

[Chapter 11 will be modified to have Karl be the security guard when Alex is attacked. Thomas will prevent him from intervening, so it will still just be the two of them fighting, but he will be watching the fight]

The security guard, Karl, looks at me once the elevator doors close. His expression is guarded. He's evaluating me with new information he acquired since the last time he met me.

"Did you know Alex was special forces?" he finally asks.

"He isn't." With how his grandparents trained him, it's an easy assumption to make after watching him fight.

"I worked alongside some of them in Kuwait," Karl says. "And they fought a lot like he did."

"Alex never enlisted. You dated him. You have to know that."

Anger flash in his eyes that I know more than he does about him. Then, it's resignation. "How..."

I let him decide where he takes this. The boxes are calm, the one containing vindictiveness it louder, wanting me to do something about this man who thought he was good enough for Alex, but the misery he is causing himself held keep it controlled.

"How did you two meet?"

"By accident."

"And... you hit it off?"

"No. I thought he wasn't serious about what he did. We had a fight that first time. And the second. And the third."

"Then how..."

"He wouldn't let it go. Then he showed up when I was at my lowest and helped. I hadn't given him any reason to care, but he still did. I had to get to know him through that and discovered that for as different as we are. We're compatible in the best way." The smile is unbidden, as his box shivers the way he does when my teeth tighten on the skin of his neck.

"He chased you?" Karl asks in disbelief.

"Hounded me." The smile shifts to satisfaction as Karl finally understands that if Alex had been interested in him, there would have been nothing he could do to keep it from happening. And that correspondingly. If Alex didn't chase him, there was nothing Karl could do to make him interested.

"Did I ever have a chance?"

Or maybe he doesn't understand that.

I consider how to explain what he thought Alex wanted wasn't what Alex needed. That even Alex didn't entirely understand that himself. That Alex's desire to be hurt, to be reminded that life was finite, wasn't the entirety of what he needed. Karl would never have managed it, because, unlike me, he actually cares.

I leave it at, "No."

The pain is evident, then relief and some resignation.

"I guess..." He runs a hand over his face. "You're a lucky man."

"I am." The words are out at the spike of light from Alex's box. I consider if I need to

amend the statement when headlights shine in from the glass front. Faint enough, it's from the parking entrance, but... considering the time, and that there are four in succession.

"Are any of the offices open at night?" It's better to remove all doubts.

"No." Karl is up and moving around the desk.

"Stay here." I'm outside as the first black Navigator comes to a stop, with its side facing the building. I rush it, not bothering with shooting. The windows will be bulletproof, the body armored. How they know we're here passes my mind and is dismissed as irrelevant. Before the sun rises, there will be no organization left to take advantage of whatever mistake we made.

The passenger door opens as I reach it, and I slam into it, shattering the arm and leg that were out. The rear door slams shut before it's fully open and they exit from the other side as two more black Navigators stop on each side. I jump onto the hood and into the driver, who is drawing his gun. I elbow his Adam's apple as we hit the ground and I roll off, pivot and launch myself into the five trying to aim at me. Then scatter, then try to position themselves so a missed shot won't hit one of their associates. The fourth black Navigator positions itself in the other row, side facing us. They don't exit, but the two other Navigators empty.

I grab one's wrist and twist until they drop the gun, then keep him before me as I rush those from the Navigator to the right. Only one doesn't hesitate to draw, but he isn't fast enough. I send my shield into him, as I kick the knee of another.

Someone grabs my arm, and I pull them off balance. My other arm is caught, then I'm shoved against the side of the car.

"Get off him!" Karl yells, running out of the building. It isn't much of a distraction, but enough I knee the man before me in the balls. The flash from the box containing my pain tells me there was an attempt at protection, but the thug dropping to the ground confirms it wasn't enough. It knows better than to persist, so my leg is steady when I use that foot to push myself and those holding me away from the Navigator.

A turn and I send the man on my left into the one trying to aim at me. Both are on the ground.

"Are you fu—" The gunshot cuts Karl off. Concrete shatters. Karl isn't screaming. They didn't hit him. But there goes any hope I had of keeping the noise down to avoid disturbing Alex. I take the Desert Eagle out and—

"Hey, Tough Guy."

I turn, take the man holding Karl, the gun against his head, and shot the man holding him between the eyes. Karl's expression is terrified as he falls. I fire as I run for him, taking three down, grab his collar and pull him to the other side of the Navigator.

"Snap out of it, Jarhead!" Up and assess, down. Six are retreating to the fourth Navigator, two are heading to flank my right, one on the left. I test the passenger door. It's unlocked.

