

Free Fall-14

I've had better ideas.

A look over my shoulder as I'm running for my life confirms that. Then I'm looking ahead because that's where you want to look when there's so many trees in your way. I swear, it's like someone put them there purposely to make my life difficult.

I duck as gunfire restarts behind me, and bark explodes around me. In the next lull, I look over my shoulder at the mass of armed men chasing me, only this time I point my gun in their direction and fire back. I see one fall and keep firing blindly as I go back to looking ahead. Then my gun clicks empty.

Maybe, just maybe, setting my new camp at the top of that hill to look in on Fernan's villa wasn't the greatest idea. I thought I was well hidden, and I had great view of the sickeningly normal life of Juan, his wife, and their daughter.

From that vantage point, you wouldn't know the guy ran a drug cartel and human trafficking ring. Even the guards seemed to be careful not to be noticed. I have to wonder now, does his wife know the kind of man she married? Is all that protection something she thinks a fruit shipper needs? Or is he the kind of monster she wanted to spend her life with?

Shrapnel from the tree next to me to swerve as I pocket the empty magazine and put in a new one. It'd be faster to drop the empty as I grabbed another, but I can just hear Tristan going on about how inefficient it's then going to be to have to search for all of them so there is no evidence we were here.

Like the wreck of the coffee machine isn't going to be evidence enough.

For twenty-four hours, I watched the Fernan and they are so normal pretend life. Then, things got hectic at the Villa, with men pulling Juan away from his family and into the back for a heated discussion right under my gaze.

Too bad I can't read lips, or understand Spanish. I bet Tristan can do both.

My guess is that they either realized someone was missing, or found the body before the animals got to it. Next thing I know.

Fine, a couple of hours later, it was like I'd kicked an anthill. Juan's men were everywhere. I have no idea where he gets them from, but he's definitely paying bulk prices. They were at my camp before I even put the coffee maker away. It became the first casualty of the firefight, and believe you me, I made them pay for that crime.

When I almost gave into the music, I knew it was time to run, so I zipped up my jacket and did that.

Sounds like I put enough distance I can alter my strategy a little. I holster my gun and climb up the next tree large enough to take my weight.

See, while there are a lot of them, they're clustered. And the clusters are spread so they will eventually flank me if I keep going in a straight line. What that last glance showed me is that they are now far enough apart that if I'm quick, I can deal with this cluster right on my tail and—give me a minute.

Six men run under me without looking up. Dumbass.

I drop, have my gun in hand and I've shot three in the back—I am not a good man, okay?—one as he turns to face me, another as he fires and the last right after his shot grazes my side. Not a bad trade.

Or course, the gunfire told them where I am, so I start running again... the way I came from.

Then I make a turn and go up higher, give myself the advantage of elevation. That's a thing, right?

They're on me faster than I'd like, and when my gun runs empty again, I grab for—I search for what should be my last magazine. Have I gone through all of them already? I should have gone for the twenty-one bullet version, not that I think it would have made that much of a difference in the long run.

I'm going to have to lose them.

Hey, that's not an impossibility!

I holster the gun so I can focus on the uneven ground. I can outlast them. These last months with Tristan have done wonders for my stamina. No, not just the sex. Drub runners aren't big on getting in shape, right? They're all about enjoying their product had having a good time.

Right?

Okay, if this was an old-style TV show, when I go around that next boulder I'd find a hunting rifle someone left behind. Nope. Okay, the next one would have a box of ammo that would have fallen out of someone's pack. Damn it, doesn't anyone actually read the script?

I am so not looking forward to having to resort to yelling jokes at them. I don't know any Spanish ones. Or worse, make use of my backup plan.

Finally, the ground levels out, and I pour on the speed. I make it no more than five hundred steps before I skid to a stop. Definitely not the way I want to go.

I look down at the escarpment. At the trees way, way, way below me. I had no idea I was this high. The view takes my breath away; the fall will take a whole lot more from me. I turn and head back, if I make it before they reach that—

No such luck, of course.

Fuck, doesn't anyone up there like me?

I pull my gun at the lone man there and fire. It clicks empty.

Of course it does. That one's on me, though. I just forgot I was out of bullets. As I'm readying to throw myself to the side, I realize he hasn't fired at me. He smirks, yells something over his shoulder, then puts his gun away.

I am so learning Spanish after this.

Yes, there will be an after this.

More men appear at the edge of the plateau. I stop counting at twenty and I holster my gun too. It's not like it's doing me any good. When one of them raises his machine gun at me, number one lowers it and tells them something. They chuckle and, except for three, everyone puts their weapons away, too.

Number one order me in Spanish. The tone makes the intent clear, but I have no idea what he wants me to do. He looks at the others, asks a question and gets shakes of the head. And I realize what he has to have asked.

“Are you telling me not one of you speaks English?” It has to be a joke. I'm American. It's expected I only know one language. They're Mexican, they have to know three at least, right? Or is that the Canadians? “How do you expect me to know what you want me to do if you can't speak English?”

