

Chapter 06

Alex—Bart, he wants to be called Bart—opens his mouth, but before his snarky reply comes out, he looks to my right. I drop the knife and draw the desert eagle as I turn. It's aimed at the form stepping around the side of my house as she appears.

"Don't stop on my account," Cornelius says, ignoring the gun, "there's nothing hotter than two naked men trying to kill each other. She licks her lips.

"What are you doing here, Cornelius?"

She wears beige pants and a white shirt. One hand rests on the plain cane she uses because of the limp I gave her, the other raises a six-pack.

"I brought beer."

"What are you doing here?" I ask again, flicking the safety off the eagle. Bart walks into my view, at the edge on the right.

She sighs. "I just want to meet your... friend. Things were too hectic at this end last weekend."

She looks Bart up and down. “You’ve never brought someone home before, let alone have someone come over twice, or stay more than a few minutes.”

She never lies.

But she never says the whole truth either. She’s much like the Fae of old tales that way. But I’ve taken her measure before and she knows what I’m capable of. I don’t need iron to hurt her.

I holster my weapon and head for the house’s door. “Sit,” I order, pointing to the couch, then continue to my workshop. I take the phone and place it in the holster on my harness, add my glasses before taking two water bottles and returning.

Cornelius is in the chair perpendicular to the couch. Bart sits closest to her on the couch. She smiles as she sees me and offers a bottle to Bart.

“Homebrewed,” she says.

I put a water bottle in his hand as he reaches for it. “Never accept her offerings.”

“Why not?” Bart uncaps the bottle as if he never expected a different drink.

I sit on the other end of the couch. Bart slides over before I’m settled in. I have an arm over his shoulder as he leans against me. Boxes vibrate quietly as warmth spread through me.

Cornelius’s eyes tighten almost imperceptibly as the unsaid message and warning sinks in.

“I’ve never put anything in any of the other beers,” she pouts, twisting the cap of her bottle.

“What are you talking about?” Bart asks cautiously.

She sighs. “I tried to poison him.”

“You *did* poison me,” I correct. “You *tried* to kill me.”

“You should have died,” she replies through clenched teeth. “I had your body mass down to the

gram. It's that damned black constitution of yours."

Bart stiffens, but I keep him in place. I raise an eyebrow at her. That's new. She never mentioned why she thought I'd survive. That first meeting ended with me shattering her leg in so many places, and the subject was not brought up during the others.

"It's a scientific fact that black men have better constitutions than white ones," she elaborates. "It's all that crap you had to endure while in slavery. We breed a stronger, tougher human being." She sips her beer. "I should have remembered that."

Genetics isn't something I have researched. It doesn't give me enough of an advantage over others. My resistance might have more to do with all the plants my father forced me to eat. Most of them made me deathly sick.

Bart relaxes fractionally. "You two are strangely comfortable with each other for her having tried to kill me."

She pants her left leg. "He taught me the error of my ways. Four breaks in the femur, five in the tibia, and three in the fibula. I'm lucky he didn't shatter the patella. Getting that replaced would have been a pain."

"It wasn't luck," I state.

"Now, when if the weather's humid, I can't put any weight on that leg."

Bart looks at me. I quiet the boxes' reaction as I look into those sea-blue eyes. "You should know this about me. I am vindictive."

She snorts. "That's nowhere near strong enough to describe what you are, Hun."

I shrug.

“Why did you try to kill him?” his tone is tinged with a protective edge anyone outside this community would misinterpret for curiosity.

“He didn’t accept the invitation to sleep with me.”

“He’s gay,” Bart states.

“I didn’t know that,” she protests. “Have you looked at him? Those arms, that chest, those legs, that cock. What did anyone expect when I saw him naked for the first time?”

“Don’t play the victim, Cornelius, it doesn’t suit you. I told you I was gay then.”

She shrugs.

“You tried to kill him because he turned you down?” Bart’s tone carries not only dismay but anger. I rub his chest to calm him. I shut down the boxes edging me to do more. She’s already picked up too much about how he fits into my life. I will not hand her ways to control me.

