

Chapter 16

I power up the phone. This is a lull between pursuit. I enter the number. It won't last. They are more frequent at night, but the longest lull has been an hour.

"Jacoby," I say as soon as he picks up.

"What?" the sharpness of his tone tells me he knows this isn't good news.

"I'm coming in hot." We're four hours away, but they need time to prepare.

"No."

"Jacoby," I make his name a growl.

"No, Tristan. We have an understanding. You don't bring your problems here. Deal with it."

"I have been for the last forty hours. They are more persistent than I expected."

"I don't care."

"I'm nearly out of ammo."

"Tristan, I'm going to plan myself on the road." He speaks slowly, clearly. He wants there to be no misunderstanding. "If I see you coming and I see anything resembling trouble on your tail, I'm going to fire in the engine block of your car until it stops, then I'm going to fire at you and your boyfriend if you try to approach, until you've dealt with whatever trouble you have. Am I making myself clear?"

A box shakes violently. How dare he threaten Bart, imply a threat to Emil. Keep us from my home. I settle it.

"What this is over, you and I will have a talk, Jacoby." I close the phone with a snap.

Bart glances at me. "You don't have to listen to him."

I tap a finger on the steering wheel keeping the boxes from lashing around. "Fighting a battle on two fronts is a losing proposition. He won't kill us, but any injury will be a distraction we can't afford." I work out Jacoby's reasoning. "Unless the confrontation

becomes a threat to the reservation. Then he will remove us to ensure it is safe. Find me a gun shop. Put a preference over a wide inventory rather than closeness.

I glance in the rearview mirror while Bart works. We're close to the hour mark. We're due for another attempt. I can't see them, but there isn't much of a line of sight with the way the road weaves.

"There's on in Fredonia."

"Too close to the reservation," I reply. "I go there every few weeks for supplies. Ideally I need it to be far enough there is no chance someone will recognize me as someone they've seen before."

He types. "In that case, there's on in Farmington, about forty miles from us. Their website tells me they have large building, lots of stock."

We'll still be in New Mexico. I don't have any Identities from that state, but Arizona is close. It should still work." "There's a wallet for Eric Strauss in the glove box." It's the fifth he looks at. I put it on my lap when he hands it to me. I had him my phone, set to speaker. "Call them."

"Farmington Gun Experts. My name is Donna, how can I arm you today?" Bart holds my phone with the laptop screen turned so I can glance at it.

"My name's Eric Strauss, Donna. I'd like to speak to the owner. I have a business proposition for them."

"And that makes you think I'm not the owner, Honey?"

"Because," I say, finding the information just as Bart highlights it, "the owner's name is William."

"I'm sorry, Honey, but the boss doesn't take any calls. All business goes through me."

The clarity of the voice, the firmness of the tone tells me she isn't lying, but that doesn't work for me.

"Donna, tell Will that Eric Strauss, the Arizona Rep for the NRA is on his way to talk to him. I'm calling first, because I want to make sure I'm not about to waste my time. If you aren't going to tell him that—" I look at the screen to confirm they are there. "I'll be happy to go to one of his competitor."

"Hold on." There's a 'thunk' as she puts the receiver down.

"Pull up information on the two closest stores, one needs to be on the other side of town from him. Size doesn't matter for this."

"Pawnshops?" he's typing away.

I shake my head.

"Who's this and what do you want?" his voice is gruff, with the rawness of a lifelong smoker."

"My name's Eric Strauss," I say in a calm, slow, speech. Bart's still working. "I'm Arizona's NRA representative."

"I'm not in Arizona."

"Very astute," I say dryly. "I need to rent your shop for a few hours. I have clients who need to talk with me, and they insist it be in Farmington. They haven't given me the time needed to a proper meeting place." I motion for Bart to show me what he has. He shakes his

head, still typing.

“I’m not a meeting hall.”

“No. You have a gun shop. The best equipped in the region, according to my research, hence why we are talking.” I motion to Bart again. His shake of the head is vehement. Boxes rattle, but I silence them. It is his area of expertise, and he knows the situation we are in.

“I’m not letting a bunch of stranger in here to do God knows what.”

“I see.” I glance at Bart who is still typing. “Then that is your final word?”

“Damn right—” Bart flips the screen with two pages and the relevant information highlighted. “—it is.”

“Thank you. Hopefully, Steve Courver will be more—”

“Wait a minute!” his objection comes quicker than I expected. “Why’d you want to go and talk with him?”

