the blond speak up.

"I'll just give him a few artifacts and hunt marauders for him," Jak muttered.

Daxter groaned and crouched down on the shoulder guard. He would have liked to continue his rant, but before he could give Jak a second helping of complaints there was a distant rumble.

A huge shadow moved beyond the hills on the other side of the cave. Daxter smacked his mouth tightly shut. Jak rolled his eyes at the distance they had to cross, but there was nothing to do. He set off, jogging as silently as possible across the broken landscape of rocks and sand. He would have used the jet board, but not in a place where something could leap at him suddenly. As long as he could hold the gun he would be able to counter.

The sound of sand crushed and the dry slap of Jak's boots against stone echoed in the wind's hollow hum far above them. By now the warrior's eyes had grown so well accustomed to the dim light that he easily saw all the possible natural traps in the ground. The stretches of glowing moss added to the weak tendrils of light from the faraway ceiling didn't exactly make it light as day, but it was enough.

He reached the edge of the high ground, gazing across the valley where the metal-pedes had rested before. The gorge stretched off to the left, a jutted blackness against the pale gray-green of the cliffs. Moss clung to the edges here and there, trying to illuminate the darkness but never reaching far enough.

Even now that he took a moment to survey it, Jak could only vaguely see where the ravine ended. It was only a fleeting thought before he returned to the matter at hand.

He may go down in the valley or walk around it. The latter would obviously take a lot longer,
maybe three times so. By the time he got around the basin, the metal-pede may have sneaked off through another tunnel and he would have to start over.

On the other hand, going through the valley was a tactical abhorrence, as Samos certainly would put it. Or tactical bullshit, coming from Torn.

Damas would probably not approve of it either.

Jak started along the edge of the valley, but moving just a few paces to the side he noted that the hill on the other side wasn't as tall as he had thought from the beginning. He may very well hear the metal-pede in time to charge his gun in case it decided to attack.

He pondered it for a second longer.

Nothing even hinted at that the huge beast had noted their presence, as it had not made a sound for a while. With all the noise it had proven to make during the hunt, a successful sneak attack would be impossible for it to pull off.

And Daxter wanted to get out of there as soon as possible.

Yeah.

Jak started downwards, even as he moved turning the morph gun slightly so that he could alter its setting again. The gun clicked and whizzed once more, its muzzle taking the shape of a miniature metal head's skull as the weapon changed from a Vulcan to Peace Maker. Satisfied with that Jak continued towards the lower area, walking cautiously while scanning the high ground ahead.

He touched down and glanced at Daxter. The ottsel had almost curled into a ball, nervously looking around. A rough cheek brushed a tense, fuzzy shoulder and Daxter turned to Jak. The small body relaxed a little at the smile, the silent reassurance that the job would be done and over with soon.

They would just finish off the main danger and then head back, safe and sound.

Daxter nodded slightly. Satisfied with that Jak straightened up and headed further into the valley.

He didn't walk too close to the gorge, there was no telling if something with an ability to fly was hiding down there. Still, the distance between the void and the hills seemed smaller than he had thought. The dim light really did play games with his vision. Frowning slightly Jak went on.

The wind was louder here, howling through the depth beside them. Pieces of shattered metal-pede armor laid scattered across the ground, Jak taking care to avoid the larger pieces. They could be really slippery, and that was the last thing he felt like dealing with.

It seemed like they would get to the other side of the area without any surprises.

But things happened so fast all of a sudden. One moment Daxter was simply gripping Jak's shoulder guard, in the next he felt all the hairs on his neck rise up like forest. A sixth animal sense screeched-

He gasped, trying to get air enough to warn Jak, but never got that far. There was a hard sound just beside his fuzzy elbow and Jak staggered, a surprised groan of pain fading from his lips as his eyes rolled upwards. The morph gun slipped from nerveless fingers and the hero crumbled.

Daxter shrieked, clumsily leaping forwards – but brought off balance by the fall, he hit the ground
and rolled gracelessly. Disoriented only for a moment, he leapt to his feet as soon as he could stand. Coughing, he tried to wipe the drifting sand from his streaming eyes.

Jak laid on the ground, unmoving. Eyes closed, the side of his face heavy against the cold stone and dust. The morph gun had fallen beside him.

Panic shot from the depth of Daxter's gut, and he dashed forwards.

Claws scraped the stones beneath him as he skittered to a halt, stumbling up to Jak's face. Small hands collided with the shoulder guard as Daxter tried to stop, but there was no reaction from the warrior.

A stream of warm breath tickled the fine hairs on the furry stomach as the ottsel spun around, granting him a brief respite – Jak was alive.

He reached out, about to put his hands on a dirty cheek. But just as he did, a shadow fell over the skin and covered the shade of the thin arms.

The hairs on Daxter's neck had not relaxed yet.

Shadows… shadows were bad. He had learnt that very early in his life.

Especially big shadows.

And the only thing worse than a big shadow, is the thing that's making it.

Ears pressed flat against his skull, Daxter turned his head.


Hello, little one. I think I'll play with you today.

End Introspection.'
Begin Introspection. Serial code: Daxter.

I'm gonna die. Shit shit shit shit sweetmerciful GODS I'mgonnadieI'mgonnadieI'mgonnadie! Oh no no no no Jak goodgodsplease don'tlethimkillhim not Jak not like this!

End Introspection.

The cavern was silent apart from the whistling of the distant desert wind finding its way into the hollows by the entrance. Silence, deafening in its force, which only grew as the seconds slipped by between those who waited.

An already thundering pulse raced at the first movement, a voice wanting to scream but unable to form the sound.

A grunt, and cloth rustled against the sand and pebbles – unaware, ignorant of how the darkness stretched out around him, not seeing the moving metal.

Jak groaned, reaching for his pounding head. The fingers briefly touched the burning area where he had been hit, but the touch only managed to send bolts of lightning through his head and he winced, quickly removing his hand.

What the hell…?

Disoriented, he heaved himself up on all four, shaking his head in an attempt to clear it. His vision swam even as he tried to focus on the pebbles beneath him. Daxter must have hit his head or something since he was not there to slap his big pal back into consciou-

"Slept well, Jak?"

Head snapped up, sight instantly clearing at the vision of red against the dusk of the cavern. The greenish light of the moss turned the crimson into a dirty brown, but there was never any question of who it was.

Erol smiled, his metallic body frame seated with unsettling ease on a rock in a little distance, the dark void of the gorge a backdrop. Before the curse had even passed his lips Jak had grabbed the morph gun from the ground beside him and was back on his feet, cold barrel aimed straight at the steel chest- and froze, because there was something missing.

Narrowing blue eyes never moved, but their corners took in the whole scene before the blond. Searching, with a growing sense of dread, for the faintest speck of orange.

Until Erol's hand emerged from behind his goliath leg, a desperate hope still managed to hang on inside Jak's chest. But at the sight of a pair of wide open, frightened eyes, the last glimmer of hope
"Dax-!"

The gasp slipped out before he could stop himself, and then it was too late. Though he never changed his stance the slightest, Jak flinched.

And the smile widened into a leer.

"Daxter, is it…" Erol said, slowly as if he was tasting the name.

But from the look on his face, it was nothing new to him. The situation was a mere test, and he was fond of the results so far.

Daxter hung in the metallic grip enclosed around most of his body, his tail straight as a poker and tiny paws clutching the cold thumb digging into his soft fur. He looked far smaller than usual, an insignificant fragment of orange against darkness and sickly green reflected in smooth steel. In the distance Jak could not see it, but he still knew that every last hair on his friend stood straight. And as their blue gazes met, the blonde saw the glistening of salty water smoothening the fur of Daxter's face. With the current state of the ottsel's mind he might not even be aware of the tears, but Jak noticed.

Shit.

Jak could not move, finger tightening on the trigger but every nerve in his body knowing that the slow Peace Maker never would be able to fire before those fingers crushed Daxter's brittle ribcage. Even if it could, the ottsel would be caught in the blast. And Erol knew that.

Jak realized that in this situation he might as well have been unarmed – and still he could not let his finger relax. He did not have the mind to do it, could not make his brain take it in and make the command.

It did not matter, did it? If he moved, or if he tried to attack-

"Sometimes you face your enemy head on…"

Jak clenched his teeth.

The first move was not his to make, not if he wanted to have the slightest chance to keep Daxter alive.

Erol tilted his head slightly, studying the frozen hero. The eyes shifted, glance touched the rigid Daxter before returning to the blonde.

"I must admit that I'm a bit curious," the cyborg said. "Your pet apparently means a lot to you."

He could have tried to deny it in an attempt to ensure Daxter's safety, make him unimportant… but it was too late for that, far too late. Unmoving, Jak spoke the only thing that came to mind, knowing it might just as well slam the trap shut even harder. Words hissed through teeth, bloodless lips harshly forming the sounds.

"Put him down, Erol. He's not a threat."

With a tsk, the mechanical head shook. Its owner never stopped watching the bigger prey this time.

"You can do better than that," Erol said.
Though he had not thought it possible, Jak tensed further. He had the attention, which was a start, but how to go from there to the point where he would have Daxter safely within reach again… that he did not quite know. For the moment all he could do was follow the lead given until he could strike back. Had to keep trying.

"It's me you want. Let him go."

A sharp chuckle.

"How cliché…" Erol said. "But you almost make it justice. Almost."

The weight was on the last word, accompanied by a sharp clicking.

"No-!

Jak stepped forwards without thinking, but froze as Erol smiled at him.

The green glow caressed its way across two new pieces of metal, a pair of blades emerging from the base of Erol's thumb and pointing finger. Daxter's eyes widened and he squirmed, but the grip of him was too tight.

"He-hey- personal space, toy man…!"

The words, highpitched and broken by stutters could do nothing for the situation. They reached Jak's ears, but hardly made sense. He could only meet the artificial gaze set on him.

Erol's smile dropped, and as he spoke it was with a businesslike tone.

"Listen, Jak, I really don't have time for this," he said. "If you don't make it worthwhile, I'll just snip this little neck and be off."

He leant towards the trembling Daxter, watching him from the corner of half-lidded eyes.

"They say the head keeps living for a little while after decapitation, you know…" the cyborg said. His leer cruelly twisted as the ottsel squeaked, the normal flow of words stuck within the small chest. The distraction was only so brief, not more than half a moment – Jak saw the chance slip away. He was far too far away, and Erol would have no problem to move far too quickly. Even his Light powers could not help at this distance.

Plan B. Or rather, Z.

"Erol!"

"Hmm?"

Metallic and fuzzy heads alike turned towards Jak at the call.

'Forget about him, look at me, look at me…'

Those simplistic thoughts remained lonely in the blonde's mind as he changed the grip of his morph gun, turning it horizontally across his chest. He kept his glare steadily on Erol even as a finger reached for a button.

Daxter's breath caught in his throat and he wanted to shake his head, scream at Jak to get a grip and do his job. But he couldn't, because the blades were choking him, Jak's movements were choking
Fingertip pressed down, and Erol tilted his head as the morph gun folded itself up in Jak's hands. A moment later the weapon hit the ground with a dull clank that echoed through the silence like a funeral bell.

"… and sometimes… you wait until his weakness is revealed."

As Jak kicked the morph gun away and raised both hands to hover on either side of his head he could only hope that Damas had not given a bad piece of advice. His jaw didn't move as he spoke.

"I'm not going to move."

"You aren't, now?"

Gears gave small screeches as the cyborg stood and raised his massive left "hand". Casually, experimentally – just testing this new situation.

Jak faced the smooth eye of the laser cannon, unmoving.

Daxter wanted to scream.

Metal jaw grinded as Erol chuckled, the chokes of laughter spiraling down into a demented giggle. He reveled in the control, razor sharp blades on Daxter's neck and laser cannon aimed straight at Jak's chest.

Blue eyes met in the instant that the cyborg focused on neither friend, just the faintest narrowing of a green eyebrow relaying enough of a message – 'Help me out here!'

A gulp, but the silent request finally unlocked Daxter's tongue and he braved the sharp edges by his throat to turn his head and glare at the amused one.

"Uh-uhm, come on ya stingy tin can, not even a teensy weensy little last wish?" he asked, hoarsely.

The giggle ended, but the smirk remained.

"I don't really see any reason for that," Erol said.

Daxter chewed on his fuzzy lip, wild eyes flying between the ripped, metallic visage of his captor and Jak's motionless face. He swallowed hard, but in the next second his little claws scraped the chilly steel supporting his small body.

"Oh sheez, you've gotta be the lousiest villain yet!" he exclaimed, "don't they ever teach any of you in Psycho High to gloat properly anymore?"

The voice broke, but he still got the words out.

Erol's artificial eyes rolled in their cold sockets, a static sigh rising from the speakers in his throat.

"Oh fine," the cyborg drawled, "give me some last words to hold dear, will you?"

"Cheapskate ass- guh!"

Daxter hissed as the razor blade nicked a few hairs from his neck. Jak's fingers twitched, but he stayed where he was.
"Words will be just fine."

Erol studied Jak, lips curling upwards.

"It's poetic justice."

For just the briefest moment it seemed as if he would continue, and a spasm twitched Jak's brow. Not that. Not that!

But Erol remained silent, waiting without mentioning the first word to leave a young prisoner's lips. This time Daxter was spared from hearing it.

Jak would have wanted to take in a shuddering breath of relief, but the situation hardly allowed such luxuries. But it was a small victory, if nothing else.

Looking at Daxter and feeling all the things he had never said cropping up inside his mind, not so many of them because he knew his best friend too well to keep a lot of things away – but heavy, heavy things that weighed down and screamed to be spoken in case this really was it-

No. This would not be it, not until he took his last breath. Jak squared his jaw, pushing the fears away. He would walk out of this too, with Daxter safely on his shoulder.

Those things were too important to be said in front of Erol. He did not deserve to hear them.

Jak ignored the screaming, and reached for something else, something to get the smirking cyborg's attention for another few moments. Anything to win time for that precious opportunity that just had to come – Jak harbored no hope that Erol would simply drop Daxter and let him scurry away, even with the blond's suffering as a prize.

Cold, blue eyes looked straight into the waiting gaze of the opponent.

"What the hell were you smoking on the race?" Jak asked.

Erol raised what would have been an eyebrow, had any hair been present.

"Hmm?" he said.

"That 'I want you' crap. I can't make anyone who heard it drop it."

The smirk changed a little, becoming more amused than cruel for just the briefest moment.

"Ah, that. I meant 'I want to see you crushed in the most pathetic way', actually."

He paused for a moment, watching Jak with the faintest smile on his hard lips.

"Didn't you know that?"

"Oh thanks a lot!" Daxter snarled.

With an uncanny disrespect for the morbid he plonked an elbow onto the flat side of one of the blades threatening his neck. He proceeded to lean his small cheek on a fist, glaring up at the uncaring face above him.

"That's just what, nine, ten extra words! What were you saving them for, trashcan-on-legs?" he asked. "You have any idea how long I've been fretting about that line?"
Never once did Erol blink. Now if he had needed to, and still had such inclinations, he might still not have done so.

"Three-hundred and ninety-two days, seven hours, thirty-six minutes and oh… fifteen seconds."

He gave a mirthless smile.

"But who's counting?"

There was a brief pause.

"Okay," Daxter finally said, "now you're just sad."

"Sad?"

Erol snorted, and Daxter eeped as the cold fingertips dug into his fur.

"Sad is counting the seconds since my, hah, death."

The continuation hung in the air for a moment before Erol swung slightly on his mechanical legs, shaking his head.

"Then it's three-hundred and ninety-two days, seven hours, twenty-nine minutes and forty-three seconds. But, whatever…"

He feigned a deep sigh and set his eyes on Jak again, cold eyelids lowering a little.

"Ah… it's too bad…"

The man and the ottsel watched him, silence stretching and he let them be grilled for a few more seconds, savoring the tension. Pleasure like this was so hard to come by for one such as him, but now… now Erol had to admit that he almost could remember how it felt to be alive.

Truly, too bad…

He studied Jak, making sure every little detail was recorded so that he would be able to replay the look on the blonde's face later on. Every little motion as the lips drew back from the teeth, every speck of red prickling his skin, every shallow intake of air, the tension of his throat almost allowing the thundering pulse to become visible.

"Trust me, Jak, I would love to take you with me… for old times' sake," Erol said.

His lips twitched in delight at the flinch his words caused.

Beautiful.

He shook his head, just the slightest bit of honest regret in his voice.

"But I'm afraid that I know myself too well," he said. "I'm on a tight schedule and you'd be a far too distracting toy. I have to think about the greater good."

Daxter's claws screeched against a metallic finger.

"Let him go," Jak said.

Soft voice, somewhere between a whisper and a growl.
A pause.

Then Erol smiled, and there was a clicking as he withdrew the blades from the small neck. Daxter held his breath – Jak's eyebrows twitched, doubtful.

"Ah well…"

The laser's lens flared up together with the sharp hissing announcing the surge of power, the deadly force within its metal womb building up for a shot.

"I suppose you've been a good enough boy, Jak. Wouldn't want you to think ill of me."

Jak saw it coming, every muscle in his body tensing for the leap. Daxter felt it coming and clutched the smooth finger harder. But it did not help.

Smile unwavering, Erol pulled back and flung out his hand, sending the ottsel's small body flying forwards- and to the side, towards the hungry void of the gorge.

Jak did not curse, he had no time for that. He catapulted himself forwards, the world bending and slowing around him as his entire body shimmered, light covering him. He threw himself, dashed, commanding time itself to slow to let him reach those tiny hands reaching for him – they were so far away, too far away but he could make it, could save everything if the light only was strong enough to carry him quicker than gravity.

His hands reached out and for the faintest moment, too short even in Jak's state of seeing the world in slow-motion, the small blue eyes lit up with hope.

Then his world rocked and intense heat seared his skin as he fell, flung in the other direction by the power of a missed shot. He sailed, hung in the air, a doll on a string waiting for the last thread to be cut before it was too late, the coarse sound of the explosion clawing and clawing at his ears – and behind it, a scream.

He hit the ground, a mix of sand and saliva on his lips as he rolled and watched, seeing every detail, every strand of hair – ears, eyes, nose, mouth, arms, hands, body, legs, paws, tail, swallowed whole by the darkness, stretched out before him for eternity.

The light died and the world sped up.

Jak heard his own scream, or maybe it was Daxter's. He didn't know. All he saw was the small orange body disappearing into the darkness of the chasm, passing the edge with a couple of feet that might as well have been yards.

He knew that he screamed, but it was brief because he heard the hissing sound behind him, felt Erol's smile and he acted. Jak ducked and rolled away, feet scraping against the floor, slipping on the pebbles as he tried to get up before the fizzling of the cannon reached its peak- his body was just reacting without a single thought making it through his brain. He saw the crackling glow of the cannon- couldn't remember why that was important, didn't care.

Somewhere, far down he knew that impending death normally would be really, really crucial, but… it did not seem like a factor anymore. The only thing that did matter was to get within reach and tear the bastard's head off and even if he would get a blast of pure energy straight in the face it wouldn't matter as long as-

The darkness roared and he let it come, ripping through his body and leaving just the urge to kill, kill and drink blood.
Erol smirked as the young man howled, claws sprouting from his nails and horns from his forehead. The beast staggered forwards, never flinching away from the weapon aimed straight at it.

Foolish brute.

Jak dashed, arms stretched out in front of him, oblivious to and uncaring about the fact that the laser was ready to fire. Erol smiled almost fondly as the command to fire zipped through his circuits.

Good bye, pest.

There was a drawn-out yelp, and something went wrong. A blur of light colors flew past in the corner of Erol's camera lenses and the joints of his left leg buckled as something latched onto it and pulled.

"You touch him an' I swear I'm gonna-"

The pathetic, wheezing gasp disappeared in Jak's roar and Erol's enraged shriek as even the weak pull stimulated his knee so much that his entire body swung just when the cannon went off. The beam of energy crackled past the beast's ear one third of a second before he body slammed the cyborg, claws hard as diamonds slitting red coating and the metal beneath.


There was a cry of pain from the whiny voice as the weight of Erol's leg crushed down on the frail arms. The distraction fled instinctively to avoid being snapped in half while the two combatants slid several feet away by Jak's force.

The claws ripped out of the armor and came down again, one set on the metallic chest and one on the shoulder joint. Metal screamed.

Warning. External armor damaged. Connection between main unit and cannon damaged.

Erol swore, grappling for Jak's throat with the blades on his hand. But the beast reared up out of reach, a chop from the side knocking the cold arm out of control just long enough for the pale hand to slam down and pin the artificial limb against the ground.

Spewing curses, the cyborg bent one leg and rammed it into Jak's chest as the beast was distracted by the catch. With a roar the dark warrior was flung onto his back, but he scrambled to his feet at the same speed as Erol.


Gritting his teeth Erol stepped backwards, watching every move that Jak made. The beast crouched, moving his feet in preparation for another attack.

Connection between main unit and upper body operational. Engaging rockets.

"Tch!"

Dark eco flared and set off the engines in Erol's back, the rockets fastened on what would have been his shoulder blades filling up with pure force as he rose from the ground and soared towards
the cavern ceiling. Keeping his eyes on the beast below he saw the attack coming and easily avoided the ball of dark lightning hurled towards him.

"This isn't over, Jak!"

His eyes rolled to take a record of the other creature left on the ground, spiking a small remnant of curiosity. But he did not have time, and though his pride throbbed in pain Erol withdrew, flying further and further into the darkness until he disappeared. This was not the end.

Seconds passed, trickling away after the cyborg disappeared in the dusky distance.

Nothing happened.

Gone.

Safe.

Jak fell to his knees, gasping and choking on his own breath as the claws and horns withdrew, his skin smoothening into the warm tan forced onto him by the desert sun. Drawing back his tongue from the shrinking fangs he turned around, trying to make sense of everything.

Something had happened, it had just been too quick- and he had thought that he had heard Daxter…”

Jak stopped moving. Stopped breathing.

Because Daxter was there, alive, sitting on the ground a few yards away, holding a hand to his head and squinting.

He grimaced and gave Jak a slightly drowsy look, eyes narrowed in discontent even though the lips were stretched in relief. He let out a loud sigh and wrinkled his nose.

"Man, that stung! I told you we shouldn't have left the car and you listened…”

Daxter fell silent and slowly blinked. The metaphoric wheels inside his head felt a little metaphorically rusty, but they screeched into action anyway. The force to push them came from the weight of knowledge that seriously weird crap was going on.

Shouldn't he be, like, a red little splat on the bottom of that big hole, for starters? He could clearly remember hitting something and then seeing nothing but- uuh, hadn't that been the light at the end of the tunnel?

For some reason it felt a bit difficult to speak, something was in the way for his upper lip. And he really did not feel that good, and the world was spinning a bit… just a teensy little bit…

What was he thinking about again? Oh yeah… the words he said, they sounded similar to something he had heard before. And the look on Jak's face seemed eerily familiar too. That flabbergasted, gaping thing he did.

Hello, déjà vu. Haven't we met before?

"Whaaat?" Daxter drawled, voice coming out in a tense wheeze.

Speaking was obviously not a good idea. His brain wanted every last bit of that precious oxygen all to itself, or it would refuse to function sufficiently. Actually, there was that rising amount of dizziness that it should bother about and the pain in the arm that Erol had almost broken, and the
extreme cold and- oh what the heck, a temporary complete shutdown of consciousness would probably solve most of that.

Such was the logical conclusion of Daxter's brain, strengthened by the knowledge that hey, Jak was there after all. He could deal with the rest even without the guidance of his fuzzy sidekick, at least this once, right?

Right. Goodnight.

And so Daxter's eyes rolled upwards and he fell over on the ground. Even that felt strange, but he was gone before he could figure out why.

The normal thing to do would have been to scoop Daxter up against his chest and dash towards the nearest means of fixing him up, but Jak found himself with an acute case of brain freeze. It took several seconds before he even managed to pick himself up and half walk, half crawl over to his fallen friend.

A hand reached out and a couple of fingertips brushed the air above a shimmering lump on the ground beside Daxter's elbow. The light flourished, spinning around before swirling into Jak's hand. His skin tingled and for a moment the blood veins beneath gently glowed.

With the added light, the darkness in his mind sunk back like a black tide. It helped to clear his mind, but only from the insistent wish to rip something apart. Nothing to do for the feeling of utter dumbfoundedness.

Finally he dragged himself over to the cleft where Daxter had fallen in, gazing down at the abyss.

There actually was a plateau not too far down, sticking out of the wall. From the looks of it though, it had been completely overgrown with moss and a net of spidery cavern grass, them being so dark that the platform had been hidden in the poor illumination. They must have been feeding on what was beneath.

In fact, the plateau seemed to be rather hollow by its base, and Daxter must have ripped through the plant life as he fell. Now a sweet, pure glow shone through the hole in the vegetation. A few drops of it had been splashed out of the pool by the furry impact, slipping towards the bottom of the abyss. Jak idly played with the thought that there might be a whole lake of the stuff inside the mountain, and it had caressed its way out on that plateau. In a few years, maybe it would break through the platform completely, and light would pour down into the blackness and evaporate it.

He was probably in shock, he concluded. That would explain the lightheadedness.

He turned around and looked at his friend again.

Yes, just the same.

The inclination to go down in hysterics was almost too tempting, but luckily he had never been prone to such things. Instead he found himself moving back to the small body sprawled on the ground.

Hand reached out again, fingertips hovering in the air before lowering, brushing against something more solid this time. Blonde, on the verge of golden threads of hair bent and slid between Jak's fingers, the color against his skin darkening and deepening into a warm red as he moved his hand upwards.

He tilted his head slowly, studying the trace of his thumb as it moved to a cheek and stroke the
soft, warm skin, finally coming to rest on the two front teeth protruding from beneath the upper lip.

Pebbles and sand rattled as Jak heavily sat back, skin still tickling from the contact he was so very unused to.

Drops of pure white eco still remained on the very human body that lay on the ground like a thrown away rag doll.

Begin Introspection. Serial code: Jak.

Oh my god.

End Introspection.
Begin Introspection. Serial code: Samos the Sage.

There will come a day, and I fear it will be sooner than later... when Jak doesn't come back to Haven. Not because he dies trying, but because he will choose not to. He does not speak much of the wasteland when he is with us, but one single phrase was enough to tell me everything. He told Daxter at one point, "let's go back". That was all I needed, because I can read Jak well enough to tell.

His tone was not very eager, but it only took one look on his face, the way his eyebrows rose just the slightest and the scowl eased. He has found a home in the very place that was supposed to be his grave.

But even if he is happy there, it's not in him, not in anybody, to forgive the ones that let him be thrown out. Not completely. Jak will fight for us because he still cares, he cannot turn his back on us and let us die. Such things are not in his nature. Yet it is undeniable that he did not make it out unscathed. He has been let down so many times by us, by this city, that I believe that this might have been the last shove he could deal with. Even if he would say it loud, "I forgive you", it would not be true. And we all know it. Still, we have all tried to make it up for him, ever since he found a way back to Haven. I can assure you that it has not gone unnoticed, as Daxter has been very pleased to make his usual idiotic comments about it.

We have to make it up for him somehow, it is a feeling all of us share. Onin, Pecker and I have the ability to do something more than the others, and we are carefully reaching out – Ashelin may have been able to help, but due to the delicate matter of this project and her already pressed situation, I suggested she stays out of it.

For me, it is not only a matter of repenting my failure to save Jak from being exiled. It goes far, far further back, three years ago and more.

Time... does not move in a perfect circle. My past in Haven, my own memories of the battle against Metal Kor from when I was younger... those things do not match with what happened in this timeline. I recall a far more desperate battle, a more frightening one.

In my past, we did not have a Jak to save us. The grown hero simply did not exist, for he had never been sent back in time to grow strong and then return.

What we had, was a child whom a blind seer had promised could change history itself to prevent our annihilation.

Perhaps we started a time loop, as the child of this time was successfully sent through the precursor ring as well. I can only pray that this loop is stable, that my past is indeed merged with this happier one.

The sacrifices we made in my past were too terrible. For my own sanity I must believe they have been undone. Perhaps I am still left with the memory because I let the innocent child be sacrificed as well.
I could have warned him, told him that we may come to a strange place. Told him to flee if he saw men in red armor.

Yes indeed, the Krimzon Guard under Baron Praxis' reign did patrol the Haven I recall as well.

Why then, did I not warn Jak? I cannot make excuses, it was neglect and foolishness on my part, and I will surely be made to pay further for it. While I did know that Praxis was a cruel man, I had no concept of the inhuman treatment he put Jak through for two long years.

Perhaps I did not realize the lengths at which that man was willing to go, but on the other hand… how could I know that he would have information of Jak's abilities? But no, I have no right to excuse myself.

Still, the last I saw of Praxis in my time… gave me a bit of hope, if that is the word, that he may not be the tyrant completely blind to people's suffering, the man we had thought him to be. It is… difficult to keep hating a man, when he once was your enemy but in different times was forced into an alliance.

We were losing, all of us were. And in those desperate times an alliance was formed between tyrant, rebels, and betrayed. All for that one hope in a child whom the precursors had faith in.

It was a long, agonizing process getting everyone to agree, nothing else can be claimed.

Yet somehow in the end, we fought our way into the metal head nest, all of us – Krimzon Guards, Undergrounders, wastelanders and lurkers alike. It was not a winning battle, but the light of the precursor ring drove us onwards. Even me, an old man and aspiring sage, clutching an unconscious child in my arms.

The child was always silent, a fear of him giving himself away was not why we had drugged him into unconsciousness. Many men died there. Many dear men. It is not a sight for such young eyes.

Still now, I recall activating the rift rider in a haze of shock, screams ringing in my ears. One of the last things I saw was Praxis crushed beneath the gigantic monster's paw. That much triumph was granted to Lord Damas, that the man who betrayed him died first. And I want to believe that his dimming eyes caught sight of me and the boy fleeing, knowing we were safe – knowing he had bought enough time, before he died between Kor's jaws, his armor and bones crushed into spoils falling down the hard chins.

Knowing that his son would be safe.

And now…

You cannot force somebody to believe. But for Jak's sake, all our sakes… I agreed to try, to give the child something back for all his suffering. For all the sacrifices.

Just a little prod, a thoughtless and vague comment made by a talking, flying monkey… to a man used to only believing his own eyes – but still knowing to trust in the monkaw's master. While no one else heard, just a little hint.

That is all we have tried, and it is all we can hope for. This knowledge is far too strange to force upon somebody. A man who only believes what he sees must first be made to doubt, then study the hints on his own. Only then can he who does not know the truth choose how to handle it. It is not our right to push him there, neither can it be done.

Lord Damas is not prone to accept absurdities.
For an eternity, Jak could not get to his feet. He managed to drag himself back to Daxter's side, something about safety already driving him on. But once back there, he sat frozen and only stared.

It seemed like something impossible, ripped straight out of everything lost from so long ago. Even more precious now, breathing, within reach. Alive. Cold fingers and blades gone, no longer threatening the precious neck.

He vaguely heard his own breathing, and the wheezing from Daxter's nose. In the background, the howl of the wind continued undisturbed by the chaos that had just passed. He felt the cold, and the rocks digging into his legs. But he didn't register any of it. All he could do was stare.

Daxter. Alive.

And… back.

He should have been dead. And yet…

It may be impossible to walk out safely with Daxter on his shoulder, but Jak felt, though he was in no state to formulate it, that he could live with the loss of that plan.

Sometime during this paralyzed phase, Jak mechanically pulled off his scarf and dropped it over parts Daxter probably would be grateful to find covered once he woke up.

Eventually though, there really was no time for such stunned musings.

Brain to body, do you copy? Do you copy? Ya think the metal heads are going to leave you alone just because you've forgotten about them? For the love of- move it, you buffoon!

The more sensible parts of Jak's brain finally gave up the shouting and rammed the metaphorical butt of a subconscious morph gun into the paralyzed parts. He blinked a few times, shaking his head to clear it of the confusion.

Right. Cave armed with a metal-pede. Time to move.

He had to admit to himself though, that his hands actually were shaking just the slightest as he shoved his arms beneath the warm back and limp knees. Shock was definitely not good for his image.

Well, Daxter could not see it and by the time the redhead woke up, Jak hoped that he would have gotten his heart down from the racing level and mind set straight again.

Hopefully Daxter could deal with being knocked out for a looong time.

Jak stood up and set his gaze ahead, hurrying forwards to pick up his morph gun. The sand crunched beneath his boots in the sudden silence – reminding him of the dangers more than ever. Apart from the wind, nothing did anything against the noise he tried to keep down. But it was difficult moving silently with the extra weight. Jak frowned, but never stopped – only looked
around with more suspicion.

He had to set his friend back down for a moment to pick up his gun, protectively reaching over Daxter's unmov ing form to grab the weapon.

That was when he noted the angrily red area on the thin lower arm – with a heart of a deepening black-and-blue hue. His brow shot downwards at the sight of darkness on the pale skin, making him forget the gun for a moment as he took hold of Daxter's wrist and lifted the arm for closer inspection. It was a large mark, disturbing in its size – stretching down the thicker end of Daxter's arm, on the underside where the skin was smoother and softer. Jak moved his gaze and frowned deeper as he found a similar, though lighter, mark on the other arm, almost a mirror of the first.

Had Daxter hit his arms on something? Maybe in the fall?

No…

He recalled seeing everything in a haze – it was nothing he wasn't used to, turning into his dark self always included that.

But there had been that sudden invasion of something light that flew at his prey, a familiar voice that gasped something – confusion drowning in rage, he hadn't cared anymore than noting that something was there. Something that didn't matter as long as he killed his prey.

Now that the eco no longer clouded his senses and his heartbeat was slowing together with his breath, he could piece things together.

Through the haze, that moving blur that latched onto his prey. The cruel light that suddenly moved. He had known that the light was important, but he had forgotten why in the rage.

Now he knew it was the laser cannon, aimed straight at him. Impending death, but he only felt momentarily disturbed by how close it had been. As he looked down to Daxter, he saw the arms that had clumsily grabbed the hard leg – movement so violent that he had bruised himself. Grabbing and pulling, making Erol lose his balance and aim.

Jak let go of the limp arm, raising his hand to Daxter's cheek. Thumb brushing against the round nose, in shape hilariously similar to the black, wet button it had been mere minutes ago. The cheek was soft, not as much as Keira', but it felt much more smooth and warm against his roughened palm.

Not a handsome face, not even a pleasant sight in the odd light of the cavern – the sick glow of the moss giving the skin a grayish tone, dampening the red of Daxter's hair into a withering brown. But the real colors had been there, fully visible in the purer light of the eco – and it would be that way again as soon as they got out of the cave.

No, not a handsome face; angular and oddly shaped like the bones had been stretched and pressed back a couple of times. But with its sorely missed familiarity, alive and safe… it was beautiful.

Jak smiled, squeezing the shoulder in his hand. Wanted Daxter to be awake then, regardless of confusion – wanted to see the blue eyes open, blinking slowly, then widen in surprise at the sight of his own furless hands. Wanted to grin at the look on that face.

But if there was one thing Jak had learnt, it was that things tended to go to hell when he really wanted them to be alright.

That thought sobered him, letting the peace last only for a couple of seconds before he hastily
grabbed the morph gun, returned it to its holster and gathered Daxter in his arms again. That done Jak stood up and started on the quick trek back towards the Hopper.

He headed for the lower slope of the hills – a bit too close to the ravine, but it would be easier to climb.

It was too quiet.

He started up the slope, the sand giving away and sliding beneath his boots. For each step it brought him back half a pace, making the climb excruciatingly slow.

One step. Two steps. One back.

Jak gritted his teeth, glancing over his shoulder. There was no real telling whether or not Erol had actually left or just taken off someplace safer – even if it did seem plausible that he was gone, with the lack of attacks during those stunned moments a little while back. Still, there was definitely something else in the cave apart from the warrior and the newly-turned-youngster he tightly held.

Two steps. One back.

He was almost by the top, lifted his foot one last time to pass over onto more stable ground-

And of course, that was when something huge smashed through the ground on the other side of the valley, sending rocks flying. A hoarse screech filled the air, echoing among the crashes of falling rocks.

Jak didn't even waste time looking around. He ran.

Behind him, still far away but hardly far enough, the monstrous body of the metal head hit the ground and started forwards on bloodthirsty claws.

Roles suddenly reversed, the metal-pede the hunter and the two young men the prey. Erol must have held it back earlier.

Frustration and dark eco merged within the warrior and he gritted his teeth against the roars of his entire being, revolting against fleeing. But tightening the grip of Daxter sent a cold shower over his temperament. He had stepped out of the car prepared to fight the damn monster on foot, but at that point Daxter had been sitting on his shoulder, small enough to slip down his shirt if worst came to worst. That was not the situation anymore. Now, Jak would have to drop his unconscious friend on the ground in order to fight, leaving him defenseless.

Protecting Daxter came first. Jak just had to keep both of them alive until he could strike against he opponent.

The opponent who, by the sound of it, had just made it into the valley. It tumbled and screeched, the sound subdued just the slightest by the sunk position. Hopefully it would have a bit of trouble climbing out, too.

They had to get out of sight before the damn thing got them in its beady sights again.

Jak narrowed his eyes ahead; the boulder shielding the Hopper was still too far away to reach in time. But there was another boulder closer by, if he just turned a little – it would bring them even further away from the greater safety of the armed vehicle, but in this case there really was no choice.
The hero took a turn.

The metal-pede roared in frustration as the loose sand slowed its progress upwards.

Daxter squirmed.

Jak sucked in his breath and glanced down. He thought he could see small motions beneath the close eyelids – red lashes fluttered just the slightest. Lips parted around the protruding overbite and a pathetic groan escaped Daxter.

Tightening the grip even more, Jak dove in behind the boulder. He crouched down until he sat on his knees, changing the grip to set Daxter in his lap, off the cool ground. Praying that his eco reserves were drained enough to make it hard for the beast to track them.

Another groan, but it drowned in the frustrated screech of the monster finally reaching the top of the hill and finding its prey nowhere in sight.

"Uhh… wha-?"

Daxter's weak mumble was cut off by Jak's hand clamping over his mouth. He squirmed for a second, panic spiking until he met the gaze set on him and recognized Jak. Then the redhead stared, blinking in confusion – despite the wooziness he obviously noted that something was glaringly odd, apart from the apparent proof of danger which was Jak muffling him. The fingers pressed to his face gave a small squeeze to underline the need for silence.

That loud, monstery noise in the background didn't sound too good either. Really not good. Daxter's first question was what it was. The second was why they were hiding instead of the usual fare of Jak blasting everything threat-like to kingdom come.

There could be no good answers to that. It was enough to make Daxter pinch his eyes shut and shuffle all other confusion into the back of his head. At the next crash he shuddered closer to Jak, instinctively aiming to take cover under the red scarf.

His brain could not avoid confusion, however, when he first noticed that the scarf wasn't there, and his hand somehow managed to curl over something that felt suspiciously much like the shoulder guard he could usually stand on.

Jak bit his lip hard enough to almost draw blood. Worry for their safety clashed with the feel of having Daxter's warm body so close.

He wasn't prepared for this. The only good thing was that at least Daxter hadn't grabbed hold of his arm – feeling the unusual weight on the shoulder plate alone poked at the panic buried in his mind.

The hard drumming of the metal-pede's thrashes forced him back to reality and Jak swallowed hard to get a grip of himself. The monster furiously shrieked, then its feet clattered off in an echo – and began to soften, but still remain for a little while as a subdued, hollow rattle.

It was going into one of its escape holes, maybe hoping that its prey would be stupid enough to start moving about and make noise as soon as the hunter was out of sight.

Jak eased up just the slightest, enough to dare another glance at Daxter. What he saw were a pair of blue eyes wide open, staring at the hand placed on dull metal. Shaking, the hand slid off and was brought up for inspection. Fingers twitched, tested, the other hand came up.

Daxter stared.
Without thinking drawing in a sharp breath but Jak twisted his hand, pinching Daxter's nose shut as well so that not even a squeak made it out. The redhead's eyes shot wide open and he writhed, trying to breathe.

"The metal-pede!"

Jak hissed it into his ear, easing his grip during the last word. Daxter froze, chest rising in one desperate gulp of air and then fluttering in quick, snapping breaths. Wide, blue eyes stared into Jak's narrowed ones, trying to make sense.

The tortured confusion was more than the blond could deal with and he shifted, hand sliding into Daxter's hair as Jak pressed his friend closer, holding his dirty cheek to a clammy forehead. Only too late did he realize that half-choking his friend may have been overreacting, but he could not blame himself for trying to avoid risks.

Daxter squirmed for a moment, then suddenly slumped. Alarmed, Jak shifted back to check that the redhead hadn't passed out again. But the eyes were open, though the eyelids had sunk and a near-delirious smile was twitching in the corners of Daxter's mouth.

He blinked when Jak frowned, but the goofy look remained.

"Izza dream, isn't it, babe?" Daxter whispered, slurring.

Finding himself furless, naked and hugged by his butch best friend just might have touched a little too far out on the other side of his view of reality.

Jak started to shake his head, when both their ears twitched at the sound of rocks crashing and rolling against each other after being flung into the air. Hundreds of huge claws furiously smashed into the ground, drumming it mercilessly as they tore forwards. Still at a distance, but from the sound of it the damn thing still had no plans on giving up the search.

A hand clenched on Jak's upper arm and he nearly jumped, a rush of panicked memories teetering on the edge of his mind – but the tightening of his own arms around Daxter's body pulled him back before it crashed. He looked down, clenching his teeth. The delirious look was gone in a pang of doubt.

"It won't even look at you," Jak growled.

Daxter still looked at him like he wasn't sure whether or not to believe anything was real for the moment. However, he closed his mouth when Jak narrowed his eyes, pressing a big finger to his own tight lips. A small nod was the only reply the redhead managed to give.

Not too gracefully Jak shuffled himself one way, Daxter the other – the redhead moved clumsily, like he was sleepwalking. It looked like his limbs were too heavy for him, which did not really surprise much. It was, however, disconcerting. Could he run if needed?

Jak studied his friend almost fall over when trying to sit straight.

No.

A jaw already set in stone got even tighter.

Without a word the hero produced his morph gun and hit the button for it to transform – a new flavor of unease presently settling in his stomach. He had always liked the powerhouse peacemaker but now the sluggish, purple shine was disturbing. It had failed him not even an hour ago.
The movement beside him had stopped. He turned to look, already knowing.

Daxter stared at the familiar gun, teeth clamped down on his lower lip.

In the background, the metal-pede raged on.

Finally Jak shook his head, hand brushing Daxter's shoulder as he stood up. This time it would be okay, and the silence promised it better than any of his words could have.

Daxter pulled up, hugging his knees as his friend left him.

Hands clenched the gun tightly as Jak moved forwards and cautiously looked around the side of the rock. The metal-pede raged about maybe fifty yards away, far too close for comfort. At least it was turned in another direction… and closer to where the Hopper was parked. Jak couldn't see the car, but he could make out the other rock in the dim light.

The most important thing was that he kept the huge beast from getting too close to Daxter. It wasn't looking for two young men, but one man and one tiny pinprick of orange. However, it would probably not stop in surprise at the discovery of another snack.

Jak set his jaw.

When the metal-pede turned away he dashed from their hiding place, running across the cave floor away from both the monster and Daxter. Only when he felt that he was far enough from the one he had left behind, he squeezed the trigger of his gun. White-purple flared beside him and the metal head roared in triumph as it spotted its prey.

It swung around, half the long body thrashing behind the rest as it struggled to completely turn.

Jak stopped running, turned on his heel and raised the gun. Sparks angrily hissed and he had to squint against the intense light, painfully bright against the dusk. He would have wanted to push his goggles down, but there was no time for that.

The metal-pede stormed towards him. He pulled the trigger.

Only too late did the stupid monster realize its mistake, but it had no chance to avoid the ball of pure energy crackling straight into its face. It reared up, screeching in agony as the flares dug into its armor, finding every way to tear at the thick skin and hard eyes. It thrashed and hit the ground again, roaring – injured, blinded and pissed off.

Jak was already running again, only sparing a glance towards the rock where Daxter was still hiding. He could see no movement anywhere except for the huge shadow of the metal-pede. It gave him a brief respite, but he still could not be sure. If there were more metal heads in the cavern, he had no way of knowing – the fact that there had not been any other attackers did not feel like a safe piece of proof. Not when Erol may have orchestrated the whole thing as long as he was still here.

Who was to say that the cyborg wasn't still somewhere close?

Jak gritted his teeth. The metal-pede was too noisy, he may not be able to hear Daxter scream.

He had to kill that damn thing. Now. Without getting too far away from the friend who needed him. They'd leave here together, alive and safe.

Hundreds of claws drummed behind him and he looked around. The metal-pede's face was burnt
black and it moved clumsier than before. The blast may have damaged its eyes. But it was still coming straight at him.

He dashed closer towards the edge of the valley by the ravine, and sharply turned. The metal-pede tried to skid to a halt but its momentum and the loose sand sent it toppling down into the sink. Jak inwardly cursed at not having managed to get close enough to the ravine to send the monster down there instead, to join its companions. He had to make do.

The monster tumbled over on its back, furiously thrashing as it tried to get back up. It wouldn't take it too long to manage, but it gave Jak enough time to start charging up the now cooled peace maker again. By the time the metal-pede got back to its feet, he was prepared.

It started up the slope, only to have another blast straight into its face – and at much closer proximity. The new screech was hoarse and the beast tumbled back down, twisting about in agony – completely blinded this time, the exoskeleton of its face cracking. Jak saw the slithering fractures as the last of the blast died away, dark eco bleeding through them and casting its non-light over the burnt insect face.

He waved the peace maker about a little, trying to make it cool quicker. But the metal-pede was so dazed that when it finally managed to turn back towards him, Jak was ready to fire another shot.

It did not screech or roar this time, it had no chance. The energy tore through the broken panzer of its face and ripped the metal-pede's head apart. Dark eco exploded, thrown about in the violent death throes.

Jak didn't stay to watch, not even to refill his eco reserves. The moment he was sure that the metal head was beyond saving, he turned and dashed back towards the secluding rock, to Daxter.

He almost fell around it, eyes locking on the redhead's eyes immediately. Daxter had not moved, still sitting where he had been left behind, curled up and staring in the direction of the steps.

Both of them lost all tension as they saw each other. Even with the crashes of the metal-pede's throes in the background, grins of relief took over the young men's faces.

Daxter tried to stand up but staggered and fell back with an annoyed grunt.

"Hot damn, I weigh a ton!" he complained, rubbing his thigh – just below where the border of the scarf. "The heck were ya feeding me all this time, Jak?"

The whine was so utterly Daxter that Jak could do nothing but smile. He glanced around one last time to be on the safe side, then returned the morph gun to its holster and hunched down beside his friend.

"You okay, Dax?"

"Naked, sore and freezing in the middle of a desert, thank you?" Daxter said.

He was grinning now, but it suddenly dropped as his elbow knocked against his bare side.

His gaze fell away and he moved his hand, pressing it against his stomach. The other hand rose slowly, shaking, to the side of his neck where a few hairs had been nicked by a razor sharp blade.

A bigger hand came into view and he jumped, ripping his gaze back to Jak. There was no smile now, but the big hand moved to the bare side of the thin neck and rested against it. Eyebrows drawn low, Jak made a shield against the remaining chill of the remembered edges.
For a second they just watched each other, Jak grim and Daxter uneasy, looking at his friend with some confusion. Soon enough however, the blond shook himself out of it. He moved his hand down and around Daxter's shoulders, helping the redhead get to his feet. A warm arm clumsily rose up and snaked around his neck – Jak clamped down his teeth, instinctual panic at the touch bubbling in the back of his mind and mixing into a painful brew with wonder at feeling Daxter unfurry and close. Until now, he had been the one carrying an unconscious body, but Daxter moved on his own now, watching Jak intently.

An annoyed blush darkened the freckled face when the scarf dangerously slipped. Daxter fumbled for it with his free hand, catching the sagging cloth.

"Holy crap..." he muttered, voice higher than usual.

He looked up, scowling in suspicion of Jak watching that undignified display. But the blond had pointedly avoided it, eyes set to meet Daxter's the moment the exasperated face turned the right way. The redhead visibly relaxed a little at that.

"I think there's a blanket in the Hopper," Jak said.

"There better be, or I'll make you skin a seat," Daxter replied.

They started towards the car, Jak keeping a lookout for any potential threat every step of the way. But even the metal-pede had finally stopped moving, and all was silent apart from the wind and their steps.

Daxter moved as quick as he could, but his suddenly returned body obviously caused him a lot more trouble than the first transformation had. It made sense; last time he had grown a whole lot lighter. To him it really must feel like he weighed a ton.

The fact that he had to try and hold the scarf didn't help either. So he stumbled along, supported by his best friend and crouching under his own weight. Despite this he took in a deep breath after a few steps.

"Well, you're obviously taking me home with you no matter what decides to get in the way," he said. "Good to know."

Jak sacrificed a moment of safeguard to half-smile at Daxter, letting him know that the attempt to lighten up the mood was appreciated. The gesture was returned with a weak grin.

"Don't I always?" Jak said.

Daxter's grin widened.

"Yeah, big guy, I've noted that's one of them quirks you've got going."

That definitely made it safe enough to pull at Daxter for a brief, playful squeeze. The protest at the stumble this caused was simply attacked by an amused smirk.

They made it to the Hopper without any further trouble. Jak helped Daxter climb into the passenger seat, taking care not to make it more embarrassing than it obviously already was for the redhead. The blond lifted his friend up by his arms and let him fall over on the seat by himself. That done Jak quickly stepped down on the ground and made his way around to get into the driver's seat. But before he sat down he reached for the back of the car, to the small expanse of floor behind the seats.
A brown blanket made out of rough cloth met his fumbling hand and was pulled out, to great relief for both of them – though for rather different reasons. Jak threw the cloth over Daxter and sat back, starting the engine while the passenger wrestled with himself to get wrapped up.

Jak drove out from the hiding place and around the rock, turning the Hopper towards where he recalled the exit to be. Because Daxter kept having troubles with getting "dressed", it was a rather silent ride through the cavern – save the grumbles and half curses of course.

It was when they entered the tunnel leading out that there was an "Uhm..." on Jak's right side. He glanced, seeing Daxter sitting with the blanket around him up to his armpits. In his lap lay the scarf, held in a loose grip.

He held up the red cloth.

"Thanks for letting me borrow this, man."

There was little else to do in reply to that than snort and point to the back of the car with a thumb. Daxter dropped the scarf where the blanket had been laying, awkwardness faltering as Jak chuckled. Grinning, the passenger rubbed the back of his head.

Up ahead the darkness parted for sunlight, the welcoming glow speeding closer and growing more intense by the second.

"Hang on," Jak said and pushed down the button to make the Hopper crouch for the leap.

They soared across the hole blocking the way in and out of the cave. The car touched down with a metallic slap and groan, but past that they skidded out and down the slope of sand into the hot blast of sunlight.

Jak let the Hopper slide along as gravity demanded, there was little that they could crash into right there. Letting the focus off the area around them he looked at Daxter again. The redhead still clutched the sides of his seat, a rather confused look on his face. He turned to see askance in Jak's eyes.

The hands let go and Daxter straightened up, chuckling with a mix of embarrassment and pure elation.

"Still used to being sent flying by your jumping acts," he said. "You'll hafta find some other way to rattle me now."

His smirk almost split his face, even more when Jak lightly slapped at the top of his red head without any intention of really hitting. Daxter still ducked away from it, laughing.

Amused and relived to the core, Jak tramped on the clutch and gas pedal, sending the Hopper back into motion. They sped across the desert, but Jak didn't head for Spargus right away. He did not want to wait for the entire ride back there to finally get a chance to stop and look at Daxter for a moment in peace. Out in the open under the blazing desert sun, sitting ducks for anything out for a kill, was not a good place for it either.

The nearest lean-to was the tunnels beneath the great volcano mountain range. More caves did not sound very much inviting either when it got down to it, but at least those were kept clean of metal heads and the marauders avoided getting into them with their clunky vehicles. The bandits were easy enough to pluck down outside with better equipment; in the tunnels the rogues could not use their normal tactic of simply coming from too many angles to fight off.
There was another reason to camp out for a little while. Even though it was a long drive back to Spargus, there was something else that needed a bit more time than that – it took longer to get to Haven from Spargus than to get to the sand city from the middle of the desert. Specifically, time that the air train needed from being called to actually arriving and being ready to bring the two youngsters to the questionable safety of Haven. But it would definitely be safer for Daxter. The first moment he took a step inside Spargus would be the moment he was in demand for the next arena fight. There was no way he could manage to survive that.

Jak hardly thought about this more than on a subconscious level yet, he didn't want to ponder such things. All of him which wasn't concentrating on driving, was set on listening to Daxter.

"I can't wait to see their faces when we get back. Oh man, the look on Pecker's face!"

A mildly deranged snerk was born from the last comment. Jak had to chuckle too, shaking his head. It struck him as Daxter went on and on, that something was different from usual. The same voice and tone, nothing wrong there. But he spoke slower.

Now that Jak thought about it for a moment, he recalled being perplexed at the speed Daxter had picked up in his rants post-eco bath. So much in fact, that it had been difficult sometimes, at first, to make out what the little rat was going on about when he really got going.

"And the revered mister Sour cream Tattoo… hey, I'm taller than Samos again! Oh man, and Tess…"

Jak squeezed the wheel. He had been prepared for the blonde lady's name to come up, even if he had not been aware of it. But Daxter went on in his rant, recounting friend after friend past his "Tessy-poo". Everyone except the one who sat beside him. But the big, blue eyes were locked on the face of the driver, the best friend, the guy who took in every word even though the route demanded the attention of his sight most of the time.

"… wonder what Keira's gonna say. And on that subject again, I hope Samos' eyes'll pop outta his lil' green skull. Not to forget Ashelin and Sig. Hah! And none of the new peeps even believed us when we told 'em I wasn't always fuzzy! Well the man's shed the fur now…?"

His rambles faltered, a pang of confusion creeping into his last words. Jak heard the frown before he saw it, but he still glanced his question.

Daxter scratched his head, watching Jak with an uncertain spark in his eyes.

"Uhm… how did I get back, anyway?" he asked. "It's… kinda blurry."

Bad memories crashed down, visible in both their eyes. Jak clenched his teeth and forced them aside – later, later…

Instead, he focused on what was alright. Explained the white eco that had made its way out from underground, onto the plateau. As he talked he felt sympathy from Daxter's disbelieving gaze. Such luck, was it luck? It was enough to make a guy religious.

But he finished the explanation anyway, and then waited for a comment. Hoping that it would keep the memories at bay – surely Daxter would prefer it that way too.

However, with so much to question about the string of events that had resulted in his return to un-furriness, Daxter's brain tried to start sorting it out from the beginning.

"Hang, hang on, wait… I fell in there because- I'm back thanks t-"
He snapped his mouth shut at the look on Jak's face.

Yeah. There really was no need to finish that line of thought.

Ever.

But the lid had been opened, and now the memory of what had happened inside the cavern, in the valley, by the ravine, in Erol's control, all of it laid bare and open to both of them.

An awkward silence fell, Daxter biting his lip. It was so apparent that he wanted to ask about why, beg for a reason for actions that should not have been possible for his best friend to go through with. But he could look at Jak now and already know that there would be a numb little smile and a headshake, and not a word anyone could hear. Only that look in Jak's eyes saying that he would do it again, and again – and let whatever happen, even if he may claim that he never really would let Erol or anybody else take him down without a fight.

Jak already looked serious enough, lips pressed together and eyes tight. So grim that Daxter's mind reeled back at least ten years, what felt like three lifetimes ago, when there were green grass and white sand and warm waves lapping at both their small feet.

Running down the beach hollering and laughing – Daxter the only loud one but Jak just behind him, just as excited but silent. Armed with sticks that in their minds were swords, attacking drift wood and ocean smoothed rocks that figured as monsters and dragons. Children not yet knowing real danger.

And then him climbing onto one of the bigger rocks after they had "slain" it, proudly declaring that they were brothers in arms and nothing could ever defeat them because they would die for each other.

He had laughed then, at the way Jak's round little face gazed up at him, triumphant grin gone in sudden seriousness. Like he took it as a sincere vow – the fantasy world broke down for Daxter in that moment, because it was too funny to see his friend taking the statement with such gravity.

But that serious expression was grown up and real now.

Daxter gulped, looking out at the sand around them in the search for some way to repair the situation. He didn't want to think about it. He'd have to eventually, but not now. Not yet.

The godawful amount of sand offered no ideas. He looked around again, finding Jak's gaze shifting from the area ahead of them and back to him quickly. Desperately, Daxter threw his mental net deeper into his own mind. And in his rush to keep away from everything that had happened back in the cave, he stumbled upon a detail that had been about to surface before he sent everything awry by almost crediting Erol for doing something good.

He was in no position to be choosy.

"Uhm, wait," he started, holding up his left hand and touching the fingertips with his right pointing finger as if trying to calculate something. "I don't remember. How did I get back up there after I fell?"

He saw Jak stiffen a bit at first, and cursed inwardly. But just as suddenly the tight face relaxed and the numb smile deepened. Daxter raised an eyebrow.

"I didn't see," Jak said, looking ahead. "I guess the white eco spat you out like the dark did back then."
"Uhuh, yeah. Real nice of it, wish it'd given me my pants back though… what?"

The smile looked odder than he had thought, but Daxter saw it when Jak looked at him. It wasn't anything he had not seen before, but definitely of the near extinct kind. Still, Daxter's heart jumped when he recognized it, though he could not at first recall why he was entitled to that smile.

"Thanks for the save," Jak said.

Daxter couldn't remember when he last had heard that voice so soft, and he was left blinking even while a warm, fuzzy feeling of pride settled in his gut.

"… uh?"

The tension shattered when Jak gave a silent chuckle. When he spoke again however, he had sobered – still smiling in the same way, but the words demanded more sincerity.

"When you pulled his leg," he clarified.

Neither of them had been fully aware how far they had come, and Jak probably should have been more conscious of it. Still, in the brief silence that followed, the Hopper rolled inside the mountain tunnels. Jak pushed down the brake and they came to a halt still within reach of the sunlight.

Daxter was blinking.

He could recall movement and blurred colors, a rush of panic – everything confused and disjointed like a dream, unable to make sense in his jumbled mind. He had an image of seeing Jak not being Jak and that cold metal thing calling itself a person when it was a monster, freak, freak freak, dared to call Jak a freak dared to smile and it was going to kill him - and Daxter was still moving and got within reach, brain far from clear enough to piece a proper thought together but he knew he had to do something against that painful light.

So he pulled the bastard's leg. But then his arm hurt and Jak took the thing away and he fell back. After that, things started to make sense again, when the screeched and sharp sounds jolted him back to the real world. Just in time to see Erol take the coward-trek and fly off.

Daxter blinked again, and did a double take. He retraced the confusing bit and set them up to actually make some sense, past the panic. Added what Jak said.

That warm fuzzy feeling grew three times its size.

"Heeey!"

He had to let out that howl, to get a chance to get his bearings straight. Because, golly, that realization and the look on Jak's face had him practically floored.

But only for a moment, of course. Then his palm collided with Jak's in a light high-five and he was cackling.

"Perfect save by yours truly! Ha! You owe me a drink, man."

Totally disregarding the fact that Jak always paid for their drinks. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered for a moment, except the fact that they were both safe and sound, anybody wanting to hurt them sent running by a joint effort.

You saved me. You saved me.
Jak sat back and just watched, trying to take it in again. And for the first time, out of the cave's dusk and in enough calm to allow him to actually look closer, he got a proper look. The red hair and the freckles, skin pale in compare to the tanned hand that had clashed into his in a playful slap. Protruding front teeth shaping the laughter, as contagious as ever. The same as the ottsel's, but stronger and finally completely Daxter again.

But it wasn't exactly as he remembered. Little details in cheekbone and smile, more angular, less rounded. Daxter wasn't fourteen anymore, he was seventeen, almost eighteen. Not a kid – but Jak knew from own experience, and he smirked a bit wider at it for once; both of them would still be called kids even when they were young men.

That didn't matter either.

All Daxter, alive, returned to what he used to be but grown. Laughing, eyes shining with delight. Beautiful.

It may have been lucky, for the way Jak's arms wanted to reach out and enclose his friend, press him to his chest and hold him close – lucky for that moment, that all such wishes were derailed, for it may have destroyed the laughter for a longer time. What did happen stopped the laughter, but it was easier to mend. Whichever the case, luck or not luck, it was not pleasant.

Because in the light, with peace, Jak saw things that he hadn't been able to notice before. When his gaze traveled down just a little bit, his smile froze.

There was a line of scars around Daxter's left shoulder – a crescent of round bumps, more pink than the rest of his skin.

Something had bitten him. Something big too, by the look of it.

"What's that?"

Jak frowned as he reached out and thumbed the offending marks. The warm skin slid under his fingers as Daxter moved, rolling his shoulder in an attempt to get it within sight. Red eyebrows jumped around on their forehead as the eyes beneath them squinted.

"Huh?" Daxter muttered.

It took him another second to realize what it was, and then he stiffened immediately.

"Ah, nothing!"

He shrugged Jak's hand off, clapping his own fingers over the shoulder. Teeth coming down on his lower lip he looked away, the hard swallow very much visible. After a tense moment he took in a deep breath and started off with what he did best. Chattering.

"I'd totally forgotten about this one. Sheez. Now don't go into mommy-mode on me, bud."

He lifted his hand a little, taking another look. The hand went back down with a low thump.

"Man, they must've grown with me. It was just some slum rat thinking I was a fuzzy piece of cheese."

Jak only clenched his teeth harder.

"Dax-"
The redhead snapped his head at the blond suddenly, shaking it with a half annoyed, half pleading look.

"Oh come on, don't stop the music. I was feeling good here, so guilt trips aren't allowed!" he said, rubbing his shoulder. "It's not like it hurts anymore. Besides you couldn't have done anything, you weren't there-"

He stopped dead, pinching his eyes shut. It didn't help, he could still feel Jak stiffen.

The words were heavy in the air, with everything they meant and reminded the two men of.

Daxter shrunk back, melting down into his seat as his hand slipped from the shoulder and hooked at the side of his stomach instead. His fingertips pushed into the cloth, massaging it against his skin while he chewed on his lower lip, glancing at Jak from the corner of his eye. Could still feel it, and knew that Jak saw that he still felt it – the huge, cold fingers clenching around his tiny body, making it impossible to breathe, to do anything but tremble.

It was far too close still, and behind it were memories of months upon months of loneliness, lost in a new world that hated them both.

"I, ah… I haven't gotten… well, yeah, I got one more since then but…" Daxter finally said, faltering. He fell silent, then set his jaw. Forcing himself to turn his head he tried to smile. "Your mommy-syndrome's been payin' off for a while."

He fidgeted with the blanket, dropping his gaze to his lap.

For a minute there was a silent struggle of wills until Daxter gave up and dared a glance. Jak's eyes nailed him to his spot, clenching the bony hands in the blanket. He shrunk further back, even though Jak did not move.

The blond's face was tight, mouth thin – unlike the eyes. There was something wild in them, a masochistic demand for knowledge.

"Uhm…"

Daxter struggled for another moment. In the end however, he let out a sigh.

"Seriously..."

It was supposed to be annoyed, but he failed to make it so. Sitting up straight he lifted his – suddenly so very heavy, making him wonder if it had always been like that – left leg and set the foot on his seat. The blanket still shielded him at first, but the brown covering fell aside with a light pull and pale skin emerged. Daxter anxiously peered at it, then turned to Jak with the same look in his eyes when he found that the marks were indeed there – and as bad as he had assumed after seeing what had become of his shoulder scars.

"Oh come on, you know that… leaper lizard throwing me off?" Daxter pleaded. "Remember?"

Jak did remember, his eyebrows tightening.

The stupid animals were normally quite gentle, even when wild, and Daxter had managed them fairly well the first couple of times the two of them were sent to the ruins to catch more mounts. Easy work that could earn even Daxter some recognition was a welcome change of pace once in a while, but…
Small orange body shooting forwards, slapping onto the back of one of the lizards. Twig-arms squeezing the neck, ready to force the beast through the twists and turns to the cage... but this one doesn't run.

It jumps, swings around and throws its neck.

"HEY whoa!"

The tiny body looses its foothold, sweeps like a wet rag clinging to the dry scales-

"Dax!"

Brakes screech, wheels tearing into the sand but its too late, too late. Before boots even touch the ground there's another kind of screech and a speck of orange flies, a sharp arch, crashes in a patch of cacti.

The lizard flees.

He doesn't care.

Meaty plants crushed beneath his boots as he rushes towards the skeletal form in the green. It lies brokenly, limbs hung over several cacti. Small hand reaches up, blue shimmering through slit eyelids, a whine.

Alive.

But pain so terrifyingly apparent.

Knees crush thick branches, ignore the sting of needles. Big hands reach down, thumb brushing the tiny hand.

I'm here, I'm here, don't worry...

Fingers wedge beneath small back carefully, nudging lightly to check how it hurts before lifting. Small groans from moving the limp arm, pricks of crimson. A weak cry and Daxter arches in agony at the slightest push at his left leg.

Two needles pierce the fur and skin, dug into the tiny calf.

Jak never did figure out if he managed to catch that particular lizard, which was very lucky for the damn thing. Even luckier now.

What had been pinpricks of painful yet small needles, hidden beneath the fur, now looked more like marks from a pair of spears. It got a whole new meaning, put the entire accident into Daxter's point of view in a way Jak had not fully grasped before. It churned his stomach, but the blond also felt a renewed surprise – after what had happened he had not believed that Daxter would ever want to try catching anymore lizards. But the ottsel had, more furiously than ever. Refusing to give up something that he was actually better at than many others.

Despite the unease, a speck of pride fluttered for the redhead.

Jak straightened up.

"Is that it, Dax?"

There was a distinct underlying hope in that tone, mixed with tension.
"Uhm…"

The hope died.

Daxter looked away, fingers drumming against the cloth covering his legs.

"I think there maaaybe something more, but it's not so bad. Really, it can't have been more than a scratch. You don't wanna see. Really, Jak…"

He turned back, blue eyes pleading.

"… y-you don't wanna do this."

What was frightening was that this was the kind of thing that Daxter should flaunt – battle scars to wear as proof of his own bravery in the past. Make up stories to make Tess coo for him.

But he didn't.

He knew Jak wouldn't coo. Jak didn't think about the bravery, not when there hadn't been any – he had enough scars for at least ten people and he'd rather face off with the entire metal head nest again than show them to anyone.

Jak thought about the pain. That he should have been there to prevent it, either by crushing anything that tried to hurt his small best friend, or-

Daxter's stomach rolled, hands clenching in the blanket until they shook.

… or say "take me instead". A small part of Daxter was still praying that he had just been dreaming the whole thing. Jak should never have done anything like that. Not for anyone.

Jak was the guy who risked everything for those he cared about. Not… sold himself.

Daxter tried not to meet the eyes watching him, knowing how they would look – stern and angry. But really, when you knew Jak well enough… it wasn't anger. It just tipped over when he got so worried he didn't know what to do with himself, that stuff that made him pick up his gun and go kill the closest thing that looked like a danger.

There was nothing he could shoot in this situation to make it better.

"Dax."

He looked up because Jak didn't sound angry.

That haggard look was worse than anything Daxter had expected.

Jak was gripping the wheel so hard the muscles on his entire arm bulged. It clashed with the parted lips and the heavy eyes.

Saying perfectly well that, "no, I don't wanna do this. But I need to." Didn't need to do anything to bring Daxter's thoughts to the moment he saw Jak's scars for the first time.

He wanted to talk Jak out of it, but that attempt had already failed.

Daxter crumbled.

"Oh sh-sheez, fine. Just stop the guilt tripping, d-dammit, okay?"
He grabbed the blanket and tried to turn on his seat, turning clumsy both because of the cloth getting in the way and being insecure in his new-old body – feeling Jak's tension raise in sync with his own for every stumble. A big hand landed on his shoulder and steadied him; he'd rather the movement had taken longer, at the same time as he was half-relieved to get the awkward motions over with. But once he sat with his back to Jak, the only thing he could do to remain was to gulp and pray there was nothing to see, no matter how stupid that would make him look. He'd prefer that.

"Well, uh, I really don't think there's anything," he started, "so just- just…"

He faltered, biting his lip as he let the blanket drop. The cloth silently slid down his back.

He knew from the hiss of Jak's breath that hope was in the wastebasket. Looked over his shoulder just to be sure, and winced at the stinging shock.

Just to be sure he reached down and around, fumbling a hand over the small of his back as well as he could. The shallows were just where he had expected them to be. He cleared his throat.

"So, it was just this allicat, see… thinking I was lying around dead, stupid hyena wannabe…"

He slumped, because Jak didn't move an inch.

"Looks worse than that, huh?"

Jak finally nodded, mouth too dry to form a reply. It did look worse. Far worse than a carcass-eating type of catbeast, the scars had grown to something that Metal Kor may have accomplished.

_Fangs sunk into fur, piercing the tender skin, lifting a limp body and carrying it off to feed on._

He could see it, clearer then he wanted – all that and the blood dripping out of the damn critter's mouth and onto the ground as it trotted onwards. And Daxter weakly squirming.

And why had Daxter been lying around looking dead in the first place?

Jak decided he really did not want to know. Tried to focus on that it was okay, it was in the past and Daxter was fine. Breathing and alive and right in front of him, looking over his own shoulder with an anxious expression.

It was no use. It wasn't enough.

Looking to meet Daxter's gaze, Jak let go of the wheel and put his hand over one of the large indentations, brushing his fingertips across it.

Daxter didn't flinch, only making the connection to the petting therapy Jak had worked on both of them for years.

He didn't know half of it. Not even when Jak clenched his teeth and spread his fingers, moving his hand to another scar, trying to hide it from his own view.

Not like he had wanted to touch, running his hands over the warm skin and feel goose bumps appear as he pressed Daxter close and held him. There was no place for anything like it, not for a lover's touch.

A thrill shot through his fingers and arm as he stroked his fingertips against Daxter's back, but it faltered and died in the rising taste of bile.
The scars laid open to him, marks of agony. Some things he never had known before thanks to the fur, that Daxter had consciously hidden from him.

Jak watched, trying to keep his breath calm. Deciding that nothing would ever be allowed to get anywhere close to hurting Daxter again. He wouldn't allow it. A connected decision teetered on his mind – to not let Daxter get anywhere close to anything that could hurt him again. But though Jak recognized the existence of such a thought, there was the wall that rose up against it. Demanding to know how he imagined being able to do without Daxter.

Alone.

"Jak… c'mon, don't be like that…" Daxter muttered.

He looked up, meeting the pleading gaze. The joy from before was broken, and they both knew whose fault it was.

Jak looked away, gritting his teeth.

The tension was broken by a buzz on the communicator. Jak jumped, then heavily sat back and unhooked the equipment from his belt. It unfolded itself in his hand, floating up to mimic some sort of flying creature.

"Hey cherries, you done over there?" came Sig's familiar voice from the speakers.

Half annoyed and half relieved to be brought out of the painful study of Daxter's scars, Jak waved his hand. On his own seat, Daxter wrapped himself up in the blanket with a deep sigh of relief. He ignored the fact that Jak's eyes cut towards him with a pained look.

"Yeah, we're fine," the blond said, "just…"

He cleared his throat. A faint hope flickered, for mending what he had destroyed a few minutes ago.

"… you know how Daxter always told you he wasn't always an ottsel?" Jak said.

He spoke as calmly as he could.

"Yeah?" Sig said, puzzlement apparent in his voice. "Why?"

The gloom on Daxter's face began to crack up. When Jak grabbed the communicator with one hand, a full blown grin spread out on either side of the overbite.

"And you never believed him," Jak said and turned the camera to the passenger seat.

Daxter grinned from ear to ear, lifting a hand to wave at the man watching on the other end of the line.

"Hiya, Siggy!"

A moment of silence followed. Then:

"What the heck?"

To the sound of Daxter's cackling, Jak returned the focus to himself.

"I think he'll want to tell you himself over a few drinks."
And now, even Jak could grin again. Sadly, it didn't get to last long.

"I'll want to hear it, but for now you chili peppers better head home if ya ain't still in the cave," Sig said.

The grin became a frown. Daxter too fell silent.

"Storm on the way?" Jak said.

"Yeah, a nasty bugger."

Sig growled.

"An' the air train's wrecked, we got attacked by marauders. I'm back in Spargus."

A pause, long enough for the problems with a wrecked air train to start being realized. But before Jak or Daxter could speak again, Sig broke them off.

"Come over to my place when you get here, it'll be safer. Closer to the gate."

"You okay with that?" Jak said.

The difference would be trying to make it across half the city, or only a few yards past the gate, to reach safety without being seen. The alternative would be hiding Daxter in the car park, but with Kleiver's lumbering presence there, it posed an even greater danger.

Sig grunted.

"Can't leave ya hanging, now can I?"

He somehow managed to force a lighter tone into his voice. But they all thought about what had happened in the arena all those weeks ago. And again, this was about the arena and the purity that Damas demanded – that everyone offered up to the desert and saved by Spargus must earn their right to stay there. Daxter hadn't been of a size that mattered before.

"Hey now, no sweat," the redhead put in, "if it's a storm they'll be running all over the place. Nobody's gonna notice Jak sneaking in with me."

His voice caught a high tangent towards the end and he glanced at Jak, hoping for a reassuring sign.

Unfortunately, Jak was never good at faking things. Especially not when it came to somebody who knew him as well as Daxter did. He settled for tightening his jaw to show that if the idea wasn't right, then he would make it right.

Daxter sunk back in his seat.

"You're prolly right," Sig said. But he too only managed to make a grim impression. Clearing his throat, he continued. "Anyway, get here as soon as you can, chili peppers."

"On our way," Jak said.

The screen went blank and the communicator dropped, folding itself up. Jak caught it and swept it back where it belonged, turning the engine key of the Hopper with his other hand. Sand tore up from the ground behind them as the car roared to life and shot forwards through the tunnel.
Outside, the wind howled not much more than usual, but the sky was darkening in the east. Soon the sand would swirl and pinprick any speck of skin it could reach. From there, it only got worse. Jak glared at the stretch of desert ahead of them, hoping that no marauders would be out hunting. He wanted some peace and quiet to sit down and sort things out with Daxter, was that too goddamn much to ask?

The past stress was getting the better of him.

He took one hand from the wheel to rub his face, then glanced at Daxter. The redhead was watching him, blue eyes still searching for a promise of safety. As soon as he met Jak's gaze though, he tried to smile.

"Ain't that just our luck, eh? One awesome thing happen, next our ride to Haven's wrecked by hobby-bandits. The precursors hate our guts, I tell you!"

The babbling managed to ease Jak's most immediate frustration. He relaxed a little, if only enough to speak.

"When we get there, we'll pretend you're wounded and I'll carry you again. I won't let you be tested in the arena."

"Yes please," Daxter said.

He shuddered. But it lasted only for a moment, as he soon launched into repeating just how cool it was that he had been turned back.

Jak would have wanted to smile more about it than he could, but the new worry dug into his already exhausted mind. It was starting to take its toll, the fight with Erol and the metal-pede, the long drive behind them and the one ahead, all the things brought up with Daxter.

Sighing a bit, Jak unhooked the water flask from his belt and took a few deep gulps before handing it to Daxter. When he got it back the canteen was a bit too light for his liking, too small to be used for two fully grown people. But it should suffice for the trip back.

He narrowed his eyes at the desert ahead. The sand was starting to drift in the increasing wind, already prickling his skin. Spargus was a shadow on the horizon, hardly visible apart from the signal tower. Speeding closer – safety and danger.

Instinctively Jak reached for his scarf to protect his nose and mouth from the sand, only to remember that it wasn’t there. Grabbing it from the back and wrapping it over his face may have been the smartest thing to do practically speaking, but he could spare both himself and Daxter that piece of awkwardness. He pulled down his goggles – they would have to make do.

After a while, Daxter lifted the blanket to hide his entire face against the onslaught of the sand.

Jak didn’t say it, but in his mind his promise replayed over and over with an addition he never would be able to speak out loud.

I'd rather fight Damas.

Various vehicles began to meet them as they neared the walls of Spargus, none of the other drivers attempting to stop them. Those men and women had artifacts in mind, even when the storm promised to be a bad one. Jak ignored them all, hardly even returning the brief greeting waves when his car was recognized. On another day he may have been going their way too, but certainly
not today.

He steered inside, passing alongside cars on their way out, and parked at the Hopper's designated spot, trying to remain calm. If he moved too fast, somebody would definitely take notice of him. As it was though, the guess about people being busy had been correct. There were not many of them left in the parking area, but those that were there were heading to and fro their cars with definite single-mindedness. Few spared a glance to the side as they hurried along, anxious to get out before the storm got too bad, or get inside in time.

Jak turned off the engine and hopped out of the car, heading around it. He climbed up on the passenger side and gathered Daxter into his arms again. The redhead was silent now, having fretfully winded himself deep into the blanket. It looked almost like he was packaged up to go, but an arm crawled out from the cloth and reached up around Jak's neck for support.

It was a pain not being able to enjoy the simple gesture more.

But Jak had other things on his mind, stepping back onto the ground and hurrying towards the city entrance. Once that gate closed behind him he felt Daxter carefully breathe out. Jak too dared to feel a little safer, but still sped up a little. He could see the stair leading up to Sig's apartment, only a few yards away – but he would have preferred to already be inside, out of sight for dangerous eyes. He trudged on, as quickly as he felt was safe.

Unaware that the danger was as real as they worried – for somebody did note them, and raised a naked brow.

Jak didn't even bother to knock, knowing Sig was waiting for them. He simply pushed the door open with his elbow and stepped inside. The owner of the apartment was already fully turned around when the door was kicked shut behind the visitors.

"Everyone in one piece?" Sig asked, stepping away from the window he had been standing by.

Probably waiting impatiently, exercising his fabled big brother complex. No wonder Jinx called him "Big Mama".

And yet, somehow, lived.

"Yeah, we're just peachy," Daxter said, forcing a smile as he freed a hand from the blanket and made the victory sign.

Both he and Jak looked quite relieved when the latter could put Daxter down on one of the chairs standing by Sig's table. The blond stepped back, placing a hand on the furniture for support.

A bit of sleep was starting to sound really, really nice.

Daxter wasted not a second taking note of this.

"I think Jak's starting to fade like a flower or something though, but don't tell him I said that. Ah crap, lookit that glare. You told him, didn't you, Siggy?"

Up to this point, Sig had still been watching both of them with distinct disbelief. It seemed like up until he heard Daxter's nonsensical rambles, he had not really managed to actually accept that the rat had been turned into a young man.

The disbelief was still there, but it changed from suspicious to purely questioning.
"What did that big bugger do to you cherries?" he asked.

Jak and Daxter exchanged glances.

There was a lot in this story that was definitely not very well suited for passing on.

"Well it was this, see-" Daxter started, grappling for how much to tell and how to do so without saying a word about any cyborg events.

He may have gotten on track if just given a second to think, he was used enough to make up stories. Either way, Sig may just have believed bits of anything the youngster said in the first place. But before Daxter had time to get going, there was another voice cutting him off.

"Is there a problem?"

A hoarse, stern voice. Jak spun to face the speaker, Sig straightened up and Daxter froze on his seat.

The intruder closed the door behind him, looking sharply at all three of them. He had not knocked, for he was entitled to go anywhere he wished in Spargus – or he had not knocked because he was suspicious of foul play, things he probably had not hoped true. But now he watched them sternly, the king who could tell all of them to die or leave the city at any moment they did not follow his orders.

And this man, Jak refused a step closer to Daxter.

Arms flung out protectively, Jak faced the man he looked up to more than he ever had anyone before.

"I know the law! I know what should be done! But it's Daxter, you know him, Damas, it wouldn't be a test, it'd be murder. He spent three years as an ottsel, he can hardly walk! I was the one who got banished, he just followed me when they dropped me in the desert. I'll bring him back to Haven as soon as the new air train gets here. If that's not good enough for you, at least let me fight instead of him!"

Jak panted as he finished, two times only. Then he stood still, glaring upwards at the silent Damas.

Actually, Damas was not only silent, he also had a mildly perplexed expression on his stern face.

It took a moment for the other residents of the room to regain their senses. Sig found himself with his jaw hanging, something that annoyed him quite a bit. He closed his mouth, glancing at Daxter.

The redhead was gaping as well. That was a bit of a relief – it wasn't just the senior wastelander who felt that something in the world order was out of place, at least.

Then finally, Damas moved. With a quick motion he grabbed and pulled off Jak's goggles, dropping them on the table and in the same fluid movement lifting his hand to his own forehead.

His other hand lightly slapped down between Jak's hairline and eyes before the blond had time to recoil.

"Hey-!"

Jak ducked away, eyebrows tighter than ever.

"You don't have a fever," Damas said, flatly.
"No, but I think he just filled his word quota for the next two weeks," Daxter said, a rather exhausted edge in his tone.

Purple eyes cut their gaze to the redhead, obviously recognizing the voice.

For a moment, nobody said anything. Daxter began to fidget under the appraising glare.

"You are that rat?" Damas finally said.

With a nervous chuckle, Daxter held up two fingers in the victory sign.

The king rolled his eyes, then set them on the silent Jak. For a few seconds they glared at each other, a silent battle of demand and refusal.

You said you didn't want to lose me.

It was never spoken, but it hung in the air above the glares.

Then finally the king grunted and made a dismissive motion with his hand.

"Then take him back to Haven at once," Damas said, disgust apparent in every word.

Jak held back a sigh of relief and merely nodded.

"Thank you," he muttered.

The wasteland king opened his mouth but paused. In the end he just scoffed and shook his head.

"Make it quick," he said and turned to leave.

Nobody had expected Daxter to be able to stand so soon, but now he sprung to his feet with a loud snort, one absentminded hand grabbing and holding the blanket wrapped around his body. And for the first time he actually stood up straight.

"Hey now, master Sand, you don't hafta-"

"Dax!"

Jak's warning snarl cut Daxter off, as did the calloused hand on the bony shoulder. The redhead turned to his friend with a protest on his lips… but it died. He blinked.

And Jak blinked.

Sig looked at them for a moment before he broke the silence with a bark of laughter. Surprised by the sudden change of atmosphere, Damas turned around.

He stood completely still, not moving a muscle as he studied the new situation. Then he smirked.

The frozen scene lasted until finally Daxter's hand came up, hesitated only for half a moment, and landed in Jak's blond-green spikes.

"Well aren't you a cute little thing?" Daxter said, grin wide enough to nearly split his skull.

Because for their gazes to meet he had to look down just the slightest bit, and Jak had to look up just the slightest bit.

The silence stretched for another second.
"… what the f…" finally made it past Jak's lips.

Sig's hand landed on his shoulder in a mock gesture of sympathy.

"Don't glum over on us now, cherry," Sig said. "You're still taller'an that green dwarf, right?"

He might have received a punch if Jak had not been busy batting Daxter's hand out of his hair, to the sound of nothing short of insane laughter from the redhead.

Two hours later, on the air train, Daxter was still laughing, but at least tried to cover his mouth from time to times when he caught Jak's eye.

But despite fuming because of the huge smirks his best friend fired off at him, Jak just couldn't really feel anything but relived.

'Begin Introspection. Serial code: Daxter.'

'This rocks. Lemme repeat that. This rocks!

Not only am I very much still in control of my Among the Living MasterCard, I got three feet added to my height with no charge. Aaand I'm taller than Jak.

This is where I practice my evil laugh. Hide the children, the Daxternator is loose, uncut and unabridged.

I'm taller than Jak. I am taller than Jak. I ain't ever seen anything like that look on his face. Ever. Mwehehe.

And I ain't ever gonna let him hear the end of this.

'End Introspection.'
A Safe Place

Begin Introspection. Serial code: Sig.

Well sure, something oughta happened since we've got a redhead where there used to be a rat.

But I know Jak, an' there's somethin' in his eyes that's been stuck since he and Daxter got back. Cherry's outta it. Don't think I ever saw 'im that bushed. Sure, if half of what they- Daxter said's true, then I can't blame 'im. Though I think there was somethin' he left out about the fight with the tin can. But I ain't gonna dig in it. Jak'd spill it if I needed to know, if he wanted me to. If I don't dig in their business, they won't sniff 'round mine. Hate to say that, 'cause they're still my cherries. But I didn't like that interrogation trip.

Ain't just that Jak's dead beat, though. When we were in the air train he dozed off after a while, but up till that he was eyeballing Daxter like a monk would an artifact. 'Course, shit happened back there. If Jak thought chili pepper was dead I can't blame 'im. Don't like it though.

Always thought he let it show too much sometimes, caring 'bout the lil' guy. And now he was lookin' like he thought somethin' would come outta the walls and bite Daxter's head off. If it didn't show before, anyone'll be able to tell 'less he cuts it. Can't run around with a weak point on his forehead like that. Or his shoulder. Just that Daxter ain't on his shoulder no more. So if nobody figured it before they'll hafta be blind to miss it now. It shows he ain't just a pet, now.

An' I'm wondering if somebody already saw it.

Gotta trust Jak to figure what's best though. Lookin' at him I guess he will. Sure hope so. Tryin' to keep Daxter alive out there just got tougher. Bringing 'im back out again just wouldn't cut it.

But I gotta admit, I had to smile back there when Jak nodded off. They'd been beside each other on the other bench in there, Daxter jabbering away o'course. Jak oughta be able to fall asleep in a stampede.

Anyway, when Daxter noted that his audience was dropping, I thought he'd poke Jak to attention. Didn't think he'd go "shoulder duty!" and pull golden boy's head at himself like that. An' I sure didn't think Jak'd go for it either, dozing off with his cheek on chili pepper's shoulder. An' Daxter just kept blatherin' on after that.

Learn somethin' each day, I suppose.

Or it's just that somethin' bad happened and they're clinging.

End Introspection.
As usual the city offered no more of an uplifting sight than usual, with the smoke rising from the industrial section and precursors knew what oozing towards the sky from the metal head den. Even from the middle of the harbor, the green vapors could be seen as they reflected the sunlight.

If one could have listened to all the dejected grumbles of the blue-clad soldiers and the slow moving citizens in a distance, it would have been beyond anything a man could deal with. They hardly seemed to bother anymore that the war factory was thankfully out of sight and lying in a smoking pile on the fields outside the city.

Still, Daxter hopped out of the air train with a huge smile stuck on his face, drawing curious looks from the guards and citizens in the immediate area – at least when Sig and Jak followed, the latter yawning and stretching even as he stepped into the sunlight.

The air train itself took off again behind the men that had stepped out of it, taking off towards the Freedom HQ. There was still the wounded driver of the last, wrecked train to take care of.

Compared to the subdued atmosphere, the redhead seemed to have been inserted from an entirely different world. There was pep and energy in his little sidesteps and leaps that many probably couldn't even remember ever feeling up to in this cold city.

Of course, Daxter's getup helped adding to the clownish appearance, as all that could be offered had been Jak's change of clothes. The dark blue shirt with its hacked off sleeves sagged around the thinner body like a sack, and they had been forced to make a new hole in the belt so that it could be tightened around Daxter's thinner waist.

As for the use of the belt, there had been some very smug complaints about the pants being too short, followed by a loud complaint about getting smacked over the head.

The colors didn't suit him at all, but failed to dimmer Daxter's aura of delight.

It was no wonder he drew attention to himself, and Jak more or less consciously stepped closer to him when a few guards paused to look closer at this intruder in the gloom. Even knowing they should all be faithful to at least Torn, judging from their screams during fighting, the blue armor was still too much like what had been red not too long ago. A lot of what the Freedom League guards wore today had simply been repainted in the lack of resources.

The gloves were still the same, dark and hard.

The guards hardly seemed that interested however, shrugging and continuing on their way after only a moment.

Daxter did not seem to have noticed anything, drawing Jak's attention back to himself with his babbling.

"And hey, you gotta teach me to drive later!" the redhead chirped, pumping a fist into the air.

He had obviously started to recover from suddenly finding himself so much heavier than he had been used to. Not that he was jumping around ottsel-style, but the slouch was definitely getting out of his motions.

Jak just smiled.

"I think you cherries oughta nap first," Sig said, giving the blond a prod on the shoulder that nearly made him fall over.
"Nah, slept in the train," Jak said as he straightened up.

Sig smirked.

"Think you're gonna need more'an that if you wanna keep up with chili pepper," he said.

Pointing with his thumb he brought attention to the fact that Daxter had made it to the bridge leading towards town already. Jak had to blink, wondering if he was just sleepy and a bit slow on the uptake. Either that or Daxter was moving really damn quick.

The redhead turned around, noticing the attention. Grinning, he jogged back with long, quick strides. Just for show he took a leap forwards during the last few feet, obviously with the plan to land in front of Jak and Sig.

He hit the pavement just behind them after flying past between them, the two warriors sidestepping out of the way without even thinking. There was a silent half second before Daxter pirouetted around, surprise as apparent on his face. Even Sig raised a brow.

"… cool!" Daxter finally concluded, grinning again.

He crouched down, holding out his arm to about the height where his head used to be when standing on the ground in ottsel size.

"Figures though, for sure! I jumped from here…” the hand moved up to ottsel head-height above Jak's shoulder, "to here six times a day for years. Gotta do wonders for a guy's legs!"

Gravity and relocation of muscles disregarded, of course. But thinking back on it, Jak did realize that it had taken a while before Daxter had been able to jump all the way up to the shoulder instead of having to climb up an offered arm. But then, considering the change of size it was apparent that not all that ability possibly could have been transferred in the second transformation. If so, Daxter should have been able to jump onto rooftops. The casual leap may have been longer than he had calculated, but only by a foot or two.

"Flex," Jak said.

The simple command did not for a second confuse Daxter. He simply bent his arm upwards and curled the hand into a fist. The bulge of muscles failed to impress as the arm still deserved few other titles than "scrawny", but still…

Jak reached out and curled his thumb and middle finger around Daxter's upper arm. In Sandover, this test had always ended with him able to touch his fingertips, but now there was a space of about an inch.

From the look on Daxter's face, he took full note of this difference. Wriggling free from Jak's grip he threw both arms up.

"And for my next trick…!" he turned and aimed a finger at Jak's chest, "… I'll beat you in wrestling, lil' guy! Ow! Stop smacking me!"

"You oughta stop givin' him bullets, then," Sig said.

But it was hard to tell if either of the young men heard him, what with Daxter's head locked under Jak's arm and the hero mercilessly ruffling the bush of blond-red hair despite the loud protests – earning them more odd looks than Daxter alone could have. Especially from the random people who may have recognized Jak as the legendary psycho. Sig just shook his head and rolled his eyes.
Kids these days.

Though he couldn't help but grin a bit.

They split up soon after that. Sig declared that he was going to meet somebody at the other end of the harbor and headed off while the trouble twins hopped into the nearest two-seat hover and took off towards the city.

Daxter kept talking, of course. While listening to the babble, Jak rolled his shoulders and grimaced at the low pop. The entire day was starting to get the better of him, so much that despite the nap in the air train he still felt tired. His entire body was heavy and sore, screaming for more rest. So much that he had to seriously consider not attempting to make it back to the Freedom HQ until a proper night's rest.

It wasn't that he balked at the idea of flying through a minor battle field with enemies hiding in every other corner – he had done it before on less sleep and feeling even worse. But then he had not almost lost Daxter forever only mere hours ago. And Daxter hadn't been a walking target.

On the other hand Jak did not feel comfortable with the thought of staying the night in what had been a war zone just a couple of weeks ago, but as they got closer to the city things seemed to be calmer than usual. With the war factory down the KG bots' numbers had naturally dwindled, and no metal heads were in sight. They may just be planning something, though.

It was a pretty easy flight however. One may have argued that this was largely thanks to the much diminished traffic ever since the start of the war. In his rather tired state Jak just might have been put a bit too much of his precious focus into his friend. Still, they made it to the edge of the harbor, and the Naughty Ottsel, without any incidents.

Dax, of course, still found reason to grumble about the ruined ottsel sign. Even if there was no longer any likeness between it and him. It was a question of species' pride, he declared at the sight of Jak's amused look. The unenlightened wouldn't understand. And damn straight it was just like the underpants thing.

This comment, however, caused Daxter to spiral off on another tangent.

"Gods, I can't wait to get some better clothes!" he said while Jak parked the vehicle.

He took a pause from climbing onto the ground, long enough to pull at the tunic – which pretty much swallowed him up entirely. The cloth ballooned out in a cone form from his pinch.

"No offense bud, I owe ya for the loan, but this is ridiculous. Cripes, what're you takin'? Your bod's outta this world."

He hopped onto the ground, straightening up to snerk at Jak's raised eyebrows. Daxter waggled his own in a mock-suggestive way.

Utterly oblivious.

And still as oblivious he stretched, then suddenly pulled back and pinched his nose.

"Sheez, I need a shower." Then he thought it over. "No, you need a shower. And a washing machine."

He still grinned however, proving that he really was not that bothered. It could be questioned if he even could feel any scent at all for the moment, considering how much his sense of smell must
have been reduced in the change. But complaints like those were a rite of passage for returning to Haven.

Jak smirked, even though every word Daxter had spoken in the last two minutes had a painful twinge. He could just hope it didn't show.

"But anyway!"

Daxter spun towards the bar/HQ and spread his arms as if he wanted to embrace it.

"Civilization! And you know what?"

He twirled back and grinned widely, moving a hand to his stomach.

"I remember how it feels to crave a steak again."

Laughing at that simple fact with utter elation, Daxter stepped backwards towards the entrance. Jak plucked the key from a pocket and tossed it to his friend, getting a victory sign back when Daxter successfully caught the small piece of metal in mid-air. Still grinning the redhead turned it in the lock before pushing the door to the Naughty Ottsel open. Jak followed close behind him.

Considering that the war was still very much real, it did not really fit to call the place a "bar", it still retained the look of an operating headquarter. The holoprojector in the center of the room still buzzed lazily, maps covered most of the table. But per the owner's loud demands from an earlier visit, the counter had at least been cleaned and a few bottles of liquor set back on the shelves behind it. To this day Jak still wasn't sure how Daxter had gotten even that far in the argument.

Something about retaining the feel of the place and angering Juju gods.

Though that couldn't have much impact on the higher-ups in town. Speaking of which…

As it turned out, the Naughty Ottsel wasn't completely empty. Nor was the counter clean as per the request, because there was a map and a collection of papers scattered across it. These were being studied by a familiar shape behind the counter – for sure, his position only had to do with not wanting to keep his back towards the windows – who by the disturbance of the door opening looked up and narrowed his eyes at the intruders.

While he did recognize the second man to enter, it was obvious that a very annoyed question about the redhead hung in the air. Like a bad stench.

This question was however mowed over by another, quicker.

"Torn? What the heck are you doing back here?" Daxter blurted, frowning in defense of his territory.

Of course, this earned him a Glare of Doom. One even worse than usual.

"Who the hell are you?" the commander demanded.

He must have recognized the voice, but his brain probably couldn't wrap itself around the idea. Which, without a doubt, made him even more annoyed.

Daxter's grin nearly split his face, but Jak got in-between them before his best friend could earn any more reasons to get murdered in his sleep.

"It's Dax, Torn."
A naked brow twitched only the slightest bit.

"Are you drunk?" Torn sharply asked.

"Oh come on!" Daxter loudly complained, throwing up his arms and fire off one heck of an eyeroll for further emphasis, "why do ye of little faith fill up the world? There's nothing wrong with the blond shorty- ow! Jaak!"

Torn watched the two of them in the brief mock argument. When their attention returned to him, he was leaning his tattooed forehead on three fingertips and glaring at the map most decisively.

"I don't care. I don't want to know," he growled without looking up.

He had, obviously, been forced to make his brain make the connection to the familiar voice and the crazy-ass claims.

"Party pooper," Daxter huffed. His pout only lasted so long however, as he soon looked over his shoulder, grinning again and beckoning to Jak with two fingers. "C'mon Jak, let's blow this popsicle stand."

Both of them could feel Torn's glare follow their very motion as they crossed the floor and passed him, disappearing through the door behind the counter.

Behind the door was, on the left side a staircase leading to the second floor, and on the very short right and the path towards the staircase a cramped little corridor with another door straight ahead. That one led to the bar kitchen.

Daxter, however, turned right towards a smaller door facing the stair. Throwing it open with wider motions than he may have intended, he stepped inside and fumbled for the light button on the wall. A smell of old clothes and dust met them.

A moment later a naked light bulb flashed on, sending its sharp light across the storeroom. It had been more frequently used in less warring days, but while remodeling the bar into a HQ Torn seemed to have just had everything that was in the way stashed in here and then closed the door. Jak could swear he saw the ropes and pole-corners of the old wrestling ring behind one of the boxes.

Daxter bothered with no details to the sides. He wormed his way onwards and through the junk and boxes blocking his way, grunting as he tried to make way and throwing glances back when Jak reached past him to remove the heavier obstacles.

When the far back of the room came within sight, Daxter let out a triumphant yelp and shimmied through towards a covered box. He stumbled on a pair of old boots on the floor and tumbled onto the floor before Jak could catch him.

Grumbling for a bit the redhead pushed himself up and flung the top of the box off, revealing a dark jacket and a pair of worn pants carelessly thrown into the container. Under Jak's somewhat curious gaze Daxter carelessly flung those two pieces of cloth out of the way. And the dirty shirt that was beneath those, too.

"People forget crap all the time, y'know, you wouldn't believe the stuff we found some mornings! Sheez, gotta be here… aha!"

Daxter triumphantly unearthed another box placed within the first one, and hidden beneath the clothes. Grinning, he hoisted it up and shuffled around to a more open area before dropping it on
the floor. Jak crouched down on the other side of the box, raising an eyebrow.

"Well color me optimistic, buddy," Daxter said, grinning widely as he removed the second lid. "You gotta prepare for the best, even in this joint."

And with that, he pulled out a light, red jacket and held it up for inspection. The sharply cut angles and colors spoke for themselves. Now that the jacket was out of the way, a neatly folded, beige tunic laid on top inside the box. And there was apparently more beneath that.

Jak smiled his approval, and didn't say a thing – the implication seemed to be that the clothes had been successfully pilfered from forgetful guests. Would probably suit them right in Daxter's view, for being such asses half the time. Therefore, Jak didn't say a word about the fact that the clothes Daxter pulled out of the box were obviously new. Well, that finally explained the occasional little strut the ottsel had taken on his own in more peaceful times.

"Aha-HA!"

With that half-crazed, triumphant cackle, Daxter pulled out a pair of blue pants from the depths of the box. The look of triumph was simply too much and Jak sat back, silently chuckling as his best friend all but snuggled with the precious piece of clothing.

"Soft underpants?" Jak finally said, rocking forwards to support his chin in hand, elbow on knee. For that, he got a flabbergasted look of mock-shock.

"Whaat? Do I hear a twinge of doubt, buddy boy? Sorry to break yer pink dreams, babe, but I've got it all covered!"

Daxter's hand dove back into the box and after some digging, he triumphantly produced a triple pack of underwear – still lovingly wrapped up in transparent plastic.

By the time Daxter's attention returned to his best friend, Jak had managed to completely kill off the wince.

He really, really wished Daxter would stop expressing himself like that, and with so many playful pet names. More than ever, at least.

"I sure hope that everything fits," Daxter said. A pause, and his grin melted into the most devious look of smugness there had ever been. "After all, didn't know I'd get this tall! Hey, no!"

He recoiled and squirmed backwards through the mess around them both, chattering protests between fits of laughter as he held up his hands in defense.

As Jak plowed after his friend, there was a voice in the back of the hero's mind screaming that this was a very bad idea, especially if he ended up pinning Daxter down among all the rubble – something that seemed like an alarmingly real possibility, and not even one caused intentionally. The floor was a minefield of things to stumble on, it would be enough with either of them making a mistake to send him sprawling over Daxter.

Another voice, on a more basic level, smirked that it was a very, very interesting possibility.

Most of Jak was, in an alliance with both of these voices, very aware of the fact that Daxter had come alarmingly close to the far back wall of the small room. Still laughing and shrieking protests and comments about height without cessation, blue eyes twinkling beautifully with mirth. But he was running out of places to go.
In the end, if Jak was truly honest, he would have done nothing but at the most tickle Daxter mercilessly. Any other possibility would damage the laughter, and he wasn't so blunt. It was just his darker side plotting other things, the side he knew better than to trust outside of battle.

It did not matter much, however, as the door was suddenly flung open.

"Daxie?"

Jak repressed the instant wish to go Dark on everything behind his back. He also repressed the sigh and simply stopped advancing.

Daxter hit the ground, still too caught up in laughter to do anything but giggle for a couple of seconds. But then he forcefully cleared his throat and looked up, past Jak. At the vision of blonde hair and generous curves, sweetness and gooey nicknames, who tried to make her way through the rubble. And he grinned like a moron.

"Hiya Tessy!" he cheerfully said.

He pouted for a second.

"Torn spilled the beans, eh?" he complained. "An' I wanted to surprise you!"

"I couldn't believe it!" Tess chirped, carefully stepping over the traps on the floor. She caught herself and bounced up straight, waggling a finger. "Well, I believed you saying you weren't always fuzzy!"

Jak got to his feet, struggling to smile. But Tess only saw the back of his head, and he couldn't see Daxter looking at him now. So he just pulled the grinning redhead to his feet and stepped aside to let him pass, hand still clasped in Daxter's to steady him. But then Jak let go, handing over his best friend to Tess.

It was what Daxter wanted. There was nothing else to it.

And Tess practically flounced him, commenting on his height (causing a few cackles), fluffing his shock of hair with dainty fingers and all but grooming him. And Daxter laughed, playing along with boyish delight.

Jak watched in silence, lips numbly stretched. But when the cutesy nicknames the happy couple threw at each other crossed his pain level, he grabbed a tunic from the forgotten box of cloths.

"Spare me," he said and flung the piece of clothing over Daxter's head. "Get changed, Dax."

The redhead tore the tunic off and spun on his heel, pouting. But the smile was still in his eyes.

"Party pooper. Okay, fine, out with you, out, out!"

He shooed both Jak and Tess out of the cramped room and pulled the door shut, grinning a promise about returning in five minutes, new and further improved. It made Jak shake his head, fond amusement pulling at the annoyance. He was brought out of his thoughts by Tess touching his arm, too lightly to even cause the panic to bubble to the surface.

She was smiling bright enough to illuminate a dark room.

"You have to tell me all about it!" she said, white teeth showing between full, rosy lips. "I'll be in the kitchen."
And with that she turned and disappeared through the door facing the one leading to the bar. Jak wasn't sure if he had even nodded. But then again, she may not have noticed whether he did, or not.

He growled at himself, shaking his head to pull himself together.

Idiot.

He did not hate Tess. She was as much a friend as Keira, Torn and anyone else. If anything happened to her, he wouldn't hesitate half a second to jump in and save her.

The most important thing was that Daxter was happy. And alive and safe. Tess should be able to help keep him away from the battleground.

Jak gritted his teeth. He did not want to realize it, he hadn't wanted to realize it.

But Daxter wouldn't be anywhere near safe if Erol as much as knew where he was, now. One single little mistake would be all it took, and Jak already knew he could make those. He would just have to make do alone.

Alone.

He was still trying to keep himself convinced of this when Daxter flung the door open and pranced out all dressed up, even wearing a new pair of boots. The pants were a little too short, but other than that the clothes seemed to fit him very well.

Jak had to smile, earning a triumphant cackle.

"I know, I know, babe," Daxter said, winking. "C'mon, don't drown me in the compliments."

He slapped Jak's shoulder without thinking, then froze instantly when the lips above the goatee immediately tightened.

Jak let out a quick breath, forcing relaxation. Daxter watched him still, apprehension cutting through the joy. But when Jak shook his head in silent assurance, the redhead quickly picked up as to put a band-aid on the mistake.

"But keep 'em coming, can't get too much of a good thing. Come on, big guy, tonight we're celebrating!"

He was moving towards the kitchen door, and Jak followed him. The hero's smile was still strained, but he was easing up.

Tess perked up when the door opened, standing by the sink and working on getting a can of beans open for whatever she was planning to throw together for the three of them – and probably Torn, too. This thought had obviously crept into Daxter's mind as well, as he broke up the restarted round of cooing with a not-too annoyed query.

"Now what the heck is Sir Dreadalocks doing back in this joint when me an' Jak worked our asses off trying to get him home, anyway?"

"Oh, just checking on the troops here, they need to know he believes in them," Tess easily said.

"Tell me about it. Bunch'a doom and gloom all canned up and ready to serve. Pf. Good to know we're here to save the day, eh Jak?"

Daxter smirked over his shoulder, and somehow Jak managed not to let it show that the words
bothered him.

Maybe he felt a bit worried about the reaction to the slap, or maybe he was just trying to make Jak talk, but the bottom line was that Daxter kept trying to wedge his friend into the conversation for the rest of the cooking session and dinner. It made it bearable in between all the “whiskerpuss” pet names, at least.

The evening saw Torn returning to the Naughty Ottsel after a long couple of hours trying to ease the fear and feeling of gloom among his men – a job that made him feel like liquefying morale and ramming it down their throats may be the only way to raise their chins. They did their best, but their spirits were just about broken. It was downright depressing.

Thus, he felt rather relieved to return to the Ottsel, knowing that at least there was one of his men who did not let the insecure future get the better of him. Speaking of which…

The door was still jingling shut behind Torn as he spoke.

"Jak, I need to talk to you…"

He fell silent and studied the scene before him for a moment, raising his brow. Calmly, Jak just gave him a glance in the dusk of the room. The noisy redhead on his right side did not seem to bother the blond at all.

Finally Torn stepped forward.

"I think he's had enough," he said, clearly annoyed.

"Nah, s'okay."

Jak sipped his own drink, glancing at the crazed Daxter from the corner of his eye.

"He's not drunk until he starts shouting that he loves me," Jak said.

Luckily, Torn was not drinking anything. He still managed to choke pretty well.

After studying Jak's blank face for a few moments, searching for the slightest sign of a lie, the Freedom League's commander sat down on the bar chair beside the blond. The way he planted himself there, the most resolute way that only Torn could use for sitting down – well, to put it in more common terms, he was obviously not going to move for a while.

"This," Torn said, corners of his lips tugging at his cheeks, "I've gotta see."

Jak smirked, turning his head slightly towards Daxter and hoping that his feelings on the matter had not been exposed.

Five minutes later it became alarmingly apparent that the limit was just about reached. Amazing however, how Daxter, even in his current state, managed to stay with the story he had told Sig – that he had simply fallen off Jak's shoulder and into the chasm in the battle with Erol.

"... and then I juusht grabbed the bashtard'sss leg and made him mishhh!"

Daxter blinked slowly at the giggling Tess, a wide, dreamy smile plastered onto his face.

"Annn' th'fun thing-y-thing ish that thiss one'sh trooe… wight Jaak?"

The lady behind the bar had to steady herself by grabbing the counter, lest she would have crashed
on the floor in hysterics. For quite a while she had found it increasingly problematic to keep making sure that Daxter had a sip of water or two between the larger gulps of his drinks, and she could no longer handle it.

Shaking his head, Jak slid off his stool and reached for Daxter's shoulder.

"Dax, I think you've had-"

He should have been more ready for it, really, but he had not quite believed that Daxter would be able to move that much in his state. That was why Jak staggered backwards as the full weight of his now overgrown sidekick hit him straight in the chest, lanky arms looping around the muscular neck.

"I looove you, maan!"

Tess hit the deck.

Turning halfway, Jak gave Torn a tired look. The commander sat stock still, a hand pressed so tightly against his mouth that the fingers and cheeks were turning white. The look in his eyes was almost indescribable, but something like "near fatal concentration" seemed the most suitable.

"Yeah, yeah… c'mon, you've had enough, let's get you to bed…" Jak muttered, steering Daxter towards the stair leading to the second floor.

He wondered if that choking sound from below could possibly be-

"Hey!" Daxter grumbled, raising his head and blinking at Jak. "Think tattoo's laffin' at you…"

A hand waved at Jak's face as he smirked, and Daxter narrowed his glazy eyes.

"Go back down an' kick his assh already!"

Jak chuckled.

"Not now, Dax. Gotta get you to bed first," he said.

The sour expression melted away and the redhead bounced his wobbly weight at Jak, not noticing the immediate tension.

"Daaw, you're the besht there ish, baby…" came a drunk mumble.

Jak bit the inside of his cheek.

If Daxter had been sober, he might have noticed that Jak stopped muttering stuff like "I know, I know, come on, this way…" when they got far enough up the stair to be out of earshot.

Then again, if Daxter had been sober he would not have said those things.

He more hung in his friend's grip than anything else, giving Jak a view from above of the drooping ears and shock of red hair. Hands squeezed Daxter's thin shoulders just the slightest bit more.

It seemed so odd, dragging the drunk redhead into the room where they had used to sleep together just a short while ago. While it had been on his mind for a while, Jak pushed aside the thoughts of where they both would sleep from now on. Instead of falling into that trap he focused on flipping on the lamp on the nightstand, then tried to get Daxter to take off his boots. It turned out to be a problematic process for the wobbly one, and ended with him falling onto the bed with the last shoe
slipping off his foot. At least it ended well.

With a slight smirk Jak pulled the blanket up to Daxter's chest, but the smile lost all amusement as he straightened up. He stood silent for a moment, watching his motionless friend in the bed.

Then he turned to leave.

A fumbling hand grabbed his wrist, and he turned back in surprise.

"Dax-"

"Don't go…"

The blue eyes were open again, the white of them shimmering in the cold light from the lamp. The words, whispered in a hoarse voice, stirred the surprise to confusion. Jak stood stock still, looking down at Daxter with his eyebrows at their highest perch.

"You're not going 'n'where, 'aight?"

While fully aware that it probably was not what the redhead had in mind, a runaway thought in Jak's head found it necessary to scream about cold facts. Like "you're supposed to be a hero, mister, and heroes don't take advantage of drunk people! Especially not best friends! It's bad enough that you let him get 'I love you, man'-drunk! Shame on you!" and similar.

It took him another moment to wrestle the thoughts aside and form a reply.

"I'm just gonna go talk to Torn-" he started, but fell silent as Daxter shook his head.

"Yur talkin' Jak-speak, ya'know."

Daxter slowly blinked up at the silent blonde. Suddenly he seemed a lot more sober than mere minutes ago. A quite unsettling development.

"Can't stop talkin' Jak-speak, buddy. S'all in yur face."

Sinking feeling starting… now.

Still silent Jak sat down on the bedside, letting his hand rest on the blanket since Daxter still did not let go of his wrist.

And those eyes kept watching him from the dusk. Finally he gave up.

"What did I say, then?" he asked.

But he already knew. Daxter's hand squeezed his wrist.

"You said that I'm gonna be okay 'cause you're not taking me with you anymore."

"Dax…"

Jak sighed, reaching up with his free hand to massage his temples. He ended up rubbing his entire face instead, trying to win time. Trying to think.

"It's different now, Dax. You'll be a walking target. Erol knows."

"Whuz'diffrunt?"
Another sigh. Jak shook his head, looking at his knees for a moment before giving Daxter a stern look in the dusk. Trying to be stern, because he was arguing something he did not even want to believe in himself. Even if he knew it was true.

"He didn't know before, he thought you were just a pet."

"Why'd he play the hostage game with me if he jus' thought that?"

Jak clenched his teeth with another shake of his head. It was enough to make it clear that had he known about Erol's knowledge, Jak never would have brought Daxter anywhere near battle.

The face on the pillow screwed up in a grimace.

"You wouldn't last a second without me an' you know it!"

Jak was about to scoff, when Daxter's pout dropped and he continued speaking, in a far lower voice.

"And y'know… if anything should… y'know…"

A gulp, hand treading across the blanket like a nervous crab until it reached up-

\textit{Coming towards reaching grabbing tearing no no don't touch m-}

Jak bit the inside of his own cheek and forced his gaze to stay on Daxter's face as the long fingers wrapped around the muscular arm, just above the grip already there.

