

Chapter 39

Control.

Tristan was in control, he repeated to himself as his claws kept extending and retracting. There was a job to do, a ship to take, a virus to destroy.

He marched along the corridor. Remembering Alex against the wall, their bodies so close, the scents of their desire mingling. Wanting him, wanting to have him. No. That wasn't what he wanted.

He was the one in control.

A mercenary stepped out of a doorway and had his gun out. With a roar, Tristan was running. He felt the shots hit him, a Kentric Imperial, but the pain was distant behind his anger.

He dug his claws into the man's neck, imagined this was Alex. He lifted him off his feet and smashed his head against the wall, and again, and again. *Die, Alex, get out of my life.* When the man's head was caved in, he dropped him in horror at what he'd done. Alex?

Motion in the corner of his eye. He spun, saw Alex. Relief flooded him. When he looked at the crumpled man, he was one of his quarry's mercenaries again—unimportant, meaningless, and thankfully, not Alex.

With a snarl, he bared his teeth at Alex. He was going to kill him this time, hurt him, punish him for taking his control away.

Alex kept his distance, fear and worry on his face. Good, he should be afraid. It was only a question of time before he died at Tristan's hands. The moment the job was done, this was all over and Tristan would be in control again.

No, he *was still* in control.

Five more mercs crossed their path, and Tristan dispatched each of them with the same vicious efficiency. It was only once they stood at the door to engineering he realized he should have let Alex deal with them. He was the weapon. He had to earn his keep to remain alive.

But one of them might have killed Alex, he thought in horror. Only to snort. Like these mercs could even hurt his weapon, his Alex. He had forged him to perfection, and not one of them was good enough to even touch him. He, Tristan, was the only one with the right to destroy what he'd made.

Later, he reminded himself. Once the job was done.

Control was through that door—of the ship, of his life. All he needed to do was get through the door. The lock was Dovinal, a newer version than what was usual on cruise ships, but too old to be a recent upgrade. Minutes, if that. Even without tools it wouldn't take him long to render it useless.

Open the door, kill everyone there, take control of himself, get rid of the virus, and go home, to his workshop. Never leave again.

He reached for the lock, stopped. His quarry knew he was coming. He would have every merc he could

in there with him. They would be ready for a fight. He didn't care, he could take them all. He dug his claws in the side of the panel, stopped again.

What would happen to Alex in such a fight?

He had to think. He had to get his emotions under control, get himself under control. Think.

Engineering had two accesses. It was possible the other group would enter from the other one, trapping his quarry between them. This would force him to divide his attention and his forces. Under such conditions, Alex could be safe.

He snarled. The universe wanted him dead too badly for things to work out this way. The other team was probably right behind him. If he went in, he and Alex would be the ones trapped between two groups, both wanting them dead.

The idea of sending in Alex alone flitted in his mind, only to be dismissed. Alex was *his* weapon; he wouldn't throw the human away so casually. He would end Alex himself when this was all over.

Think, Tristan.

He needed the element of surprise. He needed to find a way to get Alex under him, to move against him. Smell him.

No!

He growled, and Alex took a step back. *Good. Stay away from me. Don't ever touch me or I will rip you apart.*

Engineering. He needed a way in that would give him the element of surprise. What did a ship like this have? Corridors, halls, rooms, dead mercs. None of those helped. What was he left with? Alex, his smooth skin, the taste of his sweat mixed in with his enemies' blood.

He shut his eyes tight, forced that image away, ignored the ache it caused him. This was worse than being in the cage. At least the cage was something he could escape. No matter how cramped it had been, it had never held him.

Maintenance conduits. They crisscrossed ships like these, and when this one was built, rules were that every room with more than ten people working in it needed to have multiple of them because they also served as emergency exits.

Were they barred? His quarry had demonstrated an aptitude for planning ahead. Could he have thought about this situation? If he had, would he have had the time to do anything about it? Install cameras in the conduits, like he had the rest of the ship? Weld the accesses shut from within engineering? How long had Baran had this ship? What could he do about it?

He growled and threw his head back, roaring to let out his frustration, and noticed the ceiling.

Humans were inherently lazy, Alex being the exception. On a ship like this, engineering was a large room, possibly multiple rooms. When work needed to be done in a ceiling conduit, would someone in engineering really want to crawl their way around the room to get to it? He shuddered—crawl through those too-narrow conduits? No, they wouldn't, not when it was easier to just make an access in the ceiling.

He had to backtrack two doors to find a passenger room. He felt along the back wall where the conduit should be, ran his claws against it until they caught in a seam. He pulled, and the cover came off, revealing an access with "Emergency Exit" written above it.

The panel indicated it was locked, but that wasn't a problem. He reached for his buckle and only found fabric. He cursed. These were the pants Alex had gotten him in the medical bay. Well, it wouldn't be the first time he had to bypass a lock without tools.

He ripped the panel off the wall, exposing the wires and causing them to spark. Good, his quarry hadn't thought to cut the power to them. He wasn't quite as good at planning as he wanted Tristan to think.

His burned fingers healed as fast as they were damaged by the sparking. Even the burned fur regrew, leaving no indication he'd been hurt. A reminder he was slowly dying. It took all his control not to rip every wire out in anger.

The door opened, revealing a junction going up, down, forward, left, and right.

"They didn't think things through, did they?" Alex asked, close behind Tristan. "Someone gets in here, panicked by whatever emergency is happening, steps into that and drops to their death."

"Alex," Tristan growled. Stay away, touch me, kiss me. Make me feel— "Focus."

Where were the tools? Junctions should contain toolkits. Tools were always useful. This one didn't have them. He looked up, the next junction then. He climbed the ladder and tried to think about anything other than how narrow the conduit was, and found himself thinking of Alex, on the floor, offering himself.

Two floors. He forced himself to think. That was the standard for an engineering room. Two floors,

then head for the bow; that would take them along its ceiling. Somewhere there would be an access for the lazy humans to get in and do their repairs.

They would have to drop two floors in the middle of enemy mercs. He could do it, could Alex? He would, Tristan wouldn't give him a choice. Then he would secure his quarry, vent his anger on the mercs, and when that was over, finally deal with Alex.

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