

Chapter 21

The bar hadn't been this crowded when Alex entered with Tristan—a handful of people scattered around the tables, drunk. A pair at the bar looked like they didn't belong, better dressed, one in a tan longcoat that moved as if the material was heavier than it looked. Armored. His companion was clearly a bruiser, muscular, alert, in a white shirt under an armored jacket. He turned and Alex saw the butt of a gun at his belt. The man looked him and Tristan over, his golden eyes narrowing. He brought them to his companion's attention, and green eyes studied them. Alex tensed, but the man shook his head. He paid for their drinks and they headed outside.

He and Tristan had almost reached their target. Tristan wore his usual pants, gray this time, but he'd added a matching shirt and black jacket. All of it was worn, scuffed and torn in places, making him look like he belonged in one of the lower-class neighborhoods.

Before the two men seated at the nearby tables had time to react, Tristan sat opposite a man dressed in a green and white heavily armored jacket and a darker green shirt underneath. The two men stood as Tristan began talking, telling this man what kind of drugs he wanted to acquire, the kind of money he was willing to pay for them.

This was the seventh such dealer he'd followed Tristan to over the week, acting as his bodyguard. The previous ones had all gone one way. Tristan acted too interested, far too willing to overpay for quantities none of the individual dealers could ever provide. Each time, they balked. Tristan roughed a few of them up, not enough to force them to give up what they knew, but to impress on them he might be more desperate than he let on.

After all, it had been about causing a specific reaction which, Alex judged by the number of armed men that had suddenly appeared around them, Tristan had just gotten.

Instead of tensing, as Alex did, Tristan visibly relaxed.

"Did you really think you could go around town making demands like this and not have to pay for it?"

Tristan looked at the dozen men and women surrounding them. "I didn't make any demands. I just told them what I wanted, and that I was willing to pay. A few of them didn't take me seriously, so I made sure they knew I was serious."

"You're a Law stoogy," the man scorned. "You're here to get one of us honest workers to admit to something we don't do. You need to provide your handler with a number of criminals, and you're okay sacrificing folks like me." He nodded to Alex. "That him?"

The woman next to Alex turned and moved to touch him. Tristan didn't react, so Alex let her pat him down. She took the knives at his hip, the one at his lower back, the one in his boot, and the two in his sleeves.

She missed the one at the nape of his neck and the one secured to his bicep. Neither of those were what Alex considered hidden, so she was just bad at her job. The vibro-knife in the sole of his boot was hidden, as was the laser blade in his belt buckle.

The man looked at the knives. "No guns? I thought you Law types had to carry guns."

"He isn't Law," Tristan said, "and he's deadlier with knives."

The dealer looked like he would scoff, and Alex fixed his gaze on him, crossing his arms, which placed a hand on the pommel of the vibro-blade. Wisely the man chose to consider this as a reason to rethink his opinion. He eyed Alex suspiciously.

Tristan put his Azeru on the table. "I'm the one with the gun."

The man's chair screeched as he pushed himself away from the table. "What are you waiting for? Search him!"

Tristan stood and raised his hands, making it easier on the man who searched him. Alex felt a surge of jealousy as the man crouched down to pat Tristan's legs. Alex's hand slipped through the hidden slit in the jacket's sleeve and closed his fingers around the pommel as the hands moved up the leg. He prepared to pull it out and throw it as they got close to Tristan's groin, but they moved away before reaching that and began at the base of the other leg.

Alex released the breath he'd been holding and noticed how tense he was. What had he been about to do? Kill someone? Over what? A grope? He felt like yanking his hand away from the knife. If he'd done that it would ruin Tristan's plan. What was wrong with him? He slowly let go of it and moved his hands to his side.

The man didn't find any other weapons. While Tristan liked to be well-armed, his claws and strength were all he needed. Alex had seen him disembowel and break enough bones to know. He'd even been on the receiving of the bone-breaking a time or two.

The guard stepped away and Tristan sat back down. "Seeing as you went to the extent of disarming us, and you're making sure this isn't being broadcasted anywhere, can I take it to mean that unlike the others, you're interested in making a deal?"

"You can take it any which way you want. Doesn't mean I'm going to go along with it."

Tristan gave an exaggerated sigh. "Look, I'm getting tired of beating up people. I didn't think what I wanted was all that unreasonable. I came because there's been a lot of what I want selling here and at cheap prices. Come on, help me here. I just want three-thousand P—"

"What are you going to do with that?"

Tristan smiled. "Maybe I'm planning a big party for a few friends of mine."

The man didn't smile.

Tristan let his drop. "What I want to do with it is my business, don't you think? Shouldn't you be happy you'll make a lot of money? What I'm offering to pay is a quarter above the current value."

"And you think I have that kind of volume on hand? I what? Keep it in a suitcase under the table?"

Tristan looked under the table. "Do you?"

"No."

Disappointed, Tristan leaned back in the chair. "If you don't have that kind of volume, I'm sure you know someone who does. Put me in contact with them and I'll pay you a finder's fee."

The man beamed. "So that's your game; you're trying to make your way up the chain." The smile vanished. "Just like a good little stoogy does."