“I’ve never taken rejection well.” She sighs. “I might have anger issues.”

“That isn’t your problem,” I say, before taking a swig from my water bottle.

“Oh? And what is my problem, Mister isn’t a psychologist?”

“You are homicidal.”

“That’s a form of anger issues.” She drains her bottle and opens a second one.

“You don’t wait to be angry to kill.”

“I haven’t killed anyone here.”

Bart stiffens despite her casual tone.

“Jacob told you what he’d do if you did, same as with me. He’s going to remove us if we cause trouble.”

“Try to, anyway.” She smiles. “He knows better than to try. After all, he didn’t do anything after I poisoned you.”

“I didn’t tell him what you did. Just like you said, a shelf fell on your legs. We both deal with problems ourselves.” I sip my water. “It’s more satisfying.”

She toasts me. “How about something more pleasant? Or at least something Bart can take part in. We’re making him uncomfortable with our talk of hurting each other.”

“This isn’t me looking uncomfortable.”

I will have to find out what that looks like.

She leans forward, and her voice is sultry. “How good is he? When he makes you scream, is it in ecstasy or pain?”

Bart’s skin heats up against me, and he slips out of my arm as he stands. “I need to take care of something.” He leaves the living room.

I now have an idea of what him being uncomfortable looks like, but I don’t study him. I am looking at Cornelius. She looks at him, her gaze predatory until he is out of the room. She licks her lips again.

“He is mine.”

Her smile is radiant. “Oh, I can tell. I never thought you could manage that.” She studies me. “Or is it just an act? Tell me. Do you love him?”

I control the boxes. I do not react to that word. Loves means pain. My father went to great lengths to teach me that. His love for me knew no bounds, and as a result, he nearly killed me multiple times.

That box was destroyed.

Alex's box glows, but I have too tight a control over the others to react to it.

“What I feel isn't relevant. Only that he's mine. You touch him, and I will make you feel pain like you've never felt.”

“Like you make him feel?” her smile doesn't waver.

“No. You won't enjoy what I do to you.”

“Is that what he is? A way for you to release your sadistic tendencies? You found yourself a masochist and don't want to share?”

“This isn't about what he is. It's about who you think you can hurt me through him.”

She takes a sip from her bottle. “And I can, can't I?”

She played me.

Boxes jockey for importance, pride at her skill, anger at her besting me. I silence them. I nod. She won. There is no shame in it. “If you plan on touching him, make sure I'm dead first.”

“Or you'll kill me?”

“No. You will live for a very long time, in excruciating pain.”

There is no shame in losing, but that doesn't mean I will let her enjoy her victory.

She doesn't reply.

It's the first time since the first time she visited my house that our battlefield has changed, but after so long, we prefer this fragile truce to an all-out war.

Bart returns wearing pants, held up with a belt made of rope, and holding two water bottles.

“Pants?” she asks, disappointed. “Is being naked suddenly uncomfortable?”

He leans into me again and relaxes once I have an arm over his shoulder.

“No, but I don’t show my excitement to strangers. Or anyone I don’t care about. Or plan on having sex with,” he adds.

“That is a shame. I’m curious as to how big you get. So, you enjoy pain?”

“No,” he answers casually. “I enjoy Tristan causing me pain.”

“Because he’s so talented.” She smiles. “You never know, there might be someone out there who is more talented.”

He shrugs. “If they aren’t him, they can’t be talented enough.”

His box’s glow brightens and I tighten my hold on him before I can stop myself. He’s giving her too much information. I silence it and the others that responded, nearly missing that mysterious new box among the others.

I watch her and consider my plans. If she thinks she had the upper hand, she will do something stupid I have to respond—

My phone rings and she closes her mouth. I’m looking at the display on the second ring. It’s too old to show a name, not that I keep any contacts information on it. I don’t need a name to know who is calling.

