

Chapter 34

Someone screamed so loud it woke Alex. He realized he was the one screaming and clamped his mouth shut. He didn't care how much pain they inflicted; he wasn't giving those bastards the satisfaction.

Pain shot up his arm and he bolted up, cradling it. There was motion, barely perceived through his tears, and he reached for a knife. His arm fell to his side and the pain almost made him black out. He wasn't going to die unconscious. He was taking as many of them as he could with him.

"It's me." The voice was deep, gentle.

Alex blinked. He could only make out a deep brown chest, almost black. He didn't dare open his mouth to ask who he was, or threaten him. The pain was pounding at him to be let out.

"Relax, Alex. You've been through a lot."

The beatings, the torture, the electro-sticks, the fight, killing the guard, forcing himself to walk through the corridors. Yeah, a lot was something of an understatement. He looked at his arm. It no longer looked mangled. There was a spike of pain, and his hand twitched.

He stared at it as the fingers curled in with the pain. He looked at Tristan.

"We've been exposed to the virus."

His mouth fell open, but no sound came out. The shock was such that even the pain was muffled behind it. He was dead. He had a decade, maybe two, then he'd just stop working.

"You?" The idea that Tristan could die froze his blood.

"Me too." His voice was back to being cold, emotionless. This was just one more attempt on his life he had to deal with. He'd been through so many, it probably didn't even register as a problem. "How are you feeling?"

Alex considered it. "Better. I think even the pain's fading away." Carefully, he bent his arm, and he couldn't tell if what he felt was actual pain or the memory of it. He saw what was clipped to his belt. "I have knives. I'll be okay."

Tristan rolled his eyes.

"But I can see how none of the scientists thought this was a bad thing. I mean, I can understand why they didn't want to look too deep into it." He looked at the screen, found the entry for when it had been activated. "No Heal does this much in fifteen minutes. I'm sore and famished, but that's about it." He moved his arm. "Heals would never have fixed that; I doubt a mender could have. That guy didn't leave anything intact in there. Any chance there's something to eat?"

Tristan looked at the screens. "You're going to have to search for that yourself. I need to work on getting us out of here."

Alex got off the bed and stretched. He'd been sore just before, but that was now gone. He didn't even feel as much as what felt after a training session. He noticed the man on the screen, looking at them with an

angry expression.

“What’s his deal?”

“He doesn’t know what the virus really does.”

“How are you still alive?” Baran asked.

“Didn’t he have access to Olirian’s files?” Alex headed for the closest cabinet and found it empty, the contents on the floor. He moved to the next one and searched through it. Then the next, and Baran’s face appeared on the screen under it.

“You shouldn’t be able to move. I saw what they did to you.”

Alex glanced at it, then went back to his search. “Yeah? Well, thanks for that. You’d better hope I don’t run into you, because I’m thinking you’d like to experience it for yourself.”

“Sir?” a voice came from off-screen—male, sounding young.

“Not now,” Baran replied. “Something’s gone wrong.”

“Sir?” Urgency in the voice now. “You need to see this.”

Baran cursed. “What’s so import—” The screen shut off.

Alex glanced at Tristan. He was in front of the door, his hand pressing against frosted air. The lock was flashing yellow. Hazmat lock meant a forcefield, but he hadn’t known those could be made opaque. They weren’t getting out that way unless someone shut it down. He tried to listen to the ship, but only got the gibberish of a jammer.

He found a cabinet containing clothing. What it was doing there he had no idea, but he looked at Tristan’s furry ass, imagined the other side. There were things he didn’t need to see right now if he was going to make it through the rest of this day. He found a pair of pants that would fit the Samalian and continued searching.

He found boxes of nutrient bars two cabinets later. They were the good ones, medical-grade with all the extra amino acids and stuff the commercial versions left out. Didn’t taste any better.

He ate two boxes of them before he felt the dent in his hunger. He brought Tristan a box and left the pants with them. He continued eating as he searched for more weapons. Two knives weren’t enough.