Tristan sighed. "All I want is to buy product. If you can't get it, just tell me and I'm going to start looking for the next dealer. Like you said, someone at your level can't get it. I'm just trying to get in touch with someone who can."

"You see, the problem here is that I don't believe you. You come in, acting like you own the joint, sit there and start talking without even doing the polite thing and asking for permission. I think I should just kill the two of you and save everyone else the headache."

"Come on," Tristan said, a slick, closed-mouthed smile on his muzzle. "You don't want to do that."

Alex readied himself to grab the knife at his neck.

"Why wouldn't I want to? You go around talking volume not one person can have. Why shouldn't I think you're anything but a stoogy?"

"Fine," Tristan growled under his breath. Carefully he opened his jacket and reached in a pocket. He paused as guns went up. "You guys do remember I was searched?"

Their boss motioned for them to stand down, and for Tristan to continue. He took the datapad out, brought up a picture with words, and placed it on the table so the man could read what was on it.

The man glanced at it. "What's that?"

"It should be self-evident."

"So you're wanted." He looked the information over. "Where's Deleron Four?"

“Far. The Law’s been looking at me too closely there, so I can’t procure anything locally.”

“At the volume you’re trying to lock in, you’re not a dealer—not even a supplier.”

Tristan smiled.

The man picked up the datapad and read carefully. His head snapped to Alex. “This can’t be right.”

“It is.”

“This says he’s wanted for killing twenty-three Law agents.”

“Those are only the ones they know about, and that’s because they were in the precinct when he broke me out.”

They hadn’t been Law agents, and he hadn’t been rescuing Tristan. Alex couldn’t conceive a situation where Tristan would need rescuing. If he remembered correctly, the body count had been closer to thirty, not that the man in the green and white jacket had any way of verifying that.

Law agencies guarded their failure closely, so there wouldn’t be any files on a breakout with this number of dead agents. As for the criminal cartel Tristan was using as the basis for the massacre? It wasn’t like any Law agencies had associated that one to Crimson, so again, no way for the man to tell it wasn’t true.

The man looked around the room. Anyone not involved with this had cleared out, so it was the twelve guards and the barman, who looked too relaxed not to be part of this. He was also the only one of them not paying attention, so he couldn’t hear their conversation. Sound cancellation? An act?

The man typed something on the datapad, waited, made a few motions Alex recognized as erasing something—probably the records of the transmission he’d sent. He handed the datapad back to Tristan, who surreptitiously brought up the spy program, angling the pad so Alex caught sight of all the transmission information, before putting it away.

Well, that had been stupid on the man’s part—using someone else’s datapad for such a transmission. Now Tristan didn’t need him anymore. Oh, Alex was sure the node the message had gone to wasn’t connected to anyone in their organization, but his programs were already tying themselves into it. They’d leave a trail for Alex to follow to whatever systems it went through until reaching its final destination.

But their death wasn’t part of this job. This group didn’t have the fabricator; Tristan had only picked dealers who didn’t deal directly in the drugs that were flooding the market, so they would have no choice but to send them to someone higher up on the food chain until one of them knew which gang had it. Coming at it sideways ensured their target wouldn’t find out. None of their competitors would tell them. They’d buy the product at the reduced cost and sell it to Tristan at a markup.

But they would know who the supplier was.

The man was thoughtful, drumming his fingers on the table in a specific rhythm. A signal? A tick? He was looking at Tristan, but he couldn’t stop glancing at Alex. The bounties had made him falsely assume Alex was the more dangerous of the two.

“What are you doing so far from your planet? If you’re trying to establish yourself here, we’re going to have a problem.”

Tristan shook his head. “You don’t have to worry about that. This planet is nice enough, but not my kind of place. Too much local government oversight. I’m going to rebuild back home on Deleron Four. I just need a starting supply to bring in the funds I’ll need; to make sure all the right people are paid. You have no idea how much people are willing to pay for this stuff back home. If you can get me what I asked for, within a couple of days of getting back, I’ll have recouped my expenses and have enough left over so every Law agent looking into me can buy themselves Colobrie Corvettes.”

The man wasn’t buying it. Alex could see that on his face, but that was the extent of his skill at reading people. Tristan already knew every thought, every decision the man had come to, from now until how the man expected this encounter to resolve itself. That he was still relaxed meant nothing; even he couldn’t read the tension in the Samalian unless Tristan let him. Alex wished he knew if this would be a fight. He was looking forward to a good fight; it had been more than a month since the one in the prison.

The man took a buzzing datapad out of his pocket. It was smaller, and Arcan? The overall shape reminded Alex of those. He read the message and pursed his lips. “Looks like you’re being taken off my hands.”

“Is that good or bad?” Tristan asked.

The man smiled. Alex didn’t like what it promised.

“It’s what it is. Good and bad don’t matter anymore.”

Tristan returned the smile. “It should matter to you. If it’s good, I’ll give you a cut. If it’s bad, I’ll simply cut you.”

The man wasn’t impressed. “Not my problem. I’m not going to be seeing you again, no matter how this goes.”

“Believe me when I say this: if this turns bad, you’ll be seeing us again—well, at least I’ll be seeing you.” Tristan motioned to the people surrounding them. “Them? He’s going to take care of.”