"… happen to you, then it's all gonna go kablooie. And then, I'd rather be with you to the end."

Jak clenched his teeth, feeling very much as if somebody had punched him in the stomach. He looked down, meeting Daxter's stubborn look. He wasn't going to back down.

And deep down, Jak didn't want to be alone.

Silence hung between them for a moment, until finally Jak shook his head.

"Okay then," he said.

A defeated sigh.

"But you better learn to use a gun."

Daxter did not recoil from that demand, but he did not smile either.

"'Kay…" he mumbled, nodding as his eyes began to drift closed, "I'll get Tess to help…"

Oomf.

Jak cringed, but Daxter was already asleep.

The blond sat still on the bedside for a short while, gaze trailing from the sleeping face to the open door. Unseeing, silent. Gritting his teeth, the impulses from the dark eco storming in the back of his mind – warring with the fluttering warnings of the light eco, calling to his senses.

It wasn't like he didn't know what kind of blondes Daxter liked. He just hadn't thought that Tess would be the preferred teacher in combat training too.
He swallowed against the cold feeling in his chest, shaking his head. Finally he glanced back at Daxter. The face looked almost childish now that it was relaxed in sleep, a sliver of teeth poking out from beneath the upper lip. The overbite seemed more accentuated now, when the front teeth were not aided by their companions in a constant grin.

After a while Jak had to realize that Torn probably was starting to wonder where the hell his best man on the front had gone, and stood.

He only got halfway before a weight stopped him, a slack grip tightening unconsciously around his wrist. A low mumble escaped Daxter, but he did not stir.

Jak paused for a moment. Then finally he bent down and carefully pried Daxter's fingers away, placing the hand on the blanket. Fingertips sliding over skin, his and Daxter's alike – he pulled back quickly, gritting his teeth as he turned and walked out.

The door's hinges groaned a little, the grind taking on an annoyingly high pitch just before he stopped it from closing completely. Jak took a suspicious look around before stepping away, walking down the corridor quickly. He had no intention of leaving Daxter alone in such a state for any long period of time.

Torn was waiting in the corridor outside, relaying his orders in his usual court tone. It was nothing new; metal heads had been spotted in the ever-lovingly charming sewers and this, of course, was not popular among the higher-ups.

"If something goes wrong we'll need the sewers as an extra escape route," Torn emphasized. "We can't take chances at this point."

Jak raised an eyebrow, accompanied with half a grin. Of course, Torn chose to not acknowledge the existence of the silent "go wrong? Now that I'm here?" look. The business remained, Torn wanted the sewers cleaned out and he wanted it done yesterday.

It was a quick diversion, but Jak still felt that it was long enough and turned to more important matters as soon as he could.

When he returned to the room, he took another look around to be on the safe side. But the room had no windows – there weren't even any in the corridor outside. Krew had used this place for meetings and hiding people he did not want seen from the outside. There may have been some rusty hinges now after a year of little care, but that was all. Enemies shouldn't be able to know, or get in easily. It should be safe.

It would bloody well be.

Daxter had abandoned his original position of lying on his back, and had curled up in a sort of fetal position – not looking quite right, though. It looked like he was trying to curl further than his new body allowed, into a pose that had become natural to him in his past shape.

There was no way Jak could keep from smiling at that.

He reached out and carefully pushed at Daxter's shoulder and knee covered by the blanket, unfolding the gangly body to save it discomfort later for having slept too long in such a constricted position. Daxter muttered something like a protest in his sleep, but didn't wake up. When Jak started to straighten up however, Daxter's hand fumbled after him mindlessly. Probably looking for the familiar pillow.

Curiously – at least, he told himself it was curious – Jak let the fumbling hand grasp his fingers,
sluggishly dragging his hand up to Daxter's face. The tug stilled when Jak's knuckles brushed a soft cheek.

Daxter seemed perfectly content.

For a moment, Jak just stood there with a faint, and a little sad, smile on his face. Then he looked around, only half consciously as he kicked off his boots and crept onto the bed, turning off the lamp. The dip in the mattress made Daxter scoot a little closer, murmuring something again.

Just to keep him safe.

But that wasn't the only reason Jak laid awake for quite a while, listening to Daxter's breathing in the dark and feeling the warmth of the wiry body through the blanket between them.

'Begin Introspection. Serial code: Torn.'

I hate losing. Detest it. More importantly it's not something that can be afforded by anyone in Haven City right now. As if it ever was.

The important thing is that we lost one of our most important men at the start of the war. I wouldn't say that Jak can win our war for himself, but he's far too valuable not to have around.

I wonder how Veger expected to save the people by wiping out half the army. Dividing our forces was putting the entire city into a suicide situation. As if it wasn't enough that he sent our ace into the wasteland to die. Was he going to have the priests fight the metal heads?

Bah. I don't care. The important thing is that we're still alive, and with Jak alive there's a greater hope than two months ago.

He had no way of contacting us and we had no way of knowing whether he was dead or alive, for several weeks. Sig let us know, and helped us connect with Jak's new communicator. Not that it helped much when he refused to come back and help us at first.

Can't blame him. I want to, but I really can't. And I think none of us are really good at trying to make it up to him. I've been trying these last weeks but it hurts my face trying to stay that friendly.

Though it's even more unpleasant to feel the damn guilt for not stopping Veger in the first place. It's something we've all got to pay, from me to the Shadow and everyone in between. Ashelin isn't feeling so well after dissolving the council. It felt good at first, for all of us, but then she's got to deal with being a tyrant. And what then, when there's peace? A new council, full of bootlickers who won't bend to a corrupt priest or whatever nutcase the world spits at us next?

It may not matter in the end, but the one we had wasn't completely under Veger's spell. Not everyone voted yes on the goddamn "toss Jak out" bill. But we have enough shit to deal with now, too much to have him in any sort of power. For that, to keep us all safe, Ashelin had to sacrifice democracy.

I wouldn't admit it, but there's that part of me that wonders if she'll finally understand how I felt, when I sold out the Underground.
But then, the rest of me only wants to know if she'll ever really forgive me.

Anyway, for now we have a war to fight. Tomorrow we'll hopefully have new things to lose.

End Introspection.
Dawn

Begin Introspection. Serial code: Daxter.

Jak's too much of a busybody, I tell ya. He's always been like that, worrying too much. Sometimes, I think we'd better tie him up or something to make him sit down and chill the freck out. Gawd. Okay, so maybe sometimes it's a good thing that he worries. Worries like "hmm, I haven't seen my best pal in five minutes, better go check so that he isn't hanging down a cliff or something".

Not that that ever happened. In Haven. I got real good at climbing after getting the fuzz.

Eh.

And oh yeah! Considering the improvements of my gorgeous self that we've seen so far, I really wanna check if there's anything more. Some muscles are neat. I wanna know if I can handle more climbing and stuff since last I was tall. Hehe.

But… yeah. Jak. Dang. Back in the desert, he sure couldn't let the music keep playing, now could he? Now I love me some attention, but I'd be happier if we could all focus on the important stuff. There really wasn't any reason to fret like that about my scars, dammit. Really. Not like there was anything he could do about them. All well and over with, and I didn't want to think about any of it right then.

Scars… really don't matter. They don't hurt anymore.

… crap.

Well, ah… maybe I'm not one to talk. But really, what the two of us have ain't for comparing. He's got me… beat… there.

Okay, fine. Maybe I didn't handle things so peachily when I saw his "new and improved" self shirtless for the first time, either.

That was pretty soon after we'd gotten back together, just after fixing the little water problem they were having in the slums. Good ol' Torn gracefully allowed us use of the shower in the Underground HQ after that.

Considering that I had been working with nothing but rain water for quite a while, I wasn't gonna complain about that. But I kinda may have missed that Jak hesitated, because of that.

Think he said something? Him? Tactful Timmy? Yeah, right. He just went with it without a word, walking into the cramped little bathroom just after me and closing the door behind us.

And I was still in the middle of a rant about finally getting cleaned, when Jak said my name all soft and weird, making me turn around and almost shut up for the sheer odd-factor. Y'know, going all "what?", and stuff. 'Cause Jak just don't talk that way. And he kept up the weirdness by looking at me like he was almost begging for something – providing he'd ever beg for anything, which he doesn't… but as close as it gets – but wouldn't open his damn mouth and gimme a warning before
he thumbed his shirt and then ripped it upwards.

How'd'ya think I reacted? He knows nothing about finesse, it can be really, ah… painful.

"Holy shit!"

It's… worse now, I tell ya. But that was the first time I saw it. Couldn't in the prison 'cause I was busy looking around for guards and stuff while he broke the world record time in getting changed.

But then I had to see it.

An' Jak, he just stood there, shirt hanging like a limp rag in one numb hand and the other hand splayed over his chest like he wanted to hide it when it was too late. Looking at me, but eyelids hung low and with that expression I hate, the one from the prison when he just lost the horns.

Too late for me too, 'cause I'd already screwed up again, shrieking like a freakin' girl an' recoiling. Double-screwing, for the record book. I figured that look from two seconds earlier was meant to signal something really close to "pleasedon'tfreak". Yup. Reached that conclusion a wee bit late. But hey, don't blame me… I can't be expected to read his every thought, not if he doesn't give me enough clues to work with.

Huh.

That excuse doesn't help as much as I wish it would. Not when he had that look on his face again.

I screwed up by reacting like that, when he hoped I could take it with something more like a wince, I suppose. But, hell, he'd just flung out at me just how much I screwed up in the first place.

It's not pretty, people. On the front, he's just one big scar, so many you can't tell 'em apart. That's it. That's why he doesn't want even Sig to see him shirtless.

They were all tidy then, before he'd gotten scratched by a few dozen metal heads in a few bad turns, but… that was worse, 'cause you could see those first ones were made while he was tied down. All those ordered, thin lines and curves carved out in his skin, an' I don't think all of them were done for science. I don't think a doctor would need to, say, cut a nipple in half.

Eugh. Ewewew...

Didn't help that he still had bruises from being beaten up, on top of everything.

Can you blame me for jumping? It's damn freaky!

B-but… I was the one who ran away and let them do that to him.

H-he was right about that.

I… can blame Jak all I want for not cluing me in earlier, but it's not his fault I've got these lovely mental images of Erol leaning over him with a scalpel in hand.

Okay. I'm gonna have nightmares. Great.

I always thought I wa-wasn't useless to Jak. Even when everyone else said I was just good for giving the stray cats some exercise, Jak would still let me know they were wrong. Like back then by the shower, when I got myself in gear again somehow…

"Cripes, you're built like a brick!"
A second or two too late and it wasn't a perfect correction, but it got him to relax a little. At least 'nough to throw the shirt aside, and paw through his hair. I could've hopped on his shoulder and I wanted to, but I didn't want him to think I was scared to look at him. Though I was. Freaky. Freaky, freaky, freaky. Brr.

But that's included in that promise I made, an' never told him about. I've screwed up so many times, but I ain't gonna let him down ever again if I can help it. There're things that really make it worth it, no matter how freaky things get. Like Jak smiling and the ways he shows me I'm a-okay in his book. Like back then.

I'm not gonna screw up that bad again. I want to make sure he's alright. An' I'm gonna do it too, 'cause nobody else takes care of him like I do.

Even if I do think he needs a gal.

End Introspection.

________________________________________

When Daxter woke up, the first inclination creeping into his misty brain was to get up on all four paws and stretch from the tip of his ears to his tail.

He learnt pretty quick that that didn't work, as he flopped back down with a sluggish grunt of surprise. Still too sleepy to be properly confused, he just rolled over and yawned instead.

There was no chuckle, only a smile. And still, he was aware of it even before he cracked an eye open and tried to focus on the bluish blur with yellow on top.

Jak was sitting on a rickety chair, leaning forwards slightly and resting his arms across his knees. The smile reminded Daxter that something good had happened, but it took another few moments for his drowsy and somewhat hungover brain to catch up with what it was.

Bit by bit the information his body was giving him started to give enough hints, along with his mind kicking up a couple of memories from last night.

Another moment and Daxter raised a hand, looking it over. A sleepy grin spread across his face – realizing that it was no dream turned out to be just as nice the second time. Especially since there was no metal-pede on the prowl now.

He let the hand flop down on the blanket and turned his head, still grinning though it softened further from the sleepiness. Heavy eyelids and hair floating above him on the pillow in a cascade of blond and warm red.

"Hey," he said.

His voice was huskier than he'd thought, so he shut his eyes in a frown, clearing his throat. Which made him miss Jak blinking as if he was just snapping out of some transfixion.

"How're you feeling?" Jak asked.

Daxter blinked sleepily, wondering for a second about the odd note in his friend's voice. However, it was too vague, and he was too drowsy, to really dwell on it.
"Mm…"

He tried moving a little again, doing a mental body check. Heavy, gritty muscles, a dry throat, a none-too pleasant taste in his mouth, and a bit of a headache prickling along the sides of his head. He’d felt it all for a while, but it was the first time since he woke up that he gave it a quarter.

Yep.

"Like I don't deserve to," Daxter grumbled, moving a hand to his forehead.

From the corner of his eye he saw Jak's hand raise up, but it fell back before it came halfway. The display of instincts stretched his lips.

"'m too big to lie on y'r lap now," he said, causing Jak to snort.

It was an amused snort though, even if the hero did glance aside. Heaving a sigh, Daxter rubbed two fingers between his eyebrows.

"But I'm kinda missing your scarf," he murmured. "This ain't too bad, though, so lower the alert level."

Jak snorted again, but softer this time.

It was true though, Daxter had to conclude as he idly tugged at the blanket dragged up to his shoulder. It didn't smell like Jak's scarf. That, which certainly didn't smell like roses considering how often the blond got around adding it to the wash bin, always had been a refuge for a small body wrung out by a hangover.

It had always been the one good bit in feeling so bad that death seemed like a mercy, to be able to curl up and hide from the light and outside sounds inside a warm, red cocoon. Listening to the muted clinking as Jak cleaned his morph gun, knowing that a big hand would leave the work and reach for a water flask or food at the slightest notion.

Something about Jak's scarf in the embarrassing sense flashed by in Daxter's mind, something from yesterday. He never got around sorting out the memories right then, however, as Jak started to move.

"I'll see if there's anything for breakfast," the blond said, standing up.

As he did, he almost knocked his head on the lamp dangling from the ceiling, but though it hung a little too low it was not enough for him to ever be in any real danger.

It was a pretty cheap lamp – just a short, wide tube with simple arrangements to keep a light bulb stuck in the middle. Once upon a time it had been painted red, but the color was flaking and the dull metal beneath showed.

Nothing impressive, probably just placed there by somebody who was bored out of their skull and just happened to find something god-awfully ugly to spice up a secret room with.

But when Daxter looked at the lamp, his stomach suddenly lurched.

Cold metal and sharp red, hovering above Jak's head.

Before he could think Daxter had thrown off the blanket and swung his feet over the bedside, but when he started to stand he hit a full stop.
The room rolled over as his body presented the complaints about having been served too much alcohol last night, and he fell back with a groan.

"Dax?"

He was already cradling his head in both hands, but another hand was added to the hold in the blink of an eye. Yet another one grasped his shoulder, Jak's arm a firm weight against his back. The mattress dipped beside him and the familiar warmth and smell of the blond moved in, helping to steady him.

"Ehehe…" Daxter muttered. A weak, sheepish chuckle.

He felt like an idiot for the reaction. Just what had he been about to do anyway? It was just a frickin' lamp. Just a frickin' lamp…

… this time.

His brain reeled a quick and desperate prayer to high heaven that Jak would not ask what that had been about. Reason, reason, reason, quick! Jak was breathing in to speak.

"Bathroom?" Daxter hissed.

He gave himself a mental pat on the back when there was a mildly amused snort, letting him know that Jak was thinking "what, nothing else?".

Oh yeah, baby, perfect save! Though Daxter had to bite back a relieved sigh.

Jak stood, easily hoisting his friend along – thus proving that he was, without a doubt, still the stronger. Even if he was shorter.

Despite making a vague protest about being able to walk on his own, Daxter did not insist when this was ignored. He was wobbly enough, even if he started to get the hang of it halfway through the short walk. The hangover wasn't too bad, not one of his worst by far, but it seemed to have reset his brain on the fact that he should still be an ottsel. His recovered body felt as alien as the first few minutes after standing up for the first time, back in the cave.

It was okay though. Nobody else saw it, and Jak didn't seem to mind supporting him.

When they reached the bathroom door however, Daxter dragged it open – somewhat clumsily, but successfully – and staggered in on his own. There wasn't any room for more than one person in there, for starters. Bracing himself against the washbowl he crouched for a moment, but when Jak touched his back Daxter straightened out. A quick grimace, then he rubbed the back of his neck and brightened again.

"Okay, that's all folks!" he said, waving a dismissive hand at Jak, "get going, we're taking a thirty minute break for coffee and refreshments."

His voice was still hoarse, but he made it through by clearing his throat a second time.

Jak obviously did take the hint, but he still lingered for a few seconds to make sure Daxter wasn't going to fall over. Once he felt certain about that, the blond headed off – hopefully to find some of that coffee.

Daxter hit the light switch and pulled the door shut. The lock softly clicked, but he hardly registered the sound as he sunk down on the toilet lid. Crouching again, but deeper and with no
intention of straightening up very soon. More like curling in on himself, gritting his teeth as his hands crawled up their opposite arm and his fingers dug into his muscles.

*He'll tell Jak he'll tell Jak he'll tell Jak oh shit shit shit...*

Daxter's eyes ground shut and he shook his head in an attempt to clear it.

He had managed to avoid thinking about it yesterday because of everything that had happened. But now he was sleepy and had too much of a hangover to have his mind only focused on the good stuff – or the less bad stuff. Nothing to block it out anymore.

*Shadows are bad. Especially big shadows.*

*But much worse is that metal glint and the tower of cold red and the broken face and the smirk, smirk- HOLY SHIT-*

*He doesn't think. Leaps over Jak's neck and bolts over the sandy cave floor get away get away get-*

*JAK!*

Daxter bit his lip hard.

If Jak started thinking about this, he might realize that really, it should be very difficult…

*He stumbles, slips on the sand and rolls, turning, staring, through the thunder in his own head hearing every word.*

"Are you running away again?"

*That thing stands closer now one metal foot raised cold steel and crimson above blond-green hair JAK ISN'T MOVING no nononoNO!*

… for Erol to catch…

*Hardly feels the sand and rocks beneath his paws can't even remember moving leaps shrieking claws against steel cruel eyes blink but they're hard too hard there's no blood it's USELESS but I'M NOT LEAVING HIM BEHIND AGAIN-*

… something as small and nimble…

*The eyes narrow amused oh crap- cold fingers snap around tiny body trapped can't move cold cold nonono Idon'twanttodie! JAK!*

… as Daxter.

He hunched further, head dipping low enough to touch his knee. He could still feel the grip, the crushing chill invading every sense – except his hearing. Another invasion, he wasn't allowed to escape a single word, a single flavor of the smirk digging into his skull flattening every defense couldn't couldn't-

"Changed your mind since last? After all, you let us-*"

Nononono…

Daxter's stomach lurched and he grit his teeth. Don't throw up, don't throw up. It wasn't true, he hadn't, he didn't!
His eyes stung and he shook his head in sudden fury. There was no way in hell he'd cry. Taking in a deep breath he forced himself to uncoil, eyes still closed.

He could be prepared for a question.

"Hmm? Oh yeah, I hit my head, out cold for a sec and… wham! Sheez. You need eyes at the back of your head, you know. Grow a pair!"

Yeah. He had an answer ready if a question was asked. Not a pleasant answer, but more pleasant than the alternative. Knowing Jak he would be beating himself over the head for getting knocked out in the first place – that was well and enough. Daxter didn't want to know how Jak would handle learning how he had been used while unconscious.

Erol would tell him.

A shadowy moan escaped Daxter's lips and his hands curled into fists.

"After all, you let us have-"

It wasn't true, wasn't! If it were, Jak would… would…

A dry gulp tore at Daxter's throat.

… hate him.

But that wasn't true, there was no way. Not with the way Jak looked at him and talked and smiled. Big hands hoisting him up and helping him to the bathroom. Hands covering his scars like Jak wanted to take the pain away. Dull nails scratching his ears until he fell asleep, curled up above a strong heartbeat. Stuffing a melon in his face for fun.

"Dax… thanks."

Yeah.

Daxter slowly relaxed. There was no way. Erol was just spewing bull, nothing else. He didn't know a freakin' thing.

But that didn't take away the fact that the tin can had found and created a bucketful of weaknesses. Crap.

Regardless, Daxter knew that if he didn't get moving soon, Jak's mommy-syndrome would activate and send him looking for his best bud. The normally babbling mouth stretched a little as this realization only proved the point that anything Erol may have planted in Daxter's head was just hot air.

Yeah.

He straightened up and reached for the water tap. With no toothbrush available he'd just have to make do with rinsing his mouth to get rid of the worst party-aftertaste.

There had once been a mirror on the wall above the small basin, but at some point it had either broken or been stolen. Whichever it was, all that was left of it was a faint, square outline on the wall. Daxter dully studied it, rubbing a cold, moist hand against his forehead. He'd have to have a look into the mirror in the bar later. He'd done it yesterday of course, but the novelty was still-

The cold sparked something again and his hand fell to his side, bracing against invisible, huge
fingers. The goddamn phantom pain from Erol's grip took every chance it got to come back. A crazy thought leapt through Daxter's irritated and uneasy mind – maybe it would have gone away if Jak had been able to grasp him like that afterwards. Cover the memory of the cold, hard grip with warm and careful hands.

But that wouldn't happen even if it worked. He wasn't an ottsel anymore.

Ow, that stung.

Daxter grimaced at the invisible mirror. He was just being stupid.

Jak wasn't one to seriously consider hurting people who he thought of as friends. Then again, one may question if the man sitting across the table actually counted as a friend. An ally, sure, though their questionable friendship had not hit off too well. Still, the man was without a doubt on the side of good these days, no question there. His tricks and skills had proven invaluable in the battle to hook the divided army back up.

Despite all that, Jak's decision not to get even moderately violent was starting to dwindle.

Unless he stopped combining his blatant mock(?)-flirting with not-too innocently rubbing his boot against Jak's, Jinx was getting a kick in the shin very soon.

Doing business with the crook-gone-remotely-good-guy was always a delicate balance between tolerance and frustration. But it was the best way to actually get any credits in Haven these days. Successful hunts for artifacts in the desert could yield a decent number of valuable items – most of them Jak handed over to Spargus, however. But some were deemed as not having a communal worth, and those he kept – or rather, pawned off for extra credits in both cities. The only trophies he'd kept for himself so far were the pieces of armor he wore.

Jinx may not give an honest buck for the pieces of orange metal, but he was probably happier for the prizes than the rest of the defenders of Haven would. Except for Samos, of course. But here, precursor items belonged in a display case – and even in these times there were people who could appreciate it. Either that or Jinx used the damn things in his own tinkering with explosive substances.

Jak didn't really care. The relics had been buried for years. If they had a say, they'd probably just be happy to be of use again.

But it was, however, questionable if they were worth having to listen to so many comments about his ass. It was just downhill from "heeey there pretty-boy. Freshly hot'n'bothered from the desert?"

Jinx was easier to deal with when there were half a dozen metal heads incoming. Then at least it was possible to drone out his comments.

It was starting to look like the artifacts would have to feel lonely for an annoyingly long time. They just laid their in their heap on the table, seemingly forgotten. And this was so while Jak's boots, unseen as they were, seemed to be so very interesting.

Luckily for Jinx's shin and overall health however, there was a sound from the door behind the bar just when the annoyance was about to tip over into action. Jak looked up, feeling quite grateful to see a gangly shape push the door open.

Daxter staggered into the bar/makeshift HQ, grumbling about coffee. But since he wasn't whining for a headache pill or a swift death, it couldn't be that bad. He did, however, immediately bristle when Jinx poked his head into view and gave the redhead an interested leer.
The otsel senses detected a scuzzball in the territory. Alert! Alert! Protect all things precious!

Eyes dangerously narrowed, Daxter stomped over and crashed on the sofa opposite Jinx – forcing Jak to scoot further in, away from having the bomb technician face to face.

Jinx scooted after him.

Painful as it was, Daxter had to concede that he was not in the right mood to make up working plans. This would not, however, deter him from launching into a defensive counter attack.

"Ain't it a bit too early in the morning for you to crawl out of the sewer?" Daxter grumbled, rubbing his forehead with his palm.

The counter was as unfazed as it was immediate and high pitched with fake surprise.

"Well spank me up the forest," Jinx said. "The rat really is a real boy!"

"More than you ever was…"

Daxter would have grumbled about his secret having leaked out, but saved it. Though he did ponder whether to blame Torn, Tess or Jak for saving Jinx the shock. Drat.

Such thoughts were all derailed when a cup of coffee was pushed into his vision from the side. Unpleasantly black, but in these times milk and sugar were pretty low on the list of concerns for those who collected supplies. They only found coffee because that was one of the few things that kept people going. It had been like that so long that Daxter was almost ready to get used to it. Almost.

But in his current state, even the pitch-blackness of the hot liquid looked wonderfully inviting. He greedily grabbed the cup, then looked up at Jak.

The blond was watching him, one big hand on the table beside the worn coffee pot. As if waiting to see if there would be a request for more.

"You're a good sidekick, sometimes," Daxter said, as cheerfully as his sleepy state allowed.

Jak just snorted at that.

"Heh!" Jinx chortled, leaning forwards on his elbow. "Now, rat-boy, why don't ya let me an' blondie get nice and private again?"

Trying to rattle Daxter. And he had to take the bait of course, though he did so with open eyes.

"Save it, Mr. Sleaze. Your chances are sunk below zero now that I've lost the fur. Right Jak?"

He nudged Jak's arm with his elbow, firing off a playful grin accompanied with lowering eyelids. Trying to rattle Jinx.

Jinx was not the one getting rattled.

Letting out a nasal chuckle and several puffs of air to go with that, the bomb technician leant forwards with an even more lecherous leer. Daxter pointedly leant backwards, wrinkling his nose and holding his cup protectively.

"Y'know, kiddo, I kinda doubt pretty-boy would like the skills you've picked up in the last few ye-"
An ancient lever of some kind slammed into the middle of the table, so hard that the wood was chipped. Jak did not say a word, only glared the other way and removed his hand. With a snort, Jinx plucked the remnants of his cigar from his lips and crushed it in the ash tray.

"Aw, Jakky-boy. You're no fun today."

But despite the sigh, Jinx picked up the lever, scraping the orange metal against the table. The amused, naughty look drained from his eyes as he studied the artifacts one by one, exchanged for a businesslike evaluation.

It was pretty freaky, really.

In this, Jinx worked efficiently, and with a considerable lack of words. Daxter too sunk into silence, leaning back and sipping his coffee. He had to bite his lip to do it, but Jak's message was pretty clear. Sometimes, enough was just enough.

Eventually, Jinx fished a bundle of green notes from some invisible pocket. He thumbed through them for a second, removed one, and threw the rest on the table before Jak.

"Pleasure doing biz with ya, as usual," Jinx said.

The leer was back and secure as he produced a small bag and shuffled the artifacts into it. With one last glance at the duo, grinning a bit extra at Daxter's defensive glare in comparison to Jak's forcefully blank look, Jinx turned and walked out with the bag slung over his shoulder.

"Call me up when you start feelin' lonely, blondie," he said as a goodbye, waving without looking back.

The doorbell tingled.

They were alone again.

Daxter put the cup down hard, but with most of the coffee gone he didn't spill much.

"And the value of the whole building went up a couple thousands!" he declared. "For no extra charge we can throw in a free air conditioner… what?"

Jak's much bigger hand grasped Daxter's, his other hand pushing the tobacco-scented bills into the redhead's grip. Without a word, the bigger hands then withdrew. Letting the meaning sink in.

Money only had a value on good days, but even in these times people were trying to survive, to work. If nothing else, Daxter would be allowed to switch the credits for food tickets. He'd know where. He could take care of himself.

Silent moments trickled by as Daxter looked at the money in his hands, rubbing a thumb against the paper. Uncertain.

Finally, he leant back slightly and crumbled the reward into a pocket. Still not looking up.

Jak clenched his teeth.

"I have to go back, Dax. Damas…"

The thin shoulders fell, but he couldn't have expected anything else. Not when he knew.

"Y-yeah, I got it," Daxter said, rubbing his neck sheepishly. "That's cool, don't worry."
"Torn wants me to clean up the sewers again," Jak continued with a roll of his eyes. Then he looked at Daxter again, touching his shoulder. "I'll just take you to the Freedom HQ first."

Daxter blinked. Then he looked away.

"Oh. Yeah, that's cool."

It sure didn't sound like he thought so, though. Was it just because they would have to move apart so soon?

A tiny, silly speck of hope bobbed up.

"What?" Jak asked, tilting his head.

"Well, y'know…"

The skin on Daxter's neck was probably going to end up angrily red from all that rubbing. He looked up, more teeth than the overbite showing just the slightest bit. And then he started talking, easing up for every word as he dove into his native element of chatter.

"Now, as much as I'm already an expert on shooting thanks to you needing both hands while driving and all that, I ain't planning on lugging anything like your bazooka around. Can't be good for your back, man!"

Jak just raised an eyebrow, the corner of his mouth stretching to match the motion. By now, Daxter had warmed up.

"So I was gonna ask Tess for help, if she's loaded up with something smaller," he went on. Jak's eyebrow twitched at those first words. "But I thought, it's gonna be different from what I know and even though it's not your thing either, just…"

He looked at Jak, a vision of hopefulness. Like the little freckled kid who knocked on the door, trying to peek beyond the old explorer who opened, while he asked if his best friend was ready to come out and play.

"… since you're here, y'know?"

It was a simple little question, and yet Jak smiled wide and right from the heart. There were a number of things he would have liked to do in reply, but most of them involved touching Daxter. Probably a bad idea, for the moment and for both their sakes. So he held back, just smiling.

Daxter's sheepishness cracked up in a grin.

"Yeah, I know," he said, reaching out to knock his fist into Jak's. "Stupid question."

The leaner fist whipped back and the pointing finger stretched, wagging in the air in front of Jak's face.

"But just so ya know, I'm not so hot on ya skipping out on me like this!" Daxter said. "If I didn't know you're hopelessly pussy-whipped by the Sandman, I wouldn't stand for it!"

At that, Jak had to blink. But then he leant against the table, chuckling into his hand and shaking his head. But the laughter stuck in his throat when Daxter leant in close, playfully reaching around Jak's back to grab his shoulder and lightly rattle him.

There was a lazy sluggishness to Daxter's movements, remnants of the slight hangover that still
held him back from the widest motions and loudness. And Jak wasn't used to getting touched like that, almost panicking when the fingers curled over his shoulder and he felt the weight of an arm against his back. But the room was light and it was Daxter, without a threat. The panic faltered before it could be kindled.

But there was another threat as he watched Daxter grinning and leaning in closer, slowly as if the air was clogging up. Transfixed. Knowing he had to push away, the body heat was already brushing against him and the scent of Daxter filled his nostrils. Some remains of the fur, and desert sand – but nothing like Haven. He always, somehow, kept a whiff of the happiness that had been Sandover.

Different from the night before, Jak had been moving closer then, in secret. Now he was the one approached but Daxter didn't know, didn't understand – he had to push away, but the motion would be stiff and tense, so much that Daxter would notice-

The sideway motion stopped, Dax' head tipping towards Jak as the blue eyes rolled upwards.

"I'd rather you were aaall mine. It'd keep both our asses outta all your favorite playgrounds, bud."

Jak couldn't reply, just hoping he was looking somewhat collected. He also hoped that that thing pulling at his mouth was a smile.

But then suddenly, Daxter's eyebrows twitched. He straightened up and withdrew his arm, looking suspiciously at Jak. The blond stared back, a panicked thought wondering how much about his feelings had been realized.

"Hey… where did you sleep last night?" Daxter demanded. "On that chair?"

It was a small relief, but one regardless. It did take a bit of restraint not to let out a deep breath, though.

Jak glanced aside, shrugging like it didn't matter to him. It sure seemed to matter to Daxter too, though. A fist clenched on the table.

"You even nodded off in the air train, man, you needed some good ol' decent sleep!"

The words slipped out of Jak's mouth before he had properly considered them.

"In your bed?" he said.

Oh shit.

Their gazes met, eyes widening slightly.

Daxter's mouth opened, but snapped shut. All air left him.

For a split second, they just looked at each other, uncertain. Both realizing that things had changed, but unwilling to admit, to accept.

A split second only, that was all Daxter could handle – thankfully, for both of them.

"Ah… I- mean, ah… dammit!"

Daxter fretted for a moment, then rubbed the back of his head violently. Unsure what to say, Jak opened his mouth. However, he was cut off before he could speak.
"Now look!" Daxter snapped, straightening up so quick there should have been a crack. His glare was quite violent. "It wasn't a problem before, right? If we both agree on that, it doesn't matter. *Right?*"

It's difficult to have an argument like that lose, when the person you're presenting it to couldn't have wished for anything better. This time, Jak knew that he was smiling.

"Right," he said.

Daxter sunk back against the sofa, loudly breathing out in relief.

"Damn, Jak, don't put me through crap like that."

There was no apology to that. None was needed.

Daxter grabbed his cup again, and nearly had it by his lips before he realized that it was almost empty. Corner of his lip rising slightly, Jak pushed the coffee pot within reach.

"So, the plan for today?" Daxter said as he refilled his cup. "Something like avoiding Torn until I feel good enough to go shooting sounds good to me."

"Torn should be back at Freedom HQ by now," Jak said.

He took the pot when Daxter handed it over, and poured the last contents into his own forgotten cup.

"Well that makes things a whole lot easier!" Daxter said, then turned his head towards the blond beside him, an eyebrow cocked. "For once. You know, I can't even remember the last time you gave me some good news."

Jak rolled his eyes, but it was in a completely different way from when he rolled his eyes at anyone else.

They could have continued in the same vein for a long, pleasant time. However, the moment was cut short when a door in the back opened and Tess stepped into the bar.

"Good morning, boys!" she chirped.

Daxter had instantly perked up at the mere sound of her footsteps. Jak looked away, clenching his hand under the table.

"Ah, Tessy sweetheart!" Daxter said, standing up and barely swaying. "Take a seat, I gotta talk about some business."

While the two of them settled on a barstool each, Jak sighed to himself and emptied the rest of his cup of coffee. He needed the caffeine badly right then. And it was an excuse not to join them for a little while longer. But once the cooling drink was all gone, he got up and relocated to the stool behind Daxter, watching without a word.

It was quite apparent from the beginning that Tess felt less than thrilled about realizing that Daxter wanted to return to the fighting. She didn't protest, but the glances she threw at Jak spoke enough. Silently begging for help.

It was different now, she felt it too. There wouldn't be a hero and his pet, but a hero and his friend.

Daxter would have needed to be blind not to notice it. However, he acted as if it was water on a
duck's back – the only sign of annoyance his increased assurance that it would all be fine. He had not spent most of his life talking just to miss out on getting some serious skills in that art.

And the unspoken, underlying argument was always, in one way or another, "I'll be fine, Jak won't let anything bad happen anyway".

In the end, that was probably what made Tess agree, even if none of them would have admitted it.

"Oh alright then," she finally said, sliding off the chair. "I think I've got right the thing for you, whiskerpuss."

Then, blind to Jak even if she had spent half the discussion looking at him, she gently curled her hand around the back of Daxter's head, threading her pink-nailed fingers through his hair.

And placed a cherry-scented kiss on his forehead.

She started to walk towards the exit, smiling over her shoulder.

"I'll be in the shooting range, boys. Call me up when you're ready."

Daxter gazed after Tess' leaving form all the way until she disappeared through the door, shutting it behind her with a soft tingle of the bell.

Jak's fingers twitched.

After a moment Daxter woke up and turned his head, raising an eyebrow at Jak's vacant stare at him. There was something behind the blank expression, something he couldn't read. Something akin to anger. He frowned, suddenly uneasy.

"Jak?"

A blink, the expression softening immediately.

"Hm?"

"Something wrong, buddy?"

Before Jak could even begin to form a reply, Daxter reached his own conclusion. The frown dug deeper into his forehead as all the doubting he had faced last night and just now simply blew up and he near enough snarled.

"And don't give me any fussing, I don't care how worried you are. I ain't leaving you alone-"

Jak started on a calming "I know", but Daxter stumbled over the words.

"- not after all the shit he said-!"

He fell dead silent, biting his lip as the color drained from his face. Jak's mouth slammed shut.

A shuddering breath shook Daxter and he turned away, casting a worried glance around the rearranged bar as if paranoid that somebody was listening in. He heard the scuffle and steps, turning back even as he tried to curl up on his seat. Jak sat down beside him, silently placing a big hand on the thin shoulder. Caught.

Daxter gulped, but his mouth was suddenly dry. Staring at the counter he sought to avoid the gaze but could still sense it. Feeling much smaller again, like he was shrinking past the ottsel size he
"Oh, you know..." he heard himself croak. "Muttering about all the things he'd do to you- enough to make Sig's skin crawl I tell you..."

He fell silent, lamely. Still feeling Jak's eyes on him, knowing the blond wasn't buying it – Jak knew there was more but he wouldn't open his mouth and ask.

Daxter fidgeted with his shirt, shaking his head. The hand on his shoulder felt so terribly heavy and he almost wanted to be small again, able to roll into a ball and look too pathetic to be silently interrogated.

He almost jumped out of his skin when Jak suddenly spoke.

"Erol gets into your head..."

Daxter looked up, but Jak was tiredly rubbing a hand over his eyes. The calloused thumb resting on a bony shoulder rubbed against the loose cloth, comforting. Daxter bit his lower lip, listening with a chill rolling through his gut. Jak spoke from experience.

The hand fell from the grim face and Jak met the nervous gaze.

"... and then you just can't get him out," he said.

Again Daxter gulped, with no greater luck this time either. He looked away, struggling with the taste of bile. And he was there once more, bathing in dread as the cyborg seemed to dig into his mind and drag out the last thing he wanted to hear. Words crushing him.

The hand on his shoulder dragged him back to reality with a light squeeze – still heavy, but now rather a stable point helping him remember where he was. The warm, familiar touch moved slightly, calming, reassuring. He shook his head to get a grip, staring at his own clenched hands on the counter.

He wanted Jak to know all of a sudden, so that he would understand just what it meant and stop arguing against having his friend still tagging along. Understand the guilt that had to be repaid.

"H-he said..."

The knuckles turned white and he crunched his eyes shut.

"... s-said that I let them have you in the first place."

His voice broke on the last words and he shuddered as the hand clenched over his shoulder again. Then there was another one on his other side and he was turned on his seat. Opened his eyes finally, scared of what he might see.

Jak watched him, leaning forwards on his own seat. He was frowning, but when he spoke the voice was soft.

"Dax, running away..."

He leant even closer, so much that a whiff of his warm breath touched Daxter's pale face. The redhead blinked, dumbfounded, hearing Jak's voice clog up, seeing the hard gulp move the Adam's apple before the warrior spoke again.

"Running away was the best thing you ever did."
While hearing himself splutter something, Daxter could not really tell what. His arm crawled over the counter, seeking to steady him in case Jak's hands would not be enough.

As if.

The expression kept talking when the voice stopped, asking what else could you have done, what if you'd stayed and gotten killed – things that Daxter had tried to tell himself, but it had never helped before, not until he "heard" them from the only one who could forgive him. But Jak silently added things Daxter could not have told himself.

"I couldn't have survived without that hope."

"Ah. Well… if you p-put it… that way…"

Daxter weakly chuckled, scratching his cheek with one finger. Looked back at Jak's serious face, bit his lip.

The face was familiar and serious, but those eyes could stare him into the floor.

His chest felt like it was swelling.

Without thinking, Daxter slipped forwards, off the stool. The momentum continued and he rocked into Jak's chest, raising his arms around the strong neck. Ducking his head beside Jak's before he could start thinking about what the hell he was doing.

The ottsel was still so close, the small creature who knew that curling up on Jak's chest or in the crook of his neck, to be petted, was the best therapy there was for both of them. It should be okay, shouldn't it? It was just the two of them.

Like it always had been.

"I hope you're okay with being weird for a sec," Daxter muttered through his teeth.

He still could have sworn that Jak had tensed up, because he relaxed after a moment. A chill tore through Daxter's gut at that realization, but then the blond moved. With a solid thunk his boots hit the floor, forcing Daxter a small step back in alarm. But Jak's hands slid from the thin shoulders, one moving to the back of Daxter's neck. The other arm slipped down over the finer back, a slight pull bringing them back together. Reassuring.

"It's not weird," Jak murmured, shaking his head.

Chuckling, Daxter straightened up slightly and playfully dunked his temple against Jak's.

"Yeah, s'long as you promise me you'll kill anyone suddenly busting in," he said.

Standing like this, it became very apparent once again how the status of their height had shifted. Daxter chuckled at that too, but let it drop.

It took a couple of seconds to get used to the peculiar situation, but Jak didn't seem to mind. So, his partner didn't either.

After another second, Daxter started to recognize that he actually could detect the smell of Jak's hair again. It had been so close to his formerly oversensitive nose for years that he hadn't really noticed it for ages. Quite nice, he had to admit.

Even so… little things, and he hadn't been away from Jak for more than one night and a bit of
morning. It could be days and even weeks now, and they'd never be as close as when he was fuzzy…

But he didn't say anything like that. Daxter pinched his eyes shut hard and leant his temple against Jak's head. Didn't want to think about how his world was changing in a bad way. There were so many good things in the transformation, and he didn't want to lose it. And he didn't speak up about it either.

That was just too weird.

He didn't notice how Jak glanced at their reflection in the bar mirror. Hesitant, searching eyes studying them, wrapped in each other's arms.

Begin Introspection. Serial code: Keira.

I need Jak. But so does daddy, and Torn, and Ashelin, and… all of us.

But I think we all know that Jak doesn't need us.

Jak and I never really broke up, we just grew apart somehow. And yet it seemed like everyone knew the exact moment it was over. Tess told me I was just imagining things when I let that one slip. And yet, maybe it was she who made me think so in the first place, when she suddenly showed up and dragged me out to a café for a "girls' talk". It wasn't that random, but still I felt like she did it because she knew.

I don't know what Jak needs.

Jak never, ever says that he's tired or hungry. At least, I've never heard him say it, and I doubt anyone else has either. Daxter says those things, but all Jak ever does is look harrowed, and he never says a word about it. He can't admit weakness to us.

I wonder if he would have back in Sandover, if he could talk then. And I wonder if he's ever let any of those new friends of his know when he's thirsty and such. All those simple things that should be natural… but then, nothing is natural with Jak anymore.

Daddy says that he'll come back to us eventually, but even when Jak is here he still feels distant. I wanted to greet him when he returned from the wasteland the first time, when we met with the barrier between us, but I couldn't say a word. There was more than just a physical barrier. I… couldn't do a thing when they banished him. So when I saw him again, I was scared. I felt like I shouldn't talk to him, that I had no right.

And when Jak didn't say anything about accepting daddy's apology about Veger, when he said "I'll stop him myself", I was almost glad that I hadn't tried.

Jak really doesn't need us. And when he actually did, we proved him right because we couldn't help him. He has to make sure that he's alright on his own.

End Introspection.

I gotta admit, he was cuter as a fluffball. There just aren't enough cuddly, fuzzy little things in this place, and my precious little Daxxie was perfect for a little petting now and then.


I got kinda worried when I saw him at first. We had a special relationship, you know? I didn't want things to get complicated just because he was suddenly as tall as me. No worries there though, he acted just the same. Just not as much as a pet, and that's so sweet.

And he hasn't lost his real charm. That sweetie sure does know how to make a girl laugh. Gimme cute and funny any day of the week over handsome and boring.

If you want something super cute though, just look at how Jak is fussing around him like a mother hen! Aww!

End Introspection.

It started off as one of the better days in Haven. After a bit of more rest and some breakfast, Daxter declared that he was well enough to head to the shooting range.

Once there, Tess was already waiting and ready to demonstrate a pair of pretty small handguns – but her turning a cardboard metal head into confetti silenced any complaints. Small, but packing a punch. Tess proceeded to go over the technobabble which marked the beginnings of a true gun fetishist. Had she been more scientifically inclined, Vin would probably have come back from the grave – more than he already was – for her sake.

Regardless, she said a lot, but like most of Samos' lectures, it went in through one ear and out of the other without leaving a mark on the brain. But, since this speaker was a lot easier on the eyes than Samos ever had been, Daxter at least pretended to listen.

In a nutshell, the guns were too small to use a morph function, but powerful enough to get the job done. Not ideal for range attacks – Jak frowned at this, but Daxter didn't seem to mind – but would work very well in a cornered situation. Of course, if Tess had any say, that would by no means be necessary if Jak valued his arms.

And finally, when she felt done with the lecture, the blonde lady handed over the weapons to their new owner.

Even if Daxter spared the world anything like Jak's borderline manic smirk when he was given his
first gun, the redhead still smiled wide and with great interest. That kind of "run for your lives, he's on the loose!" interest. It seemed that even holding a morph gun that used to be at least three times his size couldn't actually match with having an upgraded, semiautomatic peashooter of your own.

What followed was a rather trying minute for Jak, however, as Tess pushed a button to call forth a new cardboard enemy and stepped up behind Daxter to show him how to position his arms. Despite the grungy light in the sulfur scented room, the deepening red on Daxter's cheeks was painfully visible from Jak's vantage point there from the side.

Even when cut short, the moment stretched like gum – until Tess suddenly looked up and glanced at her watch.

In the next second, chirping something about needing to do some stuff and being really sorry about this – and throwing a cheerful glance as she passed him – Tess merrily sauntered out.

It left both of the men looking at the door and wondering what the heck had just happened.

"Err. Women?" Daxter finally flung out, absently putting one of the gun in its holster so that he could scratch his chin.

Jak shrugged, but smiled slightly as he stepped over and took the space Tess had left him. This time, Daxter didn't blush. But neither did he tense or had to struggle to keep his focus.

Practicing to aim and fire without being brought off balance by the recoil was only the main part of the practice (which, considering the caliber of the morph gun versus the ottsel's small body, seemed pretty silly in itself). A sizable chunk of time had to be used practicing reloading as quickly as possible. Daxter fumbled a lot at first, in what was probably a mix of sleeping in, memories of alcohol, and not being perfectly in sync with his now longer and bigger fingers. However, unlike the situation with assignments he had been given and not come up with himself, in this case Daxter displayed a surprising amount of patience.

They quit only when they got hungry, heading back to the Naughty Ottsel for lunch. After that, despite any and all personal wishes, they found a two-seater zoomer and took off towards the HQ. Just because they knew a certain dreadlocked someone would glare an annoyingly awful lot if they didn't.

It was an eerily silent flight, at least between the two of them. Daxter didn't say a word, not after they left the safe zone of the harbor and entered what had been a battlefield of robots and humans just a few weeks ago. He just ducked down on the floor when Jak waved at him to get out of sight as well as the situation allowed.

Things were much safer now, when there was no flying fortress to rain metallic fighters onto the city anymore – but not all of them were gone, and Jak didn't feel like taking chances.

It was a trying flight, for several reasons. The silence didn't settle well with either of them, unnatural and uncomfortable when Daxter was right there. Jak kept on the lookout, more carefully than ever, forcing him into a balance of speed and attention that got on his nerves very quickly. Normally he would speed through, knowing that Daxter was ready to fire the morph gun at any approaching enemy. Even though he did keep the gun within reach, yellow shine painting the plastic lining of the vehicle, it would be difficult to drive and shoot. He didn't want Daxter moving into plain sight either. They needed to get to the HQ quickly, someplace where Erol couldn't spot them and take aim.

Few others may have realized it, but the two of them knew that Erol never really tried to kill Jak.
Or rather, he never let his underlings really try to kill Jak. Guns never aimed for vital spots, close combat involved electrical shocks. The metal heads seemed a bit more difficult to control, but when you have spent one year fighting them while they really want to kill you, you notice when grunts aren't actually going for your throat anymore. Even if they really, really want to.

To kill Jak was a luxury the master reserved for himself alone.

But now, Erol also knew what kind of wound would hurt the most.

Jak had no intention to let him have another chance at that.

The streets of what had once been the water slums were thankfully peaceful. Only chipped railings and burnt trees reminded the travelers, pedestrians and soldiers of the chaos that had ravaged even this part of town just a few weeks ago. However, here too things had calmed down since the fall of the war factory. Maybe if given a little more time, people would even start to dare hoping that the peace would last.

Both Jak and Daxter were quite relieved when finally able to hop out of the zoomer and step into the HQ. The redhead started babbling as soon as the elevator door closed behind them, glad to once again be able to move about without Jak being on high alert.

Jak listened with half an ear, concerned with his own thoughts. Getting Daxter into the HQ was a great relief in itself. The building was probably the safest place there could be in Haven, securely underground.

It was what came next that he didn't want to have to think about.

The elevator wooshed past the security floors and living quarters, finally reaching the bottom with a slow swing.

The destruction duo hadn't even stepped through the opening doors before Torn verbally hit them in the face with a usual, Torny greeting from the other side of the room.

"Are the sewers clean yet?"

Jak rolled his eyes and Daxter opened his mouth to fire off a retort, but everything halted at the call.

"Daxter! You're really back!"

Keira didn't dash across the room to take a closer look, like Tess had struggled through the padding of the store room in the Naughty Ottsel – because Keira wasn't Tess. But she did perk up and take a couple of steps closer.

Behind her, Samos leant to the side to see past his daughter's back – then straightened up again, pressing a hand to his little green face.

Even though he surely noticed the sage's annoyance (or, probably, because of it) Daxter's cheerfulness tripled. He flung up both hands in the victory sign, grin pretty much stretching from one ear to the other.

"Oh yeah, the lady killer is back in full business!"

Then his hands suddenly dropped to the height of his chest, palms rubbing against each other as the grin became demonic.
"Now where's that birdbrain?"

Very much despite their character, everyone caught themselves glancing at Onin. Her white eyes stared ahead calmly, hands resting in her lap and legs, as always, folded under her. And her bowl-hat appeared to be strangely monkawless.

"The sewers?" Torn snarled.

Jak walked further into the world of electric light and buzzing computers, shaking his head. Following close behind him, Daxter muttered about scaredy monkey-chickens that ran at the first second sight of danger.

Torn, unsurprisingly, was not pleased with this answer.

"Well, why didn't you clean out the sewers on the way here?" he roughly asked.

"Daxter's still getting used to being human again," Jak calmly said.

He didn't have to say more, the others in the room could make their own conclusions from that – though Jak suspected that they thought of words like "burden" rather than his "safe". He forced those thoughts back – they smelled of dark eco.

"I'll get it done as soon as we're done here," he added.

Torn looked like he was about to say something more, but Ashelin stepped up beside him and gave him a Look. Sighing, the commander of the Freedom League settled for pinching the bridge of his nose. He knew fully well that bossing Jak around wasn't quite as okay as it used to be, but old habits die hard. Especially in men like him. Especially when Jak didn't show any contempt towards those who had failed him.

"I understand you had to bring Daxter away from Spargus?" Ashelin said.

Knowing what was fast approaching, Jak tried to steel himself as he nodded.

"He would've had to fight in the arena if we didn't get out of there," he said. "I don't think he's ready for that."

"We'll have to find him a vacant room, then," Torn somewhat gruffly said. His hand absentmindedly twitched, as if it wanted to move towards a non-existent pile of papers to file a report.

"He can use ours," Jak said, maybe a little too quickly. "I have to go back to Spargus."

He tried very hard to keep a neutral look on his face when he said it, even when the words grew like cotton in his mouth. Even so, he had to say it.

For every word he was aware that Daxter had stopped talking and smiling.

Ashelin threw a quick glance between the two. If she understood, she didn't show it. There was nothing but a well practiced little smile on her lips as she calmly dropped her judgment.

"I see no problem with that."

In essence, it was just a waste of time to shower now, since he was going back towards the port through the sewers. But really, it could be days or weeks – he didn't really want to think about that possibility, though – before he came back to Haven again, and in Spargus everybody smelled. He
could take a quick dip in the ocean in the evening as long as he didn't get wounded beyond white eco healing anywhere along the way – bathing in the salt water during the day was asking for trouble.

It was the most efficient to clean up the sewers on his way back.

But he sure wasn't missing a chance to take a proper shower, even if the sudden cleanliness wouldn't last long.

Even though it was a lot easier to breathe in the wasteland – despite the heat burning your lungs, every little gasp felt loads healthier than the mouthfuls of smog clogging your throat in Haven – there was a certain drawback to the cleaning conditions. Not the smell, after a while everyone got used to it, and there were more important matters to attend to… however, that lack of cleanliness, then coupled with the dirt and smoke and general unpleasantness of Haven, all came down to one thing.

Jak pretty much felt like he was a snake sloughing his skin as the water and soap peeled away rather than melted the layer of dirt covering him. It made him wonder, as he stepped out and reached out a dripping hand for a towel, how much extra weight he had lost from just cleaning himself.

He dried himself quickly, then pulled on the waiting clean change of clothes while his hair was still wet. Years ago, it had felt natural to spend all day in nothing but a pair of swimming trunks. But like so much else from long ago, that had long disappeared. Now, it only made him feel edgy as soon as the excuse of being in the shower or the rare bath was gone.

Still rubbing his hair with the towel, Jak opened the bathroom door and walked into the main room.

Despite everything he struggled to suppress, his lip stretched wide at the sight of Daxter on the bed. Rather, curled up on the foot of the bed.

Somebody was still an ottsel at heart.

He seemed to be dozing at first sight, but as soon as Jak made a sound Daxter sat up and beamed at the newly cleaned hero.

"I can't tell from here anymore, but I do think my nose is grateful for your actions," he cheerfully said and hopped off the bed.

Jak would have kept smiling, but something in the choice of words made him remember something he needed to say.

"Dax…"

Jak frowned slightly, causing his friend to instantly perk up to attention. The redhead recognized a sudden change of subject when he heard one, even if he didn't look too enthusiastic all of a sudden.

It hadn't worked to tell Daxter to "go back to the city" when both of them first met the wasteland, but maybe this would be acceptable. Jak knew he had to try. His actions wouldn't have an impact on Daxter's safety for a while.

"Dax, don't go outside alone or anything, okay?" Jak said.

The blue eyes beneath the red eyebrows studied him for a second, then they rolled upwards.
"Yeah, yeah, mommy," Daxter said with a loud, theatrical sigh. "I'll be a good boy- yeep!"

He ducked and bolted, pout dissolved in a shrieking laugh as he tried to avoid getting grabbed and have his hair mercilessly ruffled again. The escape was quickly ended, Jak locking Daxter's neck under his arm with friendly but firm ease. The towel fell to the floor.

It was nothing but an excuse to have him close, in the end. Gangly and warm, and still smelling the same as he had during the night and in the bar. Now, however, Daxter wasn't asleep or willing to be there – unknowing and at peace. He struggled, laughing, but still struggling – and at that unpleasant thought, Jak let him go.

Daxter staggered backwards, still cackling as he rubbed his neck.

"Sheez!" he gasped, then strung up a warning finger. "Don't get cocky though, buddy boy. I'll get you yet, one'a these days!"

Jak just smiled slightly, still uneasy. He quickly turned away to hide it, jabbing a finger at the bathroom.

"Shower's free, champ," he said.

"Whazzat?" Daxter demanded, swiftly sidestepping around to get face to face again. "Do I sense an itsy bit of doubt there? Trying to change the subject, are we?"

The tip of his pointing finger hovered an inch away from Jak's nose.

It lasted only for a moment before Jak bent forwards, eyes pinched shut and shoulders shaking as he chuckled into his hand.

Daxter crossed his arms and turned his nose towards the ceiling.

"Humph!" he loudly scoffed. But when he went on, the voice turned silky. "Well, since you're apologizing so profusely though, I guess I can forgive ya."

He seemed satisfied with that himself, as he started towards the bathroom.

"Hokay, shower time! Hello heaven!" he proclaimed.

Saying so, Daxter started pulling off his shirt. Jak looked away, quickly, even as he was straightening up. He still caught a slip of bare back between Daxter's pants' line and rising shirt.

Jak suppressed a wish to clear his throat.

"I gotta clear something up with Torn before I leave," he said instead. "I'll just-"

Daxter's voice cut him off, too sudden and sharp. The footsteps had stopped in an instant.

"You'll be back, right?"

Even if he knew he shouldn't, Jak had to turn and look at that. The anxious tone was far too strong not to.

Daxter watched him from the other side of the room, his hands frozen on the hem of his shirt – stilled halfway up his chest. No trace of the smile remained.

If he crossed over to Daxter now, Jak knew that something would happen.
He tilted his head a little, because if he hadn't done anything even so little he would have had to move. Not trying to smile, because Daxter wasn't, and they both knew that trying wasn't worth it in this situation. Neither wanted to smile to deny this unease.

"Yeah," Jak said. "Yeah, I'll be right back."

Half a second passed before Daxter let out another dramatic sigh, head dropping forwards. He straightened up just as quickly, well-trained grin safely in place.

"Right-o, then," he said. "If that's the case, you're free to go."

He winked, then started with the shirt again.

Jak walked out the door, quickly closing it and turning the key for Daxter's privacy.

The bland corridor outside was empty, so he allowed himself to lean against the wall and press a hand to his forehead for a moment.

Precursors, this was not going well.

As he started to walk, he dryly wondered just how odd his behavior must have seemed. Truth being, however, it wasn't just that he needed to spare himself being too close to his friend in such a situation. He did have a real reason to see Torn and the others without Daxter.

A few minutes later he entered the heart of the Freedom HQ for the second time that day. Nothing seemed to have changed at all, but then nothing ever seemed to here – and when something did seem different, it seldom meant anything good. No complaints there.

Before Jak had even taken two steps inside, Torn noticed him.

"Did you forget something, Jak?" the commander roughly asked, giving a routine glare over the top of a heap of reports.

Even if he did not reply at once, the hero had the full attention before he had even gotten to the central table computer thanks to that question.

"I need to tell you something before I go."

Jak only looked around briefly, then turned back to Torn and Ashelin. As he continued each face tightened – either grim or worried. He could feel it without even looking.

"When Erol showed up, he-" Jak's eyebrows crept lower. "- he targeted Daxter. That's how he fell down the chasm into the eco. And I think he- Erol figured out that Dax is important."

Jak was stepping on unknown territory right now, and the rest of them only made him more aware of it. They remained silent, normal squabbling and interjections cut short in the face of him so wordy. Perhaps some thought that it was just because it was the first time they saw him without Daxter – without somebody who would speak for him. So they let him speak, watching him silently, and a little surprised.

He expressed himself carefully, but it was quite enough. Jak could see from the (of varying success) suppressed flinches that each and every one in his audience could guess how apparent it had been.

Giving them the eased up story about what had happened wasn't the hardest part. Jak clenched his
"Erol knows that Dax is here, for sure. And I have to go back to Spargus." His hands curled at his sides. "I'm counting on you to make sure he stays safe."

The silence fell crisply upon the room, for a moment leaving nothing but the constant hum of the computers. But it only lasted for as long as it took Ashelin to breathe in to speak.

"We'll take care of him, Jak. I promise."

They exchanged glances, a slight twitch of Jak's lips acknowledging the echo of her two final words. She had been right the last time she said it, when somebody did find him in the middle of miles of nothing but sand and rocks.

"Oh Ashelin, you don't know what you're us getting into," Samos dryly said from his corner of the room. "Keeping Daxter out of trouble is more work than it's worth." He looked up at Jak, expression softening somewhat. "But, since you're asking, my boy, we'll give it a shot."

Jak smirked slightly, and just for a little while the unease melted away.

However, it returned as he walked back through the corridors, on his way to tell Daxter goodbye. Even if everyone knew it was nothing but a temporary separation, it left a sour taste in his mouth.

A year ago, he wouldn't have been able to close his eyes in sleep if Daxter wasn't there, because the cold of the prison still filled his bones. Even if it seemed an unhealthy addiction, Jak's everyday life demanded absolute vigilance of him. And that demanded proper sleep. It demanded a way to unwind – and he had always gotten that from the cheerful chatter.

Even so, he would just have to deal with being alone for a while. Really, it shouldn't be that difficult – he felt worlds better after coming to Spargus. Not so far down mentally that he'd start imagining voices again. He could get by, and so could Daxter, despite that anxious tone and worried look.

Neither of them were children.

Still working on this mental health practice, Jak pushed the door to their room open. As he did so the thought struck him, with a fair bit of alarm, that Daxter may still be in the shower. He had to wonder how difficult that would be.

It shouldn't be, shouldn't, shouldn't.

Jak bit the inside of his cheek hard, forcing himself to snap out of it.

There was nobody in the main room, but a red spot to the side caught his eye instantly. Daxter was poking his head out from the bathroom, an annoyed look on his face. Jak raised an eyebrow at him.

"It's beyond the scope of belief and still spinning!" Daxter shouted, throwing up his arms and retreating.

Both eyebrows at their highest possible position, Jak crossed the room and entered the smaller one. It took him a moment to take in the scene.

The door to the shower was carelessly left half open, the small, pale towel on the floor a tangled mess by now. Another towel had dropped from Daxter's grip by the look of it, lying in a heavy heap by his feet.
Daxter was standing by the sink in his boxers only, his hair a messy bush after the quick drying he had been working on giving it. One hand pressed against his chin and cheek. The mirror was getting a mixed glare of half exasperation, half disbelief.

After a second he finally turned to Jak, still holding his hand in position.

"I gotta shave?" he complained.

Apparently, the pride of the fur shuddered at the thought.

For a moment, Jak just stared at him, then broke out in a voiceless laughter.

"Hey!" Daxter half howled, ramming both fists into his own hips and staring accusingly at his friend – and only one step away from laughing, himself.

Daxter's pout only melted a little when Jak stepped closer. A moment later it turned into a smirk when a big hand reached out and a thumb brushed against the rough little specks of red hair on the bony chin. Daxter wasn't really annoyed at all, he simply had to make a scene about it – anxious to have it noticed, even in his delight at this new bit of change. Jak saw right through it, but just as with all of Daxter's tall stories he did nothing to puncture that balloon. Especially not now.

There was nothing special about the place they were in, no safe familiarity or beautiful surroundings. If anything it was cramped and clinical, made only less so by the carelessly discarded towel and the wet floor. There was no emotion in the stark white bathroom. But maybe that helped, in a way. If "helped" was the right word.

One had to consider the restraint Jak had managed so far, nothing short of almost tying himself into a knot. And at this faked incredulous look, the pout and the whine, he could simply take no more.

His brain was screaming no no nonono DON'T.

He didn't listen.

Their foreheads lightly touched in a playful dunk, Daxter's grin widening as Jak silently chuckled at him. Still just best friends since forever, at ease with being close and touching each other. Daxter had never shied away or suspected foul play, he who had slept in the crook of Jak's neck, lived on his shoulder, hidden inside his shirt and taken showers with him, soaked little fuzz ball draped across a scarred arm perfectly at ease. They could have gone on like that even now, with the same brotherly ease that had grown from their childhood.

But that all shattered when Jak tilted his head and touched his lips to Daxter's.

Both smiles went blank, Daxter's eyes shooting wide open in shock.

It lasted only for a second, before Jak pulled back as if he had been stung – while the redhead before him stood frozen, fingers hawked at his sides as if he had been about to push away but hadn't been able to get further.

They stared at each other for a painful moment, until Jak's gaze fell to the side.

"Sorry."

He turned around and left without looking back.

Like the boy who turned away and looked at the reefs, unable to look at his furious, newly fuzzy
best friend. Unable to look at what he had caused. He heard a thump as Daxter's hand heavily landed on the side of the sink for support, but by then Jak was already by the door and leaving. Some numb memory made him remember to pick up his backpack and morph gun as he passed them, but then he was gone.

Whatever was in the sewers – robots or metal heads alike – would soon be wishing they were never born.

Begin Introspection. Serial code: Jak.

I guess I can't control myself. And I guess that's because for so long, I had to contend with the scraps of life Praxis felt like throwing at me – a flash of sunlight, a day at peace, anything that had been natural for as long as I could recall, but no longer belonged to me.

Nothing was mine anymore, not even me.

So I… grasp for things, desperately.

I didn't want Daxter to have to suffer for that too.

But I couldn't even keep that resolve.

I'm an idiot.

End Introspection.
Dusk

Begin Introspection. Serial code: Daxter.

... bwhthe hell?

End Introspection.

Jak left the HQ in a sort of daze, hardly even noticing where his feet were taking him.

Before he knew it he was moving through the sewers and splashing through the dirty, stinking waters, largely illuminated only by the flashes of light when he fired his gun. At least, the adrenaline served to wake him up. There wasn't just that, though.

Feeling, each moment, like Erol was watching and smiling from somewhere behind him. Knowing that he was alone, and curious as to why.

Nothing happened, but Jak couldn't let it go. Didn't want to.

A mad thought stuck in his brain while he slouched through the dark, slimy corridors, stupid and unshakeable. If he had to go through that feeling of being watched for too long, he'd probably find himself standing on a rooftop shouting at Erol to come out and face him.

It was too familiar, maybe just his paranoia; old fears from the prison of never being out of sight, always guarded – but he wouldn't wager it. When it came down to it... right then, Erol was nothing but a diversion, something just bad enough to take his mind of things.

Because that thump of Daxter's hand on the sink rolled in his ears, and those wide open, shocked eyes was all Jak saw as soon as he stopped to catch his breath.

In compare to that, Jak would have even preferred to hear that hollow, metallic voice calling his name. He could have hated Erol more than he hated himself right then.

To scare Daxter was the one thing he never should have been able to do. What he did in their room hadn't been a newly born crazy alter ego he couldn't control. It had been him.

And Daxter had never been so scared of Dark Jak that he fell mute.

Jak hardly even noticed the sunlight when he climbed out of the sewers and made his way towards the pier, towards his ride far, far away.

It all came down to that Jak already was in a bad mood when he began his journey back to Spargus. It didn't get any better, either.

The long trip in the air train stretched out for eternity behind him as he stepped out into the desert –
hours of nothing but his own thoughts. No stream of words washing over him and keeping him from thinking.

He really needed to fight something big.

In the face of that knowledge, it was almost a relief to hear a familiar voice shout at him the moment the city gates opened before him.

"Oi, poppy!"

Only almost a relief, however, because even if Kleiver was good at finding harsh work, it could never, ever be a completely good thing to be noticed by that man.

"Perfect timin'," the huge man rumbled as he stalked across the open area between cars.

Jak took a few steps closer to meet him, but did not reply. For a moment the gaze from the mean little pig eyes went up and down the blond youth, and it seemed like a real danger that there would be questions about the lack of "rat". In the end though, Kleiver seemed to decide that he didn't really care whether or not Jak had finally made lunch out of his pet.

"We've got a coupl'a boys stranded out there with a broken Shark," Kleiver said, jabbing a thumb at the wall which kept the desert out. "'Less you're so mellowed from your weekend in the big smoke that ye can't handle any real action, I want you to take a mechanic out there to get them and the car back."

It sounded disappointing to Jak's ears, at first. In his current state of mind he would have much preferred a hunting trip. Then again, things never went as easy as Kleiver liked to make them sound – just to give poor little newbies healthy doses of shock.

"I'll go," Jak said.

"Good widdle poppy," Kleiver said with a smirk.

While Jak rolled his eyes, the huge man turned around.

"Hey, Zem! Git yer useless ass out here, I found you a ride!" he bellowed.

"Yeah, yeah…"

A tall shadow stepped out from behind a ragged Desert Screamer, shielding his eyes from the sun with a huge hand. The other hand held on to a dully gray tool box.

The man took a couple of steps closer until both he and Jak managed to get a proper look at each other in the glaring sunlight. A foot froze in mid step, lips parting in a sound that never made it.

Jak's eyebrows sunk.

The mechanic was tall, probably almost at Sig's height. And like Sig, his skin was dark – but a deeper, colder hue. A thin, black braid hung down over his shoulder, hair falling out of it and clinging to the sweaty neck.

But the most prominent thing of all were the grey tattoos embedded in his skin. The depth of his color made them harder to spot, but they were definitely there.

Ex-KG, and one not exactly delighted to see who his driver was from the look of things.
Jak threw a glare at Kleiver – and as he did, he didn't notice that the mechanic's frozen expression cracked in a similar scowl at the same person. Both of them silently questioning the fat walrus if there was no other mechanic he could spare.

Kleiver's wicked grin replied that sure, he could. He just didn't feel like it.

It wasn't worth an argument – even in his aggravated state Jak recognized that. Kleiver would be the only one getting anything out of it, and he wouldn't change his mind. He would, however, be delighted to make comments about whiners.

Letting out a deep breath, Jak walked over to his own Sand Shark and climbed in, waving at the mechanic – Zem, was it? – to climb in. The Gila Stomper may have been a better choice in case they would have to pull the broken vehicle back to Spargus, but the Shark was quick and could get the job done.

Besides, it was much closer by and Jak wasn't in a patient mood to start with. Everything so far was bad enough, having to spend time with an ex seemed to be the world's way of icing the crap cake.

Once he sat in the driver's seat, however, Jak tried to get a grip of himself. He could deal with this. It wasn't like every ex in Spargus was a scumbag, even if most of them kept a careful/distrustful distance. He never had a problem with Torn being an ex-KG back in the day before they knew each other that well.

Then again, in that time, Jak hadn't yet understood what the tattoos meant. For all he had known then, it was something every other person got themselves in that strange, cruel world he had been dumped in.

Torn and Ashelin were alright. More than half the Freedom League soldiers were ex-KGs, many wary of him but not all of them aversive of throwing a grateful shout after him when he dashed in to save their sorry hides once a week.

Jak looked up and quirked an eyebrow as the mechanic clumsily climbed into the passenger seat of the Shark. He moved stiffly, avoiding to look at the blond driver. When he finally sat down his toolbox heavily landed in his lap, huge dark hands curling around the handle.

Without a word, Jak turned his head to the side to look a full question at the other man. Zem immediately leaned even harder against the car's frame, looking very much like he would gladly leap out of the vehicle right there and then.

It would have been so much better if Daxter had been there. He would have asked this bleedin' weirdo just how bad he had gotten beaten up by Haven's blond wonder before getting tossed into the giant sandlot.

But without Daxter there to smoothen it out, all there was in the car was a tattooed giant of a man just waiting to be attacked by a crazy demon.

Jak grit his teeth and looked ahead, turning the engine key with whitening fingers.

He did not need this kind of bullshit right now.

The Shark's engine came alive with a loud humming, and the vehicle rolled forwards. Jak focused on steering through the parking lot, not acknowledging anything else until the gate slid close behind them.
"Where to?" he growled without looking around.

From the corner of his eyes he still noticed Zem twitching at the sound. That did it. This time, the mechanic got a glare.

It almost flattened him against the car's side.

"I'm not going to tear your throat out!" Jak snarled.

Despite what he said, he found himself baring his teeth and quickly withdrew, inwardly cursing and trying to sear the desert ahead of them with his scowl.

"Okay, okay, okay… I got you."

The voice was deep and hoarse, but Zem didn't clear his throat in an attempt to speak clearer. He plucked his communicator from his belt and unfolded it, speaking quickly while it hummed to life.

"They're on the other side of the ruins and then a bit west," he said. "I'll get the coordinates in a sec…"

Jak just grunted in reply.

This trip made the lonesome hours in the air train seem pleasant in compare. Zem couldn't have been more aggravating if he had been constantly talking or even throwing insults. That would be a frustration Jak at least felt familiar with. The mute fear seeping from the huge man was something else, something of the nameless masses that had condemned their once "hero" to a death in the wasteland without even having seen him in person.

They did not exchange another word apart from brief directions from Zem, his gaze glued to the communicator as he spoke. When they finally – after what certainly felt like weeks to both of them – rolled over the top of a dune and spotted a dark smear looking like a car in the waves of heat ahead, the mechanic folded up the communicator and tried to straighten up.

"There," he muttered.

Jak didn't even bother to reply to that. For a couple of seconds it seemed like that would be it, but Zem suddenly reached up to scratch his cheek, hard.

"I- I, uh…"

He pinched his eyes shut.

"I've got a… history," he said, hoarser than ever. "But I ain't… angry at you, I just…"

The hand fell from his face and he turned away slightly.

"Sorry."

It was spoken low to start with, almost made impossible to hear over the engine. Jak still caught it, raising his eyebrows. There had been a lot of apologies flung his way lately, after Torn and Ashelin's official ones many others had followed. Very few of them had, however, sounded believable to him.

There wasn't a question about whether or not this one was honest or not. There was something else, something hoarse and trembling in the voice, in the way Zem's lips were pressed shut now.
Something was off, and Jak didn't like it. He still felt prompted to speak, however.

"I'm not going to kill you," he said, rehashing with some improvement what he had said earlier. It worked as an acknowledgement, but not a pardon. He didn't know what Zem meant, and he didn't want to know, that was all.

Zem flinched, but did not say anything more.

As they came closer, a man stood up in the shadow of the unmoving car and waved. A moment later the rescuers were close enough to see that there was a second wastelander waiting. This one, however, remained sitting – leaning heavily against one of the wheels, his head hanging low and his right arm in a dirty sling. He looked up and squinted when Jak rolled in beside the Shark and turned off the engine.

Sweat glistened on gray tattoos as the wounded man moved.

Another one.

"I was getting worried," the standing wastelander said – his face, at least, free of gray patches. His lips twitched when he spotted the mechanic. "Don't be too harsh on me, now, I didn't ram him on purpose."

He pointed down the hill, and moving to look around the wrecked Shark the newcomers spotted the dark shape of a typical wasteland metal head – a giant lizard armed to its teeth. The tracks in the sand showed that it had been charging, the flung to the side and tumbled down the dune.

That would explain the big dent on the front of the Shark. Zem was already eying it, annoyance seeping from his very being.

On his side, Jak had spent the same time looking at the metal head, fingers absently twitching just at the thought of fighting more of them. It was a blunt thrill Haven never could offer – not beyond that one metalpede, and that had not been a situation that allowed for a fair fight.

He turned around only to come face to face with a not at all unfriendly grin.

"Kleiver oughta think we're in real trouble if he's sending someone like you," the wastelander said. In his state of mind Jak didn't feel much at all for the half-veiled respect, but he managed to stretch his lips a tiny bit.

Daxter would have loved it – though he would have showed it by demanding more of the same, and aimed his way. But Daxter wasn't there.

It was the one thing Jak could not forget for a moment.

"Yer an asskisser, Nidle," came a gruff snarl from the ground a few feet away.

The fourth wastelander seemed to have woken up, narrowing his eyes at all of them. At this distance it became apparent that he seemed to have some trouble focusing his eyes – which also underlined the fact that there had been a bit of a slur when he spoke.

"Arch there isn't feeling so good," Nidle said, rolling his eyes and jabbing a thumb at the ex-KG slouching against the Shark.

All three of them got an unfocused glare in return for that comment, but the wounded man didn't
say anything. Nidle gave him a warning glance just to be sure, then continued in a lower voice.

"Just ignore him, his mind's with the birdies right now. I messed up a little when I gave him painkillers for his arm."

Zem made an annoyed sound, but turned and walked over to open the car's hood instead of commenting. As he bent over the engine, another, and much more acidic, annoyed sound was heard.

Nidle gave him an odd look, as if he had been expecting something more from the mechanic. Yet Zem didn't even look up, not even when he was called.

"Hey, can you fix it?" Nidle asked.

"I'll give it a shot, but you may as well prepare to get dragged back home," Zem replied, digging in his tool box.

Letting out a loud sigh, Nidle let his head drop to the side. A moment passed, and then he caught Jak's eye.

"I'll get the rope if you'd move up in front of us."

He turned and walked over to the broken Shark without waiting for more than a nod. A clanking and rustle rose up seconds later, as a big hand started rummaging around in the back of the car.

Jak started back towards his own car, when a slurring voice stopped him.

"Figures Kleiver would send the cavalierly to get us killed."

Unsteadily, Arch worked his way to his feet and leant against the car. Jak tried to make himself not look around, but he could see the motion in the corner of his eye – and a thought flashed briefly, an instinctual wonder at why Daxter didn't retort.

Then he clenched his teeth and began walking again. Not worth it, just ignore it, a drunk... high moron and nothing else. The sound of Nidle searching for the rope had stopped.

"What's the matter, freak?" Arch snarled. "Not up for tearing limbs off'a cripples today?"

"Arch!" Nidle snapped, but the damage was done.

Jak turned around, hands curling into fists. Yet he remained still and only glared back, even as Arch took a couple of not too steady steps forwards. Too close, too close, but he wouldn't retreat for an idiot of an intoxicated ex.

"Cool it, man," Zem hissed, poking up from the engine to wave a hand at Arch.

The other ex turned his head, bleary eyes narrowed at the attempt at a calming motion. A snort, and then a drawling growl.

"Shut up. Fucking coaltop..."

Jak had once, and only once – because according to Jinx, it only happened about once every third year – borne witness to a very, very drunk man throwing a racial slur at Sig.

It had been a late night at the Hip Hog, at that time, and Sig had been assigned the job as a temporary bouncer. People tended to look at the time with just a glare and jab of a huge thumb, but
some morons were too intoxicated to think that far. Most often though, it ended with a verbal hint. 
Not that time.

As soon as the two words "mud flaps" had entered the air, everything seemed to stop. The silent "uh-oh" was deafening, but the drunkard didn't even seem to notice it.

There had been barely contained distaste on Sig's face when the argument first started. That changed in a second.

Three booths away, Daxter ducked down Jak's shirt.

The idea had from the start been that the drunkard was to be thrown out.

And he was. He just had to come back for a few teeth later. And be dragged out of the harbor water, before that.

Violence might not kill racism, but it sure gives a bit of momentary satisfaction.

Zem did not have the power to change the atmosphere like Sig could, but he himself changed. Dark lips drawing back from his in compare eerily bright teeth and eyes narrowing, all that pathetic meekness was gone in a flash.

Apparently though, it was not noticed by the one it was aimed at.

"Get back t' work, I ain't talking to you," Arch snarled, sweeping his arm out at Jak. "'m talking to this fuckin' eco freak-"

The backhand flared against the bright sky and blazing sand, and deep down, Jak knew that by that distance it would safely pass several inches away from his face. That knowledge stood no chance against the far stronger instinct, the one that only knew of tattooed faces and static laughter and hard gloves.

Before he even had finished a single thought his arm flew up to block, and Arch's wrist collided with it.

It only earned him the swaying ex's full attention. The bleary eyes turned to Jak again, thinning with fury.

"You pickin' a fight?"

"That's enough, Arch!" Nidle shouted. But nobody listened to him.

Jak met the not too focused glare without a word, drawing back his hand to his side. It wasn't worth it, it wasn't worth it-

"Thinkin' yer so great 'cause you're a good driver, eh?" Arch sneered. He jabbed a finger at Jak's chest. "Even Damas wants ya dead."

Jak caught the man's wrist in an iron grip before the unsteady finger managed to actually touch what it was jabbing at. Not even this and the sliver of teeth showing stopped Arch.

"Whaddaya think he sent Sig at ya in the arena for?" The smirk grew wider, catching on to the tiniest hint of a flinch. "He sure don't want him dead."

Jak opened his mouth, but no reply formed within his mind.
He had avoided thinking about that. Of all things, he had made himself absolutely, under no circumstance, even consider that one thing. Because he had known that he had no explanation, no sensible reason.

Nails digging into palm and a dangerous whisper in his ears liar liar liar liar shut up-

A shadow fell over the two of them, a huge palm slamming into Arch's chest and sending him stumbling backwards, the surprise loosening the grip holding him. At the same time, the intruder's other hand crunched down over Jak's shoulder and shoved him further away.

"I oughta-!"

Zem's growl was cut short as a smaller hand closed around his wrist and ripped his hand away. He turned, anger draining into a look of pure horror the moment he met Jak's eyes. The smaller hand more threw aside the wrist than let go, and Zem recoiled as if bitten.

For the first time since he had left his own car, Jak spoke.

"Don't touch me. Ever."

"Ah- I- r-right…" The rage that had changed Zem for the briefest moment deflated, and he stepped several more steps backwards.

In the background Arch started to say something again, when there was a sudden thunk and the paler ex fell with glazed eyes. Rolling his eyes, Nidle stepped back and massaged the edge of his hand.

"Sorry about that," he said, then bent down to grab Arch's limp form and drag it back into the shadow.

Jak hardly heard him, stalking back to his car and climbing in to drive it up in front of the Shark. Once he held on to the wheel he could hardly remember how to let go, clenching his fingers around the hot leather until his entire arms shook.

Nobody said a word to explain what Arch had said about Damas. Daxter wasn't there to make it better.

Daxter just wasn't there.

While Jak was still heading through the sewers, amusing himself with the age old art of mentally kicking himself senseless, Daxter finally made his way out of his living quarters.

He could not have recalled the last hour if he tried. It may have involved a lot of sitting on the bathroom floor, but it was a guess as good as any.

His chin was still as unshaven as he had found it after the shower.

Blank eyes scanning the walls and floor before him, idle and uninterested even as he moved. There really was no plan, and he only vaguely registered the route when he realized where he was heading.

Just because there was no place else.

He went to the heart of the HQ, to the land of computers and frowns, where Ashelin reigned supreme and everyone spent all day reading reports and listening for calls for help coming in from
the soldiers in the city. Mostly calls for Torn to come and save them.

Daxter went there knowing that he wasn't wanted. Went there despite the fact that being a pain in the ass currently lacked its usual charm. Still, even their annoyance that didn't mean anything right then was better than the uninterrupted chug of his own thoughts.

He had wanted to go outside – not too far, of course, in case there would be any nasty surprise attacks – and just get a proper feel of his recovered body. Just move about, run a little, maybe scale a tree (all in spite of what he had promised Jak, of course). Pretend that he was still in Sandover, maybe. But ever since Jak left, Daxter hadn't felt like it anymore.

The door to the computer hall opened, and the redhead found himself mostly ignored. Except for by one.

"Aark! The rat problem is getting bigger!"

Pecker shot up from his resting place on Onin's basket hat, flapping out of reach as quickly as he could.

"Can it, bird brain!" Daxter grumbled back.

He had wanted to chase Pecker down too, yet even that didn't seem interesting anymore. Only sparing the bird one acidic glare, Daxter flung himself into a chair – a little harder than he should have, as the creaking startled him a little. Luckily enough, the piece of furniture held up.

He still had to get used to actually weighing something.

Grumbling to himself, he crashed an elbow on the chair's armrest and leant his face against a fist, crushing his lips against the hard ridge of knuckles. After a moment, he fell silent and closed his eyes.

What… the… hell?

Something had happened that could not have happened. What had he been drinking yesterday? What had Jak been drinking?

Daxter ground his lips against his teeth with the fist until it hurt, trying to get rid of the memory of Jak's… what Jak had done.

He couldn't freaking deal with this. What… the… hell? Jak was his best friend. A guy! Best guy friend! The guy Daxter knew since forever and inside out! There was no way he'd want to k… do something like that, not to a guy. Not to his partner in crime. For starters, Daxter would have known about it.

He would have.

As close friends as they were, as close as they had lived for years-

Daxter bit his knuckles as a choking heat flared up across his face.

Curling up on Jak's chest and creeping into his shirt for protection and Jak holding him close and Jak had seen him naked yesterday and what had Jak been thinking about?

The fist muffled a strangled sound escaping Daxter's chest.

He felt like he would throw up.
His stomach rolled for a moment, but then it froze as frigid guilt poured through his being.

"I'm not going to move."

How could he, dared he think about Jak like that? Jak, whom he just up and left to two years of hell, but who forgave him and still kept him safe no matter what? Jak, who would throw away his gun and raise his arms in defeat for the off chance that it may save his best friend?

And just two days later, was that best friend no better than those who yelled "eco freak"?

He might still throw up.

But why had Jak kissed him?

Daxter pulled a face behind his fist as the k-word finally made it through his mental filter. Damn. Damn, damn, damn! What… the… hell?

How had Jak expected him to react to that?

More importantly… what did Jak want from him now? Daxter suppressed a shudder, then hated himself for it. He just didn't want to think about that. Didn't want to think about that maybe he didn't have a best friend anymore, not if that best friend asked things of him that he couldn't give.

But Jak wouldn't… leave him behind. Not any worse than he was doing now, this was necessity. He'd come back.

The prospect of seeing Jak again made Daxter crunch his eyes shut even tighter. He couldn't deal right now, just couldn't. How could he ever?

Maybe, maybe this separation now was a good thing, right now. But then, would Jak have kissed him if they wouldn't spend time apart?

No… no, Jak didn't run away from things unless it was really, really, really bad.

… this was worse. And he should have known that. He shouldn't have kissed his best friend in the first place.

He shouldn't have done that.

"Well, somebody's looking under the feather."

Daxter nearly jumped out of his skin as Pecker plopped down on the chair's other armrest.

"Get lost before I pluck all of your feathers, birdie," the redhead muttered, turning further away.

"Aiaiai," Pecker said, sweeping a bright blue wing at Daxter's cheek and then quickly flying away from the half-hearted smack coming his way. "If you're not going to put your soul in it, there's no sport in indulging you."

"Get cooked!"

Despite the angry shout however, Daxter did not even make a motion to stand up.

He didn't see Keira watching him with a raised eyebrow. Even Samos gave him a glance that lacked the usual acid. Torn and Ashelin, meanwhile, did not even look up – writing off the shout as nothing worse or less than any other of Daxter's outbursts.
They had not known him for most of their lives.

Pecker flapped back to the unmoving Onin – perhaps she was sleeping, Daxter dully thought – and did not attempt to bother the gloomy redhead anymore. An uncanny silence followed, as Daxter sunk back into his brooding, tapping his finger against the armrest at a constantly changing, annoyed pace.

A sixth sense made him glance up when from the corner of his eye he noticed Samos wobbling over to one of the smaller computers. The sage pushed a button, stopping a blinking green light. A voice buzzed, but it was too far away for Daxter to hear. After a couple of seconds Samos answered something and hit button again. He turned around, meeting Daxter's eye for a brief moment.

"Jak made it through the sewers," Samos announced. "He's leaving the city now."

Daxter flinched and stared at the floor. A sound of acknowledgement was heard from Ashelin, but Torn and Pecker probably just nodded. Daxter wouldn't know, fully occupied with trying to figure out what the hell he thought about Jak heading off and away.

He did not pick up on the quick, light steps until a small, strong hand closed around his wrist and he was hauled to his feet, blinking in surprise at Keira. She most decisively nodded towards the door and proceeded to drag him along towards it, and out into the corridor. Well outside, she continued down the hallway at a quick pace. It took Daxter a moment to adjust to her speed, his own legs a bit stiff and unused to almost having to jog. This did of course not stop him to repeatedly ask her what the deal was.

"You look like you need a talk," she finally said over her shoulder.

"Ah dammit," Daxter said, trying to sound perfectly jolly though his stomach tried to turn into a knot. "I hate it when you ladies say stuff like that…"

It did not take too many turns before he knew where they were going.

In these full-blown-war days, Keira did not work on fixing and building racing zoomers or creating rift riders. She lived closer to the surface than most of the rest of the team, making herself useful by repairing damaged military vehicles. To make things easier for her, she had been assigned a room at the same level as the garage.

Right then, that didn't matter much beyond the point that she did not drag Daxter along to her room, but to the garage. A big double door finally opened for the two of them, washing out a wave of chilly air smelling of metal.

The garage was large, but not huge – one of many such places, though this was the central one, as part of the vastly equipped underground HQ. Haven could not afford the risk of keeping all their weapons and vehicles in one single place, had not done so since the beginning. So they had various places to store everything important, ready to be called upon if need be. Daxter thought he recalled something about this particular garage being a leftover from before Praxis' time – he had used it of course, but like so much else he had not built it. Mar probably had, like everything else – that or Jak's dad or granddad maybe, Daxter had always lazily figured about these kind of things.

Right now, there wasn't much action going on down there, from the looks of it. A couple of mechanics could be seen further down the underground parking lot, waving at Keira in the dusty glare of the lamps lining the dent between ceiling and walls. Or rather what remained of the walls, since everything was set up like a stable for military cruisers.
A few blue vehicles were left in their little homes on either side of the garage, the paint flaking and leaving the red beneath painfully visible.

There was probably a big door somewhere that opened to let all of the big bad fighters out, but Daxter had no interest nor time to reflect on it. Keira turned just after the door and dragged him off towards a corner, where a grayish door awaited.

Behind that was, as it turned out, what looked like a coffee room. A very simple kitchen – sink and coffee pot – and a table, both wearing dark, circular stains of many, many cups. A few chairs seemed to have been randomly placed all over the room, and in the far back there was a small, worn sofa. It was to that which Keira headed, then pushed Daxter down to sit on it. He looked up, quirking a nervous eyebrow.

"I've known you forever, Daxter. What's wrong?" Keira asked, punctuating her question by waving her finger about two inches from his nose.

She left it mercifully unsaid that anyone could see that something was wrong.

"Oh it's just… well, ya know, not-"

Daxter cleared his throat, setting his mind as straight as he could.

"It just kinda sucks finally being back to normal when Haven is practically falling apart again, ya know?" he said, stretching his lips so far it hurt. "I can't really enjoy it like it oughta be."

She wasn't buying it, and her folded arms said so before she actually spoke. Though she did give him a second to breathe, before she verbally punched him in the gut.

"It's Jak."

But then, he had braced himself for the hit, so it didn't hurt so much. He got back on track almost immediately. Almost too quickly, actually.

"Aw sheez!" he said, slapping the air. "Who needs him? It's always Jak, Jak, Jak 'round this joint. We can all have a good time even without the blond wonder, can't we?"

Keira smiled a little.

"I miss him too, Daxter."

All air left the redhead. His shoulders fell.

"It oughta be tough for you," Keira said, sitting down beside him.

Once, he would have given his left arm – maybe – to have her move in so close to him on her own. But right now, Jak – the bastard – had made him too numb and confused to even appreciate Keira getting close and friendly.

"You haven't been apart since- for forever, right?" she said.

Daxter bit his lip, looking the other way.

"It's not… it's not just that…" he muttered.

She remained mercifully silent, just waiting. And waiting. And waiting some more, while he fidgeted with the hem of his shirt. Still, she kept waiting until he was ready.
Daxter gulped hard.
"Keira, don't hit me with the wrench, sugar-hun, just..." he forced himself to look at her for a moment. "Just why did'ya and Jak... y'know, break up?"

He didn't look, but he could guess that she bit her lip. Seemingly without thinking, she plucked a small wrench from some pocket and started turning it between her hands. Probably feeling better with something to keep her hands occupied, but it did not seem to work. The silence stretched until Daxter thought that he would explode, so much that when she breathed in to speak he cut her off.

"'Cause I think, think... he never told me, see, and I think he's really..."

Daxter gulped again, rubbing his neck.

"... Really, y'know, lonely."

*Oh sweet merciful gods now she'll know he made a move on me! JAK! ME! ARGH WHAT the HELL*

When Keira finally spoke, Daxter was so engrossed in his personal mental screaming that he nearly jumped out of his skin for the second time in the last half hour. Even if she spoke so softly that it could hardly be heard.

"I don't know."

He glanced at her, but now she was the one who didn't look. She sat hunched, head dropping while the wrench kept twisting between her fingers.

"We never said anything about it, it just happened," she murmured.

A heavy feeling of regret cozily settled in Daxter's chest.

"Ah, Keira, babe, forget it, I'm sorry..."

She shook her head, but didn't straighten up.

"No, don't worry," she quickly said, a tiny smile in her voice. She shook her head again, cutting off another volley of stumbling attempts to patch up the mistake. "I just don't know."

One of her hands came up to cup her cheek, propping her up better than her neck seemed able to currently do.

"I just couldn't calm him down, I guess," she said. "He couldn't relax for long, he just wanted to keep moving."

"He does that all the time, it's nothing to worry about," Daxter said, trying to smile wider than he wanted to.

Keira let out a breath that sounded like half a chuckle.

"Yeah, I guess..." she mumbled. She took in a deep breath, and somehow Daxter managed to make himself wait and see. "I always worried about not being there if he needed me though. But, he's got you, right?"

Daxter choked out something like a weak laugh, trying not to let it sound too high pitched. It was pretty tough with the paranoid part of his mind hysterically screaming *she knows she knows she*
KNOWS AAARGH!

Hence why he jumped when she touched his arm. Their gazes met in an instant, he being the one quickly looking the other way.

"Sorry, I didn't mean- he'll be back for you, Daxter," Keira gently said.

Oh. She'd meant it that way. Right, right. The Demolition Duo, always together, inseparable-even-if-you-use-a-crowbar way. Not the big-bad-hero-best-friend-suddenly-randomly-gay-for-you way.

Still…

AAAAARGH!

He kept looking away, too afraid of freaking out to dare to say anything.

The hand fell from his arm back to Keira's knees, her voice softer than ever as she asked.

"Daxter, does he… does he have nightmares when you're there?"

Daxter's stomach turned to ice.

He stared down at the back of Keira's head, her teal hair falling down to hide her face.

"D-did you tell him what he screams?" Daxter croaked.

She shook her head.

"But you did hear him?" he insisted.

"Yeah…” she breathed, hoarsely. "Don't touch me."

Silence fell between them, cold and heavy. It lasted for what felt like hours, neither of them able to break it first. Daxter closed his eyes, leaning his head back against the hard wall.

His inner screaming had stopped, confusion and frustration frozen in Keira's words. Jak's words.

Cloth rustled softly, and he looked up when Keira straightened up. This time, he didn't turn away when their gazes met, even if the look in her pretty green eyes was painful.

"Does anyone else…?" she said, speaking low.

Daxter tiredly shrugged.

"Torn knows, but I think that's it. I told him not to tell Jak."

"That's good…"

Again silence fell, but its rule was short this time as they still looked at each other. Very soon, too soon, Keira drew in a short, vulnerable breath.

"Do you think…” she started.

But her voice broke.

Her dainty little fingers rose to her face, nails digging into the soft flesh of her upper lip. Daxter shuddered.
"I don't wanna think."

He turned away, fingers twisting around the hem of his shirt. Despite this, he could fully well note how Keira curled in on herself. Small shoulders rising as she hugged herself, raising up her feet on her tiptoes.

Before he knew it, Daxter had turned on his seat and put a hand on her shoulder. Keira gave a start, staring at him in surprise.

"You know babe, Jak wasn't ever reeeally angry at you for the whole Erol thing," Daxter said, talking a little too fast even for him. "He was just kinda worried outta his mind."

He realized the connotations of the last sentence too late, and made a face to cover up his flinch.

"Er, I mean, he knew that Gingerman was a psycho," he quickly said. "He just wasn't so sure if you knew."

"No…" Keira murmured, leaning back and closing her eyes. "No, I didn't."

They fell silent.

After a little while, Daxter's hand slid off Keira's shoulder and landed in his lap.

It was his turn to start when she suddenly straightened up. His curious gaze met with a determined look in her eyes.

"It just proves that he'll be back," she said, her voice steady. "No matter what."

Daxter's lips carefully stretched. Yeah, that was right, right? It'd be alright, Jak never let anything be wrong in the long run. He started to nod, opening his mouth to say something in agreement.

But then sweet little Keira, in blissful ignorance, punched him in the gut with her next line.

"We love him, right?" she said, smile brightening just a little bit for every word.

Until then, Daxter had managed to forget, for a little while, what had happened.

He bit the inside of his cheek hard not to scream, twisting his head to the side not to let Keira see his expression.

She gave a chuckle, and his hands clenched.

"It's not a manly thing to do, I guess," she said, weakly cheerful.

Oh. Right. She still didn't guess it, after all. But that didn't make her pick of words any less unpleasant.

"Ehehe…" Daxter muttered in an awkward laugh, rubbing his neck frantically. "S-sure aint."

He nervously glanced in Keira's direction when she touched his shoulder.

"So, feeling any better?" she asked.

No… yes… maybe?

"Yeah," Daxter said, in a voice so steady that it surprised him. "Thanks, babe."
She smiled then, the last remains of unease falling away from her face. Daxter really, really wished that what was on his mind could do the same. As she stood up he did the same, and they headed back together, chatting about anything but battles… and Jak.

By the entrance to the control room, Daxter declared that he wanted to do something. Keira just smiled and nodded without asking any questions. He turned around as the door opened to let her in, waving over his shoulder as he left.

He started walking again, and didn't stop. Roaming the underground corridors of the HQ, not caring where he went, only trying to avoid anyone he might know – and to keep moving, to strangle the thoughts rattling around in his head.

He pondered skipping food for the sake of not wanting company, but dinnertime found him too hungry to keep it up. For as long as possible he stayed away from the dining hall however, which saved him from coming face to face with most of the gang. When he got there and grabbed a tray and plate of stew from the cafeteria ladies, only a few nameless lower officials were around – and Torn sitting in a corner, reading reports while shoving down what was probably just enough food to keep him alive.

From what Daxter could tell, the commander had just started eating when the redhead got there, and he finished his meal a couple of minutes after Daxter had sat down by an empty table.

Hardly looking up Torn put his tray away and left, still reading reports. He escaped without even knowing that he'd never been at risk for a jibe about his eating habits. Even now, Daxter couldn't muster the wit.

He had a really bad feeling about the near future.

Unfortunately, he was proven right when he eventually went back to his and Jak's room – his room only for the moment, thank you – and looked around while pushing the door shut. The light was still on since he had left. He had not remembered to switch it off, which didn't surprise him much.

Everything looked too much the same, far too much. Impersonal like the blandest guestroom – just a bed with pale bedclothes, a small table beside it, a perfectly cubic bureau for storing a couple of changes of clothes, and the door to the bathroom (which Daxter very pointedly avoided looking at, for that matter). Daxter had often said that heroes deserved better, but then… it was far more luxurious than Spargus, and he and Jak both slept much better there than in Haven. Not that Daxter would ever admit it.

There was absolutely nothing for him to do here. But before, that had never been a problem because Jak had been there, and that was enough. Now though, he had no idea if he even wanted to see Jak again for quite a while.

Daxter finally let out a groan he had been holding back, sinking down onto the floor and cradling his head in his hands.

He had spent all evening turning it over in his head, but he was no closer to understanding now than he had been a few hours earlier. All he knew was that something had been made wrong that shouldn't possibly have been wrongable. And he was scared as hell of that change.

He needed to talk to Jak. More than anything else, he needed to get an explanation. To hear that it was just a really bad joke, if at all possible – but he couldn't really hold on to that crazy hope.

He needed that chat, he knew it. It would be easy too… Keira would surely lend him her
communicator if he just said that he wanted to have a one on one conversation with Jak. But turning that thought over and over in his mind, Daxter only felt a cold nail crawl through his spine. He wasn't prepared for that, not yet.

How, just how could he not be prepared to talk to Jak?

His hands slipped down to his chest and he hugged himself tightly.

"Idiot… idiot, idiot, idiot!"

What would Jak tell him when they got a chance to talk? What would he ask of his childhood friend now? Daxter didn't want to think about that, least of all.

Maybe… maybe it would feel better tomorrow, when he'd slept on it all and wasn't so shell shocked? At least, he could give it a try. And if that didn't help at all – which the cynical part of Daxter's brain grimly believed true – then he could always get dead drunk.

And then again, if he did that then he'd probably end up declaring the disaster to the entire city, and that was definitely not a good idea.

And if he was brutally honest, he highly doubted that he would be able to get a wink of sleep, despite the fact that his legs ached from all the walking and his arms and shoulders reminded him of all the weapon practice he and Jak had done in the morning. Despite that, he could have been dead with exhaust and still doubted that he would get any decent sleep. Dragging himself up from the floor, Daxter resolved to at least give it a try, despite his skepticism.

Unfortunately, skepticism seemed to hold a steady grip of his fate that night.

After turning off the light he laid still in bed for a little while, but then he started tossing and turning in a futile search for a comfortable position. His own brain gave him no rest, rolling the thoughts that had haunted him during the day over and over again. There was no solution to find now either.

It continued for a couple of hours, he wasn't sure how long. After an eternity, he did manage to fall asleep, briefly – only to wake up with a start. Blinking at the darkness, confused for a few seconds. Then he rolled over and fumbled for Jak, too groggy to remember… only to recall the truth when he realized that he was alone. Mentally cursing, he rolled over and angrily curled up again, closing his eyes hard.

Missing Jak and glad that he wasn't there, at the same time.

The same thing happened a second time, but this instance left him on his back, staring up at the blackness. Eventually, his eyes got used enough to the darkness to make out the bland, strict shadows of the room.

He covered his eyes with a hand, suddenly feeling naked without his fur.

Naked and lonely.

Bit by bit the anger peeled away under his exhaust, until only a dull throb remained.

He rubbed his forehead, trying not to think. In the next moment he let out a groan and rammed the back of his head into the pillow.

"Idiot!"
But the outburst ended there, and he went back to staring at the back of his own hand. His snapping breath was the only sound, apart from the low buzz of electricity. Some distant sound could be heard if he strained his ears, distant marching steps of the security guards. He kinda appreciated that sound now. At least it meant that there were other people awake.

A thought struck hard and he bit his lip. Was Jak lying awake many miles away, alone in his home in Spargus?

An evil thought muttered that he probably was sound asleep, the moron…

… but Daxter knew Jak better than that. He wondered, with a rising sense of dread, what would happen if Jak had a nightmare and he wasn't there to make it better.

He sat up, blanket sliding into his lap as he pressed both palms to his forehead.

Jak is a big boy. Jak is a big boy, Jak is a big bad hero who can take on half the world with his arms tied behind his back…

Except not even Jak was a hero in the middle of the night when his mind had taken him on a rollercoaster of his unspoken fears. Even if he was beyond better now in compare how it had been just after he'd gotten out of prison, who knew what would happen when he was alone? They hadn't ever, ever been separated since… then.

Daxter took in a deep breath and let his hands fall.

Okay. First thing tomorrow morning he was gonna get himself a communicator of his own, come hell or high water. Even if he'd have to pull everyone's hair to get it. Then, call Jak, sort things out *come hell or high water or mental breakdowns*, give him a shiny new number to call at any time in the day at all, and at least be safe in the knowledge that nightmares wouldn't be so scary anymore. If they could get past the whole… kissing… thing…

Which they damn well would. Right?

Right?

… right.

It wasn't exactly iron resolution, but it seemed to soothe the worst, current fears.

Feeling relieved, he laid back down and tried to fall asleep again.

Despite the ebbing unease, sleep still seemed to elude him however. Soon enough, the tossing and turning resumed, and continued for torturous, slow minutes.

Eventually, an idea crept into his tired head. At first it sounded too silly, though. Yet, as he laid awake, curling, straightening, turning, and not finding any rest, it begun to sound more and more… not sensible, but promising.

Finally he sighed and rolled out of bed, turning on the lamp on the nightstand and growling in pain at the stinging light. Stumbling on tired legs, he made it across the room and over to the far back corner, close to the bathroom door.

Jak's dirty clothes still laid in a pile there, forgotten. In the same motion as he turned around, Daxter bent down and ripped a shirt from the heap. Angrily clutching it, he went back to bed and switched the lamp off. He curled up beneath the warm covers again, holding the cloth against his
chest. Close enough to feel the familiar scent.

He woke up once more before morning, briefly in the early hours – and only to find that he had bundled up the blanket into a roll. In his sleep he hugged it, still clutching Jak's shirt. Too sleepy to be annoyed, Daxter unrolled the blanket over himself and went back to dreamland.

Because of his inability to fall asleep for half the night, he slept until midday the next day. He would probably have kept sleeping too, if he had not been roughly awoken by the news that Jak had been shot.

Begin Introspection. Serial code: Jak.

I can't feel safe around exes. I just can't. They all wore masks, I can't, nobody could know what any of them did. What I might have done to them back then. Or they to me. And they can't know if I recognize them. But I never know.

So much happened… in the prison, I think sometimes I must have forgotten some things. Maybe some of it just blurs, because it was the same pain over and over again. But it never got to be mundane. Sometimes, something else happened, something to break the usual pain. All those times are the ones I wish I could forget the most.

I did see a face once, but I don't remember what it looked like. If I've met him afterwards, I wouldn't know. It was too quick. But then, it wouldn't surprise me if he's dead.

It wasn't so long after I started talking, I think. I know I must have been talking, because… because of what Erol did.

During one of those daily fights with the guards I managed to tear off one KG's mask and landed a punch in his face. In the next moment he had lifted me by the throat. He was huge, his arms too long for me to reach even to land a good kick. I still struggled, I didn't want to die anymore. Not until I could make them pay. But he would kill me, that's all I remember of the way his face looked. I heard some of the other guards call at him to stop, but they didn't really care. Nobody tried to do more than yell.

But I still struggled, but it was brief because he rammed my head into the wall. I lost consciousness, knowing that I was going to die like that.

As usual, I was wrong.

I woke up, lungs burning and my throat so sore I thought it would break if I tried to breathe. I couldn't see at first, couldn't hear anything but the buzzing in my head and the shrieking of my gasps.

Not sure how long it took before I realized how silent the prison was. Silent, apart from the wheezing of green smoke and distant, unknowing marching. Silent, apart from the murmur too close to my ear.

"Don't you die on me. Don't you dare. I'm not done with you."

I didn't want to breathe then, not when he wanted me to. But I couldn't stop.
And Erol stayed too close, sitting beside me and holding my shoulders, not even letting me slump.

When I looked to the side, the KG who had tried to strangle me laid knocked out on the floor a little ways away. Nobody else moved, the other guards recoiling when Erol glared at them. When he finally let go of my shoulders he massaged the knuckles on his right hand, muttering to himself. And scowled at the fallen guard.

I doubt that Erol didn't kill that guard later, because he dared to want to kill me.

That's the most disgusting thing of all.

End Introspection.

Oi, what a mess!

At least last time things bubbled over, we knew the boys in red would be shooting at the metal heads in the end. But now, it's all mecha boys in red running along with the monstahs instead.

Eh, you'd think that when a modern day prophet lady hands you lunch everyday, you'd have to worry less than I do, eh? Oooh, you'd think I knew all about what tomorrow brings, eh?

Waak, wrong!

No, no, no. Onin does not see the future. She sees possibilities. Shining roads diverging in every person's life, mingling with others.

Many of Jak's possible paths end prematurely. Harsh, but true. However, he is different for many others, for those possibilities that stretch on and on, they shine brighter in him than in many others. Yes, he has indeed been picked for important things. And when he comes close to others, their longer paths too grow stronger.

Ah, but others… they have so few paths that stretch on and on.

I had a job to do in Spargus, that's why I hopped off the transport with the rat when Jak got dumped in the desert.

I can't say I have faith in the furball's brain, but it's kinda touching to see what Onin saw back there. Not a single one of Daxter's possibilities led away from Jak in that moment. You don't see that often.

But it's got little to do with my job.

"He is right. You will most likely die."

Oh no, your lordship… but you will most likely die. There are so few paths leading on, and they are weak, even after meeting Jak… or maybe because of that. My job is not to try to save him. A fatal possibility clearly revealed becomes unavoidable – that is the price to pay. No, we cannot risk that.

But other things, important, precious things, they can be revealed carefully. My job was simply to be of aid.

People tend to know some things, instinctively. But they do not always understand them, or believe.

The future is not yet written, not for Jak… nor his father.
Night slowly trickled away as the sun rose and broke through the cracks in the wood covering the windows.

If Daxter had at least gotten a few hours of sleep after tossing and turning through half the night, he was still far better off than Jak. First light saw the blond hero bleary-eyed and heavy as a rock, staring at the ceiling.

Jak wasn't even sure how many, or few, minutes of sleep he had managed to snatch through the dark hours. They had been rare, and cut short as every hint of a dream beginning gave his overheated brain such a start that he jolted awake at once. And in between that, nothing to shield him from his thoughts about Daxter, like a red hot poker through his mind.

Idiot. Idiot. Idiot.

In those rare moments that he managed to push the memory of those wide, blue and shell-shocked eyes from his mind, Arch's words dug into him instead.

"Whaddaya think he sent Sig at ya in the arena for?"

No. No.

Sometime around midnight, Jak had gotten up and stalked into the dark city, trying to walk it all off. It helped for a little while, but when he returned, hoping he had exhausted himself enough to actually sleep, nothing had changed. The unrelenting thoughts were still there the moment he laid back down.

"Even Damas wants ya dead."

NO.

And Daxter. Daxter, Daxter.

Now what? Now what…

Idiot.

The silence crushed down on him, with no soft little breaths or mumbling voice to shield him from his own mind.

Deep down, Jak knew he had to talk to his best friend, try to… what? Explain? He didn't even know how to greet Daxter after what had happened in the bathroom.

When the communicator buzzed in the early morning, Jak was so groggy that he hardly noticed at first. But finally he realized what it was, slouching over on his side and grabbing his backpack to pull it closer. The communicator laid on top of the bag.

Who'd call this early?

Daxter?
Deep down, Jak knew that the chances of that were close to nil, but it was his first thought – and it remained stuck in his mind until he rubbed his eyes and squinted at the display.

Damas.

Jak’s stomach churned just a little less than it would have done if the call had indeed been from Daxter. He quickly pushed the button to answer, clearing his throat and hoping he would be able to speak despite his from sleeplessness dry tongue.

"Yes?" he croaked.

"Come see me as soon as possible," came the reply, Damas sounding as wide awake as any other time of the day and night.

With that, the signal died.

Jak lowered the communicator to the backpack again, then raised both hands and cradled his forehead in them. Trying to get a grip.

This was bad.

By now Damas must have heard from Nidle about the near-fight with Arch yesterday. And for as long as Jak had been in Spargus, he had never once heard the king address anybody with only one single, curt sentence. Damas was a man of as much words as action.

He had to be furious.

I’ve done it again.

With a growl Jak got up and left the sleeping room, marching up to the water urn in the main room. After taking a deep draught from the dipper he splashed precious water on his face, slapping his cheeks until he felt a little bit more alive.

He still had a hard time remembering how exactly he got to the elevator taking him up to the throne room.

The grand chamber gave the same peaceful impression as always. Water trickled into the basins, offering a cool respite from the blazing heat outside. That never changed at least, regardless of whether you came up here to receive a mission, a kind word, or the reprimand of your life.

Damas rose from his throne when Jak stepped off the elevator.

Did you really mean for Sig and me to kill each other?

Even unsure of what to expect Jak needed to ask his question, but one look at Damas’ face silenced him instantly. Not angry, which was certainly good, but sterner than usual – and that may be just as bad.

It was with a feeling of apprehension that Jak approached the throne, and Damas took a couple of steps down. He remained on the stair however, standing higher up.

"I got the report from Nidle about what happened between you and Arch, Jak," the king said. He briskly continued, but Jak still had ample time to clench his hands. "I know that he was the one goading you on."

The stern look softened momentarily, and for a second Damas looked tired – but in the next
"I'm aware that you and the Krimzon Guard have a rough past," he went on, frowning deeply. "I cannot tolerate that such things continue in Spargus, however. Things like what happened with Arch can spread and cause trouble."

Jak looked up at the king, silently watching the one man he could remember truly admiring. And deep down, part of him knew that now, he would be asked to leave this city as well.

The rest of him just wouldn't accept it yet. He still wanted, needed Damas to think better of him.

He didn't even know if Daxter would ever want to see him again, after what he had done. It shouldn't hurt, he should be used to rejection by now. But it would. A buzzing threatened to fill his ears, promising blind, pure rage and sweet oblivion beyond it.

It didn't hurt.

"Because of that, Jak, I want all of you to prove to yourselves and me that you can coexist here," Damas said.

Jak blinked, then frowned. He met Damas' gaze for a moment, finally speaking only when it became apparent that the king waited for him to react.

"Fine. How?"

