

The drop-pack silently kicked in and Tristan made adjustments to land by the research station's roof access. These weren't high security structures under the more rigorous conditions, and one on a planet away from everything, with nothing more than other researchers and a lone sanctuary for neighbors, wouldn't bother with even the basics of security.

He confirmed it by checking the access hatch, and it was unlocked. It might have been at one time, but the first time one of them needed to repair something on the roof, they wouldn't have bothered locking it.

He did a second check to confirm it wasn't a trap, then opened the hatch enough to listen in.

Alex said the researchers were kept in the common area. Based on the schematics he'd studied, it was the area around which the researcher's rooms were located. It served multiple purposes, including food prep and eating, lounging, and, if they had the right additions, holographic entertainment.

This access opened on a corridor leading to the one which led to common area. One giving him access to that directly would have been better, but it was one area where the security was included within the construction. There was no access to any of the locations considered vital to the station's operations. Which included the personnel.

For as vilified as corporations were. They protected their assets.

The lack of people moving about, or conversation, spoke to, if these were usual conditions, a station between personnel assignment. Some, like one so removed, might not be manned while personnel were transitioned. In this case, it confirmed that everyone was under lock. The mercs would be stationed at the expected weak points.

That no one was guarding this access spoke of a group working mostly within the vacuum of space. Approaching anything out there unnoticed was difficult. Entering from the void, triggering no sensor, was borderline impossible.

It had taken Tristan seven times before he'd managed it.

He slipped in, hung by the rung within the access collar as he silently closed the hatch, then dropped to the ground and listened. Many of the room had doors, and they would be closed by default. The operation center, on the other hand, while on a side corridor, was open to this corridor at one end; it was too vital to limit who came and went unless the alarm was triggered. The living area was at the other end. Its door would also be open under normal operations so the researchers could come and go as needed, but unlike the operation center, the door's controls weren't slaved to the alarms. It remained open out of convenience and could be closed anytime someone desired it to be.

He listened as he headed in that direction, and once nearly there, he made out heavy

clothing shifting against a hard fabric. At the corner, he attached a camera to his datapad and placed it on the floor, pushing only the lense past it.

Tristan had tried to add a scanning suit to his datapad, but the components that allowed for remote sensing of the world at a level normal senses perceived were still too cumbersome to be practical. One had to jump to sensing the microscopic, or working in distances of inches to make something that fit in a datapad.

Two mercs in reinforced clothing leaned against the wall. One wore a helmet with a visor, light leaking from it indicating she was focused on something there, instead of on keeping watch. The other's eyes were closed. Not sleeping, but also not attentive.

He ran at them, counting on their inattention to keep them from reacting in time.

The first to react was the woman, and she reached for the weapon at her belt. If Tristan hadn't wanted to sink his claws into an opponent, he would have shot both of them from where he'd been, and neither would have known.

Her motion and the hurriedly aimed shot roused the second merc, but the seconds he took to assess the situation meant Tristan was already colliding with him at full speed, knocking the breath out of the merc as he faced the woman, batting the Sortofe out of her hand. He didn't make out the model in the time it took to do that. Sortofe was well known for always using the same base model. The differences were only apparent after close examination.

She dodges his clawed swipe, then punched him in the stomach with nothing close to enough strength for him to feel it. She would have been better served taking her knife. She didn't get the chance. His hand closed around her neck, claws digging in, and he wrenched, breaking the trachea, and ripping open the carotid arteries and jugular veins.

The man had regained his breath, and an elbow in his face removed that ability as he caved it in.

He wished the fight had lasted longer, but it would have been no more satisfying. Only not fighting as hard as he could would have made that happen, and if that was his plan, he might as well not bother fighting at all.

He broke the man's neck, ending his struggle to breathe.

The lock was set with the external override. He deactivated it and entered.

Instead of a haggard group of researchers rejoicing at their rescue, or hiding at his presence, he looked at their backs as they looked on outside through the large curved window. Mentally consulting the station's schematics told him it looked out onto the landing pad where Alex would have landed not too long ago.

"Do you recognize him?" one of them asked.

"Looks like another merc, if you ask me," someone said.

"I don't think he's with them," another commented.

Tristan joined them, curious about what would cause the comments. Even if the mercs had been planning for an attack, and he and Alex believed, they had no reason to think this was it. Alex had left the computer alone, and he was on a shuttle with all the correct identifiers to mark him as a visitor from another station.

He moved one of the researcher out of his way, then he was the only one at the window as they scurried away from him with fearful screams.

