

The rack pulls out of the wall nearly halfway the width of the room, close to ten feet in length, and is filled with guns. Immediately something is off about them. I take one out, the size and weight of my Desert Eagle, and in many respects it could be one, but details are off.

The weight, for one, is slightly lighter. It also lacks any ornaments even a weapon like mine has. There is no thought in how attractive a weapon can be. This is a tool build purely to be practical. The grip of the nearly identical one next to it is slightly more comfortable.

And they lack a serial number.

It's like that for every weapon I look over. The AK-47 look alike has a more comfortable grip, the shape of the butt fits better against a shoulder. It's designed with thought of comfort of use, instead of ease of fabrication.

Even before I see the gun that doesn't look like anything I've seen before, I know this isn't someone's collected firearms.

These are the firearms someone made.

Considering the equipment in this garage, probably from scratch down to the smallest piece.

"Take what you need," Ralf says, stepping away from the unconscious Ryan. "Ammunition is on the bottom shelf, the caliber is marked on the boxes."

I holster the Desert Eagle lookalike and take a box of fifty caliber bullets. I'm reaching for a Nosler equivalent when I notice Ralf heading for the stairs.

"Where I you going?" I ask.

"To retrieve Ryan's lock box," is the reply.

"Stop," I order, but he doesn't obey. I quiet the boxes before my annoyance shows. Ralf works within set parameters and considering how he reacted to Emil, they are currently military. I need to work withing them

"It isn't tactical for you to separate from the group." He pauses and I head for him. I have mass and experience. Ryan is currently unconscious. If it comes to it, I'll subdue him.

"Ryan considers the box vital, It must be retrieved."

"We need to assume the military knows about it."

"That's irrelevant, Ryan needs to have it."

"Then I'll get it. The military is after you an Ryan, which makes me expandable."

"Tristan," Alex warns, but shuts up at my raised finger, but Ralf isn't noticing his objection.

"You and Ryan have to be protected," I continue, aiming to influence how he processes the information. "That is easier to do if you are together. If I escort you up and there's an attack we will both have to maneuver within confined spaces and we aren't used to each other's fighting."

Emil watches us. I suspect he's ready to order Ralf if needed, but regardless of how programmed he is to answer to authority, this will go better if he can come to the conclusion that keeps him safer on his own.

"The lock box is hidden within Ryan's box spring. It is twelve inches by nine and will weigh between nine and thirteen pounds. His room is the first door on th left past the

office.”

“Keep arming yourselves,” I instruct Alex and Emil and I run for the stairs. “As soon as I’m back we need to go.”

The office door is closed, and I expect locked, even if it’s only the two of them, and I doubt anyone is allowed to wander up here unescorted. The next door is open and the room is spartan. The window over the bed, which is made to military precision, is open, letting in a breeze. The only other things are a featureless dresser, and a set of hand weights. I get the sense Ryan’s physique is something he never stops working on.

I realize that, in my hurry to retrieve the box so we can leave, I forgot about basic procedures when the door creaks behind me. Before I can move I feel the barrel at the back of my head.

The window is how they entered. The outside wall is sheer, but even without equipment it simply means more work, not that it can’t be done. That I’m still alive is curious. The soldier I fought against to protect Ryan didn’t have any qualms about killing me.

“I never thought I’d run into you again.” The voice is male, barely a hint of surprise, and somehow familiar. I run through the people I’ve encountered before and quickly place it because of the similarities.

“What are you doing here?” the little I know is that he spent months, if not years, infiltrating a Mexican cartel for the sole purpose of getting an opportunity to kill its leader. That speaks to dedication to his task, training, and control.

“The work I’m tasked to do. I can ask you the same.”

“Fixing an error.”

The snort is short, but causes the pressure against my head to lighten.

I drop and turn, quelling the surprise at the lack of gunfire. His foot is up by the time mine passes where it was. Dark clothing with military pattern camouflage. I block the knee aimed for my face and he steps back, holstering his weapon.

He’s younger than I expect. Around Ryan’s age. Some Spanish in his feature, which would be what let him operate within the cartel. His movements are precise.

“You don’t want to be in the middle of this,” he tells me.

The radio is at his belt. His hand away from it. If he lets the rest of the unit know I am here, they will change their tactics, possibly—

Something breaks downstairs. By the sound, large and heavy. The roll door. Before I move to go help Alex and Emil, my opponent is in the doorway.

“I can’t let you interfere.”

I pull out my firearm, and lose it before it’s aimed at him. I don’t question how he can be this quick and attack as he tosses it aside. He blocks my punch, but the pain registers on his face. I block his attack, but when one slips by, it isn’t pain I feel, but the tingle that tells me he struck a nerve.

It wasn’t an accident.

A gunshot sounds, a voice I don’t recognize barks something that’s an order based on the tone.

He deflects my punches, manages to twist his arm out of the grab I go for. I dodge his, and he knows better than try grabbing me.

A box glows and I wonder if its my age that accounts for two opponent in as many days that seems to be at least as good as I am. I silence it. As hard as I train, there is always someone better. It's why I am always vigilant.

After the next exchange, he still stands between me and the door. The fighting downstairs no longer include gunshots, and I hold firm Alex and Emil's boxes. I can't let how I feel about them distract me at the moment.

I need to end this and go to help.

"Why are you after them?" I ask.

"Orders." He doesn't let his guard down.