"I sent a troop to weed out the stingers in the ruins once already," Damas said. "It seems that some of them escaped, however. There have been no traces of new ones being brought there, but dead lizards were found again."

It dawned on Jak what may be asked of him, and he did not like it at all.

"I want you and a group of, hmph, exes-" Damas obviously did not like the term. "- to go there and take care of the remaining metal heads in the ruins."

A wicked inner voice immediately wondered if Jak was no longer trusted to handle something so small on his own. He quickly silenced it, however. This wasn't about that. When he turned it over in his head, he had to be grateful that the task was a simple one. It would be quick.

"Right away?" he asked, in a tone that only confirmed his acceptance of the mission.

Damas looked at him for a moment, probably taking closer note of the dark rings under Jak's eyes. But despite the facial signs of exhaust, nothing in Jak's posture or voice indicated that he was not well enough to fight. One may wonder how he would react if told that he did not look prepared.

The corners of Damas' lips twitched slightly.

"Be by your car in half an hour," he said. "I'll call on more team members in the meantime."

With nothing but a mute nod, Jak turned around and walked towards the elevator. As soon as the young man was out of sight, Damas allowed himself a slow sigh. It was a brief moment of rest for the king however, as he almost immediately sat down on the throne and picked up his own communicator.

The green, electric screen shone too brightly against the naturalistic landscape of the throne room. Even more so did the tiny letters appearing on the dark background, row upon row of headlines,
lists. And more lists, and yet more, before the pushes of buttons finally began to actually list names.

Additional pushes would bring up even more list beyond the names flashing on the screen, of date of arrival, age, proven skills and bits of noteworthy information.

The database within the small contraption was a massive thing to comprehend, and Damas kept four backups of it. Uncharacteristic and perhaps a little disagreeable if one thought too much about it… but moments like this proved that it was necessary. There was simply no way for him to keep every citizen's information on his mind.

And he had no intention of making this situation worse by sending off a troop of people who could not stand each other. This had to work out, for every ex and Jak's sake.

Damas massaged his forehead with one hand, using the free thumb to bring up a list of former KGs. Another button sorted them by date of arrival to Spargus.

He had to ensure that the group at least consisted by a couple of men who should not have met Jak in Haven while they worked for Praxis. Unfortunately, this entire mission would have no meaning if Damas only sent off tattooed men with little to no reason to actually distrust Jak.

He would have to pick a few that may hold a grudge, and trust them to be professional. Even if he would have a word with them all before they left he could hardly (sadly) trust them to admit hating Jak's guts, not when asked by their king. The best Damas could do was to make sure he did not send anyone who had ever indicated being a troublemaker.

He had already spent a good deal of last night going through these lists and thought about it. Now he could only hope to have made choices that would work out – and trust his warriors.

If he could not do that, the entire city was in big trouble. Damas clenched his teeth, remembering a worried, tattooed face and a communicator held in tense hands.

"There's something you gotta hear, your lordship."

At the push of a button a cool, smooth voice filters through the speakers. Water drips and softly splashes in the background, numbed by the words spoken. Unaware. Uncaring.

The silence between the two men is thick enough to be cut with a knife.

"I thought he was supposed to be dead."

The ex shrugs, violently.

"I don't know, your lordship, we... we thought so, we all heard about it-"

He falters, clears his throat. Waits.

"What is this?" Damas finally asks.

"I don't know, sir." He fidgets with the communicator. "Several of us got this message a couple of days ago. Suppose our numbers are still stored somewhere, we- uh... what I want to say, sir-"

He folds up the small machine and puts it on his belt, leaving his hands free, empty.

"We've been talking about it, your lordship, we-"
"Why was I not told immediately?"

There's no flinch. The man looks up, standing at attention.

"We wanted to be sure about ourselves first. It cannot be absolutely certain, but as sure as we can be I assure you that nobody here is stupid enough to act on this. We work for you, your lordship, not Praxis or- ghosts."

After a moment Damas nods. The ex visibly relaxes a little, but as soon as he hears the words he straightens up completely again.

"Do all of, hmph, you ex-KGs know about this?"

"Yessir. And now that you know, we won't keep it to ourselves anymore."

"Hm."

"There's something else, your lordship…"

"What?"

The man clenches his teeth.

"If we got this message, then chances are that the marauders also did."

And they would only be happy to act.

But Damas shakes his head almost immediately.

"It does not change Jak's standing against them much."

"Not really, no, your lordship. I'd assume." A brief chuckle, though strained.

Damas watches him, and he falls silent. Almost pleading, if his pride allowed.

Believe in me, in us, lordship.

"I will trust you all."

Damas nodded to himself.

There was a whole lot more at stake than easing tensions, as all involved would realize. The exes had a whole lot more to prove with their loyalty.

He frowned at his selection when the screen flashed him the names he had marked. All of the six men had a clean record, there was no mark by their name that indicated that they had ever initiated any trouble. One was even picked for the small circle following his name – his information revealed that he had earned that mark for repeatedly trying to break up arguments. Also for saving other wastelanders – or even bodies of wastelanders – in battle. This group needed somebody like that. Damas moved that name to the top of the list, making note to make that ex responsible for the rest of the team.

The rest was a bit of wildcards, the king could not speak much for their personal traits. He met every citizen at one point or another, but befriended only a very select few.

Only for another second or two did he ponder the list. The last name on it was a bit of a cruel
touch, he could admit it. Arch had said that there was a bit of tension between that mechanic and Jak yesterday. But they had already interacted then, and the gist of this mission was to prove that any such tension could be overcome.

Besides, if the metal heads tried to attack a car again, they may need a mechanic in place.

The name stayed.

Satisfied, Damas pushed a few more buttons. Jak's name appeared on the list, placed at the very bottom. It looked peculiar, with the rather long string of symbols indicating usefulness and skills. The most striking thing, though, was the reason that his name appeared at the bottom of the list – a fact that probably confused the computer.

The lack of a last name. There was only a question mark.

Damas had not felt it important at first, as he had dealt with people rendered amnesiac after one or a few too many hard hits on the head. In all other, similar cases the phrase "I don't have a last name" had meant nothing more than that.

He did not think of asking anymore after Jak's admitting to not have known his own father.

Still, looking at the question mark after that piece of information had been given, Damas kept finding himself frowning deeper.

He shook it off after a moment, getting to his feet. There were more important things to deal with.

Spargus did not do awkward. The city could not handle it. It was an emotion too silly and weak to be allowed in a place where the world demanded straightforward and unquestioned will to survive and nothing else.

That only made it worse.

Luckily there were not many other people in the parking area right then – lucky because there were less curious glances. Even Kleiver was off somewhere else, which was a shared relief. Even if nobody would admit there was anything shared except for a bleedin' mission putting them all in a bleedin' awkward situation.

Jak sat halfway in his Sand Shark, sitting sideways on the driver's seat and focusing on counting the ammunition in his morph gun. He did not need to do it, especially since he had was on his third run through the clips, but it kept his mind on something else than the tense exes standing a little ways away. They tried not to form a full group, but it was obvious that they were the ones who had drawn the short end of the stick. Four of them so far.

Ever since he arrived Jak had tried not to look closely at them, and they returned the favor. Everyone was acutely aware of the uncertain glances thrown his way, however. At least, after a visit to the white eco well Jak felt like he could actually make it through the day, but no eco in the world could prepare him for this.

He did throw a glance to the side when he caught a familiar figure in the corner of his eye, and frowned. Zem moved across the open area, gun slung over his shoulder and an extra belt for tools around his waist. One of the other exes raised his hand in brief greeting, which the mechanic answered with a distracted wave.

For a moment he stared towards the blond in the Shark, and one could almost hear him struggle not
to chew on his lower lip. But then he continued, stopping a little ways away from the other tattooed men. If anything, he seemed to embody the communal feeling of unease.

Five of them now. Was that all? Yet, nobody moved to take the charge. Waiting for something, somebody to send them off into battle so that they could get this over with.

They did not have to wait long, but the tension was already so high that the sound of two hands clapping gave several of the reluctant team members a start. Even Jak looked up.

"Hokay people, stop fouling the air before you kill somebody!"

A sixth ex came strolling towards the unlucky assembly, gaze easily running across everyone involved. A couple of voices were raised in greeting, sounding a little bit carefully relieved.

Jak met the look when it came his way, frowning at the relaxed smile on the man's face. It looked bizarre considering the situation, and it did in no way make Jak feel any more at ease right then.

The latest addition to the group ran a hand through his short blond hair and did a double take. His grin widened even more as he took note of the one ex not looking at him.

"Why Zem, my man! You in? What dragged you into this mess?"

The man tilted his head stupidly. From the way Zem focused on checking that the tools hanging on his belt were properly stuck, it was quite apparent that he intended to ignore the other ex completely.

His resolve turned out to be weak when the next words hit the air, as disturbingly merry as the rest.

"Don't tell me, you signed up 'cause you got tired of waiting for Kleiver to drive you to an early grave?"

"Shut the hell up, Lev!"

The rage was immediate and brief – Zem all but bounced up straight, dwarfing the other ex by at least a head. But just as suddenly, though his mouth opened as if preparing a second volley of angry words, Zem turned and stalked off without another sound.

The air seemed to clear for every step he took.

"There she blows…" Lev muttered, smirk toying with the corner of his lips as he watched the dark skinned one go.

Jak had tried to ignore the whole exchange to the best of his ability, turning back his focus to his ammunition. But he couldn't ignore it anymore when Lev stepped up beside the Shark, blocking out some more of the searing sunlight.

"Yo," the ex said, not unfriendly.

No reply. Lev let out a short breath.

"Just laying down the law, man," he said. "Listen, I got thrown out here long before you started turning Haven upside down. I got nothing against you."

Jak finally looked up, starting to answer. But he paused for a moment, quirking an eyebrow when he took a first good look at the man.
There was something decisively odd with Lev. His smile looked perfectly friendly, teeth showing just the slightest bit. Tanned skin and muscular, but for an ex he seemed a bit thin. At first Jak thought it was the eyes, twinkling as easy-going as the smile – definitely not a KG's eyes.

But then, Jak realized that it was the familiar puzzle of grey that did not work out. He had seldom seen two exes with the same pattern stamped onto their face. It seemed to be a very individual thing, from Erol's simple stripes to Ashelin and Torn's more elaborate patterns. Still all those tattoos shared the feature of being perfectly regular, each side of the face perfectly alike.

Lev's tattoos were… not right. They seemed to have been meant to cut his face into two mirror sides, but the pattern was off. One big grey area crept up beside his right eye and reached out across his eyelid (proven when he blinked) – and on the left side was the same pattern, but smaller because it seemed to be pushed further to the side. As if the tattooists had been aiming too far to the left. Even the thick stripes on his neck weren't placed in tune with each other. The only thing that seemed to be in place was the blunt square covering most of the man's chin.

The result was an impression that Lev maybe should lean to the side to catch up with the mistakes on his skin.

"What, this?" the scrutinized one said with a chuckle, drawing a circle in the air around his face.

Jak frowned at getting caught wondering what the hell was up with this guy, but Lev just kept chuckling. He held up both hands in front of his face, moving them an inch to the side with a twitchy motion.

"Heh," he said, still grinning. "I don't know when to keep my mouth shut. The tattooists said I was lucky to come out with both my eyes still in place. Pff."

He threw out his arms. That most of the others were watching was underscored when a couple of the exes chuckled knowingly.

Zem was not one of them.

"Let me tell you it stings," Lev went on. "Anyway, I was going to sign up for a medical major but then somebody hollered that I was too tall and kicked me into the army instead." His voice remained free of malice, yet there was a bit of an annoyed flash in his eyes. It passed immediately however.

Without him even noticing it, Jak's tense grip of his morph gun had begun to relax – out of pure disbelief at the nonsense coming out of this ex-KG's mouth if nothing else. As it turned out, the nutcase was just getting warmed up.

"What I'm trying to say is that I wanted to be a nurse." Lev paused, throwing a glance at the sky thoughtfully. "No, wait. I mean the other thing."

Jak was very close to ask what exactly Lev was smoking, when the man suddenly whipped his head around and glared at the other exes. They remained still and watching – most of them at least.

"Hey, go look at something funnier!" Lev said. "Like, go ask my friend what he thinks about birthdays."

Lev gestured at Zem. And though the mechanic had his back turned to everyone else, one could read his mind in the way he tensed like a bowstring, neck straightening up.

"Ah, make that birthdays and-" Lev started again.
Zem spun around, and in the next moment a screwdriver shot through the air. It crashed into the sand a few yards behind Lev thanks to his quick reflexes. He only grinned wider at the look on Zem's face.

"- and handcuffs."

What followed was a stream of death threats and cussing, pouring out of Zem's mouth. Jak blinked despite himself, in his mind trying to combine this furious ex with the meek one he had dealt with yesterday. It only worked when he recalled Zem's reaction to being called a coaltop.

And then, just as suddenly, something seemed to click and Zem closed his mouth in the middle of a sentence. He settled for glaring murder for another second, then stomped forwards and past everyone else to pick up his screwdriver. Several of the other exes were snickering, though a couple did so with a bit of a confused look – while one, a bald man with a patch covering his right eye stood bent over, shaking with laughter.

"Hey Lev, was it his or that other guy's birthday?" the bald man managed to choke out between bursts of laughter.

The sound of Zem's footsteps instantly ceased.

Lev let out a chuckle, but lowered his head slightly. From his position however, Jak caught a flash of unease in the cheerful eyes.

"Mine."

It was a feral growl rising from Zem's throat, but it only made the already laughing men chortle even harder.

"And there's nothing to tell," the mechanic continued, trying to sear a hole in Lev's head with his gaze. "That moron just said that they- he'd have to cuff me to make me listen to congratulations."

"Cuff you to a bedpost. Don't forget the chloroform I was going to ask the higher ups for," Lev mildly said. But this time, he didn't look at Zem.

Before he knew what happened Jak got a mental image of Lev going up to Erol to request chloroform, specifying that he intended to use it to drug a guy twice his size and cuff him to a bedpost while he was knocked out.

Though the single un-tattooed man did his best not to, he found his own lips twitching at the insanity of it.

He realized it when he noticed Lev looking at him, and cleared his throat to regain his composure.

"What do you want?" Jak muttered, managing to keep his voice neutral.

"Ah yeah, I did have something to say."

Lev glanced over his shoulder, seeing the other exes still pretty much distracted – now dissolved in their own crazy stories from the past, from the sound of it.

They almost made it sound like the army was about trusting your friends and working together, not beating up civilians.

"Now, as I was saying before I got side-tracked… me and Mirache there -" Lev jabbed his thumb
towards the bald ex, "- we're oldies. Came here before you got going in Haven. And happy-go-lucky Zem there, he just likes to bark at people. Dun' think anyone else here'd be stupid enough to do anything either even if they're fresher into the sand, but just so ya know. But, we're all friendly here, eh?"

He kept smiling, but a serious note crept into the expression.

"I don't want Praxis to go screwing up anyone's life here too, man," he murmured. "We can do this, right?"

After a moment, Jak nodded.

"Yeah."

Being friends with Torn and Ashelin, he should know Praxis had not only grown scum. He had trusted the two of them and even though it had not always been a smooth ride, they were both good people.

And Damas trusted him to handle this situation as was required.

Lev's serious look cracked in a relieved smile – if he was faking, he was one hell of an actor.

No. No, this man had Damas' trust as much as Jak did. Thinking of him as a KG who just happened to be in the wasteland, that was the wrong way to go. Especially in this situation.

"Good to hear that," Lev said. He turned around and raised his voice, stepping a few paces away. "Hey! People, listen up!"

This even got him Zem's attention.

"You know the drill," Lev said, gesturing towards the desert with both hands. "We go out there, we clean up the ruins all shiny, we go back, shake hands, and go on our merry way. Okay? Otherwise Damas will be pissed, but more importantly, I'll cry. You don't want to make a grown man cry, do ya?"

"You're a moron, Lev," one of the still anonymous men said, a tall one with a thin carpet of brown hair on his head.

The proper reply to this was, apparently, a deep bow, complete with one hand on his chest and the other reaching backwards at empty air.

"Thank you, I do my best." Lev straightened up. "Now are you getting to your cars or do I have to chase you with this boomstick of mine?"

He started reaching for the gun at his back, wiggling his fingers all the way.

Chuckling amongst each other, the men began to move towards their vehicles.

Jak shook his head in disbelief at it all, but though he wondered at the stupidity he had just witnessed, he realized what it had been for. He recognized the technique Daxter had worked on himself and his best friend for years.

Lev was well aware of the tension of the group. He had just done all he could to do something about it – after that circus it was hard to take any of this seriously. One had to wonder if Lev had planned it with Zem.
Though Daxter could probably have done it more smoothly. Jak gritted his teeth and started moving to get rid of his own brand of stupidity. He didn't need those kind of thoughts right now. He set himself properly in the driver's seat, folding the gun and placing it where he would be able to reach it quickly.

Speaking of Zem, as the others began to climb into their cars the mechanic pointedly ignored Lev waving at him, and instead climbed into the passenger seat of one of the others.

Didn't he have a car of his own?

Maybe not, Jak figured, if he preferred to be a mechanic rather than a fighter. It seemed odd in this society, but since Zem was here he must have retained enough training to prove himself.

What did it matter anyway?

Shrugging, Jak started the engines and rolled after Lev's Sand Shark as their clownish leader headed out into the desert. The others were close behind.

Maybe this would work out, after all.

The wind whispered sand across the carpets of cacti on long abandoned streets, but apart from that the ruins seemed oddly silent as the men turned off their cars. Normally, one would hear leaper lizards squeak to each other in a distance. But now, a frightened silence hung in the air around the empty cage in what had once been the town square.

At least, one could hope that the silence was frightened and not there because all the lizards had been killed.

That would not make anybody happy at all.

Of course, the ruins were not the only place in the entire desert where the lizards could be found, but it was the closest to Spargus and definitely the useful critters' best natural breeding ground.

Lev stood up in his car, shadowing his eyes as he scanned the area. The others waited, but kept looking around for safety's sake while doing so.

Finally Lev looked around and made a thumbs up.

"Since we're dealing with stingers I think we better do this one on foot, in two groups," he called.

He waited for a moment, but nobody protested. It made sense, even if they did not have to particularly like it. Metal heads, while not that bright, still used tactics. Stingers were simply too small and quick to deal with using heavy cars, especially in compromised areas like the ruins.

Seeing that the plan seemed to be passed unanimously, Lev addressed the troop again.

"Okay, Jelas and Jak, you come along with me. The rest of you stay here and make sure nothing eats the cars. You'll take the west side of town when we get back." He hopped onto the ground, waving at Mirache. "I'll keep my communicator on and dialed on yours at all times."

As soon as the bald ex had made a thumbs up in understanding, both men reached for their communicators to switch them on.

Jak slipped out of his car, morph gun in hand and set to blaster mod. Normally he would have preferred the beam reflexor, but if he was going to work together with two other people he did not
want to risk the rebounds hitting either of them. That would be difficult to explain to Damas.

Looking up he met the third party member's eyes. Jelas turned out to be a man of about twenty-five, eyebrows gone and a scarf wrapped around his head to protect it from the sun. He pressed a strained smile onto his lips, looking away quickly.

His body language matched Jak's state of mind quite well.

Get this done, but don't make friends. Then forget it ever happened.

At Lev's signal to follow him, the two men started walking.

All three of them moved quickly and silently down the dusty street the leader picked, listening carefully for the smallest hiss.

For a long time, there was only the howl of the wind. A couple of times the shadow of a leaper lizard moved around a corner, disappearing quickly. They took note of where it went, listening even more carefully in case the animal got attacked. But nothing of the sort happened.

They had gotten through almost half their arc back towards the cars when Jelas suddenly pointed at a patch of cacti down the street. Jak squinted, but it took a few steps more before he saw that several of the thick, spiky plants were cut and broken. Sap thickly dripped out of the plants' wounds where in the shadow – those in direct sunlight were already dry and shriveling.

The sand too had been torn up, chaotic trails drawn around the cacti.

Even metal heads got thirsty. From the looks of it they had been there not too long ago either. The sap would not stay wet long even in the shadow.

"Got a track. May engage enemy soon," Lev muttered into his communicator.

"Roger that," Mirache answered, keeping his voice down as well.

They took a few steps closer to the green patch. The cacti grew close to the wall of a long building, but a big crack had opened up in the ruin very close to the plants. Many of the trails led into the opening.

As Lev stopped, so did Jak and Jelas. They remained silent, all listening.

Only the wind howling, coming from behind them. Not an ideal situation for hearing their enemies.

After a moment Lev nodded to himself and reached back, into his backpack. From its depths he pulled a sack made of some thick hide, so darkened and scratched that Jak could not tell what kind of animal the skin had originally belonged to. Lev pulled it open and turned it upside down, letting three round containers made of Precursor metal fall into the sand – none of them the same size, but all tightly sealed.

"Bait," Lev cheerfully said when he noticed Jak's raised eyebrow.

The tattooed blond put the smaller and bigger ball back inside the sack, stuffing it all into his backpack again. Then he grabbed the last container.

"Snack time, little uglies!" he muttered, pulling the plug on the grenade-like thing and sending it flying into the open area ahead of the three men, towards the cacti.

Instead of exploding, the metal ball painted a wave of purple darkness as it fell towards the ground.
It landed with a thump, dark eco oozing out of it and pooling onto the sand. Lev quickly backed away not to get too close to the substance, the move urging his compatriots to do the same.

Jak tried not to sniff the air, but even from this distance he could feel the metallic smell of the eco. A feeling of emptiness churned deep inside his very bones – he had not refilled his reserves since he used up most of what he had.

When fighting Erol, just the other day. It felt like that had been months ago.

But the eco Lev had released smelled too strong, too concentrated. It would burn like hell. Regardless of what Jak knew about it however, he had to clench his hands around the morph gun to keep his fingers from twitching.

The container had hardly hit the ground before a distinct hissing rose up from the other side of the wall. The men tensed, preparing to fire their guns.

Two stingers dove through the crack in the wall and skittered through the cacti patch. The plants ripped and tore as bullets pierced them, the quick little monsters avoiding several shots before one of them suddenly threw itself up in an agonized arch. The skull gem popped free as it hit the ground again.

The other one slithered on like a bolt of black electricity, but a successful shot took care of that one as well. By that time however, more were coming out of the crack – diving directly towards the eco instead.

Oddly synchronized, with two having acted as decoys.

It did not seem perfect, however. The metal heads headed for the eco, but several of them suddenly snarled and made for the three wastelanders. In the next moment they turned back to the eco, skittered back and forth.

Confused.

They were quickly dispatched thanks to their hesitance. About a dozen skull gems and serpentine bodies littered the ground within seconds, the latter oozing dark eco.

Another round of hisses alerted the men a moment before six more stingers leapt from the top of the wall, soaring straight towards one in the group with their sharp tails ready to pierce.

Two were flung backwards and hit the ground, twisting in fury and pain but not quite dead yet. The wastelanders leapt out of the way for the others.

Landing on the ground, all the remaining metal heads dashed after Jak. He continued backwards, shooting one of them in mid-retreat. As weak as stingers actually were, they were quick and could reach farther than you’d first expect. He did not want to get too close.

A handful of shots rang out and the monsters collapsed in the sand. Jak stopped and looked up, meeting Lev's eyes as the man grinned and made thumbs up.

Even Jelas waved his fingers slightly, possibly relaxing just the slightest bit.

They waited, keeping their senses open.

After a minute, it seemed apparent that no other metal heads were within sniffing distance of the eco. Lev started forwards, waving at the dead stingers that had gone for Jak.
"With fangirls like that, I'm glad I'm not famous," the blond ex said, cheerfully smirking.

Jak just snorted and shook his head. As he kept talking, Lev pushed at the orange little container with his gun, rolling it further away from the remains of the eco and turning it so that the opening disappeared into the sand. The dark substance had already begun to seep into the ground.

"All clear here," Lev said into his communicator. He turned to Jak and Jelas, motioning at the skull gems lying about. "Pick up the loot and divide it later?"

Nods answered him, and he seemed perfectly satisfied with that. Turning the metal ball over again he bent down and peered into it, then carefully lifted it in a gloved hand and took a closer look inside. When he was sure that there was no eco left he reached for the sack in his backpack.

Jak stopped paying attention about then. Really, he had not wanted to do this while there were people watching, but the smell of eco made his throat dry. He needed a recharge. Only having light eco in his body made him feel as unbalanced as… no, it wasn't as bad as when there was only dark eco and no other options. But still, not at ease… and he did not need any other reason to be uneasy.

He reached out, and the eco seeping from the stingers' bodies swirled towards him. It clung, bit into his skin, hot and cold all at the same time, the sensation tingling through his entire arm and on to his body until it was all absorbed and settled.

The slimy feeling lingered for a second, but after that came a pang of satisfaction.

Too weak, however.

He looked up, unable to keep from glaring at the two tattooed men. Well?

Lev was already halfway through a slow whistle, watching Jak with some surprise… but nothing else. Jelas, on the other hand, looked away as soon as he realized that Jak was looking his way, lips pressed so tightly against each other that they turned white. After a moment he did turn his face back however, looked at the younger man for a second and then turned the other way again, rubbing his forehead.

Lev gave him a smack on the shoulder that almost made the other ex jump out of his skin, judging from the look on his face.

"Whazzap, my man, they were just teeny tiny stingers!" Lev said.

Many others would only have managed to seem ridiculous when using such a phrase in such a situation, desperately trying to avert attention from what was truly horrific. Somehow though, Lev managed not to.

He turned to Jak and winked.

"Excellent serving of metal stew, if I may say so. Shall we find out if there's any dessert?"

And with that, still holding Jelas' shoulder, he started forwards. After a moment – when the other ex walked on his own – he let go, instead putting his hand on Jak's shoulder guard as he passed.

I'm okay. You're okay.

For a second, Jak stared at the back of Lev's neck before he began following their leader as well. Then suddenly Lev looked over his shoulder and fired off a grin.
"Hey, don't burn a hole in my back, please." He turned around, walking backwards for a couple of steps and pointing at Jak. "And don't think you can shock me, buster, I've been in the sand box for years. I've seen it all. Including you going wild on the marauders in the arena."

Jak didn't say anything, but the corner of his lip twitched.

They quickly collected the skull gems without much talking and then continued. Pretty close to the end now. For the rest of the mission, they would just have to wait for the other half of the group to complete their round.

He still didn't like the situation and he was still tired, but the adrenaline kick from the fight, and the eco, made Jak feel a bit more alert. And, as much as he hated to admit it, things weren't going so badly.

Though Daxter and Jinx remained the silliest people the blond hero had ever been on a mission with, Lev climbed close.

Jak started to push those thoughts away, when his musings were cut thankfully short with more action.

There was a shout from ahead, where the cars were parked. An angry shriek followed, suddenly cut off by a gunshot. Neither were the last of their kind.

"Got a bunch of 'em here, Lev!" came Mirache's voice through Lev's communicator.

Even before the words were spoken, the trio were running. Normally rushing along in the desert was discouraged but they were in the shadow of the buildings, and it was not that far to go. Lev immediately grabbed the communicator and held it up.

"On our way," the blond ex called into the speaker.

He returned the equipment to his belt, then turned his head to the man hurrying along beside him.

"I've got horrible news, Jak. I don't think the metal heads like you anymore."

Lev gestured towards the continuing noise from the center of town, taking on a sad expression in mid-sprint.

"See? They're totally adulterous."

Daxter would have a ball with this guy, possibly in the good way for once. The thought came uninvited, bouncing off Jak's instinctual wonder at why his best friend wasn't firing his mouth right back at Lev already – momentarily forgetting that Daxter wasn't there.

He pushed the thought aside, shaking his head at Lev and snorting. This gesture got a wide grin in return.

Months later when Jak met GT Blitz, he would remember Lev because of the blond hair and flair for the dramatic. However, unlike the noisy commentator he would not come to remember the friendly ex with any sense of vehemence.

Zem had never before questioned Damas' judgment. He was old enough to remember Haven as it used to be, if only vaguely. To find out that the legendary king was alive had been an almost pleasant thing to wake up to once upon a time, though the whole "survive against a dozen angry
marauders or die" thing muddled the experience.

Life in Spargus, while not the happiest time Zem could remember, was overall good. He had come straight out of a year of working in hell into rough, unforgiving work to stay alive, and the change was better.

Hard work, at least, made it easier not to think.

Damas made all of it possible, and made sure things stayed that way. The man was born a leader.

This whole thing, however, was not a good idea. No matter what the intention was. So far it seemed to be going well, but all it would take was a slight misstep and the whole thing would explode.

Zem was sure of it. He would not stop being sure of it until all seven of them were safely back in Spargus without a disaster occurring. Even when the handful of stingers attacking the men by the cars were easily taken care of as soon as Jak and the others joined the rest of the group… no, he could not believe it would work out.

But, placing Lev on this mission did make things easier. Regardless of the fact that Lev drove Zem up the wall whenever he opened his big mouth, the stupid blondie knew how to tackle people. Like right now, checking a scratch on Jelas’ arm, talking all the while to make all of them forget that none of them felt very enthusiastic about being on this job.

It suddenly struck Zem that despite Lev's talking, it was oddly quiet. There was an empty silence around Jak, a missing voice that had always been there every other time Zem had had the bad luck to be in the same area as the youth, at least in Spargus.

Right, his babbling pet. Where the heck was that rat? Had he finally gotten himself eaten by something?

"Calling the bignasty! Hey!"

Lev waved his hand, looking at Zem expectantly. But the mechanic didn't move, ignoring the leader completely.

"You know I mean you, Zemmy!" Lev called.

Letting out a sigh, Zem finally threw a glare in the right direction.

"What?"

"Would the big baby stop hiding behind the car and let me fuzz over him?" Lev said, drawing a snerk or two from the audience.

"I'm fine."

"Yeah, I remember the first time you told me that, when you-"

"Shut up!"

Lev paused at the snarl, blinking a few times. Then he tapped his cheek with a finger, thoughtfully.

"Ooh, right. We were never, ever going to talk about that thing again," he said, nodding. He sobered. "Fine then, I'll just trust you about being unhurt."
With that, he turned to somebody else to discuss the upcoming second half of the mission.

Zem turned his gaze away, trying not to listen. Off the top of his head he couldn't think of what Lev meant with "the first time you told me that", but he knew the stupid blondie. If there wasn't originally some crazy story, he'd make one up. Always had.

Friggin' clown.

Still, no matter how much the guy stepped on Zem's nerves... Lev was his only connection to what had been before things went totally down the drain. No matter how much it hurt, Zem was not prepared to completely sever the line.

He had yet to honestly tell Lev to leave him the hell alone. Or at least, he had not said it loud enough to make the blondie listen.

Or maybe Lev was not prepared to sever that line either, for Zem was just as much his only connection to that time of their lives. They had both lost a friend then.

Zem clenched his teeth, trying to shake himself out of those thoughts before he went too far. It was the last thing he needed.

He looked around, eager to get going with the hunt. At least then, he would get something else to occupy his mind. Being out on a mission with Lev just... wasn't right. And being on a mission with Jak... Zem just had no idea how he could bear it at all, himself. Yet he had been out in the field with Jak yesterday too, and he was still breathing. Heart still beating.

It was different, now. The kid wasn't a kid anymore. Free.

Zem breathed deeply, running his gaze over the group again just to get his mind the second volley of unwanted thoughts.

And then he saw what was happening.

The hot air stilled, heavy as glue to breathe, to move in. Zem knew he moved forwards but he couldn't tell how quickly – only that it was too slow. A thousand times had he seen the same thing, well enough to know from the second the thought went from a man's brain – enough! – and down to his hands, even before the finger tightens and pulls the trigger.

There is a world of difference between a man drilled by Praxis being tense with a gun in his hand, and being tense as he focuses on the thing he hates and fears. As the fears focus, there is only one knowledge overriding every sense – need kill the enemy.

No, no...!

Zem didn't know if he cursed. Desperately shouting a warning – he could only hope that somebody else noticed, because he was not winning against the trigger being pulled.

This had not happened in there, it couldn't happen out here – not where Damas was in control, and Praxis was dead and couldn't hurt anybody anymore, couldn't give anyone orders to hurt and hurt and hurt until there was nothing left to beat.

There was no order to kill.

Even as he fell through the air Zem only knew that he had never, ever done a thing to stop anything, not when it really mattered. And now, when he finally did, he would be too late. He'd
known it would happen, and yet he wouldn't be there on time to stop it.

Jak wasn't even aware of the gun aimed at his back.

"What the fuck are you doing?!"

A shot pierced the shout halfway through, but the warning came in such force that the one shouting had to finish it. Jak moved before "the", ducking aside – driven by battle instincts and the knowledge that had been with him the whole time. The knowledge that he was among enemies.

But the shot rang out and his right arm exploded with pain. He toppled with a hoarse snarl, clawing for the hurt to stop it and turning, turning to face the danger and all he saw was red.

Red, and tattooed faces.

"You crazy fuck, the hell d'ya think you're-!"

"Oh shit-!"

"Let go! Let go, fucking traitors-!"

Several of them attacked one who shouted louder and fought back, the gun in his hand sharply reflecting the sunlight.

… sunlight…?

"Jelas, what the flying-"

"He killed them! Killed them! Let go I'll kill the little-!"

Harsh voices shouting, hands grabbing, tattoos, red scarves- no, armor- grabbing, tearing don't
don't pain needle poison numbing can't move-

"Shit- guys! Shit, he-!"

"Holy…!"

What had been a groan of pain deepened into a rumbling growl.

Don't touch me don't touch me break him don't don't I'll kill-

Black claws dug into the hot grains of sand.

… sa… nd?

More cursing, harsh and sharp but they didn't attack, they backed away- hesitant cowards. No, no wait, something's wrong.

He growled again, plunging his fingers deeper into the ground. The other hand wouldn't respond, it hurt too much to try and he wanted to kill them, kill them for hurting him again and again.

But something was wrong and every raw instinct screamed to act, act before they do, before it's too late. And still something else screamed to wait because he had forgotten something important, he lacked it, had to know… what could be that important?
No! Kill them, kill them before they hurt you, before they grab and tear and shove you on that table-

"… in the legs?"

"An' piss him off even more? It won't stop him, I've seen it-

"Kill him you-

"Jelas, shut the hell up!"

It didn't make sense, nothing made sense, why weren't they attacking? Weapons held for blocking-planning something? He sought better purchase, to prepare to move at the first threat but the ground was too soft. It should be hard and cold. Nothing made sense.

I don't understand I don't know Daxter what's going on tell me Daxter!

There was no shrill, soothing voice.

He was alone.

Lips drawing back from his fangs he snarled, daring them to come at him. He wouldn't go down, wouldn't let Praxis get him again.

"Holy shit, what do we do?"

"Damas'll fucking kill us anyway!"

… what? What what?

Something was wrong, so wrong.

Da… mas?

That was important, he shouldn't attack and he knew it, just couldn't remember why. But there was so much pain and heat and he couldn't think, struggling just to hold on to that name. Didn't even know why he fought for it, just that it was precious, too precious to let go of.

Damas. Damas…

He had stopped growling, even though he still held his teeth bared. And they had stopped backing away, muttering amongst themselves except for the one who was still struggling against the two who held him.

Is that me no doesn't make sense…

One of the group suddenly took a step forwards and he stiffened immediately.

Erol…?

No… no this one had dark skin. Taller than Erol. Somebody else, somebody warm- Sig? Who? No, black hair.

The others were silent now, watching the one who moved another step.

Claws dug through sand, uncertain.
Empty dark hands, palms pale as if they had been painted. No gloves.

"Jak, listen to me… please listen."

They never called him Jak, it was always "kid" or "brat" or… only Erol and Praxis ever called him by name, coating it with filth. But it wasn't either of them.

He blinked, sluggishly. Drew back half a step, still crouching, still angry and uncertain.

"It's not… we're not it, Jak. We're not KGs. Praxis is dead. It's not what you think."

The voice was too low and trembling. A pause, a breath.

"Gods, it's… it's not what you think."

Another step and that one smelled of something like fear but even that was wrong, he wasn't like those who laid bleeding and whispering. He was scared of something else. So scared that his voice turned low and hoarse.

"Jak, c'mon man. Damas is waiting for us."

Damas. None of the words made sense, but that name.

Damas didn't want him to kill them. That was important. So important that he couldn't.

He sunk down, trembling and swinging with his breath. Power crackled around him, hissing because he was letting go and it didn't like that. Thoughts began to filter through his mind, clearing up the closer to the ground he sunk, and yet he could not grasp one. Only that there was pain and heat, blackening out his sight.

He tried to raise his head, squinted at the mess of colors in front of him. They moved, spun over themselves, hot pale brown and unforgiving blue twisting into each other. In between the twist, darker smudges that grew quickly, and he thought he heard something that sounded like distant voices.

His eyes rolled upwards and he crashed on the ground, hearing steps approach.

If they had fooled him after all, he no longer had the strength to fight nor care.

Begin Introspection. Serial code: Lev.

Krimzon Guards aren't bad… by default. Okay, so 97 percent of us were, give or take a couple of points. Then there were those poor sods gifted with a sense of basic morals, like everyone's favorite resistance leader Torn. Not that I ever knew him. I got thrown into service, spoke up, and got thrown out after his time in the Guard. Maybe unfortunately before the resistance grew big enough for me to turn to them.

"Maybe unfortunately"? Yup, I'd probably gotten myself killed one way or another if I joined them.

Eh, says I – the guy who's survived years of overgrown metal heads and sandstorms and men with
spiky things on their shoulders trying to kill me. But you learn to love even a metal head the size of a small house, when you realize that it's easier to reason with the beastie than with a human. At least a human in red uniform.

But not all of us were bad, as I said. Not all of us are walking, talking time bombs of military service. Well, can't really blame some people in Spargus being a little suspicious of all the ink stamped on our fronts.

Blargh, can't we all just get along? Ha, check my Junn impression.

Junn?

... I'd rather not talk about him. I'd say ask Zem, but you'd just get a faceful of fist coming at you at 100 mph.

Hnn… well, there's a great big void in time, see? The three of us, well, the two of them and me tagging along, doing my best to drive my dear ol' bignasty up the wall. Anyway, toddling about in the Guard. If I was outta place there, Junn was worse and Zem kept telling us we were both idiots.

Actually, now that I think about it, "idiots" is the nicest thing I recall him ever saying. 'Course, after a while he got too head over heels to call Junn anything vaguely negative.

I can just imagine it, and it makes me keel over laughing. "Bad Zem, no biscuit!"

Ahem.

We had a subject somewhere in here, didn't we?

Right, the great big void in time.

Things went wrong when Zem got moved from guard duty to… well, something that neither of them would tell me about. Now normally, Junn would be the first to ask "What's wrong?" and not knowing when to quit until he got an answer. So when he clammed up at me asking him that… it was real mucky bad.

So Zem just went poof. Totally.

And I got the boot – hard, yessiree thank you – not long after that.

I found out that he had poofed back up in Spargus only months after he got here. He was… odd. I always remembered him as non-stop angry. Now, he was just… off. Off the rocker and still swinging.

Also, maybe I should say that when I found him he was… err, low on iron, and losing more quickly. Dripping out of him, one could say. That's the kiddie friendly version. Ah. Let's just say it's lucky I've kept up with my skills in patching people up, past band aids.

He even agreed that he was the idiot then.

Man. I don't even want to know what happened to him when he was gone. But I know where he was, and even a cheerful guy like me can get the picture. Praxis liked to play a nasty tune and the rest of us could just try to keep up the footwork and hope to the Precursors' socks that we wouldn't stumble.

Zem did, though.
And we'd both lost track of Junn.

Yeah, I'm sure you're wondering what this has to do with anything. That's okay, folks, Junn going missing is our problem. So right, here goes.

Zem won't say a word about what happened to him while he was gone. But I've seen him stare at Jak now, when he thinks nobody sees it. Staring like he's looking at a ghost. 'Course, lots of people are a little nervous of the blond wonderboy. Not like Zem, though.

I think I'll just try not to breach that subject.

He's not a bad guy though, Jak. A bit freaky, but really, aren't we all in some way?

Damas wanted us to understand that, I know. For Jak to know that us gruntworkers aren't bad, just like Torn and miss Ashelin aren't… and us to know, he's not a monster. And everyone in the city to know that too, about all of us, because we could coexist on a mission.

Too bad it went to hell.

Oh, I'll love to give the king of the sandhill this report.

I'm sorry, I'm normally a lot funnier than this. It's just that I'm in a rotten mood… though I suppose it will get worse, if Damas decides to feed me to his pet birds for screwing up like this. Gods, I didn't know. I had no idea about what Jelas had seen Jak do, that he hated him that much.

Nobody's having a good day here, people. Hope yours is better. Now move along, we've got a job to do.

,  

End Introspection.

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Chapter End Notes

Junn Durann, and his mother who shows up later, were created by fellow fanauthor and fanartist Demyrie back in the mid-2000's when she was active in the Jak and Daxter fandom - you might recognize the fanfic "Just Another Mission", which can only be found in parts on her deviantArt account nowadays (in her scrap gallery, mostly). She and I spoke a lot back then and she was a huge influence on my writing, in particular Introspective Hero. I have no idea where she's at now since she is long retired or changed her online persona, but I hope she's well whatever she's up to these days.
Begin Introspection. Serial code: Damas.

There's something about Jak that I'm not... sure what to think of.

I have no time to stop and ponder absurdities. Survival is the only thing that matters in Spargus, and moments of contemplation should only be used for planning strategy. I cannot afford to be confused.

Spargus is built by survivors, and so it must remain. The desert has only a slow or brutal death in store for those who are weak – and in both cases, it will be painful. Of course, the danger is the same for all, but with the strength and will to live, we can stave it off for as long as possible.

I too expect a brutal death to be mine, when that day comes. Everyone here must be prepared to face that reality.

The arena is the only way for us to tell if people are prepared.

Yes, it is harsh. Inhumanly harsh, perhaps. Maybe I would have condemned myself for my own cruelty, years ago. But, I am a different person now, and Spargus is not Haven.

I should give credit where it is due. I will not say that Praxis broke me, for I am still standing. Yet he did destroy something, even in me – like he destroyed so many other things, and people.

Was I unreasonable in my fury towards Sig and Jak when they threw down their weapons in the arena? From an outside perspective, I'm sure it seemed so. And yes, my past self would have condemned the man I am now... but my past self would not know what I know now. He would not yet have hesitated to strike against a man who was once a trusted friend, strike when I should have. If I had... things would have been different. Lives may not have been destroyed, people may not have been killed, and my son would still be safe.

And then again, perhaps I would still have fallen in the end.

Every life branches off in thousands of possibilities, but in the end, what does it matter? I am here, alive, and a near merciless leader I have become. Or I was. Even as I fear dark gods may drop down on all of us any day now, I find myself with more hope in my chest than I can remember harboring in years.

Perhaps the two of them broke my downwards spiral in that moment, when they refused to fight. My fury was... yes, I will admit that it was fear. For years Sig has been my sole hope for my son, and Jak's abilities made me believe that we all had a greater chance at living through whatever is coming. To see them hesitate, and stop... repeat the greatest mistake of my life, that I could not forgive. Not when I vested so much trust into both of them.

No, the king of Spargus should not become so dependant on anybody. Give me an instant of it,
however. At times I have been so tired.

Still I am tired, yet… I feel a little revived. Perhaps there is more hope than I dared to believe.

Believe?

I am not one to believe in anything I cannot see, anything I cannot prove.

And yet…

Pecker is a peculiar creature. I would not have taken him in as I did if I had not been fully aware of who he serves. While Sig reported that Onin could not divine where my son had gone to, I know the oracle can speak true. It is not mere superstition if it is proven true, as she has been right in the past. All too right, about the darkness growing behind my back in Haven.

Part of my mistake, to not listen, or not understand, what her odd prophecy meant.

It does not matter now.

Pecker is part clown, part the eyes and mouth of an oracle – serious only when there is a need for it. He was – or he and Onin were – not amused by my outrage at Sig and Jak's refuse to fight. Not that the monkaw would dare to outright patronize me, but he said… something.

"There's more to this rage than you think. Look closer than you dare to, your lordship. Look closer and believe."

Believe?

What can I believe in, apart from the fact that my subconscious is playing a game with me, crueler than even the desert?

It is… absurd. Green eyebrows above wide blue eyes prove nothing.

Simply absurd.

""

End Introspection.

Jak was vaguely aware of movement, but he was not sure if he was simply dreaming. All he knew was that the world was burning red, digging straight into his brain through his eyelids, through his eyes, and he couldn't do a thing about it.

The red came from his arm too, but that was different. It flared as the movement suddenly stopped, but at the same time the pain stabbing his eyes eased up.

… shadow…

There had been heat, loneliness, confusion… right…?

He struggled to grasp the fading thoughts. Somebody was talking, murmuring, but he couldn't make out a single sound.
Then suddenly he heard a soft, crunching sound of somebody sitting down close by. Fingers brushed his ear, touching the back of his head. He didn't like it, didn't want the invasion but he couldn't move, couldn't speak to make it stop. But it disappeared just as suddenly, and with it a hot tension around his head peeled away, leaving rubber-like, sweaty skin.

A moment passed, and then a moist cloth touched his burning brow. It was lukewarm and the motions clumsy, but the wet fabric felt like cool silk against his skin.

The murmur around him grew closer, sharp to his ears.

"Okay, okay… Jak? Jak, you're awake, right?"

Somehow, he managed to pry his eyes open a little bit. His vision swam and he struggled to focus, only seeing a mess of blurs in various shades of brown and green. He closed his eyes again and grunted to ascertain that yes, he was awake, but much more he couldn't promise.

Somebody was holding him up in a sitting position, a big hand on his right shoulder and another on his back. He tried to sit up on his own, but at the first motion pain shot through his left arm and he grunted again, sharper.

Thoughts moved sluggishly, trying to piece things together. His head throbbed in a familiar way, and the two grunts had only served to underscore how painfully dry his throat was. Using dark eco to fight in the desert and not enough water and then the pain…

It came back to him slowly, sluggishly not only because of his exhaust but because he somehow knew that when he knew what had happened, he would realize something he didn't want to understand.

But it slithered into his hazy brain, crystal clear and merciless.

Damas would be furious when he found out about this.

Jak's head rolled back in a silent groan, stopping when it hit something hard. From the surprised sound and swing of the hands holding him, it was probably the shoulder guard of whoever was holding him. The cloth seemed to hesitate, but then touched his forehead again.

The sky was too bright even with the shadow leaning over him, and he wished he could raise his hand to cover his eyes.

"… he…n't… look s…"

"… think we ca… op worr…"

"... ne… to gi… im… water…"

Half words and sounds floated in and out of his ears, too vague for his brain to connect them into phrases. The only thing he managed to focus on was that strangely enough, they didn't sound angry or very scared.

He couldn't understand.

More voices, the cloth moved to his cheek and somebody else seemed to grasp it. A still wet hand pressed against the back of his head, raising him up. Jak cracked an eye open. He still could not see very well, but at least managed to distinguish that a tanned blur sat beside him, raising a darker smudge.
"Can you hear me?" the big blur said, speaking slow and clear. Unthreatening. Concerned.

What…

Jak tried to make a sound, but now his throat was too dry for even that. He could only move his lips a little. The darker blur came closer, gently pushed to his lips and tipped. Water trickled over his papery tongue and he closed his eyes, swallowing greedily. He was allowed to keep drinking, until it was all gone. Only then was the flask removed.

Feeling somewhat more alive Jak looked up again, and this time the blurs began to take shape. The closest one became Lev, watching him with a worried frown.

"You with us now?" the blond ex asked.

"Ngh… yeah…" Jak muttered.

He tried to straighten up again, but gave that up for another little while when his arm flared and his stomach lurched.

"How many fingers?" Lev asked, holding up a hand.

Jak squinted for a moment.

"Three?" he rasped.

"Now we're getting somewhere."

Where was the threat?

"So…" Lev said, lowering his hand. "I've heard a rumor that you can use some power of sparklies - " he wiggled his fingers, "to fix yourself up. You up for that?"

The only proper reply to that, especially in this situation, was a blank, tired look.

Shrugging, Lev grabbed something from the ground beside him and set it down closer by. A first aid box, the familiar red symbol flaking from the dully grey metal.

"Figures. Then we'd better get with the old-fashioned way," Lev said.

Jak managed to mutter a somewhat coherent reply.

He sat still – didn't even have to force himself to, because he couldn't make himself move much at all – as another one of the exes sat down beside Lev and started loosening the laces holding Jak's shoulder plate. Jak couldn't bother to remember what his name was, if he'd even ever heard it.

The shoulder plate and eco ring with its leather straps were removed, but the man wisely did not make a move to do something about the tunic. Lev, meanwhile, produced a roll of bandage, a small bottle and a bag of cotton balls from the box. He shuffled the second guy out of the way, talking all the while as he drenched a cotton ball with the clear liquid from the bottle.

"I think we're all grateful that the bullet went through," Lev said. He took careful hold of Jak's elbow and lifted the wounded arm closer. Despite the gentle movement Jak clenched his teeth at the stab of pain. Lev kept talking, eying his patient and waiting for the constricted expression to relax a little. "It's just a flesh wound. You'll be up and killing metal heads in no time with a little green eco salve on top of this old-fashioned stuff. Just have to bear with the basics first as we clean you up, I'm afraid. Do you want to chew on something while we do this?"
Jak let out a heavy breath, and nodded. Anything that could help, in this situation.

The ex who had removed his eco ring and shoulder plate immediately grabbed a roll of bandage and a pair of scissors from the box. He cut off a generous piece of the clean cloth, folded it a couple of times and lifted it to Jak's lips so that the patient could bite down on it.

With a glance at Lev, the ex threw the bandage roll and scissors back into the box and unhooked the water flask from his belt. He met Jak's gaze for a second, then tipped the bottle above the wound.

A sharp breath, nothing more escaped Jak as the water crashed on the fountain of blood, flaring against the vulnerable flesh. It was brief, only enough to clean off the worst gore. Luckily, he had managed to keep the wound away from the sand even as he fell.

The other man withdrew maybe a little too quickly, but if it was from fear or respect was impossible to tell.

"Okay. Count the grains of sand now…" Lev said, raising the wet white ball in his free hand as orange-colored water still dripped onto the hot, thirsty ground.

Jak gritted his teeth against the cloth in his mouth, but did not make a sound as Lev dabbed the bullet wound with the cotton. The smell of alcohol filled the air, only making him feel dizzier. Lev soon discarded the first ball when it turned almost completely red with blood, and picked up another.

With two wounds it took even longer, but it was certainly more pleasant than it would have been if the bullet had still been stuck in his arm.

"There we are," Lev said when he felt satisfied with his work, almost cheerful again. He grabbed the bandage roll and handed it to his nameless assistant, then returned to the box for two pieces of padding and a metal bottle.

Another ex moved into view and took the items from Lev's hand. It took a moment for the blond to recognize the newcomer as the guy with the eye patch. Mirage or something. No… Mirache. Whatever his name was, he put the two small pillows in his lap, then opened the bottle and tipped it over. A syrupy, green liquid dripped down, seeping into the clean cloth. Once satisfied, Mirache put the bottle aside. He looked up to meet Jak's eyes, then lifted and pressed the pieces of padding against the two wounds. The flaring pain elicited a hiss from Jak, but after a couple of seconds a cooling sensation crept into his muscles. The eco salve was not the best thing, but it did its work.

As the pain began to ease, Jak sluggishly reached up and pulled the bandage-piece out of his mouth. It still hurt, but not so much that he had to make himself stand the soaked piece of cloth any longer. The white square fell from his fingers onto the sand, and nobody cared about it anymore.

"By the way," Lev said as he took over the bandage roll and began to wrap it around the arm, locking the padding against the wounds. "Sorry."

Jak looked up from focusing very hard on his own breathing as the bandage was tightened. Catching on to the dully confused look, Lev nodded to the side.

"About Jelas," he said. He pursed his mouth. "He was in the water slums. I didn't know. None of us did."

That did not help much at first either, but slowly the memories of shouting and swearing rose from
the fog in Jak's mind. He looked in the direction that Lev had nodded. The cars still stood parked in the center of the ruined city, not very far away. The kneeling men huddled in the shadow of a tipping wall.

Jelas was nowhere in sight, but Zem sat on top of one of the cars – a gun laid out across his lap threateningly, and his glare set on something in the back of the car, probably on the floor.

For the first time, Jak actually counted the exes. Two in the car by the look of it, one helping him to sit up, three cooperating in taking care of him and his wounds.

They were all there, still. Incomprehensibly close by.

And not one of them aiming a gun at him.

Lev watched him in silence, they all did – except for Zem, who apparently worked on glaring a hole into Jelas’ skull.

Finally, Jak shook his head and looked away. He couldn't understand. He'd been a hair's breadth from killing them. They'd been a few feet away from something most of them and their friends probably had nightmares about.

"He killed them! Killed them!"

The water slums… it made sense then. Memories, chaotic even minutes after he had gotten back on land, off the rickety bridges and piers – not sure how many men in red armor he had shot and tackled into the water, only that there had been too many of them and a desperate need to get away.

All fear of him, and the bounty on his head, tripled that day.

Now he hardly had the energy to remember at all, but at least then he knew why Jelas had shot him.

But it didn't change anything.

"Hey now," Lev said.

Jak looked up at the finger poking his arm. The shadow of a wry smile touched Lev's lips as he went on with the bandage.

"Lesse, Damas is gonna kill me because I went pale reaper with fangs on the tattooed freaks?" the blond ex said.

Mirache snorted out a brief laugh, and the ex just sitting by gave Lev a disbelieving, half-amused look. Jak, however, hardly even blinked despite the odd pick of words.

"No?" Lev said, raising an eyebrow. He shrugged lightly, careful not to rock the arm in his care too much. "Well, doesn't really matter how you want to formulate it. I'm kinda feeling peachy, though. Don't see any of my buddies lying around bleeding, either. From where I'm standing, you seem to be the only one being down."

The smile widened slightly, though there was a tired edge in it.

"Cheer up, emo kid," Lev said.

Jak couldn't help blinking at that one.
After fastening the clip to hold the bandage in place, Lev produced a fairly clean, large piece of cloth from his backpack. With a few quick, trained movements he had two corners of it tied together by Jak's shoulder, catching the wounded arm in a simple sling.

"I know you warriors just tend to forget it hurts to move," Lev said as he started to stand and brushed sand off his pants legs. "Oh, and you're not driving with that arm or I'll have to frown."

Jak just let out a defeated sigh at that. Right then, being in the passenger seat of one of his own cars seemed a very far-fetched problem. Still, the answer seemed to be enough to satisfy Lev, and he waved his hands at the men getting to their feet. Mirache grabbed Jak's goggles from the ground and silently handed them over.

Putting them on seemed like more trouble than it was worth, and Jak simply hung them by his belt with a few clumsy motions.

"Right. Move out, people," Lev said, waving at all of them.

He wasn't smiling anymore, though.

It was a silent group that drove back into Spargus and parked their cars. The silence spread around them, other people in the parking area stopping and watching as the men assembled on the ground. Eyes watching, taking in the sight of Jak with his bandaged arm in a sling, of Jelas with his arms tied behind his back and pushed along by two of the other exes.

As he began to cross towards the city entrance, Jak caught sight of Kleiver watching from the other side of the open area. Their eyes met, and the much younger man dully expected a jibe to be flung their way. But Kleiver's fat lips scrounged up, as silent as anyone else. He kept watching, unmoving until the city gate opened. Then he raised a hand and slowly rubbed his forehead, closing his eyes hard.

Jak got a sinking feeling that he did not yet understand how severe this situation really was.

The silence continued to follow them, but most of the men and women in the streets at least had the decency to keep moving, though few of them bothered to be covert with their glances. And there was quite a bit of worry to be seen in several faces along the way.

Seeing the door to Damas' residence had never felt so relieving, and yet so dreadful.

Jak tried not to, but he could not keep himself from glancing aside, at his empty shoulder.

If Daxter had been there, maybe he would have noticed Jelas taking aim. Maybe then, all of them wouldn't have to be walking towards Damas' fury. No matter what the king made out of what had taken place in the ruins, he would certainly not be pleased.

The guards by the door let the group in after a quick exchange of words with Lev. Though the elevator swung slightly from the weight of seven men, but there was at least more than enough space for them. Jak glared at the floor all the way up, not wanting to see what everyone else may be thinking. He had enough to wrestle in his own mind.

As they arrived at the top Damas sat on the throne, listening to a monk leaving a report. Both king and monk looked up and around at the sound of the elevator arriving, however.

The men silently stepped into the large room, most of them looking at anything but towards the throne.
Taking in the entire situation with a glance, Damas' expression turned harder than steel. At the same time, as he stood up, he suddenly looked about ten times older than usual.

Silently, the monk pressed his hands against each other and turned to leave, slipping past the group of warriors without giving them a second glance. As the elevator went down, the exes, and Jak, stopped just before the steps leading to the throne. More or less consciously, Jak stopped a little ways aside from the group.

"What happened?" Damas asked.

Jak stifled a wince at the tone, and he definitely did not envy Lev as the blond ex took another step forwards. From the corner of his eye he noticed how most of the other men shuffled into a tense half-formation, standing at attention. Taking some comfort in their military training.

He had no such thing, and even so it would not have helped one bit against the sour feeling in his stomach. He really wished there could have been a small, fuzzy hand pressed to his temple, to give him balance.

Lev cleared his throat, arms held tightly behind his back and feet slightly apart.

"The mission went well until we were halfway done, your lordship," he said. "I regret to inform you that I made a poor choice in the handling of the task you gave us."

All of the other exes looked sharply at Lev, and even Jak narrowed his eyes at the man's neck. He couldn't possibly be-

"I made Jak and Jelas work together for a longer period of time," Lev said.

He was.

"When doing so I was unaware that Jelas had a history of seeing Jak fight and kill several of his companions in the Guard. The stress finally drove Jelas to do something stupid." Lev motioned at Jak without looking around. He bent his neck. "Even so, I forced such a situation, because I did not know. As the leader of the operation, I take full responsibility."

"Lev, for f-"

Whoever it was who spoke cut himself off in time and remained silent. Regardless, Lev was not the one Damas glared at.

Jelas twisted his head to the side after a second.

With that, unfortunately, the king turned a sharp look towards Jak – not as cold as the one he had given Jelas, but still unpleasant.

"Anything else?" Damas said, the words drumming against Jak's ears.

Crap.

Once again, Lev cleared his throat. He straightened up, meeting Damas' eye.

"Upon being shot, Jak, uh, transformed, your lordship, but…"

Lev looked around, raising his eyebrows in a silent question. One by one, the other exes nodded – except for Jelas, who watched in silent rage with his teeth bared. Zem nodded quickly and forcefully before Lev's gaze had even stopped on him.
"… he didn't attack. He controlled himself once he understood that nobody else was going to attack him."

The blond ex glanced at Jak, a weak smile gracing his lips for half a second.

Jak met his eyes, but didn't say a word. He looked away when Lev turned back to Damas, trying to just breathe. Pain throbbed along his wounded arm, digging its way deep into his shoulder. He wanted to heal it, but he felt dizzy just trying to focus on the white eco in his body.

He should sit down, but he wouldn't show weakness, not in front of Damas, not in front of that bastard who had shot him and those, those, those men who had seen him as their old master's demon.

They knew he had been so close to killing all of them, and they still, still…

"He wasn't doing any motion to attack, your lordship," Lev said. "After he transformed he just curled up and moved backwards until he collapsed and turned back. I don't blame him for his initial reaction. The attack was sudden, and I would expect a seasoned warrior to meet a surprise attack with a countermeasure."

He looked around again, and once more there were only nods in reply to the silent question. A few scowls even softened.

Damas' shoulders sunk just a breath.

But that was the end of the calm.

"Oh yes! Let's all coddle the fucking mass-murderer!" The men who held Jelas swore at him to shut up, but he didn't. It only seemed to goad him on even more, eyes wide open in rage as he stared at Jak. "Give him special treatment 'cause he's so bloody awesome. He killed more people than the metal heads!"

Jak grit his teeth so hard they screeched against each other. Don't move, don't move. Don't. Don't.

"You fucking monster, you don't deserve to be here!"

If he clenched his hands any harder, the bones would break. Pain shot through his arm, a warning for what could happen.

Knowing that if he made the slightest movement, he would explode, and that would be worse. It had to be worse.

"I decide whether-"

Damas' snarl was suddenly cut off by three hard steps and a growl. A familiar thump of a fist slamming into a face and the harsh cry of pain following the impact.

Jak looked up.

Jelas hung in the grip of his guards; the only reason he wasn't sprawled out on the floor. A groan rose between his lips and his head rolled, exposing the angry red on his chin where he had been struck. The other exes stood silent, staring at the dark, shaking fist still held dangerously close to Jelas' face.
"Fucker."

It was barely above a whisper, harsh and wetly forced past the speaker’s bared teeth. His entire frame shook, the trembles growing from the fist as if he was strung up by it, hanging in the single word alone.

Jak too stood silent, watching. Dully confused, the emotion too detached to make him move a muscle.

It couldn't have been more than a second of that frozen state, before Damas recovered.

"You! Control yourself!" he barked, eyes dangerously narrowed.

But there was no reaction.

Lev hurried forwards, reaching out for the trembling man while throwing nervous glances at the king.

"Shit, man, back down! Hey! Zem!"

At the sound of his name Zem started, but he flinched away from his friend's touch. Breath hissed through his mouth, he violently waved his hand at Jelas but made no attempt to step close enough to hit him again.

"Bullshit!" he snarled, "fucking bullshit! What the hell d'ya think you know you little-"

Lev grabbed Zem's upper arms, dragging him backwards while cursing at him to calm down. Damas took a warning step forwards, glowering at the mechanic.

"I won't tolerate this!" the king growled.

At that, Zem finally reacted. His face snapped in Damas' direction, eyes wide open in rage.

"He thinks he can just- he didn't- nobody did- fucking doesn't know-"

He sputtered, then suddenly tore one arm free from the desperate grip trying to hold him still. The hand whipped outwards, pointing finger stretched.

"He's got no bloody clue what they did to him-!"

Zem stopped dead.

The hand and the outstretched finger hung like the fist had done, steadier this time. But as horror began to rise in Zem's face, the hand too started to tremble.

Nobody moved, only the eyes and heads turning to look at the point at which the finger was aimed.

At the end of the line, Jak stood unmoving.

The hand fell and Zem recoiled, out of Lev's numb grip.

"Oh shit, oh no… no…"

All the anger broken in one blow, he swayed, mouth opening and closing as if he was a fish thrown onto the unforgiving dry land. Shaking his head he staggered further backwards.
Jak watched him, motionless. But the blond could hear his own pulse throbbing to the tip of his ears.

"It's not… we're not it, Jak. We're not KGs. Praxis is dead. It's not what you think."

A hand reached out and fisted the sagging scarf around Zem's neck, tearing him forwards with a strangled sound.

"Don't," Damas snarled, "try my patience!"

Zem visibly gulped.

"N-no, Sir!"

Don't ask don't ask don't wanna know don't listen don't hear don't don't don't…

Jak's fingers twitched, the motion sending a nail through his wounded arm. He hardly noticed it, watching the two men. Damas bore down on Zem like a hawk extending its claws to catch a mongoose. In the background, several of the exes were exchanging glances. Lev was now staring at the dark skinned ex, a mix of confusion and disbelief in his eyes.

"What do you mean?" the king demanded.

Jak pinched his eyes shut. He didn't see how Zem just crumbled, tearing his gaze from Damas' stern face to dare a glance at the young, wounded wastelander. He could not have been looking for support, but whatever he did search for he did not seem to find it.

And then the voice. The words that broke the air.

"Wh-when I was a KG, I…"

"It's not what you think. He knew he knew all along he knew no no…"

"… I w-was picked to be a prison guard."

A sharp murmur tore through the group of tattooed men.

"Elite? You?"

The disbelief in the voice of the ex speaking, mirrored in the others’ eyes, was easy to understand. Even Jelas looked disturbed, glaring at the man who turned away. There was nothing in Zem's weak posture that validated his claim, nothing in what he seemed to be. For just a moment, Jak could almost believe that there wouldn't be any more pain.

But Lev did not look surprised, the final shreds of his positive character gone from his face as he looked at Zem. And when their eyes met Zem sighed and reached up, digging his fingers beneath his scarf. The hands emerged again, pulling his greenish, sleeveless tunic downwards. Sweat glued the dirty cloth to his skin and he had to peel it away, scratching at the widening slope of the collar.

Three horizontal, grey lines went across Zem's chest, like bars over his lungs and heart. But they were slashed through by the middle, by a slanted line in a slightly darker shade than the rest. A series of scars also crisscrossed the tattoo, too thin to be from a metal head's claws. But also too regular and centered to have been collected in a battle.

The grey markings made no sense to Jak, but the others' reactions was enough. The other exes studied the tattoo, several of them letting out snorts and half whistles. Lev's expression did not
"The commander must'a been drunk..." somebody muttered.

Zem flinched, eyes cutting to Jak. The drawn back lips were enough to make the ex quickly look away again.

"Well?" Damas said.

Lev nodded, his jaw set tight.

"He's the real thing, your lordship," he said, glaring at Zem.

For a moment it looked like he would say something more, but stopped himself. Zem looked away, starting to pull his tunic back up. His eyes pinched shut when Damas spoke again.

"And?"

Short cut words, snapped out. As if the king could only contain himself in a single syllable as he glared at the cowering ex. Zem dug his nails into his arm when he could no longer occupy himself with getting fully dressed again. Finally he shook his head, starting to speak in a hoarse voice.

"Baron Praxis, your lordship, in the prison, he... he was experimenting on people."

 Didn't notice the others' reactions, didn't see the frowns or the quick glances, Lev's blink. Didn't see Damas' lips stiffen. Only saw the one who talked, who raised his head and looked at Damas, a wild spark in his eye. Tried to remember that acting was worse, would be worse than listening.

"Pumping dark eco into them, trying to- people were dropping like flies, but there was- there was this kid who just wouldn't die, they kept- every fucking day! He'd been there for a whole goddamn year when I left-"

 Didn't see how everyone stood frozen. Didn't see the look on Damas' face.

The one who talked clawed at his own mouth like he wanted to stop the words but he didn't, didn't...

"A kid, just a fucking kid and they said he was the worst little beast they'd ever seen in there! The fuck did'ey expect, all the- gods he bit Praxis' hand once an' I thought we'd- the commander, he-"

 Some'body's shout drowned in the roar as Jak shot forwards, humanity cracking under the hiss of dark eco. Claws exploded from the fingers of the raised fist, cutting through the palm's paling skin before they extended to slice.

A peace maker hit the ground.

Zem recoiled and lost his balance, an arm raised in useless defense. The monster did not miss a pace, spread claws sweeping down to cut through bone and jugular alike.
A hand caught the sickly white wrist, jerking it upwards again and sending drops of blood flying from the cut palm. In the same motion another arm hooked around Jak's stomach and he was pulled backwards, snarling and twisting. The wounded arm twitched in its sling but limply fell back, the pain too much even in the rage.

And behind, above the pale face wrung through with hatred was another face, worn by desert wind and framed by hair whitened too early by too many troubles. Lips drawn from the man's teeth in a silent growl that would not accept refusal. A crimson drop flared in the light of torches and dark eco.

The men stared as the king of Spargus held the demon back with his bare hands.

Arms wrenching back and forth as the smaller struggled to break free, spindly threads of dark eco crawling where the hand closed around a wrist. They sparkled around Jak's claws, tumbling down his hand into the fingers below. Muscles tensed further, tanned skin whitening against sickly pale as the taller man growled, his forehead glistening with sweat erupting from the crevasses of the frown.

The threads hissed as they bore into the restraining grip, leaving not a mark as they were absorbed.

Damas twisted and suddenly tore, ramming the back of Jak's head into his chest.

"Stop it! Now!"

The jet-black eyes shot wide open and Jak froze. He blinked a couple of times, staring without really seeming to see the recoiling exes and the trembling Zem on the floor.

A second slipped past.

Then, with a shudder tearing through his entire body, Jak's horns and claws retracted and his skin faded back into its natural tan. The eyes changed last, still blinking in confusion as black was sucked inwards until only the pupil in the center of the blue iris remained.

He shook his head, turning to look at the hand holding his wrist. In his disorientation he did not understand, and in that state at least, he was safe for another moment. Until he looked up. Until he saw the blood on Damas' unforgiving face and his very being turned to ice.

A groan slipped out between his lips and Jak crumbled, finally knowing that Praxis had won after all.

Frowning, Damas let him fall to his knees. In the stunned silence, where there was nothing but the trickle of water and harsh breathing, the king finally noticed the wetness on his cheek. He reached up and brushed his fingers against his face, then pulled back and looked at the red smeared over the fingertips.

Looked at Jak, the young warrior all but curled in on himself in agony.

"It's your blood, Jak," Damas said, in a voice so soft and calm that it probably surprised even him.

The blond straightened up with a start, tearing his free hand up in front of his face. Three cuts from his own claws tore across his palm, blood trickling out of them.

In his paralyzed state of mind, he had not felt the pain.

"Precursors…" he croaked, pressing his hand to his forehead without caring about the flaring sting.
It let him breathe again, but the relief was still too weak.

As Damas spoke, he addressed the exes. There was nothing soft left in his voice now.

"You, take Jelas away. I'll deal with him later. And tell the guards below I won't see anyone until I've dealt with Jak."

"Your lordship, it was my fault, please-"

"Go!"

Zem's feverish, hoarse prayer was cut short in a sharp breath. A half second only, then his boots scraped the floor and his footsteps numbly followed the other exes'.

If Jak had bothered to look up, he would have seen how the others stepped away from Zem in the elevator as if they thought he was sick. Zem hardly seemed to notice it himself, furiously massaging his forehead with his eyes tightly shut.

Jak didn't move, because he was not told to and he wasn't sure if he would be able to unless given a direct order.

Damas did not even wait until he was certain that the elevator had reached the bottom before he sat down beside the blond.

"Pull yourself together, Jak."

There was a grunt, sounding somewhat like "trying to".

Damas shook his head, placing a hand on the good shoulder.

"Jak, listen to me."

He breathed in steadily, lips still stiff.

"What just happened was my fault."

At that Jak looked up, blinking and with blood from his palm smeared on his brow. The king shook his head again, meeting the confused, bloodshot gaze.

"I shouldn't have forced him to talk. I didn't realize the magnitude of Praxis' madness."

This time Jak shook his head, opening his mouth to shift the blame to somebody who lacked discipline. It had never bothered him much before, not after he learnt control – until he could have threatened this man. As long as he didn't hurt Daxter, or anyone, and he hadn't but now…

Damas held up a hand, scowling.

"Shut up!" he snapped, closing Jak's mouth immediately. "I never apologize to anyone. Don't ever question me if I do."

Jak watched the king for a moment, then lowered his head and turned away again. He couldn't think of a single thing to say.

Water trickled and splashed.

Finally Damas let out a deep breath through his mouth.
"I didn't recognize that Zem at first, but when he punched Jelas I remembered. He was almost killed by another wastelander a while back, who claimed Zem wasn't worthy of being one of us." Damas shook his head. "I thought that was why he lashed out at Jelas. I had no idea."

He paused.

"We seem to keep coming back to the problem of lacking knowledge…" he muttered, more to himself than to Jak.

For a moment Damas was silent, but then he turned to the young man beside him.

"I don't have to banish people often, and that's good. It's bad for morale."

A hand landed on Jak's shoulder and he looked up at the king. Damas watched him, intently like always – scrutinizing, in the search for something.

"I don't want to banish you."

The hand squeezed.

"You're not making this easy, Jak," he said somewhat dryly, but not unfriendly. "However, most of the witnesses seem to agree you didn't do anything wrong on the mission. I'm going to believe them, and you. As for what happened here…"

He shook his head.

"Considering how they looked when they left, I don't think that it will be your problem. For now, you and Jelas may fight in the arena over who gets to stay in Spargus."

At long last, Jak found his voice again.

"What I did here-"

"No."

Once again Damas cut him off, but not all sharply this time. Purple eyes closed beneath a frown, and the shake of the king's head made the braids on his face swing.

"I had no idea," he repeated. His eyes opened and he watched Jak with a pang of regret so alien that it almost gave the young warrior a start. "If I had, I would have done all of this more carefully."

The regret passed, but Damas seemed to be left drained in its wake. He gazed at the water of the pools before the both of them, rubbing his forehead.

It struck Jak with no little alarm that this was the third time he had ever, and in the course of just a few hours, seen the king of Spargus look tired.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

"Yes, you needn't worry about me." The shadow of a smile pulled at Damas' lips as he said it, however.

The tired look evaporated, and he turned serious again.

"Times are rough, and I must admit that learning what Praxis did has shaken me."
Jak clenched his teeth, looking down.

"I don't want to talk about it," he muttered.

"Very well."

The ease at which Damas let the painful subject drop did surprise Jak, but he felt nothing but gratitude at it.

Bending forwards, the king dipped his hand into the water by their feet and moved it to his face. With slow, thoughtful motions he cleaned the last remains of blood from his cheek. Seeing this, Jak mirrored the movement with his forehead. The wounds still bled a little and a small, red cloud spread into the water when he reached into it. Yet, Damas' lack of ordering him to stop let Jak know that it was alright.

Still brushing his forehead with the back of his hand Jak looked up again, finding the king watching him.

"Jak, are you…"

Damas seemed to hesitate for a moment. But Damas shouldn't hesitate.

"Did you kill Praxis?"

It didn't sound as if that was the original question, but Jak was in no state of mind to wonder too much about it. He just shook his head, letting his hand drop to his lap.

"No. Kor did. Threw him into a scaffold."

"Twenty feet of open air and CRASH! And that's why we don't fight XXXL-sized monsters with swords, kiddos! Unless you like to be carried home in a bag, but trust me, there're easier ways to have that arranged."

He could almost hear Daxter's voice butting in, telling the story in a more exaggerated – but also more detailed – manner than Jak ever could. He frowned, forcing it away. Don't go there. Don't go there.

It was bad enough that another voice was there again, the strained, coarse breathing as revenge slipped away. And even in his final breaths, Praxis made his claim on everything.

"You are the supreme weapon, Jak. And I made you."

Everything. Every step, every strain, every drop of blood sacrificed in the battle. Nothing could belong to the one who had struggled.

"Death by scaffold for Praxis. That's something for the history books."

Damas' voice was closer, real. Jak looked up, seeing the thin lips stretched in a rare smile. It eased the darkness a little, but still the blond let his gaze fall away, glaring at the empty throne room. His wounded arm dully throbbed, dark eco and his own exhausted fury slouching through his mind.

Haggard, empty.

So many screw-ups. So much laid bare, things he hadn't wanted anyone to know. That he had not wanted to know.

I made you. I made you.
"Everyone thinks I killed him," Jak said, having to snort at the irony. "And I wanted to."

Damas hummed, not making a comment. It must have been apparent from Jak's tone that he wanted to say something else. He knew that the last bit sounded a bit too much like a whine, but he ignored it. A moment passed as he debated with himself, trying to ascertain that it wasn't what he knew it was… only a statement, a musing of a memory. But it was neither, not really.

He gave up in the end, too tired to fight the desperate need to be cleansed of the memory, to be picked up and have it denied. Gritting his teeth, he let it drop.

"And he still went down saying I was his weapon."

Spat the words, hating himself. Couldn't look at Damas because it would show, show that it was nothing but a plea for assertion of the opposite.

Tell me I'm not. Please tell me I'm not. Even when I almost hurt you, when I thought that he was right. I need somebody to tell me that he was wrong.

A hand grabbed his chin and he winced, forcing down the instinct to fight back, to recoil. His head was turned, purple eyes glaring down into his. Jak flinched, the weakness laid open before the king.

"Bullshit."

The syllables were formed harshly, sounding odd from somebody who seldom took to swears. Jak blinked.

"Praxis stole a lot of things, but he had no claim on anything. Not on Haven, not on- you."

He seemed to be finished for a moment, but as he let go of Jak's chin Damas continued. For the first few words he turned away, glaring at empty air.

"Not ever. But it doesn't matter now." Damas looked back at the young wastelander beside him, stern but without the glare. "We have a battle here now, and you are nothing short of one of Spargus' finest warriors. As I think you were always meant to be."

His lips stretched a little.

"Disregarding the headaches you cost me every second month."

At that, Jak's shoulders finally dropped completely and he managed to smile just the tiniest bit. When Damas started to stand, the younger warrior did the same.

They were halfway to the elevator when another memory struck. Jak looked up.

"Damas?"

"Hm?"

"Why did you set Sig against Daxter and me in the arena?"

Damas did not smile, but he didn't grow stern either.

"The third battle should be a real challenge, and you never had any trouble with the first two. I didn't expect either of you to actually kill each other."
He pushed the rather crude button on the elevator structure, but he still watched Jak closely enough to see the brief tension crumble. A small nod, but Damas did not comment.

The elevator came rattling upwards.

"Before you leave, I have one last mission for today," Damas said.

"Hm?" Jak said, immediately trying to straighten up.

Damas snorted and shook his head. Then he looked the former renegade straight in the eye, perfectly serious.

"Get some proper rest."

Jak slowly blinked.

"If you need food then go out and get that, but aside from that I don't want to find out you've been running about for the next couple of days," Damas clarified. "Don't even think about going to Haven if they call you. They can practice taking care of their own problems for a day or two. That's an order, Jak."

It took a moment before the young warrior realized that Damas actually was serious down to the last word. Then the corners of Jak's lips twitched.

"I suppose I could give it a try," he said.

Smirking slightly, Damas sent him into the elevator with a pat to the good shoulder.

As he was lowered out of the throne room, Jak let out a slow, deep breath of relief.

Later he would realize that he had just been told "you look like crap", Damas-style.

Left alone, Damas slowly breathed in and started back towards the throne. He got halfway there before he froze in mid-step, and his face twisted. He fell to his knees, gritting his teeth to hold back a groan of pain, clutching his right wrist and pressing the back of the hand to the floor.

His fingers bent and twitched like snakes, all out of his control as the veins inside them darkened.

The dark eco flaring from Jak's claws-

Grinding out a curse Damas got to his feet and staggered past the throne, kicking one of the pots by the wall. It fell over, white eco spilling over the floor and he dove for it, burying his entire arm in the pure substance. The light spun around, seeping into his skin and leaving only a sweet coolness behind as it overpowered the foul eco.

Damas breathed heavily as he sat back up, massaging his right arm. As he did, his gaze was drawn towards the elevator structure.

Even descendants of Mar could not handle dark eco in the long run.

Gods. How long? A year? More? How had he done it? How could Jak have survived?

Not even descendants of Mar.

But…
Damas looked at his arm, turning it over and frowning as he tried to make sense of all he had just learnt.

But… descendants of Mar were among the precious few who should be able to survive exposure to dark eco for a longer period of time.

"… simply absurd…" he muttered.

Though he wasn't really believing those words anymore. He wasn't sure what he believed at all, anymore.

Jak stepped out of the elevator and through the doors only to nearly walk straight into Sig. One look between them was enough to let Jak know that the much taller man knew. He had never in his life seen anything like fear in Sig's eye, but the current worry got very close.

"Cherry?"

A big hand came up, then stopped when Sig realized that he was about to grasp the shoulder of the wounded arm. Stiffly, he let his hand fall again.

Jak could feel the guards behind him watching, and the street behind Sig was not exactly empty either. But he didn't care about the other people, only looked up at his friend and tried to smile a little, to calm him.

"I'm still here," Jak said.

A surprised but pleased murmur ran through the audience, and Sig didn't even try to mask his relief. With a loud sigh he rolled his entire head, then looked down at Jak again.

"Dammit, don't rattle me like that," he said.

That almost made it possible to properly smile, despite the exhaust.

"Sorry," Jak said.

The other wastelanders on the street began to move out, apparently satisfied with the news. Putting a hand lightly on Jak's good shoulder, Sig stepped to the side.

"Come on then," he said, "let's get you home. You look like something the lizard dragged in."

That did sound very close to the best thing in the world for the moment. Nodding, Jak began to walk, Sig beside him and slowing his long strides to the shorter man's pace.

They had not gotten far down the street, however, before the many trials of the day began to make themselves loudly apparent. After the fourth stumble Jak tiredly took a turn to the left and sunk down on the lowest step of a stair leading up to the second floor of a building. He glanced up as Sig took a seat beside him.

"Y'don't have to- urgh…"

Jak rubbed his forehead, grunting in annoyance at his own fatigue. Sig's big hand was back on his shoulder immediately.

"I'll carry you to your place if I have to, cherry."
The tone made it clear that he really would do it for real, should the need arise. Jak had to snort, but not with frustration.

"Not quite that bad yet," he muttered.

A gust of wind blew past, warm but a little bit refreshing. Sitting in the shadow with Sig beside him, and the fears of the day put to rest by Damas, Jak felt like he could just slump down and fall asleep right then and there.

When had he last slept properly, between the nightmares, the loneliness and the wonder at Daxter's transformation? Not for at least three nights, he realized now.

It was taking it's toll, even on a person like him.

The white eco fluttered deep within him, but even though he started to feel better now, he still did not feel mentally prepared to start playing with his healing powers. Chances were that in his current state, the focus he needed for it would make him fall over.

He could wait. He had been given, or ordered, time to recover.

"Jak?"

The sudden voice interrupted his sluggish thoughts and he looked up, feeling Sig straighten beside him. At the edge of the buildings' shadow stood Lev, looking very much like quickly draining willpower alone kept him from breaking apart. Sweat smeared a bundle of his fringe against his forehead, shoulders half to his ears.

His hands clenched and unclenched a couple of times before he held them up, remaining at a respectful distance.

"I know you probably don't wanna see any warpaint-faces right now but look… I'm sorry. We're sorry."

Lev rubbed his forehead and sighed.

"Jelas put us all in a right soup. We've got him holed up and trying to tell everyone what happened, 'cause us exes will be the first to rip him apart if people get it in their heads he tried to off you because of Highspeed Ginger's bounty, 'cause we'll all be next to the gallows if so."

Because Lev spoke very fast in his agitated state, and Jak was so tired he could hardly remember his own name, it did not click at once.

"But right now, we all just wanna be sure that you're not getting ba-"

"Wait, what?" Jak cut him off.

Mouth open in a half-formed word, Lev just stared at him. Jak tried to glare back, but still could not really focus against the bright sky.

"What bounty?" he demanded.

Now even Sig stared at him.

"You didn't know?" The huge man flinched at the realization when Jak gave him a confused look.

Sig pressed a hand against his forehead, cursing under his breath. When he finally removed the
hand he looked away, glaring at the ground.

"I didn't tell you 'cause I was sure you knew," he grimly muttered.

"Crap, crapcrapraaap…"

Muttering under his breath, Lev grabbed his communicator and stepped forwards. He hunched down to get to Jak's level, hitting the buttons beneath the display quickly.

"This is a recording," he said, not looking up to meet Jak's eyes. "Many of us got it a couple of weeks ago…"

He fell silent, sucking on his lower lip.

At a final push of a button, a low rasp rose up from the communicator. Then, an all too familiar voice slithered through the speakers.

"This is commander Erol."

Jak bared his teeth.

"I assume you expected me to be dead. As you can hear, the situation is quite different however, but it doesn't matter. I am calling now to let it be known that whoever can bring me renegade Jak, alive, will be handsomely rewarded. The metal heads know where to find me should anybody be successful in the hunt."

With a low bleep, the recording ended. Still not looking up Lev folded the communicator and hung it back on his belt.

Jak watched the man before him in silence. Hearing Erol's voice raised his hackles, but now that it was no longer there, the rage fell back into the mist of exhaust.

It hit him, however, why Kleiver had acted so strangely in the parking area, and why people had seemed so worried. The failure of this mission actually threatened a good portion of the city's inhabitants.

"We're sorry," Lev muttered, still as a statue.

One could think, from looking at him, that he would never smile again.

He would truly have taken the responsibility for Jelas in front of Damas, if he had been allowed to. And now he was doing it again.

This guy must have been the shoddiest KG in history.

"I'm not banished," Jak finally said, because he couldn't think of anything else that could help.

Lev looked up sharply then, relief practically blazing in his eyes.

"No? Oh precursors-"

He let out a sigh, shaking his head.

"Thank the gods. The protest march is off, then."

It was a weak smile and a half-hearted joke, but it was there. It eased up the tension in the air
immediately, if not completely.

Jak pursed his mouth. No reason trying to hide it.

"Damas said Jelas and I will fight in the arena over who gets to stay," he said.

The weak smile became a wince.

"Ah. Poor sod..." Lev shook his head.

He got to his feet.

"It's an ugly business," he said. "I can't judge, but I'm still pretty pissed at him right now."

There was a pause.

And... about Zem...

It hung in the air between Jak and Lev, but the ex proved wise enough not to bring it up. He simply nodded.

"I'd go on a mission with you again any day, if you'd have me," Lev said, managing a wry smile as he started to turn. "See ya."

"Hey," Jak said.

Lev stopped, and looked at him.

It was a little awkward, but the man deserved it.

"Thanks," Jak said, motioning at his bandaged arm.

With that acknowledgement, the remains of Lev's miserable mood cracked up and he smiled again, wide and honestly.

"You're welcome, man."

Giving a final, theatrical wave with his hand, the ex walked down the street.

For a little while, silence ruled.

"He okay?" Sig finally asked, curiously.

"I think so. Odd, but okay."

Jak got to his feet. He didn't feel quite alright, but well enough to walk.

It didn't take long to make it to Jak's simple home, and well inside the owner of the apartment gratefully crashed on one of the chair by the table. Closing his eyes for a moment he tried to make the gritty feeling in his body go away, but he fully well knew that only sleep would do that.

Gods, sleep.

As tired as he felt, not even worry for nightmares could touch him. Not even when the day had already offered several things for the bad dreams to feed on.

He opened his eyes when Sig said his name. The other wastelander held out the dipper from the
water pot. The ceramic dripped with clear liquid and Jak gratefully accepted it, draining it in a few deep gulps. Without a word Sig took it back and went to refill it.

Jak drank the second round slower, and placed the dipper on the table when he finished.

"Thn'ks."

Sighing deeply, Jak leant against the backrest of the chair with all his weight. Sig grabbed the other chair and pulled it up in front of Jak's, sitting down.

"I'll just rest up a bit and I'll be fine…" the blond murmured, eyes closing.

Not that he really believed that himself. Sleep would definitely be a start at least. Sweet oblivion.

"I think we both know what you need right now, bush boy," Sig's deep, warm voice murmured.

Jak looked up just in time to see Sig grab the communicator from his belt and raise his thumb towards the number pad. A sparkle of eager joy rose up, only to clash with a slimy dread when the blond remembered why he hadn't considered that himself.

"No- wait," he quickly said, reaching out to grasp the communicator.

Sig just quirked what would have been an eyebrow if there had been any hair. Shaking his head, Jak looked away.

"Don't bother," he grunted through his teeth. "Dax is mad at me."

The communicator was gently moved out of reach.

"So mad he won't care you got shot?" Sig asked.

Jak looked back at the calm question. The other man simply watched him, the raised eyebrow the only sign of surprise. There was no value judgment, no deeper disbelief. Sig wasn't asking why, just offering his view, and he would probably not press the matter – or communicator buttons – if Jak persisted.

And this being one of the precious few people Jak did not at all regret meeting in this sad future. For a crazy moment, he played with the thought to ask if a kiss would be bad enough to make Daxter stop caring. Just to see the reaction.

But then, knowing Sig, there probably wouldn't be much of a comment at even that. Him having been around Jinx for years, and all.

From the look on his face right now though, Sig truly, honestly didn't believe that there was one single thing his cherries could do to each other that would tear them apart.

And maybe, when it came down to it… that was the only truth there was.

Jak let his hand fall, lips stretching just the slightest bit.

"Guess not," he said.

Nodding, Sig lowered the communicator and dialed. The speakers gave a buzz, followed by a slow beeping.

Four beeps passed before a click was heard.
"Come in, Sig," came a hoarse, familiar voice over the line.

"Hey, Torn," Sig said. "We've got ourselves a situation here. Jak is okay, but he got shot in the arm on a mission. Some goddamn ex-KG went psycho."

Several "What?" were heard in the background. Realizing that none of them were Daxter's, Jak clenched his teeth. Where was he? He hadn't run off somewhere outside, had he?

"Is everything alright over there?" Ashelin's voice held a hard edge, but she managed to sound mostly calm.

Sig nodded, glancing at Jak.

"Golden boy's fine, just drooping a bit," he said, then smiled just a little bit. "I think we better let Daxter slap him up for us."

There was a brief pause, then a low murmur of Torn, Ashelin and Samos' voices, that latter far more soothing than the other two. Finally, Ashelin's voice returned.

"We're sending Pecker for him," she said. "It will take longer than using the PA system, but we need to treat this with some delicacy."

Jak pursed his mouth, but he couldn't be bothered to feel annoyed. Maybe if he thought about it when he was up to actually thinking again, he'd agree with her. The last thing needed right now was Haven thinking that its invincible anti-hero was as down as he felt right then. Torn, Ashelin and the others had enough troubles keeping everything together.

He straightened up when Ashelin continued to speak, a little softer.

"In the meantime, is Jak well enough to make a report on what happened?"

Sig looked at the blond, who grunted but held out his good hand. He got the communicator and turned it over, starting to briefly recount the events of the morning to the rather fuzzy people on the small display.

He was pretty much done when he was interrupted by a distant sound, so low the speakers hardly managed to play it. But it got louder, underlined by a grumble from Torn. Jak perked up before he noticed it himself, ears pricking for whatever words may come.

A voice buzzed in the background, too far away for any words to make it through – but the voice, the tone was too familiar not to be recognized.

Seconds stretched, there was some grumbling of other voices saying to calm down and that there was nothing to worry about, but that voice obviously didn't care. It sped closer, louder, intercepted only by a muffled sound as if a body had skidded and crashed into a control panel. A speck of red stumbled onto the communicator's small screen.

Then finally, out of breath and too loud, crackling through the speaker.

"Where's that ex? I'll rip his eyes out!"

And by those words Jak knew that, at least for now, he was forgiven. He slumped back, only then realizing how far he had been leaning forwards, tense as if ready to leap with the communicator in his hand. Sig gave him an amused look, but didn't comment.
"Hey Dax," Jak murmured.

He couldn't even be bothered to feel awkward, too tired and relieved.

"Don't 'hey Dax' me, I need a name, address, and a set of pointy objects!" The fuzz waved its arms about. "I'll teach him about psychos in red! You did leave something to maim, right?"

Jak's lips stretched wider than he'd thought possible considering how he felt.

"Yeah."

He didn't care to speak more. Daxter would find out all about it in time, but right then it didn't really matter. Just that he could listen to his best friend talking again, that was enough.

"Well good for him, then," Daxter snarled. "Make sure he's in relatively good health for a while, so I can come over there and ruin it properly! I'll just- what?"

The fuzz turned around, and a pale arm handed him something. He turned back, a grin in his voice this time.

"Seems the sourpusses over here don't want me invading their precious space," he said, waving the smudge in his hand. "Keira's being a cool babe and letting me borrow her communicator. I'll call you in a sec, okay?"

"Okay," Jak said, smile softening.

"Sheez, you're talking my ear off today, more than usual even. Keep it real for ten seconds, will ya?"

Daxter stepped out of view, and Jak handed the communicator back to Sig. The big man listened to something Samos said and replied, but Jak no longer listened. He unhooked his own communicator and put it in his lap, thumb posed to push the button for answering calls.

The first beep hadn't even gotten halfway done before he had pushed the button, and Daxter's face appeared, much more detailed, on the screen.

"Missed me that bad, eh?"

You have no idea.

"Can't blame you though, let me tell you this place is boring me out of my skull. Though considering all the action you're getting over there, I dunno if I'm jealous. Just proves that you can't do a thing right without me keeping you in line, eh?"

In the background, Sig finished his chat with Samos and the others. He shut off his communicator, but didn't move to get off the chair. Watching, with a smile pulling at one side of his mouth, as Jak listened to Daxter's ramblings.

The exhaust did not drain away from the blond's face, but it softened into a peaceful drowsiness.

The picture on the display began to bob slightly as Daxter walked, the background showing he left the command center and entered the corridor outside.

"What were you doing out trippin' with an ex, anyway? No wait, don't tell me, I don't care. I'm gonna make him wish his mama never dropped him on his head when he was a kid, whatever the business was."
He looked over his shoulder, as if to make sure he was alone.

Uh-oh.

"Oh hey, while we're at it…"

Daxter's tone became, in a second, all too smooth. And still, he talked just a little faster than usual.

"Any, say, special reasons you gave me a goodbye smooch, buddy?" he asked, eyebrows lowering.

Jak cringed and glanced up at the man before him. It now turned out that the only reaction Sig offered for this piece of news, was a naked brow raised just a little bit higher.

Seeing Jak's movement on the small screen, Daxter too remembered that there were three people involved in this conversation. He caught himself with Daxteresque speed, however.

"Oh right, you're there too, aren't ya Siggy?" he said, albeit a little too loud. "Well! If you can deal with Jinx, you can deal with Jak!"

Jak let the communicator drop to his lap and reached up to rub his forehead, trying to think. Finally, avoiding to look at Sig, he sighed. Daxter's tense look had grown to full-blown unease by the time Jak turned back to him, and judging from the unsteady picture he was walking quicker than before.

"Dax, I-"

It was a weak comfort for Jak to figure that even a guy with better social skills than himself, would have had some trouble with this situation. Probably. He trailed off, gritting his teeth.

A very awkward moment passed.

"Put it on ice 'til you're feeling better?" Daxter finally offered, trying to smile. "'Cause let me tell you, you look like a metal-pede used you as a chew toy and tap-danced on your back when it got bored."

Jak's shoulders dropped.

"Rather, yeah."

"I'm peachy with that."

Sig decided that this was a good moment to leave the boys alone. He got up, tapping Jak's good shoulder lightly.

"I'll get you some grub," Sig said. "You can pay me later."

He was gone before Jak could bring up the willpower to protest. The door clicked close and the big feet walked off.

"Give 'im props, he doesn't get rattled by nothing," Daxter commented.

"No…"

Jak stood up and headed towards the sleeping room.

"I'm gonna lay down for a bit," he said.
"Sleeping on the job, are we? Then again, whoever sent you to a job looking like that oughta have their priorities checked. Of course, I know you'd dash off without a second thought if somebody as much as mentioned 'metal head invasion', even if you're about to drop. Gads, I oughta get a restraining order to keep you in line while I'm not there to do it myself!"

During this rant Jak had pulled off his boots and laid down on the sleeping mat. He placed the communicator on its side, so that he could still see Daxter's face on the display.

Daxter kept ranting, even as he got back to their room in Haven, even as Jak's heavy eyelids began to drift closed.

As Sig came back, he found Jak asleep. By then, Daxter had stopped talking, turning off Keira's communicator with a fond grin on his face. Snorting softly at the sight of Jak sprawled on his back, snoozing peacefully in the middle of the day, Sig left the bread and smoked fish wrapped in palm leaves on the table.

He left again, carefully closing the door behind him.

His cherries would be alright.

\[
\text{'Begin Introspection. Serial code: Zem.}'
\]

I'm alive. Gods, why am I alive? Who did I steal time from? Why didn't he kill me? Oh no- no, not in front of Damas… then I'd hurt him again, even if I'd finally be dead.

I did it again though, didn't I? I didn't mean to, I was just… following orders. Just like in the prison. Orders, orders. No, it's no excuse. No excuse. No mercy. I don't deserve it.

Shit. Shit. Bloody, f… what's the use? What?

Why didn't he kill me?

\[
\text{'End Introspection.}'
\]

\[
\text{Chapter End Notes}
\]

Okay, sooo... here's where, for a long long long time, the story ended. What happened was that I had started falling out of the fandom so updates had already slowed down, and then I went to Germany for half a year for a combined language course/internship, during which I had no ready access to a computer (this was before smartphones and I pads exploded, kids... ie ancient times). So when I got back I was well and truly disconnected from where I had been... and I also started playing World of Warcraft. Oops.
However, this story kept niggling in the back of my head and six and a half year later I was hit with inspiration and because a lot of it had already been written back in the day, I managed to finish the rest of the story in less than a year.

So new readers, old readers, strap yourselves in because we're just getting into the good stuff :D
Aaand here we go with post-hiatus goodness. Woopwoop!


Begin Introspection. Serial code: Damas.

I cannot. I should not.

It is none of my business. It is not worth my time.

I'm not a man easily rattled. Nobody like that has a chance of living in Spargus, much less ruling it.

But I can't get a wink of sleep.

I have gone through worse than this uneasiness. It is not even something that happened to me. It's not something I could have changed. It's all in the past. It should not matter. That's why it's so infuriating that I can't shake it off.

No. No…

It is… none of my business.

None.

But, precursors, I can't sleep.

End Introspection.

The locker room and entrance to the shooting range smelt like burnt rubber, among other things. This one might be built into the bowels of Freedom HQ (because Daxter was certainly NOT going to head over to the harbor on his own. Disturbingly enough, Tess on the other hand was crazy enough to make it through the other direction. Somehow), but it was almost exactly alike the one down by the water.

Daxter stretched his back, half expecting to hear several joints pop. Nothing of the sort happened though, to which he felt grateful. One good point to counter how sick he was getting of watching the same corridor again and again, no matter how varied the appearances of cardboard metal heads were. It didn't help that he'd seen it dozens of times before, together with Jak, but then at least there was somebody else in there. Somebody to juggle jokes and commentary with.
"You keep shooting that fat civilian, bud. He doesn't look THAT much like Krew."

To his own exasperation, Daxter found himself repeatedly murdering the same cardboard fatso too. It was the oftentimes red shirt, he'd come to realize. That color was so ingrained in both his and Jak's brains as a sign of danger, that the trigger finger reacted much quicker than the brain. The copies of the big man that were lucky enough to have been crudely painted to wear some other color had a greater chance of survival – and their great skill in reducing the shooter's points went down.

For the moment Daxter was just taking a brief break while Tess fiddled with the control panel. So far, he felt that he was doing… well, not great, but pretty good for a beginner. It was very different from the clunky aiming he'd done with Jak's morph gun as an ottsel, but that was a plus. The small guns Tess had gotten for him were much easier to use and reload, and they wouldn't weigh him down at all. She'd said that he was by no means ever, ever going to waste that wonderful speed of his. A comment that still made him grin like a goofball.

A bigger gun would have made him feel safer, he silently admitted to himself, but that was what Jak was for. Jak had never been slow by any means, but Daxter had a whole different kind of nimbleness. Even though he was still getting used to it, this new-old body, it showed. He could get even better, too.

Thanks to all the shooting he'd done as an ottsel, balancing on Jak's shoulder at full speed on a zoomer, he'd already gotten ample training in aiming. Now he just needed to adjust to this new state of things.

Jak.

It all came back to Jak. Always.

It was starting to make him more than a little antsy. Which felt weird because if he was totally and utterly honest with himself, thinking about Jak was nothing new – ingrained as his best friend was in Daxter's brain.

"Daxxie?"

"Hmm?"

Tess' voice snapped him out of his vacant staring at the door to the shooting range. He hadn't noticed that she'd finished with the control panel and turned around.

"Aren't you scared?" she asked.

Silence.

Daxter wet his lips nervously. Tess knew, everyone knew, that he wasn't doing this for his own sake. Well, partly for his own sake, but… he did this so that he would be able to pass the arena test in Spargus.

To be with Jak again.

Tess watched him in the dull light of the room. Rust and gunpowder. Shattered cardboard. Blonde hair and rosy lips. Dainty hands covered with grease stains. She didn't seem to fit.

Daxter felt that he probably didn't, either.
Jak did. Jak and Sig and Torn. And Damas.

Not Daxter. He had just… tagged along into Jak's new life.

The guns were heavy in his belt. They fit the room, but not him. Not yet, at least.

He thought about the arena and the dozens of marauders rushing at him and Jak. About how Jak defeated every last one of them, with his bare hands if he had to. Swords raised and cruel faces hidden behind masks but you can hear the sneer in their shouts, just a boy, just a kid-

Daxter inwardly slapped himself.

He could fight, he could shoot. Who held the morph gun when Jak had to use both hands for driving, huh? Who was the one who survived for two years alone in Haven, huh? Now, bug hunting might not quite measure up to getting attacked by two dozen angry and armed marauders… but hey, not like some of those buggers hadn't been huge to him back then, right? And HEY, who killed a metal head twenty times his size, on his own, on the way to save his best bud, huh? Who bounded about smacking and confusing metal heads in the volcano until they fell into the lava, just to get to a few pushable rocks and open the way for Jak, huh?

Jak wouldn't have had such a smooth time during some of their old missions without his teammate. Now, disregarding the discussion about "smooth" and all… yep. Word of the month: teamwork. Same as last month.

So to answer Tess' question, then…

"Yeah. But…"

Daxter straightened up and fired off a confident smile at Tess.

"I'll be fine s'long as Jak thinks I have the smudge of a chance."

He tapped his cheek, looking hopeful.

"… and maybe with a lucky kiss?"

It was already too late when he had said it, and he forcibly repressed a grimace. Luckily, it got Tess laughing just enough to miss it. Even though she sounded like she was just trying to calm his nerves together with her own.

Daxter faced the door again, taking in a new breath.

"Okay babe, let's give it another shot!" he declared.

Because Jak obviously couldn't take care of himself, he darn well needed his sidekick and he should know it.

And after that… thing… in the bathroom, he severely needed to be whacked over the head. Soon.

Daxter walked through the door, dead set on making either himself or everything else fit.

Fifteen minutes later when he crawled back out of the shooting range, he felt as if he was twice as soar and stinking of sweat and burnt eco.

"Man, Tess, you had everything go all out on me, didn't you? Couldn't you have warned me, at least?" he complained ad he wiped his forehead, not even wanting to know his score.
"Aww, but you did really well," she assured him, fluttering her eyelashes innocently. "I just tossed in a few more targets and upped the speed a notch."

"More like cranked it to eleven… oi!"

Letting out a sigh, Daxter moved the safety lock on both guns before he shoved them in the holsters. Only after finishing that did he drop down on one of the benches beside the lockers. His mind spun with flashing and leaping images of cardboard enemies and civilians, jumping back and forth like lice that had come across something that not even Jinx would sell. Yet, even when he was that dizzy and tired, he felt a stitch of pride at remembering the gun safety rules Tess had instructed him on.

The same rules that Sig had drilled into Jak once upon a time.

Another thought struck and he looked up with a grin, albeit an exhausted one.

"You think I'm getting that good so quickly, eh sweetcheeks?" he said.

"You're doing great," she cooed. "Even when they started switching around so quickly in there, you got several of them." She snatched her bag from where she had left it by the wall and came over to sit beside him. "Well, suppose it's time for a snack!"

Daxter grunted a relieved approval and sagged further against the wall, until Tess pulled out a lunch box that turned out to be crammed with sandwiches stuffed with eggs and salad.

"Oh Tess, you're an angel dropped right out of heaven," he said as she handed him one of the sandwiches. He chomped into it, only then realizing how hungry he'd gotten. Until then he had been too focused, and then drained, to notice.

Tess handed him another one when he finished his first, while she hadn't even gotten through her first when he started on his third.

"Well, you're a big boy now, Daxxie," she said with a soft giggle and poked his arm. "We've got to feed you right."

He said a few more thankful things but they were all muffled by the sandwichy goodness he stuffed his face with. They finished off their simple meal in comfy silence – mostly because Daxter kept munching with too much enthusiasm to speak.

Finally full, he leaned back with a happy sigh and gazed up at the ceiling. Life was kind of good for a moment. As mellow as he felt, his brain started to move in slower circles than usual. Of course, that meant his mouth automatically did the same, seeing as the filter between them was, according to Torn, in need of being welded back on with a flame thrower.

"It's kinda funny… the smells in here are annoying, but I used to feel them much more before."

Daxter tilted his head and let his nostrils flare at Tess jocularly. "Well, 'cept for you, hun, that ain't annoying at all. I used to think that cherry scent was perfume, but I hardly feel it at all now."

At first her eyes widened slightly in surprise, but then she laughed. It was a bright, tickling sound, earnest like her giggles.

"It's the soap I use," she admitted. "You like it?"

"I wouldn't wash in it myself… not manly enough."
They both had a laugh at that, but then Tess' smile faded into a thoughtful look.

"It must be pretty weird being like that for years, and then come back like this, huh?" she said, watching him.

He nodded, his brow furrowing in thought.

"My hearing was better, and I sorta… felt things through the ground if I was on it. Steps and stuff, y'know?"

Riveting. This really wasn't coming out the way he wanted it. He made it sound just… simple, when it was amazing.

"The smells though, man. I could smell people hours after they'd been somewhere. Which wasn't always so great." He waved a hand in front of his nose for emphasis. Tess laughed again. "But it could be real useful too."

"You must be feeling a lot stronger now too, don't you?" she asked. Lost in his own thoughts, Daxter completely missed the calculating flash in her eyes.

"Sorta," he said, raising his arms to tense and show off his muscles. There wasn't much to show, but Tess still cooed. Then he paused and thought for a moment. "Though, I was a lot lighter then. I feel a bit slow. I could climb anything in a second, y'know?" He turned his hands over. "Course, I had claws."

"Yeah, but you can jump really far and run fast. I noticed that when you ran the course." Tess jabbed a thumb towards the door leading into the shooting range.

Daxter nodded. He had noticed that too, even more since that long leap in the harbor when he, Jak and Sig had returned to Haven. Gravity might be working against this new-old body, but he had still gone through years of tough, patented otsel-training.

Somehow. How did that even work? These weren't really the same muscles.

Daxter could only conclude that magic body transformations were weird.

"You know, Daxxie, I've been thinking…" Tess said, her elegant eyebrows knitting in concentration as she stared at the control panel.

"Am I in trouble?" Daxter shot back at her, grinning though he did feel a hint of anxiety. There was that crazy sparkle in her eye that she normally only got when giving stern orders to Jak.

"No, no, no sweetie, of course not!" She leapt up with a giggle, spun around and pointed at him. "But you know, I think we've been tackling this all wrong."

"Whaddaya mean?"

"Well, this shooting course is for people who fight like Jak and Sig. We should be playing to your strengths." Cracking her knuckles and with the manic look increasing in strength at an alarming rate, she stepped over to the control panel. "Let's switch things up a bit! I'm gonna set it to the obstacle course with paintballs, okay?"

Daxter opened his mouth to protest. Jak and Sig were wastelanders. It was what he would have to become as well.
However, that line of thought got temporarily squashed as his brain caught up with what she had just said.

"There's a paintball setting inside this slaughter house?!"

"You so knew!"

"I didn't."

"Did too!"

"Didn't."

"Liar!" Daxter fumed as he furiously rubbed a towel against his cheek, trying to wipe off the bright green smear of paint. It seemed to really like him, since it apparently had decided to glue itself to him forever and ever.

In retrospect he was glad that Tess had made him change into the spare training clothes stored in the locker rooms – though it had taken a while. They stunk. And they looked like something a colorblind, crazy jester would wear. Proof of what they were for.

But that was beside the point. He glared at the communicator he had set on a chair while he sat cross-legged on the floor of his and Jak's Freedom HQ room. And on the communicator's screen was Jak's face, absolutely refusing to show any sign of guilt or even sheepishness.

"Dax," he said, "you know Sig set the course the first times and then—"

"Well you coulda asked! And then Tess just went along with that… and while we're on her, you better stay clear of her for a bit, Danger Boy. She's got unholy fury to spare ya now."

"Asked Sig if there was a less dangerous setting?" Jak pointed out.

" Eh…"

Well of course he had to go and put his finger on the glaring flaw in the argument. Daxter paused only for a second, however.

"Well it should have been obvious, shouldn't it? Even Krew wouldn't want to kill off all his men for practice, right?"

Jak raised an eyebrow in that very special Jak-speak way that silently wondered why Daxter hadn't asked about it himself in the first place.

"Okay, okay, so back then all I could think was that everyone was crazy, so it didn't seem that weird," Daxter said with a huff. "But didn't you ever look closer at the control panel yourself?"

Anybody else would have pressed even harder back, asking "and why didn't you?" again. But Jak let it rest. That did not go unnoticed, though uncommented. Deflating a little, Daxter grunted and whisked a corner of the towel around in one of his ears to get the water out.

"Anyways. I'm startin' to wonder Tessy might like leather and whips, real hardcore-like." He gave that a theatrical silent second, during which Jak just watched him as well as the limited communicator pictures allowed. "You don't even wanna know what she put me through today in the range."
Daxter paused and bit his tongue. The sexy angle that should have been funny took on a whole different meaning when he realized what he'd said. To who. To who had just recently, ehm…

He cleared his throat, both to be quicker than Jak with a comment, and to fight down the swell of frustration. Why did it have to be like this?

"How's your arm?" Daxter asked, sending the conversation swerving into a safe zone.

"Mh." Static crackled around the murmur. "I'm fine."

"You sound bored out of your skull though, bud."

Jak chuckled dryly, shaking his head.

"Damas ordered me to rest for a couple of days," he said.

"And you have?" Daxter asked, widening his eyes until they hurt. Then, when Jak nodded, he continued, "well smack a medal on Mr. Grim, he's a god among men. Oh! I gotta tell Samos. He'll faint when he hears about this."

Jak rolled his eyes, then smirked. Two could play the teasing game.

"Hey, Dax?"

"Whut?"

"You've still got blue in your hair."

"Dammit!"

Begin Introspection. Serial code: Daxter.

That was okay. If we can just sit and talk like this, everything's normal. Like it should be. No confusion or tension or sudden revelations.

Can it just stay this way? Please?

See, everything can be fine. It can. So why did he hafta go and mess things up? Everything was going great… well apart from the whole impending Armageddon thing, but that's fixable as long as we're on the job! Well, as long as Jak does the really dangerous bits… and I make sure to watch his back.

I gotta see him. I gotta make sure everything can be fine when we're face to face, too. Gotta make sure that nothing changed.

It's not that strange though, right? The more I think about it… it shouldn't. Right?

Nah, it— it shouldn't be. It's just me, Jak, and me, as it's always been. Even me getting small and fuzzy, and him getting a grimdark makeover, could change that. So, so him being, uhm, a bit weird about things, it's no worse than the grinder we've already been through.
Right?
Right.

…

Now if you'll excuse me, I'm gonna curl up and try to sleep. What? No I'm not cuddling Jak's shirt, that's nutballs!

Alright, alright, alright, it's under my pillow, jeez. The cleaning lady snagged all his other stuff to have it washed. What was I supposed to do, I had to hide it.

Sigh.

I wonder if it would be worth it to ask Jinx if he's got any super powered sleeping pills to sell. Though it's probably not his usual merchandise. And I kinda like to keep breathing.

...

Jak's shirt it is. 'Cause I really need to sleep, 'cause Tess will be peppering me with paintballs again tomorrow.

Awesome.

,

End Introspection.
,

Gazing into the Abyss

Begin Introspection. Serial code: Jelas.

I'm gonna die. Just a few more hours. How many times do I still get to breathe?

What a joke.

"You and Jak are guilty of the crime of attempting to kill another wastelander. You will fight in the arena, and whoever wins gets to stay."


If I didn't join the Guard, me and my siblings would have been thrown out of Haven. If I didn't follow orders, I'd be executed and they would be thrown out. Did he ever stop to think of that? Did he ever stop and take in what the Baron was telling the people – telling us? Was it so easy just because we were faceless masks?

So he suffered under Praxis? So what. Get in line.

The smell of murky water makes me ill. It's always there, coiling through my brain.

I hear the screaming. I see Munk's hand disappear into the dark water. He fell in, so close, so close… but if I let go of the pier I was clinging to, my armor would have dragged me down too. I couldn't reach out.

