

Landing the hover in the shipping district's lot proved interesting; it was so large he needed three full spaces. Vehicles like this one were supposed to land at the edge of a city and for the occupants to use the transit system, or walk; they were on vacation, after all. Jacoby wasn't leaving the hover so far, not that he was landing close to his final destination.

He'd sent the message Alex wrote for the arms dealer from his datapad as soon as it had been able to connect to the network, eleven days into the twelve-day trip; having a properly maintained hover had allowed him to cut two days, with taking the time to land and sleep. While he waited for an answer, he did his own shopping, for the parts he needed to fix the rest of the damage Tech caused in his enthusiastic rearranging of the components to render the hover unfindable by LeisureTek. If he could get his hand on a stripped tag and new ID, he'd even be able to get the autopilot working again, and the return trip would be even shorter.

He enjoyed walking among humans again, to be able to forget he was on an alien world. This district felt like any other he'd visited while he was a merc. If he hadn't come from a Samalian town, he'd think this was a human world. He didn't see any Samalians while shopping, or a store catering to their needs.

He bought new clothing, both to look less conspicuous, and because the cleaner in the hover left this odd scent on the clothing it cleaned.

When he received the message that his order was ready, he put a light shirt and pants over his under-armor, and his least-armored jacket. He wasn't sure he could not look like a merc, but this was a good attempt. Reluctantly, he left his Terminator in the hover, and limited himself to a knife at the small of his back and in his boot. He considered taking the Azeru Alex had forced Tech to hand over, but it was too small of a weapon, not powerful enough.

He was ill at ease as he exited and locked the hover.

Jacoby mixed with the crowd, doing his best to move like someone on vacation, instead of on high alert for security officers. He missed being home, where he didn't have to worry about security, or how he carried himself, or that he had Termy at his hip.

He considered calling home, but he worried that Kline would feel he was checking up on him. The last thing Jacoby wanted to do was make his old friend think he didn't trust him to look after the people there. He also didn't want to risk the call being noticed. Home wasn't a hidden world, but they did their best not to attract the attention of the corporations.

The busy street with humans slowly shifted to a mix of humans and Samalians, then only the occasional human in a Samalian crowd, and then he was in the narrow alleys that composed the old Samalian city.

He was halfway to Jof's shop when he noticed the kids who'd trailed him the last time he was absent. He hadn't tried to hide his arrival. Had Jof told them not to bother Jacoby when he'd chased them away? No, this was different. He'd expected them to watch him surreptitiously, but there was no one here. He was the only one moving about the alleys.

Except, he wasn't. He saw a human leaning against a wall, careful not to look in Jacoby's direction as he approached. He was mostly in shadows, but the way the jacket hung off him indicated it was armored. He saw another one as he walked past, a few alleys away, talking on his datapad. This one didn't look up at him either. Jacoby also didn't look at that one, rather studying him out the corner of his eye.

Too casual, too at ease. These weren't regular security, like what had been in the building Tech blew up. These were part of a corporate security team. It couldn't be a coincidence they were here. Either they'd intercepted the message he sent or—and he realized this was more likely when he noticed the three forms in the shadows, watching Jof's shop—they were watching the arms dealer.

Jacoby walked by the shop without looking at it, consulting his datapad. When he

saw a man standing in the shadows of another alley, he deactivated the positioning option from the map and approached him.

“Excuse me,” he called out, and the man shifted. He didn’t see details, but Jacoby saw the gun at the man’s hip was large, larger than Termy. Now he wished he’d brought it.

Jacoby let out a nervous chuckle. “I’ve managed to get myself lost, and this old thing is glitching on me. I have no idea where I am. I’m supposed to meet my wife at the...” He consulted the map. “Carlison Market? I have no idea where that is from—”

The man took a step forward, and Jacoby wasn’t acting when he took a step back in worry. He fought the urge to stab the man preemptively. Hard face, scarred. His gloves had deep scuffs at the knuckles, the leftover from multiple beating he’d given.

“Sir,” he said in a harsh tone, “you need to leave.”

Jacoby straightened and made himself indignant. “I’m only asking for directions, no need to—”

“Sir,” the man said through gritted teeth, “you’re in the middle of a corporate action. If you don’t leave right now, I’m going to have to take you in, and you can explain to the interrogators what you’re doing here.”