“My research places him as the next best location for what I need. And he has a history of active support of the NRA.”

“That guy’s got nothing but junk. You aren’t going to impress anyone there.”

Bart grins.

“Do you have anyone better suited to recommend?”

William sighs. “What’s renting you my place going to entail?”

“The location empty of customer and employees. Access to every weapon on the property in case my clients want to take with some practice with something while we talk.”

“When?”

“I will be there under thirty minutes.”

“Today? I can’t close my shop to the public. How am I going to make any money?”

“Factor that in how much you’ll charge me to rent your property.”

“How long?”

It’s a little past nine-thirty. I don’t want to risk one of them showing up before it’s all dealt with. “Until six tonight.”

“I don’t know.” On anyone with skill, the hesitation means they are readying to gouge me. “This is one of my better days normally.”

“How much would it cost me to rent your store?”

“Two-hundred and fifty grand?”

There’s so little confidence he’s basically asking for permission.

“There’s a chance my clients will want to keep some of the guns after shotting them. And I can’t tell them no. After all, I am meeting with them to garner their support.” Short of telling him I’m desperate and anything going wrong will ruin my career, it’s the best I can do.

“Three? Three-fifty?”

How does he make any money with this kind of negotiating skills? “Then we agree for three hundred and fifty thousand?”

“If that sounds okay to you.”

It sounds like an idiot asking to be screwed over. Bart's eyes are wide. "Yes, it does." If he's going to invite me to do it, I'm not going to object. "I'll be—"

"Wait. What's to say you aren't going to hand my guns to a bunch of crooks? If they end up used in crimes, that's going to come back on me."

Not a complete idiot, at least. "Write up a rental contract. I'm not picky about the wording. Something that makes me responsible for any guns that aren't in your inventory by the time you come back. I'll give you my driver's license and NRA ID numbers once I'm there."

"Thirty minutes isn't that much time to do all that."

"Unfortunately, half an hour is all I can give you. If it isn't going to work for you I can—"

"No-no. I'm good. I just don't know how legal it's going to be. I should be running this through a lawyer to be sure."

Okay, he might be smart after all. Maybe they just never negotiate on prices around here. "As I said. I'll sign it regardless of the clauses you put in. I'm in a bind and I can't let these clients slip through my fingers."

"Okay. I'll have it done by the time you get here."

"Look for a black Chevrolet Chevelle."

"I don't know what that is."

"Look it up online." I snap the phone closed.

"A last stand?" Bart asks.

"Jacoby isn't giving us a choice. So long as they have an inventory to match the size of the show floor, we'll be fine."

"Where are you getting that kind of money?"

"I have some hidden in the car."

Bart looks at his screen. "Aren't you worried they'll intercept us before we get there?"

I look in the rearview mirror. Still no visible pursuit. Hopefully, it supports my theory as to why. "The further west we drove, the further away from Gregory's zone of influence we are. That will restrict who he can easily call on to take part in the chase. His failure at stopping us should also make his new partner reluctant to invest too many of his people in this. The fact they have been able to stay with us this long does worry me, hopefully the gun show will have a radio signal detector in its store. But until I destroy the tracker. It is also something they will rely on as a way to track us without us knowing it."

Something else looking back didn't show me is Emil. I look over my shoulder. He's curled on the seat, behind Bart.

"You okay?"

He looks at me and shrugs.

"Talk to me, please." I face forward again.

His reply is soft. "I'm sorry. It's all my fault. If I hadn't caught me you—"

"No, Emil, you are not at fault for it." I keep my tone gentle. "This is your father's fault, Gregory. Not you. You've been a victim through all of it. You did admirably surviving

it.”

“If I’d been better—”

“Emil,” I cut him off and I can’t keep the warning from my voice. It’s wrong, but how he blames himself makes his box tremble, and the one containing my anger responds to it. I shouldn’t direct it at him, but the people who deserve it aren’t here.

“You wouldn’t have been caught,” he finishes, Defiantly.

“I’ve been to jail,” I reply. “That means I can be caught.”

“You were a kid,” he says dismissively.

“As are you. And I was twenty-five the last time I went. I wasn’t a kid at that point. It’s how long it took for me to work out how to not be caught anymore. Cut yourself some slack, Emil. Me and Bart will teach you so you’ll be better equipped to deal with the next time someone tries to capture you. He’s never gone to jail, so he’d got to be better at not being caught than even me.”