He screamed as he fell, then the water silenced him. He came up once, gurgled, water lodged behind his mask, already drowning him. He tried to tear it off. He tried to reach for me. He couldn't. I couldn't.

I watched him sink.

All the while, Praxis screamed orders into our headsets to keep going, stop that renegade, stop him no matter what, don't let him leave the water slums alive. Munk must have heard it as he drowned.

We were knocked in the water. Duro, Kam, Credon… he shot them. At least that was quick. Not like Munk, his hand waving sluggishly, desperately at me as he disappeared. Fingers bending, seeking grip, any grip when there was none.

All those faceless masks had names, freak. They had voices and laughter and grief and fear for their families.

And now you're going to kill me too. Just as easily.

And nobody cares, because you're the hero.

End Introspection.
The morning paper almost made Daxter choke on his coffee.

For one, it was amazing that there were printers still at work, but then again somebody had to let the people know what was going on. Though they were horribly late in this case, they tried to make up for it with grand words of hope.

It was probably meant to be flattering.

**Breaking news: Haven's Finest has returned to save us**

And in smaller text, it specified that "Full pardon granted to Jak of the Underground by governor Ashelin Praxis".

Daxter glared, the brittle paper crumbling in his fist. He could clearly recall other headlines, cramped beneath the same name that now tore up under his fingers instead of being shredded by his claws. He recalled words like "criminal", "inhumane methods" and "monster".

He was suddenly glad that Jak was in the wasteland.

Maybe Jak wouldn't even had found the paper worthy of a snarl, dismissing it to the wastebasket without another thought of it. He didn't waste time thinking about crap like printed insults.

Maybe. Because the words would still be there, and even if he pretended to not care, others could. Others **had**.

Something else tried to get his attention from the depths of his memory, but he was already too worked up to listen to it.

Daxter looked up, meeting Keira's eyes. She was cringing, obviously having read the headline upside down from the other side of the table.

"Just…"

Daxter growled, tearing the first page off the paper and slamming it into the table so that he wouldn't have to see the offending, crumpled letters.

"Just peachy. Now they get in gear? And next week they'll be saying that he's having an affair with Ashelin and that's why he got pardoned— oh, ehehehe." Daxter shut up and laughed sheepishly, rubbing the back of his head as he saw the flash in Keira's eyes. Just as much, though he wanted to slam his head into the table for his own sake. Had he always slipped in on the theme of relationships when Jak was the subject? Yeah, probably. But it hadn't had this edge, before.

Gah.

Right at that moment though, an unlikely aid appeared to help bring the subject back on a safer, pissed off track. A calloused, bony hand reached into Daxter's vision and snatched up the ball of paper. He looked up, watching as Torn straightened out the page.

After a single glance, the commander balled it back up and with a flick of his wrist sent it flying to the nearest wastebasket.

"Just what we need," he said and reached for the coffee cup he had set down on the table. "A mass-
"panic."

"What?" Daxter shot from his seat, and even Keira exclaimed a protest. "I thought you guys tried to raise morale by broadcasting what Jak did since he returned, what—"

Torn shook his head.

"No, not that. Not everyone trusts Jak, but most already knew he was back. That's not the thing."

"Yeah well what then?" Daxter said, fuming about the sad fact Torn had so calmly pointed out. "Cause whatever it is, you guys better step up the praise campaign anyway, I'm not seeing enough floats and confetti out there." This was, predictably, only met with an eye roll.

Daxter took a sip of coffee to calm down. It was way too early in the morning to get this upset about stupid people.

"It's the headline," Torn said. "'Haven's finest' is what they used to call Erol."

This time Daxter did choke on the coffee. Keira had to get up and punch his back as he keeled forward, coughing and spitting.

"Oh— oh yeah!" he wheezed between coughs. "I thought that was familiar." He managed to get a hold of himself and glanced upwards. "So there'll be a lot of screaming and flailing up there from people only reading the headline. I don't envy you your job." He made himself feel a little better with that comment and a sneer at Torn.

Some soldiers sitting by nearby tables groaned, with the knowledge that it would be them patrolling the streets, repeatedly answering questions from frantic citizens.

The commander grunted, rolled his eyes, and moved a couple of tables away to eat and read reports.

Silence settled over the table for a little while as Daxter stared into his coffee. He would really have wanted something stronger in it right about then.

Keira stretched and rubbed her eyes, then slumped back down on her seat to take a deep drought out of her coffee cup. Looking closer, Daxter noticed that she looked paler than usual, and had dark rims under her eyes.

He might not have full animal instincts anymore, but he wasn't blind or deaf. Disregarding the fact that he hadn't really noticed until now, but details, details…

"Keira, hun, are you okay?"

"Hmm?" She glanced up and gave him the shadow of a smile. Just getting that much from her would have meant so much to him when they were younger, but now he had Tess. And, uh, Jak…

He pushed that away for the moment. Keira. Keira looking sick.

"Yeah, I'm fine, thanks," she said and emptied her cup. "Tess just kept me awake all night."

Daxter's offer to get her more coffee turned into a sputter. For a second they stared at each other until Keira blinked and cracked a mix of a snicker and a huff.

"Not like that! You're hopeless." She tossed a balled up napkin at him.
Cackling, Daxter finished off his coffee and stood up with a snicker.

"Well, if you're not gonna spill, I'll just ask her about the juicy details." He waved over his shoulder as he headed for the door.

"Daxter."

"Hmm?" He turned around, meeting her tired, worried gaze.

"Are you sure about this?"

"About what, sugarplum, my good looks? Never!" Daxter forced a grin, refusing to act as if he knew what she was talking about.

Keira did not even crack the hint of a smile.

"Jak doesn't want you to die," she said, looking him straight in the eye.

It took all of Daxter's willpower to not deflate even the slightest. From the corner of his eye he saw Torn glance at them, and "lack of faith" didn't even start to describe the look on his face.

"Yeah well, neither do I," Daxter said with a theatrical huff and a strained grin. "So it's off to Tessie to make sure I don't."

Keira did not look convinced in the slightest, but she tried to not let it show as she waved a weak goodbye. As he left the cafeteria, Daxter wasn't sure if he imagined Torn's dry scoff or not. It was probably real.

It said everything perfectly clear even without words. *If Jak needed your help, we'd all be dead by now.*

Kangarat crap.

Daxter was fuming by the time he opened the door to the shooting range control room, only to be met with the bouncing ball of living sunshine that was Tess. His mood almost had a whiplash, as it was impossible not to grin at the sight of her excited face.

"Me and Keira fiddled around with the mechanics last night," Tess chirped. "There are more versions of the paintball course now." She tapped her lips with a fingertip, glancing at the console with just a teeny, tiny hint of concern. "Unless something explodes. But that's why I had Keira help, so it should be all good."

Oooh, that explained why Keira was so tired.

Still…

Daxter folded his arms. Okay. Right. He had not wanted to argue with Tess, but after spending all night thinking about it, he figured that he had to.

"Look, Tess," he said, "the obstacle course is more fun than the usual one, mostly because it doesn't hurt as much… though it cheats. But it's not what I need to practice, I need to learn fighting and the clock's tickin'."

The cheerful look on her face melted away, but not in the way that he had hoped. Instead of sighing, or at least thinking his points over, her eyebrows lowered in worrisome determination.
Warning bells chimed quite loudly in Daxter's brain.

"Ehm, it's not that I don't appreciate all your work, sweetcheeks…"

"No, no, no!" Tess raised a finger to hush him and pulled out her communicator. "I thought you'd say something like that, so I got myself some backup to convince you quicker." She pushed a few buttons and the communicator beeped to indicate that the person on the other end had answered the call. "You're up, Sig."

"Roger that, strawberry," was heard from the speakers.

Though not feeling too hot about the turn things had taken, Daxter accepted the communicator when Tess offered it. Refusing did not seem like a healthy option.

"Hiya Sig," he greeted the face on the small screen, without much enthusiasm.

"Tess gave me the rundown." Sig's one eye flashed with a stern look that could have given a metal head reason to think over its life decisions. "I want you to listen good to the end, chili pepper."

"Okay…?" Daxter said, clenching his teeth. That tone gave him a sinking feeling.

"She showed me some clips of you training." He said it so coolly. "Daxter, you ain't gonna survive the arena like Jak."

Daxter felt like somebody had dumped a bucket of ice water down his shirt. He started to protest, almost strangled by the angry lump in his throat, but was cut off.

"I said listen to the end," Sig said in a firm tone. Daxter snapped his mouth shut. "Tess got the right idea."

"But—"

"Don't 'but' me off, kiddo. You're not Jak."

"Well if you're gonna be like that, may I point out that nobody's Jak except Jak, or we wouldn't even be in this mess in the first place?" Daxter snapped.

But Sig went on like a stampeding lurker – though a lot less painful, in the end.

"You're not Jak, Daxter. You're the backup."

Daxter paused.

"There's a lot more to survival than killing everything the fastest." Sig let up enough to offer a small, slanted smile. "It's just what us big boys prefer. Do you think a wumpbee like Seem and her peeps can mow down a dozen marauders?"

Come to think of it, Daxter had been wondering how the snooty rubber crew earned their right to hang around Spargus. It couldn't be their charming manners, and making random hand signs might look cool but he had never quite believed that that would impress Damas enough to give the small boys and girls a green card.

And thinking even harder about it, there were quite a few citizens that looked tough as they ought, but not tough enough to go through the same fights as Jak. Etche the bartender came to mind.

"Sooo… what then?" Daxter asked.
"Golden boy did the battle test. You'll run the survival test instead, chili pepper."

Although these news made him feel a lot lighter all of a sudden, Daxter knew he had fallen into the trap of easy relief before. This time he was still enough on edge to stop and think for a second. The flash in Sig's eye helped to warn him, too.

"Sounds peachy when you put it like that, but do ya care to share the details, big guy?" he said with a note of suspicion in his voice.

Sig explained.

Tess made a funny noise at some parts during the explanation, and Daxter pulled a face. But the cringes were not completely dismal.

He turned it over and over in his head. Thought about his lonely time in Haven, searching for Jak and struggling to live through every day. The volcano and the flying war factory. And his shoulders sunk.

"Yanno, I can do that! Easy peasy!" he finally declared, letting his confidence bloom with a cocky grin.

And just for once, Sig looked like he actually believed him. Almost.

"Show us you can run the obstacle course picture perfect ten times and we'll talk, champ," Sig said.

"Pff, I'll be back in sandy action in less than a week. Just wait and watch in awe!"

Sig chuckled and nodded.

"Roger that, chili pepper. Over and out."

Daxter said his goodbyes as well and turned off the communicator, handing it back to Tess with a grin. She studied him with some concern, though.

"Are you sure, Daxter?" she asked, in a more serious tone than he had ever heard from her. It did not deter him the slightest.

"Honey, I haven't had time to tell you half of all the crazy stuff I've done with Jak. This just made things a whole lot easier."

Her last trepidation shattered and she gave a little jump, clapping her hands.

"Great! Let's jump to it, then!"

Grinning, Daxter ducked into the locker room to change into the paintballed crazy clown outfit. As he emerged, he quirked an eyebrow at the waiting Tess.

"Hey, if I'm Jak's backup, and Sig is yours, what does that make you?" he asked.

Tess shot him a sweet smile and threw out her arm to point at the door to the shooting range.

"It makes me the best at what I do. Now go get 'em, tiger!"

A rare beep reverberated through the small, hot cave beneath the car. At the sound, numb fingers lost their grip of the wrench they had been curled over. They had not been able to hold it well
enough to use the tool properly for several minutes, anyway.

He was only just a serviceable mechanic in the first place, and Kleiver had not been pleased at all with his performance in the last few days. Kleiver was, however, quite happy to slash the pay for a useless mechanic who didn't pull his own weight.

Zem just couldn't bring himself to care. He had moved through a haze for days, not even knowing if he had eaten or drunk anything, not until he almost fainted. Somehow it never got that far, if only because he grabbed the water flask by his belt when he started to feel dizzy.

He didn't even know, or thought about, if anybody would bother to pick him up if he actually passed out.

Leaving the wrench in the dust, he pushed himself out from under the car and sat up. The small green lamp on the communicator kept blinking until he snapped the device open.

The screen didn't even flash with a picture. There was only one sentence spoken brusquely in a hoarse, familiar voice.

"Get up here right now."

"Yessir."

He said it automatically, not even sure if the speaker caught it since his voice broke within the dry throat. Without another word through the line, the blue lamp indicating that there was somebody listening on the other end clicked off.

Zem got up and headed for the gate, leaving his tools behind. He didn't even bother to brush the sand from his pants. Considering his state of mind, it was a wonder that he hung the communicator back on his belt.

Mere seconds after the gate closed behind him, the machinery moving the door pieces reacted to another city pass commanding it to work once more. Lev silently stepped through, following Zem down the street. Zem didn't look up or around, moving stiffly as if he was not even aware of his surroundings.

Lev was, though, and he eyed everyone else on the street who happened to move towards Zem. Rumors spread quick through Spargus, and the dazed, uncaring mechanic got more than one suspicious look. Mostly from exes, but not exclusively. Nobody approached Zem or called out to him, though. He might not have reacted if it happened.

But Lev had made a promise, long ago.

He sighed to himself. Why did the big lug have to be so impossible to help, though? Lev knew far better than to offer it. In all honesty and with an icy feeling if he admitted it, he wasn't sure what kind of help Zem needed. It was such an ugly mess.

For now, he'd just have to play the stalker game. In a helpful sense, of course. Not the creepy one.

Had Zem been in his right... eh, usual mind, and noticed Lev shadowing him for the last couple of days, it would not have been pretty.

He would have wanted to help Jelas too. Sure he was angry with the guy, but... Lev knew, no matter what anybody said, that he was partly guilty. He wasn't blind, either, not so much that he didn't understand the pain. But the one time he had attempted to speak to Jelas in the holding cell,
he had been met with an impenetrable wall of curses.

Jelas knew very well his situation, and he did not want help. There was none. Not even a bit of comfort. There was no choice but to leave him, and time was running out. Lev might have to live with that failure.

He grimly set his eyes on Zem's back. But he wouldn't live with leaving that fool to his own self-destruction. He had a bad feeling of where the guy was heading, and his fears were soon confirmed.

Zem reached the elevator to Damas' chamber and entered, disappearing up out of sight. Sighing, Lev sat down to wait in the shade. At least, there was only one way out of there, so he would not lose track of his stupid ward.

He wished there was somebody he could talk to about this whole mess. Who was going to make him feel better?

Junn, man, I don't know if I can do this alone.

Up in the throne room, Zem might stand at attention out of habit, but his eyes almost bulged out of his head.

"Uh… yessir. If you command…"

He trailed off, avoiding Damas' hard gaze.

"You are the only one I can ask for information about Praxis' atrocities," the king said in a stone cold tone. "I must know about the damage he did, not only to Jak but to other possible survivors."

"I don't think there were others, Sir…" Zem closed his eyes. "Beg your pardon, Your Lordship. I gotta sit down."

He could not even wait for this to be granted before he crumbled down on a stone step. Damas sat down a little ways away, but Zem could not look at him.

"Okay, okay…" Zem wet his dry lips, trying to find some place to start. "It… it's gonna be mostly about Jak, because nobody else lived long enough, I don't remember."

He needed a moment, but Damas waited in silence. Closing his eyes, Zem swallowed hard and turned his mind to that tightly closed lid in his memory. He thought he could feel a swirl deep in his soul, a terrifying stirring of madness.

Gods help me.

Somewhere to start. Somewhere. Somewhere.

"I dunno where they found him, he was there before I came to the prison. Everyone already talked about him though, 'cause he had been around for longer than anybody else…"

And so he opened that lid, and memories long pushed down flooded back in broken phrases and stuttering words. They had always been there but he had refused to think about them, though every sight of Jak had made them simmer in his overheated brain. And even then there was so much he could not describe, like the terror and rage in those wide blue eyes.

Just a kid… just a KID…
"There was that one time when he stopped eating."

Zem's fingertips rapped against his forehead while he shook his head. He bent forwards, his stomach roiling at the memory.

"I don't think he was tryin' to off himself, just… I dunno."

He swallowed hard.

"And when they noticed that, the commander went to the kid and told him all about how much 'fun' it would be to force-feed him."

For a moment he looked up, eyes narrowed beneath the tense remains of what would have been eyebrows. Then he hunched again, resuming the shaking of his head.

"I c-can't explain it, Your Lordship, commander Erol, he… he's too fucking vile, I can't even start. Me an' the other two guys who stayed guard that time, we couldn't eat afterwards, it just… he was in there for one hour, Sir."

He trailed off, stopped moving for a moment as a shudder tore through him. One hand crashed on the floor, the other pressed against his eyes as he had to swallow hard.

Damas sat silent for a short while longer, unmoving like a statue. But if Zem had dared to look, he would have seen the shaking fists.

When the king finally spoke, his voice was perfectly calm. There was however a slowness to his words, as if he pressed them across his tongue.

"And did Jak start eating after that?"

Zem risked a glance again, the look in his eyes answering before he replied with his voice.

"No, Sir."

A very slow intake of breath pushed at the king's chest.

"If it were you, would you have?"

At that question Zem blinked. He clenched his teeth, looking away as another shudder took him.

"Yes, Sir. Positively."

Silence.

Zem waited, not daring – not wanting – to speak until ordered to.

"Go on," Damas finally said, his tone unreadable.

"The commander, he… he didn't care much about Jak at first, I think," Zem said. He frowned, rubbing his neck before he continued. "But, I dunno what happened, nobody does, one day Jak just got a jump on him and had the commander in a stranglehold when we got into his cell. The commander hated him after that. Kid got a lot more violent, too."

He fell silent for a second, frowning even deeper as he thought back on it.

"I think, that's the first time we heard him talk, too," he said. "He didn't say a word before that
happened."

There was something in the way Damas breathed in that moment, which cut off Zem's stumbling attempts to piece his thoughts together. He looked up at the other man, for the first time in a while with more than a frantic glance.

Damas did not meet his gaze. The king of Spargus had closed his eyes, leaning his thin lips against a loose fist. Still sitting like that he spoke, softly, absentmindedly as if lost in his own reflections.

"Was Jak mute?" he asked.

At first, Zem hesitated to disturb the king’s thoughts. After a few seconds, however, he could not help but feel compelled to reply even if Damas did not move.

"I don't know how that works, Sir," he said. "He could make sounds, he just didn't talk."

*He could scream.*

Damas’ eyelids twitched a little, momentarily pressing down harder. As they relaxed, his fist fell to his lap.

"I see," he said.

The odd softness still remained in his voice, sounding alien for a man like him.

Damas said little else for the rest of the report. How long it took, Zem could not tell for sure. Time stretched out as his memory kept presenting new things again and again when he thought that he was finally reaching the end of the tunnel. One memory kept leading to another, things that he had forced himself to forget.

He finally slowed down, knowing there was one thing left but it wasn't that important, not after all the rest. In compare, it had less to do with Jak and the other prisoners than…

"I… I think that's all I can share, Your Lordship," Zem said. He felt as if he had been hollowed out by every word he had spoken for the last… gods, what? Hour? Two? Three?

But it was as if somebody whispered in Damas' ear during the brief silence.

"And that man who shot you a couple of years back?"

Zem flinched. That too?

"Lorke?" he said, a little too quick.

After a moment of thinking back, Damas nodded recognition.

"He, yeah, he… was in the prison too, I…" Zem violently rubbed his neck with both hands. "I went… I got thrown out after him, 'cause I…"

He faltered. His hands stilled, and he closed his eyes hard.

"Payback, he said," Damas said. He shook his head. "I do not care what caused any of you to end up here. I only care about what you do once you are in Spargus."

Zem nodded, letting out a deep breath.
"He almost strangled Jak," he said.

"Why?"

"He ripped off his mask— Jak did that to Lorke, I mean." Zem rubbed his face. "Can't do that. You don't do that. The masks were all…” He faltered. He knew the feeling, that sick feeling of being safe, of being faceless and cradled in that anonymity, free to just follow orders and not be recognized as the one pulling the trigger.

He knew it, but he did not want to put it to words.

"Lorke went nuts. He tore Jak up by his throat and… we shouted not to, the Baron wanted him alive but… before we could stop him…” He could still see the yellow and blue blur, hear the snarl. "The commander shot out like a bat outta hell and knocked Lorke flat with one punch."

It was such a bizarre sight that he could have laughed hysterically at the memory. Actually, the hysteria seemed eerily close no matter what. He bit it back. Not here. Not in front of the king. Just a little longer. It's almost over.

Gods, it has to be almost over.

"Jak was out, but the commander slapped him back to life. Lorke got suspended on the spot when he came to."

And then… then…

"In the locker rooms, he was so pissed at the commander, but then he started raving about how he was glad, too. That at least the kid would live, and suffer more. He was just like the commander. Just like." Zem dug his nails into his forehead, scratching lines, trying to stay in the moment. Not go back to those locker rooms, those corridors, that door, that alleyway where he pulled his gun out.

Weak weak weak useless weak why didn't you do something that HELPED then useless USELESS

He waited for that question to come, the one that would strike him down – why did you just stand by?

"I couldn't get Praxis or the commander. I could corner Lorke—" he choked, had to stop and close his eyes.

Lies you could have if you tried if you really tried one shot would be enough fucking useless LYING COWARD they'd kill you SO WHAT

But the mere thought of raising your hand, even raising your voice against either of those two had been so taboo in a soldier's well-drilled brain, that he had not even been able to question himself until months after he was canned and banished. It offered no comfort.

Why had he, then, never thought of finding a way to free the kid?

How?

But there must have been a way, because the kid broke out on his own. It must have been there before.

You never looked, did you? Junn would have. Junn would never forgive never never not even him
"I see." That was all the king said. So little. So simple.

Silence.

"I… have nothing more, Your Lordship," Zem managed in a hoarse whisper.

*Let me go oh Precursors let me go*

"You gave a very detailed report. Thank you for that." Damas spoke in a controlled, stiff voice. Even Zem could tell that the king was holding back, and holding back hard. "You may go."

Zem wasn't even sure he said anything as he left. Afterwards he could not even recall how he got to the elevator, or what he did once he got out on the street again.

Left alone in the thick silence, filled only by the uncaring splashes of water, Damas took in a deep breath and held up his hands. Even under his scrutinizing gaze, they kept trembling.

He clenched them until the tan was swallowed up with a tortured white.

They still shook.

Too much.

All too much.

And how, he sternly asked himself, was this supposed to defeat your unease?

And…

*"He didn't say a word before that happened."*

Blue eyes.

*"He didn't say a word…"*

Blue eyes beneath green eyebrows.

A mute boy with blue eyes and green hair.

*"Look closer than you dare to, Your Lordship."

Damas pressed a shaking hand to his hot forehead, willing the world to stop spinning. He was not going crazy. He was not.

*"Look closer and believe."

*"Simply… simply absurd," he muttered to nobody but himself.*

It was absurd. It had to be. And if it, by some insane and cruel god's will, was not absurd, it would make the nightmare he had just heard recounted… absolutely unbearable.

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Begin Introspection. Serial code: Zem.
I'm done. I'm done.

There's nothing left in me. Now I can die.

Jak only needs a chance and place – somewhere, somehow so he can do it without risking the blame. Unjust blame.

There's nothing to blame, 'cause there's no crime. It's the kid's right.

End Introspection.
Therapy

Begin Introspection. Serial code: Seem.

I fear that I have made a grave mistake.

No. Attempting to lie even to myself is weakness, and at this point it is pathetic.

I can still feel the thick stillness of the temple, the sudden hush that rolled in around all of us when the call came from the observatory.

"I can see it! I can see the Dark ship!"

Gazing into the telescope, praying the man had simply been mistaken, my heart turned to ice as I too saw it. Just a tiny dot, like a star, but not in a place where a star should be, nor shining like one. The shine of this one, even so small, had a sick, dark purple tint.

I rushed to Spargus as soon as our feverish search through scriptures and engravings had confirmed our fears. It was just a speck of eerie light now, but it would soon be visible with the naked eye. It would become the Daystar. And then…

Lord Damas listened. He believed me.

Yet he had no plan. All he could do was to begin preparations in the hope of saving at least Spargus. We monks knew very well that it was useless. Once the Dark Makers gain a foothold, it is only a matter of time until they destroy the entire world. Damas could only offer all of us a little time. It was all I could bring back to my monks, and we set out to find our own way.

But we were not allowed the peace to focus as we might have otherwise.

Metal heads had crept into the temple before. They are worthy of their insect-like appearances, for they are like roaches. Their attacks now grew in number, however, and we soon found ourselves ducking and hiding within our own temple. It has many secret passageways and traps to keep us and our sacred treasures safe, but the metal heads were determined.

They have purpose, something that was taken from them a year ago. Something is commanding them once again. They sought our artifacts. Even now my monks move them around, daily, fleeing to places the metal heads have not yet discovered both within and without the temple. But we are running out of time and space.

Still… I wonder if it makes any difference at this point.

In such a dismal hour, all I knew to pray for was something wholly different from a warrior. No warrior could be the hero this world so desperately need. We needed a scholar.

One appeared. Armed with knowledge of the Precursor technologies of old, and with a burning hatred for dark eco and everything it represents. He had a plan.

Count Veger seemed to us, me, in that dark time to be our only option.
Long cut off from the archives in Haven City and the ruins in Haven Forest, our own records were incomplete and we had no way of locating the catacombs. Veger could supply that, as well, and together we discovered that our one hope could be found beneath that polluted city.

He said that he could make himself a way in. He did not say how.

We gave him everything he asked for. Knowledge. Artifacts to control Precursor technologies. I ordered more and more of my monks to cease their work in Spargus and the wasteland to aid Veger.

Damas asked only once, and I replied that we were focusing all our efforts on finding ways to prepare for the Daystar's arrival. He believed me.

I believed me.

By the time Veger's arrogance had begun to offend my monks, we were all already in too deep to turn back. No other option had revealed itself. At least, none that I could believe in. Only that one, the dark, hateful one who snatched up the dark eco crystal we had tried to extract from the Dark Maker abomination. Desperate to get it back, I wagered and lost a light eco crystal as well.

The frustration was neigh unbearable. I found myself fearing to tell Veger about it, and even that did not make me see how wrong everything had become.

I could not turn us back. Even when his requests changed to commands. Even when he turned his aggravation on me, in the middle of the sanctuary, in front of my own monks. I only shrunk back. I had seen one who would call himself a hero, and his companion. Both tainted by dark eco. They could not be an option. Veger was all we had.

How blind I was.

It was mere minutes after Count Veger had left, with a final promise that I – we – would see the faces of our makers. I no longer doubt that he meant it as a threat should we fail him. It was no longer a situation of him aiding us. He had made us his servants. But right then, as I stood there shaking, confused, enraged, the Precursors spoke.

We all stilled.

They did not speak to us.

They greeted a warrior.

Hidden in the shadows in our own temple, we witnessed our creators hailing that man whom I had dismissed as a monster. We witnessed them bless him with their light.

The following days, I recall little of. I am told I was in a daze. My monks had to move me around as if I too was an artifact.

And then Veger returned, furious.

The technologies we had provided him had proven themselves broken and insufficient, unable to take down "those abominations" as he called Jak and Orange Lightning. And those "fools" in Haven City had dared to rebel against him, delaying his plans and wasting precious time.

And yet in his rage, he took a certain glee from informing us that for all our failures to aid him, we had still provided what he needed. We were no longer of any use, though we might pride ourselves
later of having supported our new god on his road to ascension.

We could have told him why the Precursor technologies never stood a chance against Jak, but Veger did not deserve to learn that. He left with an air of his imagined superiority, and us, me, with only bitter self-reflection.

Our one cold comfort was that we soon realized that we had, in fact, not given Veger all that he required. There were still pieces missing, vital pieces that he had not taken the time to learn about.

I had chosen unwisely. I had no idea where to start making amends. So when marauders stole a newly discovered artifact and somebody suggested asking Jak for help to retrieve it, I leaped for the chance.

He helped, without question. He was repaid, with something that I feverishly hope might be of use to him and Orange Lightning. But for me, it was a dead start. I was still too ashamed to truly ask him to forgive us.

I have no excuses. I allowed panic to cloud my judgment for too long. Knowledge does not equal wisdom, and one wielding power fuelled by arrogance is not courageous but blinded by their own egotism. I knew this already. Why did I not listen to my own supposed wisdom, then?

I do not fear that I have made a grave mistake. I know I have.

What I do fear is that I cannot set right what I have done wrong.

End Introspection.

Daxter stared at the bed.

The clean, neatly folded, newly-changed-sheets bed.

The nefarious cleaning crew had struck while he was training. Even though he immediately went to check, he already knew – they had found Jak's dirty shirt and taken it.

A severe case of frustrated growling commenced as Daxter stomped about the room rambling to himself about the gall, the thievery, and how would he ever get any decent sleep without… that… shirt…

He stopped in mid-angry-stomp and took a hard, icy look at himself. What in the name of the Precursors was he doing?

This is crazy.

Slumping down on the floor, he pulled up his legs and grabbed his ankles, making himself as small as possible. And he gave himself an unusually rough mental scan.

Whenever he was not busy ducking and leaping and swinging through the obstacle course, all he could think about was how to deal with the whole Jak thing. Every conversation led his thoughts there. Every thought ended up trailing that way.

And all he could tell himself was that he had to get to Jak, had to see him in person and work it out.
Make everything alright again.

And what if it couldn't be alright again?

"It's okay, Dax. I'm fine."

He would say that and it would be a lie, oozing out of Jak like dark eco from a dead metal head. And Daxter would have to turn away and live with knowing that he'd hurt Jak, Jak who had always been there for him, Jak who had taken so many hits already and been let down and... and Daxter knew the guilt would chew him up alive until... until what?

What?

He'd promised himself over and over and over that he'd never let Jak down again.

But that was asking too much, he couldn't pretend, and even if he tried that would be even worse because Jak would know.

Daxter's mind trampled those same thoughts in circles through his head until he finally, finally realized that he couldn't do this on his own. No matter what he'd tried to tell himself over the last few days, he couldn't. He had to talk to somebody. Somebody had to help him or he would go nuts.

Somebody.

Listing everyone he knew led to several very quick dismissals, and from the very, very short list that remained after that, only one person survived the second appraisal.

And even then, only on the grounds that it would be the least awkward – and that would still be an awful lot.

Daxter had to spend several minutes mentally gearing himself up before he dared to pull out his communicator and make the call. Afterwards, though he knew he had planned carefully what to say, he wasn't sure what he'd actually told her. But she did tell him to come over, concern for the look of him the only worry in her voice.

Holy Precursors and their elongated snouts.

It took ten minutes to get to Tess' apartment. Some of the longest and yet terrifyingly shortest minutes ever.

She had a small, sparsely – but cutely – furnished apartment near the edge of the (somewhat) safe residential area. While clean and nice enough, there was that lack of coziness that signaled that the owner did not, in fact, really live there much. Figured, since she spent most of her time in the Naughty Ottsel, even before she – along with Torn and half of his weepy crew – had been trapped on that side of town.

Daxter recalled her once saying something about just needing her own headquarters to get away from work. That explained why she hadn't minded the long commute to the harbor.

She showed him into the kitchen and sat down across from him at the table.

He knew he made some jokes, but his mouth was running on auto-pilot and he didn't even register what he said. Probably something about the pink table cloth. She just laughed a little, just as automatically.
"What's wrong?" she asked, the lack of cutesy nicknames not passing him by. She understood that something serious was going on, heck, he must be radiating unease at this point.

He had to wonder if there would ever be any cutesy nicknames again after this.

Daxter had only ever felt brave when Jak was there to back him up. And even so, Jak could not have helped him with this if he'd wanted to, because Jak was the goddamn problem now wasn't he?!

It had gone on for too long, and all of a sudden Daxter felt sick and tired of the whole thing. He could have minced and fidgeted for ages but it would not make a lick of change.

Just get it over with.

"Okay, Tessie, okay… I…" He fumbled, had to stop and rub the back of his neck. No real point trying to find the right words, though. There was no way to make this come out smoothly. "Jak…"

He took in the deepest breath of his entire life.

"… he kissed me."

Oh gods, he'd said it. He heard Tess breathe in sharply, then nothing. It seemed like an eternity passed, when actually it was only a couple of stunned seconds.

"That…"

Here it comes, whatever it is…! Daxter winced.

"That's so cute!"

Daxter's eyes flew open and he gaped at Tess, who looked like reality strained itself to the limit to keep her from puffing out rainbows and ethereal flowers. Her eyes were wide open and she pressed the balls of her clenched fists against each other, held against her breasts as if she feared she might burst open with glee.

"Cute?" Daxter managed in a voice more than one octave higher than normal.

"Oh my gosh, I suspected but I never thought Jak had it in him, aww…!" She trailed off in a loopy coo and grabbed Daxter's nerveless hands on the table. "Oh Daxxie, it makes sense, it makes so much sense now! The way he always fussed and worried and looked like he'd murder anybody threatening you!"

"Yeah, and the way he bet me against a car that one time," Daxter said with a huff, unable to handle the embarrassment.

Not the reaction he had expected. Well, he hadn't known what to expect at all and it was better than her loading up her biggest gun and going Jak-hunting in a jealous rage, but…

Tess was not so far off in her pink clouds that she did not pick up on Daxter's discomfort. With visible effort she got a grip of herself and sat back, though her lips kept twitching.

"I'm sorry, I was just so surprised," she said.

"Well, that's fine but… that's a weird reaction," Daxter said, scowling. "What about you and me?"

Her lips stopped trying to smile.
Silence. They watched each other, until Tess finally, slowly nodded.

"Yes, where do we stand?" she asked, watching him earnestly.

Daxter wet his lips. He'd tried to tell himself that this conversation wouldn't happen, but it had probably been unavoidable.

"Well, eh… you're hotter than the sun, and fun to hang out with, and…" He deflated, letting reality rear its ugly head. "But I was just a pet, wasn't I?"

Tess gave him a sad smile and nodded. They both sighed, in almost perfect sync. Stared at each other for a second as they realized it, and burst out laughing. Though Daxter wasn't sure if there was or wasn't a tinge of hysteria in his laugh.

It took a moment to recover, though Daxter's mind still reeled when Tess pulled herself together and spoke again.

"Okay, seriously now…" Tess picked at the hem of her shorts, trying to find the right words. "I always loved your personality, but yeah, it wasn't like a real relationship because… well you know. It was hard to believe even when you and Jak said you weren't always like that."

And even if that was true, when you were small and furry the truth did not matter, because you were still an ottsel. She didn't have to point that out.

"So after you came back, I haven't really been sure how to handle it," Tess said.

Dumped. Sorta.

Daxter didn't know how to feel about it. An evil voice in the back of his mind whispered that if it hadn't been for Jak messing things up, he could have fought for this. The way she looked at him now said that it would not be hopeless.

But now Jak was there, and a wave of guilt teetered in the back of Daxter's mind.

Are you really going to use Tess as an excuse to him?

He couldn't do a thing before he was sure that everything was okay between him and Jak. He knew that to the core of his being.

But I don't know, I can't hurt him but I'm-

Daxter swallowed hard and tried to focus on the one thing Tess had said that could make him muster up a frail smile.

"Well, that personality bit is still the best compliment I ever got. I gotta remember that one," he said. "You're golden, girl."

She returned his smile much more strongly, and then turned her head so she could watch him from the corner of her eye. Her smile changed.

"But you know, I bet Jak never thought about it like that. He just loved you anyway. Really loved you." She could not suppress a small squee.

Daxter rolled his head with a breathless, miserable chuckle and pulled at one of his ears. Trying to think. Trying to find his balance. There was so much he desperately wanted to say, and Tess took it all in such stride that it made his head swirl.
"Oh come on..." he said, lamely.

But Tess was just getting started.

"You should have seen the look on his face that first time you got drunk." She giggled, and Daxter felt color rise in his cheeks at an alarming rate. "When you said 'I love you, man', he looked so stunned I almost fell over laughing. I had to explain to him what Krew had wanted him to do, because he couldn't remember."

Uh, yeah. There had been a lot of drunk declarations of friendship. But that was all he had meant! Which included all the times he called Jak "baby"!

Oh dammit.

Daxter groaned, in a mix of embarrassment and agony. Had he actually led Jak on, on top of everything? He made a silent promise to never ever, ever drink again. That, however, was an afterthought to everything else that bubbled up.

Idiot. Idiot, idiot, idiot.

He wasn't sure if he meant himself or Jak, anymore. If he'd still been an ottsel, his ears would have been drooping down to his shoulders.

"But Tess, I'm not... I don't think..." he weakly said, voice cracking.

His tone of voice made the giggles stick in her throat so suddenly that it sounded like she hiccupped. Great. Another thing to feel awful about; making her feel bad.

Silence.

Daxter chewed on his lower lip, feeling ice coil through his stomach. It all came back to that.

I can't hurt him. But I can't...

He pressed his knees together so they wouldn't shake.

Finally Tess spoke. All the mirth was gone from her voice, leaving only a serious, gentle note.

"I think Jak cares enough to respect that."

"But he..." Daxter bent forwards, digging his fingers into his hair, scratching hard. "He's so miserable, I feel like I'm being guilt tripped into... it's too much! He'll give me that look and say it's okay but he isn't and it's so obvious and I'll feel like I'm letting him down and... aaargh!"

All his fears. All his frustrations. Built up ever since that moment when Jak kissed him, and finally, finally released and there was too much to put into words even for him. He let it all go with an aggravated wail to the ceiling. Couldn't care less about disturbing the neighbors.

"Daxter."

He had to blink away his angry tears before he dared to look at Tess. This wasn't like him. But there was so much terrified confusion in him that his tear channels revolted and decided to release steam on their own accord the only way they knew how.

Tess was tactful enough to ignore that. She took one of his hands between hers. Delicate-looking, yet calloused from working for hours on end on her violent hobby.
"Daxter," she repeated, watching him intently. "Look me in the eye and say that Jak would ever, ever, ever want you to do something you don't want, just to make him happy."

Among other times-I-got-dragged-along-kicking-and-screaming, the hang glider ride to the volcano came to mind and he was about to make an automatic joke about it. But that was completely different and he knew it. That was Jak showing his confident side, trusting in his own ability to bring them safely where he wanted to go. It was him giving his best friend a scare to laugh about later.

It was not him forcing himself on his best friend through emotional blackmail.

"No," Daxter said in a thick voice. "Never."

That was impossible.

Tess squeezed his hand, smiling softly.

"We all know that," she said.

All Daxter could do was nod, finally smiling. A drained, but relieved smile. Tess patted his hand in encouragement.

"Now go home and get some sleep, okay?" she said. "Lot's of training to get done tomorrow! We gotta get you ready so you can go and sort things out." She gave him a mischievous grin. "And hey, who knows? Don't knock it 'til you try it, like my brother says."

"Aw, Tess..." Daxter started with a half smile, half wince, wishing she had kept from making that joke. He wasn't ready for that kind of humor yet. Then he did a double take and blinked. "Brother?"

Her eyebrows flew up to her hair line.

"What, I never mentioned that?" When he shook his head, she gave a cheerful laugh and proceeded to drop a bomb right on his lap. "You know, Jinx?"

Daxter almost fell off the chair.

Lev had never felt so emotionally exhausted in his life.

He couldn't do this alone.

Whatever happened between Zem and Damas up in the throne room last evening, it had left the big guy in an utter daze. It had been enough to shock Lev that at the sight of him staggering out of the elevator, he had approached Zem. And only gotten pushed away without a word. Not even a curse. Zem seemed more dead than alive.

Having been a wastelander for several years, Lev was not one to give up easy. But something snapped in him right then. Nobody wanted his help. He was not even allowed to offer it.

Without thinking he had followed Zem for a bit, only to falter and return to his own meager quarters. What was the point of trying to help somebody who didn't want to be helped?

He'd spent most of the day roaming the streets trying to think. Zem was not in his apartment or in the vehicle pit. Even if Lev had known how to proceed, he couldn't find him. He could only hope
the big stupid lug wasn't lying at the bottom of the cliffs in a crushed heap, blood dripping into the foaming waves and Lev stopped his vivid imagination right there.

It was not without some effort though, as he found himself drawn towards the very cliffs at the edge of Spargus, the ones he tried to not paint red in his own mind. Looking about with no real idea for what, Lev spotted not Zem, but a monk standing just by the edge of the cliff, staring off into space. The wind whipped at the hems of her robe, but apart from that she was still as a statue.

Perhaps he could at least seek a little peace of mind.

"Excuse me," Lev said, approaching the small figure. He made a sign of respect as the monk turned her head. "Could I— oh." He repeated the sign as he realized that he had actually addressed the head monk herself. "Forgive me, my troubles are not important enough to bother you with."

Seem inclined her head in a manner as to accept his apology.

"No matter," she said. "I am not in a state of mind to be of use to anybody."

Lev bit back a suggestion about them comparing notes to see who was feeling the most useless. He was old enough to remember a time in Haven before Praxis, and in those days reverence for the Precursors had not been a thing to be shown in secret shrines. Respect for those who knew the teachings had been important then, and that still stuck with him – and even without that, he knew very well that the monks of the wasteland, with their everyday lives, earned the right to be respected.

This was not the time or place – or his own proper mindset – for jokes.

He started to back away and turn to leave, when Seem suddenly spoke again.

"Wait. Perhaps listening to your worries will give me reprieve from my own."

He hesitated for a moment, but refusing her offer seemed a lot more impolite.

"I'm honored if I can be of service."

Lev went to sit down by her feet, dangling one leg over the edge of the cliff and staring off into the distance along with her. Behind them, Spargus went on its rough, dusty business as normal. At least, Lev hoped it was normal. He wasn't quite sure about the feeling in the air.

"I have made serious mistakes lately," he said. "Lord Damas gave me a task which I failed, and it's a wonder it hasn't come crashing down on everyone's heads."


"Us exes," Lev clarified. He pulled up his non-dangly leg further and leant his chin on it. "There was a bounty on Jak sent out to many of us. And people remember not liking the KG much, and most of them know enough about Jak to like him."

Seem said nothing.

Lev went on to explain his feelings of being to blame for the whole mess the other day, and his inability to offer Jelas as much as a listening ear.

"Maybe he can get some peace of mind if he gets to talk to a monk before the fight," he finally
said, looking up for the first time.

He didn't really believe it, and he couldn't make himself sound like he did. But Seem nodded in a silent promise to send somebody to try.

That might be all he could do on that subject, Lev conceded to himself.

"Bet you heard about Zem, too. The prison guard."

Seem made an agreeing sound, but even that was laced with an edge of disgust. That rumor had certainly made the rounds. Lev said a silent prayer to the Precursors that Zem had disappeared on his own will, and not because he had been dragged into an alley by furious avengers. People had reason to hate the prison guards for the sake of many, many more victims than Jak.

Rubbing his head, Lev started from the other end of the issue.

"I had a friend, before I even joined the KG back in Haven… he joined too. We were in boot camp together. And he… befriended Zem. He was the only one who could ever make Zem smile."

Lev sighed and stared off towards the horizon.

"But he's gone, I dunno what happened to him. But before that, Zem had disappeared too. And my friend, he asked me, if I ever found Zem, to please make sure he was alright." He pinched the bridge of his nose. "I promised. It's really hard, though."

"Why?"

"Zem doesn't want to be helped. I don't know what he wants, if anything anymore."

"If he is so dependant on others to help him, he will not survive here." Seem managed to sound neutral now, but he already knew that she had little respect for one who had been in on such atrocities. And if he was honest with himself, Lev could not shake how divided he felt about it too… disgusted, yes, but he could also see that Zem was burning up with guilt.

"But if not for Junn, would I even care that he's regretting it? Even though I know he had as little choice as the rest of us?"

It was a tough thing to admit. He didn't know. He was no saint, though he wanted to think that he himself would not have been able to stand by and watch people get used as test subjects.

"Ouch." Lev pulled himself together with a dry chuckle at her matter-of-fact tone. "Yeah, I know. But this friend meant a lot to me, so I don't wanna let him down. Even if I don't like Zem much."

"It's difficult enough to keep yourself alive in the wasteland. You cannot take responsibility for somebody else."

"But if we didn't cooperate in this dustbowl, we'd all be metal head snacks."

"I do not think that is the same thing."

"No?" Lev said, smiling wryly. "Well, it's a matter of trust, isn't it? I have no idea why most people are here, and not everyone got tossed out by old Praxis. And, even he might have had good reason to kick somebody, once in a while." That edge to the life in Spargus had always seemed bizarrely amusing - and at the same time unsettling - to him. But hey, that's how it worked...

"Indeed," Seem calmly said. "But those who cannot follow our rules and aid all of us, are not
welcome here." She gave a small start as soon as the words were out of her mouth, as if stung by them. But that was all, and it was such a tiny reaction that Lev wasn't sure if he'd imagined it.

"Zem hasn't broken any rules here," Lev said, mostly to himself. He chose to disregard the fact that Zem had punched Jelas. It was minor in compare to everything else.

"Then it is just a matter of him making sure he is useful," Seem said, looking Lev in the face. "And if he needs help, or to redeem himself, it is up to him to seek it. You know very well that the wasteland does not wait."

Lev let out a deep breath. Well, this wasn't proving very useful, though he felt a little better after at least getting to voice his concerns.

"I'm not sure he knows where to start," he said.

He paused and turned his eyes towards the sky.

"Although… perhaps it won't matter at all, soon."

She followed his gaze, and only then did he realize that from the way she had held her head when he approached, she had not been staring at the Daystar. She had been gazing out at sea.

"On that matter," Seem slowly said in a voice so low that he had to strain his ears to hear it, "there is perhaps a little hope. If there is still time."

When she said those words, Lev realized that that was what he had really wanted to hear.

Begin Introspection. Serial code: Jak.

It's your own fault.

I didn't want to be there either. But I wasn't going to break Damas' trust. I was going to do what he asked of me. But you tried to kill me.

I understand what it meant, that you were in the water slums. I get it. But it was you or me. I couldn't let Praxis get me again. Never. You could have stopped. You could have let me pass. You didn't, so I had to make my own way. If I didn't, you would have killed me and Daxter. Or caught us, and that's worse. So much worse.

Never. Never. It did not matter how many got in the way. I would never be captured again.

You must have known what Praxis was. You just followed orders? That excuse makes me sick. It was still you who pulled the trigger. Still you who raised the gun to knock me out. Still you who dragged me to and from that cell, who snapped the bonds shut, who just stood by and watched. And you even laughed, sometimes.

All of you, with the same mask. The same face. You just followed orders.

That's no excuse.

And you, you forced that situation. You dragged that out in the open. You were the reason that one, Zem, said too much. You caused that – and I could have struck Damas down, if I hadn't been
so tired, if he hadn't gotten a good grip.

You almost destroyed everything.

And it will be you or me again, and it's your own fault.

End Introspection.

, 
Sticks and Stones


Oh my gosh. Oh my gosh. Oh. My. Gosh. I knew it, I knew it! And I joked with Jinx about it and he didn't believe me, because he didn't believe Daxxie had really been human before. All he said he believed in was that Jak needed some good loving, stat.

Okay, that wasn't the phrase he used, because that's how my big bro rolls. But anyway.

But it just makes so much sense, just like I told Daxxie! Just look at the two of them!

Daxxie sure should take an outside look, too. Daww, if only he could. I mean, think about it. There's nobody else who fusses about Jak like Daxter does, or can make him smile so easily, or isn't in the itty-bittest-bit scared to stick around when Jak pulls out the dark eco upgrade.

But, there's that thing with poor Daxxie. Yeah, I can see how that puts a damper on it, and makes him confused. I know he loves Jak – eee, and Jak really does love him! It's awesome! – but maybe not love-loves. And since he never had a thing for men, it's gonna be a bit tricky.

I can see it though, I totally can. But it's up to Daxter.

Ooh, but I can't stand the idea of Jak just hero-ing it out and suppressing what he feels and do'h, I wish I could just tie Daxxxie up and put a ribbon on him for Jak!

And I can't tell anybody about any of it! It's gonna drive me nuts!

End Introspection.

Lev had never liked the arena fights. Not his own, and not anybody else's, either. In his view, it stopped being fun and games when somebody lost an eye or hand or spleen. For the very same reason he hadn't ever enjoyed the racing tournaments in Haven City either. His older brother (dead) had taken him to see a race when Lev was about eight years old, and one of the racers had crashed well within sight of their seats.

Lev remembered very clearly how the medical team had struggled to pull the unconscious, bleeding man out of the wreckage, and then nearly gotten run over by the remaining racers because the competition didn't stop for nothing.

His mother (dead) had to spend all night comforting the traumatized child, but both his brother and father (dead) just tried to laugh it off and pointed to the fact that the unlucky racer was reported as having survived. As if that made everything okay again.

As he got older though, and especially out here in the wasteland, Lev understood the need for communal amusements, even violent ones. And in Spargus it was about as much fun as they ever
got. There had to be something to bring the hard-pressed people together and give them something
to cheer at, to take their minds off their own tough or miserable lives.

But this was just nasty.

It was with a heavy heart that he joined the crowds flooding into the arena spectator areas.
Challenges were often announced only a day or two in advance at most, as possible citizens picked
up in the desert needed to prove themselves quickly. Spargus didn't have time to risk wasting
resources keeping a possible dead weight alive.

Lev could already tell which way the crowd leaned, and it didn't surprise him at all. The phrase
"total slaughter" or variants thereof kept being uttered all around him. He didn't believe Jelas had a
snowball's chance in a volcano either.

And he certainly had no high opinion of Jelas, but he couldn't help feeling a bit sorry for the guy –
even if he had brought all of this on himself.

It was rough to have a gentle heart, both in the KG and as a wastelander. Lev wondered if Seem's
monk had managed to speak with Jelas. No way to know, now.

He got into the arena late. The "best" spots in the audience seats were already taken. Lev moved to
sit high up, in the middle of a row. No way to see all the gritty details, but he didn't want to in the
first place. A position like this was his usual pick, anyway, even when he had more of a choice.
Crane his neck he could see that Damas seemed to be on his throne up on the King's balcony,
waiting like the rest of them.

The crowd whooped as the challenger's gates opened and Jak and Jelas entered from both sides of
the balcony, leaping onto the platforms that would take them down to the battle.

Damas stood up.

Lev was far too far away to see their faces, in fact he could only really see Jelas. He stood straight,
like a soldier at attention.

Below the two combatants the arena was already set. The biggest platform was raised and various
obstacles and chest-high walls were raised to provide some tactical cover. It was supposed to be a
fair fight, after all, not a test or an execution.

Technically.

"Both of you are guilty of attempting to murder another citizen of Spargus in a fit of rage," Damas
said. "However, as there were some exonerating circumstances..." Lev couldn't be certain, but he
believed that the King glanced at Jak in that moment, even if he didn't move his head. "... I am
willing to grant pardon to whoever defeats the other in the arena. The loser, should he survive, will
be banished from Spargus."

Damas sat back down, and to the cheers and booing of the crowd the platforms descended, until the
two could step off on either side of the square battle field. Jelas began skirting to the farther corner,
away from Jak who responded by moving towards him, cautiously ducking between cover as the
ex-KG had his gun at the ready as well.

Then Jelas started shouting.

"Monster! Murderer!"
The arena was built to amplify anything the combatants yelled, so that it could be heard by the spectators. As far as Lev had heard, it had always been like that – so if it had been constructed to give challengers a chance to call yield of their own choice, or just because it spiced things up for a sadistic audience, was impossible to tell by now.

Jelas knew this. And now he was taking his last chance to let all of Spargus know what he thought of Jak. Those two words were only the beginning, and though Lev winced at them, he knew that he was not the one they struck the hardest.

He kept expecting Jak to snap and transform into the dark eco demon, though praying to the Precursors that he wouldn't.

Don't prove him right, man, don't prove him right!

Jelas still drew back while hurling insult after insult at Jak, who had started catching up to him now.

The crowd was largely not amused, booing and heckling Jelas – but Lev could hear some whistles that may or may not be in support of him. Even assholes are seldom without a few followers.

Lev figured that he had been wrong. He could tell that Seem's monk had not managed to speak with Jelas. Or at least that the monk had not been able to really reach him. Or maybe just made it worse.

"Damas' little lapdog! Bootlicker!"

Jak remained silent.

Great Precursors. Lev gritted his teeth, hand clenching so hard on the railing in front of him that his fingers turned white. It was stupid. Lies. Maddening.

And that was when he spotted Zem. Standing a couple of rows down, far enough to the side and surrounded by people shorter than him, which allowed Lev to see his face. The dark-skinned ex stood in silence, but whenever Jelas fired off another insult, he flinched.

Flinched as if it struck him physically.

Lev glanced down. Jelas was on the run now, firing over his shoulder and forcing Jak to take cover.

"Praxis should've tried harder to break you in!"

The crowd jeered with fury. Zem leaned forwards, eyes pinched shut and hand pressed to his mouth, as if he was going to throw up.

Lev got up from his seat and struggled to push and climb his way through. The people in the way were of no help, annoyed by the disturbance and in no rush to make things easier for him since that might entail them missing the good part. Lev, on the other hand, no longer cared about the fight.

He reached Zem who had not moved, but those who had been standing the closest to him had stepped away in case he was about to get sick.

"Zem. Hey, man. Zem! Are you okay?"

Lev grabbed Zem's shoulders – an awkward thing to do, because the other man was so much taller than him – trying to get his attention. He got it, and nearly recoiled as Zem turned his head and
looked at Lev. It was like meeting the dead stare of a corpse.

The audience howled, ripping Lev free of the shock. He looked around, just in time to see Jak's knee connect with Jelas’ stomach.

Jelas rocked backwards, finally – momentarily – silenced, and Jak went with the forwards momentum, punching the ex-KG right in his tattooed face. There was too much force behind that, even without using any eco-enhanced strength, to withstand. Jelas crumbled, and before he could roll or get up, Jak had kicked his gun out of reach and stomped one foot down on his chest, gun aimed right at his marked forehead.

The cheer of the crowd was deafening. Staring into Jelas' eyes, though, the only thing Jak could hear were the two words, spat out between teeth tinted with blood.

"Eco freak."

A pair of other wastelanders moved into Jak's vision and he stepped away, as mute as he had been in the prison.

"Surprised you di'n't shoot 'im, champ," one of them said as they hauled Jelas to his feet.

"Of course he didn't," Jelas hissed, his voice rising to one final howl for all of Spargus. "'Cause that sicko just wants me to die slowly out there!"

The guard who had spoken punched Jelas in the face as the audience booed. But Jak had nothing to say. There was nobody who could take one look at him and put to words everything he felt, and throw it right back in Jelas' face. To mock Jelas and tell him off for the bastard he was.

"Yeah well, chump, thing is... it just so happens that you should'a just been tossed out, if Mr. Mechanic hadn't had a breakdown 'cause of you. So fair's fair. Also we don't waste bullets on trash like you."

Yes, Daxter would have said something like that. But Daxter wasn't there. And though Jak could imagine very vividly how his friend would speak, he reared away from imagining it too hard. Don't go there. Don't go there.

He was tired. So damn tired.

The adrenaline ebbed, and his hands began to shake. As they had before the fight. He had lost count of when he last got a full night's peaceful rest.

Up on the King's balcony Damas got to his feet, picked up his peacemaker and stalked towards the exit. Kleiver went to follow him, then raised a meaty eyebrow when the King didn't turn towards the way down to the challenger's way out. He headed the other way, towards the city.

"Ain't you gonna see the loser off, Lordship?" Kleiver wondered.

Not that it mattered, but Damas had a tradition of being there in person when somebody had broken the trust of the city and got thrown out for it. An insult to the people was an insult to the King, was probably the reasoning.

Kleiver had never bothered to ask about the logic in it. He just thought it felt satisfying.

"No," Damas said, voice low and controlled. He did not look around. "If I get Jelas within reach now, I will break every bone in his body."
It took admirable effort from Kleiver – completely due to respect for Damas – to not comment on how fun that sounded. And even more effort to not breathe a word about how the King seemed dangerously close to having a kind spot for Jak.

With nothing else to say, Kleiver just grunted.

"Take care of it," Damas said, an icy tone creeping into his voice.

"Yes, Your Lordship."

"Sooo, you didn't shoot him?" Daxter said. He sat cross-legged on their— err, Jak's— *HIS* bed, holding the communicator in his hands.

The small picture of Jak massaged the bridge of his nose and shook his head.

"Well, okay. That's it then, and good riddance," Daxter said with a shrug. He didn't question Jak's reasoning. He just trusted it.

But there was a pause. Daxter was going to start talking about something else, but then Jak got that glint in his eye that he wanted to explain something that he had trouble getting out.

Silence.

Silence.

"He kept yelling stuff," Jak finally said, slowly.

There was a whole lot more to that. Daxter heard it instantly, but Jak didn't elaborate, looking away from the camera and clamming up instead.

"Not surprised, bet he was pissed as all hell knowing he'd lose—" Daxter started, trying to prod for an explanation.

Jak winced.

"Jak?" Daxter said, seeing plain as day that he had stepped on a mine somehow, but not knowing what it meant.

"It…" Jak faltered, glanced up, then away again. He massaged the area beneath his eyes, where dark half-moons could be clearly seen even on the small screen.

Daxter hesitated for a moment, but it was getting out of hand at this point. He had to ask the forbidden question.

"Jak, buddy… are you sleeping at all?"

Jak closed his eyes for a moment.

"… not really," he finally admitted.

*Oh CRAP.*

"You need to come back to Haven for a bit," Daxter said, urgency rising in his voice for every word. "Get some civilization, a shower, a drink without sand in it and, and…"
And we can sort things out and I’ll help you with the nightmares.

But he didn't dare to say that yet. He wasn't sure he could make promises to keep Jak company – friendly company! – in the night, not until he knew what was up and down between them.

Jak visibly relaxed, though, and started to say something. But then, as if on cue by some sadistic higher force…

"Oi, poppy!

Daxter did not like Kleiver. He did not like his voice, or his breath, or his missions, or his personality. And right then, the sound of Kleiver barging into Jak's apartment, gleefully picked up by Jak's communicator microphone, was about the most horrible thing Daxter had ever heard. Premonition dropped a bag of lead in his gut.

"… right back," Jak said and snapped off his communicator.

For a few seconds Daxter just stared at the blank screen. Then he gingerly set the device aside and grabbed the hem of his shirt, trying to breathe deeply to calm down. The bad feeling refused to go away, though.

After what seemed like an eternity his communicator beeped and he threw himself on the Respond button. Jak's tired face flashed back into sight.

"What? What?" Daxter demanded.

Jak grunted and ran a hand through his hair before strapping the goggles back on his head.

"Marauder hunting," he said, with a note of tired finality in his voice. "There's been attacks on foragers nearby. Lots of them lately."

The only thing Daxter could do, at first, was to blink.

"Are you kidding?" he finally blurted. "You need a vacation! Tell the walrus to shove his marauders right up his—"

"I just had two days off, Dax," Jak said. "Damas says I need to get back in action."

Daxter's shoulders dropped. It was one thing if Kleiver gave the orders – though knowing Jak he wouldn't back out of a challenge from Kleiver if his life depended on it – but if Damas called the shots there was no use in even trying to argue.

"Jak, hang in there, okay?" Daxter said in an unusually soft voice. "I'll come running soon, I promise."

There was a spark of life in Jak's eyes, but then he turned grim.

"Not until you're ready. Got it?"

"That might be sooner than you think, bud," Daxter said, managing to fire off a cocky grin.

"Daxter."

The grin died, crushed by Jak's tone.

"Aw sheez…" Daxter lamely started, but Jak cut him off again.
"I won't let you get killed in the arena. Understand?"

Daxter swallowed, fully recognizing the stern words' underlying message.

For the love of the Precursors don't make me chose between you and living in Spargus. I need both.

Damas would not forgive Jak if he defiled the arena again, and jumping in to save a failing challenger from death would definitely be dragging mud onto the red carpet.

"Yeah, yeah, I got it," Daxter said, clenching his teeth. A thought struck and he perked up a little. "But hey, if Sig says he thinks I'm ready you'll believe him, right?"

"If he says it in a month, maybe," Jak said, unsmiling.

"A month?"

"Be serious, Dax. I'll talk to you later." And with that Jak shut off his communicator, obviously unable to bear listening to Daxter arguing on this point.

Daxter sat stock still for a minute, staring at the black screen. Wheels turned in his head.

He wasn't dumb. He understood. Nobody would be ready for a Spargus Entrance Exam (as he liked to call it) in less than a week. Even a month was undercutting it. He got it.

But.

He hadn't been training for less than a week. He had been training for almost three years. Climbing, jumping, most importantly surviving. Screw the logistics of whether his current body being the same thing as the ottsel's. Day by day, he learned to know his new-old form better, and he knew he still had it. With limitations, mostly relating to weight and a lack of claws, but anyway.

And if Jak was stuck in Spargus hunting marauders – which could take Precursors knew how long – he might not be able to come back to Haven and get some peace of mind and sleep for weeks. He did not have that long. Daxter could plainly tell he was already running on his last reserves, and the crash would not be pretty. In fact, it might very well be an actual crash.

He snapped the communicator shut and hung it on his belt, jumping off the bed and running out of the room dead set on getting back to his training right then and there. Tess and he had promised to meet in the shooting range later, but he couldn't wait for that, he had to—

"Waaark! You almost look like you're doing something important!"

Pecker's voice had a way to derail pretty much any sensible thought in Daxter's mind. The redhead stopped and glared up at the monkaw flapping about the ceiling.

"Better things than sitting around playing sock puppet to little old ladies, yeah!" he shot back.

"Ooh, your mouth got even bigger since you took an eco dip," Pecker remarked, flapping backwards. Daxter followed without thinking. "But did your brain?"

"Get down here and we'll talk about braining, feather face!"

Pecker kept leading him down the corridor.

"Onin sees all, you know," the monkaw said with a strange note in his voice. A door opened at the end of the corridor, sensing his approach. "And Onin says you should think carefully about going
to the wasteland again so soon."

"Well I think you—"

"What?" Samos' voice said, with no little annoyed alarm.

Daxter gave a start, realizing he had walked into the control room of the HQ while arguing with Pecker. And the whole audience of mossman with daughter and the Tattoos-and-Dreadlocks duo were there, watching him with more or less concern. Pecker fluttered over to Onin.

"You're thinking about going back to the wasteland already, Daxter?" Keira asked.

Daxter clenched his teeth, feeling like he had been led right into a trap. But looking at the way they watched him made his blood boil. They hadn't seen how Jak looked. They thought he was just fine.

"Not right now, but I better kick it up a notch," he said, folding his arms and turning to leave. He had better things to do than argue with his other friends about this. Like getting peppered with paintballs.

"I really don't think that's a wise course of action, Daxter," Ashelin coolly said. "Jak's got enough to worry about, you know that. In fact, he asked us all to make sure nothing happened to you while he's gone."

"No, dammit! I have to go to the wasteland!"

They stared at him, silent, surprised at this sudden honest bravado. Unable to understand, refusing to understand.

"Daxter..." Keira started but fell silent.

Sweet, soothing voice. Concerned. The silence stretched until she finally continued.

"If you go back to Spargus, they'll force you to fight, right?" she said.

He shook his head, running one hand through his hair.

"I don't care!" he snarled, "then I'll—"

"Jak doesn't want you to die," Ashelin said, narrowing her eyes.

She looked annoyed. Keira worried. Samos shook his head, eyes closed. Torn didn't even bother about this nonsense, staring at something informative in the computer screen before him. Pecker said nothing, both he and Onin still as statues.

All of them, from the way Daxter looked, questioning his existence as Jak's friend.

*Jak doesn't need you.*

Daxter stared at them.

*It's okay, we understand, their faces said. We need him too. But Jak doesn't need us.*

They thought it selfless, an act of respect, to place Jak above them all – allow him to be the hero, admitting that he was stronger, braver, less human than them.

Daxter's fists clenched until they shook, nails digging into his palms.
"You— did'y ever know? You don't listen to him, you don't see—"

Even Torn looked at him now and Daxter gasped, an attempt to stop himself before it was too late, but it was as if he was running down a slope and could not slow down.

"– you don't hear him wake up screaming—"

He clamped both hands over his mouth, eyes wide open in shock. Four pairs of eyes stared back, beneath raised eyebrows and scowls.

Slowly Daxter removed his hands. They fell to his sides, limp.

"… screaming," he said.

It was an attempt to correct himself, but from the looks on their faces it didn't work. He had not really expected it to.

Glances flew around the room, and involuntarily Daxter found his own drawn to Keira, then to Torn. He hadn't wanted to admit it, but Torn would've needed to be deaf to not have caught it at some point back in the day.

Keira bit her lip, glancing between the redhead and the Commander. Torn glared back at both of them. All three looked away immediately, knowing, guilty – and just as mercilessly, their gazes met again only moments later as if drawn by invisible strings.

"Screaming what?" Ashelin asked, an unusual splinter of dread in her words.

Her voice hung in the air as her eyes shifted, moving her vision between the trio. Of course she had noticed, she was the kind. And because of that, all the other eyes noticed as well, following her gaze.

Another round of stare went between the three of them, and then Daxter shook his head at the same time as Keira. Torn nodded understanding.

"I don't think Jak ever wanted any of us to hear it," he said. "But…"

Torn turned to the computer terminals, staring at the blinking lights and electronic webs before him as he spoke.

"Back with the Underground I had to throw the two of them into the back rooms of the HQ to sleep, because sometimes Jak screamed so loud it could have been heard outside."

Even though the worst revelation had been averted, the atmosphere was no less thick. Daxter cleared his throat. He had them tilting over to his idea of going to the wasteland for Jak's sake, but they weren't quite there yet.

"He's better now, he is, really…"

Daxter struggled for words, and just that simple fact gave him more power than he realized. They all watched him, every single little move he made… but he was staring at the floor, the roof, the walls, trying to think of a way to make them understand.

"… Bein' in Spargus is real good for him, Sig an' Damas an' the whole city make him feel like…"

He glanced up. They make him feel like he belongs somewhere.
But Daxter did not want to tell that to the people listening. The anger had faded away, he did not want to hurt them anymore.

"… Happy."

It was a lame end. Despite the obvious copout, nobody said anything. They kept looking at Daxter, waiting for him to continue. He bit his lower lip, overbite making the action simpler than it should. He won too little time.

"But Jak can't, he can't be…"

He fell silent, shook his head. Tried again.

"It's the same when he's with all of you, with the wastelanders, he always has to be cool and strong. So goddamn…"

His eyes rolled downwards and he looked at the floor. Wanted to tell them about how Jak had to be that way around everyone, had to. But then when he ran out of adrenaline, too tired to force himself anymore… what then?

"You ever hear Jak say he's hungry?"

Of course they hadn't. Torn and Ashelin exchanged bewildered glances. Keira caught on a little quicker and bit her lip.

"Or that he's thirsty or sleepy?" Daxter asked.

He was amazed to realize that Pecker had been silent this whole time. The monkaw sat perched on Onin's hat, eyes closed and wings folded. But he was listening, and so was the old crone.

"He can't be weak in front of you."

*He doesn't dare to.*

"But he can say those things to *me!*"

… *huh.*

At that moment Daxter happened to glance at Samos, and the look he got back almost floored him. The Sage's normally stiff, sour lips stretched just a little, and his eyelids – one appearing comically big, the other small because of his glasses – sunk the slightest bit.

For the first time in Daxter's life, he saw an expression of kind pride for him, just for him, from the old mossman.

If he had looked, he might have seen Onin's lips quirk as well.

One must be careful to reveal what the future might hold, or a bad future is inevitable. But a little push at the right place can do some good.

Begin Introspection. Serial code: Sig.
Ugh. Nasty.

Sticks and stones, sure. An' golden boy would never admit words hurt him. But it's in his eyes. He could never hide nuthin'.

It ain't weakness. I know that too. Anytime some moron pulls the race card on me I can punch their lights out, but it's still there. It's stupid and it shouldn't matter, but there ain't nuthin' you can do to squash it completely. Leaves ya wondering who else thinks about it.

Dough-brains like that shouldn't matter, an' I can shake it off better. But Jak, he's taken so many hits. All those words got drilled into his brain, an' he was always wild to prove them wrong. Like they were always hangin' over him. The way he looked at me when I said he did good, back on our first hunt together in Haven, I ain't ever forgetting it. Like nobody ever gave him a scrap of praise before in his life.

He needed Daxter there on his shoulder to yell back at Jelas, 'cause Jak can't fight with words. But chili pepper can't be on his shoulder no more, an' I think that's putting him in a bad place too. It ain't good to be relying that bad on a partner, but I know they've got stuff they need to sort out too. It's tough on Jak. This ain't stuff he's good at tacklin'.

An' he was doin' bad even before the arena brawl. Not sure anybody else could tell, but I know when the cherry's in good form an' he wasn't by a mile. He hasn't been sleepin' right. Damas prolly saw it too, but they couldn'a hold off the battle any longer.

If chili pepper isn't ready to come give 'im a boost soon, I gotta make sure Daxter gets ready. Else Jak's gonna get so tired he can't drive straight. I don't wanna have to scrape him off of a rock 'cause of something that dumb.

End Introspection.

Nobody can be always strong. Not forever.

All it takes sometimes is one stumble, one broken bone, one prolonged sickness… and the stronger you had to be before, the more painful it'll be.

Daxter annoys me a great deal. Yet, that has little to do with anything, because I'm not the one he spends the most time with. I'm not the one that needs help finding the way to smile.

As I have told you before, the future I remember did not have a Jak. Of course there was no Daxter either. He had lived, grown old and died centuries ago in Sandover. Supposedly. Or very possibly died in the first metal head invasion. There is no telling what he did back then, and what taking him away from it did to history. If anything. It's impossible to tell. Then again, there's also Keira.

I had a fair idea what would happen when we activated the Precursor Gate back then (and if we hadn't, while I cannot be certain, I'm fairly sure that Gol and Maia would've done it in our stead), and I could not bear to leave her behind to die. And no matter how Daxter annoys me, of course I couldn't leave him either. Jak would need his support for the dark times that were coming – though I had no idea just how dark things would get.

Perhaps I could have prepared him better. However, how could anything have prepared him for any of it?

The rest of the village… I knew. I knew. But we could not save everyone. I had to be selfish and take the most precious person, the one I knew might be able to stabilize the time loop by building the machine in the future, that could send the new time travelers back.

Jak had to come along to the future, of course, and that meant Daxter as well.

I do not know what happened to the rest of them. There are only fragmented records until the rise of Mar, and even then the sources are obscured with legends and rumors. Perhaps some of them managed to survive, or flee. Some must have, or there would be no descendants to live now, of course.

Regardless, I had to be stronger, and more cruel, than any of those three children knew at that time. They probably realize it, though Keira is the only one to confront me about it, weeks after Praxis' fall and Jak's battle with Kor.

It took months before she could say she forgave me. I don't know if I could have borne longer than that.

Oh, I have strayed off tangent.
I believe Daxter is a fool for insisting he needs to hurry to the wasteland. However, I find it admirable that he can find the courage not to flinch away from the danger, for Jak's sake. He's an annoying brat, but it's in moments like this that I see why Jak cares so much about him.

And if Jak truly is as near to a stumble as Daxter obviously fears, then time is running short.

End Introspection.

Lev felt ready to tear his hair out. Or Zem's. Yeah, the latter sounded better.

Okay, good news: Lev didn't feel so desolate any more. Bad news: Because he was frustrated instead.

"When did you last work? When did you last eat? Or sleep?"

And Zem had just shook his head when Lev demanded answers, unable to respond to even those simple questions. But no, he hadn't been roughened up by angry avengers. No, he didn't want to talk.

That was the worst of all. He didn't even want to try sorting out the utter mess that was his head.

So in the meantime, Lev had to resort to trying to keep him chugging along until Zem either snapped out of it or completely snapped. Whichever came first. At this point, it might be any of those things.

Lev grimly thought that maybe he should set up a betting pool about it. That might actually piss Zem off enough to jolt him back out of sheer defiance.

But the first order of business was to get him back to work before Kleiver started grumbling about somebody not pulling their weight. That could be very, very bad. A complete war amulet did in no way ensure you could sit back and not be useful – citizenship could be revoked.

At least Zem seemed receptive to taking orders, probably because he didn't feel like thinking himself. He ate when Lev told him to, and came with him to the vehicle pit. Dragging his feet and still looking more dead than alive, but you take what you can get.

They went unnoticed for about five seconds after entering the parking area.

"Hey, jailbird!"

Zem showed emotion for the first time since yesterday in the arena, and flinched at the new nickname Kleiver hollered at him. The huge man lumbered towards the two of them, looking less pleased than usual. Other mechanics and wastelanders felt the oncoming storm and turned to watch, with more or less interest.

"Oh hai, Kleiver. This is my pet zombie." Lev patted Zem's back with a whole lot more cheerfulness than he felt. But then, Lev's other childhood dream had been to be an actor. He could pretend.

He was ignored. Kleiver punched a meaty finger into Zem's chest, hard enough to make him sway. Not that Zem was very steady to begin with.
"Where have ya been?" Kleiver demanded.

"Flu," Zem said. It was the excuse Lev had told him to give.

Kleiver took one hard look at Zem's hollow cheeks and red-shot eyes. It was very true that the ex looked like he had been sick as a dog. Mainly because it was true, just not that kind of sickness.

"Trust me on that," Lev said, drawing a cross over his own heart with his finger. "I'm almost a nurse."

That got him the attention, and he weathered Kleiver's sneer with a snicker.

"Take that as you will," Lev said. "Anyway, my pet here shouldn't be sharing the flu anymore by now, but he's still a little sluggish."

Understatement of the year.

"So, better not ask him to do any fine tuning. Things might go boom."

"I decide what he does in here, nanny boy." Kleiver turned his glare back to Zem, and jabbed his thumb at some far back car. "Get to it. Kurotora's Screamer. Now!" He added the last like a whip crack when Zem apparently did not move quick enough.

"Yeah, yeah..." Zem grunted, walking off and absentely picking at the tools at his belt. At least he seemed to be acting on his own accord now. Sort of.

Lev almost relaxed. Then he put on a stupid smile and waved after Zem's back.

"You be good now, big nasty! I'll come pick you up tonight, promise!"

Zem should have spun at him and snarled, especially as the pit erupted with laughter from the other wastelanders. Even Kleiver guffawed with more amusement than anger.

But Zem did not react.

Lev's heart sunk right back into the pit it had been cozily settled in for the last few days.

"Your name means 'Live', you know." His mother smiled, but there was a weary note to it. She always looked a little tired, even before everything in Haven changed. "So if you're ever feeling down, just remember that."

Those words had stuck with him, and comforted him in many a dark moment before. Right now even they could not help him much, though. Then again, his mother had been smart – smart enough that she too would have told him that he could not force somebody else to, heh, live up to his name.

Then again, at least he had gotten Zem to eat and work. Baby steps. One at a time.

---

Daxter pressed his back against the cold, metallic wall, breathing in as even snaps of air as he could. Calm down. Calm down.

Everything was still. For now. He listened for the whirr and clicks of moving metal. They were sophisticated enough to know when he moved again. And if he didn't get going on his own soon, they would come for him.
Holding his handguns ready to fire, he peeked around the corner. Nothing. Just an empty, silent corridor. Waiting.

And on the other end of it, safety. He held his breath.

There was a low, clattering buzz.

A small cardboard robot shot out along the track where Daxter's feet had been a second ago, but he was already moving and the paintball launched from the mock-enemy's head splattered against the wall.

Others swept out to the left and right of him. He shot one and threw himself past the other, rolling back to his feet and bounding forwards to avoid the other's paintball. Right about here the cardboard enemies had gotten him so many times before, often in the ankle and that meant death in a real situation.

This time he managed to get out of the way in time, only to have another ball whizz past his shoulder. That one he avoided out of sheer luck, but he'd never admit that aloud.

Because sometimes, sheer dumb luck was all you needed.

He sent the one that had shot the last ball at him to confetti heaven with a couple of shots. When he'd started training, he'd thought that running and firing at the same time was an impossible feat. Most of his smarting bruises came from Tess drilling him hard in that art.

Three more little buggers popped up ready to fire at him. He recoiled, shooting one. The others fired, then swept out of sight before he could take care of them.

Silence.

The exit opened ahead of him. Daxter threw a look at the score displayed above the door, thinking that Jak wouldn't be able to keep from chuckling if he saw it. Then again, it was better than it had ever been mere days ago. Daxter rather held on to that thought. Also, he hadn't had to wash as much color out of his hair and off his face lately. Points were secondary.

Wiping the sweat from his brow Daxter holstered his guns, loudly exhaling as he stepped through.

"Pretty good that one, 'ey Tess—"

He caught her gaze, saw the flash in her eyes. Something big swung down at his head.

Daxter did not think. He threw himself forwards and rolled up and around, ripping one handgun back in his hand to aim it straight at—

Sig.

The bullet hit the wall several inches away from the wastelander's shoulder. Sig ducked away in time – of course – but Daxter just barely managed to redirect the shot before it went off, trigger finger too far into the motion to stop.

All three of them paused, looking at the small new hole in the wall. Some concrete peacefully fell to the floor.

Sig reached out and poked at the hole.

"Nice reflexes, cherry," he commented.
Daxter holstered the handgun, letting out the breath that had caught in his throat. He refrained from a straight up "I could've killed you, you nutball!” remark, knowing full well he couldn't have.

"Yeah, same to you, big dude," he said instead, firing off a smirk. That was satisfying enough. "Shouldn't you be out hunting marauders too, though?"

"Nah, they've got that covered." Sig's smile faded and he crossed his arms. "We need you to double-time it over to Spargus though. Jak's drooping like a leaper lizard at midnight. You gotta look hard to see it, though." He added the last in a deep grumble.

Daxter's stomach plummeted at seeing Sig – *Sig!* – worried. He took half a step towards the door as if ready to leave that very second, but then logic kicked in.

"I hear ya," he said, drumming his fingers against his upper arms. "But it won't do Jak any good if I pop in only to get chewed up. And for the record I won't be happy either if that happens!"

"I think you're just about ready, thanks to fighter dove here," Sig said. Tess grinned and made a little 'dang straight' hand sweep through her hair.

Daxter had to grin as well, with a swell of pride for Tess' sake. Sig was about the most generous compliment-giver Jak and Daxter had come across in Haven, but he also never handed them out undeserved.

"You hear that?" Daxter said to Tess. "He really thinks I won't be chow and it is all thanks to you." Of course he had to make a joke about it, though.

"Hold your yakkows," Sig said, "we need some finishing touches."

Daxter looked up at him, feeling the hopeful balloon in his stomach pop in a cloud of new anxiety. It struck him right then that Sig probably hadn't just come to Haven to simply pick him up. This would probably be painful.

"I *was* thinkin' we should have a fire drill metal head hunt," Sig said, shooting Daxter's heart into his throat. He glanced at Tess, whose grin had changed to a death glare in two seconds blank. Seemingly unshaken, he turned back to Daxter. "But I couldn't look Jak in the eye if things went belly up." He pointed at Tess without looking at her. "'Course, I prolly wouldn't have an eye left for it."

"You got that right, armor boy."

"You're a treasure, you know that?" Daxter commented, shoulders dropping.

Sig chose to ignore that crack in the redhead's courage. He didn't expect the scrawny guy to be like Jak in the first place. The important thing was that he focused on getting to Jak and give him a shoulder to lean on. Or sleep on. Whatever Jak needed right now to get back in gear, Sig knew full well that Daxter was the expert on how to provide it.

"The deal is," Sig said as he pointed at the door to the shooting range, "you've got your reflexes down pat and the aiming is alright. You've been dodging robot tricks though, not metal head ones."

Yup, this was going to be painful.

Then again, less painful than the real thing. And good practice for it too (though Daxter did expect Jak to still do the heavy lifting, thank you very much).
"This thing built like the one in the harbor?" Sig asked, moving to the control panel.

"Keira and I modified it a bit, but yup, basically," Tess said.

"Right." Sig motioned her over. "So you just holler if you catch me trying something that doesn't work here." He started punching in something in the controls with surprisingly fast movements.

Tess watched him for a few seconds, then made a little jump and clapped her hands.

"Ooh, I see what you're doing! But how about this?" She moved in and Sig let her, watching as she started tapping in his stead.

"Right-o, that'll be a howl," he said, and pushed another few buttons. "But let's fire up the danger by the corners…"

They went on like that for a good minute, and Daxter listened with a mix of intrigued and alarmed anticipation.

"Okay, that oughta do it," Sig finally said. He and Tess turned around. "Give it a whirl, champ."

Daxter glanced between them and the door a couple of times, then put his fists on his hips.

"Are you sure you two don't wanna amp up the pain levels a wee bit more?" he asked. "'Cause you're both grinning like this really big old metal head me and Jak used to know…"

But at their more or less amused urging, he threw up his hands and walked in. Tess pushed the big red Start button. Two seconds later the popping and yelping started from inside of the range.

Sig and Tess watched what happened on the monitor.

"You're a good trainer, strawberry," Sig remarked after a few moments.

Tess beamed at him.

"Well, he's got his reasons to work hard," she said. Sig just nodded at that.

They looked back at the screen, both strongly suspecting that the other knew about Jak's feelings for Daxter, but unwilling to risk breaching the subject in case they were wrong.

About fifteen minutes later Daxter crawled out, gasping and with a dismal amount of points to his name, but with only a handful of new paint smears on his clothes. And that, Sig verified, was what counted right now.

"You focus on getting out of the way to a good position to shoot, chili pepper. Keep thinking like that."

"Got it… got it…" Daxter gasped, swaying.

He had a nagging inkling that Sig looked so pleased mostly because the exhaustion had gotten Daxter's motor mouth shut off. He'd get the big guy for that. With loads and loads of rambling.

Later.

"Take ten, survivor," Sig said, looking him over.

Daxter made a grateful noise and fumbled a water bottle out of his backpack, which hung on a hook
on the wall. That done he crashed on a bench and proceeded to chug most of the water down. He
looked up to smile tiredly at Tess as she fired off a compliment about how he'd done.

She disappeared into the range, saying she needed to check on something that hadn't worked out as
intended. Which probably meant that she and Sig had meant for things to be even more intense.

Oi.

Daxter closed his eyes for a moment, waiting for his pulse to stop pounding all the way out to the
tips of his ears. He glanced at the door and took another swig of the bottle.

"You really think I can do it, Sig?" he asked, in his fatigue allowing himself a crack in his inflated
self-assurance. Jak's words from last night kept nagging in the back of his mind, too. The buggers.

Sig glanced over his shoulder, standing over by the control panel.

"It's all you, chili pepper," he said. "But you've been shaping up good. As long as you keep your
cool, yeah, you have a good chance."

Fair enough.

"Heh, and Jak said he wouldn't believe even you saying I was ready so quickly," Daxter said,
grinning.

"He'll believe it when he sees it," Sig said, giving Daxter an encouraging smirk. "Like when you
won the race qualifier."

"… but you hang in there. I'm proud of you, Dax."

"Really?"

One of the best moments in his entire life.

Daxter leaned back and let that happy memory work on soothing his tired muscles. Then another
thought struck. A far less pleasant one.

"Sig?"

"Hmm?" The huge wastelander turned around, roused from whatever evil training scheme he had
been pondering.

Daxter licked some sweat off his upper lip, hesitating for a second longer. But it had been bugging
him ever since last night.

"Jak said something about that ex he fought in the arena yelling stuff at him, but he didn't explain,"
he said, eying Sig and not liking the look of that squaring jaw. "I think he wanted to, though. What
was that about?"

"Ah." Sig shook his head and came over to sit beside Daxter. He hadn't thought that Jak would
have repeated what Jelas had shouted at him throughout their battle. In fact, Sig didn't want to,
either.

But he wouldn't lie.

Daxter remained oddly silent as he listened to Sig recounting the battle.
When Sig finally fell silent, Daxter tipped his head back and finished off the last of the water.

"Riiight." He slammed the bottle onto the bench and stood up. "Gotta hurry up then."

"For what?" Sig asked, though a grim smile tugged at his lips. He had never seen that kind of determination in Daxter's eyes before. Actually, he had never seen Daxter furious before.

"Because I'm gonna find that asshat's body before it gets eaten by vultures, and I'm gonna stuff it full of gunpowder and shove a torch down his throat."

Tess hardly had time to get out of the range and declare everything was ready, before Daxter swooped past her right into the line of fire, yelling at Sig to push the Start button. She looked after Daxter in confusion even as the doors closed and the shooting began. But when Sig explained, her eyebrows crept low and her full lips pressed together in seething, understanding anger.

She tore up the microphone from the control panel.

"Go get 'em, Daxxie!" she shouted into the square device.

"You got it, sweetcheeks!" came a muffled call from inside, followed by an, "Ow!"

Sig took over the mic.

"Cool head, champ, cool your head!"

Daxter did better on the second half of that round than the first, as a few more hits knocked him to his senses. He still needed no prodding to run it again after another short break, though, nor a forth time. After that Sig told him to call it a day so that he didn't end up overstraining himself.

He still quit under protest. However, as soon as he got back to his— Jak's— whatever room he conked out the moment he laid down for a little nap.

To his own dismay he found it to be evening when he woke up again. Even more dismaying was the fact that his entire body hurt like hell.

And he was so hungry he felt like he could eat a lurker fish. It took several minutes of agonizing stretching until he could even entertain the thought of getting out of bed and to the cafeteria, though.

When he finally got there he loaded up on a double serving of stew and proceeded to more or less breathe it down as soon as he got to a table. As he lowered the bowl after drinking the last thick sauce straight from it, he found Sig sitting across from him with an amused expression.

Daxter swallowed hard and managed a grin.

"You sure did a number on me, sidekick o' Tess," he commented. He rolled his shoulder and there was a popping sound. Ow. He oughta demand a massage from Jak, for a change, as soon as possible.

… or maybe not because holy crap issues not dealt with yet oh ye gods…

"Okay, Daxter, listen up," Sig said. No nickname. Serious business.

Daxter set the bowl aside and looked up at the big wastelander expectantly.

"We do the same thing as we did today again, tomorrow," Sig said, rapping a fingertip against the
table. "Then you rest for the day. And if you do well enough, we'll go to Spargus the day after."

Begin Introspection. Serial code: Lev.

Okay. Lemme make one thing clear. I'm just gonna admit it to myself, too. I don't like Zem. How could I? He's rude, and big, and so damn dumb sometimes I can't even laugh at it. And I can imagine what he did in the prison even if he clams up about the gritty details, and then the only saving grace is that he's so trippy with guilt that I have to repeatedly stop him from killing himself. And sometimes I ain't even sure it's worth the effort.

But.

When I say that I'm doing this for Junn, I mean it. And it helps that I know how Zem got prison duty in the first place. The story got a bit warped, but most in the KG at that time had heard about the guy who killed five metal head grunts with his bare hands.

Thaat's not what happened.

Zem can fight like a berserker when he feels like it, but come on. Only guy who could pull something like that off is Jak when he's in purple people eater mode. And maybe our Grand Lordship Damas, as long as he has a stick… though a lot of people say that's just an exaggerated rumor too.

Aaanyway, Junn told me how it really went down.

It was during a mission, it was supposed to just be training… but then metal heads attacked and the whole squad got separated from each other. Junn ended up backed into a corner by two grunts, and he'd taken a smash that broke his ribs even with his armor on. He was in such pain he could hardly see straight. One of them pounced on him and was about to bite his head off.

And then Zem – who had lost his gun somewhere along the way – rushed in and punched the grunt's lights out with one hit. It would have crashed on top of Junn, but Zem wrenched it away (Junn was right when he said that Zem's as strong as an ox. Then again he added that he's also "twice as good looking!" No comments there) – just before its pal jumped on him. And then the bignasty somehow managed to survive wrestling with that thing until Junn got up and shot the beastie.

Just as he did that, Zem had gotten a grip and broke its neck. It was probably dead by then, though. They were a little too stressed to note exactly when the skull gem popped free.

Junn shot the one Zem had knocked out, too, of course.

But the guys who found them didn't pick up on the shots. They thought Zem had killed the grunts unarmed. Both Junn and Zem tried to correct them because holy crap, you did not want to stand out in the KG. But the rumor mill was already chugging.

Pulling off a great feat as a KG was like winning a ticket to the front line or the next suicide mission, because good ol' Praxis was so desperate to put his best men to good use that he tended to use them up very quickly.
And then Zem disappeared, and, again, Junn wouldn't tell me where. He knew. He was the only one Zem could tell, after all.

And Junn knew Zem had gone to Hell for saving his life.

Zem is too messed up to feel much more than questionable pity for. But he's done one good deed, at least. Too bad it screwed everything up.

' 

End Introspection. 

"Lev" is the Swedish word for "live."
Crumble

,'

Begin Introspection. Serial code: Jak.
','

They won't let me sleep.

Praxis, Erol, Jelas, KGs, even Zem. Because I knew he was there, too. It doesn't have to make sense.

They're there as soon as I begin to drift off, saying, shouting, screaming things that make me start awake. Sometimes it's not even anything they ever said. That I remember, at least.

And the hands. The hands.

And their hot, disgusting breath.

Waking me up is so, so easy for them. And I can't fight that.

I don't know how long I can keep going like this. Gods, I need sleep.

I need to fix things. I need Daxter to wake me up when it gets bad and make it okay, so the nightmares will stay away. But I can't go to Haven. They need me here.

But I need to be there. Because he can't come here. He can't. He mustn't. He'll die. I can't let that happen.

,'

End Introspection.
','

It felt unreal.

"Pack your bags and get ready to get sand in your boots, cherry," Sig had told him.

Tess had given him a good luck peck on the cheek, but the look in her eye told Daxter with perfect clarity that it wasn't just for the fight. She was rooting for Jak all the way, and somehow that had tipped over from disconcerting to funny even to Daxter. It was so bizarre to have her cheerleading Jak's crush that all you could do was laugh, really.

Regardless. Daxter was currently following Sig's orders. Not that there was much to pack, Jak had always travelled light and Daxter did not have many worldly possessions to haul around either.

The simple rucksack steadily filled up with mainly changes of clothes, first Daxter's own – most of it yet unused since he hadn't had time to go through his saved up stock yet – and then Jak's, freshly delivered from that ever unseen, nefarious cleaning crew. Those people had the courtesy to neatly fold the clothes they had washed. It was a nice, but useless habit as the clothes were now showed rather unceremoniously down into the bag. And with a lot more force than necessary.
It was a good thing for Daxter to have something to do, although it could not make much of a difference in the maelstrom of his thoughts. Most of them sang to the tune of "Holy crap this is happening!"

He felt pretty sure that Tess would have wanted to have him train a little more, and maybe that would have made him feel more secure as well… but on the other hand, he had seen and heard enough on the communicator to not really need Sig's opinion that time was running short.

Sig thought he was ready. That should be enough…

That thought and the weight of the guns at his belt made Daxter feel a little more at ease. He knew how to use them. The rest was up to him, if he could just use his speed and keep his head cool he could manage.

He could.

He could. But holy crap this is happening…

Daxter swallowed hard, telling himself to calm down.

And then he gave a start when there was a knock on the door. He cleared his throat to make sure his voice wouldn't do something weird when he answered it.

"Yeah?" he called.

The door slid open to reveal Keira, standing there with both hands behind her back and a smile on her lips. Still, she could not quite hide the worried glint in her eye.

"We heard you were going?" she said.

Dammit, Tess… or Sig…

He wasn't sure which one seemed more guilty. True, slipping away like a thief in the night wasn't a nice thing to do, but Daxter could really do without the skepticism he knew he'd still get from the Dreadlocks Duo and old greenie. Not to mention Pecker.

With some effort Daxter swallowed his annoyance and apprehension, and gave her as confident a grin as he could manage.

"Yep," he said. "Sig's given me the thumbs up, so I'm going for the gold." He said the thing about Sig mainly as a ward against protests. Because nobody should be able to argue against a veteran wastelander's judgment on an issue like this.

Well, except that teeny tiny detail about Jak saying he wouldn't believe Sig so soon…

Keira nodded, a little stiffly.

"You'll need these, then," she said.

She moved one of her hands into sight, holding out a pair of goggles. The strap was a little worn and there was a chink in the metal rim around the right glass, but the sight made Daxter's stomach make a happy little jump.

He knew he had forgotten something.

"I couldn't find a new pair so quickly, they're used…” Keira started, smiling for real through the
vague apology. Because she could clearly see that Daxter didn't mind.

"Awesome! Thanks!" he said. He took the goggles and checked on the buckle as he went into the bathroom to use the mirror.

It felt a little strange to strap them on, the ones he had worn as an ottsel had of course been a lot smaller, but most importantly that strap had been so old and used that it was a lot easier to work with. He had been so much more familiar with it, too. Still, it didn't take long before he had found the perfect position and buckled the strap at the back of his head, moving the goggles so that they restrained his hair.

"Lookin' even better now, 'ey?" he asked Keira as he walked back into the main room, making a sassy motion with his shoulders.

She cracked up with a chuckle, the dregs of worry melting away at least for a moment.

"You were missing something, yeah," she said.

"Ohh, a compliment!"

She waved aside his amused smugness with a laugh, and finally showed her other hand.

"I wanted to give you this too," she said. "You'll need it to keep up with Jak."

Daxter stared at the second gift. It looked like a pair of folded up metal discs set between a jagged one, but he recognized the design instantly.

No way…

"Really?" he managed as Keira set it down on the floor.

She pushed a button and in a second the jet board unfolded, to hover a few inches above the carpet with a soft hum.

"I threw it together really fast," she admitted, "but it should work just fine. Just… take it easy, okay?"

Daxter shot her a mock-suspicious look.

"Warranty papers, please!" he demanded. But he wasn't really worried. He knew Keira wouldn't ever hand over something she didn't believe worked – she was a proud mechanic/crazy inventor chick, after all.

And she just chuckled again, pushing the button to turn the device off so she could pick it back up.

"I put this here so you won't mix them up," she said and gave him a wink as she pointed to the edge of the folded jet board.

She had painted an orange lightning bolt on it.

In that moment, Daxter felt all his worries melt away, as if Keira's kindness had poured soothing salves over his fretting mind.

He went to meet up with Sig outside the Freedom HQ, rucksack on his back and folded jet pack hooked onto it, with a lot more ease than he had felt half an hour before.
Riding along with Sig was a wholly different experience from when Jak was in the driver seat. Daxter noticed it whenever it happened, mostly due to the lack of near-death experiences – although he was so used to Jak's driving that he hardly noticed those anymore either. Not that Sig drove like most sensible people would either. Then again, considering they were crossing a battlefield, no sensible person would even have been driving there in the first place.

How many more robots could Erol possibly have left after his factory blew up? Apparently a few more, at least. The Freedom soldiers were doing a better job at cleaning them out now, though, when the metallic buggers' numbers weren't infinite. There were a lot less robots out in the streets these days.

They got through to the harbor unmolested, a testament to the dwindling number of enemies. At least they were dwindling on this end, the metal heads were another story completely… but they were on the other side of town.

And then there was the air train ride.

The long, boring air train ride where there was nothing to do but think. Unless you talked.

So Daxter talked.

If there was one thing that could make him ramble on like nothing else, it was anxiety. He hardly knew what he said, himself, a little too busy keeping his "psyched up" bar at a high level.

Sig did not have a fraction of Jak's patience with Daxter's motor mouth, but he endured it admirably for a while. Finally, though, he raised a hand. Daxter’s teeth clacked together.

"What?" the redhead said.

"I'm gonna share a secret, chili pepper," Sig said, looking him straight in the eye with a serious expression. "An' you can't even spill it to Jak, okay?"

"Uh, okay, Big S. Shoot."

Sig's lips quirked as he inclined his head and said in a low voice:

"I get scared too, sometimes."

Daxter blinked, then stared. Then blinked again. Sig smiled grimly at him and tapped his own helmet.

"See, if you're too dumb to get scared, you ain't gonna know when you need to be careful. You gotta know when things can turn sour, so you can pull out and tackle it some other way."

He leaned back.

"So there ain't no shame in that. Just don't work yourself up too much."

Daxter wasn't beneath realizing the weight of Sig sharing that part of himself. It was humbling enough to keep him silent for a whole thirty seconds.

The sand dunes outside the barred window must have been one of the most beautiful things Sig had ever seen in his life.

The air train came to a wheezing stop and the door opened to send a flood of hot, but fresh air over the two men. They walked out with a mix of relief and tension, and Sig waved at the driver that he
could take off. The blue hovering box rose up once again and shot off across the dunes, leaving them stranded just outside Spargus' walls.

"You gotta see Damas first," Sig said as they hurried towards the gate that opened on their approach, sensing the gate key Sig carried.

Daxter squeezed the strap of his rucksack. He had just thrown it on, the other strap dangled and made the bag slap against his back for every step. He hardly noticed.

"Does he know I'm coming back?" he wondered.

They entered the car pit and started along the wall. Sig leading on clearly intent on keeping Daxter out of sight as much as possible. The reason was not too hard to figure out. Both of them kept glancing around, but though some of the people walking about noticed them and some waved a greeting at Sig, nobody approached.

"I gave him a heads up," Sig said, as easy as anything. "So we can get your first challenge done and beaten quick."

Daxter nodded, clenching his teeth. Right at that moment a big shadow appeared behind a car, and whatever he had been about to say took second seat to that.

"Kleiver sighting!" Daxter hissed.

But Sig had already noticed, ushering Daxter on the last few meters to the city gate and glaring a warning at the huge man. Luckily Kleiver was far too far away to make it over to them before they were gone, and they ignored his holler. His cruelly intrigued look had not passed Daxter by, though.

Despite the breath of relief – because the last thing he needed was a Kleiver pep talk and Sig knew that too – premonition seethed in Daxter's gut.

He tried to shake that off by settling on another worry. A master tactician, he was not.

"Let's hope Jak doesn't find out beforehand," Daxter said, glancing about. Being past the Kleiver-danger, that was still the one person he didn't want to meet just yet. No sign of a blue shirt or blond-green hair though. There were people going on their merry sandy way as per usual, but no hero that would very possibly freak out at the sight of his sidekick.

Sig made an agreeing noise.

"He'll know there's an arena fight, o'course," he said.

"Yeah, but we never went to watch others'," Daxter said, feeling relief pour into him as that happy thought soothed him. Not that there had been more than a couple of fights since the Demolition Duo first ended up in the wasteland, but still… "Jak doesn't like watching people fight if he can't help them. It makes his chronic hero syndrome ouchy."

To that, Sig nodded with a small stretch of his lips. He could respect that. And it was a good thing in this situation.

Daxter remained on high Jak-watch alert during the walk to see Damas, ready to duck behind Sig if need be. Luckily they made it there safely, and took the elevator up.

The peaceful splashing of water stood in stark contrast to the rising strain of Daxter's nerves, but he
forced himself to breathe evenly. It didn't make him feel any better that he and Sig had to wait, as Damas was listening to a monk woman giving him a report about something. That did Daxter some time to psyche himself up.

He was not going to show how nervous he was. Not now. Not later. They wouldn't get to laugh at him.

Finally – or too soon – the monk finished her information dump and left, giving Sig and Daxter nothing but a brief glance as she passed and disappeared down with the elevator. Daxter was a bit too busy staring back at Damas' evaluating look to care about her.

"One for the survival course as promised, Your Lordship," Sig said. He then took a step back, letting Daxter walk forwards and deal with this one on his own. For good or ill.

"Does Jak even know you're back?" Damas asked as Daxter stepped closer to the throne.

"Eh, we thought we better keep that under wraps," the redhead said with a wave towards Sig. "But anyway…" He folded his arms and managed to smirk confidently, "I think I better get back to my sidekick, and I guess you don't count me in the club anymore when I can't ride around on Jak's shoulder."

"I recall that you didn't even want to go into the arena when Jak did the fighting for both of you," Damas said, allowing a crack of amusement to show.

"Yeah, well, you know," Daxter said with a dismissive motion, "it would have been a pain in the ass to deal with any stray marauders if he hit his head on something, considering my height back then." He held up his hands, with a distance of about what his ottsel size had been.

"And you think you stand a better chance now?"

Damas watched him, with that dry smirk that had driven Jak up the wall – not with annoyance, but with desire to see it washed away with approval. From the moment Damas had dismissed Dark Jak being a curse and instead called those dark powers potentially useful, Jak had wanted to prove him right. And no jokes about "what about that bad first impression?" could change that.

Not that Daxter had ever had any real wish to change it. Jak didn't have that many people to look up to. And he definitely had not had a father figure before. Samos couldn't measure up by a mile.

Though, deep down Daxter felt a niggling doubt that he would be able to take away that smirk on his own.

… But he had to.

For Jak.

He squared his shoulders and put on a grin.

"I wouldn't be crazy enough to come back here if I didn't think so, now would I?" he said.

Damas scoffed, still smirking.

"We'll find out soon enough," he said.

It was obvious that he was about to dismiss Daxter straight to the arena – he had that look in his eye – but the scrawny challenger raised a pointing finger.
"Eh, one thing, Your Lordshippyness," he said. Oh boy, he did not like saying this, but he knew it was something else he needed to do.

"What?" Damas said. "Make it quick."

Yeah, you just can't wait to toss another one in the meat grind, can ya? Holy crap.

Daxter pushed that thought aside.

"You prolly remember how Jak reacted when you saw me like this the first time," Daxter said and rapped his fist against his own chest.

Damas just nodded.

"So ya know he can get a bit overprotective of me, used to having to defend the little guy."

Sorry, Jak.

"You might wanna keep him on a short leash when I'm down there, just sayin'."

Jak had said he wouldn't let Daxter die in the arena. But Daxter wasn't going to let Jak risk his citizenship in this place, where he finally felt at home.

He'd made his choice. He'd take the risk. The mere thought that he was about to be all on his own made Daxter's insides twist, but he couldn't back out now.

And if he could just get through this, neither he nor Jak would have to be on their own again.

He kept telling himself that over and over a little while later as he stood at the end of a corridor that was more like a tunnel, staring at the door ahead of him. The murmur of thousands of voices could be heard from the other side. Dang, people in this town really just dropped everything as soon as there was an arena fight announced.

At least Sig was still with him. The big guy hadn't said anything for a while, but the silent support was appreciated. Daxter wasn't silent, of course. Staring at the door his tension rose right back up towards critical levels, and he was rambling to calm himself down again.

And then Jak came barreling down the tunnel.

"Dax!"

Daxter almost jumped out of his skin.

He should not have to get startled by that voice. But right at that moment, it was the last thing he wanted to hear. He wasn't ready to deal with that yet, not before he knew he had made it through the arena. Not before he had that hurdle out of the way, before he could turn his focus onto the next one.

Before that he wasn't ready to deal with Jak.

But Jak was coming right at him now, face a mask of disbelief, anger and dread. He *had* found out.

It had the stink of Kleiver all over it.

"Oh hey…” Daxter lamely started, but Jak grabbed his arms.
Whoa close. Didn't look like pushing away would be any use right then, though. There was that intense, burning spark in those big blue eyes.

"What are you doing here?" Jak demanded, his voice hoarse.

Daxter opened his mouth, but looking at his friend's face, in real life instead of on a tiny communicator screen, gave him some pause.

Only briefly though.

"You look like crap," Daxter blurted.

Jak scowled, but it was true. Dark rings lined his eyes and a stubble covered his sunken cheeks. There were specks of dirt and dry blood in his hair and on his clothes, and even without an ottsel's sharp nose Daxter was assaulted by the scent of old sweat. Not that washing was top priority use for water out here but it showed that Jak hardly had been bothering at all.

Daxter would have made a joke about taking a shower before they had this chat, but he could clearly see that it would not be appreciated.

Had either of them looked at Sig right then, they would have seen his deep, concerned scowl. When he left Spargus to go get Daxter, the signs had been subtle. Now anybody could see that Jak was wobbling.

This was bad. Real bad. Daxter had his work cut out for him.

Getting past Jak and into the arena, for a start...

"Never mind me," Jak snapped. "Are you crazy?"

Now that just wasn't nice. Daxter's eyebrows sunk.

"Now look here, I know you think I'm here too early but lookin' at you, sleepwalker, I think I'm late—"

"Dax!"

Jak's hands squeezed his arms so tightly it hurt, staring at him with his blue eyes so full of worry and pain that it sent a bullet right at the heart of Daxter's self-assurance. He mentally wobbled, doubt bubbling up in his gut.

All he could think of doing was look up at Sig for support.

This did not pass Jak by.

"Sig!" Jak snarled.

He couldn't even get out the words "how could you?"

Sig glanced between them, watching Daxter squirm. If this would lead up to a request from the redhead to throw him back into the desert rather than letting him into the arena, Sig would at this point be very, very disappointed.

On the other hand, if Daxter went in but died in there, Sig also knew that Jak would never forgive him.
The overbite did some harsh work on the soft flesh of the kid's lower lip. Not that the lip needed any more of that treatment. It was pure wonder that it had not already started bleeding.

Sig opened his mouth, but then Daxter's lower lip slipped free and he wrenched the doubt off his face.

"Jak." Daxter put his hands on his friend's chest and gently but firmly pushed.

Jak's hands slipped away and he stepped back a little, though clearly reluctant. Daxter fired off a grin at him and cocked his head to the side, summoning up all the bravado he could muster.

"Relax, buddy," he said, though he really wished he could tell himself the same thing with as much gusto. "I ain't gonna fight a small army of marauders. Even Damas reckons that wouldn't be fun to watch."

"You can't—" Jak started, shaking his head hard.

"Hey!"

They all snapped up at the shout. A tall wastelander stood on the bottom step of the stair at the other end of the tunnel, waving at them with one hand.

"Damas wanna see ya, Jak. In that drag-him-here-by-his-ears-if-you-have-to way, if ya get my drift."

Despite the aggravating choice of words, the wastelander did not quite look like he liked the idea of obeying the King's silent order – not when Jak's eyebrows crept low.

"Hey, just the messenger." The wastelander shrugged, glancing upstairs. "Seriously though, he looked like he might come and fetch you himself if you don't go. So you better."

Jak grit his teeth for a second. Then, with a low growling sound he stalked towards the stair, only looking around to throw Daxter a tortured look. The redhead swallowed hard, yet managed to stand fast. His silence probably only made Jak feel worse, he knew that, but his brain had shut itself off.

That look was too much.

So without another word exchanged between them, Jak disappeared with the messenger following him like a guard. Sig and Daxter's shoulders dropped in muddled relief.

"I wouldn'a brought you here if I didn't think you could win, chili pepper," Sig said, turning to Daxter with an encouraging smile. "I know you can show 'em up. Go out there and show Jak he can trust you to watch his back."

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Jak stomped up the stair with a look worthy of a murderous thunderstorm, but Damas merely raised a hairless eyebrow at him. The messenger backed off as quickly as dignity allowed.

The arena was already prepared with a tower of raised platforms offering insane jumps and obstacles, the first test before a challenger was given the chance to prove themselves in battle.

"Are you sleeping right?" Damas asked in a low voice.

"Fine," Jak responded, in a harder tone than he had intended. He grit his teeth, taking in a deep breath. He couldn't calm down, but he had to try to stay focused, at least. "You wanted to see me?"
Damas didn't believe his claim to be fine for a moment. It was obvious from his searching look. But he didn't press the issue, which was a tiny bit of relief.

"Yes, your friend thought that I should keep an eye on you for this," he said instead. So calm. So very calm.

And dangerous.

Jak's already balled up hands clenched so hard they shook.

"Don't do anything you'll regret," Damas said, unblinking as they watched each other. "It's his own choice to fight. We can hope it will be a good one."

"You really like sending people down there," Jak said, unable to fully keep his frustration out of his voice. Of course he couldn't keep it in. He could never hide any emotion.

In a normal situation, showing anger towards Damas would have seemed insane to him, but this was about Daxter.

But the King of Spargus merely gave him a grim smile.

"I have fought in the arena too," he said.

That gave Jak some pause, if briefly. He had never thought about that, but of course even Damas must have proved his worth for the amusement of the whole city, at some point.

Come to think of it, how was the leadership of Spargus handed down?

"I was even made to fight in a marauder arena once, when I was taken prisoner," Damas added in a calm tone. His lips quirked when Jak gave a start and looked at him in disbelief. "Remind me to tell you that story sometime."

The challenger's gate parted, and Jak's focus was arrested by Daxter walking through to jump onto the waiting platform. The redhead's face looked a little pale and there was nothing of the usual pep in his walk, but he didn't hesitate either.

It didn't escape Jak that Daxter avoided looking at him.

The audience whistled and hollered. They didn't boo. They had no reason to. Either the challenger would prove himself worthy, or he would fail. Whichever it would be, they had a show ahead of them.

Damas stood up.

"This is unusual," he said, heard across the arena. "You come here on your own volition to take the challenge for yourself."

The audience perked up, a hush coming over them as the King uttered those unexpected words.

"Yeah well," Daxter shot back. He sounded confident, but Jak knew the nuances of Daxter's voice enough to know that he was tense. "It just ain't right to have somebody else fight for ya before, you know?"

A murmur started in the audience, amused and confused – Daxter had been loud there several times before. His voice was recognized. Still, most remained bewildered until he spun around, throwing out his arms theatrically.
"Hey ya'll, remember me? I used to ride shotgun on Jak's shoulder!"

The audience erupted, and the noise tore at Jak's ears. Now they were really intrigued, whether they believed it or not. Now that scrawny redhead was Jak's pet. Now he had something to prove more than just his survival skills. He had to have a reason to stay beside a warrior like that, after all.

And they remembered how he used to complain about the challenges. They were amused.

Daxter came back around, putting his hands on his hips as he grinned up at Damas. Still not looking at Jak.

"Begin then, as you are prepared to prove yourself," Damas said, waving his hand in the direction to go.

With his plastered on grin still in place, Daxter turned on the platform and leapt over to the prepared course, starting to scale down a wall as the marks led him to.

"Show him some faith," Damas said and sat back down on the throne, perfectly at ease. As if Jak's world wasn't threatening to crumble before his eyes. "He'll need it."

That did not make Jak feel any better.

His gaze remained glued on Daxter as the redhead leapt and swung his way through the training course – with ease, even Jak had to admit, but then again, Daxter had always been very nimble as an ottsel and he seemed to have taken a lot of that with him even through the second transformation.

But even so, even if Daxter proved that yes, he could make it to from point A to point M through a lot of dangerous jumps, swings and climbing, it all just led to the part that was much, much worse.

Jak gripped the reeling of the balcony so hard his fingers hurt, feeling Damas' eyes on his back the whole time. He knew fully well that even if the King sat on his throne, if Jak made the smallest motion as to try to help his friend, Damas would stop him. And there would be repercussions.

He'd have to make it, though. If Daxter needed him, he couldn't stand by.

Spargus meant nothing to him if Daxter died there.

Daxter himself did not allow himself to think about anything than getting through. The physical strain helped clear his brain and for every time he heaved himself over an edge or leapt across a chasm, the tension in his mind eased up. This was familiar territory. And it was not too hard.

It was certainly no worse than dangling from a net, trying to climb over to reach a lever while flame throwers randomly tried to roast you. This place had nothing on Erol's funhouse of a factory.

So far.

Soon enough he made it back to the platform he had started on, giving Damas a mock-salute that the King didn't even dignify with a roll of his eyes.

"Very well, you can jump around," the King said, and the audience laughed and jeered. "But let us see if you can fight, too."

It was a good thing that Daxter stuck to his decision not to look at Jak, for the very reason he had
decided not to, from the start. He would have lost the courage he had built up from doing so well in
the obstacle course.

Far below a cage door opened with a screeching sound. Holding his breath, Daxter looked down
over the edge to see just what would come out of the prisons lined up near the bottom of the arena.
Sig had said that for the survival test it was always different, depending on what had been caught
and kept alive long enough to be used for a challenge.

With a high-pitched, furious snarl a thin shadow leapt out and onto the nearest platform, clawing at
the air with thin, razor sharp forelegs. It was a black and grey, insect-like beast the size of a
yakkow, its huge eyes gleaming hungrily as it turned back and forth. The skull gem set on the
middle of its triangular head glowed eerily from within.

