

Ryan glares at me.

The others are busy, and instead of joining Ralf in going over the vehicles for which one they will take, he planted himself before me, glaring. The only thing in his hands is the case I retrieved from his room.

That he hasn't attacked means he either hasn't worked out our actions have played a part in this situation—unlikely—or our intervention has earned us enough goodwill to allow for explanations.

I do not usually explain myself to others unless I will gain something in the process. Alex and Emil are the only exceptions. There is potential here for me to gain, but I am starting at a disadvantage.

“Care to explain why the three of you are back here? I didn't take you for the altruistic types.”

Emil's box shimmers and he frowns before I can silence it and remove the forming smile. Emil managed to slip under Ryan's attention while spending days in the garage.

“When we were informed the military was on its way to capture you and Ralf, Emil convinced us to turn around and help.”

“Why would your kid do that? And why would anyone who knew what was happening bother you with it?”

That is still something I am not satisfied with the answer, but Ryan doesn't need to know about Asyr's odd behavior, or their involvement.

“I paid a hacker to look into you and Ralf. Alex did his own investigations as well. When my hacker became aware their search had triggered sentry programs, they looked into that and traced them to the military. Then they learned about the units being dispatched to capture you and asked that we help you.”

“You said no.” The anger is controlled. He's waiting for all the information before acting. “You said your kid convinced you, not that hacker. I have trouble believing all it took was him telling you to turn around.”

“He pointed out how dangerous you are to have as an enemy. That once you survived this, it wouldn't be long before you and Ralf worked out how it had happened and our involvement in it.”

The quirk of the lips is pride. The frown is wondering how Emil could have picked up so much.

“I don't want you as an enemy.”

“Didn't think about that before getting that hacker of yours to get those people to notice you, did you?”

“You weren't significant then.”

His expression turns calculating. “When I got the drop on you. That's when I became a threat.”

I nod. “Ralf said it was their predecessors which made you, when you said it wasn't this military after you. What did he mean?”

More calculations, internal debates. “We called it the Farm. There were a bunch of us, all kids, and they experimented on us.” He touches the bleached side of his face. “This was a side effect of the chemical aspects of those experiments. We're all been marked this way. The point was to make us super soldiers.”

“It worked.”

I expect Ryan’s smile would scare most people.

“We use what they made us to escape and destroy them.”

“Which explains the predecessor comment.”

Ryan isn’t happy. “There shouldn’t have been anything left for a ‘successor’ to come along, but it’s the only way anyone would know to keep tabs on the kind of searches that could lead them back to me and Ralf.”

I ignore Alex excitedly poking his head out of a van, and he knows better than to interrupt.

“Since all information about your presence here is in these vans. When we destroy those we aren’t taking, this group will have nothing to continue their search for you.”

“Yeah. And so long as no one keeps doing searches on me and Ralf, while knowing where we are, we’ll be able to relocate and blend in again.”

“We will not go looking for you.”

Ryan nods, mollified, and I look at Alex.

“Can we keep it? Please? It’s got top of the line hardware, a weapons locker, bunks for five, a kitchenet and a coffee machine.” He beams. “It’s perfect!”

Ryan covers his smirk almost fast enough.

“We will discuss it once the situation is resolved.”

I expect that under the right conditions, Ralf can be just as demanding of their friendship. I silence the box before it can get the better of me and ask the question. Get confirmation of my theory for their friendship. Of everything I have seen of Ryan, he survived what was done to him with an ability to function within society. The extreme efficiency Ralf put in being the soldier Emil told him to be makes it questionable how well he can exist within society. How easy it is to give him parameters that allow for him to do something unexpected.

Alex puts his arms in mine. “Pretty please? I will earn it.”

“Remove the coffee machine and I will agree to it.”

This time, Ryan smirks openly at the horrified look Alex gives me.

Emil and Ralf join us.

“I’ve found a usable vehicle,” Ralf says, “until I am in a position to build something better.”

“Good,” Emil replies. “Then, you don’t have to lis—” Ryan’s hand is on Emil’s mouth. Ralf’s closed on Ryan’s wrist. Me and Alex have our weapons out and I am trying to understand what changed.

Ryan’s tone is even. “I’m not threatening him.” Emil relaxes and nods. Ralf lets go of Ryan’s wrist and Alex holsters his APX.

I do not.

“Ralf, I need you to—” the anger is quick and buried. When he fixes his gaze on Emil, his expression is neutral again. “We need to talk without Ralf here.”

Emil nods again, and Ryan removes his hand. “Ralf, it looks like that’s going to be ours. Give it a once over and give me a report on its suitability as a living environment.”

“Yes, sir.” He leaves without questioning why anyone wants to talk about him without him there.

I can see the potential in a soldier who obeys orders without questions.

Ryan steps back and raises his hands, looking at me. He demonstrated he can cross the distance before I can act, so it isn't the act of standing down he wants me to think it is, but it does bring us back to where we were, with me more aware of his capability. I holster my Desert Eagle equivalent.

"I was just going to tell him he didn't have to obey me anymore," Emil says, the volume low enough it ensure it won't carry.

