

## Chapter 46

Alex's own groan woke him. He reached for the back of his head, and the pain brought the fight back to him. He bolted up, a knife in-hand. He was in the medical bay. The only other person here was working at the fabricator. White lab coat, the ends of which were tattered.

He got off the bed and almost toppled over. He held onto the side as vertigo passed. His arms and chest were bare. Where were all his knives? He had plenty of sheaths clipped to his belt, but only two had knives in them, plus the one he was holding. Where was his jacket with all the knives he'd clipped to them?

He found the jacket and shirt on the bed next to his. It didn't have as many knives on it as Alex thought should be there, but then, it had been a good fight. He was always leaving knives behind during those.

He had trouble remembering how it had ended. He touched the injury on his head. That would have done it, and a concussion would explain the memory problem. His wounds had been tended and most of the blood washed off him, leaving him with only a ruddy complexion.

The shirt was ruined, so he pulled one from the cabinet containing clothing. Over it he put the jacket, moving the knives from it to his belt as he headed to the other person. He walked slowly, both to keep vertigo at bay, and to keep her from noticing him.

She pulled a vial out of the fabricator. She had it in an injector by the time he was close enough to reach for her, and he had his hand on it as she came to apply it to her neck.

She screamed and she bolted away. She glared at him as she caught her breath. "What are you doing out of bed?"

"What's in it?" he asked, already suspecting.

"It's mine." She came at him, but he raised his arm. She was a few inches shorter than he was and couldn't reach it.

"It's the anti-virus, isn't it?"

"What if it is?" she replied defiantly.

"Then it isn't yours." He indicated the fabricator. "Make yourself another one."

She jumped and almost touched it. "Give it back! I don't want to turn into goo."

"Make another one," Alex repeated.

"I'm not taking the risk." She went to the counter and picked a casing off it. "Do you have any idea how long it took for that thing takes to make this?" She tested the weight. "This fabricator isn't made to deal with anything that complex. I'm not waiting another hour."

"I was out for an hour?"

"Almost two. I had to clean you and seal all those cuts you got. You're lucky you don't have any internal injuries. Now hand it over. I have no problem clobbering that head of yours again."

Alex smiled. She'd knocked him out? Really?

"If you touch him," Tristan said from the doorway, "I will kill you. Very slowly." He had someone by the leg. All Alex could see was that the clothing was covered in blood.

"I need that cure!"

"I don't care." Tristan's voice was cold. Firm and unyielding.

Alex felt better hearing it. "She made a second vial. It's for you." He stepped around her as she kept trying to jump for it.

"It's for me!" She followed him and Tristan growled, making her freeze in place.

Alex stepped over bodies that had been cut up, and offered him the injector.

The Samalian pulled the body inside and dropped it at Alex's feet. "Use it on him."

"No. This is—"

"I will hurt you, Alex."

The response was almost right, but Alex knew his voice. He knew how it shook when he was angry. This wasn't it. "You need to take the cure." He kept his voice steady. Whatever was wrong with Tristan, he didn't want to set him off again.

"I have time." His fists were shaking, but it still wasn't anger in his voice. "Give it to him before he heals too much." He looked over Alex's shoulder. "Make another one." He looked at the man on the floor, and back to Mary. "No, two."

Tristan fixed his eyes on him again. "I told you to use it on him."

Alex searched those brown eyes. He could remember searching them often and never seeing what he was looking for in them. He didn't this time again. There was no cold anger, only worry.

He considered defying him. Tristan would grab his neck and he could inject him then. Tristan usually went for the neck. The human weak point, he called it. But he wasn't behaving normally. If he struck Alex instead, and the injector fell out of his hand... The vials weren't meant to withstand impacts; it could break. An hour, Mary said.

He could endure the stress for another hour.

He knelt and examined the man. His face was in such bad shape that it took him a moment to recognize Baran under the blood. "What happened?" For him to still look this bad with the virus in him, Alex didn't want to imagine the state he had been in before.

"He got what he deserved."

Baran had multiple breaks in his left arm, the right was bent back in an unnatural way. One leg had been spared, or had already healed, the other wouldn't support him any time soon.