The audience hollered and the metal head snarled, furious.

First thought:

*How the heck did they catch that thing alive?*

Second thought:

*Bug.*

Daxter’s eyes narrowed.

He could handle bugs.

The obstacle course remained unchanged, but there were more places to go than he had been
instructed to by the glowing marks. Daxter needed no hint. Up on the platform he currently stood
on he was out in the open. That was bad.

Drawing his guns he moved as silently as he could sideways, aiming to leap down to a square
platform below, one which had a wall to use as cover.

The moment he moved his feet he heard the metal head screech. It had somehow heard him,
despite the audience. Crafty bugger.

Well, sneakiness be damned, then.

He made a running jump and landed on the platform, from the corner of his eye seeing the metal
head work its way up the tower in leaps and bounds. It was quick, and despite its size it could jump
very, very high and well.

Daxter bolted for cover with the roar of the audience filling his ears, drowning out the clatter of the
metal head landing behind him. He did hear the clang of a hard, metallic arm clashing against the
edge of the wall just as he ducked around it.

Spinning around he fired at the giant bug just as it moved around the corner, forcing it to recoil. It
gave him a couple of more seconds. Another platform hovered in the air before him. There was no
cover, but right now he just had to *move.*

There was this clawing sound when those things jumped, just as they shifted their weight about to
spring. Hard, sharp feet scratching the ground. Daxter heard it, but he couldn't look around in his
sprint, the edge was too close.
Even as he catapulted himself forwards and over the abyss, the clawing ceased and he knew that the metal head was in the air. His feet smacked onto the floating platform and he swept around, almost losing his balance from the sharp turn. He swung one leg out, crouching down – a bad position if it caught him now but there was no time and he might have fallen if he hadn't done so.

Time slowed down. The metal head seemed to float towards him, its sword-like arms raised to slice him in half.

Daxter raised his guns and fired. Most of the shots whizzed past the giant insect's skeletal body, too slim to hit for Daxter's stress-laden brain. But two of the bullets struck, though only an arm and shoulder.

It didn't have to hit anything vital.

The force of the bullets knocked the metal head's momentum off. Daxter recoiled from the arms that thrashed at the air, but they missed him by a foot. They also missed the edge of the platform.

Screeching in fury the beast plummeted, straight down into the bottom of the arena. The cry ended abruptly.

The crowd howled for his victory.

Daxter stood gasping on the platform, trying to catch his breath, trying to make sense of what had happened. It came over him in a rush; he had actually won. On his own. The cheering, the claps, the whistles were for him alone. He had survived, standing triumphant despite all his fears, despite his and everyone else's doubts.

A grin exploded on his face and with a triumphant laugh he pumped both fists into the air, spinning around to grin even wider at Damas' mildly surprised, but not displeased, look. Daxter rather regretted Pecker not being there anymore. He would have paid to hear the bird brain try to reason his victory out of possibility.

He shifted his gaze, searching for Jak, wanting to see the same surprise in him – wanted to grin and make the victory sign, seeing the blue eyes relieved and amused and proud. But when Daxter caught Jak's eyes, the grin froze.

Jak watched, stared at him, relief already present in his eyes. But more than the relief, there was disbelief. Nothing else.

The grin faltered and died, twisting into a scowl. The triumph that had made Daxter feel as if he could fly fell flat, crushed by a chilling punch of realization.

He accepted that Jak had been worried before. But Jak had watched. He had seen it. He had seen his best friend fight and win.

But he wasn't proud of him.

Because he still couldn't believe it.

Daxter collected his first battle amulet and watched Damas as the King offered his veiled threat of a congratulation. Whatever the Lordship said, Daxter didn't register it. He only watched Damas, because he sure as hell wasn't going to look at Jak again.

Disappointment bubbled within him, burning his insides.
He had nothing to say. He just nodded when Damas sat back down, and headed to the exit. The door closed behind him and he hurried down the corridor, had to make it, had to make it before—

Jak caught up with him. Daxter turned around at the call, saw the outstretched, familiar hand and that face he had wanted to see so, so much.

He recoiled. He didn't think, he just did it. Trying to get away from Jak reaching out for him. Jak stopped dead, and Daxter's eyes narrowed as the pit of disappointment flooded over and he snarled.

"What?"

And he saw it in Jak's eyes, saw that Jak wanted to tell him that he shouldn't push his luck, the next challenge would be tougher and the final one even worse.

Luck. Because of course Daxter just had luck. Jak had skill.

_I was so scared but I did it for you ALL FOR YOU and you don't even…_


Jak's eyebrows shot downwards. To some people, Jak getting angry could mean a very brutal end. To smart people it was still terrifying. To Daxter, it was a nightmare for different reasons – but he didn't remember that right then.

"Dax, I was worried—"

"You didn't think I could do it!"

"How could I?" Jak snarled, throwing his arms out. He didn't even try to deny it. He couldn't.

"Dax, you spent less than a week training, with Tess!"

Daxter had not thought that he could get angrier, but Jak found a way to make him.

"What the hell is wrong with Tess?" he shouted.

With a sick sense of satisfaction, he watched Jak wince. An explanation started in some version of "you know what I mean", but Daxter did not know, and even if he had, he didn't want to hear it. He sneered, cutting Jak off with the sheer iciness of his voice.

"Oh wait, of course," Daxter snarled, then raised his voice for every word until he was screaming. "It's because you're so jealous of her that you can't even think straight!"

Screaming to drown the voice in the back of his head that hollered at him, like in a dream – somehow thinking it wasn't him, couldn't be him being this mad at Jak, wanting to stop but not knowing how.

Jak recoiled, he actually was the one who recoiled this time, and the look in his eyes would haunt Daxter for several nights to come. But right then, there was too much fury to stumble.

Daxter's voice sunk back to an angry hiss. Against this, Jak had no way to attack, and Daxter stampeded right on even when the voice in his head begged him to stop, just stop, please for the love of everything holy, _STOP._

"And you can't handle not having a helpless little sidekick to help you feel big and strong, can you?"
He said it, and told himself that it was fine, because he knew that he was doing. Kept telling himself so when Jak's mouth tightened and his brow arched in that painful way. Kept telling himself that he wasn't hurting Jak even worse Ashelin had done.

Worse than what she'd done when she stabbed at that thing Jak never could deny or fight within himself; the wish to be a hero. It was unfair and cruel but she was angry and hiding how desperate she was by firing off a blow below the belt.

"So, the hero I knew did die in the desert. Or was it long before that?"

Tried to make him angry, call out that renegade who hated the Baron and his city but still thought it was worth fighting for, for all those people who struggled to survive.

But.

She wasn't a best friend, hadn't spent her entire life with Jak and didn't understand how deep and long it hurt. Hurt like hellfire when a friend did that to him.

No, Daxter wasn't hurting Jak like Ashelin. She had tried to goad him into action. She had a good reason.

In that feverish, insane moment, Daxter just wanted to hurt back.

And then Sig stepped in between, putting a firm hand on Daxter's shoulder and waving his other at Jak, who drew back.

"Am I gonna have to separate you two?" Sig asked, glaring at both of them in turn. "Again?"

Both Jak and Daxter started to say something, but they were interrupted again by a hoarse, not very pleasant "hey!"

All three turned to see Kleiver coming towards them.

"Are you girls done throwing tantrums?" Kleiver asked with a sneer. Oh yeah. He had been listening.

Great.

Daxter wasn't even sure that Kleiver really believed that the redhead actually was that rat he had threatened to eat once. He didn't care. He had never liked dealing with Kleiver, but right at that moment, the only thing Daxter knew was that he needed to just get away. He was not in a state of mind to figure he needed to cool his head, or think things through.

No.

He just couldn't stand being near Jak for another minute.

"Yeah you know what, Mountain Man," he said with the boldness of the emotionally numbed, "I'm not in the mood right now, so just point me at whatever crap job you've got for me."

As Kleiver's expression changed from annoyed to surprised and finally to intrigued (all of those expressions mere tints of his usual cruel one), it took all the self-control in Jak's body to keep him from telling Daxter to back down. Sig's hard look at him helped holding him back, leaving him standing there staring after the redhead as Kleiver dragged Daxter off.

Only once did Daxter glance around, and then it was with such a mix of anger and disappointment
that it churned Jak's gut. He had to turn around and punch the wall, ripping up bleeding scratches on his knuckles.

"What the hell happened, cherry?" Sig asked, looking down at Jak's heaving shoulders.

Shaking his head Jak stepped away from the wall and rubbed his face.

"I don't know, Sig," he said. "I don't know."

Begin Introspection. Serial code: Sig.

… I'm gettin' a headache.

End Introspection.
Begin Introspection. Serial code: Jak.

I wish I didn't know what happened.

I wish. But I know he sees right through me. I can't hide anything from him. It never scared me before. It was okay, because it was him.

But he said those things. It's not true. It's not true. I'd never think of him like that.

I can't stand being without him. That's true, but not because of that. And I am jealous of Tess, but not like that. I can't compete with her for him, but…

He knows that. How could he say those things?

I can't see him. I can't think. I can't sleep.

I'm at the end of my rope.

But he said those things. All I did was worry too much. I can't see him. He'll see that I'm still angry.

I don't know how to fix this.

End Introspection.

"They what?"

Tess' shriek could have shattered glass.

She had been trying to call Daxter, repeatedly and for a long time. At first uncertain when he would fight, she hadn't wanted to risk getting him nervous by over-cheering on him before the challenge, so she had waited until last night before trying it the first time.

The lack of answer then, she had told herself, probably meant he was too busy celebrating. It hadn't worried her much – she had given Sig a somber but determined order to let her know if the worst happened. Tess had gone through enough losses in her life to know that if somebody was dead, she didn't want to be "mercifully" kept in the dark. It only made the grieving process longer.

But when morning and lunchtime came around and Daxter still did not call, nor answered her calls, she had caved and contacted her sidekick.

And now she was Most Seriously Displeased.
Sig massaged his forehead, leaning against the wall of his simple apartment.

"Yeah," he said with a growl.

He had only heard the end of the argument, with Daxter's accusation that Jak needed a helpless assistant for the sake of his manliness. It was enough, though, to give him and Tess a good hint as to what had caused the row.

"But he doesn't mean that!" Tess seethed. "How could he?"

"Doesn't make a lick of a difference now," Sig said, brow furrowing. "But Jak's lookin' like a dead man walkin'." He clenched his teeth. There was no need to elaborate, the flash in Tess' eyes showed that she understood. She might look like a bubbly airhead, but that appearance had served her well during her time as an agent for the Underground. And a look was all it was.

She knew full well what happened to people who pushed themselves into battles they weren't prepared to handle – for whatever reason. Exhaustion was death.

Judging by Sig's expression, she wagered that he thought Jak could be pushed over by a gust of wind at this point. If something – and there was certainly no shortage of nasty somethings gunning for him – got close enough, it might mean the end of the hero the whole world desperately needed.

"Where's Daxter? I gotta talk to him!" Tess said. Her picture on the small screen flailed about as she angrily waved her communicator around.

Sig let out a deep breath. He hadn't seen Daxter since last night, when he had gone to drop the redhead's backpack in the quarters Daxter had been assigned. Sig had hoped that he would get some answers, but he'd only gotten a gruff thanks and the sight of a lithe body in red hurrying off to avoid conversation.

Sure, Sig could have caught Daxter, he had no doubt about that. But that wouldn't make the little guy more receptive to sorting things out.

"Got a suggestion for what we'll do if they won't roll with it?" Sig asked. It left a bad taste in his mouth getting into other people's arguments like this, but at this point he knew the situation had gone past desperate.

Tess narrowed her eyes.

Daxter couldn't remember ever feeling so miserable and frustrated at the same time. Well, it was eerily close to how he had felt when alone, searching desperately for Jak in Haven, but that time, he hadn't been angry at Jak. And he hadn't had this reason to feel guilty like this.

But it wasn't his fault. He wasn't going to look for Jak to apologize.

In a way, he was grateful for the jobs thrown his way, though they were none too exciting as per Spargus newbie tradition (as far as he knew and cared – they probably just spent that first week or so figuring out what you were good at). At least it kept him busy. He'd spent most of yesterday on a leaper lizard chasing kanga-rats for Kleiver, and he may or may not have been overdoing it. His legs and backside had just stopped hurting after all that riding around. Only reason it was not worse had to be that he had experiences riding the stupid things as an ottsel, and then they had been wild, trying to shake him off. Still, seemed his body hadn't managed to bring *everything* back in the transformation.
As if he hadn't had enough trouble sleeping.

He did feel grateful to have gotten another job today, even if it was crappy too. It involved clambering around on the cliffs rising above the ocean, picking prickly fruit growing in the crevasses. His sore muscles had screamed in horror at the prospect, but he refused to be deterred.

Even when Kleiver had cheerfully told him to watch out for angry birds. And snakes.

Both he and Jak had noticed people doing this climbing-picking now and again before, members of the forager section of worker-warriors – but though he had received some compliments from the other gatherers as they instructed him earlier and he showed off his climbing skills (with no real enthusiasm, but he was damn well not going to start half-assing things. He wasn't going to slack off and seem like he needed Jak to watch his back), he hoped he wouldn't get roped into these jobs permanently. It wasn't what he'd come here for.

He'd come here to… to…

Aaaargh!

Daxter took a moment to slip deeper into a gap in the cliff, just so he could be out of sight dunking his forehead against a smoothened rock.

How could everything have gone so wrong? Oh yeah, because Jak had to be a bundle of no faith. And an ass about it, too.

Worse than you were?

SHUT UP

Growling to himself Daxter reached into the opening between two rocks in front of him, and tugged at the nest of tangled, thorny weeds nestled there. They came tumbling out, half grown and ripe fruits dangling to the rock by his feet. He could tell them apart from the color of the thick peel – sour green or deep, invitingly red. Inviting apart from the needles.

"It's easy enough," the instructor had said, "leave the unripe ones, we'll get those later. And be careful as you twist the ripe ones free, they fight back. No need to rush, you want to have a smooth climb back down, too. After all, if you fall and splat on the rocks we lose the fruit."

Daxter's mood could be read on the dozens and dozens of angrily red pinpricks on his palms and fingers. At least there was some dredge of satisfaction in being able to slam the fruit over his shoulder into the basket on his back. The peel was so hard nothing could ruin the pulp inside at this point.

"Oi, kiddo!"

The hoarse, female voice pulled him out of his thoughts and he squinted up to see an elderly woman gazing down at him. She had only one eye, the other covered by an eye-patch, and her grey hair was set up in a strict bundle at her neck. Obviously a veteran of the wasteland, her deeply tanned skin looked much like parchment.

Also she was almost upside-down above him, giving him a crooked grin as he blinked. The wrinkly hands clutched at the rocks with such ease that Daxter could bet she would be able to give a mountain lizard a run for their money.

And then she upped the ante by letting go with one hand to jab the remains of a thumb towards the
city, holding herself up with just one hand and her toes, from the looks of it.

"Somebody wanna see ya," she said. "Step on it."

Hope perked up within Daxter.

Jak?

But it instantly drowned in annoyance. If it was Jak, what had taken him so long? And even if it was, Daxter was not going to instantly scramble over. He had wounded pride to nurse.

"I'm not done with this one," he protested and waved at the fruits he had been harvesting, lamely trying to win some time.

She gave him a near toothless, and not unkind, grin. That it was an attempt to avoid answering the call passed her by.

"Yer a good kid," she said as she clambered down, head first – looking disturbingly alike a graceful insect, actually. "I'll take over for ya." When he still hesitated as she drew up beside him, she snorted in amusement. "Don't worry, I won't steal your thunder. Boss sent me here to fetch you, he knows you're takin' a break."

"That's not… eh," Daxter sighed and gave up. Maybe a little too easily. "Thanks."

He clambered across the cliff side, stepping between cracked outcrops and ridges. There were other foragers at work whom he passed, but they only spared him a glance or two. It was easy enough to assume he was just heading back to shore to deliver one load of fruit.

As soon as Daxter came around the side of the cliff, his scanning eyes caught sight of Sig. His heart dropped further than he wanted to admit even to himself. Allowing himself an annoyed sigh, he continued until he stood on stable ground. Even then, he went to empty his basket in one of the bigger, waiting containers in the shade. A couple of bored children guarded them from leaper lizards and other animals, peering suspiciously at him as he dropped the basket. But they said nothing as they watched him turn to Sig.

"Hey," Daxter said, with none of his usual energy.

Sig gave him a hard look-over and then waved at him to follow, leading him towards a cluster of buildings.

"You made Tess worry, squirt," Sig said.

Daxter winced, and did so again when he noticed that the big guy was dialing a number on his communicator. Yeah, the redhead had kinda sorta turned his off, and not been able to bear explaining the mess to Tess. With his own angry guilt to deal with, he couldn't handle her disappointment too.

"The volume might hit the ceiling," Sig said and handed Daxter the communicator as he pushed him towards an alley.

Daxter took the device with no little trepidation, which hardly changed as he saw the beautiful but fuming face on the display. He started on a "Oh hey, Tess…", but didn't get farther than that.

"You spit out what happened right now!" Tess shouted, loud enough to make several men and women on the street turn their heads.
Daxter winced and drew further inside the alley. It didn't pass him by that Sig followed, like a guard. He was not getting out of this one without an explanation.

"And if you say anything along the lines of 'he's being a jerk', I'll come over there and rip your ears off!" Tess added just as Daxter opened his mouth.

Oh wow. She was in full "you better keep my little schnookums safe or else"-mode, except this time it wasn't aimed at Jak. No wonder even he had backed away from her that time.

Even though Daxter did not fully understand it, however, it made perfect sense that she had gone into that mode. She was, after all, desperately trying to save him – and Jak.

Daxter glanced between her and the human statue that was Sig. The exit was blocked.

He took in a deep breath and tried to the best of his ability to explain what had happened in that moment when he won, when he looked at Jak, and… well, he couldn't tell Tess exactly what Jak had said. Even if part of him desperately wanted their understanding and sympathy, he also didn't want it bad enough to steep that low. As low as Jak had.

So there.

It all sounded so childish to him when he tried to put it to words. And his audience didn't say a word.

Finally, though, as he was done – longest story of his life, at least it felt that way – Tess rubbed her face with one hand and let hear a groan.

Daxter's shoulders dropped. Nope, he was going to get no sympathy. Only an earful.

That didn't happen, though.

"Sig!" Tess growled. "Activate operation 'Unbolt!'"

"Roger that." Sig took the communicator and snapped it off.

Daxter was stunned enough that they had gone so far as to create a named plan – or at least Tess had, as that did in no way sound like something Sig would come up with – that he did not use that one distracted second to make a break for it.

Maybe he should have.

But then again, deep down he perked up at the tiny, tiny promise of a solution.

"Right. We're fixin' this on the double." Sig grabbed Daxter's arm and dragged him off.

"What?" Daxter protested in a little too high-pitched a voice. "What're you gonna do?"

"Me? Nuthin'. It's all you boys." Sig used his free hand to dial something on his communicator again, then growled into it. "Jak! Got a job for you. Get your Shark."

Daxter's mouth snapped shut.

Since they had been at the other end of town, it was no wonder Jak got the vehicle pit before them. He sat waiting in his Sand Shark, arms folded, warily watching the two of them as they approached. Somehow, he'd found a way to look even worse than yesterday. The darkness around his eyes had deepened, underlined by the red-shot state of his eye whites.
Had he slept at all?

Daxter almost asked, but snapped his mouth shut.

Nope, he wasn't gonna—

And then Sig all but threw Daxter into the car.

"Hey, watch the merchandise!"

Daxter exclaimed it more out of habit than any real thought, then cursed himself for making a joke in front of Jak right now. That could make it seem like things were fine, and he was getting angrier by the second.

He would have scrambled right off the seat and out if Sig hadn't planted his pointing finger right between Daxter's eyes. The redhead flopped back down. Staying in the car seemed like a smart survival instinct.

Both he and Jak got a stern look.

"You go out there and bust up some marauders," Sig said between his teeth. "Or metal heads. I don't care. Just get out."

He silenced both their protests with a glare that could have given a metal head nightmares.

"And don't come back until you've patched things up, you hear me?" he snarled. "Or I'll dangle you both from the wall by your ankles."

The sheer audacity of digging this deep and hard into their private business was enough to make Daxter take a stand. Even though he knew it was a bad idea.

"I don't think even you could do that without falling down, Siggy," he snapped.

He was not, however, upset enough to be able to withstand Sig bearing down on him so closely that their noses almost touched. It made Daxter recoil rather quickly.

"Mebbe not," Sig said. "But Kleiver could."

"Point taken," Daxter replied, a lot more meekly.

In that moment Jak apparently decided that he'd had enough, and hit the gas pedal. The Shark swerved off with a roar, showering Sig in a cloud of sand and forcing him to shield his face. Even though Jak had not said a word, he used that to show what he thought.

Grunting, Sig glared after the car as it zoomed through the gate and disappeared amongst the sand dunes. He probably had deserved that, getting so nosy. But it had to be worth it.

It had to.

The atmosphere in the car remained silent, and tense as a bowstring. Daxter sunk as deeply as he could into his seat, arms folded while he quietly seethed. And the driver's lips were as tightly shut as a bank valve.

Jak didn't seem to have a plan for where they were going, just driving off into the deep desert. If any beast or robber had shown up, they would have regretted it dearly from the look on his face.
Tired, yes, but anger alone could keep him going for days past his limits. That had been vital during his one-man(-with-some-allies) campaign against Praxis. Daxter knew that well, and he took a sour comfort in that, telling himself that Jak damn well could bear it.

He also understood full well that even though Jak might not care where they were going, he probably planned to use the length of the trip against Daxter. The silence was harsh on Jak, for sure, but he was used to staying quiet. He must be hoping that simple boredom would aid him in this.

Daxter grit his teeth.

Children get angry at each other now and then, even two best friends like them. Back in Sandover they'd get mad, walk away from each other. Within a couple of hours, one would find the other, poke him, and they would be off down the beach, laughing as if nothing ever happened. Because it was nothing.

Why would it have to be different now, just because they were ten years older?

But it was different.

Daxter stared at the rolling dunes passing by. Dozens of times a thought struck, something he wanted to say, start up with, but every time he stopped himself.

He wasn't going to start talking. That would mean saying he was sorry.

Well, he was. But this wasn't his fault. He had done everything right. More than anybody had believed he could, actually. It was Jak who had wronged him. It was Jak who should say something to fix things.

Unfortunately Jak remained silent. It was obvious that he thought the exact opposite about who should do the apologizing.

The lack of words was going to drive one of them nuts, but though Daxter gnashed his teeth at his own brain, he was determined it would not be him breaking it. Just this once. Because Jak was trying to be so damn crafty.

He heard a click and glanced at Jak, seeing him with just one hand on the wheel as he had reached to unhook the water flask by his belt. Jak paused for just the fraction of a second, and shook the flask. Even with the growl of the motor, Daxter could tell there was no splashing sound of water from within the container – Jak's movement was enough to see that.

Daxter's heart lurched.

Just how off was the guy if he forgot to refill his flask before heading out into the desert?

Without thinking Daxter reached for his own water bottle, but Jak made a sharp turn even as he hung the flask back on its hook. Heading towards a nearby oasis. Daxter's hand froze and he smacked it up against his chin, leaning heavily against the Shark's frame.

Well, if Jak wasn't even going to expect him to help…

That stung so deep that he had to turn his head away to hide his grimace.

It didn't pass him by that they did not exactly follow a straight line. Glancing to the side, he saw Jak massage his forehead. The heat was getting to him. Daxter looked ahead and folded his arms.
The oasis was close enough.

He didn't allow himself to think that there was obviously a lot more than the heat that had worn Jak
down.

They crested the sandy ridge that surrounded this particular oasis, and half rolled, half slid down
the slope. It was an inviting-looking one, nestled beneath one of the many mountains that reared up
from the desert sands. Palm trees rustled in the wind along the clear water, which lay half in
shadow, half in sunlight that made it glitter – a beautiful sight even if you weren't dying of thirst.

Daxter was in no mood to enjoy it.

Still as quiet as the grave Jak turned off the engine and clambered out of the car.

The angry blond did not see how Daxter's fingers twitched as he watched Jak's not too steady trek
towards the water. Twitched to fight the inclination that they should be on those shoulders and
steady those steps. But he remained where he was, stubbornly fighting down the instincts. A little
thirst wouldn't kill that insensitive jerk.

It was in the middle of that mental reassuring that Daxter's ears twitched.

Engines?

He turned his head, the first thing he saw being the cloud of dust wafting above the dunes lining
the valley. He could tell there were several cars. Spargus' citizens seldom travelled in packs. They
had the gall and weaponry to dare going out hunting alone, or in pairs. And they could keep their
engines running a whole lot smoother than these sounded.

Unlike…

"Crap...!"

Daxter turned, standing on his seat to wave at the man below.

"Jak—look out!"

His eyes shot wide open as he watched Jak turn his head, looking away from the oasis while
reaching for his gun – not seeing the dark figure stepping out from behind a palm tree, a blur
spinning in its hand.

Jak reacted automatically to the second shout, fell to his knees and rolled just when the figure's arm
snapped towards him. The stone from the slingshot hit the ground, ripping up a cloud of sand
instead of shattering bone. Snarling, Jak continued to roll until he could see the offender. He
squeezed the trigger.

The bullet exploded in the bark of the tree, way off its mark. Jak cursed and took aim again,
furiously blinking to clear his vision. The dark shape dove for the ground but he was already—

Another shot rang out and a satisfying scream filled the air. Jak tried to stand, but his legs trembled
and he had to ram his gun into the ground for support. The sound of approaching engines tore into
his ears and he had to get up, had to—head spinning...

"Here!"

A hand on his shoulder straightened him as a moist circle pressed against his lips. He greedily
swallowed the warm water as it poured over his dry tongue – but before he could take a much needed second gulp there was a hard "clack!" and a cry of pain. Daxter dropped the flask and it crashed on the ground beside the small stone which had hit it. Jak had no chance to catch it and the water ran into the sand even as he grappled for it, while Daxter cursed and massaged his throbbing hand. Another stone hitting the ground forced Jak to recoil and he blindly fired a shot towards the oasis.

There was a second marauder with a slingshot.

Gritting his teeth Jak squinted, trying to take aim properly. Another shot and a new shriek – but there was no time. He glanced over his shoulder.

The sound of the engines reverberated through his aching head. Even if Daxter hadn't managed to tell him that those weren't friends approaching, the look on the redhead's face gave enough information.

The marauders weren't over the top of the dune just yet, but it was a question of seconds. Even if he might have time to get to the water, there would not be enough time to recover.

Seconds...

"Dax!"

He croaked it, narrowing his eyes in an attempt to see properly. Daxter was still clutching his hand, but it didn't look like anything was broken. He stared at Jak, overbite coming down on his lip.

"Wha—"

"Cover me!"

Jak twisted his head towards the palm trees. For a moment it looked like Daxter would protest, but the sound of the approaching vehicles shook him out of it. The good hand brushed Jak's shoulder in a silent order to stay safe, and then he was gone. The blond didn't look around, staggering towards a nearby rock to at least have a little cover.

Daxter dashed to the brim of the oasis, ducking behind the nearest palm tree. One of the slingshot maniacs laid just a couple of feet away from where he had stopped, the other much further away. Daxter gave both of them an angry look and kicked the closest one to make sure he was out. Unmoving silence. The redhead would have wanted to check the other one as well, but he seemed to be bleeding enough to stay down. Either way, there was no time.

The first shot went off. He spun around, pulling out his guns – the ache in his bad hand exploded, but he suppressed the pain.

No... no, they weren't there yet, but the first car had screeched to a halt on the dune overlooking the oasis, slowly gliding downwards. Jak fired again, trying to keep them from getting out of the car. He didn't hit anyone, but at least it caused a lot of swearing. It seemed like the marauders weren't quite in agreement about how to attack.

"Where the hell are the archers?!!"

"Dead, ya moron! Move or you're next!"

"Like hell I will!"
In any other situation Daxter would have smirked, but he really could not find anything amusing about this one.

One after another the cars tore the sand into the air upon stopping. Jak kept firing his gun, but he could not aim in all directions at once. In fact, he could hardly aim at all, and they noticed that pretty quick from the sound of the dialogue. From three of the vehicles each a couple of marauders leapt, dashing towards the rock where Jak was taking cover.

Daxter's pulse beat in his ears as he raised his guns, trying to aim, trying to remember what he had practiced. Steady, had to help Jak, ste—

Something pulled at his leg and he fell over with a half-strangled shriek. But nobody heard him on the battleground, for all the war cries of the attacking marauders.

Daxter landed in the sand, scrabbling to get up only to see the not-actually-dead marauder gripping his leg, wild, hateful eyes staring through the worn face guard. The animalistic hatred shot an ottse's survival instincts through Daxter and without thinking he kicked. The boot of his free foot slammed into the rusty iron mask and the grip eased, only to return even stronger.

Snarling Daxter kicked again, again and again until the marauder slumped, slipping back into unconsciousness. Hissing a curse the redhead got up, swayed and smacked his fist into the palm tree for support. He had to help Jak before...

... it was too late.

Daxter froze, staring, just in time to see Jak's back rammed into the rock that had shielded him, head pressed backwards by a sword's blade against his throat. Too many armored bodies got in the way and for a few nightmarish seconds Daxter could hardly see what was going on. But he saw just enough.

Dirty, rough hands tore the morph gun from Jak's grip and he was ripped forwards, sword removed as a boot hit the back of his leg and sent him into a sprawl. He got up on one knee, growling and tearing at the men around him. But his arms were caught within a moment, wrung up against his back.

A groan and harsh breaths wracked Jak's form and he twisted uselessly.

"Lookit that. A live wastelander."

One of the bigger swordsmen stepped forwards, raw chuckles following his words.

He grabbed Jak's hair and pulled the cringing head back, so that when the marauder's mask was removed the blond glared straight up at a grinning, tattooed face.

For a moment the ex-KG just watched Jak's snarl, then shrugged.

"Oh, bet you don't remember me. But I remember you, kid."

Daxter's breath stuck in his chest as the huge marauder grabbed Jak around the throat and ripped him up from the ground. And he just watched, paralyzed, as Jak clawed and kicked, but the man was so large that he couldn't reach. There was no strength in Jak's attempts to fight back, too weakened to break free.

*And what do you think YOU can do, then?*
"Feel familiar, jailbait?"

The marauder flung Jak back down into the mass of clutching hands. Jak tore at them, a feral snarl rising from his throat. The ex-KG pulled back, only to slam the flat side of his sword against the side of Jak's face. The growl became a groan, fading as the exhausted warrior slumped.

They laughed at him.

Daxter's hands shook, fingers white against the hot metal of his guns.

"Heard you're Damas' boytoy now, kid."

The ex leant closer, but still spoke loud enough for everyone to hear.

"Popular amongst the higher-ups, aren't ya?"

Daxter's blood turned cold.

Shaking fingers tightened against the gun triggers, wanting so desperately to raise his weapons but the bastard was standing too close to Jak—

The redhead froze, ice pouring through him and drowning the anger as the sword blade shifted, edge drawn against Jak's scarf. The cloth fell – from where he was Daxter couldn't possibly see it, but he could imagine the skin of the exposed throat rippling with a thundering pulse.

"You know what that head of yours is worth?" the marauder asked, the tip of his blade forcing Jak to turn his face upwards again.

Jak glared.

"Who's asking?" he harshly snarled.

A smirk.

"Our late commander Erol, of course. Who else would want you? After all, you were always his favorite."

Jak bared his teeth, cruel laughter erupting around him. The ex removed his weapon, looking the prisoner over.

"But he said 'alive'," the ex said. "He didn't specify though..."

He paused, as if thoughtful. One could feel the smirks of the other men, even though they hid behind faceless masks.

"Speaking of all this..." the ex finally continued, "you loved to try biting off my and my pals' fingers in the good old days."

He looked around.

"What do you say about that, boys?"

As he stepped back several others followed suit, making way to a flat rock poking out of the sand. Cruel laughter spread to the winds as Jak was shoved forwards, his snarl disappearing in the shortles.
Daxter stared, paralyzed, terrified, the scene unreal. He couldn't take it in at first, the significance of what was going on.

Jak cursed as he was pushed down on his stomach. It became another groan of pain when a boot smashed down on the arm twisted up against his back. He writhed furiously, but couldn't move enough to do anything. Hands in rough leather gloves seized his other arm and dragged it upwards, crushing it tightly against the rock.

And still Daxter could not move. His hands shook and he knew that he had to act, had to stop it but his hands wouldn't move.

Jak's cheek laid pressed against the burning sand, eyes staring at his twitching fingers on the stone. The raised sword was a blast of reflected sunlight against the sand dunes.

"Cover me!"

What were you training for, you half-wit boy?!

The memory of Jak's earlier call kicked off that realization, in Daxter's head sounding disturbingly alike Samos' voice.

The world rolled into an odd slow motion as Daxter's hand went up, his eyes narrowed and all thoughts disappeared – only knowing that Jak needed him. He had to hit. No other options were allowed.

The other arm raised to steady his hand. He squinted, aimed.

And pulled the trigger just when the sword was about to fall. Tess had made the guns to be silent, but the clack as the shot rang off filled Daxter's senses.

One of the bystanders cried out in agony, falling forwards and tumbling into the two men standing the closest. The leader looked up—

Jak's body exploded with light, a pure shield flinging the men holding him away. He leapt to his feet, then flared out of sight. But all around the marauders fell, unable to avoid the lightning quick punches.

Apart from the leader, who was sent to the ground with a kick to the face. He didn't even have time to curse, crashing in the sand like a sack of potatoes.

When none was left standing Jak hazed back into plain sight, but he stumbled. Daxter saw it even through the time distortion power, used to noticing. Throwing one last suspicious glance at the marauder by his feet he dashed out of hiding, catching Jak just as the light and ability to stand left him. Daxter staggered under the weight until the other man managed to regain his foothold. With Jak slinging one arm over Daxter's thinner shoulders the two of them staggered towards the oasis, both breathing heavily.

Jak drooped, falling by the edge of the water and greedily splashing the glittering liquid into his mouth. Sweat and water drenched his face, he coughed and spat sand in between manic gulps. Daxter slumped beside him, awkwardly moving a hand to Jak's shoulder to steady him.

The lack of words lasted for a couple of seconds, until Daxter couldn't take it anymore.

"Shit, Jak, I— shit! I'm sorry!"
Jak paused just to shake his head, unable to ignore his need for water as much as he would have wanted.

"Dax—" gulp "– it wasn't –" splash "– like –"

"I had some damn water! I could've shot earlier, bastard grabbed me and shit, shit, they— I didn't wait, I— hey!"

His dejected form perked up and he stared at Jak.

"Why'dya let them do that if you had white eco left?!"

Jak slumped, one cheek on a drenched arm, peering up. Both hands resting in the muddled water, an exhausted smile shadowing his lips.

"Wasn't sure if it'd do," he murmured.

He took in a deep breath, slurring from fatigue.

"I'd'a c'me 'ere even y'd giv'n me w'ter."

Daxter growled, leaning closer so that his shadow fell over Jak's burning face.

"You scared the crap outta me, ya coulda done it without getting smacked around! You could've— I know— I oughta—"

"Dax."

"What?" he snapped, glaring at Jak sprawled in the sand, with a drained, soft expression, sweat and water glistening on his skin and in his goatee. Wet sand had splattered across the angry red where the blade and fists had hit him, and for the first time Daxter noticed the thin line of crimson and the scarlet bruises on the bare throat.

There was a pause as Jak took in a shaking breath.

"Thanks," he said.

Daxter felt like all air was squeezed out of him. He sat back, silent, blank, staring at Jak as the blond dragged himself to his feet.

"Huh... you're welcome."

He pulled himself together in a couple of seconds however, quickly retrieving his fallen water flask to refill that and Jak's. In the meantime, Jak reclined against a palm tree, still trying to catch his breath. He only smiled slightly when he took the flask back from Daxter.

They climbed the dune towards the Sand Shark, Daxter only taking a moment to kick sand at the fallen marauders they passed while Jak picked up his morph gun from the hands of an unconscious warrior. With some alarm however, Daxter watched the slouch about his friend's motions.

When Jak picked up the morph gun he almost stumbled, the weight that never bothered him before threatening to pull him off balance. He turned around, sliding it into the holster on his back – turning away from all those who had hurt him, those who still breathed after laying hand on him.

It seemed as if he was too tired to even ponder killing the leader. Or maybe that bastard was dead already. Daxter wasn't in the mood to check, walking over to grab Jak's arm and sling it over his
own thinner shoulders again.

As soon as they reached the car Jak heavily leant against its frame, squinting at his partner. The redhead stared at him.

"What, me driving?" Daxter said.

Jak let out a sigh and tiredly waved his hand.

"Sure thing!"

*Can't show you're nervous this is when he needs you don't worry, don't think…*

He’d driven a zoomer in Haven, well enough to win a race even. And he could recall Jak saying that it wasn't much different, just heavier, to drive one of Kleiver's cars.

As soon as he was in the driver's seat Daxter felt better. He grabbed the wheel with one hand, reaching for the ignition with the other. The ache in his hand returned, but no worse than he could handle. The engine growled to life and after a few tries (and testing what was the brake and the gas) Daxter managed to turn the buggy in the right direction. They took off, leaving the oasis and all the bodies behind. The marauders themselves or the vultures could clean up that mess.

"Hey," Daxter said after a few moments of rolling across the ocean of sand, "it's true."

Jak looked up with a blank expression. The smirk was weak when Daxter continued, but he was getting there.

"Everybody does want a piece of you."

Another moment passed before Jak shook his head and lightly rapped his knuckles against Daxter's goggles.

"Yeah, yeah... you're right," the redhead muttered, "that one was real bad."

"Mhm."

Daxter shifted slightly, gazing ahead at the cacti and sand.

"Let's go home."

"... Yeah."

For a moment silence reigned, but it was completely different from what it had been during the trip that had led them to the oasis. Then, all of a sudden:

"Dax."

Daxter glanced to the side and shook his head.

"Yanno, mebbe you shouldn't talk too much right now. Between you an' me, you look like you're gonna keel over." He said it with as much levity as he could.

Jak let hear a tired noise and wet his already dry lips. He'd reached his limits, and he wasn't angry anymore.

But he couldn't let this wait.
"The arena," he grunted, and Daxter flinched, glancing at him. He would have kept watching Jak, but driving demanded too much concentration of him.

A dry cough tore through Jak's body and he had to take a deep draught from his water flask before he went on.

"I was so worried," he started again.

"I know," Daxter interrupted, pinching his eyes shut for a second. Guilt roiled within him. "I know."

"No," Jak persisted. "All I could think was that if something happened, I couldn't let Damas stop me." Another big gulp of water. "So when you won, I was too surprised."

Daxter reached to offer his water flask, but Jak stopped him by pressing two fingers to his wrist before he could grasp the container. Another glance to the side, overbite working on Daxter's lower lip.

"You did great," Jak said, his voice hoarse despite the water he'd been drinking. Even when he didn't look, Daxter could feel the intense, pained gaze on him. "I should've told you that."

Swallowing hard, Daxter shook his head again.

"I shouldn'a told you those things I said, though," he said, staring straight ahead.

"It's okay." Jak removed his fingers and slumped into the seat, closing his eyes again. "Now."

He didn't say anything after that.

For now, it had to be enough.

Daxter too remained silent, focusing hard on driving and keeping a lookout for more trouble, because Jak sure didn't look like he had good reaction times right now. He couldn't speak, anyway, for fear of his voice breaking.

There were also some new self-aggravation to sort through. From knowing he was the one who messed up in the beginning, by running to Jak's side with water instead of hopping over to the driver's seat. They could have made a break for it. But he didn't have the skill with a car for it to click, too little experience. So used to Jak getting the job done.

He'd have to do better.

The gods seemed to be unusually kind to them right at that moment though, possibly being out of crap to send their way for the day. No metal heads or second servings of marauders came after or towards them on the way back to Spargus.

Daxter had a brief moment of panic as he watched the gates open ahead of them, but somehow he managed to park the Shark (mainly thanks to there being a big open spot that could fit three cars – and he parked so that only one more would fit in it, but details, details).

Luckily Jak had by then recovered enough to climb out of the Shark and walk on his own without having to lean on Daxter. Lucky because the car pit was never abandoned, and neither one of them felt like answering questions about what had happened to Jak, if he'd been forced to lean on Daxter to walk. As it were they could enter the city undisturbed, and without a word headed down the streets to Jak's apartment.
They didn't need to come to a verbal agreement, it hung between them like a tangible thing.

Enough.

Jak pushed the door open, a headache making his head throb. The apartment was not as bright as the day outside, though the sun shun through the open window holes in the wall. He went to take a deep drink from the water pot, hearing Daxter close the door.

Feeling marginally better, he slumped down on one of the chairs, closing his eyes as he rubbed the bridge of his nose.

There was a series of dry thuds as the chair was placed in front of his own. Then a tiny creak as Daxter sat down.

"Okay. Talk to me."

Begin Introspection. Serial code: Daxter.

All aboard the good ship Awkward! Raise the anchor and man the cannons, the sea is rough today! Probably full of giant squid, too.

End Introspection.

Chapter End Notes

I don't like the typical arc of romance plots. You know the:

1. Couple meet and both dislike the other.
2. Couple start liking each other.
3. Couple start a relationship.
4. Something breaks up the couple.
5. The couple overcome their issues.

Mostly I don't like it because it's predictable, and the "something" that breaks them up in step 4 tends to be pretty petty *cough*hypocrite*cough* Buuut I also couldn't get around the fact that I couldn't believe Jak would be able to have faith in Daxter after such a short training period and of course he couldn't hide it and Daxter was winded
up for several reasons… also I needed to introduce the Legendary, Mystical Lorke that Zem's been on about. He tried to strangle Jak in the prison and got decked by Erol, if you'll recall.

… yeah Lorke is definitely just a brute.

Anyway, I love shaking up the predictable plotline, so even if we had a step 4 at least I made it short.

On the other hand we'll be on step 5 for some time.

What, you thought this was almost done? This thing is 40 chapters long, people. Sooo much good stuff to come.

… and you can forget step 6 because I don't do pink sparkly romance (anymore *cough*) and I DEFINITELY don't do Babies Ever After.

I hate it when people get into others' relationships. I've had that happen to myself a few too many times.

"Oh you know what, I met this guy that I'm sure would be GREAT for you..."

Appreciate it, but a little too busy doing risking-my-prettylittle-neck-here Underground stuff. Or building weapons to help us and the possible-future-babies-you-so-desperately-want-me-to-have have the chance to be around a few years from now.

If it happens, it happens! Sheez.

Anyway... knowing that and knowing it well... in my defense, this was a wee bit different. At least enough for me. 'Cause this was probably both their lives on the line. And I care about Jak, too, as much as I care about Daxxie. If Daxter was miserable, you know Jak must have been smacking against rock bottom. Because they have totally different strengths, and they need to support each other.

Daxxie needed some pushing, though, to help him through the confusion. Oh, I'd still like to truss him up with a ribbon for Jak, but not like I'd really do that. It's just a fun thing to imagine. Heehee...

Ahem. Whatever Daxxie feels, Jak will respect it. I know that. And Daxxie knows it too. If he can just remember it.

But the most important thing is that they stop being complete morons and start talking to each other again.

Yeah, you bet I'm sitting curled up staring at the communicator in my lap.

Call me, dammit, call! With good news, please!

',

End Introspection.

',

Jak leant his head back, breathing deeply before he straightened up. He had to try to get a little more time to gather his thoughts, had to avoid the look of tense impatience on Daxter's face.

It was still there when he met the redhead's eyes. Daxter fidgeted, looking away and back again repeatedly. Clenched his fists when he realized what he was doing, made himself stare straight at Jak. Trying not to show how uneasy he was.

Jak struggled with himself, unwilling to look away but unable to bear seeing that expression get
even worse. He needed a smile, but he wouldn't get one. It wouldn't work in this situation, either way. Wouldn't be right.

He wet his dry lips, wincing as pain shot through his face. He was too damn beaten up for this.

There was a tense pause as he held a hand to his swollen mouth, eyes pinched shut. An accidental reminder for Daxter that he should still be feeling guilty, though he had tried to push that aside.

Daxter was about to pull off his scarf and drench it in water from his flask to be used for holding against the ache, when Jak sat up straight again. Eyebrows drawn low, refusing to let the dull pain be a hindrance.

"I know I shouldn't have done that, before I left Haven," he muttered, looking Daxter in the eye. "I'm sorry I… scared you."

That. He didn't have to elaborate, they both knew he meant the sudden kiss – so weighty, light as it had been.

Daxter eyed Jak.

Now, the redhead had been unable to think of much of anything apart from the meaning of the sudden smooch, ever since it happened – unless he was doing something productive like, say, fighting for his life – but the way Jak said it, it sounded more as if he'd gone Dark on his friend.

"Yeah," Daxter said. "A warning or something would'a been nice."

He really tried not to sound too seething, but still stern. Because he sure had been mad with confusion, and he was still annoyed… sorta. It was just so damn hard to remember it when Jak was sitting there all beaten up and grim, and the memories of said beating were so very close and personal.

It still seemed to hit home though, and far too well. Jak looked away, glaring at his knees. Searching for words and he wasn't finding them, the way his fists clenched and angrily relaxed made it too obvious for somebody so used to reading him.

Daxter cleared his throat.

"But, ah, you don't do warnings, do ya?" he tried, prodding.

Trying to get them both onto some sort of safer ground. It seemed to work; Jak glanced up. He recognized the attempt and it helped him to start over.

"It wasn't the dark eco," he said, shaking his head. "I know it started before… it's just that I didn't get it until I was— in there."

He made some vague motion with his hand, almost laughable – like he could sum up two years in hell with a wiggle of his fingers. Daxter pursed his lips and Jak frowned deeper, like he only realized how wrong it sounded when he spoke it. He clenched his teeth, tried to make up for it.

"I got messed up by the eco… I did, but not about you. The eco made things wrong. I can't think…"

He fell silent again, looking like he was trying to decide if that was even worse. Didn't want it to sound bad, didn't want it to be wrong. Didn't know how he could say it right.
And Daxter couldn't shut up, desperate to fill the unbearable, stretching silence, even if he wanted to bite off his tongue as soon as he had spoken.

"It's hard on you too, eh, pal?"

Jak glared, then sighed. He shook his head.

"It's a pain," he growled, closing his eyes for a moment.

Ah.

Daxter chewed on his lower lip, turning this bit of information over in his head. He had to admit, at the time it had rather seemed to him like Jak simply had been grabbing what he could reach. Like a starved man going too far in a weak moment. But that was just a desperate attempt at rationalizing something that seemed like it couldn't have happened.

The memory of a morph gun thrown to the ground and a pair of raised hands mentally slapped Daxter across the head.

*How could you even think that of him?*

He fought down a flinch.

*Idiot.*

He glanced at Jak.

But that hadn't been smooth either.

Jak met his gaze, silently asking if he had to continue. Daxter hesitated, fidgeted with the hem of his tunic. There were so many things left wide open, so vulnerable that he didn't even know where to start.

A thought struck and he tried to keep his hands still.

"What about Keira?" he muttered, voice coming out a lot more hoarse than he had planned.

The chair creaked a bit as Jak shifted again. He started slow, unwillingness still apparent in his voice.

"I was always attracted to her, and you know her… but she always—"

He fell silent suddenly, jaw clenching. An idle motion, it didn't seem like Jak realized it before his hand had settled again – moving towards his chest. He glanced at Daxter, quick enough to catch the wince, then looked away. Didn't make another sign, but it was enough to let Daxter know that something had passed when Keira saw the scars for the first time.

Something that had been worse than a best friend jumping a mile and shrieking?

He almost jumped again when Jak let out another sigh.

"And then there's that, you know…"

Jak glared at his hands, curling the fingers of one over the other's wrist and letting go just as quickly. This time, Daxter gulped.
"I think… it's still okay when you touch me," he said, watching Daxter.

Daxter sat quiet for a moment. He wanted to ask why, why he was okay when nobody else was, but the idea of the possible answers made his stomach churn. The silence dragged on, begging for words that Daxter didn't know how to grasp. If he could just find a beginning somewhere—

He closed his eyes, a cold, thick feeling pouring through him.

He had to know.

"Jak, I… I gotta tell you something." Daxter fidgeted with the hem of his shirt, looking at anything in the room – which wasn't much – except Jak.

"What?" Jak asked, voice hoarser again. Daxter was pretty sure he did not imagine that.

Wow, that wall sure was interesting. After a few more, excruciating seconds though, Daxter had to look back. He had to see how Jak reacted. Had to.

"You do talk in your sleep when you have nightmares." He rambled it out, speaking so quick that the words stuck together into an almost unintelligible mess. But only almost.

Jak's mouth became a hard line and he bowed his head, staring at the floor.

"Huh." It was nothing more than a grunt, breathed roughly as Jak grasped his own upper arms so hard his fingers whitened.

Tearing his gaze away from Jak, unable to look for a second longer – oh no, please tell me no you have to tell me no – Daxter scrambled to say something, anything.

"I'm not sure what to do— what to do when you dream now, are you sure they're not too big?" He waved his hands. Forgetting that he and Jak hadn't yet agreed to live together again.

Silence.

Daxter's hands flopped down in his lap as he worried at his lower lip. That wasn't the real question and they both knew it.

Jak glared on at the floor.

How could it be put into words, the terror of something so simple as a door opening? That cold snap and beep as a keycard is slipped through the checkpoint, and the puff of air following it. Then the dry heave as the gears controlling the door starts to move, a crack in the darkness, steadily growing; green smoke, boots, guns, red armor— or worse, dark blue, yellow, then chilly metal and red hair.

And all this time, you can do nothing to stop it and you know what comes next and all you can do is press yourself further into the wall, trying to be flat, to be invisible, but it's useless because of course they see you and they step inside and reach out—

Jak pinched his eyes shut, clenching his fists to keep from shuddering. If he looked, he knew he'd see Daxter's face tight, a paler shade than usual. Even if he let his friend see that crack in his defense, it still didn't explain what he couldn't express. There were too many shades of despair, numb fingers helplessly clutching at any speck of light. So desperately that he had been one step away from madness.
"J-Jak?"

The stutter cracked the question. Frightened.

Jak straightened up.

Daxter was scared, that was the important thing. But…

"Dax…"

Jak took in a deep breath, unable to look at him. Unable to see that horror on Daxter's face.

"If I ever push you away," he had to pause and swallow hard. "… it's not you. It's not your fault. And don't touch me then."

Daxter made a sound as if somebody had punched him in the gut.

Silence.

When Jak finally looked up, Daxter was leaning forwards, face in his hands as he dug his nails into his skin, scratching as his fingers mindlessly writhed.

A slow breath passed over Jak's lips and he rubbed his forehead. When he finally spoke again, his voice was hoarser than ever.

"I knew you'd come for me," he said.

Daxter's hands stilled. He sat back, feeling his lips part and he couldn't make himself move them back again. It didn't seem important as he listened, transfixed by the words filling the air around him. Jak's gaze flected back and forth, as if some of the words forced him to look away. Awkward, like he'd never been meant to say things like this and he didn't think he could do it well since he had no practice.

They had never really talked about the prison.

"They said nobody would come, nobody cared and I had to keep believing or I'd—" Jak hesitated only for a moment. "I'd break. I didn't because you promised you'd save me."

The spell broke on the last sentence and Daxter slumped, chin almost touching his chest.

_How could I get mad at you HOW COULD I HOW_

"Two years, two friggin' years!"

He growled it, shaking his head. Heard the chair scrape the floor and looked up too quickly when Jak's hands touched his shoulders.

Jak's eyes were speaking now, saying that nobody else had managed, whether they didn't try or fell into despair – he alone had made it, whom everyone else called the stupid little loudmouth.

The expression changed, softening.

Daxter needed to speak but the words that so easily came to him normally refused to save him. He sat stock still instead, watching Jak softly sigh and look away for a moment.

Knowing Jak would do anything for him, shit, he already knew that, no more proof, it hurt too
much— no words, please no words…

Jak turned back to him, lips thin as if he was in pain, struggling with himself. He might as well have tied Daxter's gut into a ribbon, pulling to tighten it into a cold, hard lump.

*Oh shit he's gonna say it and I can't deal I can't reply—*

The panic had to have been as apparent as Daxter feared and hoped. Jak's tense lips stretched in a mirthless half-smile and he let the hand fall, sitting back down. Didn't say a word but Daxter still sat there, pale and chewing on his severely abused lip. Because when Jak wanted to say something important his face gave it away even if he clammed up in the last moment, leaving him wide open for interpretation.

He said it even when he didn't mean to, when he stopped his words to save his friend from hearing something that pulled the carpet from beneath Daxter's feet. As if it wasn't already too late, like it hadn't been made painfully apparent.

Daxter looked away, reaching up to rub his neck in a desperate attempt to fill the emptiness with something. He had to take them past the horror of the prison that Jak had admitted to.

In compare, focusing on what Jak had moved on to was suddenly not as bad even if it too scared him. Daxter cleared his throat and tried to chuckle – then did it again because it sounded so pathetic the first time.

"You know, I always thought ya couldn't take a first step in a relationship if your life depended on it," he finally said. "You've got negative points in people skills…"

It sounded as weak as the chuckle. Daxter glanced up at Jak, who had turned his face away again. At least this time he looked a little less tense, knowing Daxter was trying something. If that meant anything at all.

It _should_ mean something. This was them, the demolition duo, Jak and Daxter…

And the Jak who even without a word told Daxter that he loved him, that Jak was frightening in a way.

Daxter bit his lip, pushing the thoughts away. No. He wasn't scared of Jak. It was the strange, foreign situation that was horrifying in its vast unfamiliarity. He wasn't prepared for it, unable to find a foothold.

Jak wasn't supposed to love him. They were supposed to be best friends, always, always together and knowing each other inside out. The fact that Daxter hadn't had a clue – that was frightening.

He squared his shoulders. Things had been really damn crappy the last few days and he wasn't in the mood to go back there. He wanted to smile. And he damn well wanted Jak to smile, too. But right then, he had to backpedal before he did anything else.

"Not that we have a 'relationship'!"

He leant forwards slightly, eyeing Jak intently. Taking cover in his jokes and offering their safety at the same time.

The really bad stuff, that couldn't be joked away, they'd have to deal with later.

"What we've got is one fine set o' friendship. People kill for this sorta thing, y'know."
Jak met his gaze after a moment.

"Don't give me that puppy-in-the-rain look, whaddaya think 'bout me, huh? That I'm gonna get up and leave?"

The flinch was badly suppressed. Apparently the thought had been there, and Daxter couldn't deny that he saw where it came from. And that made him shake his head even more violently.

"I was stu— I wasn't thinking straight before, okay? You confused me…"

He faltered and scratched the back of his head.

"Okay, you're kinda confusing me now too. I just, just— uh…"

Screw it.

He raised both his pointing fingers to signify just how important the following statement would be.

"Okay. Look. Okay. I still like boobs, okay?"

*And the prize for Dumbest Line of the Century goes to…*

But he couldn't stop now.

"So there! And you're so confusing, and it's driving me nuts 'cause I don't know what to do about all this. 'Cause after you ran off from Haven I couldn't sleep and I was fretting about how you slept and I just wanted to see you and make sure everything was okay." He twirled his pointing fingers at his temples. "And all that just kept spinning and spinning in my head, I had to get back to you, just had to. I couldn't think of anything else."

In retrospect, maybe he *should* have stopped while he was ahead. Then again, had he ever been? He realized that at some point, it had become as much trying to reason aloud with himself as with Jak.

He wasn't even sure what point he had been trying to make, anymore. He had to take a step back again.

"It's always b–been us, right? Right, so I–I'm not leaving, okay? If you're not dumping me on my ass." The last part came out a little too quick.

And Jak smiled, finally smiled, and shook his head. Even though there was still a sad edge to it, as long as it was a smile – it was a start, at least. For now it was enough for him that Daxter promised to stay, and he was wordlessly promising to accept that as the most he could hope for.

Daxter swallowed a thick lump in his throat. He should have felt more relieved, but he didn't, even though that look and resignation wasn't as bad as he had feared.

"Hey…” Daxter started again, desperate to keep patching things up. "How *have* you been sleeping, bud?"

Jak took in a deep breath and pinched the bridge of his nose.

"No better," he said.

Daxter winced, even though he wasn't surprised at all. And if Jak had been doing badly the last time Daxter asked about his sleep, that made over a week since hero boy had gotten a full night's
rest.

Daxter glanced outside. Evening was just getting started, the sky had begun to take on a warm yellow tint from the sinking sun. But with the worst tension gone, a wave of exhaustion came over him, not only from what had happened during the day but also because how badly he too had slept.

They hadn't cleared everything up, he knew that. Neither one knew for sure where they stood, or rather where they were headed – if anywhere. But Daxter did know that he trusted Jak, with anything, and he believed that things were okay enough.

There was that something that he really, really wanted, and he could plainly see that Jak was in dire need of.

"Uh, you know... I haven't been sleeping so good either, and it's a long way to my place... y'know?"

Daxter rubbed his neck, looking at Jak with a twitching smile, flinching between amused at his own boldness and freaked out by it – and feeling silly for both emotions. Jak raised an eyebrow, starting to smile. Smile for real, with no edges.

"Mind if I crash here?" Daxter asked. His shoulders dropped. To hell with it. "Don't even bother answering, 'cause you still look like crap. Sleep. Chop-chop."

He stood up, waving Jak towards the sleeping room as he himself went to close the window holes with the wood planks set on simple hinges. And as he did so, listening to Jak walking into the other room, Daxter kept sternly telling himself not to think too much.

The only way he could keep from doing that was to blather on.

"I'm glad I ain't hearing any protests, 'cause you wouldn't want to get me started. We gotta get you back in fighting shape, and pronto. It's only luck that Ashelin didn't suddenly decide it was time to set some huge plan in motion, or Damas told you to go blow up one of the volcanoes or something. 'Cause I can see him doing that. And you'd do it. Don't try to deny it. Oh right!"

Thinking of Damas reminded him of something else he really needed to do. Leaving the last window half open for the time being he pulled out his communicator and dialed a number.

"Well?" a voice from it demanded after just the first beep.

Daxter grinned. He couldn't help himself.

"Whoa, somebody's been worried, huh?" he said. And just a few hours ago, that had pissed him off.

He could see Sig's shoulders fall even on the small screen. The smile on Daxter's face revealed the important part immediately.

"I can tell Kleiver he ain't gonna get to dangle ya from the wall, huh?" Sig said.

"Yep. I'm sure it'll break his heart, but it's nothing a few beers can't fix. Not that we're paying."

Daxter pulled a face at the mere thought of sponsoring Kleiver's drinking. Or anything at all of Kleiver's, actually. Shaking his head, he made a motion towards where Jak had gone. "Anyway, sleep is for the weak. And us."

Sig smiled a bit, unusually soft. It was kind of strange to see the big guy looking so relieved. And a
"Sleep tight, bushboys," he said.

"Will do."

Daxter ended the call, then took in a deep breath before dialing another number. This time the first beep wasn't even finished before the person on the other side picked up. Tess' face flared up on the screen, a mask of worry and hope.

"Operation success," Daxter said, making the victory sign.

Tess' head dropped as she let out a big sigh of relief.

"Give me a full report tomorrow," she said as she straightened up, smiling now. "You look exhausted."

"We are. Talk to you later, then."

Even as he turned the communicator off, Daxter felt a little surprised at how quickly Tess cut the conversation off. Then he realized she probably just didn't want to get between him and Jak when they had just patched things up.

He couldn't quite decide how to feel about that.

Well, reports filed, he put the communicator away and closed the windows.

And then he was out of distractions. Dangit.

Dangit because that meant he had to go into the sleeping room and he should probably tell himself even harder to snap out of it. It was no biggie. He'd slept in the crook of Jak's arm and even on the guy's chest since his first week as an ottsel. And they'd curled up together in the shadow of palm trees or under the stars countless times as kids.

But they weren't kids now, and he was getting even more acutely and annoyingly unable to think of anything but that Jak thought differently of him than Daxter had known.

The evil side of his brain luckily got derailed at the sight of Jak. The boards covering the windows weren't without their cracks, and Daxter's eyes adjusted quickly to the dusk. So he saw Jak just fine, sitting there cross-legged and barefoot on the sleeping mat.

Jak glanced up when Daxter appeared in the doorway, lowering his fingers from his throat. But Daxter had seen him touching the shallow cut on his throat and wincing.

"Oh yeah, we need to hook you up with some white eco tomorrow. I'm putting it on the to-do list." Daxter made a motion as if writing in an invisible notebook.

Jak gave a weak smile. At the sight of that Daxter deflated. He hunched down in front of his friend, tilting his head as he looked Jak over. The bruises had been steadily darkening.

"Are you gonna be able to sleep?" Daxter asked.

"Had worse."

"Don't I know it." Indeed. Many, many times before the white eco gave Jak the ability to mend the pains of his body.
They both paused.

Jak's fingertips drifted towards the cut once more as his gaze wandered off in a distance.

After a moment Daxter sat back, hanging his arms over his knees.

"That ex, he was in the prison, wasn't he?" Daxter finally breathed.

A second passed before Jak slowly nodded. Then he spoke again, briefly recounting that time one of the prison guards almost strangled him, and Erol saved his life.

They sat in silence for a bit again after that, as Daxter rubbed the back of his neck.

"Huh, well… guess I gotta thank Erol for that, then," Daxter said. He managed to grin, holding up a finger. "But I'll do it after you've ripped him nuts from bolts."

"I'd prefer that." Even Jak could smile a little then.

Silence.

"Well, anyway… sleep." Daxter started unfastening the binds of his boots.

"Dax."

"What?" He said it a little too quickly, looked up a little too fast.

Jak watched him through the deepening twilight of the room. Again his eyes said everything he couldn't put to words.

"Err…" Daxter said, scratching his cheek. "Okay, I'm a little weirded out, not gonna lie. You can tell anyway, eh?" He chuckled a little, coaxing a small smile from Jak. "But, yanno, if we think about it…"

He pulled off his boots and dropped them to the side, then shuffled up on the sleeping mat, steadily watching Jak.

"… I'd trust ya with a gun behind my back, any day. And your tall, dark and angry makeup doesn't scare me either. So me being weirded out about sleeping beside you is just me being stupid. I won't be for long."

There. That was the point he had wanted to make the whole time, to himself most of all.

"You're not being—" Jak started, but Daxter held up a finger.

"Shush you! How often do you get to hear me admitting to a fault with my glorious self? But…"

He leaned back on his elbow, patting the empty area beside him on the mat. Unable to grin reassuringly, but managing a smile for himself and Jak.

"… in all seriousness, if we're not okay with each other, I don't know what to do with myself."

His voice got more quiet towards the end. For a little while, they just watched each other. Then Jak finally, finally sunk down and put his head on the pillow, stretching out beside Daxter.

He didn't have to say that Daxter had handled it a lot better, and that they were both fully aware of that.
With a relieved grunt, the redhead flopped the last bit down, and was immediately glad that he had been close to the ground already because it was only marginally better than hitting solid rock.

The carpet was fairly wide, but it hadn't been made for two people. Jak laid on his side to give Daxter more space, but he would probably roll over during the night.

"I'll go get my mat tomorrow," Daxter said with a yawn. He turned his head, giving Jak a smile in the dark. His voice softened again. "And if you dream, I'm right here."

Jak's fingertip brushed Daxter's hand, then withdrew just as quick as if burnt. Daxter didn't move, but he too felt the uncertainty. They still had some ways to go before things were completely okay on every level.

"Thanks."

Jak barely breathed it.

It raised the "okay" level several notches, just like that.

Relaxing, Daxter closed his eyes.

He had thought that he knew how much he had missed being with Jak, but now he could practically feel every tension in his body and almost all the tensions in his mind unwind. Because he still wasn't quite sure about things. But right now, it was enough.

He listened to Jak's breathing. It was starting to even out, but he was not asleep yet. Daxter wondered if Jak would force himself to stay awake for a while.

That thought made him feel corny as hell.

Ah, whatever. He curled up, making himself comfortable.

*Now we're safe.*

On that pleasant note Daxter drifted off.

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Begin Introspection. Serial code: Jak.

He's back.

I don't even… I don't even know. He's back.

I feel so much it hurts. I can hear his breathing. Feel the way he smells in the dark. Feel his body heat. And he's not scared. I didn't destroy us. He'll be here when I wake up tomorrow.

And I can't touch him. My fingers burn, I want to, but I can't. I can't scare him again. I can't take that risk. It was so close. Too close.

I don't want to sleep yet. I want to lie here and listen to him breathe… I want to know that everything is alright again for longer… don't want to… sleep… yet…
End Introspection.
Glad that's outta the way. I think we've all got enough troubles to make some of our own, 'specially stupid ones like the cherries were at.

I have that other problem that keeps itching me. Mebbe it's time I gave it a different spin. Never wanted to ask Jak for help with it, because it's not his kinda business to sift through the rotten underbelly o' Haven. Not the part that just deals with info. That ain't his area. It ain't mine either but I've had to make it mine.

We both rather just shoot stuff, but I ain't got no choice.

Tess is alright. I just didn't know for sure before.

I gotta try. All I've done is come up empty handed over and over. Somethin's gotta change.

It just gotta.

There was a joke amongst the people of Spargus that their current ruler was an insomniac, or could rule just as well in his sleep. Or that he was undead. Any variant of it. Anything that could explain how he seemed to always be up and alert no matter what happened at any given time of the day or night.

Damas had once told Sig that he did fine with just three or four hours of sleep. It was nice to have an explanation. Because standing before Damas' throne just before dawn, Sig himself felt the early hour weighing down his eyelids and limbs, while the King looked as alert as ever.

Of course, it was Sig's own fault, as he had decided to leave this early to get to Haven as soon as possible. While he could just have made a call to the person he wanted to speak to, Damas had long since ordered him not to. Calls could be bugged, and they needed to keep Sig's mission under tight wraps.

In these troubled times, though, he could not leave Spargus without telling Damas. And there was another thing he wanted to speak to the King about.

"Don't stay long, unless you must," Damas said, gazing off towards the wall which on its other side faced the desert. "The marauders are just getting worse."
"Do you think they've got a base nearby, Your Lordship?" Sig ventured.

Damas turned back, absently knocking his peacemaker against the floor. It was the only sign of frustration the King gave, but as it was so rare it was glaringly obvious.

"They must have, and we must find it so we can weed them out." With that, Damas made a dismissive hand motion.

Sig cleared his throat.

"Just one thing, Your Lordship. I noticed Kleiver putting the new kid in the fruit picking squad yesterday…" he started, knowing he was out on very thin ice.

"What of it?" Damas asked, impatiently.

It was the second most fun Kleiver had, testing newbies for whatever usefulness could be squeezed out of them. The foremost fun being, of course, killing stuff. But regardless of that, the testing was also an important part of the foundation of the Spargus citizenry, making sure that everyone was given a spot where they could make themselves the most useful.

And whiners were not tolerated, not even if they whined on somebody else's behalf. So Sig didn't, of course.

"It's just a waste of time," he said with a shrug.

Damas raised a hairless, less than impressed eyebrow. Retreating at this point would be insane, so Sig plowed right on.

"That kid's the most useful hangin' with Jak," he said. "It's what he came here to do."

"His intentions are not the same as his talents," Damas said. "Why are you bothering me with this?"

The second sentence didn't even need the tone to be a warning, but Damas never did anything by half. Sig decided that it was probably wise to skip the fluff and get to the point.

"He's the one who got Jak out of Praxis' prison."

For a second Damas froze, and a strange look passed over his face. But it went so quick that Sig was't sure that he had really seen it, and he had no chance to catch what it was. He did, however, see that he had struck true.

"How..." Damas said, then stopped and shook his head. "Of course. A rat could move around in there unseen."

Sig nodded. He had not believed it at face value when Daxter first boasted about it back in the day, but Jak had confirmed it. It did make sense when you thought about it like Damas just had.

"Jak's a lot better now, but back when I first met him he could hardly control that dark eco form of his," Sig went on. "But whenever it got real bad, Daxter could always snap him outta it. I ain't sayin' Jak can't go on without Daxter..."

Even if that was true. Telling Damas that one of his finest warriors had a weak point like that, though, would not be in Jak's favor.

"... but sometimes he needs somebody to remind him not to rush in blindly."
At that, Damas actually paused and then softly scoffed as if reminiscing about something.

"Yes, he can be rash. Even now." It seemed more as if the King thought aloud than addressed the man before him. Then he looked up. "And your point is?"

"Kleiver would keep those two apart just for a laugh, but they're both stronger together."

"I see."

And with that response Sig was dismissed. It was non-committal, but Sig felt that he had managed to save his cherries a lot of unnecessary frustration born from Kleiver's sense of humor. Damas might not have reason to think too highly of Daxter, but he did want Jak at his strongest.

That good feeling got squashed when the train car driver called him on his communicator, to say that there would be a delay.

He could have slept for another half hour at least.

As it was, Sig found himself standing near the gate in the car pit as the morning sun painted the cliffs above the city in a golden red. It was not too bad though. The air felt fresh and there wasn't much of a bustle going on at this time of the day, even though the night shift and day shift people were switching places. Everyone was still sleepy at this point, so there was a rare sense of peaceful sluggishness in the atmosphere.

It made things seem a lot more at ease than they usually were.

The gears of the desert gates came alive with a grinding screech. Sig took a few steps back as the two huge pieces of the gate started moving apart, to avoid getting sprayed with sand by the incoming cars. It had been enough cleaning it out of his armor yesterday after Jak used his Shark to show his annoyance with Sig's meddling.

The small convoy of three cars drove inside the city at a fairly sane speed though. Two Screamers and a carrier, showing that it was a group of foragers returning. Sig frowned. It showed how bad the marauder situation was getting, when the food gatherers called in escort backup to ensure they could carry the supplies home safely.

The drivers climbed out of the Screamers while the carrier parked near the city entrance, and the whole group met up outside the vehicles to thank each other and say farewell. The wind carried one of the forager's request to the backup drivers to send carrier leaper lizards from the stables. With a promise to do so, the warriors left.

The foragers quickly unloaded bags and barrels of fruit and nuts from the back of their car, and as soon as that was done they sat back to wait for the lizards. Sig squinted at them, noticing a middle-aged woman with warmly dark skin and purple hair amongst them. She had stayed in the shadow until then and he had not been sure, but as she moved better into sight he recognized her.

He headed that way, but before he could call out a greeting, a pair of exes appeared from the city gate – one blond, and one dark skinned, with his black hair in a messy braid. The former walked first and the latter just followed as if pulled by an invisible string, staring dully at the ground.

The woman with purple hair straightened up.

"Lev!" she called out.

The blond one perked up and his friend froze in mid-step. He remained still as Lev made a turn and
moved to meet the woman half-way. Sig stepped back to not disturb, but the wind made it so that he could not avoid hearing their conversation. Now he recognized the blond ex, though, as the one who had revealed Erol's bounty on Jak. The guy smiled in a far too cheeky way for somebody with that face paint, but then again Jak had said that he was alright. And also odd. That seemed about right.

There was a spark in his eye though, as at ease as he seemed, something that was either tension or pain. He hid it well, but not perfectly.

"Why, Mrs. Vida Durann," Lev said in an overly theatrical manner as they met, bowing to her with equal flourish. "Delighted to see you again."

Vida chuckled at his antics.

"It's been a while…" she started, but then she took note of the statue of a man behind Lev.

The other ex had not moved from the spot.

The smile fell off of Vida's face so suddenly that Sig took half a step forwards out of instinct, expecting danger. But none of them moved again.

Just looking at their differences in build, the silent ex could have easily snapped Vida in half. But looking closer at him, and the way he half turned, shifting his weight, it seemed as if he was about to run away in terror.

"Is that…?" Vida said, speaking to Lev but not taking her eyes off the other ex.

"Yup," Lev said, without looking around.

Silence.

"Oh," Vida said at length. She visibly pulled herself together and returned to Lev, making small talk with him for a brief while. But it was obvious that both of them were distracted.

Finally, however, Vida pursed her mouth and looked past Lev.

"Mr. Tower," she said, and there was so much controlled emotion in her voice that it almost broke on those simple words.

"Ma'm," the ex told the ground.

Lev gently touched her arm and shook his head.

"You better leave it," he said in a kind voice. "An army of shrinks couldn't sort him out right now."

She looked at him, and at the other ex. Lev turned his head to glance at him, too. The morose ex quickly looked up at the two of them, then turned away to walk off.

Lev let out a deep breath and muttered something to Vida. She nodded and patted his arm farewell. Then he hurried after his friend.

For a moment Vida stood motionless, until the two of them disappeared out of sight behind another carrier.

She turned away, so lost in thought that it took her a moment to even notice the approaching Sig, despite her looking right at him. Once she caught up on that she gave a start and a small smile
touched her lips.

"Good morning, Sig."

He inclined his head in response, but then his own smile faltered and he glanced after the two exes.

"Trouble?" he asked. It didn't seem like it, but there had been something very off about the whole thing.

Vida glanced in the same direction, shaking her head. Her face fell, and she idly massaged her upper arm.

"No," she said in a low voice. "Friends of my son."

All air was squeezed out of Sig's lungs.

"Ah."

It made sense, then. He didn't know all of it, not even Vida did. But he did know about her loss.

She gave him a bland smile and shook her head, but he still put a big hand on her small shoulder. Vida started to say something, but just then the city gate opened and a herder appeared with several leaper lizards outfitted with baskets.

With a soft goodbye Vida returned to her duties, and all Sig could do was return to wait for the air train. Though he used his free time to help loading the supplies, he left Vida alone with her thoughts.

Mornings were quite pleasant, in Daxter's opinion. Well, at least out here. Mornings as a whole was a horrible invention. However, the desert grew surprisingly cool at night, to the point of being uncomfortable – and during the day, it was boiling. But mornings and evenings had that refreshing middle status.

He came awake slowly, breathing in the fresh air streaming in through the cracks in the window covers. They let in enough light to make the whole room visible, even though it was a soft, subdued glow.

For the first time in days, Daxter felt refreshed from sleep. As he stretched, his muscles complained a little about all the climbing yesterday, but it was just a slight ache. With a content sound Daxter flopped back down and blinked his eyes open.

There was a grunt beside him and he turned his head, watching Jak yawn and open his eyes a crack.

"Wow, you really must've been conked out to sleep this late!" Daxter said, hoarse from sleep until he cleared his throat.

Jak mumbled something unintelligible and rolled over on his back to rub his eyes. It showed that the full night's rest had done a decent job of chipping away at the worst weariness, though.

A realization struck and Daxter's grin softened.

"Slept well, huh?" he said. It surprised him now that he thought about it, considering what had happened yesterday with that marauder ex.
There was a dry shuffling sound from the carpet and floor as Jak shifted, resting his temple against the muscles just below his elbow. The rest of the arm stretched out and disappeared out of sight above Daxter's head. Jak was smiling like that again; like he did by the oasis, like minutes after his first fight outside of Praxis' prison.

Maybe it was just the sleepiness still in his eyes, it was enough alike the exhaustion to make a similar image – though without that near-death sense about it.

Still, it hit too close to those times, making what should have been gentle, uneasy instead. Daxter hadn't deserved to get that smile right then and there, not with just so little. It said too much, asked too much and he had no idea how to answer.

Daxter's hands curled into fists without him even noticing it, and he looked away.

The snort was as soft at the look, but he heard the bitterness perfectly well. Snapping back towards Jak, Daxter got his gaze back just in time to see a big hand touch down between the two of them. The fingers flattened out, tightening from the weight of the arm that rose up further, starting to lift the rest of Jak's body. He was getting up, a dull apology in his slack expression. Not sure what he had done wrong now, but…

A fist flew open and shot upwards, Daxter's fingers slapping down on Jak's muscular shoulder and pulling.

"Get back here, you!"

"Hey, whoa!"

Jak managed to catch himself thanks to the arm he'd been leaning on, but the force of his own pull dragged Daxter closer to his friend. The thinner chest brushed the arm, and he felt the side of Jak's hand and little finger against his ribs before he pushed backwards. Even through his clothes, the redhead got a brief whiff of the body heat.

A very annoying amount of heat flared up in Daxter's throat and cheeks, too. It wasn't natural to touch anymore, not like it had used to be. And it was starting to piss him off.

He quickly cleared his throat, retracting his hand and shuffling back. Jak was still looking rather surprised, but being Jak, it wouldn't last for another two seconds. He wasn't the kind who had time to be surprised.

Only later did Daxter wonder if there had been one of those dreaded flinches, but if so he completely missed it.

At that particular point in time however, he focused on getting himself back in gear. He did this by setting an annoyed look and eye roll upon Jak.

"Sheez, bud. You think I'm a little girl or something? You're getting paranoid, man."

He let go of the shoulder and pointed a finger straight between Jak's eyes.

"And now you listen to me. I haven't slept this good in days, and there's no way you're angsting your way out of my well-deserved resting time."

Jak slowly blinked a couple of times and then, to Daxter's relief, relaxed back onto the mat.

"That's right!" Daxter said, nodding. "Listen to the boss."
A silent chuckle shook Jak's chest.

"Yeah, you know I can't get anything done without you showing me the ropes," he murmured.

Daxter snorted.

"Damn straight!" he said. "Everyone else thinks you've got it all under control, but I just happen to know better. And that's the best piece of luck in this here ol' world, 'cause otherwise we may as well have all walked around with dark eco up to our knees. Or worse."

Much, much worse.

Jak gave him a wry smile, but Daxter's grin was already weakened.

"Jak doesn't want you to die." It's too dangerous for you. He doesn't need you.

Daxter tried to get a grip, focusing on the good part of the marauder attack they had lived through mere hours ago. He'd saved Jak from getting his fingers chopped off. Even when Jak shouldn't have been there in the first place and probably could have broken free on his own.

He could have. He really could, with those white eco reserves. It may have been a hairy case either way but had there actually been any help added past the distraction?

A suspicion struck Daxter, that maybe he had been allowed to be the hero. His eyebrows tightened, making Jak narrow his eyes.

What?

Had he seriously let himself get beaten up by marauders just to make a point about trusting his best friend's skills?

And now he was lying there with bags under his eyes, uneasily trying to make out what the expression on his best friend's face was about.

Wetting his lips, Daxter tried to set his bearings straight and get back on track – deciding that this was a case of Don't Wanna Know. He grasped for the spoken dialogue from a moment ago, to head into safe territory again.

"It's true though," he said, trying to sound like it was an affirming statement.

He saw Jak's fingers twitch a moment before the hand actually rose up from the floor. Face easing up a bit, Jak lightly slapped Daxter over the shoulder.

"Yeah."

Daxter breathed out. Which one of them had an angsting problem, again?

"Hey, you keep saving my life when Erol is around," Jak murmured.

Now that deserved a big, cocky grin.

"Yeah, we'd be in a riight soup if I didn't bother pulling him away," Daxter said, cheerfulness right back in place where it belonged. Funny how Jak could do that to him, too, not just the other way around. "I'd like to see anyone else saving this sorry globe."

They shared a smirk.
Jak stretched, starting on a yawn which was cut short in a hiss. He retracted, cringing in discomfort as a hand came up to fumble for the opposite shoulder. Without even thinking, Daxter let out an evil cackle.

Their eyes met and the laughter died off, awkwardness hovering dangerously between each blink. Then Daxter shook his head and swiftly sat up, refusing that crap to take over again. Not this early in the morning. Not on his turf!

"Figures, with all your fooling around here without me knocking some sense into you. You've probably got tennis balls in your back at this point, 'cause I assume you never asked anyone else to rub 'em? I'll pull your finger if you did. It's my job!"

He knew from the split look – the amused smile and the gaze that fell away – that Jak hadn't. Of course he hadn't, there wasn't much to question there. Not when it took familiar little paws months to be allowed such touch.

Familiar little paws that had apparently been more appreciated than the owner had known.

Daxter wrung the thought from his brain by clearing his throat. He wasn't going to fall in that trap again. He was getting back to at-ease-status with Jak even if it killed him, dammit.

When Jak raised an eyebrow, a freckled nose wrinkled.

"It's gonna be okay 'cause I say so!" Daxter declared. He stretched out his pointing finger and drew a circle in the air. "Roll over, big boy."

Jak snorted but did as he was told, bundling up the pillow under his chin to prepare biting down on it if needed.

Daxter made a thing out of entwining his fingers and stretching them out, just to pull himself together properly. No big deal. This was something he had known he needed to do. Jak needed him to.

And he focused hard on any sign of real tension as he pushed the balls of his hands into Jak's back. Luckily, there was only the usual hitch in Jak's breath as Daxter struck down on a bundle of tense nerves.

"Man, you've been tensing like a snake with a cramp," Daxter said. He started rolling his hands between and above Jak's shoulder blades.

Bit by bit, they both relaxed. Sort of at least, in Jak's case, because there was always that threat of pain shooting through his muscles.

This wasn't so bad, Daxter concluded. With bigger hands and more body strength, he could get this done much more effectively. Though he kept that increased strength in check. Jak was already biting the pillow.

Time for a distraction.

"Also, first order of business after sorting all of this out," Daxter said and tapped a fingertip against Jak's back for emphasis, "is that you still look like crap. Shave, food, wash. Sheez! When did I become your mom?"

He could tell from the slight tremble of Jak's shoulders that he had finally earned a silent chuckle. Daxter felt as if a rock fell from his heart.
He caught himself smiling like a goon, but considering the situation, he allowed himself that much for a little while.

Then another thought struck.

"Eh, I hope Sig covered for me, so the forager guys don't wonder where I went off to," he said. It was a minor worry, though. "Yeah, Kleiver made me go pick fruit! Can you believe it?"

Jak made an amused agreeing sound. Even in that, Daxter could hear the real smile.

He hesitated for only a moment. In the end, though, he realized that he wanted Jak to know. So he started heading for it.

"By the way," he said, "Sig was just acting out Tess' plan. Operation Unbolt, she called it."

Jak snorted out a laugh this time, turning his head so he could glance at Daxter from the corner of his eye.

"Yeah, really. She was super pissed. Ah…"

Daxter paused and scratched his cheek. Even when he had decided to tell the whole truth, it still stung a bit.

"She kinda dumped me."

At that sudden piece of news Jak gave a start and began rolling over to look properly at his friend. However, Daxter pushed him back.

"Stay! I'm not done."

Jak kept watching him, though.

"Yeah, I'm okay. We had a good talk about stuff." Daxter threw up his arms in a theatrical shrug. Then he plopped his cheek on a fist and stared dramatically at the ceiling. "Why? 'Cause she thinks I should get with you."

Despite all his mental preparation for throwing that one out, he could still feel heat rise to his cheeks again. Dangit. But from the look on Jak's face, he neither noticed that (much) nor believed Daxter's claim.

"Oh I wish I was joking about that!" Daxter huffed, lifting one hand from Jak's back to rub his own forehead. It was theatrical, and the motion softened the weirdness of the whole thing despite his words confirming that it was actually true.

"Dax—"

"So you owe her big, just remember that!" Daxter cut him off, wagging a finger.

And that was the end of that conversation. Following it Daxter changed the subject to more nonsensical, safer things until he felt satisfied with the results of the massage. Jak slowly pushed himself up and stretched, giving Daxter a lazy smile as thanks.

"Right!" Daxter said and got to his feet. "Next on the schedule…"

Saying that reminded him that he had brought Jak a change of clothes, and that those along with the rest of his stuff was at his own apartment. The apartment which he didn't care one bit about any
He went off to fetch the stuff kept there, leaving Jak to shave. He had gotten about halfway down the street when his communicator beeped. The sight of the name on the screen made Daxter's good mood crash and burn, and he was in half a mind to not answer. But he knew that he'd only regret that.

Bracing himself, he pushed the button. A scarred, unpleasant face appeared on the screen.

"Kleiver, dude…" Daxter started, but the big man waved a huge hand.

"I ain't got time for you," he said. "'m puttin' the blonde wonder in charge of making you useful. It's prolly the fastest way ta get ya mangled, anyway."

Daxter had to do a double-take before the words sunk in.

"That… sounds too good to be true," he said, suspiciously.

"Whazzat?" A nasty grin spread over Kleiver's face. "Ya'd rather keep workin' for me?"

"No! I mean— no thanks! Thanks!" Daxter added the last as Kleiver started to say something again, then quickly switched off the communicator and hung it back on his belt before the big walrus could make changes to the new deal.

Well. This day was turning out awesome.

Almost too good to be true, indeed. He kept wondering what blessed fate had taken that weight off of him, and if there would be a trap waiting later on. Then he pushed it aside and decided not to worry about it, hurrying down the street with a big grin.

Jak was equally surprised and initially suspicious of Kleiver's sudden mercy, but it was such good news that he too didn't want to question it for too long. There was so much better things to focus on, like the fact that Daxter rolled out his fetched sleeping mat in Jak's bedroom, and showed off the jet board that Keira had given him.

First of all, though, they had other things to take care of. Repacking their already light bags they headed down towards the market, buying fruit and bread for their breakfast.

Then, they headed further towards the ocean. The cliffs fell almost straight down into the waves in most places, but there were marked, fairly safe places to climb down and if you kept moving further along, there were little beaches. But Jak preferred to be further out, where nobody could see his scars.

Reaching one of the little beaches below the cliffs, they both unfolded their jet boards and Jak waited as Daxter tested his, gliding around first above the sand and then steering it gingerly over the water. Daxter swayed, both arms out, but he had the right feel of it from standing on the board together with Jak many times before as an ottsel. At least enough for them to make it across the water and out to one of the off shore islands where Jak had used to bring both of them before.

It was with a mix of relief and excitement that Daxter hopped off his jet board on the shore and set it against one of the palm trees growing on the island. He wanted to try it out more, but knew full well that he would be doing a lot of falling on his behind. So maybe a bit further away, when there couldn't be an audience looking down on him from top of the cliffs…

And later, also. He carelessly threw down his bag besides Jak's and started pulling off his shirt.
And then reality struck and he froze for half a second, glancing at Jak. But the blond man had turned his back as he pulled off his own shirt. Daxter fidgeted with the hem of the cloth for a moment.

_Cut it OUT._

He scowled at himself. Things would never ever be okay again if he didn't stop worrying so much. He heard Jak's soft footsteps in the sand and looked again, watching as his friend walked out into the warm, softly lapping waves in only his pants, and dove into the blue.

The sight of that sparked memories with such force that it almost hurt, and Daxter ripped off his shirt and boots to follow. Sand welled up around his feet, as he ran, then water splashed up his legs.

The sun might be too hot, and they both had too many scars, but it was still a piece of heaven. Jak broke the surface with a gasp, coughing water and laughing in his silent way at the same time as he swept his soaked hair out of his face.

Really laughed, for just that moment as carefree and happy as they had been too many years ago.

It was beautiful.

Daxter couldn't do anything else but tackle him. It's what he would have done in their childhood, taking advantage of Jak being half-blind by the water in his eyes. Catching Jak by surprise had been difficult then and he knew full well it was neigh impossible now, so Daxter wasn't prepared for the fact that they both did crash back under the surface.

Then he felt Jak fluidly rolling with the motion and pushing away, realizing that of course the attack had been allowed. Even through the underwater haze, Daxter could still see the smile. No uneasy realization that he could have triggered a memory was even allowed to pop into mind.

No such things were permitted in that blissful moment.

Also he did not have time to think about it, because Jak pushed against the sandy ocean floor and launched himself right back at Daxter. Underwater it was a slow tackle, but it had all the force of the much more muscular man.

He only touched Daxter's shoulders, pushing him down as he passed by – that did not go unnoticed. In the past, Jak would probably have grabbed him tight for a slow motion wrestling match.

The change in their friendship reared its ugly head again, and yet in that moment Daxter did not feel disturbed by it. He saw it clearly, that Jak was playing but keeping his distance at the same time, respecting the boundary.

Daxter rolled around and dug his toes into the sand below to launch himself after Jak, pushing down at the small of his back. Jak turned, grabbing for Daxter's arms. They could have gone on, but the rising sting in his chest reminded the redhead that he hadn't been up for breath for a while. He caught the edge of Jak's hand between thumb and pointing finger, pinching. Instantly, he was released.

Daxter broke the surface with a gasp, Jak following a second later. They floated upright, coughing, spitting, laughing as they clumsily wiped their hair out of their faces. Then they caught each others' eyes, grinned and dove right back down.

_Time didn't matter. All there was, was the sun, sand and waves._
It was only a question of stamina, as it had been back then, for when the game ended. And it had almost always been Daxter who crawled ashore first. Therefore it said a lot about how much Jak still needed to recover, when it was he who moved up the small beach, Daxter following behind, laughter ebbing.

But then Jak thudded down and rolled to sit on the sand, smiling up and waving a calming hand. Saying not to worry. It'll be fine.

It was enough.

Daxter plopped down beside him and reached for his and Jak's bags to pull out a towel each as well as their water flasks. They sat in silence for a while after drenching edges of the cloth with the drinkable water, wiping the salt water out of their eyes.

"By the way, you better let me drive more now," Daxter said after a few moments, wagging an important finger. "I haven't forgotten that you wagered my awesome self against the Puppy!"

Jak gave him that confident smirk and shrug that he had used when making that bet. To that, Daxter shot him a more or less mock glare in return.

"Yeah, yeah," Jak said, cracking up in a silent chuckle. He wiped his face with the towel and gazed towards the cliffs. "But I want to practice something first. Out of sight."

Daxter quirked an eyebrow.

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In the light of the sinking sun, Lev followed Zem back to his apartment. It was a strange thing after day after day of leading Zem around, and he wasn't sure if it was good or bad. But he could tell that there was something on the guy's mind, and he could very well guess what had triggered it.

He half expected to get the door slammed into his face, but instead Zem glanced over his shoulder at Lev before going in. It wasn't an invitation, rather a take-it-or-leave-it-but-I'd-rather-you'd-leave-it look.

But Lev couldn't leave it, so he continued inside and closed the door. At the soft clacking sound of wood meeting clay, Zem turned around and looked straight at him.

"Lev. Why the hell're you botherin'?"

Okay, that was something. Lev breathed out and squared his shoulders.

*Here goes nothing.*

"I'd tell you," he said, "but you'd sock me in the face and then we'd have to start all over again."

Zem stood frozen for a moment, and then he deflated, more falling than leaning against the wall as a deep, rough sigh emptied his lungs.

Yeah. He understood. He had known even before he asked.

Of course he did. Like most everyone else, Lev had just barely tolerated Zem back in the day, and even then mostly to push his buttons for a chuckle. There was only one person that connected them, that had made them share the same breathing space during periods of rest after training. And seeing Vida brought that memory so painfully close.

Zem shook his head.
"Don't you get it, what I've done? What I am?" he harshly muttered.

A nerve twitched on Lev's face. Then he took in a deep breath and folded his arms.

"Did you want to?" he asked, calmly, watching Zem.

The much taller man bore that look for a couple of seconds before his legs gave away and he stumbled over to crash on a chair. Pressing a hand to first his mouth, then his eyes.

He shook his head again, harder this time.

"No. No… gods, no," he croaked. "But they made us… me… think it's right…"

He trailed off. Then he whispered something, staring off at nothing. Might not have meant, on a conscious level, for Lev to hear it, but just that he said it at all screamed out the subconscious meaning.

"I don't deserve to live."

_Help me, oh gods please help me_

Lev hunched down beside him, putting a hand on Zem's shoulder.

"Yeah, you told me that before." Lev moved his other hand up, fingertips almost touching Zem's shirt. Right at the part where the cloth hid the tattoo on Zem's chest, the one that marked him as a former prison guard – but also the dozens of scars that were slashed across that grey mark.

The scars from wounds that Zem had given himself.

"But as long as you're here, you know," Lev said, as calmly as he could despite how sick he was starting to feel with unease, "you can make your carcass useful to the city."

Zem's face disappeared behind one of his massive hands as he mutely shook his head.

Lev sighed as he stood up. Alright. Enough.

He took a step back just to be out of punching range. It was a blow below the belt, but this subject had already opened a crack in Zem's defenses for the very first time.

"I can't get through that thick skull of yours. Sad. He could have done it with one or two words." Lev didn't even have to put emphasis on 'he.' Zem stiffened.

For a moment Lev waited, but no fist flew towards his face. So he dropped the bomb.

"One of these days we're gonna have to talk about Junn."

"No!" came a snarl from behind Zem's hand.

Lev let out a deep breath to calm himself. It didn't work.

"Why are you so sure he's dead?" he snapped.

"Lev!" Zem sharply turned his head away, slamming his fist into the table.

Well, anger was a step in the right direction. Sort of.

"What?" Lev growled back.
"He was worse than you! You just opened your mouth quicker!" Zem threw out his arm towards the windows. "But he's not here! So either he died in the desert or they just shot him!"

"You don't know that!" Lev protested, refusing to acknowledge the bitter logic. "He could've just grit his teeth and—"

"He wrote to me, but then he stopped."

Lev paused, watching Zem as the taller man rubbed his own face. There was no elaboration coming for free, though.

"What, to the prison?" Lev finally asked.

Zem nodded behind his hands.

"I never answered. I burned the letters after…" He grit his teeth. "After I did somethin' I knew they'd bust me for if they figured it out. It doesn't fucking matter."

His hands fell down into his lap and he stared at Lev, eyes so intense and tortured that it hurt to meet the gaze. Lev had to glance away.

"He. Stopped. Writing."

Zem forced the words out.

However, Lev remained unimpressed.

"Can't blame him if you never answered," he said.

"He wouldn't give up on me—"

Zem seemed to realize what he said only when he actually spoke the words. His eyes shot wide open and he slapped a hand to his mouth.

Even when neither of them knew if he was alive or dead, apparently Junn could still work miracles on Zem. A small but triumphant grin swept up on Lev's lips.

"And you still want me to give up?" he said, softer than his expression called for.

Silence. Then:

"Lev… Lev, stop. Just… fucking stop."

"Can't do that, man." Lev showed proof of either momentous bravery or earth-shattering stupidity by reaching out to put his hand on Zem's back. The worn green cloth of the mechanic's shirt was damp with sweat.

Once more Lev got away with it. So things were still bad with Zem. Then again, not striking out against an insistent and annoying but still friendly gesture was a virtue.

"'Cause, y'know," Lev went on, "in the event if, and alright, let's say if, Junn poofs up from out of nowhere, the first thing he'll ask me is if I've seen you. And I don't wanna give him any bad news. You don't want me to do that to him, Bignasty, do you?"

He wasn't crazy enough to pat Zem's back, though. There were some limits to the dangers a sensible man could chose to face down.
Zem said nothing.


There's something that's been… bothering me.

Very well, I have a great many things on my mind that are more pressing, but it's like a buzzing whumpbee in the back of my head.

When Jak returned from the Wasteland, it was the perfect opportunity for us to report to Damas that the Underground had kept his son safe. Yet Onin insisted that we could not do that yet, and Samos refused to explain why.

Something's wrong. Where is Prince Mar now? Samos assured us that he and the Shadow had used Precursor technology to send the boy to a safe place, where the metal heads and schemers searching to find and use him in a political game would never find him.

I have begun to suspect that we cannot tell Damas about his son, because Prince Mar is as unreachable to us as those who would harm him. I could understand that, even if I don't like that idea. But if that's it, why wouldn't Samos say so?

And who was the Shadow, then? He looked so much like a younger Samos… a brother, perhaps? But Samos avoids answering those questions as well.

I don't have time to figure it out right now. But when all this is over, the Sage owes all of us an explanation.

End Introspection.


Chapter End Notes

Hoh-kay. So. These are my notes from when the chapter was first published back on fanfiction.net:

I should have introduced Vida Durann, the mysterious Junn's mommeh, to the sideplot long ago. Even though she won't play a huge part. But it would have been better if she'd popped up a little earlier at least. Unfortunately that's what happens when you take nine years (oh. My. God. This thing has been with me for almost a third of my life) to get through a story :P So it's all me.

The whole Junn/Zem thing wasn't even planned from the beginning, in fact Zem wasn't even supposed to become this important. What happened was that Demyrie, who got me into Jak/Daxter in the first place, created Junn Durann, her soft-spoken
KG, and his psychologist mother. Then Demyrie drew an awesome picture of Zem. So I made a much less (because I write much better than I draw and don't try to tell me otherwise) awesome drawing for her where Zem and Junn had lunch together, and made a joke comment in the description: "OMG Junn/Zem OTP theirloveissotattooed!"

I just meant it as an offhanded joke because Junn already had a female love interest OC, buuut Demyrie, being a raging and bouncy fangirl, took the joke and ran with it. Cackling. In loads and loads of scribbles and a chat-RP that we unfortunately never finished.

And along the way Zem just developed further and further. So here we are.

Of course Jinx was the one who helped me get the job as a bartender at the Hip Hog. He put his neck out big time, because if I got caught, no lifetime's worth of "being useful for getting stuff blown up" would keep him safe from Krew. Of course big bro knew I was with the Underground. Krew played on all sides – but I guess we'll never know if he also knew about which one I stuck with.

Although, being totally honest… it would be pretty weird if he didn't.

Well! It doesn't matter now.

The last bartender spent about twenty minutes giving me instructions before he bolted for his freedom. Hope he got to live to enjoy it, too, or if he was deemed knowing too much. Jinx gave me the real lowdown.

"I know yer tough, Tessa," he told me, leaning on the bar as he crushed the stump of a cigar into the ash tray. "But if trouble piles up, jus' holler. We're close by."

He motioned at a group of patrons in a corner, and a couple of them glanced our way to nod just the slightest. All of them looked dumb as bricks – scarred bricks – but also as strong as lurkers. Jinx had made sure everyone knew he was my brother, making sure that I would get no trouble from any of Krew's goons. Nobody in their right mind – and hopefully not in their most drunk state either – would be dumb enough to push their luck with the bomberman's sis.

Jinx can be a darling when he feels like it. We both knew that yeah, I could deal with unruly morons very well, thank you. Growing up in Haven looking like I do, you need to learn more than a little self-defense. Big bro wasn't talking about the usual "trouble." Drunkard idiots can get angry when they're slighted, especially in such parts of town, and then they might very well call their armed friends for a party.

I hadn't expected Jinx to leave me hanging, but hearing about his safeguards made me relax quite a bit. It made it a lot easier to play the airhead when Krew deigned to give me a minute later. Thankfully he didn't care much for the bartenders, no matter how they looked, as long as the drinks were served and the bar was clean.

But before that, before Jinx left me to start looking through the stock and learn where things were, my bro jabbed a thumb towards the farthest corner of the room. I could see a bulky shape sitting in a booth, but the light was so bad that for a moment I thought I saw a metal head. Soon enough I learned that it was just the skull of one, used as part of an armor.

Hehe. "Just" that.

"An' if nobody else is here," Jinx said, "ya can always count on Sig. Jus' be prepared for a lotta
I just looked at him and raised an eyebrow at that last comment, making both of us crack up laughing.

He was right though. I could always count on Sig. Several times he just marched up before I even had time to signal him, to stare down or drag out guests who had had a few too many and wouldn't take any no for an answer.

Of course I had heard about Krew's Wastelander of a heavy, but I hadn't met him before. The stories made him a lot more scary than he really was.

Okay, he's terrifying if you make him angry and I imagine even metal heads might stop and think for a second before trying to jump on him, but he was never rough or rude to me.

There was always something very proud and stoic about him though, as if he was just bearing being there. The usual rumor about why he worked for Krew, was that nobody else would dare hire him. But that just didn't make sense. He went back to the wasteland now and again, and I could see the glint in his eye when he mentioned that he was going. He didn't like being in Haven.

Of course I didn't ask. It doesn't take a woman's intuition to know that you'd better stay out of a Wastelander's business.

Well, that was then. Now is now.

And now I know why he's in Haven, because he just explained it to me.

And suddenly my old, biggest safeguard is big, big trouble.

End Introspection.

It was a good point, and a good idea. Really good ones, even. Even so, Daxter couldn't shake his (mild, mind) misgivings as he climbed into the Sand Shark's seat. Jak put the car in reverse and backed – undoing Daxter's noob parking from yesterday – until he could turn towards the gate. It obediently opened as they approached, letting them out into the sunbathed sea of sand. Evening was coming on, though, and it was not unbearable.

Immediately as the gate closed behind them, Jak turned the wheel and drove along the wall towards the ocean. The dunes were smoother in that area, leaving no place for potential hiding enemies to spring out.

Jak parked far enough away from the wall to hopefully keep them out of sight of anybody watching from Spargus, too. Because…

"This is gonna look stupid as heck," Daxter declared. He couldn't help snickering, though. "Prolly even after we get it right."

"We'll leave no witnesses," Jak said with a quirk of the corner of his lips.

"Sometimes, bud, you do come up with great plans!"
Daxter reached up and grabbed the bare rail frame of the Shark to heave himself up.

"Also," he said with a mix of a wince and a grin, "sorry in advance for all the times I'm gonna kick you in the head."

Jak chuckled and shook his head. Then he started shuffling over from the driver seat to the passenger's, while Daxter struggled to half-crawl, half-swing past the meager "back" of the car. Of course he managed to knock his knee into Jak's shoulder along the way. Twice.

"You know…" Daxter huffed as he crashed down in the driver's seat with very little grace, "it just struck me that I have to do a lot more work than you with this. Was that part of your smartass plan too?"

"You're more nimble than me," Jak pointed out, not trying to sound too innocent.

"Oh yeah, not like you could climb up a tower by swinging on conveniently placed poles. Oh wait!"

They lasted half a second of glaring at each other before the laughter broke through.

"Okay," Jak finally said as he calmed down, "back again. Quicker."

Even though he was still chortling, Daxter managed an annoyed sound in between. But he clambered back up.

It was a simple idea, really, inspired by what had happened at the oasis.

*What if we're out in the desert and the one of us driving gets hurt?*

Well, the one driving would most likely always be Jak. But disregarding that, the whole idea was that there could be times when they needed to switch places in the car quickly. Better have that practiced at least a little bit, so that they wouldn't have to improvise in a bad situation.

It was a pretty undignified display. That first knee to the shoulder was just the beginning, and Jak head butted Daxter in the chest or stomach from behind several times as well.

But since nobody saw them, the only ones laughing at them were they themselves.

Daxter couldn't even remember when they last had this much fun. Neither could Jak, when it was pointed out.

Finally, when they had gotten used enough to it to get the switch done sans accidental fighting a few times in a row, Daxter fell onto the passenger seat and wiped his sweaty forehead.

"I need a drink!" he said and gulped down the last water from his flask.

Nodding in agreement, Jak breathed out and started the engine.

"Tomorrow we'll practice doing it while driving," he said.

Daxter threw a stare at him, saw the look in his eyes, and sunk back into the seat with a grunt.

"Okay, but no practicing switching while zooming up a ramp for a jump! I *mean it!*" Daxter added the last to make absolutely sure Jak wouldn't get any ideas. Because he *would*, otherwise. If he hadn't already thought of it.
And there were several more cars to practice on as well. Well, at least they had some basic practice
now, so the other vehicles might not cause them as many bruises.

They drove back into the city, wherein Jak parked the Shark properly – no comments – and then
they could head off to the Black Oasis bar. Maybe if he hadn't been in such a good mood, Jak might
have been a bit more careful about what followed.

It was, after all, Daxter's first time in the bar as a human. As soon as they entered, Etche the
bartender spotted them and her scarred face twisted up in a challenging grin the moment Daxter
met her gaze.

"So, the rat's grown a few inches!" she cackled. Yep, she had seen his arena fight, at least.

"And I've got hairless hands now!" Daxter shot back, waving them about. "Remember that time
you said you wouldn't let a rat into your stock?"

Etche's grin turned into a smirk. Of course Daxter had told her that he owned his own bar back in
Haven and could mix drinks just as good as she – which was of course a bit of an exaggeration
seeing as she was a few years' worth of experience ahead of him – and she had responded by
teasing him about not allowing animals behind the bar.

"You wanna challenge me, kid?"

Jak got a sinking feeling right about then.

"Well, I betcha I can throw one of your Facetwisters together in a minute, for starters!" Daxter
declared.

Etche responded by lining up bottles and fruit on the counter, for him to prove himself. Daxter
immediately attacked.

It took longer than a minute, as the right ingredients were hidden amongst dozens of bottles and he
had to stop and look for them, but in the end he had chopped, squeezed and stirred up something
that looked about right. Meaning that it looked radioactive.

"Will you do the honors, Jak?" Daxter offered with a grin, holding out the glass.

"No." Jak didn't even glance. He happily stuck to his own, un-painful drink.

"Hey, I'm the judge here!" Etche said and snatched up the glass.

The entire bar looked on with transfixed horror as she drained the neon green liquid in a single
gulp. As she straightened up her mouth moved into something that looked like a horizontal S and
her eyes squeezed shut.

"Mh!" she groaned, twisting her neck and forcing her face back into order with sheer willpower.

"You know, it's kinda cheating when you drink it so quick you don't stop and taste it," Daxter said
with a chortle.

"Heh!" Etche slammed the glass down and plucked a clean one from one of the many, many
shelves behind the counter. "You almost got it, squirt. Lemme show you how it's done."

And so it went back and forth with the other person drinking the alchemist's creation. To little
surprise though, Etche was also much better at handling her alcohol. She didn't even seem fazed by
the time Daxter started to wobble and ramble more than usual.

There would be no declarations of love this time, Jak knew that. He also knew that he shouldn't have let Daxter get drunk – again! – but towards the end it went too fast for him to pick up on it in time. Maybe he too had had one or two too many. The competition had been rather fun to watch, and he had gotten himself distracted in his own gulps.

Finally, though, Jak pushed away and took a hold of Daxter's shoulder, dropping payment on the counter.

"Aw, I was about to get ahead!" Daxter complained, but he didn't argue anymore than that as Jak steered him towards the door.

Etche waved goodbye at them from the other side of the now very messy counter, with a glint in her eye saying that she'd like to do that again.

Daxter cheerfully rambled on as he and Jak went up the street towards their apartment, but the closer they got, the more thoughtful the redhead seemed to be. That was not how it usually went, and Jak tried to get a look on his face. The flickering torches along the walls did not offer enough light for it, though.

"Dax?" he finally asked.

"I think I'm drunk." Daxter looked up and gave Jak a goofy grin, which he returned with a twitch of his lips.

"You are."

Daxter chuckled. They climbed the stairs to the apartment and Jak pushed the door open, steering Daxter inside. As Jak turned and closed the door, though, the redhead dropped a mental bomb on him.

"Hey, no ravaging the drunk stud. Ain't yur style!"

Jak twisted his head around, staring at Daxter who just chortled and poked him in the chest. As if that had been anywhere near funny.

"Though I dunthinkya would, even'if y'were high on drugs'n buckets o' dark eco. You jusht think I think you think so."

Daxter paused and slowly blinked, finally turning a pair of wide, glassy eyes at Jak.

"Yep, I'm drunk."

He slumped a bit more, face disappearing beneath his bush of hair.

"If you've got that, then drink some water," Jak said and pulled out a chair with his foot.

He set Daxter down and walked to the water urn, not wanting to let the redhead see how disturbed he felt. It may just have been drunk babbling, a passing thought of an inebriated mind – but that still meant that the thought had been there, not necessarily born during the intoxication. And that bared crack in Daxter's trust was like a slash in the gut.

He glared murder at the hand holding the dipper. It only seemed to make the shaking worse.

Without a word he gave Daxter the dipper and waited as the redhead slowly sipped. When the
water was gone Jak took hold of a bony shoulder again, steadying Daxter's fumbling steps to the sleeping room.

Jak didn't bother to drink any water on his own. He did not drink much in the first place – maybe a little tipsy now, but not so bad in his own opinion.

He never really got drunk because alcohol never seemed to help as much as rumors would have it. If he was angry already he just got angrier, and worries increased. Not something he needed.

Daxter brushed against him, muttering something about the floor not cooperating. Jak bit his lip. It burnt after the thoughtless, drunk accusation, every little thought and fantasy he had not felt comfortable with before now twisting his stomach. Things passing through his mind of holding Daxter close and listening to that sweet voice mumble senselessly, half words broken by little gasps and moans. Things he could not help or stop thinking about, but they had always felt like a crime. A crime, as long as Jak knew that it wasn't something Daxter wanted. It wasn't right.

He should leave. He knew that, but he had to at least make sure Daxter got to bed without falling over, first.

Somehow he felt a little safer when they sat down, but at the same time he dreaded the moment Daxter would stretch out on the sleeping mat – woozy, vulnerable. As he idly fumbled with his armor, Jak considered curling up to sleep in a corner rather than lie down beside his friend. In the next second he caught himself. Where had that thing about leaving gone?

He knew why, gritting his teeth. It was just that he didn't want to be alone, either.

He frowned, trying to shake it off as idiotic, thinking about all the people who'd tell him he was acting like a child. But it came back when he glanced at Daxter; thin fingers clumsily trying to get his boots off while he kept muttering to himself. The goggles had been discarded, dirty, yellow-red hair flopping about around his ears.

Jak turned away again, fighting the urge to rub his arms. He felt dirty.

Finally there was a shuffling sound as Daxter crawled up to sleep, but Jak didn't look. He dawdled, wishing he wasn't there.

He didn't have to stay. Leaving would probably be for the best.

At the same time, that would be running away, and he pursed his mouth in disgust at the very words. So he sat there, hesitating for a few moments longer.

Daxter gave a loud yawn and shifted, trying to fluff up the pillow. An annoyed grunt followed, as he was reminded that it would be easier to fluff up a rock. He heaved himself halfway into sitting.

"Hey," he said.

Jak looked up at the sleepy, impatient tone.

"Hm?" the blond replied.

"Floor's too hard. Get over here."

Jak blinked. He sat dumbfounded for a second, until Daxter got annoyed with it and started to sit straighter. Suddenly numb, Jak just kicked his boots off and crept over. Just following an order. That was alright, it was safe.
He stretched out on his side, only to have Daxter suddenly flop down and put his head on Jak's unguarded arm. Jak started, about to recoil when the glitter of confused eyes caught him. He froze.

"You said s'okay when I touch you," Daxter mumbled.

A hint of guilt crept into his voice. He thought he had made Jak uncomfortable.

Well, he had, but not because of that.

"Yeah, but…" Jak began.

"Kay."

Satisfied, Daxter curled up slightly. His eyes slid shut.

"You're comfy."

Despite the stubborn unease, Jak had to chuckle at the statement and the deadpan way Daxter made his declaration. He could hear the sleepy smile in Daxter's snort before the redhead wriggled, underlining that he was perfectly satisfied where he was and wasn't going to move. A slow sigh, and then he settled. The breathing evened out and he relaxed.

Jak didn't move for a little while, just watching the silhouette of his friend's hair and long ear. It would be pretty hard to leave without waking Daxter up.

But after a couple of minutes Jak had to shift, trying to tilt the head on his arm so that it wouldn't completely cut off his circulation. Daxter grumbled in his sleep but didn't wake up, settling again as soon as the movement stopped. His hands had landed just by Jak's chest, fingers easily bent in relaxation.

Defenseless.

Jak moved his own free hand indecisively, unable to find a comfortable position for his arm that didn't involve laying it over Daxter's side. It would have been the most practical for balance, and the parts of him that weren't painfully constricted wanted to – but he couldn't. Instead, taking note of Daxter's hands, he lowered his own to them. It wasn't the most comfortable, the arm couldn't really rest leaning against Jak's side, but he felt better resting his fingers over his friend's.

Slowly, Jak started to relax again. It still took quite a while before he fell asleep however, lying awake and listening to Daxter's and his own breathing, shifting now and again to keep the circulation going.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, he counted on that he might move around a little in his sleep. Eventually however, the exhaustion from the day overpowered him and he drifted off.