He found plenty of scalpels, but those didn’t feel right in his hand. He wanted something with weight to it, not something he’d forget he was holding and accidentally stab himself with.

He stopped by the fabricator. It was bulky, not something he expected in a medical bay. A tap woke the screen; the directory was blank. He tapped under that and the log showed it had been used recently, but not what had been made. Considering his state, he could guess what that had been.

He thought about using it to copy one of the knives, but a check told him it only contained base organic stuff, to make the virus, and this model couldn’t take anything apart, so he couldn’t feed it the scalpels for material.

An alarm sounded, and the forcefield went clear, showing the door was open with armed people wearing bio-hazard gear. Alex joined Tristan, who’d put the pants on, and counted five of them. Four of whom held rifles that couldn’t be standard for hazmat equipment.

“Step back.” The voice was male, not one he recognized from his beating.

Tristan obeyed and Alex did the same.

“We’re clear,” the man said. The field shimmered before vanishing with a snap. The panel flashed red even though the door was open, so the sensors knew something was wrong.

“If they move,” the man said as he entered, “shoot them. The boss said they aren’t needed anymore.”

The one closest to the unarmed person grabbed them by the arm and yanked hard enough to make her yelp in pain. Woman. Alex kept his eyes on him as he forced her to the device in the center of the room.

“Aren’t we sort of immortal?” Alex whispered.

“No. We will die.” Even with the lowered voice, the finality in it was loud.

“Yeah, in a decade or two, but until then, aren’t we going to heal from anything they can do to us?”

Baran’s face appeared on a screen. “Well?”

Tristan wasn’t looking at it, or at anything. He had a thoughtful expression that told Alex to hold himself ready.

“Well, what?” the woman replied. Even with the anger and the distortion caused by the suit, he thought he recognized Mary.

“Why didn’t it release?”

The woman turned to the screen. “Did you miss the part where I told you I’m a biochemist and not an engineer?”

"Are you telling me that you can't figure out if the aerosol dispersed the virus or not?"

"Oh no, I can tell you that." She pulled a vial from the machine. "It's empty, so it sprayed it."

"Then why aren't they dead?"

"How should I know?" She put the vial back in place.

"You told me this was the virus," Baran said darkly.

She stood and spun. "No. I told you that was one of the two formulas I got from the fabricator, the older and more complex. You told me that was a deadly virus."

"Don't try to be funny. You knew what it was. You were researching it. How do you think I knew you were the one I wanted? I had enough snippets of my grandfather's research to recognize you were looking at something he made."

Mary mumbled, "I wasn't even looking into that formula, you idiot." She raised her voice, sounding resigned. "Of course, I ran searches. I find this DNA string in a fabricator lost for decades, I'm going to want to figure out what it is. You think I'm just going to plug it in and set it loose? I was trying to understand what it did, and if I could make money off it."

"You're lying," Baran snarled. "You're in league with them. That's why it didn't work. You never put it in. Milton, k—"

The screen went blank as the ship shuddered. The light flickered. Tristan took off for the three mercs by the door. Alex went for the one who had brutalized Mary.

The man fired at him and Alex didn't bother dodging. He was hit, felt the pain, but almost immediately it began cooling. He batted the gun out of the way and buried his knife in the man's chest. He pulled the head cover off and was disappointed to find this wasn't the lanky man who was a fan of the electro-stick.

He took his knife out and unclipped the one sheathed at the man's belt with his other hand.

Two of the others were in close combat with Tristan, although the Samalian seemed to be ignoring them. The third was backing up, bringing up his rifle. Alex threw a knife into his back.

He clipped the sheath to his belt and smiled at Mary, who took a step back. "Don't move." He unsheathed the knife and ran to Tristan's aid.

The Samalian was actually ignoring the two mercs stabbing him while he did something to the rifle he held. Alex sliced the throat of the closest one. Before he could kill the other Tristan had backhanded him, apparently done with his work, and wound back to throw the rifle. The red flashing light turned yellow and there was the snap of the forcefield.

