

Chapter 18

The fear in Bart's eyes has me turning before his yell vocalizes.

The flash of the gunshot nearly hides Gregory's features, then the impact on my shoulder sends me to my back. I grunt as I hit the floor and the box containing pain cracks and shakes, but I hold it close; the effort leaves me panting.

I open my eyes to Gregory standing over me, but his Chiappa Rhino revolver is aimed at Bart.

"I wouldn't move, if I were you," he warns him.

"Don't hurt—" I run out of breath before I can get my own warning out.

"Don't hurt you?" Gregory sneers. "You should have thought of that before you took what was mine." He slams the heel of his boot on the injured shoulder and the box explodes.

I scream.

He grinds his foot down.

I can't think, I can't plan, I can only scream.

The pain remains past the pressure vanishing, and through it, I fight to regain control of my voice. I finally silence the scream.

“It’s about fucking time,” he says. “I was starting to think you didn’t feel pain or something.”

I fix my eyes on him but don’t respond. All my energy goes to rebuilding the box and putting the pain back where it belongs.

“Since I’ve demonstrated I can hurt you,” Gregory says in a magnanimous tone, “care to plead again?”

“Don’t hurt him,” I say through clenched teeth to ensure none of the pain slips through.

He looks in Bart’s direction in surprise, as I expect, but I can’t get my body to respond and take advantage of his attention not being on me. There’s still too much of the pain outside the box.

“Him?” he looks at me again. “I’m about to kill you, and you’re worried about me hurting him?” the disbelief is in his voice and his eyes. “What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“I’ve been threatened too often to care anymore.” The pain is nearly all back in its box. My voice is surer. “I was fourteen when my father promised to kill me. You’re making the same mistake he did.”

“And what is that?”

“Not actually doing it.” I slam my foot on his leg, but he’s already out of the way. There’s more pain than I thought left. It’s preventing my body from acting as I tell it. My leg hits the floor and I’m panting again.

He grins, looking thoughtful. “You know, since you just admitted that hurting him is going to hurt you, I think that’s what I’m going to do. He looks like a screamer.”

“Not for you,” Bart replies with a snort. A glance in his direction tells me he’s using Gregory’s lack of action to look for something to do, but he needs to account for the revolver aimed at him as part of any plan.”

“I know hundreds of ways to hurt someone. I’m sure one of them will make you scream.”

“I scream for just one man,” Bart tells him. “But if you ask nicely enough, I might grunt for you.”

Bart’s box shines and I smile. Its light pushing some of the pain into its proper place.

Gregory is not amused.

In my peripheral vision, the top of a door opens silently. It’s at the back of the store. The possibilities as to who it is are limited.

“You’re a thug, Gregory,” I say, to bring his attention back to me. “You have no idea how to inflict pain. You think a foot on an injured shoulder is the pinnacle of it.” I have to catch my breath. “In the right hands, it’s an art form. I’ll show—” I’m out of breath.

He stares at me, glances at Bart, and his eyes are on me again. The disbelief is tainted with worry and fear. I’d smile, but I can hardly breathe.

“We’re done here. The kid’s in here somewhere and with you dead, it doesn’t matter how long it takes me to find him. You can die knowing you didn’t save him.”

He moves the revolver off Bart to point it at my head.

Bart takes a step in our direction, but the scream stops him.

It’s the sound a man makes when he believes he’s about to lose his one chance at life. I have caused many men to make that sound. I made it, once. On that day the police officers forced me into a police car and kept me from going to Justin as strangers took him away.

Emil is the one screaming as he barrels toward Gregory, a shovel held over his head.

Gregory turns, and I kick his legs. There's no strength to it, but this time I connect and it's enough to unbalance the old man. The revolver fires and the flash keeps me from seeing the impact, but I hear the shovel connect. When I see again, there's another impact against Gregory's shoulder as he staggers back and out of my sight.

Emil continues to scream, staying with him, the sounds of the shovel impacting Gregory come again, and again. Something metal and heavy falls to the floor. Gregory's revolver.

Bart is next to me, worry on his face. "How are you? Fuck, that looks bad. Is your shoulder broken?" He touches my shoulder gingerly and pushes a hand under it. The box flares, but no pain escapes it.

A body drops to the floor wetly. The shovel impacts don't stop.

"Bart."