Freedom HQ was never abandoned. They didn't dare to. There could be a crisis popping up at any second, and then there had to be somebody trustworthy at hand to shout orders at troops and directions to evacuees. So Samos, Torn and Ashelin took turns sleeping. There were always some points when they were all gathered, however. It was at those times they felt the safest, too. Of course, none of them would ever admit it.

This was such a time. For the time being things were calm. Ashelin listened to a report while Torn leaned over a computer screen, reading the lists of supplies that scrolled past under his hand. Samos sat at a table with parchments and papers strewn about, taking notes and pausing only now
and then to stare off in a distance, thinking.

Onin sat over in her corner, Pecker resting on her hat. Both of their heads bowed and eyes closed. They might be meditating or sleeping, or something in between.

The peace was broken by a beep from a side monitor. Torn turned over and pushed the button to answer.

"Come in, Tess," he said.

"Hey Torn," her voice chirped from the communicator. Everyone instantly relaxed at her cheerful tone. "I made some cucumber sandwiches for old time's sake. Should I bring them over?"

Torn did not move a muscle on his face during this random offer, but when Tess fell silent he glanced up and met Samos' gaze. The old man raised an eyebrow.

"Thanks," Torn calmly said, returning to the communicator. "I'll meet you halfway down."

He switched off the communicator and exchanged a nod with Ashelin before turning to leave. Samos followed him without a word.

During their time as the Underground, they had taken to codenames for their communicator conversations and any other time there was a risk somebody could overhear them. To make it sound innocent they had used grocery items for the names – and Tess might have had a little too much fun with thinking it all up. Any reference to cucumbers or cabbage meant Samos, apples meant Ashelin, toffee meant Tess, and Daxter would have died laughing if he heard what Torn was.

That Tess brought that back up at this time, though, was strange and worrisome.

Although, after she met up with Torn and Samos in the HQ and the three of them withdrew to a secure meeting room, it turned out that she actually had brought bread-and-cucumber-based snacks.

"Because you're falling into your bad eating habits again!" she told Torn as she shoved half a dozen, neatly cut sandwiches at him. He started to protest about not having time for nonsense, but she stabbed at the air right between his eyes with a finger. "But that's not the thing! Listen!"

Torn glanced at Samos for help, but the Sage just sat down on a chair by the round table and leaned his staff against the furniture.

"Go ahead, Tess," Samos said. He absently waved at Torn to eat his sandwiches.

Sighing, the Commander obeyed. He did take note of the serious look on Tess' face too, but he also had a lot of work to do…

"We trust Sig, right?" Tess said, drumming her pink nails against the table.

"We'd be a juggernaut short if we didn't," Torn commented and picked up another sandwich.

Tess waited for Samos to nod as well before she continued.

"Yeah, I always wondered why a Wastelander like him would work for Krew," she said, ignoring the impatient look she got from Torn. "He never seemed like a bad guy…"

She took in a deep breath, then spoke very quickly through her teeth.
"He told me he's searching for a five-year old boy with green hair and blue eyes. Mute."

Torn choked on the sandwich. While Tess shot from her seat to dunk the coughing man's back, Samos leaned forwards on his seat, eyes closing in thought.

"You… didn't… tell… him… did you?" Torn managed between coughs and wheezes.

"Of course not, what was I supposed to say?" Tess said, throwing up her arms, then let them flop down to dangle helplessly. "I said that I'd take a listen around."

She looked between the two men, clenching her fists.

"But… it's not fair. If he put up with working for Krew for all those years, just because… and he's helped us too! It's not fair!"

"No," Samos said in a low voice. "It certainly isn't." He looked up. "But we all know that he can't find the boy."

He paused.

Yes.

"Not like he, nor the one who sent him, expects."

The words hung heavily in the air. Finally, somebody had to take that final step over the edge.

"Samos," Torn said, coughing one last time. "You said that you, Keira and Jak and Daxter came here from the past because of an accident with Precursor technology…"

"Yes," Samos said, watching him evenly.

They were all silent for a moment, until Samos quietly sighed. The gears had been turning in their heads for a long time, he knew that. He owed them at least this final push to remove the disbelief, and allow it all to click. After all, disbelief must be the only thing holding it all back now, and on a very thin thread. It was more a question of "never dared to ask."

"Although we might have altered history," he said and smiled a little, "the four of us coming here set some things right, in a way. Only Keira and Daxter did belong in the past."

"And…" Torn gripped the edge of the table, not just because he was still out of breath. Standing beside him, Tess chewed on her lower lip. "And you said that the Shadow used the same technology to bring Prince Mar someplace where he would be safe."

Slowly, Samos nodded.

"And you look like an older version of the Shadow, and his name was Samos too," Tess said, her voice thinning. She had to sit down. "Samos… the Prince…?"

She could only mouth another name after that. A simple, one syllable name.

The Sage took off his glasses and turned them over in his small hands. It made his face look very different, without the spectacles enlarging his beady eyes. The blue bird that always scurried around him settled on the thick branch he wore as a bizarre head ornament. It ruffled up its feathers, oddly still.

"Let me tell you two what I remember from this time," Samos said in a soft voice.
They listened without a word, Tess pressing a hand to her mouth and a hint of pale creeping onto even Torn's controlled features, as Samos described a situation so dire that it forced enemies to cooperate – and even then, only to carve a bloody swath to open a way for a tiny, frail ray of hope carried in an old man's arms.

"So," he finally said, looking between the two of them, "if we take a hard look at the issue, Jak is not truly your Lord Damas' son. But we cannot say that he isn't, either."

Torn stared at the table. Tess rubbed her forehead. It was too much to take in at first, the revelation they had suspected for so long, and it's morbid backstory. In the end, Tess might not be the one who recovered the quickest, but she gathered her thoughts to speak before Torn could.

"We… we gotta tell Sig," she croaked. Her hands clenched on the table. "It's too cruel! We have to tell him, Samos!"

"And then what?" Samos said. Serious, but not unkind.

"Then he'll tell Lord Damas, and… and…"

She faltered as Samos shook his head.

"And do you think that Lord Damas, who has every reason to be paranoid and expect treachery at every turn when it comes to Haven, would believe it?" Samos asked. "He might very well lash out and banish Jak from his presence forever."

"But he respects Jak, Daxxie gushed about it!"

"Yes, and Jak idolizes him." Samos put his glasses back on. "Do you want to risk destroying that?"

Tess' shoulders dropped. She raised a hand, started to speak, but cut herself off and moved the hand to her face instead.

"I won't tell you what to do in this situation," Samos said. "But as for me, I admit that I am too afraid of harming Jak at this point."

"We can't tell them," Torn said, finding his voice again at long last. It was hard as flint as he glared at Tess. "Not now. We can't risk Jak and Sig's help before we're in the clear."

Tess flung out her arms in frustration.

"And what if they die out there?" she snarled. Deep down she knew very well that Torn was right, but that only made her angrier.

The Commander pushed himself up, shaking his head.

"Don't pull this on me, Tess," he said, walking towards the door without looking around. "Thanks for the sandwiches."

"Hey—!"

But he was gone.

Tess slumped forwards, planting her forehead on the balls of her hands. Her blonde hair swung down, creating wall that shielded her face. Samos sat still, deep in thought.

"What should I tell Sig, Samos?" Tess asked the table.
He gave her a sympathetic look, but she didn't see it.

"You don't need to tell him anything right now," Samos said. "Simply that you're keeping your eyes and ears open. Give your thoughts time to sprout and grow."

Tess nodded, numbly.


The poor girl wanted a yes or no answer, it's plain as a poison caterpillar on a rose. She would have preferred the former. However, Torn is right that we cannot risk crumbling Sig's trust, and I meant it when I said that I would not dare risk harming Jak.

The current situation is frighteningly delicate. Jak is still growing stronger, and another blow to his trust in us is something that I won't dare risking – from a strategic standpoint and as his guardian.

I could not even begin counting all the mistakes I made while raising him, but somehow he still trusted me in the end. He's done as he's told, because he must have known that no matter what happened I did care for him as much as for Keira. It was never just about creating a hero. That part he had to make out of himself.

But Jak was never my child, and I cannot take a gamble with the bond between him and his real father. We all failed Jak horribly when Veger's schemes were put into motion.

I hope that Tess can keep her head cool. I would like to order her to be silent, but I fear that would backfire. There was a reason for why she got along so well with Daxter, after all.

End Introspection.

Chapter End Notes

This is where I would normally do a "OMG Tess/Sig OTP!" joke, but ya know, it's nice to have a male and female character interact and still just be friends sometimes. Even in fanfic ;)

Sidenote: Etche the bartender is loosely based on my best friend, who worked as a bartender back when I started writing this story. And indeed, she invented a cocktail she named "Facetwister". It was super sour.
Hope

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.


Well that did nothing.

I should've figured. Guess I did, really… but I hoped at least Samos wouldn't be so— so Torn. It's all practical stuff, unless it's about Ashelin.

Okay, stop.

Tess, deep breath. You're being unfair.

Right.

They're right. I get it. It's risky. Jak got hurt so bad with Veger. And if Damas pushed him away, I don't know…

But… it's not right. It isn't.

I don't know what to do. I need to think.

I need to shoot a few targets' heads off.


End Introspection.


Daxter grew conscious slowly, bit by bit waking up enough to take note of things. At first, he noted the familiar sound of Jak's breathing, a steady whisper he'd been listening to for years. He was used to it being close by, that wasn't odd.

Something was odd, however.

He tried moving just the slightest bit.

Yup.

Though feeling like his eyes were full of sand, he forced their lids upwards and peered at the world in his immediate surroundings. At first it was just a jumble of colors in the dim light. The air didn't feel like it came straight from an oven yet, but from what he could tell there were rays of light prodding their way through the closed windows in the main room.

Probably early morning, then.
He slouched up a hand to rub the worst sleepiness from his eyes, felt the fingers brush Jak's shirt. A sense of "eep" lazily stirred, but in his current drowsy state Daxter could not scrounge up the effort to really get embarrassed. He shifted the motion to remove the contact, not wanting to awaken the other man. Nothing in Jak's breathing indicated that he had felt anything, though.

Rubbing his eyes helped somewhat to clear his sight, and he was getting used to the dim light.

He looked down.

Jak was even closer than he had thought, making Daxter blink. The blond's head rested against his own arm, tipped forwards so that their foreheads nearly touched. Actually, Daxter quickly recalled and realized, he too was using the same arm as a pillow.

Could there possibly be any blood left in Jak's hand?

Wrinkling his nose in discontent at having to move, Daxter nevertheless lifted his head and crept downwards, getting forehead-to-nose level in that first push of movement. In the middle of the action he was reminded of that first odd thing, but his sleepy brain couldn't handle two conflicting messages at the same time. Therefore he had to finish the move, biting his lip hard when Jak shifted and muttered something.

The hero fell silent again however, too conked out still to wake up. Daxter sighed in relief, then turned a bleary eye to that one thing.

An arm.

Around his waist.

This posed a problem.

Daxter's first impulse was to push away, either himself or Jak. But he caught himself in time, realizing that Jak definitely would wake up from that treatment.

Going back to sleep and pretending he hadn't noticed anything, on the other hand, would save both of them some serious embarrassment. Yeah, he should do that.

And he might have, if he hadn't been so thirsty. He wrestled down a cough and licked his lips, finding his tongue feeling as dry as the floor.

For a moment longer he hesitated, but the draught in his mouth was so bad that it physically hurt. There was no helping it. Carefully, carefully he moved back, biting his lower lip as Jak's hand slipped over his side. It felt alien, so heavy and so warm, pulling at Daxter's shirt and tickling the skin beneath.

Tickling. Yes. He pinched his eyes shut. It couldn't be anything else. He was just being woozy. What else would it possibly be?

As quickly as he dared he moved the last bit and Jak's hand tumbled onto the floor. Jak stirred but settled back in sleep just as quickly, making Daxter release a breath he hadn't realized he held. Crisis averted.

Daxter stretched and regretted it immediately. Getting to his feet while clutching his head, he walked as silently as his hangover allowed over into the other room. It was sweetly dark as well, although the morning sun cruelly sent spears of light through the cracks in the boards covering the windows. Sandy dust drifted through the light and the city's morning sounds were still muted as the
night shift had gone to sleep and the day shift had only gotten started on their chores.

Nicely calm for an aching head.

Well, Daxter had to admit that he didn't feel dismal, at least. He'd had worse. Jak must have been good at making him drink water last night, although it was a bit fuzzy to remember.

Speaking of…

He reached the water urn and opened it, fumbling for the dipper. It took a few dizzy, half-blind moments but finally he could take a deep gulp, gratefully smacking his lips. Much better. Almost ready to ponder actually facing the day, even. His head began to clear as he splashed some water into his face and rubbed it.

Then a groan caught his attention, making his ears twitch. That didn't sound good at all – if he had been feeling less dozy, he may even have spared a bit of more worry than he did at first. As it were, he just looked over his shoulder and squinted at the dusk in the inner room.

"Oi," he said.

That got to serve as substitute for "what's up?" and any variety thereof. His voice cracked enough from that lonely diphthong.

The shadow in the smaller room pushed itself into a sitting position, seemed to sway and then clutched its head in both hands.

The worry that hadn't felt like arriving earlier dropped like a snowball in Daxter's stomach. He absently grabbed the dipper as he turned and crossed the main room and into the sleeping chamber, squatting down in front of his friend. Jak gave no sign of noticing the presence, still sitting crouched, cradling his head.

Daxter bent forwards, leaning his head precariously to the side in an attempt to see Jak's face through the dusk.

"Jak? You okay?"

Jak's fingers parted, revealing a pair of glassy, blue irises, each in a sea of pink that ought to have been white. It took a moment for Daxter to take in the look of that scrunched forehead and red-shot eyes. He'd seen it before but only rarely, and it had been a long time since last. He knew very well the state that caused such an expression, though.

"… oh no. You're *not* hungover." Protesting reality might maybe, maybe work this one time?

Nope.

Daxter only got a tortured glare back, telling him that he was very much in the wrong. Jak's hand went up, raised like it weighed a ton.

"Water," he grunted.

The request sent the dipper into the numb hand before Daxter even had time to think about it. He did, however, not fail to comment on this situation.

"If we get a job we're dead meat!"

"I'll be fine… stop screaming." Jak grunted it, unwisely trying to clear his throat.
He groaned after that, eyes pinched shut as he greedily sipped the water.

"I'm not screaming, you're hungover!" Daxter said, too loud and realizing that too late.

No reply. Daxter took the emptied dipper when offered, and stumbled into the other room to refill the small container.

Upon returning he skittered to a halt in front of Jak, who only had moved enough to hold one hand against his face during the time apart. The dipper was drained again, though a bit slower this time.

Daxter took a third round to bring water, but when he returned he found Jak curled up on the mat. The redhead hesitated for a while, moving his weight from foot to foot indecisively. In the end he sat down on his knees, putting the dipper within reach on the floor.

Lesse, what did he do when he was hungover…?

Lie around and let Jak take care of him.

Daxter bit his lip. He didn't feel so hot himself…

Memories of hours of slouching on a soft, warm lap wrapped up in Jak's scarf surfaced and glared at him. Just lying around feeling sorry for himself while big hands reached for water and food at the slightest notion of him wanting it.

Conscience works a pretty brutal torture when it feels like it.

Okay, okay, okay. Daxter fought down the wince and frowned.

When he was hungover, at first he just wanted water. Then eventually something salty, when he felt well enough to eat again. But it should be a while until that, right? He really didn't feel like going out…

The memories did a repeat performance, even angrier than before.

Jak was suffering, dammit.

Daxter's ears mentally drooped and he bent forwards, guilt searing his throat.

"Uhm, you want anything else, buddy?" he said, as softly as he could.

A hand slouched up and waved before falling back, that together with a grunt stating "not now, it's okay".

Well, maybe not okay in any sense of the word, but still.

Feeling some relief at that, Daxter inched closer, avoiding spilling the water. Good, he could lie down some more too then. Jak made some vague motion as if being about to shuffle away, but he never really got around doing it.

A blood-shot eye opened when Daxter stretched out on the mat, resting on his side and turned to his friend. They watched each other for a moment.

Then Jak moved, leaning his head forwards – this watched with some idle curiosity from Daxter until a clammy forehead lightly pushed at his collarbones through his tunic. Then he blinked. Jak said nothing, only raised his hand and placed it on the side of his face, further shielding his eyes from the tiny rays of light making it through the closed windows in the other room.
"Oh sheez, you really gotta…" Daxter grumbled.

He fidgeted a bit with his free hand – the other was already acting as a makeshift pillow under his head. What to do with the unoccupied arm suddenly became a problem, with Jak too close to allow much movement. The hero's muscular arm rested against his own waist in a rather awkward-looking position.

Daxter struggled for a while, but finally he snorted and dropped his arm over the side of Jak's chest. He was too tired for this nonsense.

"This is not a hug, just so you know." That made him feel better.

"Nghh."

Jak merely shifted a bit, letting his own arm slip down to the floor between them. A short while passed and he moved the arm back to its perch, annoyance apparent in his motions. Daxter sighed a little more dramatically than needed, and moved to grasp the arm – carefully. And talking as he did so.

"Unless you stop moving around, I ain't gonna be able to sleep. So this is community service, okay? Okay."

And with that, he dragged the arm up and let it drop over his waist. Too tired for this, too.

Jak didn't say anything at first, though his breathing caught momentarily. After that however, he seemed to slowly settle.

"… thanks."

It was hardly more than a breath, but Jak said it.

Daxter found himself grinning, and tried to wipe it off even if Jak couldn't see his face from their current positions.

He couldn't help it, Daxter told himself. Seeing Jak down for the count was sorta funny, at least in a situation where that didn't spell disaster. About time hero-boy got to taste the wonders of backlash drinking too. Daxter didn't feel too bad about this conclusion at first, safe in the knowledge that it would pass soon enough.

But then he shifted slightly, and Jak growled in protest at the brittle equilibrium being threatened, squeezing the thinner back.

A faint growl and a weak squeeze.

It brought Daxter back down enough to consider just how Jak would feel about it, and he sobered. A bit at least.

Because it was still funny. But oh well…

Daxter moved his free arm and gingerly touched the base of Jak's head, at the back of his neck. Jak stilled, then relaxed again as Daxter's fingertips started to move in small circles into the green base of Jak's hair.

It was a piece of their long missed past. Something for lazy days in the shadow, slouching on the beach or in the grass, dozing – lazily playing with the other's hair, playfully searching for lice that
weren't there but really just massaging.

A slow sigh, the breath warm against his chest. He could hear the smile.

Daxter glanced down as Jak's head got a little heavier. The muscular arm relaxed, hanging over his waist instead of clutching. A helpless grin spread across Daxter's features, and he didn't try to fight it this time.

Within a couple of minutes Jak's breath fell into a deep, even pace. Asleep again.

Daxter's fingers slowed until they laid still among the blond-green strands of hair, lightly pressed against the warm skull. With his neck relaxed, Jak's head may have tipped back without the easy push.

Perfectly at ease with resting against his best friend in a boneless, soft sprawl.

Something tickled deep within Daxter's belly.

He would have scowled to fight it down, but he couldn't make himself bother.

"Dax... thanks."

He could count the times he'd heard that on one hand. Few, precious occasions – the situations from which they had arisen were never pleasant, nothing he wanted to remember. But the aftermath, when Jak looked at him and said those two words, that was totally different. Jak seldom thanked anyone. And when he did, it was in a passing, almost jocular way more often than not. Not like when he told his best friend.

"... thanks."

When he really, really meant it.

Daxter replayed the words in his mind, shutting off all the unpleasant "before" the gratitude. And he found himself smiling like an idiot.

At that discovery he snorted, twisting his mouth about to force the grin away. It strained in protest, like the smile had a will of its own – but finally settled.

Sig stepped out of the Naughty Ottsel, breathing deep from the morning air. It felt heavier than in the wasteland and smelled a whole lot worse, but he knew he would soon be leaving it behind. He'd done what he had come to do. If it had been right, he still didn't know.

There had been something in Tess' eyes that he had not been able to read. Past the first surprise and dawning understanding, like a red thread. Confused, maybe? He couldn't tell. Whatever it had been, and what it meant, he'd told her the truth and asked for her help, and he couldn't take that back. For now, all he could do was return to Spargus and wait and hope for some news.

She was from Haven, and he knew she could be trusted. There could very well be places and people that she could reach that he couldn't, that he had never even heard of.

Shadowing his hand he squinted at the far away pier where the air train would arrive to take him home. He couldn't see it yet, so instead of grabbing a zoomer he started walking. Civilians and soldiers alike moved around him, all of them keeping a certain distance. He noticed more than one suspicious look, and that old, tired annoyance stirred deep within him. Jak, Torn and the others
might trust him, but to most people – especially in the harbor district – he would always be Krew’s heavy.

Well. They meant nothing to him. Annoying was all that it was, and then only because he hated to be reminded of that time of his life.

Deep in thought he eventually reached the first pier. Even as distracted as he was, though, he caught the shadow that moved through the water. It caused only a slight shiver on the surface as it sped by, heading right towards a nearby ship where dock workers were hauling cargo, watched by bored soldiers. And it wasn't alone.

"Metal heads!" Sig hollered, tearing his peace maker from his back as he started running.

It startled the peace of the morning, and only a little less than the heavy splashes did. Shark-like beasts leapt from the water, tearing into the shocked men and women who did not get away quick enough. Sig fried one right out of the air as it jumped as people fled screaming and soldiers scrambled to meet the assault.

He spun around at a scream, seeing one of the metal heads lumbering towards a dock worker with his foot stuck under a fallen crate. A peace maker blast would kill the monster, but the man as well. Growling a curse Sig started forwards.

And then a crate sailed through the air and smashed onto the beast's head. It howled and staggered back as the container crashed on the ground with a hard clatter. Another dock worker appeared from the way the crate had come, swinging a crowbar at the metal head. He was as tall as Sig, and just about as muscular. That strength would be badly needed to go with his courage.

The crowbar hit the metal head between the glowing, beady eyes, and already off balance it tumbled back. The disorientation lasted only for a second, however, and it reared right back up with a roar.

At this point, there were two options. Attack and pray to the Precursors that you struck before the metal head did, or recoil and pray that its swipe wouldn't tear your face off.

The dock worker chose the first option. He lunged at the beast, right past its claws, crashing his shoulder into its chest. The surprise saved his life as the metal head had started forwards, unprepared for a madman's tactic.

The claws of the monster's back paws screamed against the concrete pier as it careened, forced to turn by the force of the assault. It fell backwards, and the worker stumbled to the side – blinded by the pain from his own blow, he didn't see the edge of the pier. With a half-strangled cry he fell into the water.

All that, however, brought the metal head far enough away from the trapped dock worker, and it gave Sig time to fire up his peacemaker.

The metal head still struggled to get its bearings straight when a ball of lightning exploded into it. For a second it hung in the air, screaming, convulsing with the energy tearing through its body. Then it crashed on the concrete. The skull gem popped free.

Sig spun around, taking aim and ending a couple more metal heads, but the soldiers were already doing a surprisingly good job cleaning out the last ones. It was over as soon as it had begun.

Looking about and hearing no more roars and hisses, Sig hurried over to the trapped dock worker and lifted the crate until the man could scramble out. The Wastelander only nodded absently to the
gasped thanks, already on his way over to the edge of the pier. A pair of dark hands were scrabbling for purchase, slipping on the wet concrete.

Hunching down and leaning over to offer a hand, Sig found himself gazing down at a tattooed face. Instantly he felt a sting of instinctual suspicion. But he quickly shook it off and grasped a dripping wet hand, leaning back to help the ex-KG haul himself out of the water.

"Thanks," the younger man coughed, turning his head to spit as he crawled up on the pier, resting on all fours. The water pasted his shoulder length red hair to his neck.

When he wiped his grey eyes and blinked up at Sig, the Wastelander frowned. He was fairly sure that he'd never seen this ex, but there was something familiar about him.

"Do I know you?" slipped out of Sig as the other man got to his feet.

The ex obviously tried to suppress it, but the start he gave was impossible to miss.

"No," he said, glancing at Sig and turning away to wring water out of his shirt. "I don't think so." He turned his head and gave a strained smile. "I think I would remember that armor."

If it was one thing that Sig did not like, it was people acting suspicious. He'd had enough of that during his time in Krew's service.

"I don't always wear it," Sig said. It wasn't a complete lie. He did take it off for bed, at least. "What's your name?"

"Ingen."

He said that too fast, too.

Sig's good eye thinned and he opened his mouth to speak again, when a Freedom League soldier marched up to them.

"Anybody hurt?" the soldier asked. Sig suppressed the urge to growl at the masked man for interrupting. He was just doing his job. Instead, the Wastelander shook his head.

"I'm good," the man calling himself Ingen said, waving at Sig with an awkward smile as thanks for the help.

"You should join up again," the Freedom League soldier told Ingen. Though his eyes were obscured, the slight movement of his head showed that he seized the ex up. Wondering why he wasn't doing his duty to the outmost.

The redhead flinched and shook his head.

"Sorry. I can't." He turned away, rubbing his face as if the memory of the mask he had once worn made him ill. "Can't."

"Hey—"

But the ex did not turn around, heading towards a medical team gathering up wounded. He spoke to one of the team and was immediately waved to where he could help carry a stretcher with an unconscious soldier.

Sig gazed after him, still wondering why the guy seemed so familiar. He could have gone after him, but when he heard the distant hum of the air train approaching, Sig decided that it wasn't
important enough to waste time on. Chances were the ex would not tell him, anyway.

Begin Introspection. Serial code: Daxter.

Uhm…

I'm feelin' a bit confused right about now.

End Introspection.

Chapter End Notes

"Ingen" means "nobody" in Swedish.

Hey, nicknaming somebody that is also sorta a stealth The Odyssey reference. I am so putting that (Swedish equivalent of) Bachelor's in Literature to good use. I mean APART from getting the kickass title of Philosophy Magister.
I know that there's a white eco well by the marketplace in Spargus, and plenty to find in urns and whatnot, so it shouldn't be this hard for the boys to get some. However, I tend to file that kind of thing under "sheer convenience for the player", much like all the convenient crates of ammo loitered all over the place. Since eco is such a useful resource, if it was that easily found it should be able to make life in Spargus a whole lot easier than it seems to be.

Begin Introspection. Serial code: Sig.

I know I've seen that mug somewhere. An' I don't know why it's botherin' me so much. 'Course, loads of exes don't wanna think about what they used to do, so mebbe it's not that weird that that Ingen guy didn't like me saying he looked familiar.

Just can't shake the feeling... somethin's off. Real off. That's what's weird though. I don't get a bad feeling about it.

I feel like I'm forgettin' something real important.

End Introspection.

They silently agreed to file that hangover fiasco under "things we don't bring up again". Daxter was a little reluctant to do so, because it would have been golden tease-fodder. However, Jak had that special look on his face after waking up and finding himself not wishing for death anymore.

What they could agree about on a verbal level was that they really, really needed to find Jak some white eco. It wouldn't have been such a fiasco and timewaster if he'd been able to heal himself, but he had used up every last shred of it fighting the marauders by the oasis. It wasn't usually this hard, metal heads tended to be stockpiling the stuff – possibly for destruction, because they sure didn't seem to like it much. Whatever the reason, they usually had it.

Too bad Damas was so uppity about chasing people instead of beasties for the moment. Although, nothing stopped the two of them from doing both at the same time...

But the next two days got them nothing. Oh sure, as many skull gems, pieces of artifacts and other spoils as they could load up in the back of the car after a trip around looking for scouts and carriers. They took down metal heads and marauders alike, and the inventory staff at the Spargus stockpiles were most grateful, but no white eco. Loads and loads of dark, but no luck with the other
side of the spectrum.

The sun had begun to dip towards the horizon on the second day when they took a final turn around the ruins and then turned homewards. Daxter leaned on the side of the car with a frustrated grunt. They might have ruined the day for about a half dozen marauders but he couldn't feel as satisfied about it as he wanted to. Jak was scowling at the ocean of sand ahead of them, as well.

Daxter turned his head, gazing back towards the ruins. The sinking sun painted the worn, pale buildings in a warm glow, drawing long, elegant cacti shadows all over them. Involuntarily, his gaze wandered towards the mountain range, towards where that cave was.

That cave where he had fallen into that insanely convenient eco well and bounced right out, transformed. Just like that.

There was plenty eco there. But there were probably also metalpedes aplenty and worse things, too. His stomach clenched and he turned away. Good things had happened in there, but so had very nearly horrible things. It was pure wonder they had gotten out of there alive. He didn't want to think about it.

Jak must have thought about that well, too, and yet he didn't make a motion to go back in there. Going in there would be dangerous and stupid, but actually ignoring a good option like that was just as stupid.

But they weren't that desperate. It wasn't like Jak needed the white eco to function, though it did make a lot of things more convenient.

"We can go to the temple tomorrow," Jak said without looking around, as if hearing Daxter's thoughts.

It would be half a day's travel just to get there. Normally Daxter would have complained, but it sounded like a sensible idea right then. Anything to keep them out of that cave.

"Yeah, Seem hasn't tossed us out on our asses yet after all," Daxter said with a relieved chuckle. "Then again, that's prolly because she's too busy breathing incense fumes."

There was a splinter of unease that remained, though, that he couldn't quite shake off. He had managed to keep himself from thinking about Erol catching him, and everything that could have gone wrong, because there had been enough distractions to shield himself. To think about that place and that time, he instinctively felt deep down, had been a mistake.

________________________________________________________

Ice cold metal digging into his fur into his body can't breathe

That huge foot rising up and Jak isn't moving

Can't breathe can't scream

Can't stop

He stomps and that crunch

Daxter jolted awake with a gasp. For a few moments he struggled for breath, desperately clawing at the sleeping mat beneath him. But he was only half-conscious and soon sunk back into more of a coma than sleep, only to be flung back with the sound of Jak's skull being crushed ringing through his head.
His entire body throbbed and he clumsily rolled over on his side, raising a shaking hand. Soft breath fluttered over the back of his hand. Jak's breath. He was right there, just a foot away. Alive and well.

A sigh escaped Daxter, though he spent several moments mentally cursing at the stupid nightmare. He flopped back and tried to collect himself well enough to sleep again. But the nightmare had dug itself in, unwilling to let him escape that easily.

Lying on his back and staring up at the dark ceiling, Daxter idly moved a hand over his ribs and stomach. Biting his lip against the memory of hard coldness encircling him in a cruel trap. He closed his eyes tightly, digging his fingertips into the tunic and soft flesh beneath.

The thought was there again, that it would be gone if Jak had just gotten a chance to take a similar grip of him when he was still an ottsel. Repeat the motion, cover the chill with warm fingers. But just like when he had thought about it before, it was apparent that such a thing didn't work anymore.

He let his lip go and sucked it back in a couple of times.

Jak could have taken the memory away.

But…

Daxter made the tiniest headshake at himself. But it helped to think about such things, to turn his mind to Jak. Jak looking at him, smiling. Safe. Warm. It was easy to think about Jak the other day, when he'd suffered from hangover but been at ease letting Daxter soothe the pain in his simple fashion. But thinking of that also made Daxter remember how he felt when he saw how relaxed and trusting Jak was even in such a miserable situation, resting against him.

Slowly he released the pressure of his fingertips, drawing them back over his stomach. Added the palm and slid the entire hand across the curve of his body, as far as he could get before the floor got in the way. Then he pulled back, but changed the motion so that the hand moved up his chest instead.

Forced himself to breathe deeply even as his throat and stomach gently constricted.

He swallowed hard but continued, caressing the side of his own neck. The abused bottom lip slid free on its own accord when the hand moved over his jaw line.

Daxter still hadn't opened his eyes.

His own fingers slipped over his lips, gently, curiously, then turned over. Their backs stroked his cheek and he clenched his other hand, a tiny shiver creeping down his entire body.

"Dax."

And those eyes and that smile.

His mouth was dry.

Jak muttered something in his sleep and turned over, freezing Daxter stock still in fear of being seen doing… what exactly? But no baby blue eyes glistened in the little light, and the sound of breathing continued in the same even pace as before.

Daxter's hand fell away, and ended up rubbing his other arm nervously. He wanted an excuse to
get up and leave for a little bit, but despite this wish and several simple rationalizations coming to
mind, he didn't move.

Jak's breath reached just far enough to be felt like a feathery coolness against the bare skin of
Daxter's arm.

"Dax." Just the softest murmur warm against his temple.

He breathed in quickly and tried to wet his lips, but his mouth was still dry.

Wondered – carefully, as if afraid that something would break – what it would be like if Jak in that
moment would reach out and wrap his arms around his best friend, pulling him close.

The constriction in his throat was a lump now and his eyes stung. Grimacing, Daxter reached up
and furiously wiped his eyes, only to find them dry. False alarm. He felt a little relieved at that, but
the conflicting emotions still rolled over in his mind.

The most painful thing was imagining that soft murmur, but he couldn't stop it. He managed to
stop the imagined arms and keep them still around himself, but the voice would not be silent. Just
that single syllable stuck on repeat, softly mumbled above him and whispered in his ear.

Daxter pushed himself up to sitting, hugging his knees.

It helped clear his mind for a little while, until he imagined the sound of Jak moving, sitting up
beside him and winding his arms around the gangly shoulders. His skin tingled to the tip of his
toes.

Tess' playful "don't knock it 'til you try it!" advice floated through his mind. She had been joking.
Or rather, she had said it as a joke, to make it easier for him to bear.

Daxter took in a deep breath and dug a hand into his hair.

Well, at least Erol wasn't bothering him anymore.

For several long, silent minutes he just sat there, staring into the warm dusk of the room. Listened
to Jak breathing, and absentmindedly took in the muffled sounds of the city outside. He tried to
figure things out, but his mind kept wandering around and around in the same bewildered circles.

Eventually he let out a deep breath and lay back down. Rolled over on his side, watching Jak's face
as he slept. Daxter hardly even knew what he was thinking about, anymore.

Torch light weaved through the window shutters and his eyes had long since gotten used to the
darkness. He could see Jak's features fairly well.

So when Jak's brow suddenly knitted, Daxter saw it and his stomach turned into a knot. Even if he
hadn't, even if he had been sleeping, the hoarse mumble would have shot him straight awake.

"Don't…"

Oh gods.

He had been waiting. He had known it would come.

Daxter pushed himself up, reaching out— and stopped himself in the last second, remembering his
plan. After what Jak had told him about the prison, Daxter had known very well that he could not
tackle Jak's nightmares head on like he'd used to. He no longer had those tiny, fuzzy, small hands
and body frame.

Clambering to his feet he hurried over to the wall. Glimmers of torchlight made it through the cracks in the window shutters, but his eyes still had to adjust to the darkness. It seemed to take forever, blindly fumbling shaking fingers over the shelf on the wall. Trying to be as silent as possible.

"Don't… me…"

Finally Daxter found the box of matches and managed to untangle one, in his haste spilling half of the box' contents on the floor. He struck a light and lit the oil lamp standing on the shelf. A warm, flickering glow filled the room, but Jak's murmurs only grew more frantic as he began to twist.

Still with his breath stuck in his throat Daxter lifted the lamp and set it down above Jak's head. It was a simple plan, but one he knew was vital. *Make sure he can see it's me.*

"Jak. Jak, wake up!"

Jak stirred and muttered something inaudible, but it wasn't enough. He trashed the other way. Clenching his teeth, Daxter leaned in as close as he dared and spoke even louder.

"It's not real! Get back here, you! Jak!"

A gasp broke through Jak's lips and his eyes flew open, blank and unseeing for that first dazed, panicked moment. He shoved himself backwards and Daxter almost followed, but stopped himself in the last second.

"No-" Jak groaned, then blinked several times and finally registered the room and the other young man sitting on the floor, staring at him.

Jak shook his head and pressed a hand to his forehead as he pushed himself up. Every breath was sucked in and exhaled with such force that it was almost like he was throwing up the oxygen.

"Hey, buddy…" Daxter murmured, starting forwards.

He froze dead when Jak recoiled.

For a moment they stared at each other, Daxter's hand half raised to reach out, to steady. Then Jak stiffly shook his head again, this time not to clear his mind.

*No. Not even you.*

Daxter slumped back, hand falling to his lap. Nausea poured through him and he swallowed hard to fight back the taste of bile rising inside his throat. It receded, but he could feel it bubbling inside of him.

*Say something, you have to say something!*

Daxter's brain veered, desperately seeking words. He had to talk, to distract, to make it better. His hands ached, wanting so badly to touch Jak, give him something solid and safe to hang on to. But his hands weren't safe anymore, not in this situation.

So his brain went for one of things that had been on his mind. The safer one.

"Eh… well, sheez, tonight sucks. You know, I was just thinking about waking you up to have you make me feel better."
Safer, but not necessarily any smarter. He couldn't keep himself from wincing, but the words were already out and Jak was watching him with a question in his eyes. At least that was better than the tension and lingering terror. All of that was still there, but then again he had always been better at helping others than himself. Concern for his best friend was a way out.

"Yeah, see, I had a nightmare too," Daxter admitted. He managed a bland, twitching copy of a smile. "Bet it starred the same sicko as yours. Nah, I ain't asking you to compare notes."

Jak watched him, waiting. Daxter could see his muscles begin to uncoil. Thanks to that, he too could breathe a little easier, knowing they were getting there.

"Naw, nevermind," he said and waved a hand dismissively. "Let's talk about something nicer."

"Dax."

Murmured so softly, with Jak looking at him like that, saying so much with just one word. Daxter swallowed hard against a sudden swelling sensation in his chest. Pinching his eyes shut he took in a deep breath, pulling himself together.

"Ugh, fine…"

His voice wavered just a little, but Jak probably figured that was because of Daxter's nightmare. There was no comment on it, at least, neither vocal nor silent. Jak just kept looking at him, the flickering light from the oil lamp reflecting in his eyes and casting soft shadows across him and the whole room.

In as much detail as he felt like recalling, Daxter rambled up the basics of his dream. He didn't breathe a word about what he had been thinking and feeling afterwards.

Of course, the question was obvious. Jak's brows crept lower and lower, not in anger but in confusion about why Daxter hadn't woken him up to talk about it. It quickly became too much to ignore, and Daxter's recounting of the nightmare trailed off.

"Eh, well, you know, you were doing so badly before I got here, didn't wanna mess you up again…" he lamely blurted, rubbing the back of his neck. He managed a weak smile. "And hey, I did wake you up. Just not for that."

"I wake you up all the time," Jak said, finally speaking a full sentence. His voice was rough from sleepiness and the unpleasant air left by the nightmares. "And you don't mind."

"Nope. It's kinda too important that you're in top notch mode."

"You too."

And the tone of Jak's voice and the look in his eyes forbade even a joke protest about that. Daxter had no idea how to react to that level of seriousness, not here in this warm glow from the lamp in the middle of the night, with their pulses still slowing down from the lingering terror born inside both their heads.

"Shucks…"

Not knowing what to do with himself, he picked up the lamp and went to put it on its shelf.

"Well, I'm feeling better now, so I'll try to get some shut-eye if you're alright."
There was a soft scraping sound and he looked around to see Jak pull his own sleeping mat a little ways further away from Daxter's. Looking up, the blue eyes beneath knotted brow asked for understanding. It was still there, and he needed space away from any kind of human warmth and smells to fully recover. He would be okay later, but not right now.

Daxter swallowed hard, feeling so utterly useless that he wanted to scream. The lamp hit the shelf with a dry clacking sound.

But Jak kept watching him.

"I wouldn't sleep at all if it wasn't for you," he said, soft and serious.

Pinching his eyes shut Daxter rubbed his mouth, trying to keep the lump in his chest from swelling even more than it already had. He felt too much in that moment, thought too much.

He knew only one way out of this. Throwing up his arms, he walked over and sat cross-legged on his mat.

"Forget I said anything. Screw sleeping, I ain't resting until you're snoring again. And for the record, some of your sawing could wake the dead!"

And off he went, following every single line of thought that popped into his head – that felt safe enough to tread, at least. Bit by bit they both relaxed until somehow, though he had no idea how, Daxter had talked Jak into laying down and closing his eyes once more. Daxter's talking softened as sleepiness began overtaking him as well, and he stretched out on his mat, mumbling himself into a deep, dreamless sleep.

Dawn woke them with rising sunlight breaking through the shutters, illuminating everything after the lamp had run out of oil sometime during the night. It still took a while before either one actually awakened properly, remaining in a state of languid half-slumber. After that night, they needed a sleep-in morning.

As he slowly grew more and more conscious, Daxter could feel the nasty aftertaste of the nightmares in the back of his brain. But it was all it was, now. In this soft morning light, with the sleepy rhythm of the rousing city from outside, even the dark memories faded into something that could be pushed aside without too much effort.

He had just started to rub his eyes, pondering whether he felt like sitting up, when there was a soft beep from his communicator. With a groan Daxter slapped his cheeks to wake himself up, then crawled over to the corner where he had dropped the device and his boots in the evening.

He didn't recognize the caller id-number displayed on the screen, so it was with a pinch of suspicion that he pushed the button to respond. The face that appeared turned out to be familiar, however. It was the tanned and mustachioed mug of the foraging master.

"Mornin'," he said, not unfriendly.

"Oh hey, ex-boss," Daxter replied, relaxing.

"Sure you don't wanna come back to us?" the man said. "You had lotsa potential, being an ex-rat and all."

Even if he had no desire whatsoever to take the offer, Daxter did have to admit that it was nice to feel wanted. It wasn't something he'd had a lot of, apart from when it came from Jak.
"No thanks, got a sweet gig that takes priority." Daxter quirked an eyebrow. "That why you called?"

"Nah. Was wondering if I could call in a favor since you quit on us."

"Depends," Daxter said and leaned back against the wall. From the corner of his eye he saw that Jak lazily watched him, listening but unmoving. "Let's hear it."

"Some of my crew are going out to gather mushrooms in the beach caves in an hour," the foraging boss explained. "An' I heard you and your pal are out marauder hunting. Would ya mind keeping an eye on my team? Marauders tend to gun for us, so it's a win-win. We'll give you some fruits or veggies later."

Daxter glanced up at Jak, who stretched out on his mat with a grunt. Then the blond warrior sat up and nodded agreement.

"Looks like you're our boss of the day," Daxter cheerfully told the communicator, doing a thumbs up at the small screen.

"Preciate it, kiddo! My peeps will be in the pit in one hour, so be ready."

"Roger that, cap'n."

Daxter switched off the communicator and hung it back on his belt as he stood up. Turning to the other room, he snatched up Jak's water flask to fill it and his own from the water pot.

"Sitting around waiting for the morons to come to us instead of being out there looking for them?" Daxter said and yawned. "Sounds good to me. You do make some nice decisions sometimes, bud."

He grinned over his shoulder, but though he joked about it, he really did appreciate the change of pace. It might very well be just about as stressful as going hunting if marauders attacked, but at least they didn't have to rush around all over the sand bowl looking for trouble. After the nearly sleepless night, it was a relief.

It put the "go to the temple to find white eco" plan on the backburner, but then again, Daxter really didn't feel like such a long trip now. He took the lid off the water pot and dipped the flasks into the lukewarm liquid to fill them.

"Hey, Dax," Jak said. He leaned against the door frame as Daxter glanced around, soft half-smirk, half-smile playing at his lips. "Good job impressing the tough crowd."

He'd noticed.

Of course he'd noticed.

It still made Daxter swell with pride to have Jak's comment spice up the compliment from the foraging master. He grinned, but then turned it into a grimace.

"Oh sure, but I had to tear up my hands to do it, so I damn well hope they liked the show!" he said.

Jak chuckled.

"Well, if I break my arm or something," he said, "we know you can pick up the slack by climbing around picking mushrooms."

"Jeebus, don't! Everything they forage here defends itself, and you're not even allowed to shoot at
A silent laugh lit up Jak's face and he shook his head, still laughing as he started turning. That moment, him standing there in the doorway with the warm darkness behind him, smiling, at ease, the complete opposite of everything he had been after the nightmare – that sight melted into Daxter's retina. Even after Jak disappeared into the sleeping room to put his boots on, Daxter stood there looking after him.

It stuck with him as they walked through the city to the vehicle pit, so strongly and insistent that it made his head spin. He would have slapped his cheeks again if it wouldn't have made Jak wonder what he was doing.

Inside the pit, there was at least something to help take his mind off his own confusion, at least a little. As they entered, they both instantly spotted Sig sitting in his Ram Rod, thoughtfully gazing towards the desert. He obviously waited for something, probably something he needed for a job, but seeing him just sitting still and thinking instead of doing something useful with his hands was quite unusual.

He did look up when he spotted the two of them approaching, though, and shook off whatever was on his mind to greet them as naturally as ever.

"Watch out, a metal head might even manage to give you a scratch if you're that distracted," Daxter said with a half-hearted grin.

It was a convoluted comment, but he felt just as unfocused as Sig had looked. The big guy didn't seem to catch on to the lack of commitment to the teasing, though, and just scoffed with a smirk.

"Not on your life, red," he said.

The city gate opened and a group of men and women walked through, carrying baskets. Daxter recognized some of them from his short career as a climber-gatherer, and waved when they raised their hands in greeting.

"Well, guess that's our sheep for the day," he said as a good-bye to Sig.

No response.

He looked up, seeing Sig's one eye narrowed at the group of foragers.

"Eh, big guy?" Daxter said, standing on his tiptoes to wave a hand in front of Sig's face. "Spot a ghost?"

"No. 'Scuse me."

The huge wastelander didn't even glance at Daxter again, instead just marching towards the approaching group. Jak caught Daxter's eye, looking just as surprised at the sudden action.

"Vida! Hey! Vida!" Sig called.

One of the foragers, a middle-aged woman with purple hair, turned to him with a recognizing smile. Sig reached her and spoke a few words in a low voice. Whatever he said, it made her eyes shoot wide open and she made a distracted excuse to the other foragers as she followed Sig a little ways away.

They were far too far away for the conversation to be heard, but as brief as it was it got them both
very animated very quickly. Sig’s hands flailed about as he spoke, vividly describing something. The woman was no less lively, pointing to her eyes, hair and chin as she rapidly talked. Then Sig nodded, grinning wide, and the woman grasped his huge hand with her tiny ones, staring up at him as if he had just saved her life.

"You ready to go?" one of the foragers asked Jak and Daxter, ripping them out of the spying.

"Yeah," Jak said, turning away from the display. "Whenever you are." He met Daxter's eyes and shrugged.

Daxter pulled a face, but he understood. Whatever Sig and that forager lady was cooking up, it had nothing to do with them.

One of the other foragers called to Sig's company. She and Sig exchanged a few more words, and she hurried off to her team. Her smile could have lit up a dark room. Daxter saw that, but then Jak touched his shoulder and waved at their Sand Shark.

"Comin', comin'..." Daxter said, pushing the weird show aside. None of his business, though it might be fun to ask Sig about it later.

That thought fell to the far side of his mind though. He followed Jak, watching his friend's broad back and neck.

The warmth of the hand on his shoulder lingered.

Begin Introspection. Serial code: Daxter.

Uhm...

Confusion still in place, thanks for asking.

I was just pond'ring...

If you spend most of your day thinking about a guy, and when he's hurting all you want to do is make him feel better, and you know that he'll always be there to make sure you're never hurting, and he can make you stupidly happy with almost nothing, and life is at its best when you're joking and laughing and hanging out...

Well, what does that say about you, really?

...

Oh dammit.

End Introspection.
Daxter hadn't ever been much of an over-thinker. When an idea popped into his head he tended to act on it, or rather start talking about it. Of course, Jak was the "take action" bit taken to the nth degree. In compare to him, Daxter was a philosopher.

But he didn't know where to begin, and even then they currently had a whole entourage of foragers gathered in a carrier car driving alongside them across the dunes. None of them would be able to hear a word over the roar of the carrier's motor, but it didn't do Daxter's nerve any favors to have an audience. Nope, much as he'd like to tackle what was on his mind right away before he did something stupid like falter, he had to put it off for the time being.

Just sitting there, keeping an eye on the landscape so that Jak could focus on driving, and pretending not to glance at him more than usual. Jak was in his right element now, behind the wheel of a rolling death machine, and there wasn't a sign that the horrors of the night had left a lasting impact. Daxter could see it fine, even with the scarf pulled up over Jak's face and the goggles shielding his blue eyes from sand. Jak's shoulders were relaxed and his grip on the wheel light, he even leaned one arm on the Shark's frame and only used one hand to steer at times.

Daxter forced himself to look back at the world around them. There would be a lot less relaxing if a giant lizard with a laser canon on its back snuck up on them because he let himself get distracted.

They drove towards the ocean, then swung along the shore and continued onto the racetrack where Kleiver had challenged them for the Tough Puppy all those months ago. Daxter had to scoff at the memory of that bet even now. He poked at Jak's shoulder and glared through his own goggles. Jak glanced at him and made a small, apologetic motion with his hand – and the way the red scarf shuddered showed that he laughed. Daxter pulled a face behind his scarf, but then cackled to himself. Oh well…

Once they had crossed the islands connected by bridges – which for a change were not blown up today (and Daxter spared a thought to what poor bastards had to go out and fix them every time the metal heads or marauders destroyed the bridges) – Jak let the foragers take the lead for the last stretch to and into the cave. They did not drive very far in, stopping where the entrance was still in sight and sunlight reached inside. Jak parked the Shark beside the carrier as the foragers began
filing out. The leader walked up the demolition duo, pointing to his own goggles as he spoke.

"Keep those on, and the scarves too," he instructed. Behind him, the foragers were tying their scarves tight over their noses and mouths, and checking on their goggles. "The mature mushrooms release spores that'll make you want to tear your eyes."

"And lemme guess," Daxter commented, watching half of the foragers equip themselves with what looked suspiciously much like spears, "you don't know if they are or not until you cut 'em?"

"Exactly."

As the leader returned to his crew Daxter turned back to Jak.

"Never break your arm, bud," he said.

"They'd probably make you the climber champ, not the mushroom poking master," Jak replied, his grin loud and clear in his voice.

The foragers lined up in pairs along the cave's side, one person equipped with a poking spear and the other with a spray can in each hand. It was clear that the latter could not have been hammered out in Spargus, as some of them even had the remains of Haven brand stickers on their buckled sides. What a thing to smuggle.

"Salt water cannons at the ready?" the leader said with a hint of mirth in his voice.

"Ready!" answered those with spray cans.

"Alright, go!"

The spearmen and –women began poking their sharp sticks into cracks in the wall. Before long a man cried out and ducked aside as a yellowish cloud exploded out of the crack he had been examining. Instantly his partner sprayed at the spores, swinging her arms in wide circles to spread the water. The yellow smoke dispersed as the spores were caught by the wet clouds and tumbled down, creating an icky-looking coating on the ground. Daxter noticed that it made sand and small rocks cling to the male foragers boots after he stepped in it.

It didn't smell very nice either, rather like old socks. If he hadn't known those mushrooms were delicious roasted, he'd wonder why they were out here poking at walls.

That wasn't the last instance of the "salt water cannons" being used, but soon enough the foragers began feeling safe enough to go in and start ripping out the pale, round mushrooms that remained, to gather them in the baskets. Once a pair of workers had exhausted one crack in the wall, they moved to another.

It wasn't terribly interesting to watch, so of course Daxter was soon talking up a storm to veer off insanity from boredom. Jak leaned back on his seat and put his feet up on the dashboard, though he kept watching the other end of the cave for any sign of incoming trouble, safe in the knowledge that Daxter was guarding the other way.

They looked at each other every now and again, as they usually did when Daxter said something particularly funny. The jokes were a bit disjointed today, though, and it was obvious to the redhead that Jak noticed. Even when the goggles made it impossible to see each other's eyes, he knew from the way Jak turned his head and studied him. Daxter pretended not to take any heed of it, though he had to sit on his hands to keep from drumming his fingers against any convenient surface at times.
**How long is this gonna take?**

Because right now he *certainly* couldn't talk to Jak about what was on his mind. And it made Daxter's whole being itch. He wasn't sure if his courage could handle the wait, not trusting himself to stay on course with the thoughts in the back of his head if it took too long. If he let himself think it over he knew he'd start running around in circles and decide it was stupid and a bad idea.

If he'd had a watch he would have checked on it about once a minute. Even when he did see that once all the sporeplosions were cleared up, there were plenty of mushrooms to pick and the baskets filled up quickly. Daxter were relieved to see the first basket be brought into the carrier… but then that forager returned with an empty basket.

With a sinking feeling Daxter craned his head, but from he was he couldn't see inside the carrier, of course. He did make a basic evaluation of its size, though, estimating how many baskets could fit in there along with the people. Then he felt like slumping over the side of the Shark and tear at his hair in frustration.

He swallowed it down, though, looking at Jak who sunk deeper and deeper back against the seat. It was unlikely that Jak would allow himself to fall asleep, but he must be as bored with the inaction as Daxter felt.

The only remedy was more talking. It was all Daxter had to offer, even when he still could not speak the words that burned on his tongue. What exactly were they, though? He tried to push that question away, if he thought too much about how to formulate himself, it was a doomed plot. Nothing could sound right in his mind, he'd just have to wing it.

If he dared to.

And then the Precursors – or whatever guardian spirit they had delegated the "mushroom administrator" title to – decided to be in a good, generous mood.

One of the foragers stabbed her spear into a slightly wider crack and almost lost her balance as the entire tool disappeared into the darkness. A huge cloud of spores billowed out with such force that her protector had to call for those nearby to help. It took four of them to get the cloud under control, and the ground before the crack was left looking unpleasantly much like somebody had thrown up all over it. But the forager who had awakened the spore beast just stepped over the mess and disappeared into the crack.

"Oh wow," came from inside. "I struck gold, peeps!"

Baskets were brought over and mushrooms came pouring out like an avalanche of puffballs. It was not enough to completely load up the carrier, of course, but it cut down on the waiting time significantly.

The foragers were all in an excellent mood as they loaded up the last baskets and themselves in the carriers, and the two cars could finally, finally start moving back towards Spargus. That trip too, in all its unusual uneventfulness, stretched on and on and on in Daxter's mind. The familiar rocks and dunes dragged on forever, and by now he was so worked up that he couldn't keep tabs on what he was saying and kept losing the thread, starting over and changing the subject at random. Jak might only catch pieces of it over the loud engine, but he couldn't possibly be unaware that something was very off.

The Spargus walls rising up above the dunes was a beautiful sight, blasted by sunlight and swimming in the heat waves rising above the sand. The gates opened up for them and they rolled
inside to park. The foragers drove closer to the city entrance to make unloading easier, but the leader came hurrying over to Jak and Daxter as they were getting out of the Shark.

Daxter stood unusually silent as the leader thanked for the assistance, though apologizing more or less as a joke for the lack of action. Jak just laughed that off, and the leader handed him a slip to trade for fruit or vegetables later as payment. Then the man scurried off to help moving the mushrooms into the storages, leaving the demolition duo alone.

"Too late to head to the temple now," Jak commented, looking up at the sun.

Daxter nodded agreement. Having to camp out in the desert night was best avoided if you could, and they both needed to get proper sleep after last night.

Jak jabbed a thumb towards the city gates.

"Wanna practice driving?"

Out there. Alone. Well out of sight of everyone.

_Don't freak out don't freak out it's just Jak don't freak out you don't even have to say anything you know no no no don't go there no backing out you've waited all day don't freak out_

"Yeah, sure," Daxter said, stretching as he said it so that he could force his voice to sound like a grunt. He wasn't quite trustful of his vocal chords right then.

It didn't pass him by that Jak gave him a meaningful look, either, glancing towards the foragers and back to Daxter. Yup, setting up privacy but being tactful about it. Daxter wondered how much of his anxiety showed, and if Jak read too much into it. If such a thing was possible.

_Okay chill, breathe, or you'll crash the car into the wall on the way out._

He got into the driver seat of the Shark while Jak seated himself in the passenger's, both of them lowering their goggles to their eyes and raising their scarves again. Afterwards, Daxter had no idea how he managed to back and turn around, and drive out of the city without breaking anything. Well, Jak had parked pretty nicely to make sure there was a wide area to move the Shark around in, but still.

Right. Now then…

Daxter turned left, driving along the wall towards the ocean. All the while trying to focus on driving, while desperately trying to think up where to start. Maybe it would have been better to plan ahead…

He wasn't the least surprised when Jak spoke up. Actually, he felt relieved for the push forwards.

"What's bothering you, Dax?"

Daxter rubbed the back of his neck.

"Yeah, well…” Glancing around, he figured they were safe here. True the landscape was open, but they would see anything that approached from a good distance. And the sight of the ocean and the palm trees, with their reminder of childhood, made him feel about as relaxed as he could get under the circumstances. "One sec."

Gingerly, Daxter raised the gas pedal so that the Shark slowed, letting it roll forwards by its
momentum until it came to a natural stop. He couldn't sit down for this, he had to feel the ground under his feet.

*Have to have an escape route, you paranoid little rat,* said a biting voice in the back of his head.

And he had to see Jak's face, so he pushed his own goggles up to his forehead and shook the scarf down to show his friend that he ought to do the same.

Finally Daxter swung out of the Shark, then stood waiting impatiently as Jak climbed out on his side and walked around the vehicle. It took only a few seconds, but to Daxter it seemed like his friend was dragging his feet and taking a sweet ass time. And yet, when Jak stood in front of him, Daxter felt like he would have wanted some more time to think, yes please.

But it was too late. If he made an excuse now, he might never be able to work up the nerve again.

"Okay, okay..." Daxter clapped his hands together in front of his face and waved them about to underline that this was really friggin' serious business. "We had a good talk and I think we sorted things out fine so I hate to mess anything up again— wait no, don't look like that, wait, *listen!*

He didn't blurt the last because Jak turned to leave or anything, because Jak stood still as a statue. But the look on his face fell from worried to a pinch of panic. Too late Daxter figured that his clumsy start sounded very much like it could run off into a "we had some good times, but..." speech, and he wasn't surprised that Jak's smarting emotions veered off into fear for that.

Jak folded his arms as if to ground himself, only partly soothed by Daxter's nervous reassurance.

"Okay, what?" he said, warily.

Daxter deflated.

"I'm so frickin' confused, Jak," he said, rubbing the back of his head.

"About...?" Jak slowly said, watching him. Something sparked in his eyes, disbelief and hope so frail that it didn't know whether to rise.

Daxter knew he could squirm and run around until both of them were driven mad from it, but he'd had enough. He just charged right in, before he could stop to think again.

"I might figure it out if you kiss me again," he blurted.

He could practically hear Jak's gut do a backflip. That look of surprise and wonder passing through the blue eyes could have struck him down, unable to look away. But right then, Daxter had to focus everything he had into not fidgeting, and he couldn't enjoy that amazing sight of Jak looking like that.

"Well, do it right this time. But hey, no bending me backwards or nothin', I ain't some glittery diva!"

Daxter's voice caught a higher note at the end though he grinned, trying to conceal it. That and how he lost some control of how fast he was talking, speeding up – working himself into a state of freaking out when trying to calm himself down.

Jak tried not to frown, but the flinch on Daxter's face said he didn't do well.

Embarrassment hung thick in the air, mingling with growing uncertainty as Daxter's grin weakened
just the slightest. Both of them searching for a way to get around it, if not through, without having to retreat.

That would be the worst of all.

Jak raked his brain. When he'd been with Keira, they had managed to produce other problems – severe, deep cuts from pasts started the moment they went through the Precursor ring. He had to fix this or there could be a slope leading down, events that may only get worse unless it all turned right, now. He and Daxter couldn't afford it. He had to do it right, indeed. Had to.

There was a way around it, every problem had one… just that he had always sucked at finding solutions in these areas.

But, this wasn't Keira, or Ashelin, or anybody else that could easily misunderstand him. This was Daxter. Who had known him almost his entire life.

Jak's tight lips loosened, curling into a wry smile. This earned him a suspicious look, and that almost made him laugh. The tension seemed to him to dissipate, even if Daxter still looked uneasy. But Jak knew he could take that away, too. He just had to find somewhere to start.

So he smiled, easily this time.

"And we still need to practice driving," he said, jabbing his thumb at the silent Sand Shark.

In his over-clocked state, Daxter flinched in surprise at the sharp change of subject. His eyebrows went down in a hurt look, and he opened his mouth to ask what the deal was about ignoring the offer he'd worked his nerves bloody for. Jak cut him off with a strong hand on each of the thinner shoulders.

"You're still making the turns a little wide, but you're getting the hang of it," he said.

The echo of a similar phrase from almost two years ago halted the protests. Daxter bit his lip, knowing what should come next and that knowledge lit a glow behind the embarrassment in his eyes.

"I'm proud of you, Dax."

A grin cracked Daxter's tight face and he moved a hand to rub the back of his head.

"Aw, you're just tryin' to butter me up."

Jak raised an eyebrow, silently questioning if he would ever do anything of the sort.

"Don't you try to play innocent, bub!"

It was in the time of those smiles that Jak moved forwards and pressed his lips to Daxter's.

As if a button had been pressed the redhead tensed, half raising a foot to take a step back. But then he put it back down, trying to relax. Arms hanging hesitantly, hands opening and closing – useless appendages unable to find a purpose or even search for one.

Blue eyes staring into Jak's, the close proximity making them difficult to focus on. But the confused, anxious look was still there in the background.

Jak didn't press on or linger for long. He moved back a little after a moment, brushing his nose against Daxter's cheek as he stretched upwards the little bit needed to softly mumble into a long
"You're doing great."

"Thanks, shorty. Ow!"

Daxter only recoiled as much as the headsmack demanded. Then he swung back just as close, even if Jak let go of his shoulders. He got the silent raising of a curious eyebrow for that action, and Daxter took that reward with a little louder cackle.

"Now listen, buddy..." the redhead said, looping an arm around the back of Jak's neck and wagging a finger in the very small space between their faces. "I've spent all my life being on the short end of the tallness stick. I gotta milk it for all its worth now."

The finger stopped wagging, and the hand sunk out of the way. At the same time, Daxter's teasing grin softened. The corner of Jak's lips rose slightly.

"Err..."

Daxter glanced aside, rubbing the back of his head with the free hand. The other arm remained where it was, holding on to Jak.

"It, uh... it's kinda weird," Daxter admitted, hand sliding from his hair to brush his lips. "'Cause it's you, y'know? Hey!" He tightened his grip of Jak. "Don't back off on me, I didn't say I don't like it."

Jak stopped trying to move away, but the frown remained. They watched each other for a moment. Finally, Daxter let out a loud, theatrical sigh.

"No, I'm not doing this just to make you happy, dammit!" he said with a snort. "I've got some integrity values too, y'know."

"Well?"

"'Well'? Look buddy boy, it oughta tell you something that I like you enough to let you give me a smooch in broad daylight. I can hear all the world's ladies crying from here."

Daxter spoke a little too quick after half that speech, a shade of red creeping up his cheeks. After finishing, he cleared his throat.

"So, anyway... yeah." Daxter narrowed his eyes. "Hold still for a sec."

He leaned forwards and pressed his lips to Jak's. A little unsure what to do, but then Jak opened his mouth just the slightest and the tip of his tongue darted out, playfully touching Daxter's lips. Daxter made a surprised noise and they broke away, chuckling.

"Okay. Okay." Daxter took in a deep breath and spread out his fingers against Jak's chest. He could only bear to look him in the eye for very short periods of time as he spoke. "Don't read too much into it, 'kay? Just 'cause of this and 'cause we're sleeping together doesn't mean I'm ready to jump in bed with you." He frowned. "Eh. You know what I mean."

"Yeah." Jak tilted his head the slightest, causing the metal of their goggles to clack together. "I know."

A less pleasant thought reared its ugly head in Daxter's mind, disturbing the moment. He didn't want to care about it at first, but it kept poking at his attention until he knew that he had to be
"Jak?" he said in a softer, serious voice. "Are you gonna be okay?"

There was a flinch, a shadow of the night before. Then Jak's shoulders fell and he let out a deep breath.

"I think so," he said. "There were times like that with Keira too. They come and go."

Daxter nodded, managing to smile a little again.

"We'll work it out when it happens," he said.

Jak's smile said that he knew, with absolute certainty, that he could always trust Daxter to help him through. The redhead started to say something again, to push away those unpleasantries, but there was a sudden beep.

Sighing, Jak plucked his communicator from his belt, but one look at the screen turned him serious in an instant. He quickly pushed the button to answer, and addressed the person on the other side of the connection.

"Yes, Damas?"

Daxter leaned against the frame of the car, perking his ears. Oh boy. Things tended to get rather hectic whenever Damas called. He hoped it wasn't time for his second entrance exam already. He hadn't gotten enough sleep lately and he definitely wasn't in the mood for that kind of nonsense…

"Get back to Spargus right now," the hoarse voice of the King crackled through the speakers. There was a twinge of barely suppressed rage in his tone which made the hair on Daxter's arms rise. Jak's eyebrows twitched. "We have a situation."

Sig didn't need the long trip in the air train to fall into more sober thoughts. No matter how glad he was to give a friend hope to get in touch with a lost loved one, he was from the very beginning aware of reality. First of all, the man calling himself Ingen obviously did not want to be noticed. That he had not tried to get in touch with Vida somehow was less worrying, as her son had gone missing before she ended up in the Wasteland. Neither had known whether the other was still alive, nor where.

Second, Sig would have to start asking questions in places where he was not wanted.

He had been prepared for it to be troublesome, which was why he wasn't surprised at his current situation. It would have been nice to have avoided it, but it could have been worse.

Maybe if he could have found the guy that had been trapped by a fallen box, and been saved from the metal head by Sig and Ingen…

No.

If things were as they appeared, then "Ingen's" name was Junn Durann.

Either way, that man had been nowhere to be found either, and so Sig had tried asking a random fellow and it had ended up in this soup.

At least the dock worker he had approached was only refusing to cooperate, not attacking him. And they were out in the open on the docks and not nearby any alley, so even if things went ugly the
dock worker and his gathering numbers of agitated co-workers couldn't try something stupid like attempting to drag Sig off out of sight for a beat down.

They wouldn't manage unless they were at least twice as many as they were now, of course, but Sig didn't want trouble either.

Sig glared at the man he had attempted to ask about "Ingen", who glared back.

"Don't know nobody like that," the dockworker said for the second time, folding his arms.

He had no reason to help a weirdo Wastelander. Especially not one who had worked for Krew. Sig felt a dark suspicion that he might have been involved in a hit against somebody the man knew, or even the guy himself.

There had been so many people that Krew ordered him to teach a lesson.

"All I want is to give'm a message from his mother," Sig said.

"Is that what ya call it these days?" somebody behind him said.

Sig didn't bother looking around. Any movement from him right now might be the spark that would set off the big boom. Feet shifted all around, as did the grips of crowbars and bundles of ropes. No good combinations.

"Right." Sig slowly raised both hands, waving them to signal he didn't want a fight. It only made the men shift again, almost simultaneously.

"Is there a problem here?"

The slightly muffled voice snapped through the tense air like a whip, and heads turned towards a trio of Freedom League soldiers walking up to the gathering crowd. The dock workers scattered with mutters about suspicious questions – although they did it with a whole less panic than they would have done three years ago at the sight of those masks.

Sig was the only one who didn't move, figuring he may as well try to make it through a round of tiresome questioning if it meant that he could toss his own question to the dock patrols.

"Alright, buddy, and what—" the soldier at the front started, but one of his companions grabbed his shoulder.

The three held a muttered, slightly static conversation and Sig let them, waiting it out. In the end, all three of the soldiers gave him a quick, friendly salute.

"Sorry about that," the leader said, "just checked in with HQ about your identity so we know you're in the clear. Was there a problem?"

"Nuthing I couldn't handle, but thanks," Sig said. "Didn't wanna get in a fight."

It did have it perks to be on the law enforcement's side, apart from sleeping better at night.

"I was just asking 'bout a guy I saw the other day," Sig went on. "An ex-KG with red hair, big guy like me. Called himself Ingen. I think he may have family in the Wasteland that he dun know is alive."

He didn't want to offer the man's real name. Junn Durann used a pseudonym for a reason, and if he heard about anybody knowing too much about him he was likely to take off somewhere else, if he
hadn't already.

There was a pause as the soldiers thought it over, but one by one they began shaking their heads.

"We can keep our eyes peeled, but no promises," the leader said. "We get asked about lotsa missing people."

"Figger as much."

And considering that "Ingen" had recoiled from the soldier asking him to join the army again, the man would probably keep his distance to any soldiers anyway. But it was worth a shot. Just as it had been worth asking the dock workers. With any luck, they would warn Junn that somebody claiming to know his mother had been looking for him. That might hopefully draw him out, as long as he dared to take the risk.

As the three soldiers walked off, Sig stood alone for a moment to ponder what to do next. He was in the city, so maybe he might as well check in with Tess. She hadn't called him but he would like to know if she had been doing any research.

His communicator beeped, killing off his planning. Annoyance sprung up when he saw the name on the screen. Truth to be told, he didn't like this caller any more than Jak and Daxter did. But he couldn't ignore it, either, so he pushed to answer.

"Where the hell are you?" Kleiver grunted from the speakers, not even bothering with a greeting.

"Had to take a round of Haven again," Sig said, impatiently. "What?"

Kleiver's oily moustache twitched as he barked out a nasty laugh.

"Double-time it back here," he said. "Damas is headin' to war."


Begin Introspection. Serial code: Kleiver.

S'long as I git ta do things my way 'round here, I dun care two spits 'bout who's running this circus. Kings an' Queens have a short expiration date 'round these parts, though Damas has hung on for pretty long now. 'pose it's 'cause he had trained being top dog before he even got his first mouthful o' sand.

Him, King of Pussy Town Haven? Pff. They couldn'a sent him out here quick enough. I knew we'd have a lotta fun with the guy first time I saw him. Barely out of his first arena fight an' he was hollering challenges at the last King to get down and take 'im on. Farao was his name.

'Course, ya can't even dream o' being if ya ain't even a citizen yet, so Damas would have to finish his challenges first. Damas knew people knew who he was. Eh. I din't care, though it would'a been fun ta fight 'im 'cause he wasn't no Haven softie. But people were queuing up ta take 'im on and he knew that if he din't show 'em they din't wanna mess with him, he wouldn't last five minutes out on the street before somebody shot 'im in the back.

Damas response to "you ain't ready yet, pup"?

"Next challenge. Now!"
He was pissed already, so he just barged on. An' we ain't gonna say no to good fun down here, so he got what he asked for. An' walked out.

By then people were hollering for more. Most had wanted his blood jus' 'cause that sounded more fun at first, but now he was provin' to be good, and we respect that. Good fight, too. Left him outta breath and bleedin', standin' there staggerin'.

An' then he glowed white.

'Course everyone knows they say the rulers o' Haven are descendants o' Mar, but most think it's doohickey. Well, thought. I did too. But he glowed, and he stopped bleedin' and pantin'. The monks almost creamed their robes, hollerin' that he could use white eco.

S'pose many would call it cheating, but out here, we use everythin' we got ta survive. Ain't nuthin' wrong with that.

Eh? Dun ask me where he got a hold of white eco since he was fresh from Pussy Town. I know it's rare there but ya know, he was top dog there too, 'ey. I dun care.

So he straightened up and stood there havin' a glarin' match with Farao.

"I have caught my breath and I am ready for the next challenge!"

And that was about the last polite thing they said to each other. I dun even think half o' us even understood some of them insults, 'cause the Farao could do fancy talk too, and the two o' them got kinda into it. Least until Damas got Farao so pissed he jumped down there ready to smash Damas' brains out with his fists.

I'm sure ya can use that fancy head o' yours to figger out how that ended.

Damas is a right King for Spargus. He ain't scared of goin' out there with the rest of us. An' he knows to prepare in case he dun come back.

He's good, but we can't afford to have a King that we can't live without. Chess is a stupid game.

End Introspection.

"Farao" is the Swedish spelling for Pharaoh. Don't ever say that you don't learn anything from reading fanfics ;D

Eh, I don't think I've got Kleiver's dialect down, it confuses me so. But oh well, you win some and you lose some. At least he finally got an introspection!
Lev Haste

Chapter Notes

Gadd is from my other fanfic Spartacus Now, where he escaped marauder captivity to find help after Damas was captured.

See the end of the chapter for more notes


Lately it seems like all I'm doing is staring at my communicator. A least… this time I'm not waiting for a call. So I'm not feeling useless because of that. But waiting for some Universal Truth to pop up in all its liberating glory ain't really doing it for me, either.

They all trust me. They have from the start. Torn always knew I could keep my mouth shut, even under pressure, because in a pinch I could always play the clueless ditz. But this isn't like in the old days, when there was always a risk for a KG to stare me down and demand to know where some fugitives had gone and I would force tears to my big ol' deer-caught-in-the-headlights-look and he'd walk off knowing he'd just talked to a soap bubble.

This is a friend asking me to help him, and I can't even imagine how he's suffered over the years.

It's too much.

Just too much.

I...

I'll crack this time, I can feel it. But how do I tell Sig the truth?

End Introspection.

The reasons behind Damas’ call to Jak, and Kleiver's to Sig, were set in motion about eight hours before the calls were made. Early that morning, before Jak and Daxter had even woken up from their attempt to get some sleep past the nightmares, Lev entered the car pit to look for Kleiver, and after a short discussion with him he continued on to find Zem.

The mechanic had taken to working random shifts, or at least so he said. Lev suspected that the man worked and worked until he was too tired to think, then ate, slept and got back to work. At least Kleiver had no reason to complain, as Zem was making up for his earlier lost time with gusto.

It was Lev's strong opinion that Zem needed to breathe some fresh air, and a reason to drag him out
wasn't that hard to find. One had just fallen into Lev's lap and he intended to use it.

After some searching amongst the cars and asking around, he eventually found Zem half buried in the depths off a Dust Demon. The car had so many tears and bumps in the frame that it looked like only sheer force of will and copious amounts of superglue could possibly hold it together.

"Hellooo," Lev said, reaching up to poke at Zem's lower back.

The response was a blind swat at his hand and a muffled curse.

"Morning to you too, sunshine," Lev commented.

Zem pushed himself out of the motor cave and glared down at the intruder. Sweat, oil and dirt competed with each other to make him look like something to frighten small children with. With a sigh, Lev shook his head.

"Do we have to go over hygiene regulations again?" he asked. "You may be a bit of an arse but you don't need to smell like one, ya know."

"Bah."

Zem jumped down on the ground and pulled out a fairly clean rag from his tool box. He dripped something on it from a bottle and wiped his face and hands, removing the worst smears from at least those parts of himself. Whatever was in the bottle had an eye-watering smell about it, strong enough to drown out the stench of stale sweat.

"Done whining?" he grunted and tossed the rag back in the box.

"Just about. Phew!" Lev pinched his nose for a moment, grinning while Zem rolled his eyes at him.

Chuckling, Lev turned and walked towards one of his own cars, waving over his shoulder at Zem to follow.

"Well, come on, I need to go pick up a pal who crashed out in the sand box," Lev said, glancing back with a smirk. "And Kleiver said that we could borrow your moping ass. As long as your head's out of it."

"You seem to have a morbid fascination for my rear end," Zem grunted, but stalked after Lev.

Zem tried to ignore the hearty laughter he got from that comment. The response, however, made him freeze in mid-step.

"That's because someone told me that he thought it looked really nice."

And then Lev ran for his life, cackling.

Hopping into his own Sand Shark, Lev raised both hands in a pacifying motion as Zem advanced with the expression of a thunder cloud.

"Down there, Bignasty," Lev said, smiling.

"It's not funny."

Lev's smile softened just the littlest bit.

"He really did say that, though. When I asked why he put up with you."
"Stop." Zem grit his teeth. "Stop it."

"Okay, fine. For now." Lev let out a deep breath and pointed to the passenger seat. "Get in, my pal is probably fighting PTSD as we speak."

"So I'll be out there with a moron and a basket case."

"Yup," Lev said, reaching for the ignition as Zem climbed into the seat beside him. "You'll fit right in!"

There was no argument to that. Zem just folded his arms and stared off into space as Lev drove through the city gates and into the ocean of sand outside. Despite the grumpy attitude from his passenger, though, Lev felt a lot better than a few days ago. Zem had finally awoken from his daze, and that was as much of a victory as could be hoped for. At least for the moment. With this, finally there was hope that he could get better.

Lev drove westwards, towards the smaller volcano by the ocean. Thanks to the early morning it wasn't too unpleasant a drive, at least for the first half hour. Then the sun got going on baking the world and them.

"Here, be my guide," Lev said after a while, tossing his communicator into Zem lap.

Without a comment, Zem flicked the device on and set it to pick up on nearby distress calls. The screen turned into a black field with green, crossing lines and a white dot in the middle, showing their current position. Another, blinking dot hovered at the edge of the screen.

"Bit more left," Zem grunted, and Lev turned the wheel.

As the blinking dot got closer and closer, Zem gazed ahead to try to see their goal. A rock formation stuck out of the sand ahead, and a dark, oozing river poured down the dune tossed against the great stones by past storms. The foot of the volcano was in sight, rising above the sand.

They drove around the rock to find an overturned, half flattened car, a bald man sitting in the shadow of the rock, and the dissolving corpse of a huge, lizard-like Wastelander metal head a little ways away. Dark eco flowed from the giant beast as it slowly disintegrated.

The man picked up his morph gun and stood up with a relived grin as Lev parked the car. Up closer he turned out to have only one eye, the other covered with a patch. A nasty scar stuck out from the upper and lower edge of the covering. A bloody cloth was sloppily tied around his left arm.

"Hey, Gadd!" Lev cheerfully said as he jumped out of the car. "Good hunting?"

"Yeah, but my car is bust." Gadd waved the gun at his pancake of a vehicle and the metal head. "Bastard stepped on it just to piss me off before it gave up the ghost. Might be some useful parts left, though."

Zem was already heading for it to see what he could scavenge from the smashed car.

"I would'a brought a bigger car if you'd told me it was that bad," Lev said, but without malice.

"I tried," Gadd said, plucking a smashed communicator from his belt.

"Ah. Let's check your arm."
Lev got a med kit from the back of his car and sat down in the shadow with Gadd to patch him up properly. As he was finishing the bandaging process, Zem came to join them, shaking his head.

"It's scrap," he said. "An' Lev's Shark ain't got the pulling strength. We'll need to send somebody."

"Okay," Lev said, pulling at the bandage. "Will you be a dear and report in, eh?"

Zem grunted but sat down in the shadow by the other two men, pulling out his communicator. Calling the Spargus security HQ, he gave a brief report on the damage and that they had picked up Gadd. Over in Spargus, buttons were pressed to turn Gadd's gate pass back on. As soon as he had activated his war amulet, his key to the Spargus gate had automatically switched off, so that no enemies could snatch it up and use it to storm the city.

Finishing the quick dialogue, Zem switched off the communicator and grabbed his water flask for a much needed gulp.

"Lovely weather today," Lev said, fastening the last bandage. He smirked at Zem. "I was starting to think you'd never get out in the sunlight again."

"Bet y'thought I'd offed myself," Zem grunted.

"The thought kinda crossed my mind a few times."

Lev scratched his stubble with a thumb, thoughtfully.

"Eleven or twelve times, I think."

"Feh."

Zem took another swig from his flask, letting the water swirl around in his mouth for a moment before he swallowed. He didn't look at either Lev or Gadd, but then he'd hardly given them more than glances at any given point. Instead, he stared ahead at the endless expanse of sand, sky, and the quivering heat in between.

"Too easy," he finally muttered.

He grunted slightly when Lev pushed at his shoulder, but rocked back with just a short glare. The other ex let out a curt breath of air through the corner of his lip.

"Damn, man," Lev said. "It's a cop out. A cop out, not easy!"

At that, Gadd broke his status as audience only.

"Ain't that the same thing?" he pointed out.

"Dunno, doesn't seem easy to me," Lev said with a shrug. Then he looked back at Zem. "Then again, I kinda like breathing."

"You're just gettin' into whatsit, now," Gadd said.

Lev gave him a half-interested look.

"Whatsit?" he asked.

"P something, I think."
"I got no idea."

Zem rolled his eyes at the two of them. They were lazily warming up to this exchange, while it was getting on his nerves very, very quickly.

"It's when you've got another idea 'bout a word," Gadd thoughtfully droned on.

Lev shrugged again.

"No idea," he said.

"I'm sure it starts with P…"

"Pragmatics!" Zem snapped. "Cripes…"

He ignored their amused glances. But a moment later, when Lev spoke, smirking, Zem's fingers rigidly tightened around his flask.

"Listen to that. Bet you learned that from Junn."

Zem was on his feet so quickly that Gadd blinked – a furious shadow towering over Lev and blocking out the sun.

"I told you——!"

But he seemed to catch on to the triumphant glimmer in the other ex's eyes quick enough to stop himself. The dark mouth snapped shut and he looked away, growling eerily much like a metal head.

"You're too easy," Lev said.

The fists coiled up by Zem's side twitched and for a second he seemed about to strike. But a moment passed, during which he might have seen Gadd automatically reach for his morph gun, or he caught himself on his own accord. Whichever the case, Zem settled for spewing out a very long string of rather creative swearing – the overall meaning coming down to that Lev should do a few rather painful things to himself – before turning and stalking towards the working car.

A few seconds passed, while the metaphorically burnt smell drifted out of the air.

Gadd scratched an itch behind his ear, then grunted as his fingertip touched something small that definitely shouldn't be there. Pinching quickly and drawing his hand back, he was greeted to the sight of a crushed insect between his fingers, its tiny black legs still twitching – but there was no blood on his fingers, so at least it hadn't bitten him.

"You're too easy," Lev said.

Courtesy of sitting still for too long out here. Well, if it had bitten him he might have noticed, but he didn't feel that sure about it. He'd been a wastelander for so long that he honestly couldn't remember how it felt not to always hurt somewhere.

He threw the tiny body aside and stood, brushing the sand from his pants. Then he paused for a moment, glancing at Zem who was climbing into the Shark.

"Why the hell are we talkin' about this kinda thing anyway?" Gadd said to the world at large.

Lev chuckled and got to his feet, waving towards the car with his water flask.

"Cause he's a jumping loon who ain't happy 'less he's pissed."
"Shut up!" came a snarl from the vehicle.

"See? He's alive again!" Lev cheerfully said.

They started towards the car, but after a couple of steps Gadd decided to give in to curiosity – though he leant in and spoke in a low voice. Because even if Lev seemed at perfect ease with teasing the dark skinned man, Gadd had a little more of his preservation instincts intact.

"Who's Junn, anyway?" he muttered.

Lev seemed about to speak loudly at first. In the last moment however, he changed his mind and murmured in the same sort of low voice.

"Eh, Junn Durann. He kept Zem as a pet in the Guard."

"Lev."

It was low, and rumbling. A few death threats were neatly tucked into the single syllable, too. And Zem didn't even turn his head when he spoke it.

"Hey now, he asked me!"

Zem still didn't turn around, but he gave another round of suggestions of what Lev should do with himself. A second passed after he fell silent, only as if Lev waited to see if he was done.

"In that order?" the shorter ex finally said, as cheerful as ever. "That'll be kinda tricky."

"Go to hell."

"You already said that."

Gadd glanced at Zem, getting a searing glare in return. The mechanic turned away after a moment, arms tightly folded over his chest. Gadd spent a second trying to figure out how sarcastic Lev had been when declaring that a guy like that had been anyone's pet.

"Then why don't you—" Zem started, but a sudden noise cut him off.

All three of them sharply looked around at the sound of engines. Rough engines. A cloud of sandy dust rose above a not too distant dune, far more than could be created by just one vehicle.

Neither of the three bothered to even curse. Zem swung over to the back of the Sand Shark as Gadd and Lev threw themselves into the car. Sand exploded behind them as the car's wheels roared into the ground, seeking purchase. They shot off just as the first marauder car crested the dune, followed by another.

Lev didn't bother to look around to check if there were more, staring ahead as he steered the Shark towards the nearby volcanic cliffs. But another cloud of sand rose up to the right of them, and two more marauder cars appeared within sight to cut them off.

There was a whirr as Zem grabbed Lev's gun, changing the setting on it. He aimed and shot at the pursuers, but the bumpy ride made it near impossible for him to hit anything. They reached the side of the mountain range. It was no saving grace, but at least it meant that no marauders could come from that way too.

Gadd raised his morph gun as well, and a hopeful crackle rose as the tip of it flared.
The peace maker shot never got a chance to load up. A lucky shot from one of the cars coming from the side hit one of the Shark's wheels, shattering it. The Shark veered, slid, and all Lev could do to save them from crashing was steer along the velocity and hit the brakes. By sheer luck they were halfway up a dune when it happened, and the car spun up against the slope to come to a lurching halt. Zem got thrown out, rolling against the sand and coming to a halt against one of the rocks by the base of the cliff.

That could have gone better, but also far worse.

Lev choked on his own breath, for a moment half unconscious. He came awake as Gadd roughly shook him, and they both clumsily climbed out of the car to take cover behind it. Zem crawled over to them, shaking his head to get his bearings straight. He had somehow managed to keep a hold of Lev's gun, though he handed it over without a word.

Squinting and holding a hand to his aching ribs, Lev watched as the marauder cars gathered in a half circle around them. The attackers stayed well out of firing range, but at this point they were just playing. All they had to do was charge forwards with their cars, guns blazing.

"I don't say this often, but we're royally fucked, gentlemen," he grunted.

"Didn't they ever tell you about morale in the guard?" Gadd growled.

"Oh sure, right after Praxis' Monday lectures about positive thinking."

Lev took out his war amulet and pushed the button, more out of instinct than any real hope of help arriving in time. Numbly, Zem did the same.

"We're fucked," Lev repeated.

"Unless we can stall," Gadd said, reaching into a pocket. "Or give up."

There was a soft beep. Lev glanced to the side and saw Gadd ball up his hand around the smallest war amulet the ex had ever seen, half the size of his thumb. Then Gadd popped it in his mouth and swallowed it with a deep swig from his water flask, face twisting in pain as the beacon was forced downwards. But after a moment he relaxed, and only then did he turn to look at Lev.

"I always said they weren't ever takin' me alive again," Gadd said with joyless grin. "And I still made plans for it. Heh."

He barked out a bitter laugh, but pulled himself together when Lev grasped his shoulder.

"I'll be okay," Gadd said, waving his hand.

Lev didn't feel quite certain of that, knowing well that his friend had a lot of baggage from his past as a marauder slave. Right then, though, Gadd did seemed focused enough to keep his cool for at least a little while.

"Think we can take one of their cars?"

The sudden question brought both men's attention to Zem. He was gazing ahead, shadowing his eyes with one hand. Sweat pearled down his dark face, adding a dull shimmer to the grey of his tattoos.

The hand fell and he met their gazes.
With a clatter, Lev changed the grip of his gun.

"Suicidal people first," he said, chuckling.

Their planning was cut off by a call from the surrounding cars.

"Listen up, ya inbreeds! We can do this the fun way or the easy way. If you give up we may let ya live!"

It was followed by rough laughter from the other cars.

"Give us a minute to discuss your offer!" Lev shouted back, glancing at his companions.

Neither one of them looked at him. Zem was staring right ahead, a spark of confusion flashing over his face. Then it disappeared just as quickly, and the grim scowl returned.

"Do ya really wanna give up?" Lev asked Gadd, studying him.

"No. They'll take me back kicking and screaming." A wild spark had come to the man's eyes. He was drowning panic with anger, and it worked.

Hopefully it would work long enough.

"Heh. Good plan. So, any big bangs?" Lev asked.

Gadd nodded, holding up two fingers.

"Well, better than nothing," Lev said, breathing out through his teeth. "I'm down to the basics."

"I'll be a distraction," Zem said. "They oughta think we're low on ammo now. If I can piss 'em off enough to cluster up you can take out a good deal of 'em."

"Oh no, see, I can't let anything happen to you."

Lev smiled, a well trained motion that could defeat even this situation. He reached out, squeezing Zem's shoulder.

"Junn would hunt me down and maul me," he said, softly.

"Shut up about Junn." Zem pinched the bridge of his nose, eyes crunched shut as he growled, voice hoarse and broken. "Shut up, Lev. Shut up. Junn is— Junn… go—"

He took in a deep breath, bowing his head low.

"We've ain't got time for this shit. I'll be a fucking distraction."

"Well?" came an impatient shout from the marauder's circle, underlining Zem's words. "What'll it be?"

Gadd and Lev exchanged glances.

"I'll give you one of my peace maker bullets," Gadd said, reaching for the clip on his gun. "We better make 'em count."

Quickly nodding, Lev snapped an empty socket on his morph gun open and shoved the offered bullet in there. That done, he glanced at Zem to make sure he was ready. The mechanic didn't meet
the gaze, his eyes shut tight as he sat back, taking in a couple of mouthfuls of water from his flask in hard gulps.

As ready as he would ever be, probably.

Lev stood up on the seat, putting a hand beside his mouth to strengthen the shout.

"To tell you the truth, gentlemen, we kinda like the peaceful way!" he called. "So how about we let you have this fresh, juicy and grumpy mechanic nobody likes, and my other pal an' I run along?"

He looked down to cheerfully beam at Zem's murderous glare, then straightened up and added as an after-thought:

"He's one of Praxis' old favorites too!"

"I swear, I'm gonna bleedin' haunt you," Zem growled, rubbing his forehead while Gadd struggled to stop smirking despite the situation.

There was a momentary pause from the enemy camp, and the wind even brought in a couple of disbelieving chuckles. Not every day you come upon a possible victim who's up for comedy, for sure.

"Put a bow on him and we may think it over!" came the reply, finally – and the laughter was louder this time. But it was also more cruel.

"I would if I could, good sirs!" Lev shouted back.

"I know you would," Zem grumbled.

He gritted his teeth and stood, hopping over the side of the car onto the ground.

"Don't you want a good luck kiss?" Lev asked.

There was, however, an unamused twinge in his voice. He still got a rude gesture in return.

"Just shoot if you gotta," Zem growled.

He stood up and walked out of the cover, sliding down the sandy slope on his heels. There was a curious murmur from the marauders, surprised and amused at what might happen next.

Halfway between the attackers and the defenders, Zem stopped and grabbed a screwdriver and a wrench, snapping them from his tool belt. He could have spun them over between his fingers, but he had never bothered to learn such useless tricks.

"Lesse who's the inbreed, kids," he muttered. Then he raised his voice. "Hey! Are you pansies just gonna sit there aiming at me all day? I ain't working for nobody who can't fight!"

Gadd watched Zem's actions, shadowing his one eye with a hand. Too bad it might be the last show he ever saw, but at least it would probably be a good one. He had once seen a Spargan mechanic take down a Wasteland metal head, with just her tools.

Gadd wouldn't be surprised if Kleiver gave all his mechanics lessons.

From the cars came jeers and somebody shouted an insulting challenge back. Zem responded in kind, resulting in a laughing mock-groan from several of the marauders.
"Oi..." Lev commented, pinching the bridge of his nose as the insults quickly grew more and more basic.

"What?" Gadd grumbled without taking his eyes off the show, waiting for the right moment to fire.

"I know it's standard procedure, but can't he at least go out with a little bit of dignity?"

The only answer Lev got to that was Zem yelling something very unflattering about whoever-insulted-him-last's family jewels. Lev sighed.

Several marauders rose up from the cars to yells along the lines of "That's it!", and Lev's gut clenched in anticipation. He knew their chances were abysmal and Zem's worst of all since he put himself in the line of fire, but maybe they would be able to take enough marauders out...

"No!"

The roar froze the marauders, and they looked around. From one of the middle cars a huge bulk of a man rose up, drawing his sword.

"He's all mine!" the big boy snarled as he jumped out of the car.

"Oh come on...!" Lev muttered as the lonely marauder charged at Zem, who raised his tools to defend.

So much for hoping they'd all jump on Zem to be neatly blasted into oblivion. Then again, that would have taken the mechanic out too, and Lev didn't like that idea at all.

Maybe if Zem could keep it up, though. He may very well be able to take down that one guy for a start...

Lev heard a rock clatter down behind him. Then he heard Gadd's shout. He spun around, looking up. The marauder falling towards him was a black shadow against the clear blue sky, but the sword flashed like a bolt of lightning.

Lev's arm moved, trying to get his gun in range to fire. To block. Anything.

Too slow.

*Oh dammit. I can't do anything right lately.*

The shock dulled the first pain.

It went so fast. He almost had time to be surprised.

Zem feinted to the side as the marauder charged at him, but the man saw it coming and swept his leg out, tripping Zem.

The heat of the blazing sand tore at his skin straight through his clothes and he hissed in pain, rolling over. He caught sight of the sword just as it sliced the air towards him.

"Oh sh—"

But he got his wrench up in time. The violent clang tore at his ears and his elbow hit the sand, a sour ache vibrating through his whole arm. Screeching, the edge of the sword clashed down the mouth of the wrench. The tool was flung out of Zem's grip and hit the ground with a dull thud.
However, it served to bring the attacker off balance and he stumbled.

Gods, that bastard was strong.

Zem rolled out of the way and blindly scrambled backwards, given the brief triumph of the marauder's cursing. The armored man started to regain his balance, the mask turning towards the refugee. Eyes blazing with fury glittered behind the holes in the metal. For a second.

With a hiss Zem flung his hand forwards and up, sending a rain of sand at the mask. The marauder recoiled, cursing in pain as the powder got into his eyes. He staggered backwards, tearing at the mask. It gave Zem time to get to his feet, fumbling at his belt for another tool to use. His fingers smarted from scrambling around in the hot sand but it was nothing—

The mask hit the ground and the marauder wiped his eyes with the back of his hand, then turned back to his opponent. Rusty metal removed, the tattooed face was left open for full view – with its familiar scars and smirk.

Zem's breath stuck in his throat.

No. Nonono.

"Hello, Tower," the marauder said.

Shock held Zem frozen a second too long. He had no chance to parry when the marauder's fist connected with his stomach. Zem staggered back, screeching for air, and the fist slammed into his chin, sending him to the ground. The marauder's boot came down on Zem's chest before he could gather himself enough to roll away.

From the cars, laughter and cheers rose up.

"Hey boys, I think we found some walking, breathing stress relief!" the marauder standing over Zem called.

Other masked warriors began jumping out of the cars, heading over to see the spoils. In the back of his head, Zem numbly realized that they must have gotten to Lev and Gadd somehow, because there were no shots coming from that way. He just couldn't care right then. He couldn't care about anything.

"And don't be too gentle on him," the mask-less marauder told his men, shifting his weight hard.

A pained sound escaped Zem, and he the back of his head into the hot sand as the studded boot pressed roughly against him. He squinted upwards, teeth bared.

"This little sicko loves it when it hurts. Don't you, Zem?"

He just rolled his head to the side, closing his eyes.

"Hey, Lorke."

It was so soft that it was a miracle even the one addressed heard it. But the boot disappeared from his chest. Before Zem had time to try to breathe again however, he was grabbed by his collar and hoisted into standing.

He didn't struggle, only putting so much weight into his own legs that he didn't choke because of the grip.
"Hey, piece of shit. Nice braid."

Spit prickled Zem's cheek for a second, then it melted into his own sweat and the heat. He turned his head then, sluggishly.

And smiled at the face of his captor.

"Aren't you dead yet?" Zem said.

Lorke's eyebrows only had time to twitch before a fist rammed into his chin, sending him stumbling backwards.

It was a display that even had Gadd's mouth falling open. His own captors' grips eased just the slightest, but not enough to let him move.

"What is he, psycho?" somebody said.

Zem managed to get another punch in before he had to retreat, but this one only hit the marauder's chest armor. The mechanic growled, swinging back to avoid the counterblow. Red drops glistened against the blue sky from the cuts on the dark hand.

Neither stopped.

They were clumsy, gracelessly ramming their fists at the other and trying to avoid the counters. There was a trained quality to it, their motions eerily similar. Blows delivered and blocks hindering them, first the marauder, then Zem. Like they were only practicing old skills imprinted in their bodies, trying to revive the memory but neither managing quick enough.

Gadd realized that they had the same kind of training even before the marauder's unmasked face happened to turn into view, and he saw the tattoos. Around him, the other bandits were starting to make amused comments about the fight, betting about how much more Zem could take.

"He'll be down in three more hits."

"No way, man. Two tops."

"I dunno, he seems really damn stubborn."

"Lookit those eyes. What's he smoking?"

"Some good shit."

Gadd squinted, trying to see what they meant. He felt strangely empty. This had been his nightmare for ages, ever since the relief of being free from captivity had eased up enough to let the memories wash in and claim every night.

But as empty as he felt, he did not feel so dead as Zem looked. His eyes had no light, his face limp.

The fight went on, but only one of the combatants had proper armor to protect him. But even as he was clearly faltering, losing ground and aim, Zem kept trying to land a blow.

"I thought you guys just said he was suicidal 'cause he worked for Kleiver," Gadd murmured to the body beside him.

Lev didn't reply. His misted over eyes stared at the sky, drying in the unforgiving heat but unblinking. He wouldn't blink. Not ever again.
And by the next blow Zem fell, his nose broken. He cried out only once, a strangled yelp. Then he laid still.

Turning from the finished fight, one of the marauders bent down over Lev. The mask obscured his face, but Gadd could see the man's eyes moving through the small openings.

"Hey—" Gadd started as the marauder reached out for Lev's face, for a moment believing that the robber might desecrate the body.

But the marauder silently closed Lev's eyes and walked away.

He left it to the others to loot the corpse.

Zem didn't struggle anymore when they tied him up, even if small movements revealed that he was still awake. Didn't try to get loose when they dragged him up and half carried him towards the cars, dissolving braid slouching over his shoulder.

Gadd saw his face only when the mechanic was thrown into the back of a car, when one of the men jerked Zem's head back by his hair and called him a good one, worth keeping for amusement value alone.

He flinched then.

Blood was smeared over his face, dripping from his nose. One eye swollen closed, lip cut up. Sand clung to him, stuck by sweat and blood.

He didn't flinch when his opponent ordered the guards to make sure he stayed alive. His one visible eye only rolled to the side.

Silent acceptance.

Begin Introspection. Serial code: Zem.

If somebody asked, I'd say I don't know why I fought back. Just suppose nobody'll ask, not like it matters. I'm a warrior, it's what I should've done. Looks clear enough. Even when we knew we were losing, nobody in the Guard has a right to retreat. Nobody under Damas either, I s'pose, but he'd never put a bullet through anyone's head if they pulled back. He wants us to stay alive.

I jus’… didn't. I didn't hit him 'cause I wouldn't go down without a fight, or 'cause I was tryin' to break out alive. When I realized it was Lorke, it jus' didn't matter anymore. I didn't matter.

I haven't mattered for years, but if Lorke's still alive I guess I gotta be too. But I had to fight him and he'd fight back, to just make it more even.

It's not right if he kills me. He's… got the right but he can't make me pay enough. If he'll be the one to end it, all I can do is try an' make it right.

… he an' me… in the prison…

I spent months looking at a kid who wanted to die, but he wasn't allowed to. Everybody else was relieved sooner or later, but not him. Praxis and the commander wouldn't allow it. Not him. He had
to live and scream. And scream. And scream.

And I was too fucking chicken to give'm a bullet of mercy. So I shot the one guy who tried to make him stop hurting, instead. Shot him, knocked him out and shot him again. Not so he died.

Just wanted to hurt, because I knew he had enjoyed hurting the kid. Hurting him and all the others. He always laughed.

And then he failed to give the kid death, to stop his pain. I had to make him feel a bit of their suffering.

Heh. Can't even remember being sane.

It took months, they prolly didn't care since Lorke got dumped in the wasteland anyway afterwards. He was supposed to be thrown out. He just got to rest in the infirmary for a bit.

But I wasn't okay, I... got in another fight— with Lorke it wasn't a fight though, it was— I followed him until nobody saw. The other fight, was in the prison. Blew a fuse and hit another guard and somebody shouted you'd think I was psycho enough to shoot Lorke.

I think... maybe they suspected it all along.

An' when I woke up in Spargus he was already there. And he'd figured it out.

I still wanted to live then, s'why I made it out alive. I could'a just let him shoot me when he had the chance. Maybe I thought there was still a chance I'd redeem myself.

Like it mattered. Idiot.

Lev doesn't care either, not really. He shouldn't. He shouldn't have tried, he shouldn't have...

But Junn could make him care, Junn could do anything.

I never understood, I won't understand why Junn was in the Guard. Some people just shouldn't. Heh... who'd'a thunk I'd be one to buckle? I was material, I was so damn angry all the time. A word about the color of my skin and somebody bled.

Why was he there? They hadn't started the draft yet, he shouldn't have. Just shouldn't. He looked the size, shit, he was taller than me. But gods, why didn't they turn him away in the office, one look at his eyes and you knew he shouldn't be there. An' still he got in fights too, but even that... for his mum, 'cause some asshole kept being an ass about her. A KG getting into fights for his mum's sake, what the hell?

He didn't fit, he... shouldn't have been made to fit. I don't even know if they changed him after I left. Sages, not that. Not that, shit... no.

I couldn't... just couldn't look him in the eye now. Not even he would stop me from fighting if he knew. Not even Junn.

Fuck. It's too late.

End Introspection.
Chapter End Notes

Way to go, self. First time ever killing off a non-antagonist character.

I swear it's not just for shock value. Lev's death was planned from the start. Still. He kept growing on me, like he seemed to do for the readers as well.

…

*sob*
Begin Introspection. Serial code: ?

Oh hell no. I ain't talkin' to anybody.

You listen ta me, feller. You ain't got no idea what it was like, back when Praxis and Krew were in charge o' things around here. We got squished between 'em, 'tween their bloodhounds. And the KG at least just shot you point blank. Most o' the time.

Krew… his people…

An' that Wastelander bastard, we all know him. Krew's bootlicker. An' now he comes here and has the gall ta ask questions? Hell no.

I dunno what Ingen did, but we all agree. He ain't hearing about this. He's a good guy. He'd prolly go right in the trap. "Message from his mother?" Kiss my ass.

Now get lost, we've got crates to load.

End Introspection.

Shortly after the marauders had driven off with their prisoners, four shadows ade it down from the mountain range, steadily leaping from foothold to foothold until they reached the ground.

The group of monks stopped about two meters above the ground, giving the area a final look-over before the leader waved her hand and they descended the last bit. Two of them went to collect the war amulets tossed to the ground by the marauders, while one checked on the body on and the leader took out her communicator to make a report to Spargus.

"Come in, Spegel," crackled from the communicator after a moment.

"Marauder attack, one dead," Spegel said. She glanced up as one of her companions held up his own communicator, showing a blip moving further and further away from them. "Two beacons found, a third one moving away with the marauders."

"Heh, sloppy of them to miss an amulet," came the response from the communicator. "We'll take 'em, then. Lemme see who they killed."

Spegel turned her communicator towards the body.

"Closer to the face," the man on the other end said, suddenly grim.
When the camera caught the tattooed features of the victim, a string of curses were muttered through the speakers.

"A friend?" the Spegel softly asked.

"Yeah. We'll be a few peeps screaming for blood in a minute."

"I'm sorry."

"Thanks. But we'll get them. Can ya hold the burial? He had a lotta friends."

Spegel pursed her mouth and glanced up at the others, who shook their heads after exchanging glances.

"Our leaper lizards can't carry another man to Spargus," Spegel said. "It's too dangerous."

"Hang on a sec, will ya?" the man in Spargus said. Then followed a sharp mutter, as if the person on the other end was talking to somebody else in a loud voice just out of reach for the microphone. Other voices joined in the murmur.

The monks waited, though one kept a close eye on where that one moving war amulet was heading. If it was found on the prisoner and discarded, it would still be a clue where to head to hopefully save the abducted Wastelanders, of course. Still, it was the first time any of the four could recall the marauders missing an amulet. Normally they were very thorough with making sure they never brought a tracker along.

That thought was momentarily derailed as the voice from the communicator spoke up clearly again.

"Listen, can ya stay put so nothing eats 'im? We're comin' over right now to pick 'im up and rip them a new one."

"Wait, this is all very strange," Spegel said, frowning. "What if the marauders did have a working communicator and know they're taking an amulet along? It can be a trap."

There was some grumbling in the background.

"Alright, fine. What do you wanna do?" the Wastelander asked, impatient.

"You may send somebody here to pick up the body, but hold the attack," Spegel said. "I leave two monks here to guard, me and another one will follow the marauders and scout the area."

"Thank you," came from Spargus, with relief. "Keep your link open, and we'll be there at any sign of trouble."

"Agreed."

Spegel hung her communicator on her belt and motioned at one of her companions.

"Come on, Silver. There is no time to waste."

The other monk grimly nodded and the two of them mounted their leaper lizards and took off across the dunes, while the two monks left behind gently dragged Lev's corpse closer to the cliffs. That done, they fetched cloth and bottles of embalming fluids from their saddle bags.

Silver and Spegel rode across the desert as quickly as they dared, to avoid driving the lizards to
exhaustion. They might very well need the lizards to be able to run as fast as they possibly could at any given time, should anything attack. Spegel checked her communicator at regular intervals, a frown digging deeper and deeper into her forehead as she compared the distant dot's position with the area ahead of them.

The T-shaped mountain range just southwest of Spargus rose up from the sands, and the dot was leading them right towards it. A memory sparked in the back of the monk's mind and she glanced around at Silver, who raised her protective hood just a little bit to share a suspicious look.

It took almost two hours to ride there, but the leaper lizards were strong, resilient beasts well used to long travels in the unforgiving heat and kept a steady pace. Once they reached the cliff side the monks drove the lizards to ascend by nimble jumps. Gaining higher ground was a relief to both the animals and riders. No place was completely safe in the Wasteland, but at least here they were out of reach for anything that couldn't climb or fly. It halved the normal danger.

They crested the edge of the cliffs and gazed down, not sure if they would see anything. The dot had stopped a little ways further east, inside or below the mountain.

But something else greeted the monks.

There was a zigzagging trail between the rocks, uneven so that nobody on the ground could tell that there actually was a way in. The sand was torn up by the wheels of marauder cars, so many that it was impossible to tell.

A few men and women wearing little but loincloths, guarded closely by several marauders, moved about just outside the outmost rocks, sweeping at the ground with heavy cloth. Smoothening the sand and erasing the tracks leading inside, leaving only the tracks that drove up towards the cliffs and then turned around.

Finished with hiding the tracks, the slaves were called in by their guards, and herded up the trail into the mountain.

Silver and Spegel waited until all of them were out of sight before they moved further up, carefully so as to not disturb a single stone and alert any possible enemies below. Holding her breath, Spegel lifted her communicator and set it to the lowest possible volume before whispering into the microphone. They should be far out of hearing range, but she didn't dare to take risks.

"Come in, Spargus."

"Have ya found them?" the Wastelander on the other end demanded, though in a low voice.

"In a manner of speaking, yes." Spegel gazed down, clenching her jaw. "We will require a larger scouting team."

Breathing made him feel like choking. Gadd coughed, almost retching on the mix of sand and blood in his mouth. Even when unconscious, he'd had an inkling that waking up was a bad idea. Disorientation only saved him from the truth for a little while. Then the memories kept flooding back and he pushed his aching body up, shaking his head to clear it.

It was difficult to think, hunger and thirst wearying him. The trip here had been long, but so had the silence. He thought he must have passed out during the journey, further clogging up his brain. Only some vague memories remained of how he had gotten from there to where he currently was.

After seeing Lev get cut down, he'd just let them take him as more marauders leapt from the cliffs.
Most others might have gone down avenging their friend, but Gadd's own history had bitterly taught him to wait for a chance, especially when he had a hidden ace.

They had still given him a beating to make sure he stayed down. He was pretty surprised, though, to find that he was no longer tied up. Looking around, he figured they had decided this was enough. He was in a small cavern, fenced off by uneven, rusty bars. There was another one across from him, and as he squinted he could make out Zem's unmov ing body in it.

A small corridor stretched between the cells, its stomped earth running out of sight in the dusk. The only illumination came from a torch too far out of reach from either simple prison to really give any light, and its smoke hung thick in the air with little way of escaping.

Zem just laid there, eyes closed. Maybe he was dead too.

Gadd gritted his teeth, trying to get his mind straight. Trying to keep the panic down. It was too familiar, too real, too raw. Madness teetered on the edge of his mind, memories he had suppressed of lashes, punches. He had watched more than one friend get their tongue or ear cut off for insubordination, or just assumed slights towards their marauder "masters."

After escaping his first captivity, he had spent hours with monks teaching him to handle the panic, teaching him to focus on his breath to take him back from the edge, back to the here and now. Well, here and now didn't help him right then at all.

It took him a while to get his breathing under control, gulping down the thick, dry air through his teeth.

Okay. Okay…

There was one thing he could think about to calm himself, to give him a little bit of hope at least. The marauders hadn't found any war amulet on him – because it was in his belly, sending its message out undeterred. Of course, that was far from foolproof either… he may as well start praying to the Precursors. Or Damas.

The latter sounded more sensible. Still, he wasn't sure if there was any room to hope, not when they were this far into enemy territory.

It hurt to move, but he eventually managed – with a lot of bit back groaning – to at least prop himself up against a wall. It didn't help much, but at least he didn't have his face full of floor anymore. Sitting like that he cradled his head in his hands, struggling to focus on his breath.

"You'll be okay."

Gadd looked up, watching Zem through the double line of awkwardly shaped bars. The green eyes were open now, the torchlight flickering in them. The tiny flames looked eerie in the lifeless gaze.

"What makes you think that?" Gadd grunted. Zem hadn't been a marauder prisoner before, he couldn't really talk.

Well, at least the guy wasn't dead. The mechanic hadn't seemed conscious until now, not since the fight in the desert. The marauders had dragged him in here and thrown him on the floor of his cell. He hadn't taken a step on his own – but neither had he struggled. That much Gadd could recall, dreamlike fragments as he himself floated in and out of consciousness.

Now Zem dragged himself up on his knees, leaning into the corner of his cage-like room. It was clumsy, unlike Gadd he still had his arms tied behind his back and he was obviously in a much
worse state after the beating he'd taken. Dirty rust scraped at his forehead as he leant it against one of the iron bars.

But despite all signs and reasons for discomfort, a small smile slithered across his lips, digging into the swollen cheek.

It would have been disturbing if Gadd could have brought himself to care.

"Well, not really okay I s'pose," Zem murmured. He closed his eyes for a moment, then looked up again. "He just doesn't care about you."

A suspicion arose.

"Are you going to try something?" Gadd asked.

The smile twitched and Zem drew in a shaking breath.

"Don't think I need to," he said.

"Heh."

There was a piece of undeniable logic in that one. He'd done quite a lot already.

The silence wasn't long.

"Where's Lev?" Zem murmured.

"Dead."

There was no comment. Only a slow breath passing through Zem's lips as he closed his eyes.

Silent moments trickled by. The aching pain in Gadd's body started to fall back into a sore throb, almost making it possible to think again. But that only made the hunger and thirst more prominent. Gadd didn't bother to curse aloud.

Zem's smile suddenly twitched back to life, dully.

"I know how it goes," he muttered, as if to himself. "He's just patching himself up. He's still pissed… might be drawing it out, but he's too damn blunt for that. I am too… I am…"

He crumbled suddenly, all weight resting against the bars. His murmur dribbled down to a whisper, but Gadd still managed to hear it.

"I'm not… not like that. Aw fuck, I'm not, not…"

"Zem."

He looked up.

"Hm?"

Gadd set himself cross-legged, watching the other man. Dull, lazy interest. It just didn't matter anymore.

"Are you insane?"

The question sounded odd when spoken like that. Both of them – anyone – knew that such a thing
was never asked in a bland tone like that. It should be shouted or harshly whispered. Not sounding like a question about the weather.

Zem breathed out through his nose, probably a bad idea considering its broken state. His wince proved this assumption right.

Then he shook his head.

"I don't think so. I think I'm… past that. Ah hell…"

He leant back, good eye turning to the rough, blackened ceiling.