Tristan stepped to the field, placed a hand against it and swore in a language Alex had never heard from him before, then pounded it. Alex took a step back. He'd never seen Tristan this way before. He went cold, colder when he was angry, not hot like this. He should be working out how to make those responsible pay, not lose it on the forcefield.

He took a step toward him, ready to risk his anger, when he heard a tone and a voice ask for his identification. Alex smiled and headed for the closest computer.

"Tristan!"

"What!" Tristan replied, seething with anger.

"The jammer's down. I'm going to have control of the door in a minute, max." He entered commands. "Hello there, let's have a chat." Fifty-three seconds later the forcefield was down, and he'd ensured he was the only one who could bring it back up.

Tristan placed a stack of knives on the counter by Alex and left. Alex smiled and proceeded to secure them on his body, using medical adhesive on two to stick them on his forearms.

When he was done, Tristan was securing the last holster to the makeshift harness he'd made by crossing two belts over his chest. With it in place, he headed for Mary.

"Don't fight him," Alex said. "You're just going to get hurt." He did the rounds of the bodies.

"Aren't you going to protect me?"

"Him, I can't protect you against. But he'll only hurt you if you give him a reason." He trusted Tristan to have gotten all the knives, but he wanted to check. Four knives were like just wearing a shirt and nothing else.

He didn't find anymore so he rejoined Tristan, who was patting down a terrified Mary. On the counter were a datapad, various tools he didn't know, and two data chips, one of which had a picture, so a reading one or a vid.

Tristan reached her pants pocket and pulled a small case from it. Mary froze. Whatever was in there

was important to her. Tristan opened it and pulled out an injector vial.

“What is this?” The rage in Tristan’s voice made her shrink back even more. “He was right! You were going to take this for yourself and spread it!” He wound up to smash it on the counter.

“Don’t.” Sheer terror in her voice. “It’s the cure.”

Alex stared at her.

“What cure?” The suspicion in Tristan’s voice echoed Alex’s. Olirian had never mentioned a cure.

“There were two formulas in the buffer. I synthesized them digitally. The one that was released is this giant DNA strand, complex beyond anything I’ve ever seen. The other one is simpler, so it’s the one I researched. There’s nothing on the net about it or anything like it, but it was made to counteract the other one. It was easy to find the places where they were made to interact. They’re almost like matter and antimatter, canceling each other, but without the giant explosion.”

She paused to catch her breath, but a growl from Tristan urged her.

“I didn’t know what either did until Baran told me about the virus and how deadly it was. I wasn’t going to let him kill me with it, so I printed the other one when he wasn’t looking. I figured it was the cure. When you didn’t die, I thought maybe I had it wrong, that he gave you the cure and I had the virus, but you’re clearly freaking out over being infecting, so I don’t know anymore. If you have the virus, why aren’t you dead?”

Tristan leaned in and she pressed herself against the wall. “Because that idiot has no idea how it works.”

“It heals before it kills,” Alex added. When she looked at him, he moved his arm.

“How? The bones were crushed beyond repair. They would have had to be replaced.”

“It’s a miracle-worker, right up until it kills you. A bit more than a decade of perfect health, then it’s over.”

“And that’s the cure?” Mary reached for it, but Tristan growled. “But it’s mine. I made it.”

Alex shook his head. “Not anymore. It’s his.”

“If she’s telling the truth,” Tristan said.

Alex looked at the back of his head. Didn’t he know? Couldn’t he tell? “Why would she lie?”

“The old man never mentioned a cure.”

“His mind wasn’t exactly whole; the docs said so.”

“When was it made?” Tristan asked Mary, growling at her.

“I don’t know,” she whimpered.

“When was it entered into the fabricator?” Alex asked. “You did get the index when you copied them over, right?”

Mary looked at him, nodded, and gave him a date.