“Emil?” I ask before the third ring sounds. “What’s wrong?”

I head outside, ignoring Alex’s concerned question. I can’t have this conversation where Cornelius can hear. She already learned too much today.

“I’m sorry.” He snuffles. “I know I shouldn’t have kept your number, but it made me feel—” He cuts off as the phone is taken from him.

“So, you’re Tristan.” The man is older with a New England accent. It’s where I met Emil, so this can be about him, and not someone using him to find me. “I’ve been looking for you for a very long time.”

“What do you want?”

“To kill you. Why do you think I went through all this trouble? Invite you fishing?”

“If you have Emil, you know where to find me.”

“That I do. ‘I’ll give the kid credit. He held out longer than some full-grown ass men I’ve questioned over the years. He did tell me about that reservation you live on.”

“Then why hasn’t a sniper taken me out?”

“Because that isn’t how I work.” The snarl in his voice thickens his accent. I’ve heard it before, but I can’t place it. “I’m going to kill you with my bare hands.”

“Then why aren’t you here?”

The pause is long.

He may be trying to get me to fill it with more questions. This isn’t the first time he has threatened someone. He may be expecting me to follow a script. He may be used to how the others reacted and are unsure how to proceed now.

“I’m not there,” he answers, “because you’re going to come to me. I know little about you. Until the kid gave me a name, I didn’t even have that. All I had was a black asshole built like a brick shit-house. You have no idea how many of your people fit that description.”

“I won’t go to you,” I say before I can silence boxes.

“See, I think you will. It’s been how long since you saw the kid? And your number is still in his

phone. I'm thinking it's because he means something to you. Why else give him your number if not so he can call you when he needs you to protect him again?"

This silence this time is because he wants a reaction from me. He has made a series of wrong assumptions and threatened someone he believes that I care about. Because of this, he believes he knows how I will react, but I have the boxes under control this time. Even that unknown one.

"I guess the kid picked up the steel from you. Okay, here's what's going to happen. You're going to come find me. I don't care how long you take, and I promise you the kid isn't going to die until you do. He's too pretty for me to just kill him, anyway. So I'm going to enjoy his company while I wait for you, if you get what I mean."

"I do," I growl as boxes slip my control.

"Finally." The triumph is loud. "I was starting to think you didn't give a shit about him. I really didn't want to be wrong about this." He chuckles. "I'll be waiting, so please take your time." The call terminates.

I shake with the effort to bring the boxes under control. That man doesn't understand what Emil represents. The balm saving him puts over the hate festering inside me at my inability to keep my brother safe. This is like me failing again. Telling myself Emil brought this on himself doesn't quiet the boxes. I left him with a family who would care for him. He chose to travel the country, looking for the desperate to send my way. His own penance for what he believes is his fault.

When the boxes are sufficiently quiet, I can think again I place a call. "Asyr. I need the location of the phone that just called me. I need it now. Drain all the accounts you have access to if that's what it takes." I nearly disconnect but add. "Please."

I go inside. Bart is in my place, seeking comfort in the heat of the couch in my absence.

“Cornelius, leave.”

“We were just talking about life,” she says, “nothing—”

“Now!”

Bart is who jumps. He’s never seen my anger. Not the anger that kills. She has. She’s also a psychopath, and she’s learned that her acting doesn’t help against me.

“That must have been quite the phone call.” She stands. “It was a pleasure meeting you, Bart. I hope you drop by on place at some point so we can have dinner, the three of us.”

“I don’t think so,” is Bart’s flat reply, and she smiles.

“I like him,” she whispers as she walks by me. “If you don’t take good care of him, I will.” She is gone while I wrestle the boxes under control again.

“Is everything okay?” Bart stands before me, his expression concerned.

I go through the boxes, allow specific ones to vibrate, and use them for my response. “I’m sorry,” I sound saddened. “I should go home.” The smile I give him breaks. “I have to deal with this, and it’s going to take a while.”

“I don’t mind staying.” There is hope in his comment. “I can help.”

