

The town feels dead.

I mean, it's like two in the morning, so they're just all asleep, but with knowing the military's around here somewhere, this normal lack of anyone out and about has an eerie feel to it. Tristan's driving like this is a normal day, well night, but I can tell how attentive he is.

"Shouldn't the army be somewhere?" Emil asks. He still has bed head. "Why weren't they there to keep us from entering the town?" He's looking around too, but not as attentively. But then again, Emil has this knack of looking like he's never entirely paying attention to what's going on around him.

"Asyr said special forces were being used," Tristan says, slowing as we approach the turn we need. "And this is American soil. I don't expect the operation has been sanctioned. They won't want to attract notice."

"You think it's why we're not seeing explosion there the garage is?" I ask. "We somehow beat them here?"

"Or they are lying in wait for us."

"They can't know we'd come back," Emil says. "Not with how much work it took me to change your mind."

"Not knowing doesn't mean they didn't prepare for the eventuality. It depends on when they were informed of the searches, how in depth their access to what happened here was, and how long they had to run facial searches on all social media attached to the residents. We were enough of an anomaly that we will show up on them."

I take the APX out from under the dash and clip it to my belt when the garage comes into view at the end of the street. All I see in the streetlight's glow is the empty gravel parking before it.

"How are we doing this? Ralf's inside, but the bar's closed, so there's no telling where Ryan is at this point."

"I know the route he runs and the speeds he runs at," Tristan answers. He drives on the gravel and parks halfway to the building. Plenty of room to turn us around on a moment's notice. "I'll find him, let him know what is going on, and we'll come back. You two get Ralf ready to leave. His tow truck should be powerful enough to let them escape."

"I'll knock him out if I—"

"Don't." Tristan's tone is severe. "I don't know how Ryan will react to any assault on Ralf, even a well-intentioned one. Use words."

"Got it, won't harm one hair on him."

Tristan kisses me hard before we part ways. "Be careful." The tone doesn't let me give him one of my usual flippant reply, then he's off.

Me and Emil head for the door next to the roll doors. No doorbell, so I bang on it like a maniac and Emil winces, looking around as if I'm announcing our arrival to whatever special-ops soldiers might be hiding out there. That isn't why I'm doing it. The bedroom is on the second floor, with the only access the stairwell in the middle of the building. That means unless I wake the dead, Ralf isn't—

The door opens, and a white mask on black face is looking at me without signs of tiredness.

“We need to go,” I tell him, and push my way into the garage as he processes the information.

“It’s the middle of the night,” he finally said, stepping away to let Emil in.

“And it’s time to go, get clothes, get whatever you need, but get it fast. You don’t —”

“It’s too early. I don’t wake up until six.”

“You’re up now. Get to it. There’s not time to waste.” I clap my hands to hurry him along, but all I get is a blank stare.

“Ralf,” Emil says, “what’s the process for emergencies?”

“Ryan handles the emergencies. I handle the garage.”

“What are you supposed to do if there’s an emergency and Ryan isn’t here?”

“Wait for him. Ryan is in charge of the emergencies.”

“We don’t have the time for this,” I snap. “Ryan is on his way, but you have to get things ready so that as soon as he and Tristan arrive, you can get in your truck and vamoose.”

Emil stares at me and mouths the question, ‘vamoose’?

What does he want from me? I don’t have time to get the nice words.

Unfortunately, that doesn’t get Ralf moving, so I do.

“Where are the keys to the truck?” I demand, heading for the workbench.

Ralf is there before me. “Don’t touch my tools.”

“I don’t want your tools. I want the keys to the truck so I can get it ready for you to get out of here as soon as you get off your ass and get your stuff.”

“I’m standing.”

“But you aren’t moving! Don’t you get it? The military is going to barge in any minute now. You have to go!”

His eyes go wide, and he looks around like they’re already here. “Where’s Ryan?”

“He’s on his—”

“He didn’t tell me what to do.” Ralf takes a step toward a cabinet, stops, turns to the stairs and steps in that direction, but then he turns for the door to the computer room, then he takes a step toward the tow truck, only he’s facing the workbench again. It’s like he’s trying to do a dozen things at the same time. All the time he’s muttering under his breath about orders and parameters and asking where Ryan is.

I give Emil a questioning look, in case he has some idea what’s going on, but he’s watching Ralf. I mean watching him with the kind of attention I’ve never seen him give anything other than the screen of his phone when I’m about to kick his ass on Castle Crash.

Yes, I am the one who wins those.

The door is kicked in. Me and Emil have our guns out and aimed at Tristan, carrying Ryan over his shoulder.

“We need to go,” he orders.

“I thought we weren’t supposed to hurt either of them,” I point out. I mean, if he’s going to knock Ryan out, I might as well—

“I didn’t do this. Ryan was fighting a unit when I reach him, had taken down seven of them when one manage to stun him and another knocked him out. I took care of the

remaining five, grabbed him and ran here. We need to leave.”

“Easier said than done.” I motion to the pacing Ralf. “He’s on the fritz. Keeps asking for Ryan.”