“It matches with what Olirian told us. That’s about ten minutes before he had to get out of there. Not a lot of time, but the guy was the one who worked on the majority of Salvation, so he had the brains and the knowledge to pull this off. And she can’t know that he had to run, so the odds that she just made up the date are small.”

Tristan didn’t reply; he was looking at the vial. Alex was getting worried. He should have worked all of that out before him. Salvation couldn’t be affecting his mind, so what was wrong?

“What? What are you going to do with me?” Mary asked.

When Tristan didn’t say or do anything, Alex answered.

“I’m going to tie you up so Baran doesn’t think you’re our friend.”

“Alex,” Tristan growled.

“She’s a victim here. We can’t bring her with us because that shudder was another ship forcefully docking. The bridge is panicking over it.” He brought his hand to a knife. He’d made the attempt, but he knew what Tristan’s response would be.

“Fine.” Tristan stalked off. “But if she becomes a problem, I am wringing your neck.”

His hand froze as it closed on the knife. He’d won the argument? What was he supposed to do now? He saw the roll of medical tape on the counter and his brain reengaged. He grabbed it and sat her down by one of the medical beds. Like everything on ships, it was welded in place, but it had plenty of cubby holes to put things in. One was long enough it had a bar in the center of it.

“Did...he threaten to kill you?” she asked as Alex placed her hands on each side of the bar.

He shrugged. “It’s how he shows he cares.” He began taping her hands to it.

She looked at him in dismay. “That isn’t caring. Look, maybe you think that he—”

“Don’t.” He tried to keep his voice even and focused on the taping.

“How can you do that to yourself? You’re a mercenary, you’re supposed to be strong. How can you put yourself in a—”

He wrapped a hand around her neck. “I don’t need you to tell me I’m in an abusive relationship. I fucking know. I chose him. I decided to stay. He made me what I am, and I’m not going to walk away from him.” He let her go and went back to wrapping the tape over her hands.

“Look, it isn’t healthy. I think—”

“I don’t care what you think.” He looked at her with disgust as he stood. “Maybe your word doesn’t mean anything to you, but it does to me. I promised him I’d stay, no matter what. I’m going to stick by it.” He grabbed the injector on the counter and left.

“Had a good talk?” Tristan asked, his voice calm and cool.

Alex glared at him. Oh, now he was back to his old self. “What about the mercs? They’ve been infected, and Olirian said nothing short of the body’s destruction will stop Salvation.”

“Put the forcefield back up. They won’t get out of that.”

“And then?”

Tristan headed into the hall. “We get away from here. He’s going to send people to check what happened. Can they get through your locks?”

“Only if Baran has a good coercionist. It isn’t my best work, but it’s going to keep the amateurs out.”

“Can you make sure no one gets in?”

“If you’re willing to give me the time.”

Tristan shook his head. “Too much is happening.” He motioned to the terminal on the wall. “I need to know who is on that new ship and what they’re after.”

Alex tapped on the screen. “At a guess? The same thing Baran was after. I’m getting the feeling that more people know about Salvation than we thought.” It only took him a few seconds to tell the medical bay what to do. “Done. Door’s locked, field’s active.” He did a quick search. “But I can’t access anything that’ll tell me who they are from this.”

“Where’s one you can use?”

Another quick search. “Four doors down, entertainment room. There should be something with a full connection there.”

The room was large, with multiple terminals against a wall, holo-projectors spread about. Alex smiled at the sounds. “Oh, this will do nicely.” He handed the injector to Tristan. “That was on the counter.” Then he headed for the closest terminal.

With a few commands, he was behind the control overlay. “Alright, where are you?” He looked through the code, listened to the computer. “There you are. I need access to—” He felt a sting on his neck.

He jumped to his feet and turned as he pulled a knife and looked for his attacker.

Tristan stood before him, a look of dismay morphing into terror on his face. He held the injector, and the indicator clearly showed the vial was empty.

Alex touched his neck. “What did you do?”

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