I smile at Bart while he glares at me.

“What did you do?” Emil asks, awed.

Bart sighs and closes his eyes. “Nothing good, kid. Nothing good at all.”

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Farinton Gun Expert is a long cinder block building with twenty feet of bay windows on each side of the door and it’s name over that. That’s not good. Moving shelves behind them as cover. In my injured condition, will take time. Time we almost certainly don’t have. I park on the far end of the sand lot and I see two doors on the side of the building. Those will have to be blocked off.

This is nowhere near ideal, but it’s what I have to work with.

I maneuver out of the car and lean against it. “Emil, pop the back of the seat and bring it out.”

He has to work at it. I ensured he folded up and down easily when I modified it, but I didn’t want it to come off each time I wanted access to the trunk. He comes out with it. I use a knee to hold it against the Chevelle, and pull the back off with my uninjured hand, revealing a large bundle wrapped in cellophane.

“Is that what I think it is?” Bart asks as I force the bundle out of the form fitted foam. He slipped out of my hand and I stop myself from reaching with my injured arm as I feel the muscles pull.

“I don’t know, I can’t read your mind.”

Bart snorts. “How much is in it?”

I reapply the back to the seat, ensuring the velcro holds it in place so no one can tell it can be removed.

“Guy’s coming,” Emil says.

The man is short and fat. Even from here I can see the yellowing of his fingers. The jeans are clean, but worn. He has a revolver holstered at his hip. Large, made to intimidate, but the grip’s leather is worn from multiple use. The shirt has more sweat on it than warranted by the heat, even for a man of his mass. He’s nervous.

“He matches the picture of the owner from their site,” Bart says.

“Mister Strauss?” the man calls, caution in his tone. His eyes widen as I stand and put the seat back on the back seat. They go from the sling to the cast and then up to settle on the Desert Eagle on my harness. His walk gains confidence. It marks me as a gun lover like him.

“You look in bad shape,” he says, as I pick up the bundle. I let a box’s flashing affect me and wince at the pain the motion causes to my injured arm. I drop it in the sand before the Chevelle, then sit on the edge of the hood.

“I’ve had a few bad days.”

“You should see the other guys,” Bart says almost at the same time. Emil Snickers and I glare at them.

William slows and studies us. “Are you really with the NRA?” He clutches the paper that has to be the agreement.

I reach for my wallet, letting the box make me wince some more, then I fumble one handed with it until I have Eric’s NRA card and hand it to him. It looks official enough. Their logo is easy enough to recreate and they’ve yet to include RFID chips in their cards. There’s even a Eric Strauss in their database, although he’s white, blond, and with blue eyes and had a predilection for young girls.

The only thing that isn’t accurate, not that he has a way to know, is the number on the back of the card. It does lead to a NRA member, and he will confirm I am who I claim I am, since answering that number is the only reason I left him alive.

“Call to confirm who I am,” I tell him as he looks the card over. “I’m out of the Phoenix chapter.” I want to make it as easy and quick for him to finalize the transaction. I have no idea when Gregory will arrive, and I don’t want the added complication of William and whatever customers are still here.

“Are there really any clients coming?”

I tap the bundle at my feet. I turn him so he can see the bills are twenties. “There’s half a million dollars. It should answer any question you have.”

Emil gasps, and Bart stares at me.

William looks at the paper in his hand. “I wrote the agreement for three hundred and fifty thousands.”

“Then don’t declare the rest,” I reply casually. “It’s not Uncle Sam needs to know. But it does mean you don’t get to ask questions.”

“How do I know they aren’t fake?”

This is reaching a level of careful I can’t afford to deal with.

“They’re real,” Bart answers, the dismay in his voice doing more to convince William than anything I could say. “He doesn’t bother with fake anything.” He looks the car over and when he looks at me again, I see the effort not asking the question requires.

I smile. Yes, there is more hidden in it.

“What do I have to do?” William asks.

“Everyone out of the store and off the property now. Turn the security off. Hand me a key so I can lock up when I leave. No one shows up until after six tonight.”

He hesitates. “Is there going to be anything left of my shop?”

I motion to the paper. “As soon as I sign this, you can claim you know nothing of

what took place, which will be an honest answer unless you keep pushing.” He hands it to me and I sign it, adding Eric’s number where it’s required and his driver’s license number. “If they have a problem with any of it, they can sue me.”

I hand it back and he bends down. I put my foot on it. “Once everyone’s gone.” He hurries back inside.