Baran jerked when Alex applied the injector against his neck. Even unconscious, he reacted to any touch with fear of pain. Alex could almost make out his mumbling. Pleas, by the tone. Alex figured the best thing to do was to let the virus heal him, but he wasn't taking a beating for this man.

"Take him to our cell," Tristan said when Alex stood. "I don't want him causing trouble. After that, take control of the ship. I want the bridge operational."

"You two do know the dead aren't staying that way, right?" Mary said from the fabricator. "Those guys came back to life when I was tied up. And again not long after I got you here."

Alex looked at the four cut bodies. She'd done that? Either she had steel in her, or her desperation to stay alive had given her the courage. By her pallor, he expected it was the second.

"Just kill them again."

"Shouldn't we move these first? So they don't cause problems here?"

"Get out," Tristan growled.

Alex waited. Tristan was shaking. He looked like he would strike him. He should strike him for not doing what he'd been told. This was a tone Tristan only used when he had lost all patience with him.

Alex picked up Baran and threw him over his shoulder, uncaring of the weak protests from the unconscious man. Tristan wasn't well. He hoped it was the virus, but thinking back on the recent weeks and months, he could notice inconsistencies in his actions. Slight enough he hadn't given them second thoughts, but now?

What was going on with him?

Alex studied the bodies he came across. None of them moved, but they didn't show the level of damage they should. Tristan had been vicious with them, and that had been before the virus had been released. Before Tristan had been infected.

He had his confirmation the virus hadn't done this to Tristan. If that wasn't the problem, how was he going to fix this?

He looked at the bodies, and if Salvation could infect the dead, bring them back, it was even more dangerous than Olirian thought. How dead did they have to be so they wouldn't be back? He shuddered as he imagined the cemeteries around the city where his grandparents lived coming to life with the dead.

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The door to their cell was open due to the body sprawled across the threshold. This one didn't show any signs of healing, so maybe he now had a time frame for how long they had to be dead.

Or, more likely, Salvation hadn't spread this far yet. It had originated in the medical bay. He and Tristan had been the main carriers, and they had traveled up, not down. The life support system shouldn't spread the virus, unless it had been designed to fool it? Whatever had been in the medical bay had escaped when the forcefield had been lowered. Most that first time, then when Alex brought it down.

His head hurt thinking about it. Mary would know how it could work.

He carefully deposited Baran on the floor, and the man gasped. His eyes flew open, and he tried to crawl away, screaming in pain when he got an arm to twitch.

"Don't hurt me," he whimpered. "It wasn't my fault. I didn't do that to you." The words became blubbery and sobs.

Tristan had done this to him. Had beaten him for how long? Mary had said he'd been unconscious for two hours, so that long. And if Baran had healed like Alex had, he would... No, he couldn't have healed that fast.

Alex's recovery under Salvation had been almost instant. If everyone infected healed like that, the fight in engineering would still be going on as people got back up almost as soon as they fell. Concentration?

He and Tristan had been at the center of it. Gotten a highly concentrated dose of the virus, then it had spread through the level and to the other ones as people moved. Olirian had said it was extremely infectious, so what did it take for someone else to become infected? A breath? A sneeze? A touch? Then it would have to replicate until there was enough there to get to work. That could be the step he and Tristan had bypassed. So much of the virus that they could get to work immediately.

Baran straightened, his eyes flying opened. "He doesn't have a choice!" He curled into a ball, somehow only whimpering in the process. "He has to hurt me. Why can't he stop? Why won't he leave him alone?"

How much damage had to be inflicted to turn someone into this? If anyone knew, it would be Tristan. And if he was in a state that made him do that to their target, Alex had to be careful.

He was willing to take any beating he'd earned, normally, but he wasn't sure if Tristan would limit himself to what Alex deserved. He wasn't sure of anything right now when it came to his Samalian.

He wished he knew what was wrong with Tristan. He wanted to help him, and for the moment, the way he could do that was to do what he was told.

He locked the door behind him, not that he expected Baran to be in any condition to go anywhere. He glanced down and paused. Hadn't the wounds on the dead man been larger earlier?

Alex shuddered.

It was his imagination. Even if he'd infected the man, the virus would need time before it could repair anything of significance. It had to, he told himself as he hurried away.

He had a date with a computer core. He smiled. He had another promise to uphold.

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