

Alex felt the heat of the engine blasting away as he ran. They hadn't waited for him to be at a safe distance, and instead of a slow takeoff, she'd had them throw the engine at max.

Once he no longer felt the heat, he stopped and looked up. He should have left them a surprise for that. Still could; the buoy was in contact with the ship, and coercing that would be easy. He put the case containing the Defender down as he watched the ship vanish, and his pack joined it. He decided not to bother. Their paranoia would do the work for him.

He took his jacket off and looked it over. The back had a few lines of carbon, darker over the gray armor, but that fell off when he brushed them with a hand, and the jacket was intact underneath. He brushed the back of his pants and his hand came away with more carbon, but those too were intact.

If either had been damaged, he'd have blown them up right there...maybe. No, it would be months before they reached a station, and he could imagine them staying awake the entire time. In a locked ship that size, with those kinds of personalities... He smiled to himself, wondering which one would be left alive after all that time.

He looked around at the fifteen permacrete buildings large enough to only hold one ship each, and some couldn't be more than two-person shuttles and a permacrete landing pad in the center of them.

This was supposed to be a port? Where was the control center? He looked up at the clear sky. Okay, so this place might not have the kind of traffic requiring someone ready to help out at a moment's notice, but still, this wasn't the edge of the universe. It was barely the edge of explored space.

He'd expected more. The automated buoy had led him to think there was more here. He fingered his earpiece. Had the thing lied to him? Maybe this was why Terion Two had been at the bottom of the list he'd taken from the Law officer. Could Tristan really be hiding here? He hadn't been in any of the other locations on the list. If he wasn't here... Alex didn't want to think about that.

He took out his datapad, and after connecting to the buoy, brought up the local map. No large population center, which was where he expected the Samalian to thrive. A place to carouse, charm guys, and enjoy the spoils of his crimes.

He found the town on the map, a loose collection of thirty buildings, with the same number spread out over miles around it. That wasn't a town. That barely qualified as a settlement, and this place had been around for over a hundred years, according to the buoy. What did they do? Chase new arrivals with pitchforks and torches?

He threw his pack over his shoulder. He wouldn't find out if Tristan was here, or not, by staying here. He grabbed the case and straightened as a man crested the hill, walking along the dirt path leading to the town. Alex put the case back down and decided to wait for him.

At half the distance he made out the gun at the man's hip, and the ease with which he walked showed the man was used to its weight. For a moment Alex thought he was in one of those old settlement vids, and that the man would greet him with a, "howdy," or a, "how'd'you do, sir," with the tip of a hat.

But the man didn't have a hat, and when he was close enough he didn't have to shout, he said, "Afternoon. We don't get much visitors in these parts. Sorry for taking so long. I'm Jacoby, what passes as portmaster."

Alex nodded in greeting, but didn't say anything. He couldn't place the accent, but it wasn't like he should have expected to. With the way SpaceGov enforced the use of Standard Speech, accents were the only way any society could express their individualism. So long as the accent didn't make the language unrecognizable, SpaceGov let it be.

What he could place was the body language. The man was alert, but calm. Mercenary, or maybe retired. Alex had worked with enough people in the "life" to recognize them on sight. Jacoby had probably identified him as such too.

The man's hand stayed close to the grip of his gun, a large model that on anyone younger he would think was for show. Alex's own gun was in his pack. He'd decided a long time ago that arriving in a new place wearing it sent the wrong message. He wasn't looking for a fight. The knife at his belt was enough to let anyone looking to start something know he wouldn't back down. And the half-dozen hidden on his person could be used to make the point clearer if needed.

"They didn't stay," Jacoby said. "How'll you be leaving?"

"I'll make my own arrangements when the time comes. Maybe someone here can give me a ride."

"Folks here aren't known for traveling much." The man looked up. "They in a hurry to leave? They left their exhaust on you." When he looked down, he motioned to Alex's blackened hand.

"The deal was for them to drop me off. They have places to be."

"Got anything to do with the dead ship floating out there?"

Alex shook his head. "Just sleeping. They'll get going in a few hours." He looked up. The exhaust trail was still visible, but the atmospheric winds would dissipate that. The only thing that ship would be able to confirm was that their quarry had skimmed the atmosphere. Of course, unless they were idiots, they'd know it could have landed and taken off. They might decide to drop down and check.

"When they call to find out if I got any visitors, you want me to tell them no?"

Alex leveled his gaze on the man. "Why would you do that?"

Jacoby shrugged. "Got a policy here. So long as you don't cause trouble, it's not my job to put people on your back."

"So you're what? The local law, on top of being the portmaster?"

Another shrug. "Nothing official, but like you, I've lived the life. If what you're looking to do is get away from that, this ain't such a bad place to do so."

Alex shook his head. "I'm just passing through. I'm looking for a friend who might be staying here." He couldn't see himself staying in a place like this, even if he wasn't looking for Tristan.

"We don't have anyone else from the life here," Jacoby said. "Mainly farmers and folks who wanted a life away from all the hubbub."