“How much?” Bart asks, the dismay still audible.

“Half a million,” I answer, knowing that isn’t the question.

“How much more?”

“Enough.”

“Aren’t you afraid someone’s going to steal it?”

I shrug. “I’ll detonate it before they get to enjoy it, let alone what’s hidden in it.”

He’s quiet, then. “How do you have so much money? The people who come to you are the desperate who can’t get anyone else to help them. Those aren’t people flush with money.”

People hurry out of the store, glancing our way as they head for their cars. “You do realize most of the people I kill for them are the kind who can’t put their wealth in the bank.”

He glances at Emil, concerned.

Emil answers for himself. “I was eight when I watched him kill a thug my father sent to murder me. I know what he does. I’m okay with it. It safe my life, twice.”

“Okay.” He looks uncertain how to take the information. “Some of them must have had bank accounts, because yours is large enough that—” he raises his hands and steps back as I straighten and level my gaze on him. “Calm down. All I did was look. You do know how I go about taking down my targets. Right? The banks are all connected to the internet, and that is my domain.”

I’m torn.

I’m actually torn.

He snooped into places he had no business and he should die for that. His box protests. But he found those places, went it and out and Asyr never realized. They would have told me if he had triggered any of the security they have on my accounts. They kind of skill required to go around Asyr’s security is...

A box reacts, it’s one that has been silent for so long that it takes me a moment to understand what I feel.

I’m proud of him.

“We are going to discuss boundaries when this is over, Bart.” I settle the box down.

He shrugs. “Sure, but you’re going to need me to cross them so I can add actual security there. I mean, do you really want to trust the hack job that second rate hacker did that let me waltz in? What if someone else gets in too, and they don’t stick to simply looking?”

The bastard thinks this is funny. I reach for him and the box flashes. I don’t let the pain register, but it’s a reminder I’m injured. “You are lucky I’m hurt, Bart.”

His amusement drops. “That’s not how I see it. I expect you to make me pay for my

impertinence.”

I can envision the fight. The blood I’ll spill. His moans of pain and pleasure. My body reacts before I can take control of the boxes and I no longer think it’s a good thing I can’t do to him what he deserves.

“You can be certain of that.”

William hurries in our direction. There’s only one car left. He hands me a key chain with seven keys on it. “Those are the keys to the doors. Make sure they’re locked when you leave, along with the range. I don’t need Donna getting in there without supervision and shooting things up. I’ve shut down the security system.”

There is suppressed concern on his face, no subterfuge. I push the bundle to him.

“I’ll leave the keys in the ground by the door.”

“Don’t—” he grunts as he lifts the bundle. “—bother. I have the originals and I’m changing all the locks as soon as I come in tomorrow.” He heads to his car.

“Bart, go check the security, shut it down if he didn’t do it. Destroy the last thirty minutes to be safe. Emil, go in and pull all the magazines you can find. Load any that aren’t.”

Once they’re off, I wait for William to have driven out of sight, then move the Chevelle to the side of the building. I’m putting the seat back in place when Bart returns.

“They have bug detectors.” He hands me a package. “The camera’s were off, like he said. It’s on an old VCR, and it looks like he’s been using the same tape for the last decade. I physically disconnected the video and I’m having it record the static. There’s not going to be anything to pull off it by the time we’re done.”

“Get the place ready.” I take the detector out. “Barricade the doors as best as you can, get Emil to help if your arm—”

“I’m fine.”

I look at him and make a decision. “We’re going to need something beyond the front windows since they’re going to be the first thing to be shot out.”

“I’ll get on it.”

I test the detector, then crawl under the car. I start at the front. The engine block has the most nooks and crannies. It’s the easiest place to hide a tracker. I ignore the cellphone, tucked in one of them, waiting for the call that triggers the explosives. There is nothing else in the front, so I crawl back, scanning everything.

When it beeps, I stare. How did I never take precautions against this? No wonder I never found the bug. They fucking dropped it in the gas tank.

I rush inside, ignoring the flash from the box each time I set my injured foot down. I also ignore Bart as he tries to get my attention. I rip a speaker off the wall, harvest the magnet, then rummage behind the counter until I find a hot glue gun and a coat hanger. I unwind the hanger, glue the magnet to one end, then head back to the car.

When I’m back inside with the bug on the magnet, the car is finally clean.

“Where was it?” Bart asks.

“In the gas tank. I’ll need to make something to ensure it doesn’t happen again.”