The man says something again to the men around him.

“How about this? Would you believe me if I said this is just some big misunderstanding? I mean, you work for a guy to traffics in people, and I really don't like it when young people are taken advantage of. Now, I can understand how you'd think that means that I'm here to—”

Six of the men step forward, pulling long knives.

“Can we not do that?” I ask with a sigh. They way they're holding them, there's a sense they feel I should be intimidated by them, but after Tristan, how can I be? It's not like any of them measure up to him. “Look, trust me. A knife fight is not what you want.”

The music tells me otherwise.

It had been a lot easier to ignore it when I was running for my life.

They take a step forward that might have been meant to be threatening.

I sigh. "Have it your way." I unzip the jacket, revealing the harness of knives under it, then let it fall to the ground. I so did not—

The music swells.

Who the fuck am I kidding. I grin. I so wanted this.

And so do they.

Two of them rush me, and the music wraps around me. It moves my hands, and I'm holding knives. It moves my legs, and I'm by the first man. He's cut from hip to shoulder before he understands what happens. The man grabs as me as he falls, pulling the song out of true enough, the second man nicks my arm. Then the song rights itself and my other knife is in his stomach and makes a long sideways cut.

The stench disrupts the song and I back away, trying not to retch. Fuck, stomach acid smells horrible. Why do I keep forgetting that? Intestines, each time I tell myself to go for that next time, and what do I do? Aim just a little too high.

I turn away as that man falls, and when the music returns, it's softer, anticipating. They stare at me in shock. They thought two of them would be enough. They thought they were in for a show of skin the gringo.

I grin. Only one person gets to skin this gringo, and he doesn't want me anymore, so you are fucking out of luck.

The music swells, telling me that in a second five of them will move, but only two of those now holding knives. The other three pull theirs out as they run at me, screaming. Do they think they can cause me not to hear the music? Do they think their screams will distract me from it?

How about I should you what the music can do?

I let go.

I let go of Bart Crimson. I let go of Tristan, and his belief the music is of my making, mine to control. I let go of what I want.

I let the music in.

There is enough of me there to feel the warmth of the cuts they give me. Some times the resistance as one of my knife digs in deep makes it to whatever's left of me. I am aware of moving back, the cacophony at my back warns of the fall there, but I'm not worried. I'm not there.

And the music isn't worried either. It simply is.

It surges and we move away from the escarpment. Men drop, are replaced, and the symphony continues. The music will never stop. The music is eternal.

Only, I realize as more of me returns to the fight; the music needs to move my body, and that isn't eternal. That's only human. A human that's been pushing this fight for long enough, my body's sluggish and the cuts sting. I retreat closer to the ever-increasing cacophony at my back.

And I realize one thing that never occurred to me before now.

The music can't make me win this fight.

As much as we both crave for this fight to go on for all of eternity, it will come to an end. And it will come to an end with my—

The thunder of a big ass gun chases the music away and I'm all that's there, panting, fighting to stay on my feet. It comes again, somewhere behind the mass of men. How the fuck are there still so many of them after all the ones the music killed?

They turn as it comes a third time. At the fourth, a head explodes and they scatter.

Tristan lets them.

I stared at him. He couldn't be here. That's impossible. I'm delusional, that's it. I'm lying in a pool of my blood, wanting him to be there. That might be why this is what comes out of my mouth.

"What the fuck are you doing here?"

Not my best opening line.

I realize he was walking, still it, toward me. “What did you think I would do when I found out you vanished?” He changes the Desert Eagle’s magazine before holstering it. “What are you doing?”

“What the fuck do you care?”

Oh, that was so not the right thing to say. Now, he’s pissed.

I step back. Yes, I’m scared. It doesn’t matter how angry I am at him. I’ve seen what he can do when angry and now that’s directed at me. And where the fuck is the music? I glance at my hands as I take another step back. Yes, I have a knife in each hand. Did he fucking scare the music away?

“What is that supposed to mean?” He demands.

“Don’t fucking play innocent! You—” the scream I let out as my next step back doesn’t find ground is worthy of the best girly scream award. But that gets interrupted by the realization I’m not falling to my death. Tristan’s got me by the collar.

“What is wrong with you?” he growls. “Are you looking to die?”

“Let go of me! I am so fucking fed up with your games!”

He opens his mouth, then looks around me. “Seriously?”

My affirmation dies on my lips as my dangling foot still doesn’t find anything solid to press against. If I tell him to let go, there is nothing there for me. And my anger reminds me there’s already nothing for me. He fucking chose Emil over me.

“Why are you hesitating?” I ask, ineffectively slapping a hand against his arm. “Don’t you have someone to go home to?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Emil! You fucking know that’s who I’m talking about! He’s the one you love. Not me!”

“Of course I love him—”

The words hit like a magnum caliber round through my heart. There really is nothing left. I thought... I thought that if I shoved this in his face, he’d contradict me. I didn’t want to be right.

“—he’s my son.”

What?

“That doesn’t mean I don’t love you, too.”