

From the air, Samalia's capital looked much like any of the other cities he'd seen in his life. Well, cities on well-populated worlds. It didn't look as densely packed as the capital of Deleron Four, but was greener.

According to the information he'd found on the net, it was called Grefrozon, but that didn't sound like any of the words that came over the speaker during their approach. The speech was all in Samalian, since he was the only human there.

He'd gotten his neighbor, a male with lustrous blonde fur with deep red stripes, to repeat it a handful of time, and if he did twist the growly sounds this way and that, it might resemble the word he'd read for it.

Alex felt off, being the only human in this group, being the alien, but it was also exhilarating. Samalians came in varying weights and height, but he thought the average was about his own height. Like his neighbor, everyone's fur was multicolored, and Alex couldn't make out any recurring patterns.

He could see dark splotches on light backgrounds, the reverse, dark on dark, and a few were patchworks of white, brown, rust, black, and tan. If he'd seen that pattern watching a vid, his first thought would have been that it looked fake.

The thing that really put his self-control to the test was that no one except him wore shirts. He hadn't thought about it when Jack went bare-chested almost everywhere, and now he realized it could be a cultural thing. Alex kept his hands on the strap of his bag and handle of the case to keep himself from running his fingers through all that fur.

Once the shuttle landed and he was able to exit, he breathed in relief. He'd had to repeat to himself over and over that he had someone, that Jack was waiting for him, to keep his hands to himself, and even with that, he'd caught himself loosening his grip on the strap just before landing.

The planet-side port wasn't as crowded as the shuttle had been. Here too he was the only human, but he saw a Fedolrinan, its lanky, tree-like body towering over everyone. It looked around as if it was lost, referring to its datapad while it tried to get one of the Samalian's attention.

Alex began moving in its direction to help—he knew a word or two of Feldorinan—but he stopped himself; he had an appointment to keep, and it wasn't like he was familiar with the city or even the port.

Leaving the port, he came across an electronics store and stopped in to see what they had. Everything was a few years out of date, but good quality. They even had a few models of earpieces. None of them matched his; these were all versions for the public to use. They needed to be configured to interact with specific systems, while his would do all that work itself.

Still... He bought one and had it shipped to the Golly, to Asyr's attention. It would make her job a little easier, and once she was comfortable with it, she'd be able to find a better one.

That done, he headed into the city to meet with someone who might be able to help him locate Tristan.

During his flight down from the station, mainly as a way to keep himself distracted, he'd been able to locate the three Samalians who had crossed path with Tristan. One was dead; Alex hadn't thought to set that as one of the parameters for the search.

The second one was on the other side of the planet. She was a mercenary who had been part of a team with Tristan decades before. The only way to reach her was a ground vehicle. Samalians hadn't yet adopted shuttle technology to travel long distances, and the port in the

capital was the only place set up for the larger models coming from the station to land.

He'd contacted her, and she'd claimed not to remember any Tristan. She could have been lying, but her fur had been mostly white, with some tan through it. From his reading, Samalian's furs turned white as they aged. That and the trembling in her limbs led Alex to think it was just age and memory loss.

The last one had been another mercenary, but he'd retired recently. He'd started a weapon repair shop on an outlying neighborhood of the capital. He'd contacted him, but the man hadn't been interested in talking over comm. Alex had needed to make an appointment.

Without a shuttle system, Alex tried to find some sort of ground vehicle that could take him there, but nothing registered on his datapad, and none of those traveling on the wide road had anything on them indicating they took passengers.

He tried to get one of the pedestrians to help him, but other than glancing in his direction, they ignored him.

Back in Alien-Nation, on Deleron Four, it had come up a few times in conversations, how humans often acted as if the aliens walking the streets were invisible. Alex had seen that behavior himself, and now he was on the receiving end.

If he hadn't been in a hurry, he would have allowed himself to be offended. He'd always treated the aliens he met with respect—wasn't he entitled to the same now? But his appointment couldn't wait.

At least he knew where he was going. The city had an open net, and a map was available. He couldn't read the street's names, but his contact had sent him the address to his shop, and that now came up on the map. All he had to do was run there to be able to reach it in time.

Alex smiled; at least he'd make it. He couldn't imagine what he would have done if the 'him' from his Luminex years had been in this situation.

He would have given up before ever reaching the planet.

The height of the buildings dropped drastically just a few blocks away from the port. There they had been a dozen stories in height, but now they were no more than three. Large buildings often took up the entire block, with an open space in the middle.

His research had indicated Samalians were gregarious, as Jack had claimed. They lived in close-knit groups, helping each other with whatever tasks needed done, from housework to rearing their young. They weren't always related by blood, but were families of choice. The articles didn't go into details about it, but the implication had been that all the members of each group were intimate with each other.