“Ralf,” Tristan calls. “I have Ryan. We need to leave.”

Ralf looks at him, and for a moment I think we are finally going, but no. The man starts hyperventilating.

“Ryan has to tell me what to do. He’s the only one who can. What are the parameters now? What do I do?”

And on and on he goes. I look at Tristan, who isn’t showing how he feels, as usual.

“Grab him,” he says. “We’ll have to throw them in the RV with us and deal with things once we’re away from here.”

Okay, finally bringing this to an end.

I grab Ralf’s arm, only for it to melt out of my grasp. I telling you; it turned liquid, that’s the only way I wasn’t able to hold on to it. His other hand, on the other hand, was definitely solid as the palm impacted my chest and sent me staggering back, struggling to breathe for a few seconds.

Tristan’s next to me. Ryan’s sprawled on the couch. Did he throw him there?

“I’m okay,” I wheeze. “I wasn’t expecting him to hit so hard. He doesn’t look that strong.”

“His clothing is purposely loose to cover up muscles.”

“I’ll keep that in mind when I go to grab him again.”

“Let me handle it. You go see to Ryan. We will have to move quickly once I’ve subdued him.”

I don’t obey.

I mean, can you blame me? After the way Ralf just hit me away, I wasn’t going to not watch my monster put the guy in his place.

Tristan grabs Ralf’s arm, and the guy contorts it until it slips out of his grasp. Tristan avoids the following palm hit even while staring at his empty hand. I’m staring too. Tristan’s strong. Trust me, I know how strong he is. When he grabs you, you are grabbed. You don’t—well, I certainly can’t get away from him then, even if I wanted to.

Tristan reaches for Ralf again, but this time, he’s out of the way. When Tristan manages to get a handful of the shirt, Ralf is out of it. He’s leaner than Ryan, but Tristan’s right. There are muscles there.

Man, he’s quick.

And he’s pissing off Tristan. That isn’t going to be good when he finally grabs him. Doesn’t he get we’re here to save their asses?

“That is enough!”

That it’s Emil who yelled is surprise enough, but the look on his face, his entire posture, leaves me speechless. He’s always on us about how he’s nineteen, not the sixteen he looks like. Well, he definitely doesn’t look sixteen right now.

“I said, enough, soldier!”

What the fuck?

Ralf stops moving, but Tristan steps away as Emil approaches. He gives me a perplex look that I will cherish for the rest of my life.

“What is the problem, soldier?” Emil demand in an authoritative tone I never thought he’d be capable of. And do remember he managed to talk Tristan into coming back here.

“You can’t, you don’t—” Ralf still sounds lost.

“Is that how you talk to a superior officer?” Emil snapped? “I am General Emil Crimson, you will respect me. Is that clear, soldier?”

“Yes, sir!” Ralf is rod straight.

“Good. Now, describe the situation to me.”

“Information has arrived that we are under threat, sir.”

“What are you going to do about it?”

“I don’t know, sir. I’m just a mechanic. Ryan didn’t establish parameters of action for this situation.”

Wait, what?

“I have your new parameters, soldier. Are you ready?”

“Yes, sir!”

“You are an elite US army Ranger soldier, understood?”

“Yes, sir!”

“Your mission is to extract all allied personnel from the assaulted territory.”

“What are the acceptable losses, sir?” Ralf demands.

“None, is that clear? No one gets left behind.”

“Yes, sir!”

“Move out!”

Instead of going for the truck or a door, he makes a beeline for Ryan. Not a ‘oh my god, how can my brother from another mother have gotten hurt.’ But like a soldier heading for a downed ally. Fast, but utterly controlled.

Tristan is the first to reach him as Ralf looks Ryan over with the kind of precision that makes me think he might be able to perform surgery if it came down to it. Or if Emil told him he was a world class surgeon.

We are so going to talk about what that was about once this is over.

“What is the enemy?” Ralf asks.

“Special forces,” Tristan answers. “An unknown number of units. Standard formation, if the one Ryan fought is all we have to go by.”

Ralf steps away from Ryan. “He has nothing life threatening.”

“He probably has a concussion,” Tristan said. “One of the soldier stuck him at the back of the head with the butt of a rifle hard enough to render him unconscious.”

Ralf considers something. “Ryan can take it. We need to arm ourselves.”

“We have weapons,” I say, “in the RV.”

“The distance may not be secure, and there aren’t enough of them there.”

“Oh, and you have more?” I ask, rolling my eyes as he heads to the cabinet that blocks the door to the computer room from view.

Tristan and Emil follow him, so I go along. I mean, sure, the cabinet can hold a decent number of them, but nowhere what we have hidden throughout the RV.

He grabs the handle, and when he pulls, instead of the doors opening, the cabinet

pulls out, and keeps pulling out, revealing the longest rack in existence.

I'm pretty sure I've only ever seen a longer one in one place.

"We're going to need guns," Emil says.

"Lots, and lots of guns," I finish. Then bump fists with him without looking.