“Oh, ah.” Jacoby backed up. “I’m sorry, I didn’t know.” He turned and hurried away, cursing silently. Jof couldn’t know about them. If he had, he wouldn’t have told Jacoby his order was ready, not unless Jacoby was the target, and if he had been, he wouldn’t have been allowed to walk away.

Back on a main road, he leaned against a wall and pretended to check his datapad, listening for anyone following him. He wished he’d left Alex one of his dedicated comms. They would have been able to figure out an alternative, not that Alex could do anything from that town without access to the network.

He had to contact Jof. Jacoby had to let him know his shop was being watched, as well as work out how to get his order past the watchers. He couldn’t call the Samalian. They might have missed the message he sent earlier, but they would notice a call, and while his datapad had obfuscating programs, they were nothing a corporate coercionist couldn’t take apart in the time it took Jacoby to initiate the call.

This was supposed to have been easy.

“You need help.” The voice was accented, but confident.

Jacoby looked up from his datapad, then down at a young Samalian with light copper fur and black swirls. He wore canvas pants which should be thrown out and replaced. He had the look that even on an alien face, Jacoby recognized. This boy thought he’d found himself some easy money.

Jacoby looked around for the rest of his group, but he was alone. Without having to worry about being mobbed by kids—Jacoby hated the idea of having to fight his way through them—he almost told this one to leave him alone, but realized in time he could make use of him too.

This was a boy, right? He decided not to wonder or ask. He didn’t want to think a girl would pull this kind of hustle, or any hustle.

“Do you know where...” He had trouble recalling the full name. “Jofdelbiro’s shop is?”

“I could,” the boy answered in a derisive tone.

Back home, Jacoby would grab any kid who spoke to him that way and drag them to their parents with instruction on teaching them proper manners. Here? Jacoby simply nodded.

“How many credits for you to remember?”

The boy snorted. “What do I do with that? I’m down here, not up there.” He indicated the sky.

“Fair enough. What is it going to take for you to remember and deliver something to him?”

The boy looked Jacoby over. “Two bags of horftun.”

Jacoby had no idea what that was, but it didn't matter. "Where do I get them?"

"Three," the boy corrected.

Jacoby smiled. He knew this hustle, but didn't feel like playing it. "How about I make it five?"

The boy narrowed his eyes, his ears folding halfway back. "Will it get me hurt?"

"Not if you can avoid being seen."

Another snort. "Humans don't see much."

"Then you should be fine. So, is five enough?"

He pointed to a shop on the other side of the road. "You'll get them there."

"Two now, the rest once you've delivered it."

"Four now," the boy countered.

"Three, and three more when you get back."

The boy frowned. "That's six."

"I'm glad you can count. Does it work for you?"

"How do I know you'll give them to me when I get back?"

Not the kid's first hustle, he thought, not even in the first few. Jacoby had no idea how old the kid was, but he'd been at it for a while now. Considering the number of humans in the city, he probably made enough to live off his hustles.

"How about you point me to a place I can wait for you?"

"You can wait here," the boy answered.

"I'd like to sit down."

"You can sit here, no one minds."

"Kid," Jacoby said, trying to reign in his impatience, "I want to sit down and have a drink. I don't expect this to be quick."

"They don't let me in any of your places."

Somehow Jacoby didn't think that would stop this boy, but he didn't want to argue. "Then show me to one where you can go in."

"They're not going to like you there."

Jacoby chuckled. "I've spent most of my working life dealing with people who didn't like me. I can handle it."

The boy considered it, then pointed at a door at the far corner of the block. "That's Porfi'nat. She has food and drink."

Jacoby nodded and wrote a quick message. He transferred it to a data chip and handed it to the young Samalian. "Give that to Jof and tell him where to find me."

"The horftun?" he asked, taking the chip.

"Give me a name—not your real one, just a name I can tell whoever's in charge there so they'll hold your three bags."

"I get three now."

"The moment you agree, I go buy them."

The boy gave him a name Jacoby could remember and, more importantly, pronounce. Horftun turned out to be dried meat, packaged in bags, large enough they were almost too much for the boy to carry. Jacoby took the other three to the door he indicated.

The place was a smaller version of Dini's tavern. The bar was on the right side of the room, and a dozen tables were placed in the open space, far closer than Jacoby liked. Samalians did seem to enjoy being close to one another. Did they feel the same even with strangers?

Not human strangers, based on the hateful glared he received.

