

Chapter 09

The locks lined up on the workbench are all rebuilt and latched. Like each one before them, they were easy to bypass. Even without the specialized pick the Locksmith gave me, the longest one took me to unlock is three minutes. Two of them claim to be military grade locks. Only one of them needed me to use Locksmith's tool.

Security, using mechanical locks, is only increased now, by adding more of them, and increasing the chances the person breaking in will be discovered before they are done. Anything large enough to house a mechanical lock that will stop anyone, but a master, will be large enough not to be practical for most people using them.

I take the harder of the two military grades and pick it again using my regular lock picks. I won't let the Locksmith's tool become a replacement for my own skills, only a help.

* * * * *

I have the time down to under three minutes using my picks when the knock at the house's door comes

"I've got it!" Emil yells as I look up to the screen, then frown at who I see there; she isn't who I expect. I check the magazine in the Desert Eagle and I head to the door. I put aside thoughts of what is delaying Bart. He should have been here in the night.

"Hello again," Cornelius greets Emil sweetly. He's too young to interest her, but she knows what he means to me, which means she might still want to use it. "You're looking good, is Tristan—"

I step into the living room, Eagle in hand. She smiles as she looks me over.

"Emil," I say.

"I know," he replies. "I'm not to let her touch me, I'm not to drink or eat anything she gives me. I'm not to go anywhere with her. If she tried to force me, I'm allowed to shoot her in the left knee."

She raises an eyebrow. "You are raising... your son interestingly."

"Emil knows who is and isn't a threat to him, and I aim to ensure he will handle them appropriately."

"Is there anyone here who likes you?" Emil asks.

"Being liked was never the point of living here."

Emil rolls his eyes.

"Why are you here?" I ask Cornelius.

"I came in to check in on you."

"I'm fine."

"Your injuries were extensive. Unless you've somehow gained a medical degree in these last months, I'm still the expert."

"You know I would have called you if I hadn't healed properly."

She snorts. "The way you don't seem to have any pain receptors, how are you even going to know?"

"I feel pain. I simply choose to be selective in how I react to it."

"Look. I promise not to fondle you as I look over your injuries since I'd rather you didn't—"

I find I'm smiling at the surprised expression as she sees Emil holding the APX Bart left him, and at the murderous expression on his face. He quiet his box before Cornelius looks at me again.

"I thought you had a boyfriend," she says. "One who doesn't seem as touchy about me joking about touching places I shouldn't."

"Exactly," Emil replies coldly.

She nods in understanding. "Where is Bart? I was hoping for a chance to observe the entire family unit."

"He hasn't arrived," I answer.

"Yet," Emil adds.

"That's interesting. He's usually here well before the sun's up."

"Are you spying on us?" Emil demands.

"It isn't spying when the SUV's headlight wake you," she replies. "And you do know what they like to get up two on his arrival, don't you? A woman my age, in a place like this." She smiles. "Well, I do have to get my thrills anyway I can."

Emil glances at me, concerned.

She's lying, but he isn't skilled at picking that up. She's good enough that looking for basic body language isn't enough, and it takes years to become proficient in understanding the subtle ones. Her age plays against what she claims, along with needing the cane to walk. I'd have heard her if she came near my house, even with Bart there to occupy me.

That is one level of invasion of my life she would not survive.

"I take it you aren't concerned he isn't here yet?" she asks, amused at Emil's confusion.

"If it was something I should be concerned about, he would have called to let me know."

She leans toward Emil, who takes a step back, using a hand to cover her lips from me, but barely lowers her voice. "Isn't it nice how well those two communicate?"

I narrow my eyes at her. Silencing boxes. She is trying to goad me, nothing more.

"Look," she says, straightening. "It's clear that if I try anything inappropriate, I have two of you to worry about now, so this is only going a proper examination. You're already naked, so it isn't like you have to do more than sit down and let me palpated the appropriate regions."

"I know that means basically groping him," Emil says.

She sighs. "Emil, it's only groping if it's one of those places. Medically, it's palpating. Unlike your father—"

"My dad."

"—I do feel pain, and I hate it. So I'm not going to give either of you a reason to hurt me. This is me being the good doctor I was trained to be and looking after a patient, no matter how he feels about it. You don't want him to die because something didn't heal properly and got infected now, do you?"

"I'm fine."

"Dad?" Emil asks, his tone uncertain, unable to keep the fear at bay.

I fix my gaze on a grinning Cornelius. "Remember that if you insist on playing dirty, I am better at it than you are." Her smile falls.

I sit on the couch and holster the Desert Eagle. Emil doesn't holster his APX and watches her attentively as Cornelius proceeds to palpate my body.

* * * * *

"He's not showing up, is he?" Emil's in the doorway to the workroom. There is disappointment in his voice. As conflicted as he is regarding how his presence impacts my and Bart's relationship, he cares about him, about his Pop.

"It isn't looking like it." I stand, cleaning the firearms from the display can wait until we've eaten.

"Aren't you even a little worried?"

It's the first weekend Bart hasn't spent here since that first one. Sleeping without him has been odd. "For as impulsive as he is, he understands how important our relationship is. He tracked me all the way to Portland for it. When he visits next weekend, he'll explain what prevented him from coming."

"Could he have been in an accident? You know how he drives."

"The number on his emergency contact is one I monitor. If he had been in an accident, they would have been called, and I would know." I place a hand on his shoulder and smile at him. I try to let it be natural, but I end up tapping the needed box so it will be reassuring. "He's fine. You'll see. Come on, let's eat." I take a pemmican bar from the cupboard and hand it to him, along with two bottles of water. I take three for me and one bottle, then we sit at the table.

The act carries a sense of waste with it. I can eat at my workbench, but Emil finds the ritual comforting. He told me of how meals were important to his mother. She'd cook them while listening to the radio and singing along. Then they'd sit, say grace, and eat.

I told him he could say grace, after he told me the story, but he shook his head.

"If there was a God," he answered, "my father wouldn't have killed my mother or tried to kill me. You wouldn't have had to come a monster."

I haven't told him my story. I don't plan on it. His story is horrible enough without having to compare it to

another's and have to decide who had it worse.

He's only through half of his bar by the time I'm done with mine. He's a slow eater and drinks a lot of water. I finish my bottle and stand. I tried to stay at the table until he was done, but I have too much to do. He hides his disappointment. A part of him still hopes we can recreate something of his childhood, something that will make everything he's had to endure worthwhile.

I can't give him that. I explained it to him. He said he understood, and I believe him. But the mind isn't a simply machine. And he doesn't yet have his own boxes to keep everything in its place, so he still wants things he can't have.

I go to the workout room and start my regiment. Some weights aren't back to where they need to be due to my injuries, but they are on track.

By the time I'm done with my first set, Emil joins me.

I can't give him the things from his past, but I can help him build new good memories to become those he will look back on when he is older. This will be one of them. The two of us, training as the music plays on his phone. Me helping him maximize his potential. Him helping me...

I do not know what these moments mean to me yet. But I know they will mean something. The way boxes pulse calmly, but in a unified sequence tells me this is something I am growing accustomed to.

That I am growing to enjoy it.