

Chapter 17

Gunfire's loud.

I haven't seen a TV show that portrays that correctly. It doesn't matter the kind of earplugs you wear. After a minute of constant firing, your head feels like a hammer's gone at it all day. It's mush.

Thinking's barely an option. All you have are reflexes.

Fire, eject the clip, put one in, fire. The first time the Desert Eagle slides at my feet, it takes a full second to register. And by then I've only emptied two clips. I change its clips and slid it back to Tristan. He might not be feeling the pain of his injuries either, but he's better than me at not adding to that damage.

Another thing I don't often see shown properly on TV is how firing at a larger force is a losing proposition. There's no way to cover all approaches, not even those you can see. It's only a question of time until someone finds a blind spot while you're reloading, and your mind's too addled to understand where they went.

Tristan, on the other hand. There's something inhuman about him.

When the body falls at my feet, its neck broken, Tristan is already fighting the next guy to make it into the doorway. It takes my brain three seconds to get into gear. Three long seconds during which another body falls.

At that point, two of them have pushed their way in. Tristan's fighting one, and the other's raising his gun in his direction. I'm faster and the man's head explodes off his shoulders. No thoughts required, which is a good thing, because nothing can get past the mush in my head.

Another one makes it in, coming at me. He doesn't have a gun, but a knife. And something cuts through the fog in my head. A melody. It tells me how he'll move and I back to avoid the slash. It doesn't tell me about the rifle I step on and have to shift my focus to keep my footing, but it still tells me how he's moving, so I catch the wrist as he tries to take advantage, twist and I don't hear his scream as I feel the bone break. But the melody continues, gaining intensity as he drops the knife. It promises me victory, tells me how to catch it, turn it and smash it into his chest.

I ignore it. I don't need a knife to win this. I pull him to me, then down. My knee meets his jaw and breaks it. He pushes away, a snarl on his face instead of bawling his eyes out from the pain. He picks up the pain, and the melody calls to me.

I should be holding it, not him.

I push the anger down. The need to take it from him.

I don't need the music. I don't want it; I lie to myself.

He's clumsy, fighting with his off-hand. He doesn't listen to the music, because I use it to know how to counter him. If he could hear it, he would be able to turn it to his advantage. I block with a hard

slap and his hand opens. The knife flies out of it, the melody a crescendo of hope that turns into a full orchestra as my hand closes over the pommel. Then the knife slams into his ear.

I let go of it as he falls and the melody dies away plaintively.

I look up and Tristan has only stepped away from his opponent, K-Bar in hand, and another body at his feet. How many were there? My mind's getting faster. A dozen out with the guy in charge. Tristan told me his name, but what do I care for it? No idea how many were in the cars. I know we shot down more than a dozen already.

Did anyone else drive up to join the fight? I can't tell. I couldn't hear a plane take off on the roof, let alone a car arrive.

Three push through the door and come at me. More go for Tristan, but I can't pay attention to that. I put my faith in him being the worse monster here. That these thugs, in suits or not, are only a pale imitation of him.

If even that.

I block, dodge, punch, kick.

It's pure survival.

TV shows at least get that right, nowadays. Fighting's ugly. It's not a ballet, it's a slaughter. If you aren't getting sick watching them fight, they aren't doing it right. If they make you want to get in a fight. Don't.

If you do, pray that it's over quickly.

As if my shirt's not already damaged enough, they rip it as they try to grab me and cut it as one distracts from the sweet melody of the knife being used so I can't use the information it gives me. By the

time one of them finally drops—an open hand strike at his adam’s apple—my, used to be white, shirt is mostly red from fresh blood. Too much of it my own.

When the second drops—a well-placed kick in the balls—I have a deep gash on my left side. All muscle, but it’s bleeding freely. I don’t feel the pain, but if I don’t stench the flow, I’m going to be out of the fight before the last guy can finish me.

I step back and reach out to steady myself. My hand rests against a shotgun, from a display of them. It becomes a club, giving me reach, and I don’t need the melody of his knife to help me take him down.

A fourth man replaces him.

Where the fuck are they coming from?