He bits his lower lips as he studies the injury. "I don't feel an exit wound. Is that a good thing?"

"Bart."

"Fuck, the bullet's still in there. That can't be good."

"Alex." There's a wetness to the sound of the impacts now.

"My name's Bart!" he glares at me. "Can't you fucking remember that?"

"You have to stop Emil."

He looks toward the sound. "He's fine. I don't think that guy's going to do anything to him ever again."

I grab his arm with my working hand. I have to reach over my chest to do that and it's nearly

enough to send the pain spilling out. “You must stop him. If he keeps going, he’s going to be beyond saving.”

“I don’t think—”

“I have to save him!” I can barely breathe, but I will not let that stop me. “I have explained what he means. I can’t move, so you have to save him for me. Please.” Maybe it’s that I am pleading, or it’s the word itself that makes Bart look at me in concern, but then he’s gone.

I close my eyes. I reorder the boxes, register the extent of my injuries. I’m in bad shape. Bart is right, the bullet is still in my shoulder.

The sound stops.

Steps approach. I force my eyes open and when Emil comes into view, there is fierceness in his eyes, instead of the vacancy I expect. It is the look of a man who had conquered an enemy or a fear. Emil’s box glows, and among the boxes that respond to it is one that I have used when manipulating others, but I can’t recall it ever triggering outside of my control.

Shame.

Shame at not trusting Emil to be strong enough to overcome what was done to him instead of breaking under it.

The fierceness vanishes as he looks at me, replaced by fear.

“I’m okay,” I tell him and reach up.

He takes my hand and drops to his knees. “You can’t die.”

He sounds like a broken man again. He has been counting on me to save him, and I no longer look like the monster who will obliterate all who threaten him.

“I’m not dying. Not today, anyway.” I look at Bart, who is looking down at us. “I need you to take the bullet out. Emil, get the first aid kits. There’s a display of them at the back.”

“A tool bag too,” Bart calls after him. “If there isn’t one, I need pliers. Needle-nose is the best.” He kneels next to me. “And a Zippo from that display over there.”

“There’s a multi-tool by the cash register,” I add as loud as I can, and Bart shakes his head.

“Is there anything you don’t know where it is?”

“The coffee machine.”

“Back office,” he replies, then smiles. “You knew that.”

“I don’t bother remembering something I’ll never have a need for.”

His expression grows dark as he studies the injury. “This is going to hurt. I’m going to have to dig in there, and this was not covered in any of the first aid classes I took.”

“Didn’t your guardians teach you?”

“Nothing like this.” He looks at me, stunned. I see the questions he wants to ask.

Like how I’d know they could teach him how to care for gun injuries. The nod is understanding. He knows I have access to a hacker and as much as he doesn’t respect them, he also knows I wouldn’t employ someone who isn’t competent.

“Grandma taught me how to stop most wounds from bleeding. Gramps how to deal with any kind of broken bones. Then never expected I’d get into firefights.”

“Don’t they know what you do?”

He goes back to studying my injury instead of answering.

“Bart?” I press.

“They think I’m a good man.” There is shame in his tone. “She knows I take down abusers and perverts who think they’re above the law, but she thinks I do it because it’s the right thing to do. She also thinks I do it with my hacking exclusively. Neither of them understands that I’m broken, that there’s something wrong inside me. She doesn’t know I do it to feed the festering need inside me to see people hurt. To be the one who makes them suffer the way I—”

“Those people deserve to suffer,” I tell him.

“It’s why I go after them, instead of whoever pisses me off that day. I let her believe I do it out of justice, from the safety of a computer.” He looks at me. “I’d like to keep it that way.”

I nod. His box glowing in response to having been given information Bart considers important. At being trusted with it.

Emil returns and Bart takes the disinfectant from a first aid kit, then hesitates.

“Just pour it in. Don’t worry about my pain. It’s back where it belongs.”

The look that crosses his eye is one questioning my sanity, but he empties the bottle on my wound. The box flairs, but holds. This is nothing compared to other pains I’ve endured. The box is now stronger for having shattered.

He has Emil heat the pliers as he wipes the excess. Then he wipes the soot off them and plunges them into the injury. The box cracks, and I question my ability to keep it from shattering. Then Emil’s hand is in mine and his box glows and that light seals the cracks, lessens the effort needed to hold the box whole.

