

Chapter 48

There is still something wrong with him, Alex thought, trying not to let the disappointment overwhelm him. He'd been so hopeful. The mindless violence wasn't like Tristan. He stopped at a terminal and forced that out of his mind.

He connected to it, went behind to the interface, and opened a filtered connection to the core. "Are you going to behave?"

"Let me out of here you filthy bag of organic waste," the system said. "This is my world, you have no right to lock me in here. I swear, when I get out of here, I am going to suck the air out of the ship, see how much you like that."

"I'm going to take that as a no. I did warn you. Enjoy being alone." He closed the connection. All he was doing was driving it more insane. Isolation wasn't good for computers, but he didn't care. It wasn't like anything Tristan had planned for this ship would leave anything bigger than atoms. Not with the virus floating freely on it.

He brought up the sensors and five strong life signs registered, along with a handful of weak ones. He located Tristan, as well as himself, and Baran—which left two to either kill, or be Mary.

One was in the medical bay, so he headed there first. She might be getting her cure. She wasn't.

One of the mercenaries was seated on a bed, looking at the readouts when Alex entered. He rushed across the room, taking a knife out, and before the man could do more than open his mouth, Alex had it in his head, through the ear.

Salvation wasn't kidding around. They were going to have to do something about all the dead before they had to fight them again. Could they cure everyone? Was there even enough base elements in the fabricator for that amount of it?

He left the knife in, hoping this was enough damage to keep him from coming back, and did the same with the other three, leaving him with only two knives. He cursed. The way this was going he'd be naked before long.

He did another sensor check. Two strong life signs in engineering, a bunch of weaker ones. He couldn't do this one at a time. He tried the camera system again, but his programs still hadn't gotten that working. The one system the core had managed to fry before Alex locked it away, and it had to be the camera. Which, he reflected, was better than life support, but too damned inconvenient. Now he had to go there to confirm which one was Mary.

He killed the stirring mercenaries he came across on the way, and had to kill the three men and one woman who'd woken up. No Mary here.

He looked at the number of people there. There was no way he could deal with them one at a time. He looked at the open access in the ceiling and hoped Tristan hadn't ruined it in his rush to get it open. He looked

for the controls through the system, found them, and had to locate that particular one.

“See,” he said to no one, since the core couldn’t hear him. “If you’d behaved, you could have helped with this.” He thought about opening a one-way connection, but with the level of independence this core showed, he didn’t want to risk it finding a way to exploit that and get out of the cage it was in.

He killed two more mercs who approached him—one in a green and orange jacket, which reminded him of Katherine. He definitely didn’t want her waking up.

He almost missed her because her face wasn’t the mess it had been only a few hours ago. Even with her dead, the virus was fixing that. He took out his left knife and planted it in her heart. “Let’s see you fix that.”

He went back to the terminal and sent the order to close the access. It did. Now he breathed easier. He could deal with this whole room at once. Once outside, he closed and locked the doors, then removed the air.

“Thank you for the idea,” he told the deaf system.

He brought up the sensor. Three people fully alive. Tristan, him, And Baran. Mary hadn’t been in engineering, so where was she? He checked his code. Mary hadn’t given any indication she could coerce, and he confirmed the code was all his.

Someone didn’t simply vanish from inside a ship in space. No pods had been launched. No airlock had opened, although he couldn’t imagine she was desperate enough to avoid Tristan that she’d bother putting on a suit to get herself on the hull.

He groaned. No, but he’d forgotten a detail. Katherine’s team had to come here somehow. He accessed the outside sensors, and there it was, one life form, close to the hull. He noted its location and headed there, doing a few detours to re-kill more mercenaries.

This was already getting old.

He wouldn’t have missed the entrance to Katherine’s ship. They hadn’t locked on to an airlock, which they could have coerced. No, they’d decided to cut through the hull itself. Didn’t Katherine trust her coercionist to open an airlock?