"Yeah, this doesn't really look like his kind of place." Alex smiled. "But you know how it goes. It's that one place you were sure he'd never go to that he ends up settling on, so I figured I'd check it out. If he's here, you can't have missed him. Samalian, a head taller than me, brown fur so dark it could be black, an—"

Jacoby tensed. His hand was on the butt of his gun. Relaxed, but ready to pull it out. "I thought you said your friend was from the life?"

Alex fought the urge to reach for his knife. "I said this wasn't his kind of place, not that he was a mercenary." He kept his breathing steady. If Jacoby decided this needed to turn violent, Alex would have to react instantly. There was this story he'd heard about bringing a knife to a gun fight, but what no one seemed to realize was that an expertly thrown knife could end the fight before the gun was out of the holster.

Jacoby studied him, must have noticed something in Alex's body language, because he moved his hand away from his gun. But not so much he couldn't go for it if needed.

"He's here?" Alex didn't bother hiding his surprise. How many dark-furred Samalians could there be off Samalia?

"I didn't say that."

Alex smiled. "You were ready enough to shoot me. You often feel that protective about people who aren't here?" What was Tristan doing here? Unless there was something about this town or planet that had been carefully hidden, it had nothing of value.

"Alright, so maybe I do know who you mean. What's he to you?"

"A—" Alex took the time to study Jacoby. Outright lies wouldn't do him any good now. "He's someone I know. I met him a few years ago, subjective."

"And what? You decided now was the time to get reacquainted?"

Alex shook his head. "Been looking for him pretty much all this time. He isn't an easy man to find."

"Could be a reason for that."

"I expect there is."

Jacoby relaxed a fraction more. "What do you want with him?"

Alex tapped the case with a toe. "I'm returning something of his."

"He left that with you?"

Alex thought back to that day. "He had to leave in a hurry. I doubt he remembers he'd bought it."

“Why don't you show me? Careful like.”

Moving slowly and keeping his hands visible he crouched, unlatched the case and opened it. Jacoby glanced down, then studied the statue of the Defender.

Alex knew the effect the sandy colored stone Samalian had on people who'd met Samalians. Even with the damage and faded colors, the details were impressive. The curved swords, one held, the other on the ground. The look of resolve in those painted eyes that spoke of the pain he could cause to anyone who dared threaten what he protected.

Jacoby looked like it took an effort to look away. “All this way, just for that?” There was disbelief in his voice, but he didn't tense.

“It has sentimental value.” He didn't need to know the value was to Alex rather than Tristan.

“That...friend of yours, he got a name?”

Alex closed the case. Would he go by Tristan? That was a common enough name among humans, but for a Samalian? For a Samalian wanted by SpaceGov? Tristan had used plenty of aliases over his long career, but his look was as distinctive as his name.

“I knew him as Jack. I doubt he still uses that name.”

If anyone here knew who Tristan was, they'd try to capture him for the reward, or call in bounty hunters. Either action would have had the same result; this place would've been erased off SpaceGov's registry. Tristan wouldn't be captured by anyone.

Jacoby took his time replying, his gaze on Alex as he stood. The man was thinking hard, he could see that. What about? He couldn't be sure.

Unlike what the vids showed, mercs didn't have a code. There was a reason they were both loved and despised by the corporations and SpaceGov. If there was enough money involved, a merc would do just about anything. One individual merc might have scruples, but there would always be one willing to commit that unimaginable act of atrocity.

“We call him Tech,” Jacoby finally said. “On account of him knowing so much about machines and stuff.”

Alex nodded. This did confirm it could be him. “What's his name?”

“Just Tech. We don't prod here.” Jacoby indicated one of the buildings. “First thing I saw him do when I got here was fix up Cornelius's ship.”

“Why did he do that?”

“She had to rush off in a hurry. I offered mine, but hers had all this medical stuff. I guess that whatever took her away needed that. Tech fixed it, so she could go. When she came back, he went over it again. Fixed it good enough she hasn't had any problem since.”

“Just like that? He fixed it for her?” That couldn't be him. Tristan didn't help people unless he needed something from them. Maybe that was it? She'd done a job for him? No, Tristan used people, he didn't trust them. Unless she didn't know what she'd been doing for him? Maybe obtaining something illegal? But then why repair the ship afterward?

“Tech's a nice guy. He's fixed just about everything that's been broken here.”

Could there be two dark-furred Samalians? It did sound like it. So this might be a waste of time. But he'd be here for months, even if he could find someone to pick him up now. Unless he asked that ship when it woke up? That would fall under the stupider stuff he'd done in his quest to find Tristan.

He might as well go check this Samalian out. “Where can I find this Tech?”

“You willing to give me your word?”

“What about?”

“Tech's part of this community. I want your word you're not going to cause him trouble. If you're here to hurt him, I got a cot over there. You can stay there until someone's here to pick you up.”

“As one man from the life to the other, I promise, I'm not here to hurt him.” Alex wouldn't trust a merc to keep his word, but he did his best to keep his.

“You're lucky. He got back a couple of weeks ago. Right now he'll be home, but unless something needs fixing at one of the farms, by the time you get to town, he's going to be at Diny's Tavern. He always eats lunch there.”