"You saw Lorke up close?" he asked, without looking at Gadd.

The other prisoner raised a tired brow.

"Who, that guy who beat you up?" he asked.

"Mm."

"No."

"He's got a round scar… here," Zem said, the last word almost incomprehensible. As he spoke it, he poked his tongue at the inside of his not swollen cheek so that the soft flesh ballooned. An almost comical sight, even as he winced again.

But a rising suspicion widened Gadd's eyes just slightly. Zem's head limply fell forwards and he was smiling again.

"I did that," he said.

"You what?"

At this point, Gadd expected Zem to chuckle. But in the mechanic's defense, he didn't. That was a relief.

"He's got more than that," Zem murmured, curiously as if exploring something in his own mind which he had not been fully aware of before. "Four bullets and he's still alive, then again… where was I aiming anyway? Just one more, 'say ah, you bastard'."

He shuddered, shaking his head again.

"Death was too easy, too easy… that fucker, he laughed."

Curling up further, he chewed on his lip. The swollen split cracked and blood prickled out in fat drops, tinting his teeth red.

"He was getting kicked out anyway, pissed off the Commander. What should they care? That's my problem, I cared. You can't care in the Guard. Not in there, in there. But how the fuck can you laugh? How?"

He stared at the silent Gadd, begging an answer.

"It was… just a kid. Just a fucking kid. And he had to live, never stop… never stop the pain, we weren't… I couldn't… but Lorke…"
He wasn't hysterical. That was the most disconcerting thing – but maybe, maybe he had just made himself so exhausted thinking about whatever was playing in his mind now, that he could not act physically. If there was hysteria, it was only in his thoughts.

And then suddenly he breathed in deeply and straightened up. The smile had lost its edge, even if it was still there.

"I want him to kill me. Jak. He deserves it. Ain't happening now though… I suppose, Lorke deserves it too. But then…"

He looked dully thoughtful. Staring off at nothing, struck by something he may have believed at a subconscious level.

"… maybe if Lorke kills me he'll die too. Then only Jak will remember it. 'Cause I think we're the last. And the commander, 'course, but…"

Gadd regarded him. He felt slightly sick after listening to the disjointed mutterings – another pain to his heap – but then, there was more pity. He didn't want to know what Zem meant. Not know what had driven the man to this.

It was like a confessional, as if religion had a worth to them again. A worth past the monetary value and usefulness of artifacts. But then again, Gadd thought, maybe he was listening only because he knew what the man in the other cell thought. That Gadd was listening to a man who needed to lighten the load on his soul before he died.

"I think you're insane, Zem," Gadd murmured, surprising himself with his soft voice.

Zem breathed in through his broken nose with some effort.

"Yeah…" he mumbled, his head dropping.

Not too far away, a door opened.

Gadd immediately stiffened as three shadows appeared and opened the other cell, but Zem didn't move. He only looked up when the hard boots forced themselves into his sight and he was yanked upwards by his collar.

It was the big marauder, Lorke, flanked by two other men. The leader had taken off his mask, staring into Zem's dull eyes.

"Time for a little chat, Tower," Lorke growled, grin twisting into a horrifying smirk.

Zem's silence only made the other man snarl, and he tossed the prisoner over to the two marauders. They dragged the unresponsive man out of the cell and down the tunnel, out of sight for Gadd.

With a sick feeling pouring into his stomach, Gadd raised his hands in preparation to cover them. He could very well tell what would come next. He'd heard it before, but he had a feeling that this would be worse than anything he'd listened to in the past.

Another sharp scraping sound of a crude door opening.

"Hang on a sec, wait—" a vaguely familiar voice started.

"What?" Lorke snarled.

"What the hell are you—"
"Not in the mood for this, fresh meat!"

The argument escalated, but it was very brief. A few more exchanges, warped by the echo as the voices rose, and then the rasp of a sword drawn. A heavy stab and a scream.

"Throw him down there and come help me hang up this piece of shit," Lorke snarled.

One of the guards returned, dragging his groaning companion along. He carelessly dumped the dying man on the ground outside of Gadd's cell and reached for the victim's face.

"You're fired," the guard coldly said, ripping off the other's mask before disappearing back down the tunnel.

It was the marauder who had closed Lev's eyes back there, Gadd noticed. And without the mask, more than that was revealed.

"Hardly didn't recognize you when you're not screaming obscenities," Gadd said.

"Very funny," Jelas wheezed.

Gadd dragged himself over, looking at the ex. He'd known Jelas a little before he was thrown out of Spargus, and the man had seen better days even prior to getting stabbed in the stomach. His cheeks had hollowed out and his clothes were ragged. Probably the same clothes he'd worn when he got banished. Not like they let you pack a spare.

Blood leaked out between the fingers Jelas pressed to his belly, coloring the faded shirt crimson. Dirt clung to his sweaty skin and his face twisted in agony, relaxing only momentarily as his strength ebbed. He did not have long, but it would still be several excruciating minutes.

He stared Gadd in the eye and mouthed "help".

There was nothing that could save him and he knew it. At this point, only one kind of help could be given.

"Can you sit up?" Gadd said, voice softening. He was not cruel enough to let another man suffer.

Jelas shook his head.

With a sigh, Gadd reached through the bars and grasped Jelas' throat. The awkward angle of the bars and his own wounds made it impossible for him to make it quick by breaking the man's neck. He had no other choice, since Jelas could not move into a better position.

Jelas did not struggle as Gadd strangled him.

From further down the tunnel there was a wet crunch, and Zem screamed.

Kleiver seldom hurried anywhere, unless he was driving of course. Very few things were important enough for him to bother straining himself for it. Then again there had been very few times when Damas had snarled like that, ordering him via communicator to come to the meeting hall right now.

There was a strange air in the city, he noticed that on the way from the car pit. Mostly exes – but not only them – stood in smaller or bigger groups here and there, speaking rapidly and in upset voices. Kleiver didn't take the time to listen or ask what it was all about, but he had an inkling that Damas rage was connected to it.
Kleiver inwardly grunted. He sure hoped those tattooed morons weren't up to something. There had been such snafus with them lately, and a mutiny at this time would be annoying.

He took the elevator up to the throne room and continued into the meeting hall, finding that the rest of the Spargus council plus Seem were already there, leaning over the map on the table. Damas stood with both hands splayed over the surface, teeth bared and eyes blazing.

Kleiver couldn't help smirking. Whatever was going on, was gonna be fun.

"They were right on our doorstep!" Damas snarled, slamming his fist into the map.

Whenever Damas actually got pissed off, things always became interesting. And messy. And right now, he looked as if somebody had spat him in the face.

"Care ta fill me in, anybody?" Kleiver asked the room at large, moving up to the others.

Seem briefly filled him in on the attack and how her monks had followed the SOS signal.

"It seems that we have finally discovered where the marauders were attacking us from," she said, rapping a fingertip against the mountain range below Spargus.

Kleiver snarled, in a flash fully understanding why Damas was so angry.

"They made a base right there. That close to Spargus." Damas' hand clenched against the table.

"No wonder they've managed to harass us so much lately," the foraging master grimly said.

"Do we know what's in there?" Damas demanded.

"Eh, just about, Lordship," Kleiver said, fingering his moustache as he studied the map. "I think I know what they're usin'. It shouldn'a exist anymore but they prolly found it and dug it out. Musta taken them a while, though."

"A wasted effort. We're going in." Damas looked sharply at Kleiver. "What do you recall from this place?"

Kleiver thought for a moment, then began drawing invisible lines on the map with his thumb, giving an estimate.

"There were others who should remember. We'll have a lil' chat an' see what we can draw up," he finally said.

"Very well."

Damas started handing out orders for preparations, and the council members scattered. Finally, the King turned to Kleiver again.

"You, call Sig and make sure he's in Spargus. Or get him back here. I'll begin gathering soldiers for the assault."

"Yeah, about that, Lordship," Kleiver said with a grin, jabbing his thumb towards the elevator. "Dun think ya need to bother fishing for volunteers."
Begin Introspection. Serial code: Damas.

I am a strict advocate of not rushing in blindly, but there are times when one must act quickly. Every moment means a risk that they might discover the war amulet and realize that an attack is coming.

There is the concern that this is a trap, but no signs point to that. The scouts saw slaves covering up the tracks as they must have normally done to conceal the hidden entrance, and though those monks could not see far inside they could detect no preparations for an assault.

The marauders have seemed to grow in strength lately, and now we finally see why. We cannot allow this to continue.

End Introspection.

Chapter End Notes

The two named monks were named after my real life friend and fellow Jak and Daxter nut, who goes by the name SilverSpegel online *waves* That means Silver Mirror.
There were an awful lot of exes in the car pit. Daxter instinctively stiffened as Jak drove through the gates and they both saw the grim faces of the Wastelanders gathering up just outside the city entrance. There were others too, both men and women, but over half of the warriors bore grey tattoos.

Glancing at Jak, Daxter saw him scowl but clench his teeth. As he slowed down to park, one of the exes broke away from the gathering and hurried over, waving.

"Hey!"

"What?" Jak warily said, stopping the Shark.

The tattooed face was twisted with both anger and grief, but mostly the former.

"Eh, you prolly don't remember me," the ex said, motioning towards the desert. "I helped patch you up after Jelas… whatever. Bastards killed Lev, man!"

Jak gave a start.

"Who?" Daxter demanded, utterly confused and trying to hide it with annoyance.

"He was the one who led that mission…" Jak started, but the large gates opened once again with a series of whirrs and heavy clangs.

Two Gila Stompers roared inside, slowing and stopping in the middle of the pit. The driver – a tall, bulky ex with gray hair – of one stood up and waved, calling the crowd forwards. The ex that had spoken with Jak and Daxter turned around and hurried that way.

The people surged towards the cars as the passenger, a wiry monk, climbed to the back of the car. There was a body swathed up in a blanket back there, and Jak's stomach dropped as the monk pulled at the wrappings.
The driver turned around and gathered up the body in his arms, and the monk freed the cloth. The blanket fell away from the body's face and the driver shifted his grip, tipping the limp head up against his arm as if he had carried a sleeping child.

Lev did indeed look like he was asleep, eyes closed, lips parted just a little. The wind toyed with his short blond hair, whisking the edge of his carrier's pale scarf across the tattooed face. His goggles were gone, probably looted by his murderers. Jak's hand clenched on the Sand Shark's hot frame.

A wail rose up from the crowd, miserable for just a second before the rage overpowered sadness. They wanted blood.

"Oh wow, they got one with a fanclub," Daxter muttered, though under his breath so that only Jak heard it. Even Daxter could tell that a joke wouldn't be appreciated by the crowd.

And he didn't fancy them turning on him, either.

"Yeah," Jak said, a bit louder than Daxter had spoken. It earned him a confused look. "He was a good guy."

"I feel like I'm missing a puzzle piece or five here," Daxter said, raising his eyebrows high.

Jak had to lean in to be heard when he spoke, as the crowd's blood thirst was only getting louder. There was a spark in Jak's eye too, that he shared their sentiments.

"He led the mission where I was shot," he said, scowling towards the dead body. "You would've liked him."

"Huh," was all Daxter managed at first. He wasn't surprised that Jak was upset about somebody getting killed, even if he'd only met them once. Jak could get upset about just hearing about complete strangers dying. A random ex-KG seemed a little out of place even there, though.

And then, all of a sudden, silence swept in over the car pit, so quickly that both of the young men gave a start and looked around.

The crowd parted, and Damas walked through.

The ex who held Lev moved as if to step down from the car, but Damas halted him with a hand motion. Instead, the King climbed up beside the tattooed man, who turned to hold Lev's body forwards.

Damas reached out and gently held his palm against Lev's forehead for a moment, then stroke his hand down over the peaceful face, fingertips lingering on the closed eyelids. A moan rose from the crowd, and the King carefully lifted the cloth to cover up Lev's face again. Then he turned to the people watching him.

"He didn't die for nothing! Those who were with him were taken prisoner, and one of them managed to keep their war amulet. We finally know where the marauders that have antagonized our patrols and foragers for weeks have been hiding." Damas raised his peace maker above his head in one hand as the crowd let hear a roaring, vicious cheer. "They're in the mountains to the southwest. And we're taking them out right now!"


The King, after the crowd had yelled and waved their guns for a bit, shut them all up by ramming
his peace maker into the side of the car with a loud clang.

"The scouts have concluded that they're using an old, half-finished metal head nest that was long thought destroyed," Damas said, "that gives us a basic layout, and veterans have drawn up a map from memory. I want everyone who's on this mission to download it to your communicators. Keep in mind that it can't be completely accurate. Code NA28-07-97EI."

He added the last after a moment, giving the warriors a chance to take out their communicators and prepare the settings. Jak absently handed his to Daxter, who punched in the numbers. A crude outline of a cave system, drawn by green lines on a black background, popped up on the display. There were also several question marks on some of the tunnels and rooms.

Daxter groaned.

"Since this is an old cave system, we cannot use peace makers during this assault," Damas instructed. "We mustn't risk cave-ins."

There was some grunting at this, but in understanding.

"We don't have an exact number of opponents," Damas continued, "but it's estimated to be about one hundred at the most. By all signs, this is a forwards camp. Despite that we must not be careless. I want ten Ram Rods to lead the charge."

Volunteers raised their hands, and Damas picked out nine of them – including those that had gone to fetch Lev's body – then looked up and pointed right at Jak. The King didn't change his expression of grim determination, but a flash passed in his eyes. Jak didn't need to be asked twice, though he did wait a moment for Daxter to scramble out of the Shark after him. They hurried over to their own Ram Rod while Damas divided the rest of the team.

Daxter kept waiting for somebody to tell him that he was still firmly in the "fresh meat" heap and thus not qualified, but nobody seemed to care. Until he climbed up into the Rod and met Jak's hesitant gaze. Daxter raised a hand. Normally he would have complained about this being a bad, bad idea overall, but for once they had a lot of backup. And it was useless arguing with Jak about a direct order from Damas. And most importantly…

"Nope, don't wanna hear it, babe," Daxter said. "If I went with ya into all those other death traps I ain't staying behind now." And he tapped the side of his lips for emphasis.

Jak watched him for a moment longer, but then nodded.

"Stick close, though," he said.

"Don't I ever?"

People were moving to their vehicles one on one or in small groups. Daxter swept his gaze over the car pit, just about to make a comment about how stupid it was for them to get drafted into the ex-KG Avenger Brigade, when he spotted Lev's body being carried off on a stretcher by two monks. Damas exchanged a few words with the driver who had brought in the dead man, and then both the ex and the King climbed into the former's Ram Rod.

"Seriously? Master Sand is getting off his throne?" Daxter said. He turned back to Jak, who didn't say a word. He just stared at that other Ram Rod as if hypnotized. Then a grin spread over his face and he reached for the ignition.

Daxter rolled his eyes and slapped a hand to his forehead.
"Oh man, fanboy. You're just a liiittle too excited about getting to see Damas fight." He quirked an eyebrow. "Should I be jealous?"

That finally got Jak's attention back, as he scoffed and gave Daxter a light whack over the head. The redhead cackled, but his stomach did a little twirl at the reassurance, joking as it was. Then he tried to mentally slap himself into gear. A little early to get like *that*. He could at least retain a little dignity!

But he couldn't keep down his goony smile.

The small army finished loading into various cars and they rolled out, Damas in the front. Once out in the open the other Ram Rods accelerated to flank the King's vehicle as the smaller cars spread out behind them, giving each other maneuvering space just in case something nasty was unfortunate enough to come in their way.

Daxter glanced about, having to admit to himself that being part of such a large team was a thrilling feel. He was so used to just him and Jak having to wing it on their lonesome – but here there were allies all around with a common goal, ready to support at the slightest notion.

It was quite a drive even if their goal was technically pretty close to Spargus – but that was close on a map, less so in the actual desert. Eventually though, the brown cliffs heaved up over the horizon.

Jak's communicator beeped and Daxter unhooked it so that Jak could keep driving. Glancing about, he saw people in the surrounding cars making similar motions. As he pushed the button, Damas' voice rose through the speakers.

"We're getting close. Stay sharp." That was all.

Daxter gazed ahead through his goggles. As they crested a dune, there was a motion up on the cliffs. A pale square spread out, flapping in the desert wind. The cars turned that way, heading straight towards it. Getting closer, Daxter saw that it was a monk holding a blanket, signaling where the hidden entrance was.

They reached a row of boulders and jutting rock no different from the rest of the foot of the mountain, but the monk stood just above it, gesturing. The convoy slowed and as Daxter strained his ears, he could hear Damas' voice and the crackle of a communicator. He couldn't hear what they said, but the monk up there also held their hand up as if speaking into a technological marvel.

Damas made a communal call once again.

"The trail is narrow and twists. Follow closely." And with that, the Ram Rod carrying the King drove forwards, in between two of the rocks.

With their position in the group, Jak could only make him and Daxter the fourth in line. The road took sharp turns, forcing the Ram Rods to crawl at times, but it was a short trip. Once through, it was straight into the cave. Still they took it slow, waiting for those behind to have a chance to catch up.

"Be prepared," Damas grimly said, as calm as ever. "We're going in."

And his Ram Rod charged forwards, the others following with just enough distance in case there was a need for a sudden brake.

There were screams from inside, just barely heard over the roar of engines, and hard, metallic
crunches as the front Rods plowed over marauder cars. Jak drove in and they found themselves in a large cavern, lit up by glow moss and the cars' lights. In the poor illumination it was for those first moments blindingly dark after the bright outside, but Jak rolled up beside the other Wastelander cars. The next Ram Rod came up beside the Demolition Duo, further building the wall.

Marauders scrambled for cover in the shadows, hiding behind the cars along the wall where the ceiling was too low for the Rods to drive through. Slingshot rocks and bullets flew through the air even while the smaller cars were rolling in.

It was obvious even from the start that the surprised marauders were outmatched against the more well-armed and furious Wastelanders.

Damas rose from his passenger seat, forcing defenders to duck and cover with well aimed bullets. Somebody on the other side yelled recognition of him and he ducked down under a hail of stones and bullets. The distraction worked, though, giving the other Wastelanders a few clean shots.

Daxter caught Jak's eye, both of them wondering if they had seriously just seen Damas use himself as bait. There was little time to ponder that, though, as there were still a lot of marauders.

Jak didn't bother with the Ram Rod's gun, standing up and aiming his morph gun to pick away at defense and marauders alike. Daxter opted for the safer tactic of slightly leaning out the window to take aim.

The marauders were already caving under the onslaught and the Wastelanders from the back leaped out of their cars, charging forwards to take out those hiding behind cover. Some fell, but there were too many of them and they clashed with the defenders, swords caught against guns and fists smashing into bodies.

And then, Daxter spotted a familiar form. It took a moment before he recognized the huge marauder, and by then the man was already disappearing down a tunnel, leaving the men he had spoken with to hold the line. Daxter's eyebrows shot downwards and he grabbed Jak's shoulder.

Jak glanced around, and Daxter pointed.

"That guy who tried to chop off your hand at the oasis!" he shouted over the noise of battle.

A growl twisted Jak's face and he jumped down from the Ram Rod, skirting around the fight to get to the side tunnel, Daxter hot on his heels. The guards didn't stand a chance in the face of a Jak who wasn't too exhausted to care about whether that ex-prison KG lived or not.

But somebody else caught sight of the two of them leaving.

It wasn't a very long tunnel, and there were no guards as all of them must have already rushed to the front or hid. After just a few steps Jak caught sight of a body on the floor and halted, waving at Daxter to be careful. The light was dim, but he still saw the tattooed face with it's closed eyes, the blood stain spread over the dirty shirt. Jak's lips twisted, and he looked away, conflicted at seeing that particular ex dead.

He didn't pity him, but it was strange to find him here of all places.

The body laid just outside of a crude cell, with another one facing it on the opposite side of the tunnel. A shadow looked up inside of it and then staggered towards the bars, revealing itself to be a bald Wastelander. He grasped the bars, a wild look in his remaining eye.

"You okay?" Jak asked, moving to shoot the padlock on the door apart.
But the bald Wastelander frantically waved at them to hurry on.

"Never mind me!" he croaked. "You gotta help Zem!"

Jak froze, and then turned to run deeper down the tunnel, not even glancing at the body on the floor again. Daxter followed, clenching his teeth. His remaining ottel instincts were hollering that something was about to go very, very badly.

Just ahead a snarling voice was speaking, only answered by a groan. The shouting and gunshots from the war in the big cave must have overpowered the brief conversation by the cell, because it didn't seem like either person ahead had an idea that somebody was coming their way.

"Just gonna slit your throat before I go."

They came around a corner and Jak's froze, gun aimed and ready to fire – but the sight threw him off. Daxter took one look and slapped a hand to his mouth, eyes shooting wide open in horror.

It was a bigger cell than those they had passed, likewise fenced off with crude bars so that anybody on the outside could get a full view.

No. Not a cell.

A torture chamber.

Various terrifying tools were hung on the wall as well as waiting chains. A brazier blazed in the middle of the room, several iron pokers lined up in a scaffold beside it. The marauder stood by the wall, leaning over a prisoner and holding his sword to the bloodied throat.

A whimpering voice in the back of Daxter's mind pointed out that yeah, they really needed to help Zem.

The prisoner was on his knees, the chains shackling his wrists the only reason he was upright. His long black hair laid pasted against his head and face by sweat and blood.

So much blood. There was more blood than dark skin. Daxter's stomach roiled and if his body had been responsive at all he would have staggered back.

"Sorry I couldn't do it proper," the marauder sneered, insanity lacing his voice. "You deserved to die screaming, you muddy shit. For old time's sake..." he tilted his sword and Zem grunted pathetically. "Yes, we had a lot of fun with that back in the day, didn't we?"

"Say what you want..." Blood and spittle dribbled from the prisoner's mouth and his voice was both nasal and lisping. The eye that wasn't completely swollen shut glared at the marauder, with the final burst of defiance from a doomed man. "... but I didn't... ever... laugh."

The marauder snickered. A cruel, cold laughter.

Daxter heard Jak's breath hitch.

He did not think. He just threw himself down and covered his head. A roar unlike anything he'd heard from Jak for ages tore through his friend with a vicious crackle of dark eco. The morph gun fell to the ground.

"Praxis' little pet monster!" Daxter heard the marauder snarl.

Then Jak ripped right through the iron bars, and the marauder's furious war cry turned to a howl of
pain. He screamed. And screamed.

Daxter glanced up, and then looked away just as quickly when a sliced off hand hit the ground inside the room. And Dark Jak just kept going, tearing the man to death bit by bit. Pieces and blood splattered on the walls and floor, and in Daxter's ears the wet slaps were as loud as the screams.

*Oh Gods, just kill him! Just end it!*

Running steps came down the tunnel and Daxter looked up, almost jumping out of his skin when he saw who it was. He pushed himself up on shaking arms and shook his head, fearing that this might be too much.

The marauder finally silenced, and the remains of the man fell to the floor as Dark Jak tossed his hands and let the body slide off his claws. And then he turned around, just as the intruder reached Daxter and grasped his shoulder. Dark Jak didn't see it, his whole focus aimed at the other living creature in the cavern.

Zem squinted up at the demon towering above his trapped, crumpled form.

"Go ahead. It's okay."

It was hardly more than a wheezing breath.

Zem heavily tilted his head, exposing his throat. Jak's hand rose up, long, black claws still dripping with the marauder's blood. The hand on Daxter's shoulder squeezed it so hard that white spots danced through his sight, and yet his throat was tied in a knot.

He could not cry out. He could not stop Jak.

The fingers tensed, bent.

The hand swept out, cleaving the air.

Zem fell forwards with a gasp, crashing on the ground. His chains hit the floor with a hard clatter, the severed ends sparking with dark eco for a second. He tried to move, only to sag back with a pained moan.

But he was alive.

Daxter slumped with relief. He glanced to the side, but the face above him was unreadable. He could swear he heard a quiet sigh of leaving tension, though. Then his attention was arrested by the sound of staggering steps.

Jak stumbled backwards, snarling, spreading the marauders blood into his hair. Ice poured into Daxter's gut. Soon... soon he'd see his handiwork.

Jak clutched his head with a final growl, shuddering under the crackles of dark eco as the transformation receded, his skin tanned, color flowed into his hair and the darkness left his eyes. For a moment he just stood there, heaving with every breath, dazed.

Then he saw what remained of the marauder, and he looked at his own gory hands. Daxter saw plain as day when the realization struck, that horrible, horrible realization of what he'd done, how far gone he'd been. How he'd been reveling in the agony he caused.

Jak gagged, staggering backwards.
The hand left Daxter's shoulder but he was left sitting there, numb, unable to think, as the person who'd held him back walked into the torture chamber.

Jak struggled to gather himself, tried not to feel, tried not to think.

Useless.

He gagged again, almost falling but grasping balance by leaning against the dark wall. It smelled of mold and blood and screams. His stomach roiled, the stench clung to his mouth, everywhere, crawling, pressing, inescapable.

Desperately holding a hand to his face, trying to block it all out, keep the nausea from exploding but it was in him already, all of it and he could not protect himself. Tasted copper sliding through his lips, not his blood, the other's, that thing that was dead and torn, strips of flesh under his nails—

Hands were on his arms then, hands that were too big to be Daxter's, but weren't guards' or Erol's or Praxis' either. He couldn't look around, only let himself be pushed down on his knees, and that person was beside him, one hand moving, pulling the scarf aside.

"Don't fight it."

Something broke. Jak choked, but that was the last wall torn down before he buckled and retched, unable to stop it this time. The sour taste exploded in his senses but even that was better, better, better than the mold and screams and blood.

He was left trembling, shaking in every limb as it finally ended, a final dry heave and he fell backwards, all strength drained and gone. But the hands wouldn't let him hit the floor, catching and supporting him. It was then that he saw what he thought he had heard, had felt all the while but been unable to accept. That someone like that would see him like he had been, like he was. Purple eyes watching him, curiously free of disgust.

He would have paled, would have been furious and hated himself even more for allowing any of what had passed. But in the exhaustion, all he could feel was a dribbling shame as he stared up from under heavy eyelids and the mist filling his sight.

Wanted to say that he hadn't wanted to. That they made him that way, that he wasn't like that, not that horrid, not that out of control.

He just couldn't remember how to speak. It never seemed to change anything, either way.

The voice that finally spoke wasn't his, but he could have almost believed it. He couldn't have believed that the other man could speak in such a soft, strained way. Maybe he was disgusted after all. Jak thought so for a second, until his brain finally caught up with the words, the tone.

"Don't. It's fine. It's fine."

Soothing, but it didn't fit, not from him. Not him, ever, speaking as if to a child who was frightened of having done something wrong.

But that tone, that feeling, stirred something far, far back in Jak's mind and suddenly it did seem to fit. He blinked, lost, confused on top of everything else.

He was straightened up, trying to support himself and only managing halfway. Sluggishly tried to wipe his lips with his arm, to restore some spoil of dignity. The arm fell down when he could no
longer keep it raised.

That hand moved again, pushing at his head to keep it up. He flinched, the motion too familiar. A threat.

But the expression on the face above him had not changed.

"I heard. It's a lie, Jak. You're not a monster."

He slowly blinked.

"What…?"

Unable to recall how he made the sound, but it was answered.

"You're not a monster. You didn't kill him when he asked."

Jak tried to pull himself together. He took in a deep breath, shaking his head in an attempt to clear it.

"Mnh… thanks," he finally grunted, lamely.

There was only a soft snort in reply. Somehow however, it managed to sound approving.

He noticed movement in the background, heard Zem groan as he was lifted by some other warriors. It was enough to rouse both the two kneeling men. Jak fought himself to his feet, but he could not deny the offered support. Not from **him**.

"Your Lordship?" a woman's voice said, breaking the strange air.

"Yes?"

Damas turned around, at the three Spargans who were holding Zem up. He hung in their grip, struggling to raise his head. Blood dribbled from his multitude of wounds across nasty bruises, and his left leg sprawled at a strange, numb angle.

The question was silent, but obvious. **Is it even worth trying to save him?**

Zem's feverish eyes peered at Damas as well as his swollen face allowed. He weakly shook his head.

Damas was silent for a moment.

"I do not think I can pass judgment on you," he finally said, ignoring the confused looks from all directions. "Jak decided you should live."

Zem's head dropped.

Damas watched the broken mechanic be gently brought out of the nightmarish room. He remained silent as he turned and followed, Jak more or less hanging on his arm. But before he handed Jak over the pale Daxter, the King seemed to have collected himself. When he spoke, it was with his normal, controlled tone.

"I'm glad you didn't kill him."

Jak looked up, confused. It took a moment before he remembered Zem's chilling offer.
Looked at Daxter again, the wide, frightened eyes.

At least he hadn't entered.

Jak held on to that. He didn't want to think about that Daxter looked scared of him. He couldn't take it.

Begin Introspection. Serial code: Daxter.

Yeah, he's freaked me out. I ain't gonna deny it.

Because it hasn't happened in a while. Not that badly. He's been able to control it for ages and… and…

Hell.

I hate it. I hate it, we ain't talking pretty stuff here. But… I understand why he flipped. It's just that I haven't seen him that bad for a while, I thought it was gone. That he wouldn't ever go there anymore.

It's… a lot. Of crap.

Yeah sure, I get scared when Jak goes absolutely psycho. Who wouldn't? But hey, unlike the main population of this sorry rock, I'm not scared for my own hide. Nuhuh. No, I really ain't. It's the base rule of our existence, y'know. That Jak can't hurt me. But I'm scared that he'll never manage to get back again.

See, even when Jak goes psycho, he's… still my Jak. Or at least, I know he'll come back and be my Jak again. But it was rough sometimes back in Haven, when he was pissed outta his skull from morning to bedtime. Not much between him and Darkie sometimes, it got hard to tell the difference when he was real down and low. He hasn't been like that in a while, he's been doing better. So we've both been feeling better, and I like that. It's easier to make him smile these days.

But when he went all out like that back there, he was back in "I'm gonna kill Praxis" mach two mode.

And I really don't wanna deal with that Jak again. I'd do it, because he's Jak, and I'm Daxter, and he's the best friend a Daxter can have. But it was hard enough to drag him out of that mental pit the first time around, him and me both could live happily without seconds. I wish all the hobby-sadists would freakin' leave him alone.

I want him to smile. I want him to be happy. And I'll find a way to keep him from ever sinking back down if it's the last thing I do.

End Introspection.
Comfort

Begin Introspection. Serial code: Damas.

If I had called out, I could have stopped him. Or I could have rushed in and tackled him. To simply grab his arm at that point would have been unwise.

Hmm?

No, the marauder… seeing what he’d done to his prisoner, I believe he got what he deserved. But for a moment, I wasn’t sure what Jak would do to Zem. I… know more than I wish I did, after I made Zem confess his past, and the rest I can guess. Him offering his death to Jak was, in a way, admirable.

But I do not know if I could have forgiven Jak if he had murdered a helpless man, even a death seeking wretch.

I could have stopped him. But I did nothing, because I had to know if Jak too knew, even when he was that far gone, that it was wrong.

Being dangerously useful is a double-edged blade. He must not be dangerous to his own allies.

I should feel only relief, because he proved that he can control himself, even when revenge is the obvious option. And the battle was a great success. We suffered few losses and found many men and women thought dead, instead enslaved. Heh. It’s a bit of déjà vu.

I should feel only relief…

… but Precursors, his eyes. For a moment he looked like a lost child, when he finally looked up at me. Like a child with… those eyes… and...

Leave me, I must think. I must make sense. I must.

End Introspection.

More people left the marauder hideout than had gone to do battle there. Underfed, pale slaves dressed in rags, many with wrists chafed by chains and backs marked by whip scars climbed into the many vehicles alongside the warriors. Drawn faces relaxing and eyes sparking with new life as they were brought out of the dark caves and into the blasting sunlight.

Some would be given replacement war amulets. Others would have to fight for theirs. But even those who knew they faced an uncertain future in the arena had only smiles and silent tears of relief.

The caravan of Spargan cars rolled over the dunes, though some stayed behind to take care of any
possible returning marauder patrols. They also guarded the place in wait for a demolition team that would set charges to collapse the caves and tunnels once more, to ensure that nobody could make use of the hideout again.

There was cheering, laughing and animated talk amongst the victorious Wastelanders. A great victory, indeed. And now, they should have one less thing to worry about. It was a good reason to be cheerful, for once.

Jak let Daxter drive the Ram Rod back towards Spargus.

He hadn't said a word since the torture chamber. When they had gotten back to their car, he'd just climbed into the passenger seat, in the middle of the crowd of animated allies. Where everyone could see him chose to not take the wheel. And he didn't care. He just slumped in the passenger seat, staring off into space.

It turned Daxter's blood to ice.

A couple of freed slaves got to ride with them back towards Spargus, cramming themselves into the back of the Ram Rod's passenger cage. Daxter knew that he rambled, and even got a relieved guffaw from the man and woman in the back now and again – though that may or may not have been because they were so happy that they were prepared to be amused by any lame joke. Daxter hardly knew what he said, but he knew that it wasn't exactly his A-game.

Jak didn't even look at him.

Daxter's throat tied itself into a tighter and tighter knot the longer the true silence stretched, even as he tried to fill it with useless words. In the end, he just stopped because he could hardly breathe. He desperately wanted to scream at Jak to come back from wherever he'd gone, but he couldn't find the words, especially not with an audience.

Every time he glanced aside, all he saw was the edge of Jak's profile, half-turned away as his head slumped.

*It'll be okay you have to be okay I'll have to make you okay you just gotta, you just GOTTA*

Pressing his lips tightly together, Daxter focused all he had into driving as safely as he could. It was the only thing that could keep him sane.

Anytime they'd been out, he always found the walls of Spargus to be a beautiful sight, this time more than ever. In there, there could be breathing space. There could be just them, so Jak would have a chance to uncoil. He just had to.

The caravan rolled into Spargus bit by bit, and as the demolition duo rolled in Daxter saw that there were monks and medics waiting to take care of the wounded and the slaves, gently leading or carrying them off. That made it easy to just dump the two slave passengers, as they could take care of themselves. Daxter could focus on the most important thing.

Somehow, he managed to drag Jak all the way through the city to the ocean, to properly clean off all the blood out of sight. It helped that Jak didn't put up a fight, just went along like an automaton. At least, he threw a glance or two at Daxter when the redhead tried talking and joking, but the gaze was so far off that it seemed as if Jak looked right through his friend.

Daxter stared at Jak mechanically drying his hair and pull on a change of clothes. He'd come back. He just needed a little time.
It helped a little to cling to that hope, but it didn't make Daxter's hands clench and unclench any less, frustration making his throat burn. He'd seen Jak worse off, but it was so long ago that the experience was mercilessly raw.

He was pretty sure where Jak was right now, and it didn't seem like he could return yet. That laugh he'd heard had triggered it all, and he was still struggling to get out.

*What had they been laughing about?*

It wasn't hard to figure out. And it robbed Daxter of any clear thought. It was too much. He had no words that could fix it. Watching Jak like this made his heart ache, made him want to scream his frustration. Wanted to touch Jak, arms burning with the wish to hold him close, hold him safe. Make it okay.

But he didn't dare to touch him, not when he was stuck *in there*.

Evening was falling by the time they made it back to their apartment. Daxter refused to let Jak ride his jet board there, seeing as he'd barely made it to and from their little bathing island without falling off. No need to make things even worse by having zombie Jak run over any trigger happy Spargus pedestrians.

Those were just about his exact words to Jak. And Jak just nodded absently, folding the jet board and hanging it on his back before starting the trek to their home. Daxter stared after him for a moment before hurrying after, clenching his jaw so hard it hurt.

Cooling winds blew in over Spargus and the sinking sun painted the buildings, cliffs, sand and people in warm, soft colors. Here and there a lizard or dog-like creature lounged about on the warm rocks, rolling contentedly onto their backs to warm their bellies. People went about their business as usually, many smiling and talking excitedly about the successful assault Damas had led.

Jak walked through it all like it had been a ghost town. He climbed the stairs to the apartment, leaving the door wide ajar without a glance over his shoulder. Daxter lingered by the door before going in and closing it, leaving the two simple rooms in shadow. His gut twisted.

The air felt thick with the silence. He could vaguely make out Jak, more out of habit and sound than sight catching that he was sitting down on one of the sleeping mats, pulling off his boots and tossing the backpack, goggles and morph gun aside.

The only sensible thing to do was to lit the lamps, so Daxter busied himself with that for a couple of minutes. Tried to give himself time to think.

By the time the soft light of the oil lamps illuminated both rooms in a gentle, fluttering glow, Jak laid on his side on one of the mats, legs half pulled up and fists tightly curled. Staring at nothing still. Daxter wasn't sure what he was seeing, but it was probably not the room he was currently in.

*Oh gods come back COME BACK TO ME*

Daxter sat down with a wary look, eying Jak.

"Hey buddy… hey…"

There was no reply, Jak still didn't look at him. The fist lying in front of the stern face was clenched so hard the knuckles were paling.

"Jak? C'mon, don't give me the silent treatment. It's freaky when you do."
Blue eyes glanced upwards, and the fist unclenched the slightest bit as a sign of recognition. But then it constricted again. Daxter wet his lips, then set his jaw. He would not give up.

Shrugging with a loud sigh, he tugged the goggles off his head, then started to pull off his boots.

"Fine, be that way. Can't blame you really, I feel like I could sleep a week. There oughta be a bonus system for times like these, something better than a handful of credits more."

The final boot hit the floor with a dry *thunk*. Daxter entwined his fingers, turned his hands over and stretched for good measure. He would absolutely not let it show how uneasy he felt.

Settling back down he reached out, brushing his hand over Jak's shoulder, the one he had always stood on as an ottsel. Very carefully, searching for the tiniest sign of fear. But there wasn't any reaction to it.

Desperation reared another tiny, shivering sprout. Daxter bit his lip.

"Jak…"

He scooted closer, lying down on the thin stretch of mat that was left beside the blond.

"… c'mon," Daxter whispered, moving his hand to Jak's back. It was a risk, but the shoulder had been safe and he could see that words weren't reaching far enough.

At least he had the attention, blue eyes staring into his in the lamplight. Green eyebrows crept low in a scowl that had lost its edge. Anger gone, leaving behind nothing but pain that twisted in the depth of Jak's gaze, searching for an escape. Daxter felt as if that pain stabbed him right through his throat, choking every attempt at speaking.

*That laugh.*

An arm was around him suddenly and he was on his back, staring up at the same pain looking down on him and it was clawing, begging for something, anything to drown it. Daxter opened his mouth but there were no words. His throat was too dry.

Jak's hands curled over his shoulders, the only warning before the blond moved. His weight bore down on Daxter, eliciting just the tiniest eep. But then even that was muffled in a rough kiss.

Daxter had seen it coming, so the squirm could not be blamed on surprise. It was a weak twist, the motion itself uncertain about whether to be a protest or confusion. He didn't know. His hands fumbled, like an extension of his mind, trying to find something to hang on to – wanted to find a breather for him, push away because it was too sudden.

It wasn't right.

There was only pain in Jak's eyes and his grip, desperately clutching Daxter. Hands grabbing his upper body, while Jak's knees dug into Daxter's hips, making it impossible to move. The kiss ended when fumbling fingers pushed at a tense arm, but even then Jak only let up a little. Their lips were still so close, close enough to softly brush against each other as the two young men gasped for air. Some spoil of the tenderness that should have been there.

Daxter hesitantly reached up to push more at the arm, demand a time out. That was what he wanted, but the movement was weak.

He could not joke away that snicker that Jak had recognized, that had made him go berserk. Only
one time before had Jak looked anything like this, and that was that time in the prison, in that second as he transformed back, looking so lost and confused and hurt.

*That laugh.*

Daxter's hand curled up and sunk to the floor. He shuddered, tense but laying back, looking up at Jak who still watched him with the same agony in his eyes. There was dark eco there, or its legacy, a sickly purplish tint behind the blue. Maybe it was just deeper than the light could go.

Jak wasn't thinking straight.

Even understanding that fact, Daxter swallowed hard but did not move.

He could not push Jak away when there was so much pain.

But as soon as that numb realization petrified Daxter Jak froze, staring at him, and then leapt back as if bitten. Groaning, Jak staggered away, sagging down in a corner of the room. Nails digging into his face, eyes crunched shut.

Daxter heaved himself up, dragging his knees up under him. A chill not proper for the desert surged around him after Jak's desperate embrace – but it was easier to breathe. He needed a moment to gather himself.

Okay. Okay. Everything's cool.

Okay, nothing was cool, but at least Jak was awake. Better? Maybe?

Daxter needed a few seconds to calm down. Then he crawled over to Jak, whispering his name.

Jak didn't react, just sat there – shaking, too angry and exhausted to make the decision to move. So it remained until Daxter grabbed hold of his arm and tugged, pulling Jak upwards. The blond obeyed without a word, though sluggishly. And once he sat up, his legs bent against his chest and he turned his face away, sighing at the dusk.

Daxter swallowed hard, trying to ease the drought in his mouth.

Jak didn't have to look at him to silently scream *oh gods how could I how how forgive me I didn't I wasn't-

It was an opening. A horrible one, but one nonetheless. Daxter took in a deep breath and charged in.

"Now look here," he said, folding his arms with a huff. "If you can go all purple rage and still not slice up that trussed up ex, there ain't no way you're gonna do something stupid to me while you're rosy-skinned."

Jak moved his head until his eyes showed just above his arm. He was listening. Finally listening.

Daxter managed to fire off a grin.

"I'm using logic here, buddy. Suck it up."

There was no smile. There was no relaxation. But in that moment, there was a flash of gratitude in Jak's gaze, pure and desperate.

Daxter's shoulders slumped. Something swelled and relaxed in his chest. Too many emotions
clogging him. He swallowed hard, his head spinning. Too much. Staring at the blond man before him, trying to find the words, trying to sort out what he felt for this person that meant everything to him, and seeing him hurt was pure torture.

He knew he should try to talk about other things, but it felt even more wrong. He was too shaken as well, frightened by the idea of what could bring Jak so far away. Just like Jak was curling up and trying not to think about it.

*If I lose you I'll go crazy when you're hurt the world ends*

He knew that with absolute certainty.

And finally could admit why to himself.

It wasn't the right thing to do, but it was what felt the least wrong, promising just the faintest speck of comfort for both of them. And it may get better.

So Daxter did it anyway.

He reached forwards, past Jak's knees, winding his arms around the tense neck. Leant after his arms, until his chest met with the pulled up legs and could go no further. It was enough, he could touch a clammy temple with his forehead. Jak moved just a little bit, leaning against the contact.

Daxter wet his lips, or at least tried to.

"It's okay," he whispered, soft voice cracking under the hoarseness of his dry throat. "I'm here."

For a moment there was only silence.

Then slowly Jak let out a deep breath and lifted his arms. The tightly held legs parted and Daxter scooted in, enclosed and held – but not forcefully this time. He tried to relax into it, but fear of what he wanted to say still made him tense.

Warm breath tickled beside his ear as Jak leant against him, taking in the familiar smell of hair and skin. Daxter gulped down some air of his own, hardly registering any scents from it as he pressed his cheek to Jak's. The big ear stretched out like a shadow against the warm dusk of the room, he could have touched it with his nose.

"Ah, hey b-babe," Daxter breathed. "I love you, y-ya know."

He didn't mean to stutter. Didn't mean for it to sound like a whine. Had meant for it to sound so much more important. And now he was left inwardly cursing, holding his breath as Jak froze.

But he could only take a second of it, because the idiocy of his statement screamed for repair. He didn't even think before starting to babble, whispering harshly as he tightened his grip for every word.

"Yeah, and I don't want to hear any complaints about it either, when my fangirls come to break down the door! Sheez! The things I do…"

He fell silent, squinting at the darkness with a lump of unease clogged in his gut.

Jak sat unmoving for a moment, stretching the silent tension to the breaking point. But when Daxter opened his mouth in a grappling attempt at another bit of one-sided conversation, a deep breath pushed the wider chest into the smaller. Deep and strong – and just a little bit wet.
And Jak grew heavier all at once, slouching forwards but still supporting with his own arms, hanging over Daxter and burying his eyes in the curve of the scrawny neck.

Daxter relaxed, squeezing Jak's back as he closed his eyes and let himself be pulled even closer. Looking for support and being the supporter, both of them in a silent understanding.

And promise not to tell anyone else.

"I'm on you like a sticker, alpha male," Daxter mumbled. Then he added, when there was a small shake that felt like a chuckle, "with superglue."

He curled in closer. Jak was still shaking, gratefully accepting the closeness.

"Here's the deal, okay?"

He stroke his hand into Jak's hair, combing his fingers into the jungle of soft strands. Wasn't quite sure what to do in this situation, so just went with what felt right.

"Your and my fangirls… and fanboys, come to think of it… alike can say whatever they want, got it? 'Cause nobody, nobody can have you on my shift, and there's nothing anybody can do about it. I'll get a 'Property of…' tag for ya when we get back to Haven, seems it won't go through their skulls otherwise."

Jak snorted, making Daxter's lips stretch. Tapping Jak's temple with his finger, the redhead kept on talking.

"Though maybe I better get some permanent ink and write my name on your forehead instead, because knowing all the morons running around, they might not even notice a tag if it's stuck to a neon pink collar— yip!"

That was a pretty strong tug of his ear.

"Hey, hey, hey, cool it, I'm just saying. 'Sides, it'd clash horribly with your eyes, anyway."

"Yeah." It was the first thing Jak had said aloud ever since the marauder hideout. "It would."

There was a frail, tiny smile in those words. Daxter let out a sigh of relief, leaning his forehead against Jak's.

There were no magic words or actions to stop the pain, but at least they could be a band aid while time dulled the horrors.

It was very late, almost midnight, when Sig received the summons. By then he had already been in Spargus for a few hours, helping out with identifying the freed slaves. They couldn't have somebody claiming to be somebody they were not, even if said person had been a slave of the marauders – there had been times when a banished criminal was found in such a state, and jumped for the chance to get back in. This time it seemed to be fairly clear, though.

Sig may have been called back from Haven in case he needed to be the de facto leader of Spargus should Damas be gone for a long time, but by the time he'd returned there were already reports about the success. In all honesty, Sig had no complaints about that. He would serve as temporary King if it was required, but he preferred ground work – even if Damas had bestowed on him a great deal of faith and honor in choosing him for that if-required job.
He had been seriously considering sleep when his communicator beeped and a hoarse voice demanded his presence. So Sig turned away from the way to his apartment and headed to the elevator to the throne room.

He found Damas sitting on the stairs leading up to the throne, peace maker laid beside him as he leaned forwards, arms on his knees as he stared at the swirling water in the pools.

Trying not to scowl with concern, Sig approached and saluted when Damas looked up at him with a nod.

For a moment there was silence.

"Sig." Damas rubbed his naked eyebrows, eyes closed.

"Your Lordship?" Sig said, with no little alarm. He had never seen the King like this.

For a moment Damas said nothing.

"I will ask you to do one strange thing," he finally said. "And I will explain afterwards. Understand?"

"Sir?"

"Describe Jak to me."

Sig blinked. He hadn't been sure what to expect, but any guess would have been far, far away from something like that. For a moment he wondered if Damas had been so overcome with fatigue that he had become delirious, but the gaze from the purple eyes was as sharp as ever. The King was tired, that was all. He still had a firm grasp of reality.

Then why…?

But Sig was not one to refuse a direct command from his sovereign. He cleared his throat, just to get a grip of himself and push the confusion aside.

"He's a great warrior and a loyal friend," he started.

"I meant his appearance." Damas made a little hand motion that sort of served as an apology for being unclear.

That didn't make this any less bizarre at all.

"Yes, Your Lordship," Sig obediently said, despite just feeling more puzzled. "He's short, but muscular. His eyes are blue, and his hair shifts from green to blond."

"That."

Damas held up a hand. Sig shut his mouth immediately. For a moment the King just looked at his soldier.

"Haven't those last things ever struck you as odd?" Damas finally asked.

"His eyes and hair?" Sig said and, when Damas nodded, continued, "it's not that unusual—"

"And if I told you that a while ago, I learned that he used to be mute?"
A Wastelander that gets caught by surprise tends to end up dead. Sig was born and raised a Wastelander. He could not remember the last time he was surprised. But right then, he stood stock still, staring at Damas.

… oh.

It made sense, all of a sudden. At least the questions. The revelation, however, made Sig's head spin.

"Sig," Damas said in a low voice. "Am I going crazy?"

Sig had to swallow hard to pull himself together.

"He's too old," he said, his own voice sounding strange to him.

Slowly, the King nodded, rubbing his face.

"Yes. Yes, of course he is. And I couldn't have sired two mute sons." His hand stilled, forehead resting heavily in the palm. "And Mar got his eyes from his mother." He closed his eyes.

Sig still reeled, and Damas went on.

"For a while I wondered if he was maybe the product of some unknown, illegitimate line. But…"

He shook his head. "There are so many things, even some I can't fully grasp. The way he looked at me today, after he…"

Damas trailed off and stared off into space.

"He can't have been sent here to confuse me. Nobody could have taught him those things."

The King of Spargus, ex-King of Haven city, was not one to throw his hands up in frustration. But he made a motion as if to do so, though that was the end of it.

"He said he didn't know his father." A scowl dug into his forehead and he stared intently at the man before him. "Where is he from, Sig?"

"I… don't know, Lordship," Sig said, finally finding his voice.

Damas straightened up, determination returning to his gaze.

"Then who could know?" he demanded.

Sig almost wanted to ask why Damas did not just ask Jak himself, but he could see the reasoning. Doubt and confusion clouded the road ahead, and the King needed to hear it from some other source than just the one at the center of it all.

And that, at least, was something tangible. Something to aim at.

"I can find out," Sig said, with confidence.

A spark of paranoia flashed in Damas' purple eyes. Too many losses, too many mistakes, had given him deep, smarting wounds. Even when he asked for something, he wasn't sure if he dared reaching out for it.

"Good," he said. "But be very careful."
"Yes, your Lordship."

Begin Introspection. Serial code: Sig.

… I better psyche up before I ever dare lookin' at the cherry after this. Or he'll wonder what I'm starin' at.

Be careful. Right.

Where to start…? Jak never talks about himself, an' as much as Daxter babbles I can't remember him sayin' a thing 'bout their childhood. Never thought about it before.

… wait.

Some crazy story about Precursor tech? I never took that seriously.

… nah. It's gotta be one'a them stupid stories the chili pepper sprouts twenty a dozen by the minute. I gotta ask somebody sensible.

Like Tess. Dammit, why does it gotta be so late at night? I hafta wait 'til morning.

End Introspection.
Begin Introspection. Serial code: Damas.

I may have said too much. I may have asked too much. But I'm at a point where I just have to admit that I cannot make any sense of the situation anymore.

I've tried to reason for so long. I don't even know when the confusion really began. It seemed to be a niggling feeling in the back of my mind for weeks and months, and what really tipped it over is obscure to me. Not that it truly matters.

The only thing that matters is an explanation. At this point I might swallow any crazy story, if it only sounded the least bit plausible.

Well… I can say that, but that theory has yet to be tested. I know myself. If I'm to believe, it takes more than an account. I must have proof.

And then again, reality often turns out more mundane than what one might expect.

… or what one might hope, no matter how implausible the wish is.

End Introspection.

Spargus had celebrated that night. It wasn't just the avenger army and freed slaves who had reason to be jubilant – a major victory that promised a (slightly) easier time ahead was no small matter in the harsh Wasteland. Maybe the revenge squad had started the party and the rest had just followed. Regardless of how it had gotten going, it had been cheerful and loud.

As he drifted awake, Daxter vaguely remembered the hollering and animated talking from outside. He hadn't been bothered about missing out. There had been more important things to do. Seeing and feeling Jak slowly relax and sink into sleep, after spending half the night soothing him and finally coaxing him to come lie down… no victory celebration could beat that.

He opened his eyes a crack, only seeing a teal wall. His lips twitched a little and he drew back a little, so that the world became a little more than just the front of Jak's tunic.

Jak stirred as Daxter moved, but settled back down. His warm arm slid over the redhead's gangly shoulders as Daxter pulled further away. There was no agony now. The green eyebrows rested between closed eyes and a relaxed forehead. Lips parted just the slightest. Calm, even breaths.

As much as Daxter would have liked to stay there and study every little detail, he was so thirsty it almost hurt. Just a little drink, and he'd come right back.
His bare feet made nary a sound as he snuck out of the sleeping room and crossed the floor to the water urn. There was only a soft, dry rasp as he lifted the lid off of the container and grabbed the dipper.

He stood silent in the dimly lit room, listening to the lazy noise from outside while he sipped the water. It didn't sound like anybody was up for much action today, though a few poor sods obviously had made it out of bed even after all the partying.

Well, he had no plans of doing anything much today, even if he didn't have a hangover.

Even the light seemed lazy, thin rays of it stretching in through the cracks in the planks covering the windows. Tiny particles of dust floated along the thin rays, idly making their way towards the floor.

Peaceful.

Daxter lowered the emptied dipper, then stretched upwards with a yawn. He felt like he could feel every last muscle in his arms and shoulders. Several of them ached and protested against the motion, but he let them. It would pass. The cloth of his tunic hiked upwards, tickling his skin in a flowing brush. There was another tickle along his arm as the dipper tilted and one of the last drops of water dripped onto his wrist.

He closed his eyes momentarily, breathing deeply as he kept stretching. Familiar smells made themselves known, things he had grown so used to that he hardly felt them anymore – the damp scent of wet pottery, the dry, burnt smell of hot sand. And in the background, that salty hint of the ocean, like a touch of his childhood.

In the rare silence, other senses than sight and hearing seemed to become more prominent.

Something dark lurked in the back of his mind and he knew there were things he did not want to think about. But he was still too mercifully tired to be forced into facing them. The only thing his mind felt up to deciding was that today, the world could do without its top comedian. He wasn't going to do much at all if he could do anything about it.

That sounded like a plan, and he wrinkled his nose with a content smile to underline his wisdom.

He started to lower his stretched arms.

More feeling Jak approach than actually hearing him, despite the only sounds being the muted footsteps and low mutters from outside. Then again, Jak had a tendency to get into situations where he had to sneak while wearing boots, and at the moment they were both barefoot.

Hands brushing Daxter's sides and curving, cupping his waist for a moment before moving on. Fingertips became a warm tickle, pressure against his stomach through the tunic. A new part of the tranquil sensations from a moment earlier, Jak melting into the feeling of the morning. Arms encircling Daxter's chest, a stubbly cheek touching his shoulder.

And it felt right.

Daxter reached up and dug his fingers into Jak's hair. It was a clumsy motion from how they stood, but it served well enough as a silent "good morning." Even Daxter felt that speaking right then would be too loud.

He glanced at the door, knowing they only had some dried meat to eat and should probably go out and get breakfast so they could start the day off properly.
If they went out, this delicate stillness would be broken.

He was tired and ached all over. He didn't want to be a hero today. Breakfast could wait.

Jak drew away, but only to pluck the dipper from Daxter's hand so that he could drink some water too. Still silent, Daxter just watched him as Jak tipped his head and let the water flow into his mouth. The muscles of his throat moved rhythmically as he swallowed, and right then Daxter found that hypnotizing.

It was obvious to him, from the slow way Jak moved, that they were in agreement about not doing anything more strenuous than this for the time being. Jak hung the dipper on the urn and put the lid back on, meeting Daxter's gaze.

Without a word they went back to the warm dusk of the sleeping room. The oil lamps had long gone out, but there was well enough light coming from the cracks in the windows in the other room to let them see things fairly well. It was good napping light, too.

Daxter stretched again as he sunk down on his mat, only to wince as a bolt of icy pain shot between his shoulders. He reached over his left shoulder and dug his fingertips in, rolling the skin and muscles in circular motions, feeling a lump of knotted nerves almost immediately. Oh yeah, Jak wasn't the only one who could tense up from stress, especially not after last night…

Jak's hand brushed Daxter's aside, sending it tumbling over and down into the redhead's lap. Glancing around, Daxter could not help smiling as Jak settled behind him, grasping one of his shoulders and started to roll the ball of a strong hand over the offending lump in Daxter's back.

Looking forwards again, Daxter chewed on his lower lip. Not that it hurt, Jak was in fact a little too careful. Not surprising, this wasn't how it usually went and no matter how many times Daxter had laughed at his pal being bad at handling the pain of a sorely needed massage, Jak wasn't going to put his friend through the same.

Of course he wasn't.

Last night felt like a bad dream. Daxter thought that much, and then pushed that aside. He didn't want to remember. The only thing that mattered was that everything was alright now. This was real, with Jak's warmth seeping through his shirt, and the weight of his hand and gentle, circular push of his palm and fingertips causing waves of hot goose bumps to rise on Daxter's skin.

Daxter tilted his head forwards a little bit, fingers clutching at the folds of his pants. Tried to hold back a little spark of unease that tugged at his heart. He shouldn't have thought about last night, but it wasn't just that. He hadn't lied to Jak when he said he loved him, it had been there for a long time and Daxter had just needed to accept it – but he had only gotten so far yesterday, which included the kisses.

He hated that little dark stitch that burrowed into him, but he couldn't deny it either.

He sat straight all of a sudden, looking around and putting his hand on Jak's hand that rested on his shoulder. Jak stilled, meeting his gaze with a question in his eyes. Wondering if he'd done something wrong.

"This is okay," Daxter said, his voice hoarse from disuse. He cleared his throat, tried to smile and only managed a bland, embarrassed one. "Just… give me some time, 'kay? Things are speeding along a bit…"

Jak's shoulders sunk in half-relief and the corners of his lips stretched. That wasn't the it's-fine-I'm-
okay-but-not-really-look that Daxter had been freaking out at Tess about when discussing Jak with her. It was 100 percent pure "I understand."

But Daxter could see the memory of what had happened last night lurking in the back of Jak's mind, ready to throw a strangling net of guilt over him. So Daxter quickly scooted around to face him proper.

"I'll let ya know, okay?" Daxter said. He felt heat stab at his cheeks but didn't care. The way Jak looked at him made his stomach twirl. "I'm thinking that… I wanna know what it would be like, but…"

He trailed off, having to look away because he couldn't bear it. It was too much at once and too quickly, which was exactly why he needed more time.

Jak's hand drifted in and brushed his shoulder, resting upon it in reassurance. He may have meant to draw Daxter in, but the redhead moved first and wrapped his arms around Jak, giving him a silent, soothing squeeze. Jak closed the hug, rubbing his hand over Daxter's back.

That rub soon changed into a continuation of the massage. Eventually, drowsiness from the peaceful silence and the remnants of their lack of sleep made them stretch out on the mats, Jak's arm once again resting over Daxter's back.

Their dozing did not last long, however, as there was a sudden beep intruding on their peace, painfully noisy in the sleepy silence. Daxter just groaned as Jak pulled himself up, rubbing his eyes.

Sighing, Jak set himself cross-legged on the mat and reached for his communicator on the floor. Picking it up, he let out a short breath through his nose before pushing the button to answer.

"Hey Torn," he yawned, raising a hand to his lips.

And with that, the coziness was thoroughly broken. Daxter slumped, sourly pursing his mouth.

"What the hell have you been doing?" the scruff voice demanded, "Sig just reported you fought a war over there!"

Jak shrugged.

"Pretty much, yeah."

"Pretty much? Did you—"

It was a little hard to see who was involved because of the small screen but Torn got shuffled to the side, and from the mutters the helpers tried to get his blood pressure down. Instead, Samos moved into sight on the screen.

"Are either of you wounded?" the Sage demanded.

He sounded quite angry.

"Yeah, we're fine. Sorry to leave y' hanging. It w's just…" Another yawn. "… really exhausting."

"Really exhausting."
Samos repeated it slowly, shaking his head in disbelief. When he spoke again, the voice was distinctively calmer.

"I'm relieved that you're both well," he said, "but what exactly happened over there?"

When Jak started to give the whole explanation thing a try, in his currently highly sluggish way, Daxter decided to get in between.

"Mrrrh…" the redhead grumbled as he slouched upwards.

His arms slid over Jak's shoulders from behind, heavy head following shortly. Jak glanced to the side in tired amusement, but Daxter squinted at the communicator.

"Marauders, men-napping, rescue mission, we kicked their asses," he said. And with that, he nudged Jak's cheek with his own. "Sleep now."

To make his point clear he let his head slip forwards until his face was hidden against his own arm. Jak had to smile.

"Daxter's right," he murmured, "we gotta rest s'more."

He smiled a little wider, though tired – enough to let Samos know that the concern was appreciated. It worked, as the green sage visibly relaxed a little.

"Very well then," he said, softer than before, "but when you have a chance, please return here. There are a few things we need to investigate and we need your help, Jak."

Daxter didn't have the energy to get annoyed about being excluded.

"'kay, we'll be there as soon's we can," Jak said.

"Good, good."

Samos cleared his throat.

"Sleep well, boys," he said.

Nodding, Jak pushed the Off button.

Daxter was still a warm weight against his back, but as soon as Jak moved to put the communicator down, the redhead melted backwards and flopped onto the mat.

"Aw, man. Why'd'ey hafta get worried 'bout us now? Let's get cozy again."

A sleepy grin had spread across Daxter's features, teeth just vaguely visible in the dim light. He reached upwards, though every motion made it clear that his arms felt like they were full of lead.

Not even his exhaustion could keep Jak from chuckling. He scooted around and started to lie down, letting Daxter pull him to the thin chest. It wasn't soft, but certainly more comfortable than the pillow. His aching limbs groaned for every motion he made but once Jak settled, a soft warmth began to spread through him. Cheek just beneath Daxter's left collarbone, the blond closed his eyes.

A hand crept into his hair and he didn't flinch. It was too familiar, too welcome, too gentle when the fingers idly scratched the back of his head and neck.
He still felt a bit sick, but he tried not to think about it.

Daxter yawned, rocking both their worlds a little. Jak let up a bit to let him breathe as deeply as he wanted. Sleep drifted just within reach, about to tuck both of them in.

"Mm'ey Jak…" Daxter mumbled.

"Mmh?"

The other fingers ceased to move as only one started drawing slow little circles in the blond-green hair.

"Y'know that crazy thing I said last night?" Daxter said, suddenly serious.

Jak stilled. The grave tone sent an infectious uncertainty through him and he glanced upwards as well as he could.

"What?" he said, even hoarser than before.

The fingers and palm spread out against his neck and he could feel Daxter nodding upwards a little.

"Want me to say it again?"

Jak slumped back with a snort, pinching the arm by which one of his hands rested. And despite the grunted protest, Daxter cackled softly.

"… so?"

"Mhmm."

"Love ya, Jak."

It sounded better this time, because he could say it playfully. It was easier to say the second time, too.

There was a knock on the door.

"Aww, geez…" Daxter groaned rubbing his eyes. It was like everything was conspiring against them right then. Well, that feeling wasn't that unusual but he could've really done without it – more than usual.

Jak grunted something and pushed himself up, hand brushing Daxter's shoulder to silently say that he could just stay. As Jak headed into the main room, though, Daxter pushed himself up to sitting cross legged. The only person he could think of that might come visit them was Sig, and he didn't feel like having the big guy see him lazing about. He'd earned some respect from Sig all by himself and he wanted to keep it.

There was another knock as the door wasn't opened soon enough.

"Coming," Jak grunted, loud enough to be heard. He took just a moment to yawn and run a hand through his hair, just to not look completely frazzled as he opened the door. "Yeah?"

Jak's tone shifted as he spoke that second word, from tired to awake – and confused. Daxter could see why, because it wasn't Sig out there.

It was an ex.
With the sunlight pouring in behind the man and casting him in shadow, it took a moment to see the tattoos, and another moment to recognize him. It was the same guy who had spoken to them as they returned from the desert, just before the dead body was brought in and Damas led the avengers to battle.

"Hey," the man curtly said, though not unfriendly. He jabbed a thumb over his shoulder. "Just wanted to say that we're holding Lev's funeral by the cliffs at sunset."

Jak slowly nodded.

"Alright," he said. "We'll be there."

The ex let out a breath, bowing his head briefly.

"Means a lot, man," he said and turned to leave.

Jak closed the door and turned around, finding Daxter sitting with his elbows on his knees, chin plopped onto his fists. A green eyebrow rose in question.

"Nah, nah," Daxter said, waving a hand. "I don't mind goin' to that guy's funeral. We fought in his honor and all that." He tilted his head. "Just wonderin' what I gotta do to get ya all to myself today."

Chuckling and shaking his head, Jak sat down behind Daxter, putting his arm around the gangly shoulders. Daxter leaned his head against Jak's hoping that they would get a little longer quiet time now.

He could get used to this.

Sig walked towards the cliffs as the sun began to turn yellow. As uneasy as he felt, he had not been able to refuse when Vida asked him to come down there. He didn't know the guy who had died, but it was that one he'd seen Vida talk to the other day and she wanted somebody to lean on in her grief. Not that she had phrased it that way. The Wasteland had hardened her like so many other survivors.

It wasn't the funeral that made him feel uneasy. He had tried to call Tess all day, but she hadn't responded. It wasn't like her at all, and he had trouble keeping his worry down. Clever and experienced as she was, he clearly remembered the hulking metal heads that had attacked the harbor. Anything like that might have gotten the jump on her. Torn and the others hadn't known where she was, either, but their unconcern hadn't made Sig feel any better about it.

They didn't know what he had asked of her. Perhaps it had been foolish. She may have gone to ask questions that she shouldn't have. It wasn't like Sig to worry, but it was also against every fiber in his being to put a friend in danger and leave them there.

He tried to push those thoughts away. The pixie had held her own against Krew, she knew how to deal with things in Haven.

But there were still those metal heads and robots, no matter how she ought to know how to stay safe. Those weren't thugs and drunkards.

Absently he noticed that there were a lot of exes going the same way as he, and many more had gathered up down by the edge of town where the land sharply fell towards the ocean. There weren't only tattooed former soldiers, but they were the majority.
Coming from higher ground he could see that the crowd stood gathered in a half circle around one of the metal scaffolds used for the cremations. A pair of monks were working at preparing it. It was like a box with a net top, where the body would rest. Containers of oil was placed inside the box itself and carefully prepared wicks were drawn up towards the deceased. The body, in turn, was wrapped in cloths prepared with chemicals to burn long enough to vaporize the flesh, leaving only bones behind. The monks would later bring the remains to the Precursor temple, unless the deceased had expressed other wishes beforehand, or their family preferred otherwise.

"Sig."

He turned his head and raised a hand in silent greeting to Vida, who came towards him from the shadow of a building. She returned the gesture, struggling to smile a little. At that, he shook his head and she stopped trying. No tears, but her eyes were clouded.

"Condolences," Sig murmured. He didn't know what else to say or do in this situation. Losses were no stranger in the Wasteland, but he wasn't even sure who the dead guy was or what he had meant to her.

"Thanks," she responded in a low voice. She looked towards the crowd, starting to drift that way and Sig followed her like a huge shadow. "He was…"

She didn't exactly freeze up, but she nearly stumbled in her step. Sig followed her gaze, seeing a small gathering by a building near the funeral site. A bald Wastelander with an eye patch, and a blonde woman in a medic's clothing were helping an ex with deeply dark skin sit down on a stone bench. The latter staggered, from the look of it unable to use one leg, and wherever his clothes did not cover his skin he had bandages and stitches. The medic hovered nearby, but the other Wastelander sat down by the ex as they both silently stared down towards the center of the crowd.

Sig recognized the ex, though surprised to see him like that. He didn't comment as Vida continued on as if nothing had happened.

"… he was a beautiful kind of person."

The monks had just finished their preparation and gently urged the crowd to spread out so that nobody would be unable to see. The people silently obeyed. A hush fell over the already somber gathering as two other monks came down the road, carrying a wrapped body on a stretcher. As they reached the pyre, a group of exes broke away from the crowd, three of them carrying pieces of smooth, twisted driftwood. The monks looked at them all, but did not protest as two of the tattooed men took over the task of lifting the body onto the metal net. As they stepped back, the others began to carefully arrange the wood around the body.

Wood wasn't easy to come by in the desert and as such, even driftwood had better uses in for example tool handles than as fuel. But it happened that it was used in funeral pyres, simply because of the effect it could create.

The sinking sun was painting the clouds in a magnificent carpet of purple and red against a deepening orange as one of the monks lit a torch. She turned towards the pyre but paused, and then offered the torch to one of the exes. He silently accepted it, bowing his head in thanks. Before he made another motion he glanced around at the other nearby former soldiers, but they all either just looked back or nodded the slightest bit.

With their approval, the man stepped forwards and lowered the burning torch to the cloth covering Lev's chest. The flame caught and he stepped back as the fire quickly spread across the body,
running down the sides along the wicks and flickering wildly in the wind.

Sig noticed a soft, surprised murmur from the crowd, and looking about he saw several people more or less conspicuously glancing a certain direction. Looking that way, he shared their wonder at seeing Jak standing a little ways away, Daxter at his side. Both of them watching the funeral pyre in silence, serious.

Though he recalled that Jak had called this one ex "odd, but okay," Sig hadn't exactly expected to see him attending the guy's funeral. Even if he was less taken aback than many of the exes, who could hardly keep from staring. Jak didn't seem to notice the attention, which was just as well.

Sig's attention was called back to Vida as she swayed, shoulder brushing his arm. Looking down he saw her clutch her elbow, pressing a loose fist to her lips. He put a hand on her small shoulder, feeling it tremble as she quietly wept for Lev.

The fire caught on the driftwood and it crackled. The flames rising from the salt-drenched wood was not red, however, but an otherworldly lavender. As the fire spread through the twisted lumber, the strangely colored flames rose around the blackening cloth, encircling it and the red and yellow blaze.

Somebody started a somber chant and the crowd fell into it bit by bit. Feet and the butts of guns beat the ground to the rhythm of a heartbeat, in tune with the chant as a pillar of dark smoke rose against the warm colors of the sunset.

As darkness fell, Vida murmured that she was leaving. The fire still burned and the chant still rose into the night, but she had seen enough. Sig followed her the way home. It might not be necessary, but the frail smile he saw in the torchlight told him that the gesture of support was appreciated.

He was glad to have been able to offer some comfort to a friend in a dark hour, but he had to admit to himself that he was also relieved when it was over. Returning to his own apartment, he lit an oil lamp and sat down at the table. Setting his jaw he took out his communicator and dialed Tess' number.

Just one more attempt for today. If she didn't answer, he knew he might have to go look for her, or ask somebody to do it. He couldn't shake the guilty worry.

One signal.

Two.

Three—

"Yes! Sig! Hi!"

He would have felt more relieved if she hadn't sounded so high-pitched. Instead of relaxing, he scowled.

"You okay there?" he asked.

Tess cleared her throat.

"Yeah, fine! I'm fine… uh…" She looked embarrassed. "Sorry about not answering, I just saw you called me before. This stupid thing must've hit the floor one too many times."

Sig had been around Krew and his lot enough to know when somebody wasn't quite telling the
truth, and he was just trying to decide whether to let her off the hook or not when she broke the silence that gathered between them.

"Sig, I… you should come here, I need to talk to you and I don't wanna do it over a link." She sped up a lot towards the end, as if she was about to lose her nerve.

For a moment Sig sat very still. Then he slowly nodded.

"Alright. I'll call the air train to come haul me over in the morning."

"Great! Let's meet up in the shooting range in the harbor!" Again with the high-pitched voice.

"Tess," Sig said in a firm, even tone.

Even on the small screen, he could see that she gave a start.

Silence.

Finally, she raised a hand and dug her fingers into her hair, upsetting her neatly groomed fringe.

"I'm okay," she said, sounding way too miserable for her claim. "I'm okay, really. It's just… complicated." She managed a smile. "It's not a trap, by the way."

He humored her with a scoff.

"Would hope not," he said.

Somehow, that made her relax a little.

"Yep, I wouldn't want to be the one cleaning up the idiots setting one for you," she said. This smile was a bit stronger. "I'll be waiting in the range."

"Alright, see you there."

With that, Sig turned off the communicator and heavily sat back. He wasn't quite sure if he felt any less uneasy. At least, he was confused rather than feeling a diffuse guilt, now.

'Begin Introspection. Serial code: Tess. '

And I'm back to staring at my communicator. I'm shaking. I can't recall when I ever shook this much. I try to clench every muscle in my body but it's still there and I know that as soon as I relax I'll start trembling again.

I know he knows I lied. Yeah, I knew he called me, five times even. I wanted to respond. I tried. I reached out. But every time, I panicked, and I couldn't push that stupid button.

Every time that happened, though, I got so angry at myself and now, finally, I was so pissed off – pardon my Kras – that that chicken part of me just got squashed. But now it's done, and I can't even keep up by being angry anymore.

I'd never even think about letting my friends down. But now I feel like I'm gonna march right off
and betray Torn and Samos’ trust.

But it’s even worse not to. And now there's no going back.

There's no going back. Sig will be here in less than twelve hours.

Ohgodsoh
Revelation


I should've talked to somebody. Like my bro, or even better Keira. She knows so much of it already. But I dunno if she's figured out the truth… she might not have. Talking about Damas became a weird taboo after the Baron took over, and somehow it's still stuck. The royal line of Mar was so, so tied with Haven City, I don't think we knew how to handle it when we lost it.

We all grew up with the legends of Mar. But I gotta say, even as a kid I felt like he couldn't have had the time to do half of everything they say he did. Some think that maybe Mar wasn't a single person, but maybe an organization that through the years sorta… condensed into the legend. But at the same time, the royal family, that everyone knew were all more or less adept at channeling eco…

Like Jak always could, even when we only saw him use dark at first, because we didn't have any light around.

Guess we never figured it out because we all thought it was just because what Praxis had done to him… but then, nobody else survived those experiments, so why didn't we figure it out sooner?

Well, because who'd even stop to think that time travel was involved?

I guess it doesn't matter now, though… oh, I wish I had talked to Keira and made her give me a pep talk! Sig will be here any minute… I've gotta stop shaking.

End Introspection.

The air train swept down over the harbor and sunk down to the landing dock. The nearby workers and soldiers moved out of the way to not get so close to the hot engine exhausts almost without looking up, so used to the comings and goings of the transport that they just reacted automatically.

With a heave of steam and gears the back door opened and three men walked out. Daxter was the first one on the dock, stretching his arms above his head with a grunt.

"Finally some fresh air!" he declared. He didn't expect much of a response, and he was correct. Jak just nodded agreement, but Sig didn't even seem to hear him.

Without a word Sig walked past, muttering a quick goodbye and that he was in a hurry.

Daxter narrowed his eyes after Sig as the big Wastelander headed off down the bridge that led to the eastern part of the harbor.

"I swear he was staring at your face when he thought we weren't looking!" Daxter muttered.
Jak shrugged and made a vague sound. More than that, he didn't comment on the fact that Daxter had questioned Sig on that three times through the ride, and the big guy had denied it with increasing annoyance every time.

It wasn't like Sig to be like that, but he obviously had something on his mind that he wasn't willing to share. If he wanted their help, he'd say so. They both knew well enough that trying to draw answers out of Sig was a futile effort – Jak just respected that more than Daxter.

The two of them headed across the long bridge connecting the outer docks with the main harbor, looking for a convenient zoomer to use to cross the robot-infested industrial section. Well, less infested than it had been before they took down the war factory, but still not as good as it could be. Which was to have no metallic buggers at all.

Daxter chatted on, and Jak listened. For a little while, that was all well and good. But then, during a lull in the talking, when no soldier or dock worker was close enough to hear, Jak asked the million dollar question.

"Do you want them to know?" he said, watching Daxter from the side as they walked.

The question had been on Daxter's mind for a while, and he figured that it had taken a few laps around Jak's brain too. Well… Sig and Tess pretty much knew, and he was fine with that, but…

"Ya know Torn will just give us a lecture about couples not going into battle together or some crap like that," Daxter said and rolled his eyes at the thought. Like the tattooed wonder didn't sit around dreaming of the days when he was out there with Ashelin… "Let's save it for when things have quieted down a bit more, eh?"

Jak nodded understanding. Another thought struck Daxter and he had to scratch his head.

"I think I owe telling Tess a bit more, though. She was cheering you on like you wouldn't believe. But anyway!" He wagged his finger at Jak. "I prefer not listening to more of Mister Stabby's bitching than we have to. Agreed? So let's try to be a bit subtle in broad daylight."

Jak quirked an eyebrow, amused at how Daxter made it sound as if they had been kissing out in the streets of Spargus.

It didn't take too long to find a zoomer to "borrow" – then again, that had always seemed to be the general custom when it came to Haven – to travel across the dangerous area. It did take a little longer than usual though, as Jak opted to find a two-seater one as opposed to the smaller, quicker one-seated ones he had used to prefer. They might still fit on one of those even now, but those were less sturdy and with a passenger it would be difficult to steer.

Daxter certainly wasn't one to complain about Jak having a sensible idea once in a while.

Both of them remained on high alert through the trip through the abandoned streets of the industrial section, but there seemed to be a momentary cease fire for the moment. Either that or Erol had pulled back for the time being, preparing his final troops for a bigger assault. Impossible to know, and so Jak didn't worry about it. He focused entirely on driving as quick as possible. There was no shortage of sparks and whirrs, but they saw no moving robots. Scrap heaps of ones taken cared of in the past, yes, but that was all.

So it was with surprising ease that they reached what had once been the water slums and parked outside Freedom HQ. Daxter did notice that people gazed after and pointed at Jak with wonder and hesitation, and his mouth twisted into a sneer. Oh yeah, they liked their hero again now. A little
late.

He shook it off and followed Jak inside the grand building. The elevator took them straight to the command room once it recognized the entry pass Jak carried.

"Hiya, crybabies! Anybody ordered a couple of heroes?" Daxter cheerfully said as he swaggered in, getting three sets of glares in return. He noted with some disappointment that Onin and with her, Pecker, were missing. Mocking the bird brain was tradition, dangit.

But nope, only Samos, Torn and Ashelin were there.

"It's good to see you again," Samos said.

"You're gonna have to share a room, this isn't a hotel," Torn said, waving at them dismissively while returning to look at the screen he had been reading from. "We put a cot in your room, Jak."

Unbeknownst to him, he'd just uttered the best news Jak and Daxter had ever gotten from him. Daxter had to use all his self control not to glance at Jak, but he knew they were both relieved to not be made to sleep in completely different parts of the building.

Though Daxter had to wonder if it had anything to do with the chat he'd had with Torn and the others before he left for Spargus. Eh… they didn't know, did they?

He pushed that aside too. No use worrying if nobody brought it up.

"We have a list of things we need your help with, Jak," Ashelin said, "but I assume you'd prefer to clean up first. Come back in one hour and we'll brief you."

"Alright," Jak said, and both he and Daxter turned to leave.

"And Daxter…" Torn said.

The mere act of him addressing Daxter directly, and by name even, was enough to give the Demolition Duo pause and turn towards the Commander.

"Since you made it into Spargus, we should review your skills. Jak can—"

"No." Jak threw out his arm in front of Daxter's chest before the redhead even had time to open his mouth.

Samos looked up and Ashelin turned around. The ever-present crease on Torn's forehead deepened.

"Jak, you're doing heavy duty missions. By Tess' reports, Daxter is better suited for scouting and quick strikes."

"We stay together or we go back to Spargus."

All three of the leaders looked a little startled, to a greater or smaller degree. Once the first surprise settled, the realization seeped in, of just how used they were to Jak doing what he was asked without making any demands in return. There was some shame that also came with that realization.

Torn glanced at Ashelin, who gave a small nod. She wouldn't admit it feeling uneasy, of course, but she clearly recalled Jak's stubborn refusal to return to Haven when she came to ask it of him. She didn't fancy challenging that side of him again, because even if he had eventually relented and come to their aid, they could not afford jeopardize his help.
"Alright, alright," Torn said, throwing up his arms. "He's your problem as usual then."

"Not a problem," Jak said and walked out together with a triumphantly grinning Daxter.

Torn grunted and looked to Samos, surprised to see the Sage thoughtfully pulling at his beard, a small smile playing at his softly green lips.

Before Jak and Daxter had even gotten to the HQ, without their knowledge greater things were pushed into motion.

Sig crossed the bridge with long strides, his good eye set on the distant entrance to the shooting range. It wasn't much of a walk, but this time it seemed to him as if it took forever to get there. Maybe he should have grabbed a zoomer. At the same time, he felt like he needed the walk to calm down and gather himself.

He wasn't sure what to expect, and yet he felt as if he walked to a decisive battle. Trying to keep his worries and careful hope under control hadn't helped much, and the long trip had not made that any easier. His last talk with Damas kept taking rounds and rounds in his mind, and he had not been able to keep from studying Jak's profile, searching for some clue.

And damn, Daxter could be surprisingly perceptive when he wanted to. Or maybe it was just in this kind of case, because he was high-wired to guarding Jak. But he hadn't caught all of the times Sig had looked, or it would have gotten really embarrassing.

Maybe there was truly something there, in Jak's features… but it may as well be Damas' confusion spilling over to Sig. He wasn't sure he could trust his senses, or if he was just deluding himself. But after the King had spoken with him, he could see why it was torturing Damas so much.

He reached the end of the bridge, and walked the last few yards over to the door. It was familiar to him, almost like an old friend. But this time, he had no idea what was on the other side of it.

Okay, time to be sensible.

He opened the door, and the first thing he saw was Tess bolting up from her seat on one of the benches.

"Hiii, Sig…!" Tess said, having to wrestle her voice down an octave or two. She cleared her throat as his single eye thinned in suspicious concern.

The door slid shut behind him.

For a second they stared at each other, until Tess pressed her hands together and her fingers started tangling like agonized snakes. She took in a deep breath and stilled her hands as he opened his mouth, forcing her pointing fingers against each other in a resolute wag.

"Give me a sec," she said, closing her eyes hard.

Sig could practically hear his own heart drop.

"I ain't gonna like this, am I?" he said.

"No… maybe. Ooh!" Tess groaned and pushed a button on the console.

With a soft clicking sound a pair of cardboard metal heads swished out of the wall and stopped in the middle of the floor. Tess finally looked up at Sig and gave him a wavering smile.
"In case you need to hit something," she said.

He grunted and rubbed his forehead.

"You ain't scared of me, are you, pixie?" he softly asked.

"No," Tess said, and she meant it. She had dealt with many horrible people in her life, and Sig definitely wasn't the kind of man who would take out his anger on a messenger. "But you'll probably get mad."

She might not be worried about getting on the receiving end of his rage. However, that didn't mean that Tess liked the idea of Sig getting angry.

"Okay."

Sig went and leaned his peace maker against the far back wall, then walked back and sat down on one of the benches.

"Hit me," he said, folding his arms across his chest and watching her evenly.

"Right." Tess squared her shoulders and took out her communicator. She had been mentally preparing for this for days. "Just bear with me for a little, alright? It's complicated, but it'll make sense." She paused. "Sorta. Well… look at this, first."

She pushed a button and a red hologram flared up in the air above the device, of a short, elderly man with a beard and a thick bundle of hair. Sig squinted at it as it slowly spun in place.

"Is that the green eco Sage?" he asked when Tess said nothing.

"Yes, but… it's the Shadow, of the Underground," she said. "They're not related. He's not here anymore, he… d'oh…" She turned off the image and sat down on an opposite bench, rubbing her forehead. Hours of agonizing over what to say, and she had already lost the thread.

Sig waited for her to gather her thoughts, which showed admirable patience. It probably took all he had not to apprehensively tap his feet, though.

"Okay!" Tess snapped her head up, hands balling into fists. "I'll explain everything, I promise, but… okay! Prince Mar is safe!" The last words burst out of her with such force that they melded together into a single entity.

Even so, Sig only needed a second to disentangle the message. He sat very still, not breathing, not blinking. Tess had to look away.

"And," Sig finally said, "the bad news are…?"

She met his gaze, her usually so cheerful face a mask of misery.

"That's where it gets complicated," she said. She carefully put her communicator on the bench beside her and patted it. "That… the Shadow, you could tell he looks like the Sage."

"Yeah?"

"Well, thing is…"

It took her longer than it should have, but once she got rolling with the truth the story tumbled out of her. A little disjointed at times, but clear enough to follow. In the end Sig sat leaned forward,
drawing circles on his forehead with his fingertips.

"Oh," Tess said, deflating with relief. "You're not mad?"

All Sig could do at first was shake his head.

"It's funny..." he finally managed, rubbing his face. He looked up at her with the look of a man who wasn't sure if the world still functioned as he had been used to. "Just the other day Damas told me he saw so much of his boy in Jak, he hardly knew what was up or down anymore."

Tess sucked in her breath, eyes lighting up with triumph.

"Then—!"

But Sig shook his head, shooting down her good cheer with a single motion and two sentences.

"I can't tell 'im all'a that, he'll never believe it. He already thinks he's going off the road."

"It's a good time for him to start believing crazy stuff, then," Tess said, folding her arms. She didn't even want to hide her frustration. "Come on, Sig! Man up!" Her elegant eyebrows took a dive. "Or maybe you don't believe me?"

"Yeah, I do," he firmly said, finally looking up at her. "You wouldn'a joke 'bout this."

"Dang straight." But the brunt of her annoyance broke off at his reassurance. She sat down across from him on another bench.

"But even if I trust ya, Damas prolly won't. Not when it's something this loony. He doesn't know ya."

"Okay."

Tess let out a deep breath, tilting her head back to stare at the ceiling. One finger furiously tapped against her upper arm as she thought. Sig let her, lost in his own swirling emotions and ponderings. He still had to fully accept what he had heard, because even if it did make everything make sense and he truly did not doubt Tess' honesty, it was just so far out there.

"You know..." Tess said at length, looking back to him with a careful smile. "Maybe we should do the sensible thing and talk to somebody who's smarter than either of us."

Sig had to admit, with detached amusement, that it was a sound plan. When she went into greater detail, however, he was less thrilled.

It had always been the plan to rebuild the slums much like the water slums. But then, the war happened. The new part of Haven could not host the entire population, so parts of them were still forced to huddle in the old, decrepit buildings, waiting and hoping for better times as they had done for years. In some ways the situation had improved, and in some others, it was worse than ever. At least the law enforcers weren't actively harassing them for the slightest suspicion anymore, but there was on the other hand a full scale war going on.

Onin did her part by regularly returning to her old, familiar tent, setting it up amongst the spoils to offer the poorest some scrap of hope with her advice. Even though the future laid clouded in darkness, sometimes it helps to just come to somebody who is wise and will listen.

Tess wouldn't even have suggested they go see Onin if she had been in Freedom HQ. Sooner or
later Torn and Samos would find out about Tess' treachery, but she didn't feel like having it happen so soon. With any luck, they wouldn't know until things had calmed down and sorted out, and then there wouldn't be a problem… right?

She refused to dwell on those thoughts. It was too late to regret anything now, and really, that was a relief of sorts.

Sig on the other hand did not feel relieved in any sense of the word, glaring at the simple, pitched tent as they got closer and closer to it. A young woman in worn, dirty clothes hurried out, a tired smile lingering on her lips as she slipped down a side street and disappeared. There was nobody else waiting outside for their turn, so Tess just hurried in holding the tent flap up and watching him steadily.

Sighing under his breath, Sig approached the opening.

Even if Damas had taken Pecker in and listened to his advice, Sig had never understood why. He knew the King had a great interest in birds, but that didn't seem enough to lend an ear and give an important position to one just because it could talk. Damas might know something he didn't, but that wasn't the point. Sig was a practical man and he didn't like any mumbo jumbo.

And no, Jak's eco tricks didn't count. Eco wasn't strange, its uses had been studied for hundreds of years. And the ability to channel eco powers through one's body, though rare, was not a new occurrence.

It was nothing like the dusky cloth hut smelling of incense and the multitude of herbs hanging in bouquets from the sloping ceiling. Nothing like that bone bag of an old crone, sitting cross legged and lifting her head to turn a pair of milky eyes at the visitors.

Sig clenched his jaw but let Tess lead him inside, ducking under the low cloth "door". His head almost touched the ceiling once inside. Not that it mattered, he would have just pushed it up a little.

His fingers twitched when a colorful lump dropped from the shadows above Onin and landed in her strange headwear. It unfolded, surprisingly gracefully, into her interpreter. His greeting was less graceful than his movements.

"You come here like thieves in the night," Pecker said, rapping his feathers together as if they had been fingertips. He looked annoyed as he gazed upon the visitors over the edge of his colorful wings. " Took your sweet time too, didn't you?"

Sig bristled, but Tess put a calming hand on his arm, then narrowed her eyes at the moncaw.

"You listen here, bird brain," she said, taking a cue from Daxter but managing to be a whole lot more intimidating in doing so, "I'm pretty sure you know full well I had to drag him here kicking and screaming, so don't you dare ruin all my hard work."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah." Pecker cleared his throat as Onin straightened up, her face unreadable.

She shook her hands, and blue, powdery light streamed from her fingers as she began making strange hand motions.

"Greetings, blahdiblah," Pecker started interpreting in a bored tone, "almost as melodramatic as telling Jak hi— oi!"

Onin had reached up and punched at her hat, upsetting Pecker's perch. Light still flowed from her hand as she did so, drawing a dissipating blue veil across her annoyed features.
Sig had to admit that the lightshow was impressive, mostly because he couldn't figure out how Onin managed to create that effect. He wasn't prepared to accept that there were truly magical powers at work.

"What's the deal, ya shriveled antique?" Pecker complained, craning his neck over the hat's edge to have a sort-of one sided glaring contest with Onin. She might be blind, but she could still emote quite well with her white eyes.

She made an annoyed hand motion. With a grunt, Pecker straightened up.

"Okay, you're not happy to be here," he said, looking at Sig, "so boss lady says I need to be a little more respectful to keep you from storming out. Sound about right?"

"I like the way you think, Miss Onin," Tess said, folding her arms and giving Pecker a smirk. She got a toothless, wrinkly little smile back from the old lady.

The ancient soothsayer turned her face towards Sig, giving him a slight nod that again upset Pecker's seat and made him grumble. The Wastelander hesitated for a moment, but then let out a deep breath through his nose.

"So, I'm told Jak is the grown Prince Mar, son of Damas. I don't know how…"

He paused when both the old woman and the moncaw didn't move a muscle in surprise. The frustration he'd felt for the last hour, that he could not, would not aim at Tess, found an outlet.

"How long did you know?" he growled.

Onin's hands swept back and forth, up and down, and Pecker spoke without even looking at what she was signaling.

"We have always known what had to come to pass, in this age as in every age," Pecker said, wisely reigning in his smug smile at this fact.

Sig's whole life passed before his eyes. Or a painfully select part of it.

"Are you sayin' I worked for Krew, for nothing?" Sig said in a low, dangerous voice. He could have accepted almost anything but that. Through all those dark moments, all those terrified eyes and the sound of sobs from people who didn't deserve being on the end of his orders… his one comfort had been that he was doing it to find and save that child. For Damas.

And people had known, always known about the Prince, and not only that, possibly Sig's mission as well and they had done nothing. Nothing.

Onin raised her hands, and the blue sparkles flowed over her palms like a pair of small, ethereal waterfalls. There was a new softness to her wrinkly face as she shook her head, as calm as anything.

"Nothing is ever without some purpose," Pecker said. Onin made a whisking motion with one hand, touching the other to her heart. Then followed a series of other motions Sig wasn't quite convinced meant anything at all, but he still listened to the moncaw. "Ponder, for example, if you had not been Krew's right hand man. You can surely take a guess at who else it would have been."

Sig closed his eyes and grit his teeth. Oh yeah, he could. He'd blown that bastard's brains out in a fight over who should have the job as Krew's top blood hound, and that man had deserved it.
"And would you have let somebody like that teach Jak?" Pecker calmly said.

On the surface, Jak had just wanted to know how to use a gun, as a stepping stone in his path to revenge. But the way he had looked after their first hunt, when Sig had told him he'd done a good job...

Anybody else, anybody like Krew's earlier heavy, would have seen that and told his boss there was a skilled murder machine to be easily exploited. And that slimy, two-faced monster would have known how to do it, too. Jak had been in a bad place, and he was too trusting. He could very well have gotten roped in until he couldn't get out. Or until his battle teacher decided it would be more profitable to drug him and present him to Baron Praxis. Sig could see it all too well.

His anger began to deflate. But Pecker was still pouring oils on the unruly waves.

"You were the first person in this city who accepted him without question, and showed him that there was kindness to be found even here."

Onin made an upwards sweep in front of her eyes, and for the first time something Pecker interpreted seemed to make sense.

"You were the only one he could look up to, that made him feel like there was somebody else than just the rat looking out for him. If you know where he had come from, you should know how much he needed that."

Blue light kept flowing from Onin's finger even as she pointed at Sig and touched her heart again. The falling light streaming from the outstretched digit looked bizarre, but Sig was too distracted by the spoken words to care. The old crone smiled.

"So you see, son of the desert," Pecker said, though rolling his eyes just a little at the flowery title (but what can you do, the boss had spoken), "you were doing Prince Mar a desperately needed service even when you did not know that it was him." There was a soft rustle of feathers as Pecker shifted his weight, leaning his head to the side. He might have wanted to look at Sig as if he was stupid to not realize the obvious, but Tess glared as if she was contemplating what to have for dinner. So Pecker kept his face neutral. "And even apart from that, do you not truly see that no matter what crimes you committed, it would have been so much worse for many people if you were not there?"

Sig looked away. His lowered shoulders were answer enough.

More glowing hand motions.

"So, what was it that you really came here to ask?" Pecker said, not quite managing to hold back the impatience in his voice.

Right. Sig held back a wish to rub his forehead, and settled for another deep breath.

"Damas is already wondering about Jak," he said. "But he ain't gonna swallow the idea of time travel just like that. How can I let him know the truth?"

Onin's hands had stilled in her lap. For a moment she just sat still, unseeing eyes turned towards nothing as if there was something to divine from the shadows in the ceiling, that only she could fathom. Sig thought he saw the eyes move a little from side to side, as somebody looking between several nearby choices of something and trying to decide.

Finally she swept her hands out, spreading fading light in the air before her.
"The power to bridge that gap is in your own hands..." Pecker noted the look on Sig's face, and took it down a notch – not ungratefully. "You have the ability to give Lord Damas a chance to speak with somebody he does not like much, but whose word he knows he can trust."

Pecker fell silent, settling back on his perch as Onin sunk down, tired out.

Sig stood silent, gears turning in his head.

"Ah," he softly murmured, finally. Tess touched his arm, and he nodded to her, closing his one good eye. "Thank you."

"Oi!" Pecker complained. Sig ignored him.

He had to wait for the air train to refuel and go through standard maintenance before he could return to Spargus. Because of that, the sun had begun sinking as he once again watched the door open, and he stepped out into the air shivering with heat. The walls of Spargus rose up before him and he hurried towards the gate as the air train took off again, the driver not wanting to linger in this dangerous area more than absolutely necessary.

Foragers were unloading their haul in the car pit, talking excitedly amongst themselves. Sig hardly even noticed, but he did catch that yes, the marauder attacks had gone down significantly.

He entered the city proper and hurried over to a lizard stable to get a leaper lizard big enough to carry him down the sandy main road as quickly as possible. A strange, wistful calm had come over him, like when something that had meant the world to you is coming to a close. Despite that, he drove his mount at full speed through the city, weaving past pedestrian warriors and monks.

Even then the trip to the King's tower seemed as long as the walk across the harbor bridge. When Sig finally, finally could leap off the lizard, absently patting the animal as it shuddered with exhaustion after the hard ride with a heavy burden, his own heart was racing.

The evening sun shone in through the windows in the throne room, casting golden flashes upon the water in the basins and painting the plants and walls in warm colors. Damas sat on the throne, back straight as a pine tree, gaze sharp as he listened to a report delivered by a scarred female warrior.

The purple eyes flicked up as the elevator brought Sig within sight, but that was the only acknowledgement as the King then returned his full attention to the report. Only when the woman had finished, bowed and turned to walk away did Damas look back to Sig.

Sig wasn't quite sure what he felt when he stepped forwards, passing the woman along the walkway, returning her silent greeting nod. He looked around as he heard the elevator rattle down, making sure that she was gone before he walked the final bit up to speak with Damas. This, of course, did not pass the King by, though he did not comment.

"Yes, Sig?" Damas said, his voice even.

It had been the longest mission of Sig's life. He still was not sure he had been the right person for it, but the weight and importance of it had weighed him down – the honor of being selected always tempered with the sacrifices he had been forced to make, to his pride, to his sense of what was right. He'd given everything to this task, and in the end he could not truly complete it. But he could at least offer the push for a final step.

"I found out something about Jak's past, Your Lordship," he said.
Damas sat very still, watching him. Waiting.

"He was raised by Samos, the green eco Sage." Sig unhooked the communicator from his belt. There was a slight motion about Damas' lips when he heard the name and title. "I don't think he would speak to me about it, though."

Sig took one step up the stair to the throne, offering his communicator in both hands.

"But he couldn't refuse if you asked him, Your Lordship."

There was a soft clack as Damas' peace maker thudded against the side of the throne by the King's slow forwards motion. He reached out, fingertips touching the communicator for a second before he lifted it out of Sig's grip. Turning it over, he looked at the device as if he'd never seen such a thing before.

"Freedom HQ is in the call list," Sig said, keeping his voice steady. "They'll answer if they think it's me. He'll be there."

Damas slowly nodded, changing his grip of the device. He pushed a button, and Sig watched as the King scrolled down the list of people and places to call. Then he sat still, just gazing at the name on the screen.

Seconds passed.

Damas closed his eyes and shook his head. Sig remained still as a statue, but his gut twisted into a knot.

"I… do not wish to ask him, or anybody in Haven, for help," Damas murmured, so low that it was almost inaudible. But when Sig made a forwards motion, the King raised a hand. "I don't want to, but perhaps I must, then." He looked up at the man before him, looking so tired once again. "Let me think about it."

Hope sparked, but Sig dared not show it lest he kill it before it could grow.

"Keep my communicator for as long as you wish, Lordship," Sig said. "I'll make do without it."

The King of Spargus slowly nodded.

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Begin Introspection. Serial code: ?

What is it?
… he's in Haven again? Really.

Well, I think we have time for a little fun. Might even get things going quicker, actually.

End Introspection.
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Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Begin Introspection. Serial code: Sig.

Well, it's been four days. I'm kinda missing my communicator. It makes life easier, stayin' in touch and not worryin' about missing orders. But I won't be caught dead asking Damas to give it back. I dun like one bit that he's still thinkin', though.

It ain't like him to think so much. Makes me nervous he ain't gonna make that call.

I ain't religious… I was raised right to respect the monks and what they said, but also to depend on things I can see and feel. But… if you'd hear this one single prayer of my life, Precursors… let this one thing turn out right. We've gone through so much, it's cost so much. Don't let it all be for nothin'.

End Introspection.

When he first saw the neatly tucked up bed and simple camp cot in their room, Daxter wondered if there would be another sudden step. Until then he hadn't even thought about it, but after the last few days it seemed obvious they would still sleep together – right? But sharing a bed seemed a wee bit more intimate than sleeping on mats beside each other. Of course he didn't want to say that out loud, though.

Calling dibs on the shower gave him a little more time to think, but the warm water clearing away remains of salt along with the usual sweat and dirt from him wasn't as distracting as he might have wished. He still felt confused when he walked out, in a fresh change of clean clothes and rubbing his damp hair with a towel.

Jak sat on the side of the cot, waiting for him. He had folded up the blanket on it. Not saying a word aloud, yet offering to sleep on that himself if Daxter preferred it.

The sight of that made Daxter's shoulders drop.

"Dammit, were you always this charming or did I never notice?" he said with a chortle, slapping the towel over his shoulder as he walked over.

"I'm trying real hard," Jak said with a slight grin.

Daxter had to laugh at that, both of them relaxing completely. Finishing that, Daxter tilted his head and looked at Jak.

"Ya know I trust you, right?" he said.
The only response – the only one needed – was in Jak's eyes as he looked up, smiling.  

"Yeah, so, just try not to squeeze the stuffing outta me like your old crocodog pillow, okay?" They exchanged a grin, then Daxter jabbed a thumb towards the bathroom. "Now git in there, you need it as much as I did. Phew!"

While Jak showered, Daxter flopped down on the camp cot and twisted and turned several times, then flung the blanket so that it half hung down to the floor. Satisfied that it would keep the cleaning crew from starting to whisper amongst themselves, he crawled into bed. If it was any different, they'd find out.

Now, three nights later, he had concluded that it was a lot more intimate, even with soft pants and tunics on. Well, it felt like it, at least. Jak didn't do a motion different than when they were in Spargus, simply resting an arm over Daxter's stomach or chest. And really, Daxter couldn't recall sleeping this well since the time he was an ottsel. Even better, he noted that Jak seemed a lot more rested as well.

Which was a very good thing, because Torn and Ashelin made sure to fill their days with a lot of running about and blasting stuff. At times it was just picking things up or dumping things in the metal head or bot section of the city – most of the time without saying much about what the stuff actually was. But it probably served some important purpose, considering they didn't let just anybody handle it.

It all went unusually smooth, though Daxter had to practice his aiming on more than one occasion.

Even though every evening was a blessing promising sleep, he did take the time to check in on Tess and spill the beans, late in the second day. It was so embarrassing that he didn't even want to talk to Jak about it afterwards – who had wisely opted to stay the heck away. For all her squealing flailing, though, it was genuine happiness for both of them and he felt that most of all.

It was after lunch on the fourth day that Samos called them to ask them to check on the forest. He said that some of the green eco vents had suddenly become clogged – not that unusual when there were heavy rains or a lot of leaves falling, but it had happened suspiciously quick. The plants were too dozy from their approaching winter rest that they could not tell him much more than that there was something moving around in the forest.

And he felt that since Jak and Daxter were already making a round in that direction, they could make themselves a little more useful.

And so the duo found themselves standing on the sloping hill leading down into the autumnal landscape as the door closed behind them. Blazing reds and yellows rolled beneath the clear blue sky, but only a few birds chirped amongst the leaves. The smart ones had left, after all.

"Clogged vents!" Daxter said for the sixth time. "Did you sign a contract to become a janitor? 'Cause I didn't!"

"He's probably just paranoid because of the Precursor tech here," Jak commented.

"Uuhh. Like anything could put a dent in those pillars. And I think that telescope kinda served it's purpose, we already know that freakin' ship is coming!"

Jak shrugged and unfolded his morph gun.

"Stay sharp," he said and started down the trail. Sighing, Daxter drew one of his guns and followed.
They went down into the forest and walked between the trees for a while until they found one of the vents, just about where Samos had estimated the problem to be on the digital map in Jak's communicator. Whoever the scoundrel was, they hadn't bothered to hide their work very well, just tossed some leaves over the grate and left. Jak hunched down and wiped the leaves and dirt away, only finding more dirt beneath. It had been clumsily shoveled down – the ground by the grate was torn up by what looked like claws.

A little bit of green eco drifted out through the cracks in the dirt, making his hand feel pleasantly warm as he reached out. It drifted towards him until he pulled back.

"Since when do metal head pull kid pranks?" Daxter wondered aloud, a little more tense now than he had been before.

"Not sure it's metal heads," Jak muttered, narrowing his eyes at the marks in the ground. They were too even.

Looking back to the grate and the oddly shaped bolts that held it stuck, he concluded that somebody else would have to open it up to clean it. As long as the forest was secure, Keira could do it – though he didn't really like the idea of her crossing the metal head section, and he knew full well that Samos would blow a root at the mere suggestion.

Either way…

"Not much we can do about this," he said and stood. "Let's see if we can find whoever did it."

Daxter let out a noise of complaint, but followed him.

They walked deeper, reaching the lake. The warm sunlight broke through the shadows of the trees and glistened on the water and the warm orange of the Precursor metal pillars proudly rising from the lake's depths.

Even Daxter had to admit that it wasn't too unpleasant for an excursion, at least so far.

They continued around the lake – would have used their jet boards but since they didn't know what they were looking for, it was better to not slip around haphazardly and too quick. At least since Daxter hadn't gotten much time to practice with his board, and with an unknown hostile around it didn't seem like a good idea to start.

"Hey, I've got an idea!" Daxter suddenly said, raising a hand with his pointing finger stretched in a theatrical incoming-genius pose. "Why don't we split up to cover more ground?"

Jak turned around and gave him a long look. Daxter stared back.

Then they both snorted in amusement and continued on, side by side.

As the sky turned yellow and began to darken, though, their patience began to run thin despite the nice day. They'd pretty much toured the forest and nothing had jumped out to try biting their faces off.

With a grunt, Jak stopped and Daxter did the same, looking hopefully at him. Time to give up and go home and nap?

"Keep a lookout while I call Samos to ask if he's got anything new to share," Jak said, folding up the morph gun as he spoke. He hung it on his back to have both hands free for the communicator.
Daxter took a step back and turned his face up, gazing towards the deep blue sky above. A pale half moon was rising already and the air felt cool and easy to breathe, the autumn leaves whispering all around them. Well, he couldn't complain about the scenery, when he took a moment to stop and just experience it. The autumns in Sandover had been sparkling with color too, but they had also been brief – as had the boring winters, mercifully.

While Jak started dialing on the communicator, Daxter's thoughts wandered for a bit, distracted by the peaceful surroundings. Well, he was keeping an eye out either way, right?

And then a KG bot swooped down, shooting an iron band from its hand. It closed around Daxter's wrist, still attached to the robot by a thick rope. And the peace was shattered.

"Hey!" Daxter shrieked, spinning around and fumbling for his other gun with the hand that was still free. Then he shrieked again as the rope violently stretched, ripping Daxter from the ground and up to the hovering robot. The gun fell from his hand and disappeared into the grass.

"Dax!" Jak snarled, snatching his morph gun back in his grip as the communicator thumped against his thigh. It would have fallen into the grass if it hadn't been hanging by his belt with a string.

"Hello, boys," came an all too familiar voice from the faceless robot, crackling through the speakers which somebody had seen fit to install on a murder drone.

Jak would have fired, but the robot dangled the struggling Daxter in front of itself, making it impossible for Jak to shoot. Even at this close range, there was no way he'd take the risk and their enemy had obviously counted on that. He stood frozen, snarl on his lips.

"Oh, Mr. Tin-Can-Man," Daxter snapped with a hardly suppressed wince, kicking uselessly at the robot. He'd almost gotten his other gun out of the holster but the sudden pull had made his grip slip. At least it was still within reach… "We have got to stop meeting like this!"

He tried to grab his gun again but received a warning shake.

"I see that my cameras weren't glitching back in the cave," Erol commented, as calm as anything. "Though being a rat suited you better."

Oops. Daxter winced.

"Erol!" Jak snarled. The demand to release the prisoner laced his voice, but all of them knew that it was useless to speak it.

At first Erol didn't respond, as if waiting to see if Jak would voluntarily surrender in a bid to save his friend, again. Because it worked so well last time. But when there was no offer, he let the robot give Daxter a shake, making him cry out as his strained arm and shoulder were jolted.

"What, this scrawny thing was so important to you?" Erol asked, amused. "He's like a little fairy, with buckteeth."

"Well, at least I ain't a walking garbage chute!" Daxter winced, trying to put on a brave show. Jak would get him down. Somehow.

Erol ignored him.

"But I get it now," he said, thoughtfully. "It's the hair."

Daxter happened to glance down, and saw Jak freeze, panic blazing in his eyes. His lips moved,
dangerously close to forming a useless "no".

"That's why you called me Daxter, that first time you spoke up."

Daxter's dazed "Huh?" drowned in Jak's roar and the crackle of eco. The morph gun thumped into the grass and Dark Jak streaked across the ground, snarling like a maddened beast. He leapt onto a rock, from it onto a tree branch and launched himself through the air. But the robot swept out of the way and flew deeper into the forest, towards the lake… in a straight line for the walls separating the forest from the metal head infested part of the city.

The wind howled in Daxter's ears and his arm hurt so much that black dots danced in front of his eyes, but he grit his teeth and fumbled for his other gun. They were so far up that he knew he'd break several bone if he was dropped now, but he could see the lake glisten just ahead.

"H-hey!" he gasped. "Won't there even be an in-flight movie?"

Joking made his own head clear and distracted him. His fingers curled around the familiar metal of the gun…

"You're such a jester," Erol said with a scoff.

On the last word, Daxter shot the robot straight through the "head" at point blank. There was a violent crackle from within, and then the jet pack faltered. Momentum carried them forwards a few feet longer, then the plummet began. Daxter saw a glimmer of the moon in the water, just before the world exploded in bubbles and darkness.

He'd managed to take in a deep breath before he hit the water, and childhood training of diving from increasingly stupid-high spots helped him to keep it through the shock of crashing into the ice cold water. His knees hit a rock and he scrambled for it, using it to shoot himself upwards. Breaking the surface, the chilly air tore at his wet body but it felt like heaven.

The rocky beach was a mish-mash of nooks and crannies to stumble on and get his feet stuck in, and he was half blind because of the water in his eyes. He raised his hand to wipe it out…

And realized that the metal band was still tight around his wrist. Glancing around, he saw a thick line sagging behind him into the water, still connected with the red blur beneath the surface. Well, at least the rope hadn't stayed inside the robots arm… he didn't want to think about the alternative.

Another realization struck him twice as hard. He had lost his remaining gun when he hit the lake. It might still be useable if Tess had constructed it to survive a bath, but it was also colored just like the rocks. He'd never be able to find it in the water, in this poor light.

"Crap, crap, crapcrapcrap…!"

He made a mental note to add a small dagger to his arsenal when he got out of this. Would've been pretty sweet right now. But first things first. He scrambled on through the cold water, teeth chattering as the gentle evening wind clawed freezing needles through his wet clothes.

"Jak!" he called out, hoping for the best. "Jak, over here!"

A distant roar answered him, and his gut did a back flip at the pure fury he heard in Jak's voice. Erol had really gotten him this time. And when he reflected on what the cyborg had said, it dawned on Daxter just how humiliating it must have been for Jak to mistake the person he hated the most, for the one he loved the most.
His head dropped and he rubbed his forehead. Water sloshed around his dripping boots as he finally reached the shore and started up it, the grass reaching to his ankles. It seemed the rope was pretty long, at least. He got several yards away from the lake before it stretched and forced him to stop. With a grunt he looked around and glared at it, then sunk down in the grass to wait for Jak.

And then he heard a whirr. He snapped up, seeing a crocadog-sized, spindly robot drop from a treetop like a metallic, red bug. It skittered towards him and Daxter reached for his guns without thinking, only to be reminded again that he had lost both of them.

"Maybe you'd have better luck with a bow and arrow?" Erol's voice crackled from the robot.

"Did you spend all week installing speakers on your leftover toys?" Daxter snarled, moving his feet apart to prepare bolting. The rope would limit where he could go but it was still a fairly large range... hopefully he could dodge the bot until Jak got there. "You need a hobby."

"Perhaps," Erol said. "How about angling?"

The rope suddenly snapped taught and Daxter yelped as it tore at him, dragging him several inches back towards the water. Towards the cold depths where the robot lay.

"Think we can go Jak-fishing, kid?" Erol asked. And a soft laugh, almost a giggle. "I know that, technically, you're not a fish, but I don't mind using you as bait."

"Do ya also know that you're really lacking in the humor department, among all your other faults?" Daxter grit out, digging his heels into the soft earth. It only created a pair of scratches in the grass as he was yanked yet another little bit closer to the water.

"Oh, we just have different tastes when it comes to what's funny, that's all," Erol said. "Want to hear another joke, since we're waiting for Jak?"

"No thanks, I've got my own and they're way better than yours."

"I think you'll like this. It's a smart one, made by scientists even."

There was a soft beep, and a tinny murmur rose from the robot's speakers. Even when the words were unintelligible, they were so familiar that Daxter instantly recognized it. It was he himself, calling out to Jak, saying he'd been looking for two years and say something, just this once!

Premonition boiled in his gut, even though he had no idea what was happening.