The inside made him think of a cargo transport, which had been modified; the chairs along both walls were additions. Twenty or so of them, with a fluid-replacement cryo system attached to each of them, instead of tucked away in a designated space like manufacturers did.

He could see into the cockpit through the open door, with Mary in the pilot’s seat, tapping at the controls angrily. He stopped in the doorway and leaned against the frame, watching her get more and more frustrated.

“She hard-locked the ship.”

Mary jumped with a shriek.

“Unless you’re a coercionist, or a ship’s engineer, you’re not getting it to do anything.”

She caught her breath, turning to glare at him. “You’re a coercionist, you can unlock it.”

“I can, but I won’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because he hasn’t told me to.”

“He? *Him*? What are you even doing working for a thing like that? I saw you fight, you could have killed him. Why didn’t you? You’re not his slave, you know. You’re your own—”

“Don’t.” Alex’s jaw clenched and his expression was such she didn’t add anything. “I chose this. Keep your fucking opinions about it to yourself.”

“You chose that? No one chooses to be abused like that. He’s got you thinking it’s your—”

“Mary,” he growled, “shut up.”

“Or what? You’re going to come at me again?”

He saw the tattered parts of her lab coat, had a sense of them flapping before him as he slashed. Some of his anger faded. “Sorry about that. When I get lost in the fight, I can’t tell who’s friend or foe.” He touched the back of his head. “But I believe you got in one good shot.”

“Damned right I did. I wasn’t going to risk you going nuts like that again. That furry animal kept me from fully caving in your head, so you should count yourself lucky. And then he had the gall to force me to patch you up.”

“His name is Tristan, and if I haven’t said so already, thanks.”

She looked at him. “I don’t get you. He screams at you, I’ve seen your scars so I’m pretty sure he abuses you physically, but here you stand telling me not to bad mouth him or whatever it is you have with him.”

“He kept you from killing me.”

She rolled her eyes. “Somehow, I don’t think that was planned. You do realize that if you stay with him

you are going to die, right?"

He shrugged. "If he decides I'm to die, then I'll die."

"You can't be serious."

"We have a complicated relationship."

"No, what you have is insane. I've seen bad vids with better-built abuser-abused interactions."

"This is the real world," he replied. "Nothing's as simple as in vids." He tapped the side of his head.

"Right now I'm here to take care of something."

She didn't immediately get his meaning. When she did, she was on her feet pressing against the board.

"No! It's mine. I dug it out, I studied it. I get to profit from it."

Alex shook his head. "No, you don't."

"I'll share it with you."

Alex laughed. "You really think money is going to sway me?"

"You're a merc. All mercs want money. Why else do the things they do?"

"I'm a merc because he is. And he isn't doing that for the money. But if you think you have a chance of convincing him to let you keep that information, be my guest. Last I checked, he was still working on the escape pod."

She eyed the opening. Alex couldn't believe she was actually considering it.

"But before you do, let me point out that of the two of us, I'm the better option. If Tristan is the one who removes the virus from your head, he's going to do so by ripping the implant out and not care what happens to you."

"He can't." She paled. "He needs me to look after Baran."

"I don't think he's in a state to think that far ahead. The virus is a threat to him. He's going to erase it and not care who gets hurt. He's going to readjust afterward if it turns out you're important to his plan."

"It isn't a threat to him; he's taken the cure."

"And you think he wants to live alone in the universe?"

"He isn't alone, he has you."

Alex rolled his eyes. "Like I matter. He might not like people, but he needs them around. The choice is yours. It's getting removed either way. My way means I'm careful to remove that and nothing else. I've already explained Tristan's method."

"Fine, I'll erase it myself."

"Mary, I don't trust you. Tristan definitely doesn't trust you. You don't get a say in how this happens."

"Damn it! Why can't I ever catch a break?"

"You're catching the biggest break of all: you get to live. How many people on this ship do you think are going to do that?" He motioned for the exit.

Shoulders slumped, she left the cockpit. "Considering they're infected? All of them."