I throw myself to the ground as he pulls a gun. Holes appear in the rack of cleaning supplies. Rifles clatter around me as my roll stops at the front of the store. I grab one one-handed and fire. The kick rips it out of my hand and my shoulder nearly follows.

And I didn’t even hit the fucker.

Thank God got illegal painkillers.

I grab another and this time, the shotgun makes a hold in his chest.

Pain or no pain, my arm falls to my side. There goes my good arm. Hopefully, it being black and blue is the worse I’ll have to deal with once this is over. Another rifle serves to push me to my feet.

The front half of the store is a mess, but at least no one’s entering anymore. There’s already enough people in here as it is, and they’re all focused on Tristan. Three are taking him on directly, while... seven of them move around, looking for shots he isn’t giving him.

I pick up my gun—I'm not trying this with a rifle—and aim. I'm not ambidextrous like Tristan, but I'm not horrible with my off-hand. Three shots and two fall down. The rest turn in my direction and I'm running before they unload their guns in my direction.

Debris flies around as all they hit is the content of displays. When they pause, it's all at the same time. I pop up and drop one as the idiots all reload at the same time. I shift my aim and curse as someone impacts me.

Down we go and I throw him off me. I can't think about where my gun's gone to. I stand and immediately drop, gunfire exploding around me. The man tackles me again, but I latch on to him and use my weight to keep us lower than the displays.

I knee his stomach; he punches my side. If not for the painkillers, that would have incapacitated me. I catch motion out the corner of my eye and force us to turn. He's between me that gunman, but if he's alone there, another's going to come from the other side. I unbalance him and shove him in the gunman's direction. I run to the side, picking up a can of campfire lighter that survived the gunfire.

I know I saw lighters in here somewhere. I pour the can out as I head for them. Grab a Zippo and light it. If I wasn't about to die from being littered with holes, this would be the worse idea ever. I flick it into the fuel on the floor as the gunmen step around the display with all the other cans of campfire fluid.

There's no explosion as the flames reach them and the display, but their screams are surprisingly soothing.

I run by a knife rack, as I go around, and ignore the music coming from the sheathed blades. When I peek over the display, they're no longer screaming, putting themselves out. I can't have that, not

when I have this on the shelf next to me.

I uncap the gallon size container of gunpowder as I sneak around. This is going to be interesting. I consider pulling my phone to record it.

A gunman turns the corner ahead of me and we freeze. Where did he come from? I react first, throwing the container at him. Gunpowder flies and when it impacts, the container exploded, sending more into the air.

Fuck-fuck-fuck!

I run.

This time, I get my woof of conflagration, except it's chasing me. I throw myself down and manage both hands over my head. The flash of heat is over before it fully registers. Gunpowder burns real quick.

I pat my hair, and everything feels fine, but that could be the painkillers. I take off my shirt, and somehow two patches were dry enough to catch on fire. I put them out and don't bother putting it back on, it's barely rags at this point.

The fire I started with the campfire fluid is now going full force. I look up at the nozzles in the ceiling, waiting for them to disgorge water. It's quickly clear that someone hasn't been maintaining his fire prevention system. That might work against him when he claims this to his insurance company.

I grab the closest extinguisher, not overly hopeful they'll even work, but I have to attempt to stop the fire from spreading since I'm the one who started it; and I'm still stuck in the building. Can't say that I care to go up in flames with it.

I spray the fire, and the white powder covers the display and everything around, killing most of

the fire. Two men on the floor are alive, but close to overcooked. I weigh it and step over them without using any more of the extinguisher on the parts still burning. I could need it for more important fires.

The third is barely singed. He was far enough that he was only flashed cooked by the gunpowder. He grunts and sits, eyes going wide as he sees me. Then he's falling back as the bottom of the extinguisher impacts his face.

I look around.

Tristan is in the center of the store, panting. His arm is out of its sling and he's leaning to the left, so his cast probably didn't survive the fight. There is no one else standing. His gaze rakes over my naked torso and smiles. The bastard doesn't even seem in pain.

Right, the painkillers.

I smile back.

A door opens at the back, behind Tristan and I expect Emil, leaving his safe place now that the store is silent. Instead, it's an older man, raising his gun at Tristan's back.

"Tristan!" I yell as the man fires.

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