Outside the city, a few of those groups would form a town of widespread buildings. Here, they had no choice but pack themselves in tightly. But he thought they tried to keep the feel of their communities, with the courtyards inside the structure where children played under adult supervision. The one thing that caught him unprepared was that neither those children or adults wore any clothing.

Alex looked away and hurried on, but he'd seen enough to know that Samalian women looked as much like human ones below the belt as the men did. The quick sight had made him miss Jack again.

He'd expected the buildings to spread further apart as he moved away from the port, like they did back on Deleron Four or where his grandparents lived. Instead, by the time he reached the repair shop, the road was too narrow to let most vehicles through, at least not without damaging the sides.

By the shop's entrance a bike was parked, resting on its hover pads. That was probably the only thing that could easily move down the alleyways. Looking at it, he got a sense it was a human vehicle. He hadn't seen any Samalian riding one on his way. Considering how minimal their clothing was, riding one probably wouldn't be safe for them.

With a smile and a thought of how it might feel to ride on one holding onto Jack, he entered the shop.

"Finally!" a woman said. "It's about time you got here, I've—great, you're not him."

She was human, a little shorter than Alex. She wore a leather jacket and pants, both with visible plates on them. She had a gun on her hip and was eyeing him in annoyance.

Alex got a clear sense she was dangerous, and he moved his hands closer together in front of him. A relaxed pose, but one that put his hands close to the knives hidden in his sleeves.

But she wasn't impressed with him. "Go back outside and wait your turn."

Alex felt the anger rise at the callous way she'd dismissed him. He pushed it down as fingers reached in his sleeve to grab the hilt of the knife, then stopped himself. He had every right to be angry. He wasn't some nobody to be ignored, not anymore. He wasn't ever going back to being that.

"What did you say?" he asked through clenched teeth.

"I told you to leave." She placed a hand on the butt of the gun. "I got here first. Don't make me repeat myself."

Alex took a step toward her. "Lady, I have no idea who you are, but unless you plan on paying me, you don't get to order me around."

She gave him a vicious-looking smile, her hand tightening on the gun. "I'm the one with the gun. Those knives of yours aren't going to do anything against that."

The only thing that smile did was make him angrier. He kept that controlled; he didn't want to be overwhelmed by it. He'd need to keep his head for when she attacked him, and he had no doubt she would.

Other than the gun, she didn't have any visible weapons, not that it meant anything. But her free hand wasn't moving, so she either had extraordinary control, or she counted on the gun to ensure her victory.

All he had to do was close the distance and he'd have the advantage. He didn't worry about her having hardened skin; his vibro-knife would go through that easily enough. He hated making a mess in this shop, but he'd take her out quick and dirty.

A low growl made them look away from one another to the Samalian standing behind the counter. "No one fights in my shop." The growling gave his word an odd accent.

The Samalian was Alex's height. Sandy fur with black spots in it covered impressive muscles. His claws were out—not especially long compared to Alex's knives, but they were sharp. Jack used his instead of knives to cut his food.

Alex slowly raised his hands.

The woman turned, not taking her hand off the gun. She gave the Samalian the once over. "You Jofdelbiro?" She didn't seem impressed by what she saw.

She didn't know anything about Samalians, Alex thought. It was the only thing that explained how she ignored the tension in those muscles. The man was ready to jump the counter and cut her up.

"Move your hand," the Samalian growled.

"I don't have time for your posturing. I'm told you have a—"

His growl deepened. He flexed his hands, and the claws became longer. Alex took a step back in reflex; those things were longer than Jack's.

The woman finally seemed to realize the Samalian was serious, and moved her hand away from the gun.

"Look, are you or aren't you Jofdelbiro?" She still sounded annoyed.

The Samalian studied her for a moment, then the growl lessened until Alex couldn't hear it anymore, but he still felt it in his bones.

"I am. Who are you?" His voice now had just a hint of a purr to it.

"I'm Miranda Sunstar. I need you to—"

"I don't know you," he interrupted her. He pointed to Alex. "You?"

"Crimson. I called earlier."

Jofdelbiro nodded. He pointed to Miranda. "You leave. Call and make an appointment."

"Do I look like I have time to deal with that? How much is it going to cost me for you to get rid of him?"

Jofdelbiro placed both hands on the counter. He leaned in, causing his claws to add furrows to those already there. "You leave, or I throw you out."

Alex moved aside. He didn't want to get in the way.

Miranda made fists, and Alex thought he heard them creak. It could confirm she had hardened skin. He wondered how claws would fare against that, and how Jofdelbiro would react if Alex tried to help him.

"Fine!" She turned on her heels and stalked to the door. "Don't expect to ever see me again."