"Did you hear something?" somebody on the recording said, just as Jak snarled his promise to kill Baron Praxis.

"Eh? What's that rat doing there?" another voice said. "Commander, should we send somebody down there?"

"Over a rat—?" Erol's voice started, annoyed, but then there was a hollow, panicked beeping.

"Bio readings show increased eco activity. Eco level at 50 percent," a female computer voice drawled. "110 percent. 170 percent..."

"What the—"

And Jak's distant roar in the background as he for the first time transformed into his Dark form.

"How in the hell— the readings were normal a minute ago! Did something trigger it?"
"Was it the rat?"

Daxter felt something break inside of him.

"N-no...!" he gasped, shaking his head furiously. "Why should that—"

But dark eco had transformed him. And Jak had been pumped full of it.

Maybe... maybe...?

His head spun.

"How would I know?" Erol said, shutting off the recording with the supposed scientists screaming about what had happened to Jak. "But even I have to admit that it's strange that everything was normal minutes before you touched him."

"Oh you think this is a riot, don't you?" Daxter snapped, swallowing hard against the thick, choking lump in his throat.

"Yes, I just love to play with little boys like you," Erol drawled.

Daxter's stomach roiled.

"Y-ya d-don't have t' tell me t-that, the word's all over the street." He gritted it through his teeth, wishing the stutter hadn't been so loud.

Erol chuckled.

"He mentioned that already, did he? Pity."

"Sicko!"

"You're the master of insults, aren't you? Know when you're outclassed, boy."

Daxter opened his mouth, but then Jak broke through the bushes some ways away. The sight of Daxter froze him for half a second, but then he rushed forwards again, passing between two trees.

Something dark fell from the tree tops, and Daxter couldn't shout a warning quick enough to stop Jak's dash. The darkness fell over him and he tumbled forwards, kicking and clawing – and for every wild movement only entangling himself more in the—

Daxter almost laughed hysterically.

"Is that your best? A freakin' net?" he blurted out. "Remember when you threw the whole army at him in the water slums?"

"Oh no, not just a net."

Of course it wasn't. Should have figured.

Jak's claws had already cut apart several of the thick ropes but he was still wrapped in it, and in his current frenzy he would have trouble getting loose, that much was apparent. Another small, bug-like robot dropped down.

"Shit— Jak! Look out, it's—"
The robot hooked its dagger-like front legs into the net. A click, and then electricity danced from it, little lightning bolts dancing through every tangled rope around Jak's body. He howled in pain, arching upwards as his muscles spasmed. Somehow found the strength to swipe at the robot when it for a second let up.

But two more dropped down and the air filled with crackles and Jak's roar. And then nothing.

Jak slumped down with a heavy thump, black eyes closed.

Daxter hardly noticed how he was yanked another little bit closer to the water.

"It can't be that easy it can't it can't IT CAN'T"

"Well, that's just embarrassing even for a half-wit eco freak," Erol said, voice moved to one of the robots by Jak. "You won't hear me complain, though."

One of the robots shifted, poking its sharp leg at Jak's forehead. He didn't stir.

"Oh, now let's see," Erol muttered, a manic glee creeping into his voice that was nothing of the angry but confident, manipulative man he had once been. This was pure madness. "These little ones can't do much but if they slice up his legs he won't make trouble when I send something to pick him up…"

The horrific monologue became a drone in Daxter's ears as his brain finally caught up with that Erol was completely distracted. The rope had stopped yanking at him, further proving that. A wild plan formed in his head, glancing at the little robot nearby.

He fished out a rock from the water and flung it right into the bot' glossy "eye." The projectile smashed through and the metallic bug went down with a crackling whirr. Not stopping to be amazed at how easy that had been, Daxter snatched up a branch and pulled it within reach so that he could grab the bot by one spindly, sharp leg. A jolt of electricity surged through his arm, but he managed to bite back a cry.

Daxter wrenched the leg loose and caught the rope against a larger rock jutting out of the water. Silently praying to the Precursors to keep the tin can from remembering him, he began sawing himself free with the robot's leg. It was clumsy work – the rope was thick, and the leg was difficult to hold without cutting his own fingers.

Erol did not seem to notice what happened, caught in his loud planning.

"Aah!" Erol let out a demented sigh, purely for show since he had no reason to breathe. "I want to take his eyes but I want him to see…"

The rope snapped and Daxter straightened up, wincing as he saw the blood dripping from his left hand's cut fingers. It was a small issue though. He looked around, wincing as he caught another string of ideas from Erol's rambles.

"You're not laying a finger on him, you twisted bastard."

He could see Jak stirring from the swoon, growl building as he remembered where he was. Clawed fingers twitched but he needed a few more moments, just a few… Jak was still so weak and the robots were already moving in to give him another shock, to make sure he stayed down.

"You know, it's funny that you keep calling him freak when you look like something from a low budget horror movie yourself," Daxter said, his voice more high pitched than he had intended. "Do
you even have your brain left?" He barked out a fake laugh. "Wait, did you ever have one, what with how you handled losing that final race?"

There was a snarl from the robots and they all turned on him. Daxter hid his right hand behind his back.

"That does remind me," Erol said, his voice low and seething dangerously, "Jak would love listening to you screaming."

"Yeah, probably," Daxter said, managing a fairly honest grin this time. "Speaking of which…" he moved his arm and held it up, revealing that he had freed himself. "… you're still a complete sucker when it counts."

Two of the robots started towards him, but they didn't get far. Jak's fist slammed into the ground and dark energy exploded out in a wave around him, charring the grass in a wide circle – but also frying the robots with dark eco.

The forest fell silent.

Only for a moment though, as Jak snarled and started trying to disentangle himself. Daxter waited another couple of seconds, wanting to make sure that Erol didn't have any more robots at hand. It seemed strange that there would be so few.

But nothing else happened, and he figured that the cyborg had to be too pissed off to not attack with everything he had at hand. Also that was as far as Daxter's shattered patience went.

He rushed over to the thrashing heap on the ground. The robots just laid there like dead, freakish crabs. Daxter ignored them as best he dared.

"Jak!"

The pale head tossed in his direction, pitch black eyes staring up, furious, suspicious. Pale face twisted like a cornered animal's, raw and unthinking.

Minutes before you… before you before you… touched him.

Did I do this to you?

Daxter bit his lip, reaching out.

"Jak, I didn't—!"

His mouth snapped shut at the growl. The dark, trapped creature recoiled from the tanned hand. He still snarled when the arm fell to numbly thump against Daxter's side.

"I… didn't, right?"

The wind gently rattled the leaves around and above them, but knifed at Daxter's soaked body. Jak didn't move.

Swallowing hard, Daxter wrestled down the twisting panic and guilt inside of him. He had to help Jak, first. Then, he might get some answers – though it terrified him to think about what they might be.

Jak had gotten one hand outside of the net, the one he'd used to set off the dark explosion. Now it pressed down, fingers spread and the tip of the claws digging into the blackened earth. He growled,
though lower this time, as Daxter leaned forwards.

"Hey, don't gimme none of that nonsense, you ain't no tall, dark stranger," Daxter said. He spoke the jovial words softly, though. Jak shifted his weight uncertainly, teeth still showing but in a confused withdrawal of his pale lips rather than anger.

Daxter carefully moved closer, stretching one hand forwards along the ground, palm down, towards Jak's. The eco-burnt grass crumbled to ash as he touched it, staining his fingers and spreading over the singed ground. Jak's pitch black eyes flicked down towards the hand as it moved into reach, then quickly back to Daxter's face.

"You know me," Daxter said. "I'm the one who doesn't run away."

His fingers drifted over the hand, fingertips brushing its back before he added the palm. Jak laid silent, watching him. Listening.

To Jak, when he changed like this everything seemed to move too quick or too slow, every word too loud, every motion a threat. Except from this one. This one's voice was soft and soothing. It didn't make him want to lash out.

"You're not a monster, Jak."

The hand moved to his cheek and he let it, blue eyes staring into his. He just slowly blinked. Daxter's eyebrows narrowed.

"You're not a monster."

Every syllable stretched out, digging their way into his hazy brain – but gently, not drilling like so many other words had done. Spreading across the hateful voice hissing in the back of his mind, the voice that told him to kill before he got killed, covering it in a veil—

"Not a monster."

— of peace.

The hand left his face, passing the darkness of his eyes without hesitation. He could feel the pressure of fingertips on his horns and they shrunk away, disappearing into the oblivion of his will together with the fangs, claws, pale skin and white hair.

He slumped, all tension fleeing his body and leaving a pounding exhaustion behind. Looking up at Daxter who still watched him in the same way, regardless of what he looked like.

"Hey, welcome back," Daxter said, but his voice cracked with relief and his shoulders slumped.

Jak just barely managed to form his friend's name. He wanted to speak, he needed to speak… but Daxter shook his head and reached for the net.

"Just a minute. Let's get you into something more comfortable."

Together, they managed to untangle Jak and he stood, still a little shaky after the shock treatment. He felt as if he had run several miles. Daxter ducked under his arm with one look at him, dragging Jak's arm around the gangly shoulders for support.

"Whoa there," Daxter said, though even in this state Jak heard the tension in his voice. "Let's just go get our pea shooters and blow this popsicle stand on the double, eh?"
Jak could only make an agreeing sound. It wasn't until they had walked several steps that he found his voice again.

"Dax," he croaked. "Dax, sorry."

"About what?"

Jak reached up and rubbed his forehead. There was a red mark from where the robot had poked him, but it would fade soon enough.

"He had to say that… that… you wanted me to say your name first and I…"

Daxter tried to stop him, say it didn't matter, but Jak shook his head and went on.

"I had been dreaming… he stood in the door, I didn't see right," he slurred.

Though Daxter's heart lurched, he took in a deep breath and shook his head.

"Meh. I wasn't paying that much attention to the décor in there, but the lighting wasn't exactly the best, was it? And you were sleepy. I'm more upset your brain didn't catch up on that I was never that ugly."

He put up a brave smile. It made it a little easier for Jak, at least for the moment.

Together they made it through the forest, supporting each other as best they could.

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Begin Introspection. Serial code: Daxter.

Okay, good. We're good. Everything's under control. Yes. Right. Great.

…

… Can we get to the part where he makes me feel better, now?

End Introspection.

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Chapter End Notes

This chapter is chock-full with references :D

First, for LadyFitz's Jaxter fanart "The One that Doesn't Run", to Nashidesei "Bait" (which is fanart for my old super silly parody Jak and Daxter comic "Mermaids" on deviantArt. Three words: Erol with tentacles.)
Also, Erol's comment about Daxter using a bow was inspired by Lady-Darkstreak who came up with that concept. Which looks badass. The braids help, too, haha. ("The Archer and the Gunman").

All the referenced art can be found on deviantArt.

Also there are a bunch of references to people who reviewed this story a lot when it was originally posted on fanfiction.net.
Ehm. Sooo...

In the past I've left some readers disappointed over my inability to write certain things. So with that in mind, the reason for most of this chapter, which was mostly written way back in the mid 2000's… well, the reason can be spelled "coached by Demyrie."


Begin Introspection. Serial code: Daxter.


Shitshitshit I'm gonna freeze to death how does he manage to get into my head how can he make it feel like I'm cold to the bone—


Bad word choice there, smartass.

This blanket isn't enough. It's damp now, too, and the wind is cutting straight through it. Through my clothes— through me. I'd tell Jak to slow down because the speed makes the wind worse, but I know he just wants to get through it and I can't argue with that.

So damn close. And I keep thinking about how just after I turned back, Jak didn't want me to come along anymore because he was scared something like this would happen. And I just barged on because I didn't want to get left behind. I didn't want either of us to be alone.

I don't want to be his weakness.

I… I just wanna curl up and listen to him breathe and know we're both safe. Maybe everything will be okay after that.


End Introspection.


They hardly spoke a sensible word before reaching the Naughty Ottsel. Jak was too drained, and Daxter hardly even knew what he was babbling about. Just spoke to keep his mouth going because it made him feel a little better, even when thoughts kept spinning around and around inside his head, digging deeper and deeper into him for every turn.

His teeth starting to chatter and the loss of adrenaline making his shoulder start aching was, actually, a sort of relief. At least it forced him to focus on something else. Jak was not exhausted
that he didn't notice Daxter freezing in his wet clothes, though. He dug out a blanket from his backpack that Daxter could sweep around himself. It helped a little, but it was too thin to completely keep the wind out.

They moved as quick as they could, picking up their guns – in Daxter's case, the one he'd dropped in the grass because neither of them felt like staying to search for the one in the lake – and only stopping on the way back to find a working green eco vent. It rejuvenated Jak enough to chase off the numbness of his limbs and mind, and even if it didn't work as well on Daxter it at least made his shoulder better and warmed him up a little.

But the chill stole over him again as soon as they hurried away from the vent, and from there it only got worse.

Which lead to – after they got out of the forest – Jak driving like they had a platoon of annoyed KGs at their heels. Jak's driving might have felt nostalgic, but Daxter was too busy being miserable to appreciate that. He didn't even care about the angry, howling metal heads far below them as they zoomed through the infested section.

He huddled up as best he could against the wind and his own thoughts, clenching his jaw to stop his teeth from chattering. And Jak said nothing, only stared straight ahead as he drove. Didn't slow down even as they passed the no-man's land warzone between the infected section and the harbor. It was fairly calm today, the new protective walls to keep the ground metal heads out had not yet fallen, at least.

Only when what remained of the Naughty Ottsel got within sight did Jak begin to slow. The broken sign had never looked so beautiful to Daxter.

Jak "parked" and jumped out, coming around to give Daxter a hand. He wanted to wave it aside, but as soon as he started moving he felt how stiff he was with cold.

"Got a change of clothes in there?" Jak asked.

"Can scrounge something up," Daxter grit out.

And a couple of minutes later he found himself in that storage room where he'd stored his just-in-case clothes. Where he'd shown Jak that pack of soft underpants and they had both been joking about that. Because life had been so amazing then, with Daxter just returned to what he had been and an endless array of possibilities open before him. Most of them involving helping Jak.

But now he was alone in there under the dingy light of a naked light bulb, searching through the boxes of forgotten clothes with shaking hands. Jak had disappeared somewhere, not saying where. Daxter glanced at the door over his shoulder, fighting down the instinct to throw himself at it and yell at Jak to come back right this minute because… because…

"WAS IT THE RAT?"

He swallowed hard and returned to scrounging. There were still a few new clothes he hadn't gotten around taking with him, thankfully. He didn't really feel like dressing up in some oversized pants that had belonged to some drunk associate of Jinx'.

He pulled out a warm-looking, red shirt from a cupboard. It was still wrapped in plastic and he tried to open it, but his cold fingers slipped. Growling at himself, not even able to do something that simple. He tore at it, finally used his teeth to get a grip and rip the plastic apart.

Jak opened the door just as Daxter pulled the shirt out. The redhead felt a stitch of comfort that his
friend hadn't seen him struggling with the plastic. Nice to not be seen as a complete loser.

Cold comfort.

"Here," Jak said, handing Daxter two thick towels. "Get dry." He closed the door behind him.

Daxter didn't even think twice about it. He dropped the shirt and quickly got out of his soaked clothes, wrapping himself up in the towels as he went along. A sigh of relief escaped him as the heavy, dry cloth enclosed him, soaking up the moisture from his skin. He rubbed the towels against himself, but didn't get far with that before Jak reached out and massaged his back and arms through the cloth. The warmth of his hands seeped through, but just the action was enough to make Daxter feel better.

He let himself slump, thumping against Jak who drew him in, pressing him close. Water from Daxter's hair dripped into Jak's clothes but neither one cared.

Then Jak suddenly drew back, and Daxter's over clocked brain panicked, wondering if he'd leave again. But Jak pulled a green eco salve bottle from a pocket and opened it.

"I'm not hurting," Daxter said, trying to chuckle. He should have said something about 'mother hen,' he remembered too late to add it.

"I don't want to risk you getting sick," Jak said, and Daxter had no argument against that. It was a good point, actually.

Daxter sat down on the floor and took the bottle from Jak's hand, shaking the towel from his shoulders. Even as he poured out the glowing salve onto his hand, the little pinpricks of eco drifted sideways, towards Jak – hence why the blond couldn't help apply it. Whether he wanted to or not, the main ingredient would go into him instead of the person who needed it more. But he sat down beside Daxter, putting his arm around the gangly shoulders. Body heat and closeness helped, too.

Although, it made it a little hard to focus, Daxter felt, as he fumbled to spread the salve over his own chest and throat. It seeped into his skin within seconds, leaving behind only a sweetly tingling feeling and a scent of fresh grass. For just a moment, that smell was stronger than that of the dust of the small room.

"What did he tell you, Dax?" Jak asked in a low voice.

The words struck Daxter like a blow and he flinched before he could stop himself. The bottle would have fallen to the floor if Jak hadn't caught it.

They sat silent. Daxter looked the other way. He knew that if he didn't say it, Jak would have to, and maybe they might as well get it over with.

"You were right," Daxter said in a small voice, wrestling the words out of himself.

"About what?" Jak asked, and Daxter could hear his scowl. He knew the frown wasn't for him but for Erol, but that didn't make him feel much better. Not about this.

"You said I'd be a target 'cause he knows now."

Jak grabbed his shoulders and wrenched Daxter over, shifting to make it a little less uncomfortable when he saw the wince. But he didn't let go, and the look in his eyes made it impossible to look away.
"You shot that bot down, and then you got yourself loose." He shook his head. "When I said that, I was too stupid to see that you can take care of yourself."

"But—"

"I make mistakes too, Dax! The trick is to crawl out of them. And you did!" Jak leant in close, staring into Daxter's eyes. "You can't let one slip get you down like this."

Daxter couldn't handle that look for long before he produced a broken chuckle and rubbed his neck, glancing aside. There was too much in that gaze for his torn up mind to handle. Maybe on a better day, now that things were different, but not right then.

It said Don't you leave me I need you, among other things.

"What did he tell you?" Jak asked again.

There wasn't even a need to wonder how Jak just knew that Erol had said something to tear Daxter in half. Jak would have known even if it hadn't seemed so obvious from his friend's misery.

There wasn't any way to get out of it, either, even if Daxter had wanted to – even when he dreaded the answer. Stuttering and hesitating, he told Jak about the recording of the scientists' comments. At the end of it his shoulders were almost up to his ears, which meant the side of Jak's hands touched Daxter's jaw line.

Finishing, Daxter gazed at Jak pleadingly, chewing on his lower lip.

His heart almost leapt out of his chest when Jak shook his head.

"I was getting angry before I heard your voice," Jak said, squeezing the tense shoulders. "The only thing you triggered was that final spark." He managed to produce the shadow of a smile. "And good thing, because it saved you a lot of work with those bonds."

Daxter let out a breathless, joyless bark of laugh.

"Heh, yeah, you did help out a lot with the saving, come to think of it—"

"No." Jak said it so firmly that Daxter gave a start. The green eyebrows crept low, but not in anger but in determination. "You saved me. I've never thought anything else."

"Really?" Daxter slowly said, in a low voice because he still didn't feel convinced.

Jak looked him right in the eye.

"You're not the sidekick to me."

For a moment Daxter stared at him. Then he lounged forwards, forgetting everything about flinches and bad memories, and flung his arms around Jak. Only then did he remember, but by then Jak had already wrapped his own arms around Daxter, squeezing him tight.

They stayed like that for a while, content just to be close.

Finally though, Jak gently let go and told Daxter to get dressed while he called Samos to leave a quick report and make sure they'd be allowed to take the night off to rest up. Laughing, Daxter commented that he was amazed they hadn't already been called by half the world about crap that needed doing.
The final leg of their journey back to the HQ was more pleasant than the first. Jak drove more carefully, though, because now that the tension had left both of them they were both drooping with fatigue. Daxter half-slumbered through the whole drive, small smile twitching on his lips.

They were both more sleepwalking than anything else as they made it into the Freedom HQ, somehow – neither was sure afterwards how – making it to their room.

Early next morning, Daxter woke up the moment Jak pulled away. His eyes cracked open and he sleepily peered upwards, eyelids barely obeying his demand to stay up. Jak was just a blur against the half light of the dimmed lamps, a blur that paused to brush its forehead against Daxter's. Then it straightened up, and tucked the warm blanket around the wiry body still in the bed.

Daxter owlishly blinked, drifting too close to sleep to even mumble a protest. There was a soft snort from above. Then Jak headed towards the bathroom on almost silent feet.

Yawning, Daxter closed his eyes again.

But he wasn't falling asleep. He was waking up. His body screamed for more sleep, but his mind had already started darting all over the place. Or rather, it was darting back to yesterday.

He curled up and ducked under the covers. The soft darkness was warm, but not warm enough. He almost wished that he was furry again, then he wouldn't have felt his skin so much. It'd be nice if he could've handed in his full-body-cover and gotten a new set, one that wasn't so great at remembering metal.

Erol himself hadn't grabbed him this time, but that was only a side note comfort.

Daxter squirmed, trying to think of something else. When he thought about what had happened yesterday, he had to think about what he had been told. What he had felt. And even if Jak had shook his head and squeezed him tight and spoken words that couldn't have been more perfect, Jak wasn't there right now.

The shower turned on in the bathroom, a hum of water peppering the plastic walls and a warm, familiar body.

Daxter rolled out of bed and to his feet. He stumbled forwards while rubbing his eyes and trying to get his body to realize that he was awake. Only knowing that he needed to be with Jak, right now.

When he opened the door to the bathroom he was already struggling to get rid of his dirty shirt, and it landed with a soft fwhump on the floor beside Jak's clothes. Daxter's pants and underpants – soft underpants – followed moments later, though in his current state he almost fell over trying to get them off.

He didn't stop to think.

Jak must have been aware that he was outside. And yet, when Daxter pushed the door to the shower open, a little too hard, the hero looked over his shoulder with a start. He obviously hadn't expected that. Clods of pale bubbles were melting down his scarred back, one soapy hand stilled on his neck.

Daxter bolted a whole lot more awake at the sight, blinking and only vaguely aware that his lips
parted.

Eh. Not like it was the first time he saw Jak naked, and in the shower, and not like they hadn't had a different kind of friendship for quite a while but all that new stuff was still pretty damn new and all the (few) times that Daxter had instigated anything it had still been pretty innocent and he could swear he was blushing because it sure felt hot all of a sudden.

… dang. That was a nice sight even for sleep-loaded eyes. Jak's hair laid soaked over his head, hanging down his neck but not nearly as long as it had been just a few months ago. A lot of things were different a few months ago.

Jak was smiling now, and turning. Daxter cleared his throat.

"Hiya, gorgeous," the redhead said, quickly wetting his lips when he felt how dry they were. "Fancy meeting you here…"

A wet hand reached out and Daxter took it, letting himself be pulled into the warm, falling water. He didn't slip, the floor was constructed with a grainy texture to prevent such things. It was more the heavy state of his body and Jak's pull that sent Daxter softly crashing into the blond.

He straightened up, chuckling and a little embarrassed at his own clumsiness.

"Yeah, fancy that," Jak murmured, reaching out and sliding the door shut behind Daxter's back. It closed with a soft rattling, enclosing the two of them in a small world of their own with the warm water washing over them.

Daxter leant into Jak with a deep, content sigh. He really could get used to this, and quickly so.

There was no rush, not at first, just a slow, curious tingle. He was still waking up, for the moment content just to have Jak close. Still fully aware and remembering why he had felt such a need to go to his friend, but the fear ebbed away when Jak's fingertips rubbed against Daxter's neck, dipping into his hairline. The red-blond hair was already drooping down, hanging around Daxter's shoulders.

Jak didn't have to say a word of assurance, everything he had murmured yesterday silently repeated in the simple caress. It's okay. Don't listen to him.

But there was something that Jak felt more pressing than Daxter did, expressed instead by the closed eyes and a careful kiss to a freckled cheek.

I'm sorry, so sorry.

Daxter wound his arms a little tighter around Jak's back. They both had a problem with being less forgiving on themselves, than each other. He wasn't going to stand for it, though.

"Don't angst on me, buddy. It smells funny, and not in the good way."

He paused for a second, then fired off a leer.

"If you get angst all over me I'll make you give me a full body wash."

One of Jak's eyes opened slightly and his lips stretched. Heat rose up through Daxter's throat and cheeks, and it wasn't quite embarrassment this time. He leant back against Jak's arms, away from the blond, tilting his head slightly and lowering his eyelids. The falling water softly peppered his chest.
"And we can't have that, now can we?"

He was pulled back up and Jak dropped one arm down to around his waist, pressing them tightly together.

Oh yes, fully awake now.

But the grip eased as Jak let go with one arm and reached backwards. He merely cocked a teasing eyebrow at the curious, and a little disappointed look he got from that. Daxter was a little too distracted staring his dissatisfaction, and because of that he almost jumped when Jak's hand landed on his shoulder, suddenly cool with liquid soap.

The long fingers curled, running down the thinner arm and leaving behind a delicate trail of white. The water melted the soap away almost immediately, even as Jak paused to massage Daxter's wrist. In one stroke, he took away the grimy feeling and memory of metal that still remained there.

Humming his appreciation, some kind of purr had he ever had that ability, Daxter rocked forwards and rested his head on a familiar shoulder. Jak let the hand slip free, wrapping his arms around his friend again and leaning his cheek against the soaked red hair.

"But you know, I think I'm… maaaybe… a little bit guilty too," Daxter murmured, reaching behind Jak to the soap bottle.

He brought his hand back and far down the strong spine, grinning when Jak closed his eyes and arched into the slippery touch. It made it very easy to press slow, liquid kisses to his neck. As soon as Daxter straightened up, Jak restarted the return of favors.

They both moved slowly, rubbing soap and clean foam over each other's skin. Lingering over pronounced scars, pretending that they could wash away all the old pain. And maybe, for just a little while, that was true. Little wet kisses nuzzled in every now and then wherever their fingers passed deepened the tingle.

It melted into being sex almost invisibly. It could have been that neither of them really would have noticed the change, if Daxter's back hadn't made contact with the wall. The half-transparent plastic was cooler than anything else, causing a jolt. Daxter straightened up, meeting Jak's gaze with something akin to thoughtfulness.

Here, pressed to the side of the shower, the redhead was partly outside of the circle of falling water. Jak blocked even more of it, but it mattered very little. His body heat made up for the loss, even as Daxter got more friendly with the wall.

They both paused for a moment, Daxter's arms resting around Jak's neck and upper back. Jak's hands drifting on Daxter's hip and leg, the last soapy bubbles dissolving.

There was no need for an agreement or understanding, it had always been there. It was just fascinating how they had simply flowed into the situation, together. They needed no new understanding of how it should proceed, either. Daxter had instigated it, therefore he sealed the deal. Jak just waited for him.

Daxter moved his hands, stroking Jak's shoulder and neck before cupping his cheek. Jak leant into it, soft, lazy smile touching his lips.

"You're gorgeous," Daxter murmured.

Jak didn't say anything right then, but the look in his eyes spoke loud enough. He moved closer,
nudging Daxter's head back against the wall when their lips met.

Gently, Jak's hand moved from a lean, strong leg, fingers drawing small circles on the wet skin of Daxter's stomach before dipping down. A sound like a hiccup escaping him, Daxter broke the kiss as his neck arched. But the wall was in the way and he couldn't go further, hazily grateful for that when Jak gently took his lips again.

Just as everything else had been so far, it was more a caress than anything else. Slow and perusing, and yet so much more intimate and warm that Daxter squirmed, seeking more. But it was withheld, cruelly, lovingly drawn out and he could feel Jak's smile against the side of his mouth.

A stubbly cheek stroke against his, rough against the moist softness of everything else. Daxter sucked in a sharp breath, tongue running over his lips and leaving them mindlessly parted. There was a chuckle, but only a shadow of the laughter remained in Jak's voice when he whispered. A low, honest murmur promising never to let anything go wrong again.

Realization cut through Daxter's foggy mind and his eyelids rose, trying to catch Jak's gaze. It was in the murmur and the blond's single-minded attention, only giving and not granting himself anything.

Still trying to make up for what had happened yesterday.

"Jak…"

Daxter could only breathe it, his normally so trusty voice utterly failing. Their eyes finally met, Jak silently asking for no disagreement. Needing desperately to make it okay, but it already was, what happened back there hadn't been his fault and Daxter knew that all along. He'd said so. He'd forgiven Jak.

But Jak hadn't.

A hard gulp rocked Daxter's Adam's apple and he leant his forehead against the blond's.

"T-told ya, not… angst on—"

The words floated out of reach, his toes curling when Jak nuzzled an ear sticking out of the soaked red-blond hair.

*I can't forgive myself if I don't try to make it up to you.*

He wasn't using fair arguments. Not the silent ones, not the way he flicked his tongue over Daxter's earlobe, not the way he made pulsating motions with his hand.

Daxter wrenched his face against Jak's neck, struggling desperately to muffle the cry of sensatory overload. Need, pleasure, annoyance. Helplessness. That feeling of guilt should have no place here, not with them together.

Daxter hadn't come here just to *be* loved.

But when Jak got like that, the best thing to do was to let him work it out. To distract, help him only worked when he let his guard down.

The movements had stopped. So close to each other, mind numbingly close – but Jak stood unmoving, letting himself be held in a tight hug, head ducked beside Daxter's ear. Waiting to know if he had just destroyed the moment. Trembling just a little, needing it to be alright, needing Daxter
but so, so scared of ruining everything. Everything seemed like it could shatter at any moment, any wrong motion.

Daxter struggled to form words through the chaos in his head, but his body acted on its own basic instinct. Given a taste and then suddenly left hungering it rolled, seeking that delicious heat. Jak's breath hitched, then slipped out in a low moan when all of Daxter's warmth brushed against him again. It sounded like he hadn't intended to let the sound escape, but it worked wonders.

One of Daxter's hands slipped down from its perch. It tumbled down along Jak's spine, down to the inwards curve. Wet fingertips caressed wet skin and Jak bent his head back, fingers loosening. Daxter bit back a whine, knowing it was his own fault but this was more important, and in one way it made it easier to think.

And in another, more difficult to.

With Herculean effort he focused, turning his head and slipping his tongue over Jak's neck. Tasting water, sand and tanned skin. A groan answered him this time and Daxter could grin, even if the sound wasn't very agreeing.

Daxter wrapped his arms around the strong back, making – letting – Jak straighten up and meet his gaze. The blue eyes were misted over, making the grin a little stronger.

However little Jak thought he deserved right then, who had spent years dreaming of and longing for who, again? He wasn't the only one who could make unfair arguments.

"Y'gonna get it," Daxter murmured.

For a moment they both stood frozen, but suddenly Jak's arms wedged between the wall and the redhead's back, crushing the smaller body against his broad chest in a tight hug. Though he did let out a "herk!" in a vague kind of protest, Daxter returned the favor to the best of his ability. Tightly cocooned together and with the water flowing over them, he finally felt that it could be okay again.

"Love ya, stupid," Daxter said, theatrically rolling his eyes though it couldn't be seen.

Jak hummed, letting up a little and leaning back so that they could look at each other. He was smiling again, faintly but strong and secure.

He understood, he just asked to do this.

Daxter wrinkled his nose.

"Well, if you put it that way..." he leant in and pecked the tip of Jak's nose with a light kiss. "S'long as you don't beat yourself up while you're sexin' me up, 'kay?"

The look that crossed Jak's face in that moment was one of the funniest things Daxter had ever seen in his life. He cracked up, unable to keep from laughing. And to the sound of that, Jak caved too. His arms slid tighter around the lean body he held, as if looking for support to keep standing as laughter wrecked through him in relieving waves.

There was nothing else right then. It was safe and strong and it held both of them, so encompassing that all else was forgotten.

Daxter was still giggling like crazy, trying to catch his breath, when he felt the cool wall brush the back of his head. Not even that could make him stop laughing. He tried to stop only when Jak kissed him, and it didn't work because they were both shaking with laughter. It didn't have to work,
they kissed anyway. Tried and failed and didn't care one bit, because that wasn't important.

It washed over them from inside, like the water and soap on their skin, and in the end they were left gasping for breath in between the last fading giggles, leaning on each other. After a while Jak cupped Daxter's cheek, making him open his eyes and look at the blond again. Another failed kiss ensued, but this time it worked a little better.

"Gods, I love you."

A pretty weird phrase coming from Jak. Daxter even blinked, but then he would have widened his smile – if he could have grinned wider than he already was. He settled for tilting his head, and winding his arms around the blond's neck. Jak's laughter peacefully ebbed away, only a smile and his slightly lowered eyelids remaining of it.

"Normally I only let the babes tell me that, you know," Daxter said, turning his head a little more to gaze at Jak from the corner of his eyes. "But I'll let it slip for you. 'Sides, I think you kinda count as a babe anyway— eep!"

He let the last slip too, even though he full well knew that it was a mock-glare Jak gave him. It didn't last long either, before it cracked up and their foreheads gently brushed.

"Yeah, you pass," Daxter murmured.

He quirked an eyebrow, sliding his hand up to the back of Jak's head. The blond just watched, smiling – holding back and waiting for a signal.

"Now, handsome…" the redhead sweetly said, "where were we?"

Begin Introspection. Serial code: Jak.

He's so warm.

End Introspection.
The Precursor Temple

Begin Introspection. Serial code: Onin.

They swivel. All the paths swivel. There are so many of them, and I cannot see where they end anymore. The darkness was so far off, but in just a couple of days it is before me no longer. I will be as blind to the future as everyone else.

Perhaps there is light on the other side, perhaps I shall know once again… I do not know.

So much can happen before the uncertain overtakes me. There are so many ways that we can fail. That Jak may fall.

Damas will die. Perhaps. So many of his paths end sharply, just before the darkness. Some of them today. Some of them tomorrow.

But there are others too, whose possible paths shiver and break. And so many more if Jak stays here. We have already allowed Haven to take so much from him. We cannot dawdle any longer.

There are some things that must be. Other things are parts of the whole, and can go either way. There is very little I can do, unless I am asked. This power is not to be abused. It must be a gift… and even then, it is not for me to steer with force. I cannot lead… I must point.

Should we fail, then at least there is hope for another cycle. Jak may try again in another time, another reflection, even if it means nothing to us who die here.

End Introspection.

The ceiling lamp was switched off, sparing the room from its cold, harsh light. Instead, the softer night light set above the bed glowed warmly, casting a soft illumination on the walls and floor.

Right then Daxter preferred it that way. He shifted a little, just to better feel the softness of the blanket that cocooned both of them in, and Jak’s warm body against his. A sleepy grunt of protest answered him, and Jak's hands pressed against his back as if worried that he was going anywhere.

"Ya needy teen..." Daxter mumbled, tilting his head to nuzzle the blond-green hair on the head tucked beneath his chin. It wasn't completely dry yet after the shower, but pretty much. Another grunt, and he could feel Jak smile against his chest.

As Daxter settled back, a runaway thought wondered if Jak would ever have laid like this with anybody else, completely relaxed. The thought ran off in a darker direction unbidden and pointed out that what had happened between them in no way meant that everything was okay. There would still be times when Jak panicked and needed space. Daxter pulled a face – Jak couldn't see it so it was okay – and mentally waved those concerns aside. It would happen eventually, but they'd tackle
that when it came. It would pass, every time.

Daxter's hand slipped over Jak's shoulder to his back, drawing mindless little circles. He felt the tiniest bit of tension when his fingers passed over the areas where stress bundled up tension that required massages to sort out. It made him chortle softly, and Jak's breath tickled Daxter's chest in response as he too silently laughed.

While Jak relaxed again, Daxter's mind rolled the other way and reflected on himself, and how quickly he'd let things happen after all, from that first kiss and their reunion in Spargus.

But it was just the two of them, the Demolition Duo, after all. As soon as he'd gotten over the stressing and fear of guilt choking him at first, he'd known full well that he was completely safe with Jak. He'd known it all along, really, though he had needed some verbal slapping at first to remember it. Compared to his current circumstance all that fear seemed bizarre, but he knew he'd had to get through it at the time.

Jak's hand drifted, as if he could sense that Daxter was thinking a bit too much. Calloused fingertips slipping over the base of Daxter's neck, down the sides of his spine, lingering, feathery light at the dip of his lower back and the redhead's breath hitched. He felt that small motion of Jak's lip against his chest again, knew he smiled.

Every smile was always a victory, and right then they were so close, so easy to grasp and hold and bask in.

A need to see and not just feel came over Daxter and he crept down, winced a little at his stiff muscles. Neither one of them had moved much for a while, content in the lazy warmth after they dried themselves after the shower and returned to the bed – because it was still stupid-early in the morning. As soon as he moved again, the memories of the adventurous yesterday returned to Daxter's joints. He refused to think about that day any more than that. A distraction was easy to find.

Jak's eyelids were heavy, and he slowly blinked at Daxter as their faces became level. Soft, warm lips stretched and it was impossible not to kiss them. Lazy still, even when Daxter dug his hand into Jak's hair and felt a hand at the back of his own head. Both sleepy and spent, content to just linger in this gentle warmth and closeness.

Later he'd tell Jak "Okay hot stuff, show me something more, then." But not right then, because right then was perfect just like it was. He'd have to be ready to go further, too. And Jak had to be as well. Or maybe he'd never be. It didn't matter.

They'd figure it out.

The communicator beeped.

Groaning but waving at Daxter to stay where he was – because unless there was a real emergency Jak had no plans on going anywhere but back to bed – Jak rolled out and to his feet. Even if he still fumed, Daxter felt a little bit less displeased as he heaved himself up on one elbow and watched Jak stalk across the room to answer the call.

Jak snatched up the communicator with such force that it looked as if he was going to fling it into the wall – and the wish was clearly there – but he turned himself around and aimed it so that the
camera would only catch his face.

"What?" he growled.

"Waaark! What crawled up your pillow and died, ya sleepy bum?" came the response from the speakers.

Daxter thumped down against the mattress.

"Son of a bitch...!" he groaned.

Jak, however, didn't waste even that much breath on Pecker.

"What?" he repeated, only a little less I'm-about-to-wring-your-neck-ish.

"You two need to get your featherless behinds back to the Wasteland on the triple," Pecker said, speaking noticeably quicker than he usually did. "And then start heading as far south as you can get!"

"If we need to go to the Precursor temple, just say so!" Jak snapped. "This better be impo—"

"Waaark! Caramba, you're grumpy today. Just run over there right now, you'll see when you get there." And Pecker wisely cut the connection after saying so.

With a growl Jak lowered the communicator and ran a hand through his hair. Looking up, he watched Daxter clamber out of bed and start reaching for his clothes. Some of it still made a trail towards the bathroom, which couldn't help but make them light up a little bit despite the unwelcome order to move out.

"They better give us a paid vacation after all this," Daxter declared while dressing. "Preferably on a nice little tropical island somewhere, where we can't even get a signal on the communicators!"

Jak could only smirk at that.

Even so, as they left the HQ, people they met along the way took one look at Jak's face and then took the long way around the duo.

The huge Precursor statues rising from the darkness of the temple's center stood as silent as ever, cold and uncaring about the little people who struggled on the platforms before one of them. They spoke only to the worthy, and the monks all tried to not think about what that meant. It was tough enough to bear their communal mistake with Veger.

And for the moment, they had worse problems. The metal heads had found another one of their hidden artifact vaults. This time the monks had managed to fight them back, but the door was irreparably broken and the treasures had to be moved. Again.

With a sigh of relief Seem set her burden down on the floor. The box rattled as the many items inside knocked against each other, the sound soft as the pieces bronze colored Precursor metal met.

"Where do you want this?"

Seem glanced around at the monk who had asked her. He looked haggard, his face paint unable to hide the dark rings under his eyes. The artifact in his hands was no bigger than his head, but it had a strange, misshapen form and metallic arms bending in strange directions which moved at the slightest motion, making it hard to hold without jostling everything about. It looked like a crushed
insect – and one look told Seem that whatever it had been, it was probably broken. The monk knew
that too, but he still carried it. They had already been forced to leave so many behind before. Even
broken ones had a higher value now, aside from their inherent historical value.

The question was, of course, if there would be any history left soon. Even with Jak…

Seem pushed that thought aside, to not let the numbing guilt come over her again. For now, they
had to just bring everything here temporarily so that they could have some time to figure out where
to hide the artifacts next. She waved at one of the shelves on the wall and the monk went over to
unload his burden.

The work went on at its silent, tense pace. Then suddenly, running, stumbling footsteps intruded on
the peace. They all spun around as a male monk fell out of the tunnel leading to the main temple.
Blood smeared over the sandy floor as he writhed, at first deaf to the calls, recoiling from the hands
that reached for him to help.

"So-something… with— with—" the monk's pitiful attempt at an explanation ended in a hysterical
wail as he curled up, clutching his head.

Dark eco swirled around his wounds, making the blood bubble and hiss as the foul substance dug
deeper into his flesh. Seem called for white eco and some stumbled off to find it for the poor man,
while she and everyone else hurried up the tunnel, drawing their guns.

Seem too pulled out her weapons. She had been forced to use the small hand guns a lot more often
lately, and the weight of them brought a little courage to her. Premonition told her it would not be
enough, however.

A horrible stench like sulfur and charred flesh assaulted her nostrils and she pressed the back of
one hand against her nose, hearing several people behind her make gagging noises. It only got worse
the further they got.

Seem saw a flash of crimson and pure darkness as the tunnel twisted, and then they stood in a
grand, open room. Whimpering or silent, still monks laid strewn about like dolls after a child's
tantrum, blood tainted with dark eco seeping over the floor from the deep cuts in their bodies.

It was not what made Seem freeze in her tracks, her meager "troops" staggering to a horrified stop
around her.

Living darkness turned their eyes upon them. Alien, dark bodies slick as metal, with elongated
faces and noses – vaguely alike Precursor statues and machines, but twisted into a foul mockery of
those creations. Blood coated their knife-like claws already, just a taste of what was to come.

She didn't need an explanation for what they were. She had been waiting, all of them had been
waiting for the inevitable, and now that was right in front of them.

And in the middle of it all stood a monster of a different kind, smiling, amused. Twisted metal
limbs and worn red coating, one hand human and the other grotesquely large, shaped like a bloated
gun. That half face and his orange hair only accentuated the horror, showed that he was so much
worse than just a machine. Seem knew enough of Haven City to recognize the KG symbol on the
thing's chest plate.

"What are you?" Seem demanded, her voice shrill.

At a time of crisis, she had to be strong. She had to be brave to bring courage to her monks. But
that thing, that metallic, misshapen thing with that horrible, insane smirk and the creatures that
hovered around that metal demon filled her with such dread that she was amazed she even managed to speak.

They had come to crumble everything to dust, everything she had tried to protect, everything and everyone entrusted to her.

The robotic creature gave her a lopsided smile, eyelids half sunk.

"I am formerly Commander Erol of the Krimzon Guard," it said. The smile grew. "And you're annoying."

Several monks rushed forwards, past her, raising their guns. Others screamed and ran, and those who attacked full well knew that they were only buying those who fled a little time. They just tried to get in the way.

"Call for help!" somebody who wasn't Seem shouted.

She stood rooted on the spot until that shout, until she met the gaze of the one who had yelled at her. It was one of the monks who ran forwards to make a defense line, calling out with just a quick glance behind – like the others ready to sacrifice his life to give others a chance to survive.

Seem hesitated for only a split second – Damas would have stood and fought with his troops to the bitter end. But she was not Damas, and her monks were not his warriors. They would be slaughtered if they fought. She would be slaughtered.

She ran.

"Scatter!" she shouted at the fleeing monks, hoping that some of them would be able to get away amongst the labyrinthine tunnels of the temple. If they could just get to the exit.

"Kill the leader!" she heard the robotic monster shout behind her, above the agonized screaming of the falling defenders.

She didn't dare to look around. The monks split up and dove into side tunnels before her, their numbers thinning as they fled for hidden paths in the hopes of getting around to the outside of the temple. It felt as if mere seconds passed before she heard dark claws clattering against the floor behind her.

Through the panic one thought break through – if they hunted her especially for being the leader, then she had to make that count. One by one the other fugitives took off to the side, but she continued on through the bigger tunnel. There were paths ahead too, secret doors and passageways that could bring her around and outside. But first she had to lead the attackers as far away as possible. And then…

… abandon the temple?

We need help.

The last monk ahead of her disappeared, hopefully to safety. Every breath tore at Seem's throat as she rushed on, driven by terror and desperation alone. She reached an open chamber at the end of the tunnel and dashed over to an alcove in the wall, clawing at a torch. The socket slid to the side and the back of the alcove swung open into the adjacent room – but without using this short cut, one would have to run through a winding corridor to get there.

Seem leapt through and dared a glance back as she closed the hidden entrance. No living darkness
in sight. How long she had, she did not know – but it was an opening, and she tore her
communicator from her belt as she sunk down on the floor, her legs trembling.

With shaking fingers she hit the buttons on the device, slipping several times so that she had to
back up. Sweat iced her pounding forehead, every second shaving off another precious moment
until those demons would come thundering down the tunnels to sniff her out.

Finally, finally she managed to make the call, pressing down the final button so hard that the
communicator almost slipped out of her unsteady grip.

One beep. At the last moment she realized the mistake and quickly pushed a button to lower the
volume, so that it would not give her away.

Two beeps, softer this time.

"Oh hey, Face-Paint!" Orange Lightning's cheerful voice came through the speakers, in her ears far
too loud even with the lowered volume. "What's up?"

He looked very different now, but she recognized his voice, and she had seen his arena fight. She
knew it was him. But more importantly…

"Jak!" she croaked, just assuming – silently begging – that he was also be there. He had to be.
"Erol is attacking the temple! Please help us!"

"Aw, snappercase," Orange Lightning grunted, all amusement vaporized.

But from the background came the voice that Seem so desperately wanted to hear, the voice that
she had once foolishly hated as much as the rest of that man.

"We're on our way, Seem," Jak grimly said, just within reach of the microphone and barely heard
through the almost muted speakers. "Hang on!"

The sound of distant, clattering footsteps reached her ears. She would have wanted to tell them
about the Dark Makers, but panic clouded her senses and she leapt to her feet, gasping out a "thank
you" before turning the communicator off. Fumbling, she blindly tried to shove it back in its holder
by her belt as she ran, but lost her grip instead. It crashed against the floor like thunder, and a
triumphant howl came from the direction of the hunting footsteps.

Seem didn't stop, leaving the communicator behind without a second thought as she rushed down
the tunnel. The steps were still far behind, but she could hear them getting closer and closer for
every step.

The tunnel split in two ahead of her. She dove into the left tunnel, around a corner and threw
herself at the wall. Her nails scratched over the uneven rock, and she tore up her fingertips in her
frantic search for a hidden button. The footsteps echoed behind her, louder and louder.

Just as she started to fear that she in her terror had ended up in the wrong place, a small part of the
wall gave away. It sunk inwards, and with a soft click a portion of the opposite wall swung open.
She dove inside and punched at the button to close the door. It slid shut behind her, leaving her in
complete darkness until she managed to find an eco light in one of her bags.

The small, pen-like artifact lit up with a soft glow on one end as she activated it. Not much, but
enough to help her find her way down the hidden tunnel.

As she hurried on, for a moment she wondered if she had lost her pursuers. But just as soon as she
had dared to tempt fate with that thought, there was a sharp screech of claws against stone behind her.

Seem stumbled down, down, until she ran into another wall. It took another precious few seconds before she found the button to open the door. The torch light of the tunnel outside nearly blinded her but she ran out, not daring to waste time closing the door. She just fled on.

Ahead of her the tunnel opened up, and she saw precursor metal against a great darkness. It took a moment before she realized where she had ended up. The panic had led her astray – she hadn't rushed towards the exit of the temple. Instead she had ran back into its center.

Dusty sand drifted through the air, glowing little pinpricks floating about in the beams of sunlight coming through the cracks in the ceiling far, far above. The torches fluttered, lazily sparking as their light danced upon the smooth surfaces of the huge Precursor statues. Still smooth, millennia later.

It was all so peaceful it hurt.

There was still blood on the ground from the wounded monk who had come to warn them about the attack, but he was nowhere in sight. Hopefully somebody had helped him flee.

There was nobody to help her.

Seem crashed on her arms and knees. Tasted blood as she choked gasps of air in and out of her lungs. Her whole body ached. She couldn't even imagine getting to her feet again. They would find her within minutes and she was so exhausted that she didn't care anymore.

Struggled to not throw up – some semblance of pride remained through it all, to not do something so disgraceful in this holy place. The Dark Makers would desecrate it soon enough, but she could at least try not to.

Somehow she managed to sit back on her knees, head heavily tilted backwards so that she could see the colossi rising from the abyss before her.

"I've tried…" she half whispered, half groaned. She closed her eyes. "I've tried, but I've done nothing but fail you at this crucial time. I even dismissed your champion."

Her whole life she had dedicated to the service of those who had created these statues and everything else on this world, and she had wanted to spend her last moments looking at their landmarks again. But as she heard her own words softly echo in the dry, hot air, the truth struck her like a blow. Her head dropped.

"No… I'm not even worthy to gaze upon you."

In compare to what she felt when admitting that, she wondered if it would hurt half as much to have dozens of claws plunged through her body.

There was a pair of heavy, clacking sounds and her eyes flew open, thinking the Dark Makers had found her. Then a deep, soft voice spoke.

"Ah, but you have struggled so, Faithful One."

Seem flew to her feet, shock electrifying her drained muscles as she stared upwards at the statue facing her. The metal eyelids had drawn back and a warm glow shone from beneath them, filling up the darkness and illuminating the statue's face.
She couldn't speak, just gape as the very gods spoke to her again.

"You must not lose hope. Our hero is approaching, but until then, you must…"

There was a pause, and Seem thought she heard an agitated murmur. Afterwards she would never admit it even to herself, but it sounded like three different people arguing about something being difficult to aim. But that was nonsense, and she would cling to that even after she had truly seen her creators.

And she definitely did not hear that grand voice clear its throat before continuing.

"You must keep the most important artifact safe. As long as Jak safely receives this one, there is still hope."

A beam of light shot out of the statue's eyes, converging on one of the many artifacts carefully set on shelves along the wall. Seem stumbled over and grasped it. It looked much like a Precursor orb, but larger. Under her fingers, the ancient Precursor metal came alive with a soft hum and she could feel the power awaken within the relic. Even in her haze, she recalled that it was a recent find. The archivists had suspected this one was of great importance, but not been fully able to determine what it was. There had been suspicions that it had something to do with machines left behind in Haven, but since Veger had since severed his ties with them, the monks had lacked complete records once more.

But now it was awake, and waiting for the one who would need it.

Hard, distant footsteps came from a distance, but they no longer frightened Seem. She turned around, and even as she did a hidden door even she had not been aware of opened on the wall beside the platform. Gazing up at the statues, she bowed her head in silent awe and gratitude.

"We wish you good luck, Faithful One," the Precursors said. "And one more thing."

"Yes?" Seem gasped out, half turning in the door.

The voice sounded almost amused.

"You have already gazed upon a vision of us. He is very different now, but he is still always at our hero's side."

The door slid shut on its own, leaving her in darkness. Just ahead there was a dim light, just enough to let her see the steps leading down before her. Seem staggered down the stairs, clutching the artifact as if it had been a human baby.

She stepped out in the dilapidated half of the temple. For safety's sake, all known paths had been cut off to this area. It was practically falling apart and had been so for many years. Weather had worn down the rocks and sand laid in droves in every corner. The floor itself had caved in, creating a wide chasm before her, where only old pillars reached up like dead trees. The smell of dust was almost suffocating.

Glancing around, Seem spotted an intact shelf on the far off end of the chasm, and the shadow of a jump portal. Perhaps it could be made to work. A narrow path along the wall might take her there.

Carefully she made her way over. The fear had left her. She knew she would not be found. The only concern that lingered was for her monks, but they were all clever survivors. As long as she had brought as many Dark Makers as possible away from them, most should make it out. It would have to be a worry for another day.
Safely reaching what had probably once been a study but was now merely a floor and crumbled walls, Seem carefully put the artifact down and then inspected the teleportation gateway. A little fiddling was all it took – it was merely turned off, she found. To be sure she made certain that it would only go one way, to the entrance. She could leave there, later. But not yet. The Dark Makers may still be lingering out there.

She sunk down on the floor, holding the artifact close. The Precursors had showed her the way here. It was the safest place she could be.

So she waited.

How long she sat there, she did not know. But when there was a distant sound, she looked up not in panic but with quiet tranquility.

On the other side of the chasm, a being of pure, gentle light moved. A person followed it, as easy as anything, a person wearing red and brown, and with hair colored like fire. The clues were enough for Seem to recognize that ethereal being as Jak.

He spread a pair of huge, glowing wings and gathered his friend into his arms. Then he rushed forwards and threw himself out over the abyss, carrying himself and Orange Lightning across the darkness towards her with strong flaps of his wings.

That was truly a hero blessed by the Precursors. Of course, at this point she did not need any more proof.

Seem stood up, smiling with relief. She had not failed. And finally she would have the strength to tell both of them she had been wrong from the start.

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Even if none of them would ever admit it under torture, Torn, Samos and Ashelin quietly allowed it to themselves that they tensed up quite a bit when learning that Jak had left Haven again. They did have faith in themselves and their soldiers and workers, but if anything really went down it was good to know they had their best man at hand.

With both him and Sig back in the Wasteland, they were out of heavy artillery. But there was nothing to be done, no matter what those two were free agents and more and more, the leadership in Haven had to accept that even Jak's loyalty leaned towards a whole other city.

It was more worrisome that he hadn't even bothered to call in about taking off, though Pecker had informed them as Jak and Daxter were leaving – and since it was on Onin's request that they did so, there was little to argue about. Well, Pecker had said that Jak was in a horrible mood, and they still didn't know what exactly had happened in Haven forest. Something must have really upset him, that was the only idea they had. Samos too was upset because the green eco vents were still clogged, but apparently fixing that would have to be put on the backburner.

None of them discussed their concerns, of course. They just went about their daily business of planning, administration and ordering about. Onin sat on her pillow lost in thought – or meditating, or asleep – with Pecker resting in her hat.

None of the other three in the room noticed Pecker rapping his feathers on the brim of Onin's headgear occasionally, glancing at the large digital clock displayed at the corner of many of the computer panels. Occasionally, Onin shifted when he did so. To one used to seeing them at rest, it would have been obvious that they were not at all at ease, but even Samos was lost in his own duties.
There was a beep from the communication monitor. Ashelin, standing the closest, pushed down the button to answer.

"Come in, Sig," she said, reading the name on the display.

It was not Sig's face that appeared on the screen.

"Not today," a hoarse voice said, and everything in the room stopped.

Samos froze. Ashelin stared. Torn snapped to attention.

It was a blessing, all three of them silently agreed later, that Daxter had not been there to see their reactions. He would never, ever had let them hear the end of it.

Onin and Pecker were the only two who barely reacted. Pecker allowed himself an unusually gentle smile as Onin's lips stretched the slightest bit, her milky eyes softening. At once, they both relaxed.

"Unc— Lord Damas?" Ashelin finally managed.

He deigned giving a small, but stiff smile, clearly as uneasy as she was confused.

"Hello, Ashelin," he said. "We might talk later, but right now I must speak with the green eco Sage."

Torn and Ashelin's gazes flew towards Samos. He, in turn, glanced at Onin.

Blue, ethereal dust whisked about the old crone's fingertips as she made an airy, small motion with her hand, palm held upwards.

_Go ahead._

Closing his eyes for a moment, Samos took in a deep breath and moved over to Ashelin. She stepped sideways out of his way in silence, feeling her pulse beating to the tip of her ears. The tension in the air felt as if that just before a decisive battle. But she would not be part of it.

"Greetings, Your Lordship," Samos said, as calmly as if he didn't already know what troubled Damas enough to contact him directly. To swallow his pride and make that direct reach into Haven, to that place that only held painful memories for him, and to ask for help there… there were very few issues that could torment the King of Spargus enough.

Damas' lips curled in a strained half-smile. It was the only greeting he could offer.

"Something very puzzling has been going on," he said. "I hope you may share some light on it."

"I will do my best, if I can be of any help," Samos said, still somehow managing to keep calm though his heart spiked. It felt as if he had been waiting for this one moment for the last fifteen years.

There was a pause as hesitance flashed in Damas' eyes, one last second of doubt he had to overcome even now.

"I…" he slowly started, "have been told you raised Jak."

"Indeed, I did," Samos softly said, holding the King's gaze through the link.

Damas opened his mouth to speak again, when there was a sudden shout.
"Your Lordship!"

The voice was distant, but loud enough on Damas' end to be picked up by the communicator he was using. His head snapped to the side.

"What is it?" he demanded.

"The scanners are picking up—" the messenger gasped for air, his voice frantic. "Something huge—! You need to see—"

Damas pinched his eyes shut, but only for a fraction of a section. He glanced back at the communicator.

"This will have to wait," he curtly said.

Samos' gaze flew to Onin, whose face was nearly covered by a veil of blue light as she frantically signed. Pecker was clutching the edge of her hat, leaning so far forwards that he risked falling. Spinning back to the screen, Samos called out, reaching out his hands as if he could have grabbed the King of Spargus and held him there for just that moment longer, when there was no time to explain, to make sense.

"Trust your own senses, Your Lordship!" Samos called.

Damas paused and for a moment, pain flashed in his eyes.

"How could I?" he said.

"What else can you believe in?" Samos returned.

Damas took in a sharp breath and looked away, visibly trying to pull himself together.

"You will answer my questions later, Green Sage," he said and cut the connection. The screen went pitch black.

Pecker fell off Onin's hat and landed with a feathery thump. It was the only sound, apart from the cold whirr of the machinery. Ashelin staggered backwards and into a console, grasping it for support as she stared at nothing, trying to make sense of what just happened. Torn crashed on a chair, rubbing his face.

Samos looked towards Onin. She sat silent, gazing upwards with unseeing eyes. Finally, she breathed in and made a small motion with her hand. He did not need Pecker to translate for him.

If there is still time, perhaps there is a chance.

Begin Introspection. Serial code: Damas.

I need proof. Any proof. One way or another.

But first I have to live to see tomorrow.
End Introspection.

I wonder, sometimes, if we created a stable time loop. Well, we can only hope. As far as this one goes, we know that we succeeded in sending little Mar to Sandover, and at a much lesser cost than what I recall. But will every loop be the same? Have we closed a circle, or is it different every time?

And if the flutter of a butterfly's wings in the wrong place can cause a storm at the other end of the world, then what changes could even greater events bring?

End Introspection.

Late midday saw the demolition duo exiting the temple. It was unbearably hot by that time and the idea of crossing the desert was unappealing, but Seem had urged them to hurry back to Spargus.

All the artifacts that the attackers had gotten their hands on had been torn into scrap, but the temple was as far as they had seen cleaned out of Dark Makers.

Jak still wasn't sure how he had gotten talked into Daxter's suggestion for a final safe guard test. They had not been able to find Erol in the temple, though a lot of tracks left behind in the form of tell-tale scratches on the floor from his feet and burn marks on the walls, but nothing beyond that. So to make absolutely sure the temple was cyborg-free, Daxter had ran around yelling insults to Erol's... "honor"... while Jak followed close by. It had been pretty silly, but effective in its own way. There was no way that Erol, especially in his current mind set, would've ignored Daxter if he had been anywhere within hearing range.

Jak had a feeling that Daxter felt a great need to defy all the horror Erol had put him through in the forest. Well, the redhead had gotten his fill of that – safely too, because the cyborg had not shown up.

With the temple secure, Seem insisted they head to the city in case there would be trouble there. The surviving monks could pick up the pieces by themselves. There were more important things for the Precursors' Chosen to do, she insisted.

Her wild change from how she'd been when they first met was almost creepy.

They had reported in to the Spargus defense HQ, but the report back was that there had been no signs of new kinds of monsters. Daxter muttered for a long time about how the guy they'd spoken to probably thought they were drunk.

But it was all they could do, and now it was time to leave.
"Well, that was weird," Daxter summarized as he climbed into the Dune Hopper.

"Which part?" Jak asked, unable to keep from smirking.

"Do ya want me to order them by size or take it from the beginning?" Daxter narrowed his eyes and jabbed a finger towards Jak. "And let's make one thing clear, buddy boy. You keep those flashy wing tendrils where I can see them at all times!" His smirk said that maybe, just maybe he wasn't quite serious about that, though.

Jak paused in his climb to the driver's seat and slowly raised an eyebrow at the redhead.

It was the worst display of "whatever do you mean? I am not in the pleasure of understanding you" in the history of eyebrows. Daxter could only handle a fraction of a second of that before he broke down in snickers.

In that good mood they rolled down the hillside and made the precarious jumps between the tall islands and broken cliffs that made a make-shift path to and from the temple. Of course Daxter never ever let a trip be without comments that there had to be a better way, but Jak just never took the time to look.

The hot day wore on and they stopped by an oasis along the way to drink and refill their flasks, before continuing north.

The Spargus lighthouse was just rising above the horizon when Jak's communicator beeped. Daxter reached out and unhooked it from Jak's belt to answer for him. He pushed the Respond button, but didn't have a chance to say anything before Damas' voice whipped through.

"Jak! Come back to Spargus, our scanners are picking up… something." The grim pause before the final word dropped ice into Daxter's guts. "It's not a storm."

Daxter raised the communicator towards Jak to let him answer this one.

"We're almost there," Jak said, only half turning towards the device as he kept staring ahead of them. He pushed the gas pedal harder into the floor. "In about twenty minutes."

"Come to the gun tower as soon as you get here," Damas replied. "You're the best gunner we've got and I believe we'll need that."

"Whooa, today's just one thing after another," Daxter grunted, blowing up his cheeks.

"Tell Damas about the Dark Makers!" Jak growled without even looking around, eyes set on the growing glow of the light house.

Daxter grunted at the prospect of this madness, but turned the communicator over to face Damas through the small screen.

"We ran into some weird creatures in the temple earlier," Daxter said. "If you guys see anything that looks like a midget Precursor statue had a lovechild with a metal head in a tub of dark eco, just keep shooting at them. They have shields but they don't last forever."

"I'll inform the troops of that if necessary," Damas said, and it was impossible to say if he took the advice seriously or not. "Hurry."

Then he cut the link, and Daxter grimly hung the communicator back on Jak's belt.
They flew across the dunes – sometimes literally because Jak drove more like a madman than usual – and finally the Spargus walls rose up from the sand ahead of them. The gates opened to reveal the car pit.

It was a battlefield.

Damas had been forced to inform the troops about the Dark Makers.

Hulking, dark beasts leapt and ran around under a hail of bullets from Spargans taking cover behind cars. There were pools of dark eco everywhere, and defenders who were forced out of their cover had to run in dangerously wide arcs to avoid the foul substance as they sought for new places to safely aim from. Some of them didn't even bother with that, though, but took on the attackers head on. And even when new Dark Makers kept appearing out of nowhere, there was no retreating from the Wastelanders – only fury that somebody dared to try take them in their own turf.

A big group of monsters appeared just in front of the entrance of the pit just as the gates opened, and Jak plowed right over them with the Dune Hopper. He jumped out of the vehicle with Daxter just behind, leaving the car standing on the twitching bodies as they dissolved into dark eco.

The two of them rushed across the pit, dodging attackers as well as stray bullets, shooting at any enemy that tried to get in the way. The door to the main city was half open, jammed, forcing them to squeeze through.

Things were no less chaotic on the other side.

Jak exchanged a glance with Daxter, grabbing his jet board from his back. Grimly, Daxter nodded and did the same. He still hadn't had time to practice much with it, but it would be quicker and probably safer than finding a frantic leaper lizard to ride. And he wasn't going to be left behind. He zoomed after Jak, following his ques to steer this and that way to get around and towards the gun tower at the other end of the city.

It didn't seem like an organized attack. There was no frontline, no tactic to the assault. The whole city was a war zone, with Dark Makers teleporting in alone or in clusters at random locations to fight the defenders.

Perhaps they had thought that the chaotic assault would shatter the defenses and make Spargus an easy, if messy catch. However, the chaos benefited the Wastelanders more than the Dark Makers. The Spargus citizens were used to fighting alone, well drilled in taking care of themselves.

The people congregated in small groups and split up as the situation demanded wherever they were, fighting on their own when necessary. Bodies laid strewn the streets, yes, but there were also pools of dark eco, showing where Dark Makers had fallen. And there seemed to be a lot more pools than corpses.

Daxter caught sight of Etche the bartender taking cover behind a broken wall, sniping at any Dark Maker she got in sight, taking out their shields with quick shots to leave them vulnerable for others or her headshots. He would have given her a thumbs up, but he was a little too busy trying to keep his balance while swerving as far away from the enemies as possible.

Several times it was just impossible to get around them though, and he followed Jak's lead to jump off the jet board and fight their way through. And somebody was always at their back when it happened, men and women coming to their support to clear the way. Grim grins and smirks exchanged, then the demolition duo rushed on through the city.
Just as they flew out into the open after the central caves and saw the ocean line beyond the cliffs, a huge Dark Maker teleported in right in front of Jak. He reacted lightning quick, ducking and throwing himself off the jet board to the side. Daxter was not so skilled with keeping his balance on the board, however, and scrambled off of it just nearly avoiding falling on his behind. He clawed for his gun and Jak already had his morph gun halfway up, when two exes came from a direction each and tackled the Dark Maker.

All three of them went down swearing and screeching, blindly punching and clawing. Then Jak put his gun to the monster's head and shot it at point blank. The two former KGS scrambled away before the metallic body dissolved into eco. One of them swore with pain, clutching his bleeding cheek. A claw had sliced clean through it, showing his teeth behind the blood and swirling dark eco.

Jak grabbed the wounded ex's arm and the man stopped, squinting dazedly at the blond. Without a word Jak reached up, holding his palm near the wound. The dark eco siphoned out of the torn flesh and into Jak's hand.

The ex breathed in raggedly, grunting out something that was probably gratitude – though the remaining pain made it impossible for him to speak. Jak just nodded to him and hurried on to grab his jet board from where it had careened off to. Daxter saved a comment just for this time, though he couldn't help chuckling despite the situation.

They hurried on, seeing a line of defenders holding off the Dark Makers by the gun tower. At the center was Damas, flanked by Sig and Kleiver, and several others. A peace maker blast lit up the open area in front of the tower, blasting a whole group of monsters backwards, just as Jak and Daxter swept down the final sandy hill. Grinning as the two of them skidded to a halt in front of the group of Wastelanders, they exchanged glances with Sig. However, there was little time for that.

"Get up there, Jak!" Damas shouted to be heard above all the war cries, shots and screeches. He pointed towards the ladder to the great gun. "Something big is coming down!"

"On it," Jak growled and leapt over to the ladder.

He climbed up one peg, then paused briefly to glance over his shoulder. Daxter gave him a thumbs up, grinning. There was no lack of faith there. But there was also no room for more than one person up in the turret. Jak was too far away and everything was too noisy for it to be worth shouting at him. That thumb and the grin served well enough as a promise to be right down here, making sure that nothing got up there to bother him.

With a nod, Jak turned back and continued to climb. Daxter looked around, and the Wastelander who had been standing beside Sig actually shuffled to the side, giving the redhead a grin as she waved at him to stand between them. His stomach doing a little swirl of both pride and anxiety, Daxter hurried to obey. Standing there alongside his and Jak's mentor and the other big boys of the city, though, a rush of courage came over Daxter and his fears ebbed even when a group of Dark Makers charged towards them. He'd only ever felt that all-encompassing bravery with Jak before, but suddenly there were more people who counted on him, who he could count on. Together they wore down the evil gods' shields until they could fell the attackers, before the monsters even got close.

And then there was a roar, so loud that it shook the ground.

Daxter twisted around, but all he saw was a huge splash far off into the ocean, sending waves speeding towards the cliffs to crash against them. Others turned too in alarm.
A gigantic demon rose up from the water, standing on legs the size of the lighthouse. Daxter's stomach dropped to his feet and he recoiled. Somebody wailed in terror.

The huge gun fired.

Shots soared through the air and exploded into the colossus' face and knees. It reared back, howling loud enough to make the palm trees shake, and spewed out a solid ball of dark eco. The projectile flew right towards the gun tower, but exploded into huge pieces of shrapnel as Jak shot it out of the sky.

Somebody grabbed Daxter's shoulder and he was turned back, seeing more, human-sized Dark Makers rush towards the tower. Swallowing his fear, he told himself that Jak could handle the big ones. He and the others had to make sure nothing got up there to stab him in the back.

Afterwards, it seemed like a nightmare. Daxter focused all he had into shooting at the foot soldiers, aiding those with bigger guns and better aim as best he could. Behind him, deafening splashes and new roars told him that Jak had yet another colossus to hold back – or one had fallen. Occasional hissing explosions told him that some of the attackers' eco bombs made it through Jak's gunfire, but most of them happened far out to sea.

And then two of the colossi landed in the city.

Daxter heard Damas' curse, the one and only time that ever happened, and for a moment he thought it was all over.

But the shadow of the huge gun swung around over them and the shots flew above the houses, pushing the giants back. They recoiled, driven backwards. One of them toppled, its knees shattered and face a crushed mess bleeding eco. It staggered back, stumbled on something, and fell.

"It's on the other side of the wall!" Sig shouted, and cheers rose up to confirm this estimate.

"It better not have trampled over my cars!" Kleiver gruffed, but he sneered triumphantly nevertheless.

The last one soon followed, one final earth shattering roar and then it crumbled.

And with it, the assault came to a halt. No more Dark Makers appeared, and those that remained were too aggressive to stop, and were dealt with as quick as the Wastelanders could weed them out.

The silence was sudden, unbelievable. All of them waited, those by the gun, those out in the streets, standing tense, listening.

But there was only the howl of the wind and the groans of the wounded.

Even Sig slouched as the tension left him, so Daxter allowed himself to topple forwards, slamming his hands on his knees to not fall as his own gasps for air rocked him. A hand on his shoulder, and he looked up to give Sig an exhausted grin.

Glancing at Damas, he saw the King stand there, shoulders hunched, eyes closed as if he said a grateful prayer to either the Precursors or the strength of his people.

Daxter's mind could only stay on anybody else for so long, though, before he looked around to find the big damn hero of the day. He craned his neck, gazing at the tower, ready to whoop at Jak for doing such a fine job defending the city.
There had been too many projectiles, however. Not even Jak had managed to take all of them out before they struck. Thankfully the gun tower had been built sturdy enough to handle it…

But looking up, Daxter's heart plummeted as he saw all the dark eco sliding down the tower in thick, lazy drops. It looked like a huge, bizarre candle. And all of that would want to get into Jak.

He'd hardly finished the thought before he saw Jak move up there. With the distance between them it was difficult to see any details, but he could see the movements and read them. Blond head turning back and forth, as Jak realized that there was a wall of dark eco to get passed if he wanted to reach the ground.

Or not.

Just as more and more heads turned towards the gun, towards their King as well as the hero they knew was up there, Jak's body flashed with light eco. Daxter's grin exploded on his face as the surprised shouts rose to a flabbergasted crescendo when Jak spread his wings and leapt off the tower, sweeping down.

So even the big bad Wastelanders could be impressed by something else than a good fight, huh? With that proud conclusion, Daxter glanced about to see Damas' reaction. He saw the King's surprise, and got to snicker at that for a second before the expression changed from wonder to alarm.

Ice poured through Daxter and he spun around. Somebody cried out.

Jak wobbled in the air, constricting in agony. His wings shriveled and he plummeted, crashing on the sandy ground as the light shattered and he writhed, clawing at the black shrapnel digging into his body. His clothes and bags were in tatters, torn apart by the shards of the dark eco projectiles that had made it through. Darkness swirled around his bleeding wounds and he roared, claws sprouting from his fingers and horns from his head as his skin paled and his eyes turned pitch black. Dark eco crackled out from him and his arms flung out, fingers convulsively digging into the loose sand as he threw himself back and forth on the ground.

The people who had rushed towards him recoiled from the black lightning that lashed at them – even Daxter, though he moved several steps closer than the others before he was forced back, pain coiling through him as a thin black line singed his hand.

"Jak!" he shouted, and he wasn't alone.

Then Damas marched past him.

"Bring light eco!" the King shouted, just barely heard above Dark Jak's roar.

It brought at least some people out of the spell well enough to send them scurrying off. Damas didn't even look around. Black energy whipped towards him but he raised his hands and pure white light flared up from his palms. The lightning thrashed around, recoiling from the light and he leaned against it, forcing himself closer and closer as everyone who still remained just stared.

Still it seemed to take forever, one painstaking step at a time, and it gave Daxter enough time to close his gaping mouth and clench his fists. He'd seen enough of eco powers to not be surprised, but he hadn't seen anybody but Sages and Jak use it so easily before. But he'd also seen enough to know when it was running out, and Damas' light flickered dangerously as he neared Jak.

Even if he reached him, he might not be able to use the eco to—
Damas' grabbed Jak's shoulder and hoisted the writhing demon up to an unsteady sitting position.

And then he slapped Dark Jak upside the head. The roar stumbled and the squinting, black eyes turned on the King. But Damas didn't balk. He pointed out to sea, staring into the pools of darkness set in Jak's twisted face.

"Use it up, Jak!"

He had to repeat himself twice before the words seemed to go through. Snarling in pain Jak fumbled up on his knees, aided by the steadying hand on his shoulder. He brought his hands together and people flung themselves out of the way as a ball of sickly purple light formed between Jak's palms.

The roar rose up again, but this time it had purpose as Jak threw out his hand and the dark eco charge flew past the tower, disappearing beyond the cliffs as it flared out of sight. Then another, and another.

Bit by bit the black lightning bolts grew fewer in number as Jak forced the dark eco out of himself. The singed smell faded.

Daxter still got several more eco burns before it was completely safe, forcing himself closer step by step as he refused to wait until all of the foul energy was spent. It brought him close enough to be there when Jak swayed.

The eco crackled weakly as Jak fell forwards, catching himself on his hands. Color flowed back into his skin and hair as he gulped in air in choking gasps, shaking with each breath. Blood, not eco, flowed out of his wounds but there was still dark shrapnel lodged into his flesh. Daxter saw that as he grabbed Jak's other shoulder and helped him straighten up.

Jak's eyes sluggishly rolled, meeting Daxter's, then Damas' gaze. His lips moved, but no sound made it out.

"Don't be stupid!" Daxter snapped, voice clogged with the relief – though he still felt Jak needed to be told what was what, because he could see that hero boy struggled with an apology for messing up just now.

Jak tried to smile a bit, but that took out the last he had. The blue eyes rolled upwards and he fell backwards, thumping into the sand.

Daxter's hand crashed into Damas', both reaching to check Jak's pulse on his neck. After one look at the King Daxter relented, moving his fingers to Jak's nose instead. The flutter of breath against his skin calmed him, and Damas sat back a moment later with relief.

Medics and people carrying bottles made of Precursor metal hurried over, but Damas waved the former away.

"Give me pliers and bandages. There's still solid dark eco stuck in him," the King said.

He took control of the situation. Of course. Even as he opened bottles and absorbed light eco from them right into his hands, even as he grabbed pliers with glowing fingers and began pulling out the shards from Jak's arm, Damas was giving orders to everyone.

Begin gathering the wounded. Help the monks clear up the dark eco on the streets. Make sure there aren't any enemies left in the city. And Sig and Kleiver, you are in charge if something happens for the next hour.
Daxter only took note of it vaguely. He was completely focused on Jak's wounds – the dark eco shrapnel did not like being pulled out. Dark sparks flashed out and made Jak's muscles spasm as the pliers touched them, but the bolts also recoiled from the light enveloping Damas' fingers. After wiggling them out of the wounds, Damas dropped them into an empty eco bottle. Even the clatter sounded angry.

The moment Damas finished one area and moved aside, Daxter dove in with bandages to stop the blood flow. They both moved quickly, silent.

The contents of Jak's bags laid spilled on the ground. Little things, credits, bullet clips. Many of them singed and broken from the vicious assault of the eco. Daxter didn't think much about them then.

He was so focused on Jak that he did not notice Damas' gaze idly running over the items while he shifted to move around to Jak's other side. Neither did Daxter notice the King pausing. And he didn't see Damas reach out and pluck one small, orange item from amongst all the others, cradling it in his palm as he stared at it.

It lasted only for a second. Then Damas pocketed the item and went on with his work.

The crowd had dissipated by then, all of them sent off to deal with whatever orders they had been assigned.

How long they worked with patching Jak up, Daxter didn't know. But finally Damas put the pliers aside and put a hand on Jak's chest. His fingers flared again, but Jak did not react.

"There is still strong eco in him," the older man said. He gathered Jak in his arms and stood, as if the burden did not bother him at all. "Come."

Daxter did not have it in him to protest right then, even if he knew that Jak would have been mortified to know that he was carried through the city like a swooned damsel. This was definitely filed under "things Jak doesn't need to hear from me" in Daxter's mind, and he could only hope that nobody else would inform the hero about it, either.

Thankfully, as far as he could see they were pretty much ignored along the way. People were a little too busy helping, digging, searching, and getting helped.

Damas led the way to the elevator to the throne room, and Daxter followed without a word. The redhead's hands were shaking from all the excitement now that the adrenaline ebbed, and he clenched them to hide it. On the other hand, Damas did not have the courtesy of showing a single sign of being tired.

When they reached the throne room, Damas walked inside but then headed to the side of the grand hall. Water peacefully flowed, splashing gently in the basins beside their feet as the two of them walked across a bridge between two pools. At the end of it, there was a door that Daxter had never noticed before. Then again, he and Jak had always been under scrutiny when they were in this room. Not really a good time to go exploring.

"Open it," Damas said, and Daxter obeyed.

On the other side was a corridor lit by the last rays of the sinking sun. Fresh evening air flowed in through open windows framed with elegant cacti and tough, small trees. Colorful birds roosted in the branches. The most parrot-like were green, with blushing red around their heads, but there were several different kinds of all the colors of the rainbow. They fluffed up their feathers at the sight of
Damas but regarded Daxter with more suspicion in their cold, round eyes.

"Huh, I thought Pecker only joked when he said you had a harem of lovebirds," Daxter said. He didn't care that it was Damas he talked to, he had joked – as much as he dared – in that man's presence before. Because Daxter needed some jokes to keep his own anxiety under control and he would have his jokes, damn it.

"They will hack out your eyes if I tell them to."

Oh yes, of course Damas said that with a little bit of amusement. Daxter gave a start and glared back at the birds, taking note of their sharp beaks.

"They make excellent guards, as well," Damas added. "Nothing slips past them and they are too alert to be taken by surprise. If something comes this way unbidden, I will know immediately."

"Which one is Pecker's girlfriend?" Daxter asked, though mostly out of habit.

He didn't expect a response, so the one he got actually made him snicker despite the worry for Jak.

"He seemed to prefer the company of the blue ones."

There was another door at the end of the corridor, and again Daxter had to play bellboy and open it. He hadn't been sure what to expect, but he was surprised when he realized where Damas had brought him and the unconscious Jak.

It was a simple room, though fairly large. Pictures had been hammered out on the wall, and a quick look gave Daxter the idea that it showed Spargus' history. At least, that looked like a lot of little sticky figures building houses and the lighthouse. Shelves with scrolls, books and papers lined one wall around a tall desk – of course the owner of this room wasn't the kind to sit down and work or read. There were a couple of chairs, but they looked like they were mostly for show. A wide but plain bed stood by the far wall, and that was where Damas headed.

Carefully, he let Jak slide down on the blanket and straightened him out, then pulled at one of the younger man's arms so that the hand hung over the side of the bed.

A few more birds perched by the open windows, curiously watching the proceedings.

While Damas went to fetch an urn made of Precursor metal, Daxter fought down the urge to joke about how he'd always thought that the King of Spargus slept in a coffin. He stood there uselessly, shifting from foot to foot until Damas returned and told him to light the oil lamps and bring the chairs.

Glad to have something to do, Daxter hurried to obey the order. Damas, meanwhile, placed the urn beneath Jak's dangling hand and when Daxter returned, took one of the chairs to the other side of the bed, where he sat down.

"Keep an eye on that container, and tell me if it begins to fill up." Damas grasped Jak's other wrist. "I'm going to channel light eco through him and force the brunt of the dark out of him through his hand."

"You can do that?" Daxter asked as he plopped down on the other chair, grateful to finally get to rest.

"I can try."
Pure white light glowed and flickered between Damas' fingers as he closed his eyes, and the constant line between his eyes deepened. A noise escaped Jak's throat but he didn't stir, to the shared disappointment of both Daxter and the King. Neither spoke it, though.

Jak's other hand twitched, and Daxter pulled a face as he watched dark eco swirl out of his friend's fingertips, forming thick drops that slowly fell into the urn. Half gas, half liquid.

"Nice tricks you've got there, Boss," Daxter said, fidgeting and looking away from the eco. "Are you a white eco Sage or what?"

"No, but such skills run in my family." Damas didn't look up. "It's impressive that Jak can use both light and dark, though."

Daxter almost made a comment about how Jak had used to give all the other kinds a run for their money too, but bit it off at the last second. He was about to ask if there was anything he could do to help. However, Damas was quicker.

"It's a great thing, that," he continued. "To have balance."

"Ah yeah, I suppose." Daxter rubbed the back of his neck. "Miss Make-up… eh, Seem said something about that too."

Damas finally opened his eyes and watched Daxter with an even, unreadable look that made him fidget even worse. Letting go of Jak with one hand, the King reached into a pocket and drew out a small, orange item.

"It's one of the things this symbolizes," he said, and Daxter winced when he saw what it was.

Damas rubbed his thumb against the Seal of Mar, the uneven circle made up by two mirrored, drop-like shapes. In the past Daxter had commented that it kinda looked like a pair of stylised ice cream cones, but he didn't feel like making that joke right then.

"Fell out of his bag, huh?" Daxter said and glanced at the torn strips of cloth that remained of Jak's shirt. "Good thing it didn't just fall in the ocean, then we'd be in a right soup. He really should keep that thing someplace safer. Dammit!" He threw up his hands. "He was carrying most of our money, too! Now it's probably spread across half the city."

"Why does Jak have this amulet?" Damas asked, cold to Daxter's monetary worries. His voice still had that same, even tone. Completely controlled.

Daxter, however, winced again at the question.

"I'll tell you if you want," he said with a breathless chuckle, shaking his head. "But it's so crazy, even from me, that you ain't gonna swallow it."

"Try me."

"Heh… okay then."

So while dark eco lazily dribbled out of Jak and into the urn, Daxter explained about the Precursor tech that had brought them through time and to Haven, then went back to explain Sandover, and following that what happened after he helped Jak escape from the prison. It took a good long while, but for once Daxter stuck to the basics and didn't elaborate with too many manufactured facts. It was difficult enough to believe.
Damas didn't comment. At times he did not even seem to be listening as he sat there, holding Jak's hand. Purple eyes moving just the slightest, gaze flickering over the unmoving face.

Outside, evening deepened into darkness as the story continued, but the soft light of the oil lamps and white glow of Damas' hands illuminated the room and the three men inside of it.

Finally Daxter wrapped it up with the defeat of Kor and the aftermath.

Silence.

He waited for a comment, doing his damndest not to start drumming his fingers on something. Not sure what he had expected, but complete disinterest? That was a tough pill to swallow.

After several more seconds, Daxter opened his mouth to ask if there was no opinion about all of what he had just said, but Damas waved at him without even looking.

"Wait, I'm almost done forcing the eco out of him," the King said.

Glancing at Jak's hand, Daxter noticed that the darkness gathered up to fall a lot slower. The urn was nearly full. The last clog dripped down, and there was nothing more. Letting out a low breath, Damas let Jak's hand slip down on the blanket.

"Your story…" he said, finally looking at Daxter again, "is insane."

"Yeah, that pretty much sums it up," the redhead said with a shrug. He pointed at Damas' hand, the one he knew still held the Seal of Mar. "Can't prove it with much more than that and witness reports, though. Well, we do have that head of Kor up on the wall in my bar, but everyone knows we capped that bad boy."

"Indeed…"

A small sound escaped Jak and he moved, his eyelids twitching. Daxter started up, only to be met with a commanding hand motion to stay put.

"I want to hear this story from him as well, so be quiet about it," Damas said in a low, serious tone.

"Uh?" Daxter blurted, but the warning look he got shut him up.

Jak groaned and raised a hand to heavily flop it over his own face, weakly rubbing his forehead for several seconds before he pried one eye open and squinted at the world around him.

"Hey sleepyhead," Daxter said, letting out a sigh of relief as he caught Jak's gaze.

Blinking, Jak managed to smile a little bit. Daxter's gut did a happy little thwirl, as he saw the worst tense confusion evaporate in Jak at the sight of the redhead. Then the heavy, green-blond head turned and the hero realized who else was there.

He immediately tried to sit up, only to suck in a sharp breath of pain. Daxter reached out to push him down, but he didn't have to.

"Lie still, Jak," Damas said, and even his lips twitched a little when Jak – well trained that he was to follow orders – heavily fell back immediately. "We won the battle, and largely thanks to you."

He gently grasped Jak's shoulder. "Your life debt to Spargus is repaid. You are one of us, now."

Jak slowly blinked, not able to process the words at first. Then, a flicker of triumphant pride lit up his eyes. Daxter grinned but stayed silent for just a little while longer, letting Jak bask in being
fully accepted and welcomed into the clan. There was a time when jokes did not actually enhance
the emotion – there would be plenty of time for that later. Even Damas smiled a little, with no grim
or bitter edge.

"You will get your final piece of your war amulet later. I had prepared a welcoming gift from me,
as well, but it will have to wait as things are now."

At that, Daxter could not keep his yap shut.

"Hear that, Jak? He knew you'd pull through!" he said with a grin so huge it hurt his face, as he
poked at Jak's arm.

Jak caught his eye and grinned back, but it softened when he looked back at Damas.

"I don't have anything for you," he said, a little awkward.

Damas shook his head.

"You give us all hope, Jak. That is thanks enough." He paused for just a fraction of a moment.
"Times are grim, but when I was the leader of Haven city, things were grim then as well."

The revelation was so sudden that it took a second before it sunk in. Then Daxter's mouth fell open
and Jak tried to sit up again, unwisely.

"Wait, you were the leader of Haven city?" Jak asked with a groan as he sunk back down, peering
up with one eye. The other one was scrunched shut with pain.

Damas' lips twitched, but whether it was a smile or not wasn't clear.

"Yes, until Baron Praxis betrayed me. I will tell you more some other time." A longer pause, and
then he did smile briefly. "I should tell you about that time I was captured by marauders, too. But
first…"

He turned his hand over and opened his fist, revealing the Seal of Mar once again.

Jak instinctively started reaching out for it, but winced and slumped back. Sweat broke from his
brow, glistening in the light from the oil lamps. It was the only sign of discomfort apart from the
awkward motion.

"I said, lie still," Damas said, though with a twinge of amusement rather than annoyance. "And
don't try to heal yourself. It would probably do more harm than good right now."

"Sorry about this," Jak grunted and shifted. *He* was annoyed at his current state, quite obviously.

"There are times when even warriors need to rest. You were in a bad shape." He plucked the seal
of Mar up between his thumb and pointing finger. "You'll need new clothes and bags, too."

Jak grunted, looking between the amulet and Damas' face.

"Why did you have this?" the King asked.

"It's a crazy story… Dax can tell it better," Jak said, his voice hoarse. He did not see Daxter shift on
his seat.

"I'd rather hear it from you," Damas said, in a tone that would not be questioned.
Letting out a deep breath, Jak closed his eyes for a moment to gather his thoughts and find some place to begin.

Jak told it differently from Daxter. He was not so used to even telling a story. He jumped around, lost the thread, got the order wrong. Daxter didn't dare to try correct him, sensing that there would be unholy wrath or at least a very scary glare if he did so. There was something going on here, that his tired brain struggled desperately to figure out, but the day had been so stressful that putting the pieces together remained just out of his reach for a long time.

As Jak began to near the conclusion, though, a tiny light bulb sparked up in the back of Daxter's head.

And Damas said nothing for the whole time. Not until Jak finished, and several moments had passed.

"That is difficult to believe," the King finally commented.

"I told you it's a crazy story," Jak grunted. He eyed the amulet which Damas turned over and over between his fingers, obviously wanting to ask the King to return it but held back by something in Damas' eyes.

"Indeed."

Damas paused and held up the amulet between his thumb and pointing finger. For a moment he studied it, then his gaze moved back to Jak's face.

"Your friend said something similar," he commented.

Jak blinked and glanced at Daxter, who shrugged with a just as uncertain expression. But Jak could see that gears were turning in Daxter's head. A confused, disbelieving crease was slowly digging into the redhead's brow. However, Jak himself was still too groggy.

"I suppose," Damas said, and a strange smile quirked his lips, "that you want your amulet back, Jak."

"Yes," Jak said, pushing himself up and suppressing a wince as he did so. "Please." It was the first time Daxter could recall Jak asking nicely, but then again it was like an afterthought. There was something about the way Damas held the seal, though, very possessively. And it was Damas.

"Very well."

And Damas reached into a pocket and drew out an identical amulet, holding up both of them. The two young men stared.

The King's smile grew as he made a small motion with the second seal.

"It did fall out of your bag," he said. "But this," he motioned with the first one, "is mine. As for your story…"

He took Jak's numb hand and placed the child's amulet in the palm, then rolled Jak's fingers closed to a fist around the seal. The King's just as big, but even more calloused hands curled over the blond warrior's.

"I think the most important thing about believing a crazy story," Damas said, meeting the stare from the blue, widening eyes beneath the green eyebrows, "is wanting to believe."
Chapter Notes

Kleiver's underling is named after Scrabblesnorton, who made a great portrait of Zem, and sketches of him and Lev, on deviantArt.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Hey, did you hear? Do you remember Lev Haste?"

"Yeah, he was a great guy. What about him?"

"I heard all this time he was actually alive in the Wasteland. But he died just last month."

"What? That's…"

"What did you say? Lev was alive?"

"Hey, Ingen. What, you knew him too?"

"… yes."

"…"

As the sun rose above the horizon, Zem left his simple apartment and started up the main street of Spargus. It was a slow, hobbling walk, far from how he had once strode with long, angry – or sleepwalking – steps. But it was what he'd have to work with. People glanced at him as he moved along, but it ran off him – where anything like that would have pushed all his buttons once upon a time. If he took the time to think it over, the glances didn't mean much. They didn't linger. Spargus was at least not so cruel as to automatically equal "cripple" with "dead weight," as long as there was still some usefulness to be found.

Even with the green eco treatment it had taken almost a month to fully heal from the wounds Lorke had given him. Well, as fully healed as he could ever get. There was nothing that could be done for his left leg. He could move it a bit and support his weight a little, but that was about it. For the rest of his life it would take him twice as long as it had before to get anywhere, using a plain staff for support.

Gadd had been a support too, throughout the healing. And to help Zem return to work, he'd constructed a tool bag that Zem could hang on his belt, since he needed both hands for balance as he walked and therefore couldn't carry his old tool box anymore.

And more than that, Gadd had tersely claimed all the guilt for Lev's death. It didn't make Zem feel any less bad about it, but knowing they shared the burden made it easier – for both of them, surely. Neither one was comfortable enough with the other to discuss anything like that on a deeper level. But they could be gruff, silent aid to each other.

And then there was Jak.
Zem hadn't ever regarded himself as anything close to philosophical, but for those first days when he felt like a bundled up mummy trapped in bed, there wasn't much else to do than think. And it was hard to think of anything else than what had happened during the marauder attack, and the aftermath.

The torture chamber was a red blur in his head, and he didn't want to try sorting that out. But he remembered Jak, as that demon, hovering above him – raising those claws when he offered his throat… but cutting his chains instead.

It wasn't forgiving. What had been in the past could not be forgiven, Zem knew that.

It was rather "shut up, you moron!"

At least, that's what he took away from it.

Lying there under the watching eyes of the Spargus medics, his brain had taken that puzzle piece and put it together with what Lev had been trying to do – make him live.

His thoughts came to a halt as the gate to the car pit heaved open before him.

The smell of oil, rubber wheels and hot metal whiffed at him and he breathed deeply.

The doors had not even begun to close before a rough voice whipped through the blistering air. "Yer bloody late! Git!"

It may have been the first time ever Kleiver actually caused a twitch of the lips. At least to the person he was aiming his attention at.

"Mornin'," Zem responded in an even tone.

Kleiver didn't even dignify that with a snort, even when it was Zem's first day back on the job. A meaty thumb jabbed at one of the vehicles lined up against the wall.

"Gunny's Stomper's been makin' funny noise a while, peek it," Kleiver said. "And then ask Scrabs for more work."

And with that he turned away from Zem and started shouting at somebody else.

Zem didn't even shrug or shake his head, he only limped over to the offending vehicle and leaned the staff against its frame. Supporting himself on the car with one hand, he managed to wrench the hood open.

Not allowed to die. Not even allowed a normal greeting. All day ahead and the sun already trying to scorch his back as he bent over a car he knew broke down every second week because the driver was a friggin' lunatic. Sore and looking forwards to a life of never being able to walk properly again.

He felt better than he had done in years.

He wasn't happy. He wasn't sure he had ever been happy, apart from snatches of moments during boot camp… before he'd punched that metal head, and everything went to shit.

But…

He would try to live with himself, since Jak had refused to kill him. And for Lev's sake.
Picking out a wrench from his tool bag, he started with the usual suspects of the engine.

A little while later, as he had been forced to spread his search even wider, there were soft footsteps behind him. He didn't think about them until they stopped and a feminine voice spoke up.

"Mr. Tower?"

The voice made him wince and he glanced around, heart dropping at the sight of Vida Durann. She regarded him with a strange spark in her eye, her arms neatly folded – she seemed to do everything neatly, and even that had always frightened him because it made him feel even more like the big dumb oaf she must see him as.

"Ma'am."

He never knew what to say to her. Unsteadily, he turned around and leaned his back against the car for support.

"I'm… sorry about Lev…" he tried.

She closed her eyes for a moment.

"So am I," she murmured.

He made an awkward agreeing sound, wondering why she had approached. For the life of him he couldn't figure out what she could possibly want from him.

"I heard what happened to you," she said. There was real sympathy in her voice now, but for a moment her tone was so alike her son's that it made Zem's throat tighten. "I can't even imagine…"

She trailed off.

It took a few seconds for Zem to gather himself enough to speak again.

"I don't remember much," he said, more brusque than he had intended. He internally winced, but she didn't seem to mind.

"It's a coping mechanism," she said in a matter-of-fact way.

He made the agreeing noise again. She was a shrink, so she ought to know.

"Are you going to be working here all day?" she suddenly asked.

The question was so out of left field that he stared at her for a second.

"… yeah," he finally said. "Got lots of catching up to do."

"I'll leave you to it, then," she said. A peculiar smile touched her lips. "I'm just waiting for the air train."

"Going somewhere?" he wondered, mostly out of surprise. Not that he had anything to do with her personal business, but Lev had at some point mentioned that she had no ties with Haven anymore. Like most of them.

"No, no," Vida said, shaking her head. She looked at him, that smile briefly returning again. "Good day, Mr. Tower."
"Bye?" he said, watching her walk off. Still completely lost on what she had wanted.

Despite the strangeness of the conversation, he quickly shook it off and returned to work. Eventually he managed to figure out the Stomper's hiccups and did what he could for it, though the damage was piling up so bad that the thing would end up as scrap any day now. Finishing that he was assigned a faulty Ram Rod, which to his dismay he was informed he'd have to crawl under to check on.

Complaining was never a good idea even for a cripple, though, and he just clenched his teeth and hoped that he'd be able to get back up without help. After getting a board with wheels he went over to his next project. There he set the board down and carefully sunk down so that he could lie on it, scooting in under the broken car. At least there was shadow here, but the air was heavy to breathe.

As he set about his work, he heard the distant whoosh and hum of the approaching air train. Well, whatever business Vida had with it, it should be over soon. He felt a bit relieved thinking that she probably would have left the pit when he was done with the Ram Rod.

Minutes passed by at their own pace, as he wrenched at bolts, pulled at pipes to make sure they sat right, and squinted at the shadows beneath the car.

"Zem! Where the hell ya hidin'?" Kleiver suddenly snarled from a distance.

Zem grunted and shuffled a little closer to the side of the car.

"Under Coina's Ram! What?" he called.

"You're still there? Move yer butchered ass!"

Zem let out a puff of air, blowing up his cheeks slightly as he did so. Wiping his sweaty forehead he felt a gooey smudge spread over his skin. Oil. Great. He suppressed a sigh. But leaving Kleiver unanswered for more than two seconds always meant pain, so he didn't spend too much time on his own little mistakes.

"I'll be there in ten, tops!" he called.

"Whatever!"

Allowing himself another sigh Zem made an attempt to wipe the worst of the oil off his face with the back of his glove, before returning to the job at hand. He worked as quick as he could, but the sound of approaching steps made him tense up.

Ten minutes couldn't have passed that quickly. Could they?

"I'm on my way, dammit!" he called, seeing a shadow pass by outside.

The shadow stopped.

Aw shit. But Kleiver never cared much about swearing as long as things got done. Zem tried to decide if his tone had been too annoyed.

Silence.

This would hurt, wouldn't it?

"Hey," a man said.
It did hurt. Because that voice sent shock coiling through Zem's body and without thinking he tried to bolt up.

*Thunk!*

"Ow! Fu— shi— wha—?"

Somebody grabbed his ankle and yanked him out from under the car. The only reason he didn't fall off the board was due to his sweaty shirt plastering him to the wood – luckily so since from the strength of the pull he may have been dragged over the sand just as easily, even if he had slid off. Zem was in no situation to either protest nor help, holding one hand to his pounding forehead and the other to his bleeding nose.

The brightness of the sky was blinding after spending such a long time staring at the dark underside of a car. Zem squinted at the silhouette crouching above him, blood streaming from his nose over his oil stained glove. The broken swear words were the only thing he seemed able to form.

"Am I gonna have to wash your mouth with soap?" the same voice asked. And the silhouette drifted into clarity.

Red hair in a loose pony tail over his shoulder. Tattoos on warmly dark skin. Grey, kind eyes.

Oh gods.

Zem's mouth snapped shut and he sat straight up – or rather, made an attempt at it. He got halfway before his body decided that such things weren't allowed, and he almost fell back down. In the last moment he got his hands on the ground for support and tried to push himself into a sitting position.

Warm red drops kept pouring from his nose, tickling his lips and their taste was in his throat too, metallic sweetness almost choking him. He coughed, curling forwards to cradle his nose again. A tiny part of him was still sane enough to realize that he must make a horrible sight – but the rest of him laid in pieces on the ground.

A finger nudged his arm and he looked up, panicked, only to find a folded up paper tissue being offered. Judging by its worn and by age yellowed corners it must have been lying forgotten in its pack for quite a while. Or just lying in its pack, moved from pair of pants to pair of pants in the wait of being needed.

The latter sounded the most plausible, knowing the owner.

Zem took the tissue without a word and pressed it to his nostrils, still bent over and trying not to let the dizziness turn into nausea. He couldn't even remember how to speak.

"Maybe you should lean your head back."

"Ugh," Zem grunted. The tissue was already soaked through, but as soon as he looked up he was offered another. He let the first drop from his shaking fingers and took the new one, leaning back against the hot metal frame of the Ram Rod. Because following an order was easier than thinking of any action of his own. Closed his eyes for a moment, trying to make the world make sense again.

He kept his eyes closed for a couple of seconds, for as long as he dared to. Breathing through his mouth, he finally had to look, terrified that the mirage would be gone.

It wasn't. Grey eyes watched him steadily, gently, worried. Eyelids slightly lowered. Always
slightly lowered, always, giving the eyes a soft, sleepy look.

He couldn't look at anything else until the voice spoke again.

"Zem?"

He raised a shaking hand, the one that hadn't been trying to dam the nosebleed, and touched the face before him. He should have taken off his glove, but he couldn't recall how. Fingertips first, touching lightly, airy, ready to flee – then suddenly the entire hand pressed to the warm, real cheek, when the skin did not turn into mist upon the touch.

Only then did Zem's eyes turn from wide open to thin.

"Where have you been?" he croaked, his voice cracked, the nosebleed making his words nasal. "Where have you been, Junn?"

The grey eyes' lids twitched, kindness becoming guilt.

"I'm sorry," the redhead said, his voice low. "Did you need me?"

Zem felt as if those six words shattered what was left of his mind, frozen for an excruciating moment. Then he crumbled, would have tumbled onto the ground if Junn had not caught him by the shoulders.

"Oh gods, you moron. You stupid idiot..." Zem's hands clenched in Junn's shirt, clawing for support to hold himself, smearing oil and blood into the cloth.

The hands moved from his shoulders, arms wrapping around his back and he felt Junn tremble as much as he did, whispering Zem's name mixed with broken apologies.

It ended too soon, far too soon. Junn cut himself off in the middle of another "I'm sorry" and started to stand. Zem scratched for him, panicked thoughts of oh gods don't go not again racing through his head and yet he couldn't speak a word of it. But Junn hooked an arm under Zem's armpit and helped him stand. Automatically, the mechanic grabbed his staff on the way up, dropping the blood soaked tissue. Thick crimson drops still dribbled from his nose, but less than before.

"Come on, let's talk over here..." Junn muttered.

Zem hadn't even remembered where they were, but when Junn clumsily half-dragged him into the shadows between the Ram Rod and another car, he became acutely aware of the show that had been put on in plain sight. Luckily this part of the car pit was pretty deserted. When he looked about he spotted Kleiver in a distance, talking with the armored guy Zem knew was called Sig. Vida was there too, also in on the conversation.

Were she and Sig actually distracting Kleiver?

He didn't have the brain power to elaborate on that idea. Just let Junn bring him out of sight, letting him sink down with his back to the somewhat cool wall.

Zem needed to speak, needed to ask, needed to know but he didn't know where to start, didn't even dare because one question would lead to another being posed to him and then he'd have to talk and and and oh GODS NO I CAN'T TELL HIM

Panic rose in a choking, crippling grip through his chest and throat, making it impossible to speak even if his brain had been able to function.
At first, Junn didn't seem to know what to say either, his gaze searching Zem frantically, seeing all the scars, staring at the near-useless leg. Zem couldn't take it for more than a couple of seconds before his head dropped, shoulders rising as he pressed a hand to his bleeding nose.

"Mum… said you were tortured," Junn finally said, his voice nearly cracking as he had to force the final word over his tongue.

Zem grit his teeth. So it had to turn in that direction at once, towards Lorke, towards the why, towards the prison. If he had to be damned again, he'd rather get it over with.

"Can't say I didn't deserve it," he grunted, staring at his knees.

"No!"

Junn snapped it, his voice high-pitched with pain, disbelief. Of course.

"You don't even know what I've done." Zem wanted to snarl it, scream it, hide behind anger because that made things easier to bear. But he couldn't. He could only whisper.

"Zem. Listen close." He had to look up then, because Junn's voice was tight and controlled. But he could still not keep a tremble out of it. Junn tried to smile, but it was just a twitch of his lips that wasn't even a mile away from his eyes. "Small words so you get it."

They both flinched at the phrase, which was ridiculous because Junn himself chose to use the words… didn't matter, because it was an echo that tied them together with that one person who had never stopped smiling.

"If you can't use normal words then shut the hell up!"

"Ooh, listen to the Bignasty! Does my superior vocabulary upset your delicate sensibilities?"

"Junn," Zem interrupted, "Lev… Lev's…"

"I know."

Zem blinked, even though the flinch a second ago should have clued him in. But he was hardly in a state of mind to take in subtle clues.

"That's why I'm here," Junn said, causing another blink. He managed to smile a little this time, though sadly. "The rumor spread. Then because it turned out I had known one guy in the Wasteland, I was told that a Wastelander had been asking for me."

The smile died.

"But Zem, listen. I stayed in the KG for too long."

"No. No, no, no…" Zem trailed off mindlessly, shaking his head as he leaned forwards, refusing to understand.

A joyless laugh, almost a sob, broke out of Junn and he reached across Zem's chest to grasp his shoulder, putting his other hand at the back of Zem's head in an awkward half embrace.

"I don't want to tell," Junn mumbled in a hoarse voice. "I don't want to know, Zem. Not right now."

Mute, Zem could just hold on to the arm against his chest, pressing it closer, feeling the warmth. But the danger had blown off, at least for the time being. The worst terror uncoiled in his chest.
"Junn!" came Vida's voice, a note of warning in it. 

Looking up and craning his neck, Zem saw Kleiver lumber away from the two people that had kept him busy so that the two men could have a brief, private talk. Zem's stomach dropped. Reality demanded he returned. 

"Coming, mum!" Junn called back. But he didn't look away from Zem, who grabbed his wrist in an iron grip. 

Holding his gaze, Junn put his own hand over the mechanic's. 

"When do you quit work?" Junn softly asked. 

It took a moment for Zem to find his voice, and even then it was just a croak. 

"Six."

Junn nodded. 

"I'll come back here then," he said. 

Though still reluctant, Zem unclenched his grip and let Junn stand up, watching him start to leave. 

"By the way…" Junn looked over his shoulder, and he finally smiled for real. "I like your long hair."

A hoarse chuckle broke out of Zem before he even knew what happened. He had no idea when he'd last laughed. But it was the only thing he could do, gazing at Junn as he walked away, still smiling. The redhead walked off, towards his waiting mother – and that was okay, because he would come back. Vida glanced past her approaching son, meeting Zem's gaze. She smiled, too. 

For the first time in his life, Zem felt that everything could become alright. 

Towards the end of the day, Sig walked down towards the cliffs. It was a routine he had whenever there was enough time for it, as the temperature began to slip towards bearable and the cooling winds from the oceans helped to wash away the past hours. It made it easier to sleep after a long, hot day. 

The cavern area opened up before him and he stepped out into the final blasts of sunrays, as the sun sunk and colored the sky a pale blue that would soon tone towards yellow. Birds chattered in the palm trees, and bright bronze-colored lizard rats skittered about trying to avoid being spotted by the sleepy leaper lizards lounging in the shadows. 

People were gathering for the reconstruction work. Most of the grunt work was done by now, and new houses stood where the assault by the Dark Makers had tore old ones down, but there were still things to be done. The hard labor was easier to get through when the air was cooler, hence why it was restarting for the day at this hour. 

There was a new sense of optimism in the air, even with the cracks in the buildings and the remaining shadows of eco burns on the rocks. Of course, the air in Spargus had always felt worlds better to Sig than the claustrophobic atmosphere of Haven City, but even there life went about at an easier pace to the sound of hammers and saws. It was the optimism of surviving a great threat. 

Of course, there was sorrow for lives lost in the battles, but those who lived on at least knew that
there was a future to be had. It was less surprising in Spargus, but no less heartening. The two cities felt closer too, all of a sudden – things would always be terse, that was the nature of Spargus, being built by outcasts, but there were those that could finally bridge that gap.

Sig smiled a little, thinking about Vida smiling even as tears ran down her face as her son rushed past him through the gate and hoisted her up in a bear hug. He wasn't quite sure about what had happened after that, but he'd helped her deal with Kleiver – both with convincing him to call for somebody she wanted her son to see, and then keep the big oaf's attention away. It wasn't that Kleiver was snoopy, but he had an everyday-sadistic sense of humor and would gladly muddle a happy reunion just to be an arse.

Vida would have none of that for her son, and that was enough for Sig.

Theirs was definitely not the last family reunion. Sig's lips twitched at that thought.

Even after finishing one difficult task, he'd given an even more nerve-wracking one.

"We can't let this out. People would take any chance to protest that I give him special treatment, even with what he's already done for Spargus. And you, don't hesitate to stop me if I start pushing him too hard just because he's my son."

That was a tall order to fulfill, but Sig could see the logic. He'd do his best, though it might take every bit of courage in him if it came to that. But it was probably just a safeguard. He was not the only one could raise a protest.

He owed Tess a lifetime of drinks and help carrying stuff. Maybe he'd even give in and let her pick his peace maker apart, like she'd asked for many times in the past. Allowing that would take a good deal of courage too, though. And swallowed pride. But it was the least he could do as thanks for her help.

Getting closer to the ocean, he shook those wandering thoughts off and focused on the moment. A salty breeze stroke against his weather bitten face and he just stood there for a while, listening to the waves crash into the cliffs. A little ways away, a group of small children were play fighting, using broken off salt water reeds as makeshift swords.

Foragers were climbing down the rocky walls with their final hauls for the day, calling out and chatting with each other. The kids who had guarded the big gathering baskets on the ground got their payment in fruit and scurried over to the smaller children who had been playing, to share the haul.

Turning his head, Sig spotted a pair of young men sitting on a bench in the shadow of a building. One of them was just leaning back, eyes closed, while the thinner one was chatting away, waving his hands about excitedly to make the tall tale even more colorful. Even when the audience wasn't looking, the more muscular of the two had his head slightly turned, and somehow one just knew that he was listening to every word.

Sig headed towards them, and as he approached, Daxter poked at Jak's arm. The blond hero opened his eyes and straightened, stretching. They both stood up as Sig got closer, waving back at his greeting.

"Are you lettin' me catch ya lazing about?" Sig asked, giving them a slanted smirk and mock-stern glare.

"Oh put a cork in it," Daxter said with a theatrical wave of his hand. "An' just try to make an
argument that we don't deserve a lil' vacationing."

"I'll let it slip this time," Sig said with a chuckle.

He wouldn't even have made an argument against that if he'd wanted to. It really was difficult to justify anything else. It didn't matter that Jak was as restless as ever, out there hunting marauders and stray metal heads with a complaining Daxter at his side. If they wanted a rest, they'd deserved it, and they even had approval from the gods themselves.

Oh, Sig hoped Daxter wouldn't start ranting about being a god again…

Almost as if he'd felt something like that approaching, Jak spoke up.

"Something weird happened just before we left Haven the other day," he said.

"Yeah!" Daxter cut in before Sig could even comment. "We had some people coming from this Kras place asking the council about a racing championship. I didn't even know there was another city!"

Sig turned and gazed off in a distance, frowning slightly.

"Hn, I reckon they oughta be real tired of eating fish," he muttered.

"What's that championship, anyway?" Jak asked.

"Combat racing. Real ugly, lemme tell you that." Sig caught the blond's eye and smirked. "You'd like it."

Both of them chose to ignore Daxter's very loud groan in the background. Sig looked up at the signal tower, thoughtfully.

"If they wanna hook that up again, they'll probably come here too and want space for racing," he said.

"Think Damas will allow it?"

"Depends on whether he's in a good mood, I suppose."

Sig grinned at Jak and gave him a friendly punch to the shoulder.

Jak did not flinch.

Even Daxter's groan ceased.

"'Course," Sig said. "The top dog's been stuck in a good mood for a long time now."

Cackling, Daxter flung his arms over Jak's shoulders and leaned against his back, grinning from ear to ear as he knocked his head against Jak's.

"You got that right, big guy," Daxter said. He gave the sky – the amazingly Daystar-free sky – a mock-thoughtful look. "I just can't imagine why, though."

Jak reached up to tug at Daxter's fingers, enclosing several of them with his own hand. A light, gentle squeeze answered him. Breathing hot, sandy air and gazing across the baking city with its mix of rough, brave people, and feeling Daxter's relaxed body against his, and…
He glanced up at the tower, knowing who sat up there ruling his city of forsaken survivors.

Life was beautiful.

_The end._

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Chapter End Notes

And HEY, all it took was for Erol to set up a trap in a cave and toss Daxter off a cliff! EVERYTHING turned out better! Everybody say thank you to the nice tin can man.

And then run like hell.

Final thoughts? Eh… what else can I say? This thing took almost ten years to be completed. It's the longest fanfic I've ever written, and it sure took its time. And yet I finished it in less than a year once I finally got my behind in gear again. So if some things seem a bit disjointed, well, that's because of the long process it took.

There's a kinda-sorta sequel that focuses on Sig, City of Light, though it has a different tone and themes from this one.

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