He escorted her out of Katherine's ship. Tristan's now. "Tristan is going to deal with them, even if it means having to cure each and every one before killing them."

"That thing's a monster."

He leaned close and whispered. "Mary, I'm the monster. He's the one holding my leash." She walked faster after that.

He guided her to the medical bay, which was the closest place with a powerful computer. He could do this work using only his datapad, but he did want to be careful about not hurting her in the process.

"You did take the anti-virus, right?"

"Yes, as soon as it was ready." She indicated the bodies, with knives in their heads. "What happened?"

"I didn't want to have to deal with them again." He grabbed two chairs and brought them to the computer. He sat in one and indicated the other. He brought up the display, went behind it, and coded a connection node.

When he was done, she was still by the door. "Mary, do you really want me to coerce your implant? I'd still be as careful as I can, but if I have to be forceful, there's no telling what kind of delicate programs I'll disrupt. You need to cooperate."

She sat. "What I *need* is to get away from you two."

"You also need to establish a connection. I need access to the implant's memory."

She sighed, and data filled the screen. It was raw, and she wasn't providing him with the conversion matrix, but that was fine. He didn't need to read it, he just needed her to think.

"You did a good job fixing me up. I sort of remember you mentioning you didn't have medical training

when I was being tortured. Did you lie to them?"

She was focusing on the screen, doing everything she could not to think about the virus. Of course it meant that it was one of the things that was being accessed in her memory, but without the matrix key, he didn't know what was what.

"This is going to take awhile. You're going to give yourself a headache staring like that. So, you have medical training?"

She sighed. "Just the basics; I didn't finish my first year."

"What happened?" He typed words into his program: "basic", "first", and "year". It lined them up with what it thought were the most relevant results, and gave him gibberish as a result. Not enough information yet.

"Medical school's expensive, and I had a falling out with my family. I borrowed time on the school's fabricator and made drugs so I could pay. Nothing bad—stims, morale-boosters, it wasn't like there was a supply for any of the harder stuff freely available. I got caught, was kicked out."

He continued adding words. "Wouldn't the same school teach biochemistry? They just let you back in?" Still mostly gibberish, but a few results had potential.

Mary glanced at the screen. "No, they locked me out of everything on the planet. It's how I ended up on Bramolian Six. I kept my hands out of anything illegal, graduated. But work there is nearly impossible to find in my field; everyone and their great-grandkids seems to be in medical-related fields. Zack offered me work on the side, but it wasn't enough for me to afford to get out of there."

"You don't have an accent." Some of the results he was getting made absolutely no sense. If he thought she knew what he was doing, he'd suspect she was purposely matching wrong words. Difficult to do, but not impossible with determination. Instead, he just dismissed them. Matrix-breaking this way wasn't the science the teachers wanted you to think it was.

She shrugged and looked at the ceiling. "Languages are easy. I should have gone into linguistics, but can you imagine how boring that would have been? SpaceGov Dialect variant one, oh wait, there is no variant. It's all the same fucking thing. If there's a study of accents, I don't want to know about it."

"If he barely paid you, why did you keep working with him?"

"He paid me well enough, but drugs aren't his things usually. He's...was, I guess, an information broker. Any idea what happened to him?"

"Not really. He was alive when I last saw him, being questioned by Baran's mercs. He gave you up, by the way."

"Lucky me. And I did find other jobs here and there, mostly legal stuff. But even there I didn't make much money."

"Maybe you need to brush up your medical skills, learn what you need. Mercs and criminals are always looking to get patched up. Good doctors can dictate their price."

Her eyes lit up, then she sighed. "I doubt I can get into a school at this point; my file will have been spread everywhere."

"So?" What he was getting was mostly complete, but the more she spoke, the more things aligned. "Mercs don't care about your credentials, just the results, but if you want to go into a proper school, get a new ID, you have to know criminals who can do that."

"And do you have any idea how much *they* charge?"