Alex picked up the case. “Thanks. How long has he lived here?”

Jacoby shrugged. “Don't know for sure. I've been here forty, subjective, and he was already

here. We're not all that keen on documenting stuff here. Ninety years is what I've heard for how long he's had the land. He travels a lot." He indicated one of the larger buildings. "That's his ship in there. He got a new one this last trip. Nice one too."

Alex glanced at the building, but was too surprised by what he'd learned to see it. Ninety years? There was no way Tristan had kept a base of operation for that long. Every other base he'd gone too had been abandoned after only a few years, some as fast as only one job.

He looked at the path, toward the town. None of this made sense.

"How do I find this tavern?" He slung his pack over his shoulder.

"Just follow the path, it'll take you to the middle of town." Jacoby smiled. "When you reach the fountain, just look left."

"Okay." Alex picked up the case. "Are you escorting me there? To ensure my good behavior?"

Jacoby snorted. "You gave me your word. Anyway, I need to see to the buoy. If I'm going to tell that ship no one landed, I can't have it make a liar out of me if they question it directly."

Alex began walking.

"But," Jacoby said, "if you decide to break your word, I don't care just how good you think you are out there. I am going to put you down."

Alex didn't reply. He didn't even slow his pace.

The walk was quiet, and not as boring as he'd expected. The SpaceGov registry had this planet at the bottom of the colonization scale, so Alex had expected a mostly barren world, with a breathable atmosphere and maybe a few patches of green. This might've been the only area with land that could be used for farms, but Alex recalled seeing a decent amount of green as they landed.

Now, if he were to take a second look at the registry, he wouldn't be surprised to find subtle traces of coercion.

He smiled as he enjoyed the walk and the air. He tried to remember when he'd last walked planetside, let alone been anywhere without any of the chemicals used to make the air breathable on corporate worlds.

Fryon? No, he'd had to shuttle to the mountain. Dublundor? It had to be that one. The world had been humid and overgrown, and there hadn't been any way to see anything resembling a building where the sensor picked up power. He'd had to land and trek through the vegetation to reach what had turned out to be the ruins of a building. The power generator still worked, but nothing was connected to it. There had been a battle there, and after that any intact technology had been hauled away.

By the time the town came into view, he wished he'd had a hover ride. He was going to add that to the list of things to get, which meant acquiring a larger shuttle, unless he went for one of those hoverpacks.

The buildings were more varied here. Some of them still had the permacrete underpinning, but most were built of wood, stone, and something that might've been the local equivalent of permacrete. This wasn't the work of people in a hurry to have shelter, or staying only long enough to get a specific job done.

This was people settling for the long haul. Laying down roots. He could see filigree in the wood and around windows, stones meticulously arranged to form a foundation. One had a scene sculpted in the permacrete equivalent. Another had a forest scene painted on one side, and he saw reds, oranges, and browns in the other side as he walked to the center of the buildings.

He noticed Diny's Tavern before he'd reached the fountain. Jacoby hadn't needed to tell him to look left; there was no way he could have missed it. It was a two-story structure, the bottom part made of rough-hewed gray-green stones. The second story was built out of a golden wood, which he at first thought had been painted that color.

The door had a wooden banner over it, moving in the breeze, with a busty woman painted in bright colors, carrying a tray filled with food in one hand and a tankard of something foamy in the other. She had a smile on her face that hinted that she might be willing to offer other services, if you were so inclined and had the money.

It certainly said, "eating establishment".

He stood by the fountain. It was circular, made of stones and without any water. There was a pedestal in the center, and the tubing to connect to the part that would spew the water, but that

was missing.

He looked around, attracting the gaze of some of the people walking or standing around the buildings, but none of them came to ask him what he was doing there. Except for them wearing modern clothing and that the hovers looked to be no more than twenty years old, he could be standing in an old settlement vid. He hadn't thought there was anyone left who lived this way.

He headed for the tavern, falling in line with the people also heading there, but not talking with them. Inside it was one large room with a bar at the back, tables spread in the center, and stairs going to the second story.

Whatever he thought about the room was derailed when he saw the Samalian seated at a table on the far wall, reading on a datapad.

The room went silent as Alex's heart stilled.

The coloring was almost right, just a shade lighter than what he remembered, but the smattering of white in his fur? The star field in a dark night that he'd lost himself in so often? He'd never forget what that had looked on Jack's chest.

Any lingering doubts left him as the Samalian looked away from the datapad and their eyes met. He'd only seen them once, when he'd found out Jack hadn't been real, but they had haunted his dreams. The coldness in them had burned its way into his heart.

Here, of all places. This was where he'd found him, the alien who had ripped his heart apart.

The Samalian's eyes moved past Alex, to a man. They exchanged a few words, and he went back to reading.

Alex's heart began beating again, and sound restarted. Men and woman talking amongst each other. Plates scraping on tables.

He had to go to him, remind him of what he'd promised. He needed to go and make sure he kept his word. He had to talk to him.

Instead, he headed to the bar.