

Chapter 05

“I need you to explain to me why you don’t have a kitchen,” I tell the naked hunk on his back on the bench as he lifts weights over himself.

“There is a kitchen,” he replies without altering his motion, up and down, slow, methodical. The bar never comes to rest on his chest and his arms never extend enough to lock. I don’t know if there is a perfect way to lift weights, but if there is, I’m looking at it.

No, I’m not just looking at the gorgeous cock.

“That’s an empty room. A kitchen will have a fridge, a stove, and an oven. The pantries will serve as more than storage for boxes of whatever this is.”

“Pemmican.”

He doesn’t even look at the wrapped bar I’m holding. That, more than the fact the boxes were identically nondescript, tells me they all contain the same thing.

“Whatever that is,” I reply.

“It’s food.”

Okay, I’ve seen him eat it one last weekend. That doesn’t mean it’s food. A bar nine-inch long, three wide, and one thick of something packed tightly enough it feels like I could hammer a nail in with it, can’t be food.

“Are you actually expecting me to eat that?”

“No.”

“So, you have an alternative?”

“No.” The barbell is deposited on the holders. No clanging, no dropping. I can’t even imagine the weights on it, and his shoulder has to be hurting from last weekend, but he doesn’t look like he felt it.

“What if I wanted to cook you breakfast?”

“There’s no need to cook pemmican.”

“I mean, make you a proper breakfast. I’m not sure how you were raised, but I was taught that if you spend the night at someone’s place, you make them breakfast the next morning.” Well, Grams mentioned it one time, as she was reminiscing about her and Gramp’s courtship. I figure that if Gramps cooking for her had been good, me cooking for Tristan was too.

“I was raised to survive by any means necessary. Social niceties were not included in those lessons.”

I almost ask.

I almost ask why a man would kidnap him and his brother. But it was too hard finding that information for me to believe he wants it known.

“You’re telling me you eat this all the time? Not just when you’re dealing with withdrawals and injuries that make it impossible for you to make food.”

“Yes.”

“I survive, Alex.—”

His mouth moves, but I don’t hear anything. “What did you call me?”

“Alex.”

“My name is Bart.”

“That’s your middle name. Bartholomew.”

“My name,” I repeat forcefully, “is Bart.”

He looks at me. His face betrays nothing of his thinking. Is he going to ask me to explain why? I never told him my full name, which means he looked it up. He researched me. If he’s even slightly aware of the significance of my last name. And the fact there are nearly no mentions left of me in relation to the Crimsons, he has to understand why I—

“Alright.” He stands and picks up hand weights.

I watch his back as he does curls. “That’s it?” does he know? Doesn’t he want to know?

“Yes.”

I have no idea what to do with that, so I switch to another important subject. “Tell me you have a coffee machine somewhere.”

He doesn’t answer.

“Please, tell me you have instant coffee.”

He doesn’t answer and my mouth goes dry. Are any of the mugs in the SUV filled? It’ll be cold,

but I can reheat—no microwave. Over a fire? Does he even have a fire pit?

“Oh, dear God, let there be coffee left in one of them.”

“There isn’t.”

My head snaps up. “How do you know that? Did you search my car? When?”

“While you were sleeping.”

“Bullshit, you fell asleep next to me. I would have woken up if you moved.”

“You aren’t that light of a sleeper.”

I want to argue. I am not a heavy sleeper. After what was done to me in my sleep, when Dear Old Dad dropped me off to that pimp, I wake up at the drop of a hat.

Which means he didn’t even make that kind of noise.

Fuck, I’m impressed.

“What the fuck am I supposed to do without coffee?”

“Eat. Drink water.” He puts the weights down and faces me. The only thing he wears is his gun harness, and on it are his desert eagle, holstered, a pouch in which he keeps his phone, another for his glasses—he needs them to read, and one in which he keeps a bottle of lube and condoms. Four extra clips for his gun. I study them so I won’t have to think of what he’s, unreasonably, demanding of me.

He raises an eyebrow and I look at the wrapped bar in my hand. There are no inscriptions on it, no list of ingredients. He expects me to eat this. To eat this while drinking water.

He is certifiably insane.