Whose is irrelevant.

"Why send so many people to capture them?"

"I don't know why there's so many of them. They're that dangerous, I expect."

"You're here to help. You're here to make sure the mission succeeds."

His nod is barely noticeable.

Ryan and Ralf are dangerous enough to warrant a group of this side, but does that justify the action? A box makes itself heard, and for a second I consider that it has to be. Why else would the military do this? But I know better than to believe everything they do is justified.

"They don't deserve this."

"That isn't my decision to make."

The only angle I have is based on no more than a minute of interaction in Mexico.

"So you're perfectly fine with being part to assaulting innocent men?"

"They aren't innocent." Except his eyes flick to the side, as if he can see out the door behind him.

"How do you know? You don't know why they sent so many people. Did you ask the what the mission was?"

"Ensure the targets are retrieved."

"Why? Because one's a genius level builder?"

He frowns. "It doesn't matter what—"

"Really? So you're okay with innocent people being detained, or worse, as much as you are killing cartel leaders?"

This time he looks over his shoulder and I fight the urge to take advantage. With his reflexes I might not succeed and it would undermine what I'm attempting. I don't need a win. I need a withdrawal.

He squares his shoulders as he looks at me. "I have a mission to accomplish."

"Does that mission include dealing with me? Having you in this building?"

"The mission is to do what's needed to help it succeed."

"Do you agree with what they are doing?" The question is a risk.

"How I feel about it doesn't come into play." Not ideal as a response, but enough to proceed.

"Then could you be somewhere else, right now, and still be working toward helping the mission succeed?"

"You're asking me not to act on what I know to be the best course of action?"

I block the pained cry from downstairs. “Can you think of one nearly as good?”

I see the debate in his eyes. He prides himself on always doing the best he can and he knows his presence here can ensure Ralf and Ryan are captured. If he isn't going to do that, he needs to justify the reasoning to his superiors, if not himself.

He smiles slightly as he looks at me. “We didn't block the signals as quickly as we wanted. It's entirely possible one of them was able to call out for reinforcement. With everyone focused on the capture, it would allow new arrivals to surprise them. It could be advisable for me to ensure that doesn't happen.”

He isn't moving. So I wait.

“Why are you involved?” he asks.

He won't be satisfied with my previous answer. “I played a part in leading to their discovery. I won't let that stand.” He searches my face and finds determination, a hint of annoyance at myself, and resignation to take him on if he forces the issue.

“I'm not the only one who was lent to them for this mission.” He picks up my firearm and places it on the dresser as he heads to the window. “You won't be able to talk them out of stopping this.”

“Will you warn them about me?”

He smiles, hand on the windowsill. “How am I going to do that? I wasn't here to have met you, was I?” then he pulls himself out of it without touching the bed and drops.

I head to the bed and cut the box spring open. I don't have the time to search for how Ryan accesses the hiding place.

The lock box is banged up, speaking to many years of use. The lock is simple, and if not for the fighting I'd take the time to see what Ryan considers so important Ralf won't let it be left behind.

I'm out the door and down the stairs.

The fight is split into two groups. Alex and Ralf are surrounded, fighting around Ryan's unconscious form, closer to the destroyed roll doors, and holding their own. Emil is closer to me, back against the tow truck, also holding his own against three soldiers.

I silence the surprise that no one has pulled a knife and triggered Alex. The numbers are not in our favor and there is no way to know how many are on their way. I head for Emil as he reaches deep into a open compartment of the tow truck without looking.

I grab a soldier's head and break her neck, causing the other two to glance in my direction. In the distraction, Emil pulls a bar that's nearly as tall as he is from the compartment and hits one of the soldiers in the head. I punch the other hard enough he doesn't move when he falls back.

“Ralf, where are the key?” I yell, causing some of the soldiers to look in my direction. Something is thrown at me over them and I barely have to move to catch it. A set of four key. “Alex, You and Ralf take Ryan to the RV, me and Emil will take the tow truck.”

“You might have missed this,” Alex replies, “but we are kind of busy.”

“Is there a reason you haven't shot all of them?”

“Lost my gun.”

“There's a rack full,” I exclaim before I silence the box.

“I was looking for the best one, okay? I'm not like you, going for the biggest baddest weapon. And then these assholes barged in unannounced.”

I take out the Desert Eagle equivalent and the soldiers are scattering before I bother shooting. "There!"

Emil is already in the passenger seat.

I fire at anyone raising their heads as I get into the tow truck and two die. Ralf takes a weapon from a downed soldier and fires as he and Alex carry Ryan.

The second key fits the ignition, then I rev the engine and move between the soldiers and Alex.

Outside, no one's visible, and since no one is shooting out us, the entire force must have come inside. Whoever isn't on their way here will be blocking the four accesses to the town and patrolling in case Ryan and Ralf flee on foot.

"Where are we going?" Alex asks as Ralf carries Ryan inside the RV. "It's not like there's a lot of options."

"We're dealing with attackers who are now spread thin. They came in expecting a fight and flee, but not having to deal with us as well. Their reinforcements are hours away. We make it out of the town, and this is no different from when we have bounty hunters chasing us."

"Do we really want to add the military to the list of the people after us?"

"We're already committed to this course, Alex."

"I blame that son of yours," he replies getting into the RV.

"He is our son, Alex." As soon as the RV starts, I drive onto the road and toward Rombauer.