"And you can't imagine the kind of trouble telling him that would have caused. You can't just set him loose like that. Without the right parameters, he doesn't stop, he doesn't care about consequences, all that matters is the task set before him. And if he gets to decide what that task is at all times? Don't be surprised if tomorrow there's a radioactive crater in the middle of Oklahoma because he wondered what was the most efficient way to split the atom." When he locks eyes on Emil, he doesn't hide the anger. "You have no idea how pissed I am that you somehow got him to accept your authority over mine, but you're stuck with it."

"He can't come with us," I state.

"Your kid should have thought about that before he made himself a general."

"If he hadn't," Alex replies, "your friend would have ended up in their hands. And with you unconscious at the time, I don't think getting him back would have been easy."

"That doesn't change the situation he created."

"I can't simply tell him to be a civilian, can I?" Emil's tone makes it clear he wants a confirmation, not if it's possible.

"Civilian isn't a set of parameters. A job is, but that means it's the only thing he's going to be, unless his mind drifts and he forgets for a while, which is long enough for him to do a lot of damage without intending to."

"Like offering to perform surgery?" Alex offers.

"He needs constant supervision, reminding of what he is. Not to build beyond what the customer asks for."

"But it's all within a military structure, right?" Emil asks. "That's why he accepted my authority as a general."

The "yes," is through ground teeth, then he breathes easier. "The entire structure we were going to work under was military, so that aspect underpinned nearly everything. It stuck more with some than others."

"Then I know how to do this," Emil says as Ralf exits the van.

"You will have an extra hundred and thirty-three square feet of space," he says once he is next to us. "The generator has a twenty-three-hour run time when fully fueled. The solar panels on the roof can recharge the batteries within four hours at sixty percent sunlight. You lose fifteen percent of the potential weapon storage, but gain a dedicated locker that can accommodate all your handguns as well and six of the nine rifles you have. I ___"

"When did you hide a ninth rifle?" Alex asks me, the tone accusatory. "Never mind that. Where the fuck did you fit an extra one?"

"—Rate the armor of the body to be eighty-three percent of the one I installed on the RV. Without opening the computers, I can't—"

“Don’t you even think of touching my rig,” Alex warns.

“You can stop, Ralf.”

Ralf stands at ease.

Emil rakes a slow breath. “Okay. While you were looking over the van, I gave Colonel Ryan Walker a mission. You will be working under him. Do you understand? Whatever order he gives is the same as if they came from me.”

“Yes, sir. I won’t disappoint you, sir.”

Emil smirks at Ryan’s raised eyebrow. “Is that satisfactory?”

“Yeah,” he doesn’t sound pleased. “That should work.”

I wish Emil had added a set of conditions that would ensure Ryan didn’t remove him to be the only one with control over Ralf. I lock eyes with the man. Which means I need to impart that any idea of attacking my son is suicide.

“Well, before you two explode from proving which one’s got the biggest set of ball,” Alex says. “And it’s my man, so you can stop trying. What’s the plan for the two of you? We are going to find a quiet place so I can put my wonderful new rig through its paces. Then, it’s the wide new yonder for us.”

For as blunt as his attempt at diffusing the situation is, it works. Ryan breaks the stare.

“The general’s mission requires that we go to ground for a while. Reset identities. Once that’s done, it’s going to depend on how much information I can unearth on the Farm’s successor. Look for a way to bring them down before they do too much damage.”

“We’ll help,” Emil says. Alex groans.

Ryan looks at me before nodding. “If it gets to that, I’ll get in touch.”

No, you won’t. Before that happens, we will have cycled numbers multiple times. This is the last you will ever see of us.

“I’ll take care of destroying the other van,” I tell Ryan. “The two of you can get on with your mission. Alex can wipe all the drives before I destroy everything,” I add, as Ryan looks to argue.

“We need to move the stuff out of the RV anyway,” Alex adds. “And he loves blowing stuff up.”

Again, Ryan isn’t happy with the situation, but he nods.

“Come on Ralf. It’s time to move.”

They make it halfway when Ralf stops, turns and hooks a foot under something. The wrecking bar goes up with a jerk of his leg and he catches it. He returns to us.

“Every soldier needs his weapon, sir.” He offers Emil the bar. “Even a general.”

“But it’s yours.”

“No, sir. In my hands, it’s nothing more than a tool. In yours, it’s a deadly weapon.”

Emil takes it reverently. “Thank you.”

“It has been my honor to make something the suited the general.” He turns and returns to Ryan, who isn’t looking any happier.

“I’d say I can gather all the information on this new organization before wiping the drives,” Alex whispers, leaning against me. “But someone got to them first. There isn’t even an operating system left.” He grins. “I get to write my own.”

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The van handles better than I expected. Whoever build it spared no expenses. Alex is on his new toy and Emil is putting weapons away.

As soon as we reach the highway, I'll test the acceleration.

I take out my phone when it vibrates. The message is from an unknown number.

Thank you for helping.

I put it away and ponder how it is that Asyr knows the situation has been resolved.