But if it’s eat that or go hungry... I’m not a fan of hunger. Pimps don’t really see a point in feeding you past the level where you won’t die of it.

I unwrap the bar and the... what the fuck is this? Is dark brown, feels dry, and smells... I have no idea what this smell is, which is something in its favor. I know what shit smells like, so even though it looks like that's been compressed into the bar, it isn't.

I take a small bite and gag before it even touches my tongue. I think I'm going to throw up. What is that texture? The taste isn't as gag-worthy as I expect, but the fruitiness is odd, along with the earthiness and whatever those other tastes are. I take the bottle of water Tristan hands me and drinks half of it before taking another small bite.

I follow him to the empty room, where he takes a bar out of the box I opened and eats it mechanically. Is that his secret; he has no taste buds?

He did say he liked how I tasted, so probably not.

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So. If nothing else, Pemican is filling and makes water bearable by the need to drink it if I want to avoid dehydrating all of a sudden. He ate three.

We are back in his workshop, where he opens a cabinet and takes to M-Tech out of it. He clips one to the side of his harness, then turns and hands me the other.

"Are you fucking insane?" I demand, stepping back. I don't hear the song, but I can imagine it, feel its call.

"I want to see how good you are."

"You know how good I am." I head for the door leading outside to get away from the temptation.

"Bart."

I ignore him.

“Bart, stop.” The tone isn’t that of an order, so I continue outside, raising my voice.

“I’m not touching one of those. You’ve already seen the results.”

“Bart, Stop!”

I freeze. I don’t even think, I just obey.

I close my eyes with dread as I hear the melody of the M-Tech sliding against leather as it leaves its sheath. It’s a song of promises, dark and bloody.

“No,” I state. To it or him, I don’t know.

He throws the knife.

Unlike what movies have you believing, a thrown knife doesn’t make a sound before the impact. Except for me. The music intensifies as it approaches.

I don’t move.

I don’t have to.

One of the things the song tells me is that it isn’t aimed at me. It slams into the tree a couple of paces before me. I open my eyes at the way it trembles, embedded two inches into the wood, adds vibrato.

Pick me up, it sings to me, remember the joy, the harmony.

“I am not touching it.” I can’t take my eyes off it.

“What if I order you?” he asks.

“Don’t,” I say and barely hear myself. “Please don’t. You have no idea what it wants me to do to you.”

“It’s a knife, Bart.” The tone is neutral, not the exasperation of the few others who said similar things. “It doesn’t want anything.”

I spin, anger rising, and I know I shouldn’t do this again. “Didn’t you see what I did in that storage place?” At least he isn’t a shrink determining if I need to be fitted for a straight jacket. “Didn’t you wonder how I could move like that? Avoid gunfire?” at least he saw me, so he doesn’t have the luxury of thinking I’m making that part up. “How the fuck do you think that’s possible?”

“Situational awareness,” he answers as if he’s thought about it for years. “You heard their steps, the rustle of their clothing. You noted the way the skin crinkles as they applied pressure on the triggers. The same way I do it.”

I let out a bark of laughter. To my ear, it’s mocking. He doesn’t react. “I wasn’t aware of anything except the symphony! It told me how to move, who to cut, throw a knife at, and where to reach for a replacement. If I listen to it, give completely into it, it will move me like a deadly dancer through all the danger until there is no one left alive.”

“There is no music, Bart. It’s a mental trick that makes it easier for you to process the information around you.”

“You’re wrong.” The song is still there, behind me, pulling at me. And I want to turn, step to it, free it from the tree. That’s what scares me. How badly I want for things to be as simple as when I drown in the music.

“We all have mental tricks that let us deal with situations, stay in control, process a slew of information, speed up your reaction to—”

“Shut up!” the song increases with my shout and I close my eyes. “You think I haven’t heard

any of that before? You're repeating almost word for word what the shrink told me after the racetrack." What Grams and Gramps also said, until, like the shrink, I gave them the answers they wanted to hear. "I had to agree with her if I didn't want to end up in a padded room, but I don't have to go along with your fantasy!"

I pant as I wait. I'm sweating in the dry heat. I want to run; away or to him, I have no idea.

"Explain it to me."