Not the reaction I need. I change which box vibrates. I take him by the shoulder, my expression a mix of stern and sad. “Bart, I don’t know how long it’s going to take. It’s more than six hours for you to get back to Phoenix and you have work tomorrow.” I kiss him lightly. “I’ll make this up to you next weekend.”

“Are you sure you want me to?” his disappointment is tempered by the knowledge of what I will

do.

I nod, my smile sad again.

He kisses me hard and boxes slip my control. I kiss him back, hand on his ass, inside his pants.

I grind against his hard cock.

I have trouble getting one specific box under control and as I result I pull on his pants until the seam strain. I want him under me; I want to take him. I have the time to indulge. It isn't like Emil is in danger of dying.

Another box's shine buries this one and I get my lust under control before I rip the pants off Alex—Bart.

I gently push Bart away. Emil will suffer if I don't reach him quickly. If Emil suffers, then... a box, far at the back of my mind, pulses and I have trouble breathing.

"It's that important?" Bart asks. This isn't an attempt to distract me from what I need to do, but he knows how I react to him, how badly he erodes my control."

My answer is more honest than I intend. "I wish it wasn't. I want to fuck you so badly it hurts, but—"

"Someone needs help, don't they?" he interrupts before I can reveal too much. "Are you sure I can't help? I can call in sick."

Why are you so helpful, Bart? Can't you worry about your life more? "You need to keep your routine. If you give them a reason to look into your life, they might find things that would hurt you."

He knows there is a level of subterfuge in what I am telling him. He can't work out why, but it hurts him that I am doing it. "I'll see you next Friday." His kiss is tender. "Be careful. I don't want to

lose you.”

The only box that slips my controls is that unknown one. “I always him.” I want to say something else. That box wants that before I silence it. But even if I hadn’t. I have no idea what it wanted me to say.

He collects his things. The remnant of his shirt, his jacket, socks, and shoes. I will get him clothing when I am done with this. It’s only fair I replace everything I destroy.

He looks at me before getting into the SUV. Worry, hope, and hurt. As soon as it’s out of sight, I head for the workshop.

Glasses and headset on, I bring up the dialect file I keep on the united states and go through those for New England. As it plays, I read Emil’s file and look for a detail that might tell me who the man is.

Emil’s mother was murdered by his father at the same time he tried to kill Emil. His reaction to an illegitimate son is as aberrant as that of the way my father treated me. I am aware of that, but the box that treatment created simmers and reminds me it is easy for fathers to turn on their children.

Thomas Masters is dead. I kill him. Jasmin Rithal has a father still alive, as well as two aunts, but they have no reason to want Emil hurt. As far as they know, he died in the same staged accident that took his mother. Master’s mother died when he was twenty-eight of natural causes, as far as the medical reports indicate. With Master involved, there is no way to be certain, but it holds no relevance to Emil. Master’s father killed himself when he was fourteen. Alcoholism. Unemployed, he let life break him and a gun barrel in the mouth finished the job.

No other relatives.

Then who is this older man with the Boston accent? Emil lived in Manchester until Masters showed up. He left New Hampshire before that. Master lived in Portland but traveled out of Maine. The only occasions I could confirm he went to Boston was to have sex with prostitutes. He couldn't tarnish his Conservative Christian image by being caught in a prostitute's bed in his city. Being single was borderline enough. The extra scandal would have cost him his following.

So who is this man and what is the link between him and Emil? There is one because that is the only time I have been in New England, returning from my exile north.

I receive an email from an anonymous account. Inside is Emil's location.

This was too quick.

Asyr's information mentions the phone is still on.

A box shiver and I question if they are in on it. I silence it. Asyr doesn't know what is happening. They do not care. Only that I pay them.

There is only one reason for the phone to be on.

The man wants me to find them.

I gather what I'll need, and put that in the Chevelle.

The boxes quiet as I work. There are no emotions, only expectations. When I find that man. I will make him regret messing with me or what is mine.

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