The Samalian shrugged as the door closed.

With the tension dissipating, Alex wondered where he'd heard the name Miranda Sunstar before. He set it aside. Probably one of the crew had mentioned her.

"What do you want?" Jofdelbiro asked. The lack of tension didn't make his muscles look any smaller, or the fur any less fluffy.

Alex stepped to the counter. "I'm looking for someone you've worked with before, about thirty years ago, objective. Tristan."

The Samalian's eyes narrowed. "Why are you looking for him?"

"I have unfinished business with him."

The Samalian's ears straightened. "Unfinished? Then my advice is to run in the opposite direction of where Tristan is. The way that guy finishes business is never good for those involved."

This time Alex did clamp down on the rising anger; it wouldn't help. He did his best to keep his tone calm. "Look, just tell me where he lives. I won't tell him I got the information from you. I'll deal with whatever happens when I find him."

"If I told you, he'd know. What makes you think I'd know where he is?"

"You're one of the few Samalians he's worked with. It makes sense he'd contact you when he came back here."

"Here? You think Tristan is here? On Samalia?" Jofdelbiro let out a bark of laughter. "That male would have to be in a cage to set foot on this planet again. Sure, I was on the same ship as him, but work with him? Tristan doesn't work with anyone, let alone one of his kind. It was just the two of us among a human crew, so I figured we needed to stay close, watch each other's back. He didn't care about it. The one time I pushed and tried to convince him we had to keep each other safe, he broke my arm. I have no idea what he thinks he is, but Tristan certainly

doesn't consider himself a Samalian.

Alex had taken a step back at the anger in the Samalian's voice. If he was this angry after all this time, a broken arm had been the least of what Tristan had done.

He waited for him to calm down. "If he isn't here, do you know where he might be?"

"Why? Because all Samalians are family? We always know where the others are?"

Alex raised his hands to placate him. "I just meant there aren't that many Samalian mercenaries out there. You have to have heard something."

"Alright, yeah, I've kept an ear out for him while I worked. I didn't want to ever find myself in the same planetary system as him. But you're out of luck; the last thing I heard was that he got caught and put on the prison ship that's flying around."

Alex shook his head. "He escaped."

"Really? When?"

"A few years ago, objective," Alex answered distractedly, not paying attention to what the Samalian said after. Alex was pissed. If Tristan wasn't here, how was he going to find him? He couldn't just go around and hope to run into him.

Alex looked up. "What did you just say?"

"Huh?"

"You said something about someone asking about Tristan?"

"Yeah, a human. Like you, he had unfinished business. He had a list of places where he thought Tristan might be hiding, and he wanted to know if I had any information on them. If Tristan had mentioned them while we were on the same ship."

"Did he leave you a way to contact him?"

"Sure."

"Can I have it?"

"How much are you willing to pay for it?"

Alex sighed. Couldn't anyone in the universe do something just because it was the right thing to do? At least he had easy cash. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a cred stick.

"That's a thousand."

Jofdelbiro took it and checked the amount. Alex was momentarily surprised when the Samalian didn't contradict him. He'd been certain Anders would have screwed him over, even with that.

"You want to find him that badly? I can sell you a Fogar grenade for that kind of money. It's going to be quicker and less painful, just don't use that in the city. It can take out half a dozen blocks."

"I'll take the information."

The Samalian looked him in the eyes. "You are going to get yourself killed."

"I paid for the information. Hand it over."

Jofdelbiro sighed. "Humans. What is it with you and death wishes?" He took out a datapad, then searched around for a data chip to put the information on and handed that to Alex.

"I have no plans on dying," Alex said.

"And I had no plans on coming back here, but it was that or face a long stay in a max-security prison. It doesn't matter what you want. Tristan will kill you anyway."

Alex nodded. If it came to that, then dying would be better than living knowing he'd never get Jack back. Without another word, he left the building.

The bike was gone, so he'd been right, it had been a human vehicle. That woman's— He

stopped.

Miranda Sunstar. She'd been the mercenary who had caught Tristan and delivered him to the Sayatoga prison ship. He'd run multiple searches for her, but they had all come back blank; her information was well-hidden. He'd ran into her by accident and not even realized who she was.

He laughed. What else could he do? She'd been right there. He could have gotten answers. If there was one person still alive who knew more about Tristan than what was in the files, it would be her. He looked around just in case.

He shook his head in amusement. There wasn't much he could do about it now. He pulled out his datapad and ran a search, but she didn't come up. She was still hidden. He had no information on the bike, but he still sent a message to the port, asking to be notified if it was spotted there. She'd have to leave the planet eventually.

But he couldn't afford to wait for her. He had someone to track down, information to get. He had to make it to Bramolian Six as quickly as possible.