He headed to the bar where a Samalian a little shorter than him, but broader, eyed him suspiciously. Was there such a thing as a slim Samalian? If there was, would Jacoby even recognize that? He put the three bags on the counter. "These are for Jifnik. He's going to be by for them in a while." He offered the Samalian a credit chip. "This is for

you, so you'll give them to him, instead of keeping them."

The Samalian watched him without reacting. Did he, or she, speak Standard? Jacoby wondered. The Samalian took the chip, and then moved the bags to a shelf on the wall, in view of everyone.

Jacoby picked a table in a far corner, surrounded by unoccupied tables. He looked the thin crowd over as he took his datapad out, and paused on two at the other end of the room. Unlike the other Samalians Jacoby had encountered, each of these two wore a shirt and a jacket.

One had golden fur with a mane of brown hair, but it was the other who'd attracted his attention, or rather what he wore. The sleeveless long coat, which had seen better days, and the hat. An odd thing with a large brim, the sides bent up, and a dip in the crown. He'd seen a hat like that before.

The golden-furred Samalian nodded in his direction and the other one turned, locking green eyes on Jacoby, and he was certain there had been recognition in them. Only it was impossible. Jacoby only knew one Samalian, Tech, and he would have remembered one with orange fur with black stripes.

And it had been a human who'd worn that kind of hat, and the long coat had sleeves, he thought. It had been a long time ago, not long after he'd entered the life. The man's memory had stuck with him because he'd felt off. He hadn't been part of his team, or even on the same job; this was a case of two unrelated jobs intersecting.

As far as Jacoby had been able to tell, the long coat hadn't been armored, or the shirt, but the man had managed to take hits and not fall. And his knives had been old, not old in the sense of having seen a lot of use, old as in belonging in museums.

"I give." The Samalian from behind the bar was before his table, interrupting his thoughts. "Stop watching. I give what want." His accent was so thick Jacoby barely understood.

"I'm not watching," Jacoby answered. Not you, anyway. "Bring me something to drink."

"Not have human drink."

Jacoby shrugged. "Bring me something you'd drink. I'm waiting for someone. I'd rather be a customer than just loiter."

The Samalian didn't look like he understood, but he left.

The golden-furred Samalian was the one who felt off this time. He had the same broad shoulders that seemed to be typical of Samalians, but Jacoby had never seen one with such long hair. It fell to his shoulders at the back and vanished into the shirt in the front.

The barman returned with a foul-smelling drink, and the two Samalians went back to their own meals. Jacoby searched the network for any information on LeisureTek's security, but he couldn't find anything. There had been a time where he could navigate the network with ease, finding anything that wasn't behind security programs, but that was before he'd retired.

Someone sat across from him, but a quick glance told him it wasn't Jof. "I'm waiting for someone." He went back to his reading.

"You're waiting for me."

Jacoby looked at him, her? Something said "her" to Jacoby. "You're not who I'm waiting for."

"My father isn't coming."

He put the datapad down. Her sandy fur was darker, and she had brown swirls in it. "Who's your father?"

"Jofdelbiro," she answered.

"You were at his shop." He vaguely remembered her now.

"Are you here for business, or to drink that?" she wrinkled her nose at the mug.

"I'm here to pick up the order," he said, putting his datapad away, "but your father's

shop is being watched.”

Her ears twitched. “After the building was destroyed, any Samalian who looks at weapons is being watched. If my need for the money your friend offered wasn’t great, I’d send you to the human weaponeers.”

Jacoby wondered what she could need that kind of money for. “So you can get me the weapons?”

She pulled out a datapad and even before she began typing on it, Jacoby pulled it out of her hand.

“Don’t use that,” he said. She glared at him. “The corporation has its ear and eyes on it.”

“You think I don’t know how to protect myself?”

He made sure she hadn’t brought up anything relevant. “I think you have no idea what the corporation is capable of. If they’re watching you, they don’t just have people standing around your shop, they have programs floating around the network, waiting for you to transmit anything.” Could they have programs in it? No, they would be storming this place if they did. They probably just had someone outside, waiting for her to come out, waiting to see who else would exit.

“You were on it.” She indicated his datapad.

“I was just running generalized searches, and I’m not the one they’re looking into.”

“Then how do we do this? Do I tell you where to go?”