“You can get a cap that locks.”

“Too easy to pick. I’ll have ample time to come up with something at the

reservation.”

“The window problem was easy to deal with. He reaches behind shelves on the wall. There’s a clank, and metal shutters roll down. They cover the wall from one end to the other, except for the door. They have slits at various heights so we can look out and fire through them, “I think our shop owner might be a prepper.”

I nod. “When you work around so much hardware, it’s easy to realize that others might turn it against you.”

“You’ve been thinking about stuff like this I take it.”

“You know I like to be prepared. Leave it down,” I tell him as he reached behind the shelf again. “The open door will be enough warning of their arrival. Which shouldn’t take long anymore. We’ve been stationary for thirty minutes.”

“Aren’t you destroying the bug?” he asks when I put it on a shelf.

“That’s just going to make them scatter and aim to block any possible exit routes. I want them to come here and box us in. I want them done and over with. How is Emil coming along?”

“He has stacks of them and he’s still going. If we run out of ammo before this is over, it’s not going to be because we weren’t prepared.”

“Line up guns along the window. Go through as many of the caliber as possible, rotating them.”

I join Emil and take a box of 22s. “What’s behind that door?” I ask, putting the weight of my injured arm over a magazine to hold it in place as I put bullets in it.

He glances at the door. “An office with a small storage room.”

“The door?”

“Metal, the wood’s just a veneer.”

It supports Bart’s theory of William being a prepper. “When the shooting starts, I want you to go in and close the door. Don’t open it until the shooting stops.”

He stops moving. He shakes his head.

“Emil, you—”

“No,” he whispers, and I wait him out. “You can’t leave me out of this. This is my fault. I have to be part of ending it.” Tears fall on the glass. “What if you and Bart die? Who’s going to protect me then?”

I place a hand on his. The contrast in color and size is extreme. He looks up at me.

“No matter what else happens, Emil, Gregory will die here. He’s the only one with an interest in you. Once he’s dead, you won’t matter to who’s left, so if me or Bart die here. You’ll still be free.” He tried to pull his hand away, but I don’t let him. “We won’t die, Emil. None of us well. I promise you that, but even if I do, you will be safe. Gregory will never threaten you again.”

“I can help,” he says, hopeful.

I tighten my hand over his. I try to make it comforting, but this is one aspect of interpersonal relationship I am lacking in.

“I know. I don’t want you to.”

“Why?” there is pain in his voice.

“You already killed a man. That will eat at you.”

“He deserved it, he was going to kill you.”

“It doesn’t matter. Killing leaves a mark, and you need to process that.”

“I won’t let it affect me,” he says with confidence. “I’m not the baby your saved ten years ago, I’m stronger, harder.”

“I know.” I look him in the eyes. “I want it to affect you.”

“Why would you want that?” he demands in disbelief and he’s loud enough Bart looks in out direction before going back to placing rifles.

“Because death doesn’t affect me. I can kill indiscriminately and no think about it afterward. Bart is the same on some level. I don’t want that for you, Emil. You’re broken, but no so much yet that you no longer have a chance at something that passes for a normal life.”

“What if I don’t want a normal life?”

His box does something incomprehensible. My heart tightens. I want to take him in my arms, hold him and never let go, but I don’t understand why.

“That isn’t a decision you should make until after you’ve processed what’s been done to you.” I see the defiance in his eyes and I force myself to tell him the truth. “I couldn’t save my brother, Emil. So I need to protect you. I need you to be safe so I know I’m capable of keeping someone safe. Otherwise, it means that even if I’d had the chance to safe him, I would have failed. It’s not fair, but you’re that person for me.”

“Okay,” he says after a long silence. “I’ll hide. Just don’t die, okay? Maybe I represent your brother, but you’re the only thing like a father I’ve ever had. I can’t lose you.”

I squeeze his hand while his box jumps and flips. It spreads a chaos to the other boxes that should make me slam down on it, but I hesitate before gently quieting them so I can think again.

“I won’t. I promise.”

He smiles. “And keep him alive too, okay? He’s kind of growing on me.”

“Yeah, me too.”

We go back to filling magazines in silence.

It’s ten minutes later when Bart calls. “We have company.”

I grab a handful of magazines and Emil arm fulls. He divides them by the guns, making sure there’s each of the needed calibers and goes back for more.