The man’s face hardened. “You might have been someone big on that mudball you call home, but here, you’re nobody. The bosses are going to turn you into little piles of ash if you so much as look at them wrong.”

Bosses, plural. Interesting.

Tristan sneered. “I’m big wherever I decide to settle. I’ve had corporations in my pocket, so you and your little rodents here don’t worry me. They look at me wrong, and they’ll end up as bloody ribbons on the floor. And not long after that? You’re going to be dead too.”

The man rolled his eyes. “You don’t scare me.”

“Then I guess you aren’t as smart as you look.”

The man was saved from replying by three men entering. They wore green and white heavy armor and held rifles. Alex looked around at everyone. He hadn’t really paid attention to the man’s guards before now—they hadn’t mattered—and he saw every one of them had green and white as prominent colors. Gang colors, he realized.

So these would be gang enforcers. They were taking the bounty seriously, even if the man here wasn’t. Their rifles weren’t for show, nor were the gun each wore.

“Your escort is here. I suggest you enjoy the flight; it could be the last time you enjoy anything.”

Tristan stood and sighed. “So you believe this is going to go badly for me. For your sake, you should hope you are wrong. You’ll hate seeing me again.”

He turned and headed toward the new arrivals. Alex fell into step behind him. The three enforcers escorted them to the cargo hover outside. The side door was open, showing four more enforcers armed in the same way.

Alex looked at the space he stepped in. In such close quarters, a fight would hurt, but he and Tristan would be the survivors. With twice the numbers? Alex would have been concerned, but still confident. Unless they had all trained together daily, the enforcers would get in each other’s way, giving Alex and Tristan the advantage.

Whoever they were going to see hadn’t taken the bounties *too* seriously.

The inside was dark, windowless, and blocked off from the pilot area. He felt it vibrate as it moved, and activated his implant. Datapads spoke to it, simple language for a simple device. The hover’s system was more complex, but it was a dedicated system with little in the way of personality. It did have the navigation running, and it was happily saying the coordinates as they changed. Alex connected to it through his datapad and had it record them. He’d be able to reconstruct the route later if needed.

Then he listened to the systems outside the hover—stores—houses, small companies. It didn’t tell him anything useful, but it was something to listen to while they flew.

The trip took an hour of a circuitous route that had them going all over the city, only to end up a few miles from where they were picked up. They exited before a tall building—disused, by the look of missing letters on the name over the door. “Robiton Tower” was what it originally said, the “ito”, “T”, and “er” now missing, only leaving the imprint of what they had been on the permacrete surface.

He sub-vocalized the name for his datapad with a command to do a search. Sixty stories, it told him, a mix of apartments and offices. Went bankrupt twenty-two years ago. Never repurchased.

So this was a headquarters for a gang? Fancy.

The guards led them from the van to the entrance. The lobby had more enforcers, but they didn’t pay Alex and Tristan any attention, focused on the outside. Past that, it looked like most of the floor had been gutted, leaving only columns to hold up the rest of the building.

The space had been cleaned up, and a mob of heavily armed people waited for them. Men and women, all wearing green and white. He saw a serpentine form among them—a Kataress. He hadn’t seen one of those since his time at Alien-Nation. There was another alien, tall, thin with bark-like skin, but the name of that species escaped him.

They all looked eager for a fight. These were bad odds. If only a few of them had proper training, there was a lot of space and the columns provided cover. They could stay out of each other’s way, and no matter where he or Tristan stood, someone could go around.

He did his best not to show his worry, but he couldn’t keep from glancing at Tristan. Calm as always. He wished he could believe this wasn’t an act. Tristan was amazing, and together they were deadly, but there had to be over fifty people here. There was no way this wasn’t concerning him, even a little.

“You know,” a man said, somewhere behind the mob, “you’ve really been causing us problems.”

“You go around hurting our people,” a woman continued. She sounded like she stood near the man.

The bosses, probably. “You spread word that you’re willing to spend a lot of money for something we don’t even sell. Talking the kind of quantities that means you either made yourself a big shot, or you turned stooge.”

“The bounties were a nice touch,” the man said. “I could almost believe them, but then I do know a few things about you. Kudos on whoever fabricated them.”

“I have to say,” the woman said, “we never expected you to come back here, not after what you did.”

Alex tried to remember what Tristan had done. He remembered him mentioning being here before, but he hadn’t given any details. Still, this was Tristan, so whatever it had been would have left a mark. He was surprised there had been anyone left to bring it up now, though. Tristan was usually thorough.

The crowd shifted, then parted. A man and a woman walked down steps from an elevated platform with two...well, “thrones” was the only word he could think of to describe something that gaudy.

She wore white armored pants with green highlights. Her shirt was white, as was the jacket—armored, something inspired by the military, also with green highlights. She had short red hair that seemed particularly bright with all that white. The man wore a mirror version of hers—green with white highlights. He had green hair to match his outfit.

But it was the hands they lifted, guns pointing at him, that made everything click in place. No wonder the port had seemed familiar.

“Hello, Crimson,” the woman said.

* * *