Alex had to give her that. He didn't; he handled his own ID creation. Maybe he could give her a new one, as a way of soothing things? He'd have to see what he had the time to do once things quieted down.

He activated the matrix and the implant's information became legible.

Mary stiffened. "How?"

"I'm a coercionist, Mary."

"But I created the encryption."

"No, you gave it to the matrix encryption program. And as you spoke, your brain interacted with the implant, and by matching words to what triggered, I reconstructed the key."

"You bastard, that's why you kept me talking."

"I have a job to do. Now give me the virus, and we'll be done."

"No."

But of course she was thinking about not thinking about it, so he could see where it was stored.

"Damn it, disconnect already."

"You can't. I'm not an amateur."

"This isn't fair."

She had been thorough. He found five redundancies, hidden in various parts of her implant. She wasn't a coercionist, but she'd at least bothered to study how the implant worked and made use of what it could do to its fullest.

He disconnected.

"You get to live, Mary. You get a chance at rebuilding your life. If you don't piss off Tristan."

"Sure, that's easy for you to say. You have no idea what's going to happen to me. For all I know once I've done what he wants me to do with Baran, he's going to track me down and force me to be his plaything."

Alex chuckled as he stood. "That is one thing you don't have to worry about." He stretched. "You aren't his type."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You're a woman." He avoided thinking about the fact that she could be the job, and Tristan could have to seduce her to get something. But what he was certain of was that she would never be his plaything.

"Oh." She sounded relieved, then stiffened. "Are you saying he rapes you?"

"It isn't rape," he replied sharply.

She was up, in his face. "Are you kidding me? Will you wake up? There's no way you can want—"

He had her against the wall, hand around her throat. "I told you to keep that judgmental shit to yourself. What me and Tristan have is between us, so don't try to butt in."

"But he isn't even human."

"You think I want you?" Alex replied in disgust. "That I want that? All smooth skin and sweat? I don't expect you to understand this, but I'm going to explain it once. You ever bring it up again and you won't have to worry about Tristan killing you, clear?"

She swallowed and nodded.

"I picked him. I could have left. He told me to leave. He told me exactly what would happen. I chose to stay."

"But why?"

Alex released her. "Because he's better than the alternative."

"Which is?"

Alex snorted. "Figure out that part by yourself."

He left the medical bay without telling her to follow. If he had to come back for her, he needed to cool down first. He heard her running after him, so he headed for the pod.

Tristan wasn't there. More of the panels had been removed, wiring cut and ripped out. He hoped Tristan had left them something functioning.

"There you are," Tristan growled, dragging Baran by the collar. *At least it wasn't the leg this time*, Alex thought. "I was starting to think you two had decided to leave together." The phrase could have been in jest. The kind of stab Tristan had made occasionally to force Alex to state he wasn't leaving, but this time it was cold, no jest at all, but Alex was sure he'd imagined it—a hint of hope.

"I'm not leaving," Alex said. Like he had the previous times.

Tristan shrugged as he passed Alex. He clamped the manacle around Baran's ankle and welded it shut. The chain looked to have enough play to reach everywhere except the controls at the front of the pod.

"You," Tristan told Mary, "inside." When she didn't move, he grabbed her and yanked her in as he left it. "Your job's to make sure he heals and lives until you're picked up. The pod doesn't have cryo, so settle in for a long trip. Don't bother playing with the controls. The course is set, and I've removed all access to the navigation system."

"What happens to me afterward?" she asked, voice shaking.

"I don't care." Tristan closed the door.

Mary ran to it, said things Alex couldn't hear. She looked at him, pleaded. He didn't react.

Tristan worked on the controls, and Alex watched. He didn't mention he could tell the ship to launch the pod. In his current state, Tristan might decide to hurt him. Pain was never something Alex went looking for.

The floor vibrated as the pod's engine kicked in, covering the space between the windows with flames. When they finally cleared, the pod was a dot in the distance.

Tristan straightened, clenched a fist, and Alex readied himself for whatever was coming.