On the landing pad before the ship, Alex stood, hands in the air as two mercs patted

him down. Leaning forward, he saw far too many mercs pointing their rifles at Alex. They might have been taking what happened inside the station easy, but they weren't taking any chances with unexpected arrivals.

Tristan saw the moment they were about to die when one merc dropped his guard to take something at Alex's back, then raised the knife to show it to the others, holding it within easy reach from Alec's raised hand.

Alex's expression turned into an over acted bashful as he said something. Then the knife was out of the man's hand and into his chest. As Alex moved him while holding onto the knife, it easily sliced through the bones and out of the collarbone, detaching the arm from the body. Alex made himself small behind the body now taking fire and Tristan expected Alex was looking forward to the fight.

He'd made out nearly a dozen mercs there. The two rifles he could identify from here were Karoshes. One might be a DTN, which wasn't cheap. That meant that as well as being prepared, they were equipped.

"Stay here," he told the fearful researched as he hurried out. Alex would survive; he had no doubt. But well prepared and well equipped would also mean skilled. This could be a fight that pushed him beyond his ability to control himself, and if that happened, Tristan needed to be there and ensure no one not involved with the mercenaries were caught in this.

He turned into the corridor leading to the one set of stairs and lift that would take him down to the level of the landing pad. Ground-side stations rarely bothered with making reaching exits expedient. The lack of danger of decompressive explosion seemed to lead to a lack of corresponding safety measures.

The corridor took him by the operation center, there three merc exited, turning in the direction he was heading before noticing his presence. A look in the center as he ran past it showed it was empty of personnel.

They were at the lift before one of them looked over his shoulder, then let out a surprised yelp, fumbling reaching for his firearm. Tristan claws his throat open, then dodged the stun stick another swung at him, aiming to force him back. Instead, Tristan stepped forward, catching the arm and directing it at the third merc, who'd been waiting for an opening to stab him with a vibro blade.

She shook under the much to high power as Tristan held her against the wall with the stick, ignoring the man punching him in an attempt to make him stop. When he let the man go, mid swing, he staggered and Tristan broke his spine with one punch.

Then he ran down the stairs, and toward the landing pad.

He stepped outside to Alex fighting the last three mercs; moving fluidly among the eleven dead bodies around them. A slice sent a line of blood in the air as the knife cut the throat nearly through. The motion made his human turn, showing he was without his harness, but had half a dozen knives clipped to his jacket. While the smile on his face wasn't maniacal, it was worrisome.

He dropped halfway through the spin, and the other knife cut through another merc's ankle, detaching the foot, and before she fell back two more deep cuts appeared, one across her stomach and the other her chest, as I Alex raised himself.

As with anytime Tristan watched his human fight, he felt amazement at how skilled he

was, pride that he had played a part in making him this good. Where that would have been the end of it. The end of what he would admit to himself. Now, he could allow himself to feel the heat rise within him. The desire to take him, the only predator who could hold his own against Tristan and make him his, over and over. Make him scream defeat, make him beg for more, And give it to him.

The chuckle derailed his thoughts, his desire. It was the reminder of the monster he had played a part in creating. That, as desirable as Alex was when he fought, there was a danger of his lack of control destroying what they were attempting to build.

The sigh that followed was filled with contentment. "I'm okay," Alex said. He looked over his shoulders, smiling. "I'm actually okay." His face was cut, bloodied, and an eye didn't open completely, but he was happy. "What's the situation inside?"

"The researchers are free," Tristan answered, walking to his human. "Possibly watching us. That window is the common area they were held in." He caressed Alex's bloody cheek with his thumb. "It's working?"

Alex chuckled. "Seems like it. Don't ask me how, because I haven't liked any of what they've had me do. I don't think I've even been able to go inward and understand why I do the things I do. But yeah. I could sort of feel it creeping forward as I fought, and I...didn't let it."

Tristan kissed him and felt something he didn't often feel, even now that he allowed such feelings.

He felt hope. They could do this. They could overcome this issue and go on with living their lives. They could go back to Samalia, back home, and build their future.

His kissing became needful, but Alex pushed away with a laugh. "How about we make sure there aren't any mercs in there before we give those researchers some lessons in interspecies relations?"

Tristan pulled Alex to him and rested his forehead on his. "I don't know if I can wait."

"It'll be worth your while. After all, these mercs must have a ship hidden somewhere around here. We can make it ours in the most personal way we know out."

Tristan smiled at him toothily. "But only after I have fucked you senseless in it."