I search his eyes for anything pointing to him just humoring me. That shrink was lucky she'd made sure there was nothing sharp in her office, because when she asked me that, the first time I didn't agree with her reasoning, I saw the mockery in her eyes.

All I see in his is patience. I chose to believe that is how he feels.

"Grams's an expert with knives. She taught me everything she knew after they took me in. You can't understand how much I loved it. Not just learning from her, but the feel of the blade in my hand. The knowledge they would now defend me. That I would never be at someone else's mercy. Gramps helped too. He taught me how to use my body in a fight. But no matter how good I got with that, too, it never matched how special knives felt when they were in my hands. There was no symphony then, but I knew how special knives were. I'd already felt what they could do. In case you're wondering, since that wasn't in any file you found on me, most of the scars on my body weren't gained while fighting. The man Dear Old Dad handed me over to when I disappointed him once too often liked knives. He liked them almost as much as I do. It took three months for Gramp to find me. Also, before you ask, he's dead. I put a bullet between his eyes two years later. And yes, they are also where I learned to shoot."

There aren't any emotions in my voice or even in me, as I tell him the things that led to the

music. I cut them out of me when it comes to those events and cauterized the wounds.

“The first time I heard the music, it was while saving a girl from her father who was about to rape her along with some friends of his. She couldn’t be older than fourteen. There were more of them than I’d expected and if it wasn’t for the music, I’d have died there. That’s where I got that scar on my back. Most of them survived because I wouldn’t give myself fully to it. I was scared of the promises it made me, of the price it asked for them. I’m still terrified of them because each time I can’t stop myself and give in, it becomes that little more tempting to just hand myself over completely, to not come back when the song ends. I’m not a good man, but if I hand myself over, I don’t think I’ll even be human anymore.”

Tears streak my cheeks. Of course, he’d get me to cry. Who else by that cold bastard could make me? No, that’s the anger speaking. He runs hot, but he controls that heat perfectly.

“It isn’t the music that wants you to kill, Bart.”

Fuck, he doesn’t believe.

“Yes, it is.”

“You want to kill.”

“No,” I snap.

“You want to kill for what was done to you.”

“I don’t want to kill anyone!” how can he think that of me? “The song makes me do it.”

“You’re using it as a scapegoat, so you don’t have to take responsibility. But you can’t do that if you’re going to take control. You have to accept that you are the killer so that you can control the impulse. To put that on something else means you relinquish control. If you aren’t in control, you can’t

decide who needs to die. You just kill.”

“You don’t get it.” I thought if anyone would, it would be him.

“I think that I, better than anyone, do understand. What do you think I am, Bart? Why do you think I live out here where the only people around are no better than I am? I am a killer, just like you. I know what tempts me, and I keep away. I control my emotions because they are bombs waiting to explode and take out everything around me.”

“I’m not like you,” I say weakly. Why can’t he see that? What will it take for him to understand?

“Yes, Bart,” he replies gently. “You are.”

“I’m not!” the song crescendos with an answer and I move before I understand what I’ve agreed to. The M-Tech pulls out of the tree and I spin, releasing it. The music surges as understanding sinks in.

It happened. I gave in fully. The symphony has me and the triumph is loud as the knife flies true to its target. The one thing I found I wanted will be gone and it will be all I have left.

The music screeches to a stop as Tristan grabs the knife out of the air and brings his arm down next to him.

“How?” How is that possible? The music never failed before. It sang his death.

“It isn’t magic, Bart. It’s training, innate skill, and mental work. The music you hear isn’t something outside of you. It is you. You need to accept that, take it in and start using it, instead of letting it use you.”

That’s twice now that he disrupted the music. No one’s ever done that. “Can you teach me?”

Can he really control the music?

“I can’t teach you. All I can do is help you. You have to be the one to work out how you control it.” He offers me the knife. “But that starts with you taking up the knife and fighting me.”

I swallow as the song picks up, promises joy again. “I might kill you.”

“You won’t.”

“You don’t know that,” I snap. “You can’t know it. You have no idea how loud the music gets.”

“I do know it.”

I search his face for...something. “How?”

He smiles, and there is satisfaction there. “You don’t want me dead.”

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