Outside, Gregory’s Lincoln comes to a stop at the far end of the lot Five SUVs stop on each side of him. Unlike the the Lincoln, they are new, with only the dust from the road to mark the surface.

“I expected them to be black,” Bart comments as Emil returned with more magazines. He puts two in each of my pockets.

“They’re fifty-cal.” Then he’s heading back.

“He doesn’t realize that one-handed you can’t reload, does he?” Bart whispers.

“He need to help.”

Bart looked where Emil is arming himself with more magazine and I see the look in his eyes.

“Don’t,” I warn him, harsher than I intend. “Don’t feel sorry for him. He doesn’t need that. He needs you to be strong. He needs to see there’s a way out. Right now, that’s the only thing keeping him going. If he thinks you don’t see that for him, he’ll start believing it too, and I will not have that. Am I clear, Bart?”

Bart nods, looks outside, then at me. “Is there a way out of this?”

“Yes,” I reply through gritted teeth, taking out the orange pills from my pocket. “We’re going to make one, understand?” I hand him two. “You aren’t allowed to think otherwise. You are too strong to let these thugs stop you.”

He takes them. “I thought...”

“Pain’s not going to help you right now.”

He raises an eyebrow as I dry swallow two of my own. If I am taking them, he has nothing to use as his protest. He swallows them.

“I know you’re in there!”

“Very astute of you,” I yell back. “I’m sorry to see you survived the chase.” I take the rifle next to me and chamber a round.

“How about you come out and we talk this out like adults?”

“And I have your goons shoot me? No thanks. I prefer talking from behind a metal barrier.”

“No one will shoot you. I’ve told them you deserve a chance to end this the right way.”

I look through a slot. Gregory stands before his Lincoln, six men on either side, more in the SUVs. Not one of them holds a gun.

“Don’t,” Bart hisses.

I step into the doorway, plan already set. I hold the rifle in my good hand, finger on the triggers, but the barrel pointing down. With my arm in its sling, I appear like a man trying to look threatening and failing.

“I’m...” Gregory starts “impressed that you’re still alive.” The admiration is honest.

“Get on to the sales pitch, Gregory.” I try for confident, but put enough worry in my tone he can’t believe it. “I have better things to do than stand here.” Of the twelve standing eight are in suits. What I can make out of those in the SUVs makes me think of men in streets clothing, possibly gangs, only doing this for the pay.

So maybe twelve men from Gregory’s Mexican partner. That he didn’t replenish the ranks means he’s reached the limit of what he’s willing to invest in this operation. And they are who will target me and Bart directly. The others will do what Gregory pays them to do, which will include Emil.

With time and the opportunity, those I could convince to leave, or pay them to do so.

“Fine. You can’t win. I have the numbers. Surrender and this ends cleanly. These men drag you to their boss and you pay for whatever you did to piss them off.”

“I thought you wanted to do that to me. Didn’t I steal your son’s wealth before you could take it for yourself?”

“I did. But I’ve grown to respect you. I can count on one hand the number of men who stood up to me without flinching, let alone had the balls to fight back. For that, I’m

promising a clean death for your two friends.”

I sigh. I don't bother even trying to appear brave. All I have left is exhaustion. “So that it. Torture for me, clean, painless death for them.”

“If you hadn't cost me so much, I'd consider offering you a position in my organization, but I need to recoup cost, and that only comes if I hand you over.”

I nod. “I'll point out that you started it. If you'd left Emil alone, I wouldn't have had any reason to come after you.”

“Would you have left something like what you did to me slide?” his question is honest.

So I don't lie. “No. I'd have come after you if you'd taken from me. The problem is that I swore to Emil I'd keep him safe from you.”

“I respect that,” Gregory says solemnly. “But there are promises you shouldn't go making.”

“Only if I can't keep it.” the rifle is at my shoulder before I'm done talking and the gunshot punctuates my statement. The recoil rips the rifle out of my hand, and Gregory falls back from the impact.

I'm inside before anyone has time to take out their gun, holding the Desert Eagle.

“Center of mass?” Bart asks in disbelief. “Why didn't you take his head off?”

“When this is over, let's compete to see which of us is the best shot with a rifle, one-handed. He isn't getting up from that, even if it didn't kill him.”

Gunfire erupts and the din of the guns and bullets make speaking impossible.

Or so I thought.

“Don't you dare die” Bart yells over it. “The kid isn't the only one who needs you alive!”

I smile and nod. I put the muzzle of the Desert Eagle in a slot and fire until the magazine's empty

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