Bart curses and something clatters to the floor. “Clotting powder! It’s that gray bag. Put it in now. I think I nicked something.

There is a flurry of activity over me. The box flashes bright with pressure and everything goes black.

A slap brings me back.

“Don’t you die on us,” Bart says.

“Not part of the plan,” I reply.

“I thought you had for a moment.”

“Exhaustion,” I tell him. “Blood loss. How are your injuries?”

“Bandaged and clotted.”

“Good. We need to leave.” I offer him my hand. “Emil will have to drive.”

“I’ll do the driving,” Bart counters in a tone that leaves me thinking he noticed something I didn’t. He takes it and helps me to my feet.

“Are you in a condition to drive?”

“Coffee can let me do anything.” He smiles at me. “And I need to replenish my fluids, as do you.”

“There is water in the car.”

“Emil, do me a favor and fill as many of my travel mugs from the coffee machine in the back while I secure Tristan in the car.”

Emil looks to me and Bart sighs.

I nod. Now is not the time to argue over his coffee addiction.

The trek to the Chevelle is slow, and once there he lowers the passenger seat’s back and lies me on it. Then he hands me a bottle of water.



I wake to the clattering of the mugs in the crate as Emil puts that in the backseat. Bart joins us a few minutes later.

“I’ve made sure no one can talk,” he says, motioning for Emil to get in. “There’s nothing I can do about the blood we left behind, other than burning the place down, but after the destruction that’s already happened, that feels like going too far.”

“Asyr can erase any evidence from the police’s system.” Something occurs to me as Bart is about to protest. “Did you lock the front door?”

He stares at me. “The door is about the only thing still standing of the front. I don’t think locking it will make a difference.”

“I told William I’d lock up once we were done.”

That look questioning my sanity flutters back, but he heads for the building. Then he’s back. “It’s done. I even threw the key inside, for all the good that’ll do.” He has us on the road and is drinking from one of his mugs already.

I turn my phone on and enter a number.

“Hello Tristan,” She answers, her voice syrupy. “I heard you got yourself into a spot of trouble.”

“Cornelius. I’m about two hours away. I’d appreciate it if you were at my house when I arrive. I’m going to need you to patch me up.”

“What do you have?” she asks excitedly.

“Broken leg, in multiple places. A broken arm. A gunshot injury at the shoulder. The bullet has been removed. There might be some hairline fracture of the spatula, but it isn’t broken. I have lacerations, but nothing feels like an internal injury. Bart has bruises and lacerations. His right arm is

giving him problems, but it's mobile, so it isn't broken." Emil's injuries are not the kind a doctor like Cornelius can look after.

"I'll have everything ready," she says, far too eagerly. "I'll bring my painkillers, my anesthetics, and—"

"I'll provide everything you'll need. You know I have supplies for situations like this."

"Tristan, the stuff I make is much better than whatever you got from the medical suppliers."

"And if I trusted you, I'd let you use them on me. But you still want me dead, remember?"

"I don't actively do, and you know that. You just need to pay for refusing my advances."

"And you'll get other chances, just not this one. I'm in no mood for games."

"Fine," she replies, the disappointment loud. "Two hours. I'll be there. Without anything of mine." She disconnects.

"You're going to trust her to treat you even though she wants you dead?" Bart asks.

"Who wants you dead?" Emil demands, his voice a mix of fear and anger.

"It's more of a game than anything else at this point," I reassure him. "And no, I don't trust her. It's why I'm going to be conscious the entire time. She knows I'll have her writing in pain, no matter the state I'm in, if she tries anything."

"Wouldn't it be simpler to go to another doctor?" Bart asks, handing the empty mug to Emil and motioning for another. "You know, one who doesn't hate you?"

"There are no doctors I trust more than Cornelius."

Again with the look questioning my sanity.

"I know her," I explain. "I know how she thinks and what to expect. I can plan accordingly and

I have taught her what happens if she crosses me. Anyone else is an unknown I can't plan against. And I am not in a condition to spend the time learning all I need about some doctor, so I will be able to ensure they don't get it in their head to try something stupid that will complicate matters." I close my eyes.

"And there are no doctors in the state better than she is."

"Well," Emil says as unconsciousness begins claiming me. "If she tries anything, I'm going to kill her."

There is no hesitation in his voice, no doubt. The glow from his box accompanies me into sleep.

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