Jacoby thought about it. He could leave a back way, or stay here for the rest of the day, hours after she’d left, but he knew corporations. They wouldn’t believe she’d come here just for a drink, not unless she was always coming here, and Jacoby didn’t think so. The only way he was getting out of here without being caught was to deal with her tail.

“Put your hand on the table, palm up.”

She frowned, ears back. “Is this a human thing?”

He stifled his sigh. “It’s a ‘let’s deal with this’ thing.”

She placed her hand as he instructed. He palmed one of the dedicated comms in his hand and covered her hand with his. “You’re going to go outside and walk down the road. Go in a straight line, don’t look behind you.”

“Why?” Her fur bristled.

“So I can spot and deal with whoever is following you.” She started to pull her hand away, but he held it. “Before I talk, the comm unit will click twice. Don’t react to it, just listen and do what I tell you. Understood?”

Her ears flicked the way he saw the Samalians that hung around the temple did when they talked together.

“What does that mean?”

“That I understand.”

“Good. Can you convince the owner to let me use the back door?” As she led him to the door, he saw the bags of meat were gone, as were the two Samalians he’d watched.

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She waited five minutes, as instructed, before leaving, giving him the time to get onto the roof. He spotted the first of her tails instantly. She had to know about that man too; he was blatant about following her. He was a decoy.

It took Jacoby longer to find the second tail, but as a lone human, any time he poked his head out of an alley, it was impossible to miss him, if one was looking.

He clicked the comm twice. “You have two of them. Don’t try to lose them. I’m going to take care of them, but it’ll take some time.”

Jacoby hurried down the roof and ran to get behind the serious tail. He wished he’d brought Termy, or better yet, one of the rifles he’d taken off the dead humans. He could have taken both of them down from the roof with one of them. It wouldn’t have been discreet, but it would have been quick.

He should have brought a stunner, or a stun stick, or an injector loaded with tranquilizer. Jobs were almost never straightforward, and he should have figured this would be the same. He sighed. There was a time when he had always been ready for anything.

A long time ago.

He stood out among the Samalians walking around, but the agent didn't bother looking behind him. He'd almost caught up to the man when he ducked back in the alley. Jacoby checked to make sure he was heading away, before running across and for the next alley. The agent was hurrying, but he had to deal with going around the buildings, while it was a straight line for Jacoby.

Jacoby didn't wait for him to appear in the alley. He ran in and tackled the man as he turned the corner. The man pushed Jacoby off him and pulled a knife. He didn't speak; he knew this wasn't an accident.

Jacoby dodged and blocked the initial strikes, gauging the man's tactics, his strength. He was well-trained, but young. He didn't have the experience, and it showed in how clean his attacks were. They were based on how he was trained, not decades of fighting.

Seeing the opening, Jacoby grabbed the wrist, twisted, and struck the man in the throat. While the man tried to catch his breath, Jacoby pulled him in a chokehold. Less than a minute and the man was limp in his arms.

Jacoby found the restraints, along with an injector loaded with a tranquilizer. No gun. This was a capture mission. Had they traced the explosives he and Alex had used to Jof? They hadn't detonated them, so some might have survived Tristan's explosions. If they thought Jof was behind it, they would have raided his shop. They were hoping the culprit would come back for more.

Unluckily for them, he had.

He pocketed the injector and restrained the man, dragging him behind the building to ensure no one found him until he was done.

Then he was back among the Samalians, and they barely reacted to his presence, other than moving out of his way if they saw him coming. They didn't complain if he bumped them.

It was the same for the other agent, in the middle of the crowd, not even trying to hide his presence. He got behind the man and injected him before he could react. Jacoby caught him and pulled him in an alley, restraining him too.

He clicked the comm twice. "I've taken care of your tails. Keep going. If you have a data chip, click once. If not, twice." The comm clicked once.

"Enter the location of my package on it, then turn around and walk back to the tavern we came from. Keep the chip in your left hand; I'll take it when we bump into each other. My advice is for you to go home and disappear. When they realize someone neutralized your tails, they are going to come after you. Corporations aren't nice when they think you're working against them. If you can't vanish, don't give them a reason to think you were part of whatever they are looking into."

He was back on the street, his datapad in-hand, acting as if he was trying to find something on it. He saw her stop and turn in the distance, then head his way. He bumped into her hard and caught her to keep her from falling against anyone else.

"Sorry," he said as she wrenched her hand out of his. She replied in Samalian and walked on. He pocketed the chip and continued on his way.