Crouching as I open it, I see the holster under the glove box and pull the M&P out. I confirm it's loaded and hand it to Karl.

"You steady?"

"What's going on?" His voice trembles, fear fills his eyes, but he takes the M&P, checks the magazine, and racks the slide.

“You stepped into a war.” Still crouched, I step away from the Navigator until I can see beyond its tail, and fire at the man trying to sneak closer. The next shot is too close to be from the attackers.

Karl has the gun pointed in the other direction, a man on the ground, unmoving. His hand is steady. “What’s the plan?”

“Staying alive,” I reply. “Killing them.”

“I can’t—”

“It’s war, Jarhead. You don’t kill them, they kill you.”

“You’re special forces, aren’t you?”

“Will that make you get off your ass and fight for your life?” I pop up and assess. They’re on the other side of the Navigator, which means the only one left here is the second sneak.

I hurry to the side, ignoring Karl’s protest. The second man isn’t behind the car, so he went for the other one. I rush the gap and gunshots hit the sides, and confirm they are armored, and Karl returns fire.

I look under the partially open passenger door to confirm he isn’t behind it. I look lower and see shoes at the back of the car. I step around the door, glancing in, and pause as I see a key in the ignition, instead of a keyless starter. I carefully get in, and the suspension is firm enough the Navigator doesn’t shift.

I make it to the driver’s seat to the sound of more gunshots impacting the car Karl hides behind. I buckle up, start it, and immediately back it. The bump confirms the man didn’t get out of the way. Then I accelerate toward the fourth Navigator as hard as it can.

The impact in its side explodes the airbag, but I keep my foot on the accelerator and force the other Navigator a hundred feet before its mass stops us.

Shots sound against the windshield and driver side windows, but they don’t even crack. One goes down, and I open the door as the other changes target, and shoot him before he realizes what I’ve done.

A head pokes over the roof of the other Navigator and there’s a hole in it a moment before my shot explodes it. Karl is a good shot.

I’m at the back to the sound of more shots.

“Reloading!” Karl yells, and I turn to cover my back. “Active!” he yells and I go back to making my way around the Navigator. The first glance shows doors not fully closed. He glance through the rear window doesn’t reveal anyone in.

I open the rear door and when there are no shots, I look in. An unconscious man slumped forward against his seatbelt. One shot and he isn’t a concern anymore.

The one in the passenger side isn’t moving, blood dripping down his head and against the window. A shot confirms he is no longer alive.

Crouched at the front, I survey the space. “All shooters down,” I call, and stand. I reach the first who is still alive, bleeding from a shoulder wound, and aim at his head.

“What are you doing?” Karl demands.

I fire. “Removing a threat. Can you erase the security tapes?” I move to the next one.

“You can’t—” his hand stops short of touching my arm. “You can’t just kill them in cold blood like this.”

I level my gaze on him. “If this isn’t something you can stand, go inside, erase the

tapes. I didn't want you involved in this."

"Afraid Alex's going to be pissed if I got hurt?"

"Your death isn't one I can conveniently hide," I reply and the flatness of my tone makes him step back, grip the M&P tighter. "You can help here, or go in and erase the tapes."

"Security is uploaded to the cloud. I can't do anything about it."

"Then, pile the confirmed dead into the front Navigator. I'll help you once I've made sure there are no threats left."

There are seven still alive as I check them. Four from Karl's shooting. Unless under immediate threat, he went for disabling shots. The other three were run over as I pushed the Navigator.

Once they are all dead, I help Karl.

I drive the packed Navigator three blocks away, and park it in an alley. I'll return once Eduardo Aleman has been dealt with to properly dispose of the bodies. Alex can find where the records of the fight are and erase them.

Back, I park the undamaged Navigator in a corner of the lot. It should go unnoticed until I have a place to store it. The one I drove into the other goes next to the one with the bodies. The one that was driven into comes to a shuddering stop halfway there, and the best I manage is to brute force it to the side of the road.

I don't have the needed tools to deal with the blood, but it will be dried by the time people arrive. On the black asphalt, it should go unnoticed. I'm almost done pilling up the spent cartridges when Alex exits the building.

"What happened to . . . What did I miss?"

"Did you get what we need?"

"We have four hours before the FBI goes to talk with Aleman. That's the most I was able to delay them through misfiled reclamation and the like. At this point, they just want to talk with him based on the claims he made, but if he has anything resembling the evidence he claims to that, and you seem certain he will, then the moment they are done questioning him, they will make him vanish into witness protection. So tell me you have a plan."

"Tell me you have two names and badge numbers we can use."

"Who do you take me for? I don't have two. I took twelve."

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